

Foundations

A Sermon

by

The Reverend NEVILE DAVIDSON, D.D.

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A Sermon

Preached in Glasgow Cathedral
on Sunday, 16th October, 1949,
at the Annual Visit of the
Deacon-Convener and Members
of The Trades House of Glasgow

BY

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Minister of Glasgow.
Chaplain to the King in Scotland.

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the Collector and the Late Convener

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The following Gentlemen were invited to the Service:—

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To

THE DEACON-CONVENER, THE COLLECTOR
AND MEMBERS OF THE TRADES HOUSE OF GLASGOW
AND TO
THE FOURTEEN INCORPORATIONS
IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THEIR
GRACIOUS REQUEST

THIS SERMON IS DEDICATED

Foundations

"Be watchful and strengthen the things which remain."

—Revelation 3 : 2.

Scripture Lessons

THE DEACON-CONVENER READ THE
SCRIPTURE LESSONS AS FOLLOWS :—

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON :—BOOK OF MICAH
CHAPTER IV., VERSES 1-7.

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON :—
GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. LUKE.
CHAPTER X., VERSES 25-37.

THE people to whom this letter was written were passing through a period of danger, anxiety and strain. They were a small group of men and women living in a vast pagan environment. The Roman Government was suspicious of them ; local officials in most places were unfriendly. Both socially and economically, they were beset by a constant sense of insecurity. Hardship, hostility, persecution, seemed inevitable. They must expect the severest testing of their loyalty and courage. Perhaps worst of all, their own religious and moral life had fallen to a low level, so that they had not the spiritual stamina needed for the dangerous days through which they were living.

At such a time even the finest institutions and traditions only survive if there are found a sufficient number of men and women ready to stand by them and defend them. The very existence and future of Christianity seemed to be at stake. It was at such a moment that the writer of this letter to the Church in Sardis tries to rally his friends with this great admonition : " Be watchful and strengthen the things which remain."

We too are living in a time of testing. As a wise leader said recently, "Mankind is now passing through one of the great crises in history." Much that we value is threatened. Two world wars within the span of a lifetime have shaken our Western civilisation to its depths. On the material plane, we are threatened by unprecedented economic dangers. On the moral plane, the forces of Communism are embarked upon a ruthless campaign in Europe; attempting to secure if not the extinction of Christian beliefs yet the domination of the Christian Church. The dark shadow of atomic warfare hangs sinister over all lands. There is little sign that we in Britain are morally and spiritually adequate to such days of crisis. There is among us a widespread sense of disillusionment and frustration. There has been a serious decline in morals. Our spiritual life is at a low ebb. Many have given up altogether both religious beliefs and religious practices. So that Christianity even in our own land has lost the power that once it had in shaping our customs and ideals.

Into the midst of this atmosphere of failure and frustration there come like the sound of a rallying drum these words—"Be watchful and strengthen the things that remain."

Thank God, there are things which remain; things that not all the prevailing tumult and chaos have been able to destroy; things so precious that, if we can only preserve them, then amid all the din of political dispute and anxieties of the economic crisis the soul of our nation will be saved.

What, then, are these things that remain?

1. I would suggest first the value of the individual.

The most significant feature in the life and teaching of Jesus our Lord was His unbounded interest in individual men and women. The Gospels record many conversations and incidents showing His love of people for their own sake. Humble people, insignificant, unimportant people. In fact for Him there were no unimportant people. Because every man, woman and child, said Jesus, whatever their station in society, whatever their natural gifts, is of infinite value in the sight of God. In an age where slavery was universally accepted, that was an epoch-making claim. There is perhaps no truth which has exercised so profound and creative an influence on the social development of mankind as this Christian insistence on the sacredness of personality, the unique value of the individual.

Here is something which needs to be guarded and strengthened in our time.

In the modern industrial system, the individual seems to count for less and less. I listened a few days ago to a broadcast discussion on the subject of increasing productivity. Five prominent business men took part in it. The strange thing to me was that the whole discussion was on an almost completely impersonal level. Improvements in machinery, greater efficiency in management, more successful publicity, greater economy; but scarcely

a single word about the individual worker, his possibilities and ideals. The human element was almost completely ignored.

In a world of mass production, in a world of huge combines and multiple stores, in a world dominated by machinery, the individual worker is just an insignificant unit, a number on a card index. His personality can all too easily be swamped and stifled. His work is in danger of becoming, not the expression and fulfilment of his personality, but its frustration.

Another threat to the dignity of the individual comes from the operation of a "welfare state," with its too indiscriminate charity. Because if you manage a man's life too completely for him, even for his good, you undermine his independence. Life should not be made too difficult for anyone, or it will kill their happiness and hope. But neither should it be made too easy, or it will sap their vigour and initiative.

What is required above all in human relationships is that spirit of sympathy and compassion illustrated in the beautiful parable of the Good Samaritan which we heard read this morning; sensitive to understand the needs of our neighbour, quick to help him in time of trouble, seeing in every individual man a "brother for whom Christ died," a child of God. It is this principle of neighbourliness, of mingled respect and compassion for the individual, which through the centuries has inspired the charities of the Trades House.

2. Another truth which must be strengthened in our time is the importance of character.

During the last half-century we have discovered the enormous influence of environment upon men and women. We have realised that, if they are to enjoy fulness of life and health and happiness, they must have the best possible surroundings—good houses, good food, parks, playing-fields. The new realisation of the need of these things is one of the great discoveries of our time. It lies behind all the careful planning of our new towns; it lies behind the splendid new social services which have meant for so many people the raising of the whole standard of life.

