

THE RECEIVING AND THE TRANSMITTING GENERATION.*

“One generation shall praise Thy name to another, and shall declare Thy mighty acts.”—Ps. cxlv. 4.

THE sentiment of this day is a mingled one : in which the memory of the past and the hope of the future strangely combine. These final services of our old place of worship will soon be followed by the commencing services of a new one. Like the Jewish fathers in the days of Nehemiah we remember the former house with sorrow ; but like the children of those fathers we rejoice over the new foundation. We pay our tribute to the generations gone, who have spent their lives and their devotions here. But we purpose by the help of God to continue both their devotions and their work, transmitting all with increase to the generations that shall be born. In that hope we are greatly solaced ; and shall go on our way, sorrowful indeed that we shall see this place no more, but always rejoicing because we shall find its sanctities renewed in another if not a better place.

You see, brethren, that our thoughts have already begun to flow into the channel of my text, which

* Delivered on the morning of the last day of public worship in Oldham Street Chapel, Manchester.

exactly expresses the spirit in which divine revelation bids us view an occasion like this. The voice of God in His word always calls off our minds from passing and changing phenomena to things that are unchanging and pass not away: from that which "decayeth and is ready to vanish" to that which is undecaying and "cannot be moved." The melody of this note of the psalmist is the strain to which the whole of Scripture is set: it stamps the impress of eternity on all the things of time. But this general truth is here brought home to us in a manner that is very appropriate to the day. It speaks of every generation as having two characters: one as receiving from its predecessor the tidings of the divine power and grace, and another as transmitting the same tidings to its successor with increase. These will be the two topics of discourse; and may He who is "the Same yesterday, to-day, and for ever" help me to speak and you to hear!

I.

The text places the transmitting generation first: but in our use of it we ought perhaps to invert the order. For the ages can hand down nothing which did not come to them from without; if we mount upward step by step we find at last that