The three marks of a reliable character are truthfulness, purity, honesty. Now it is a somewhat sinister symptom of present-day society that among a great many people these qualities are made light of. The standards of sexual morality have never been lower. The sanctity of marriage is in many quarters openly scoffed at. During recent years especially there has been an immense increase in dishonesty, from bag-snatching and shop-lifting to black market transactions. There has been an increase in untruthfulness, whether it be the petty lie told by a schoolboy to avoid punishment or the deliberate lie of a false income tax return.

"Be watchful and strengthen the things which remain." If as a nation we are to recover, we need to lay new emphasis on the importance of character.

We need a return to the fundamental principles of morality, a "Back to the Commandments" campaign.

You who are business men representing many different professions, industries, trades, will agree that the foundation of all true, honourable success in the world of affairs is character. That is still recognised everywhere. I am constantly asked to give a young man or woman a "testimonial," a reference as to their good moral character. Why? Because any reputable business house, any fine institution, recognises that, whatever be his technical qualifications, a man is not worth much, and won't do his firm or profession credit, unless he is a man of integrity and honour, a man who can be trusted, whose word can be relied upon, whose habits are above reproach. In a Christian country especially it is right that we should have such a standard. The fifteenth Psalm finely describes the man of such character :—

" He that walketh uprightly and worketh righteousness and speaketh the truth in his heart ; he that back-biteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour ; nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour. In whose eyes a vile person is contemned ; but he honoureth them that fear the Lord. He that sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not. He that doeth these things shall never be moved."

As long as we in Britain are producing men of that stamp, we need have no fear for the future.

3. And the final quality which must be maintained and strengthened is Faith in God.

We have been thinking of the importance of character. But character of the finest type is not self-made. It draws its beauty and freshness, its strength and stability, from higher sources. Its source is in faith in God. One is struck by that again and again in reading the biography of those who have done most to uplift society and help their fellow-men. Their character was based on their religious beliefs.

Do you remember that portrait of a great statesman of olden times, Daniel, Prime Minister of the Babylonian Empire? A man of immense political power and social prestige, subject to the endless temptations of public life. How every morning and every evening men and women, passing along the busy streets of that great pagan city, could see a figure at his open window, looking towards Jerusalem, kneeling humbly at his prayers, asking for the grace and guidance of Almighty God to fit him for his daily tasks and responsibilities. That was the secret of Daniel's life, his stability, his integrity.

We hear much to-day about the need for economic recovery. Still more urgent is the need for spiritual recovery, for a flowing tide of faith which will bring us as a people back to vital belief in God, back to

those great religious loyalties which our forefathers acknowledged, back to that "righteousness which alone exalteth a nation."

But let me finish on a more personal note. For you and I each one need in our own individual lives that security which only the Christian Faith can give. This universe is too mysterious, the flux of historical happenings is too bewildering, the problems of right and wrong are too perplexing, the temptations of everyday life are too strong, unless we have within our own breast that belief in God which is "an anchor of the soul both sure and stedfast."

Spiritually, a great many people to-day have drifted away from their moorings and are at sea. But in spite of a superficial attitude of defiance or cynicism, I believe there is a real longing, especially among younger people, for moral assurance and spiritual certainty. Even albeit unconsciously, they feel they need a creed to live by. Confronted on every hand by chaos, suffering and change, we of this age of transition need above all things the sense of spiritual security which alone gives strength and peace of soul. "Be watchful and strengthen the things which remain!" A recovery of the Christian Faith on the part of many men and women of many lands is undoubtedly the supreme need of our time.

"Trust ye in the Lord, for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength." Deep down in every man's heart there is a craving for the changeless. And religion alone can offer us this, pointing us above

the flowing stream of time to a realm of eternal values. David Livingstone, writing to a friend from the depths of Equitorial Africa, says, "Shall I tell you what has sustained me amidst the toil and loneliness of my exiled life? It was the promise, 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the days.'"

You, Mr. Deacon-Convener, and your colleagues who are worshipping with us this morning, and whom we count it a privilege to welcome once again within these venerable walls, are heirs to a great and long tradition. You have made a notable contribution to the life and welfare of this city in manifold ways. I believe that the three great principles of which I have been speaking to-day—the value of the individual, the importance of character, the necessity of Christian Faith—have been the foundations of the whole structure and growth and work of your famous institution. If you, Mr. Deacon-Convener, and we all of us who call ourselves Christians can in our day hold fast to these foundation principles and build both our national life and our individual lives upon them, then we need have no fear of the present difficulties. For by God's help we shall triumph over every temporary frustration and vicissitude.

leges, to which it is said to receive indeed all
the benefit of every arrangement. And I say
that I think," says justly, "in which we
have had our money ever lost, and suffer very
heavy loss from the late losses, and the continual
debt and expense which we have had."

"I am sorry to see that you are in such a
situation, and I hope you will be soon relieved.
I have been informed by your agent, Mr. C. H. Smith,
that he has been engaged to represent you in
your negotiations with the Bank of Boston, and
now I hope you will be relieved from all
trouble in reference thereto, and will be enabled
to make other arrangements, and to get
rid of your debts, and to commence life again
in a more comfortable and independent condition.
I hope in your case, as in mine, that the
expenses will be small, and that the result will
be satisfactory. I hope also that you will be
able to get rid of your debts, and to get a small
income from your estate, which will enable
you to live comfortably, and to support your
wife and children, and to pay your debts.

"I hope you will do well, and that you will
soon be rid of all your difficulties, and that you will
have a comfortable home, and a happy family.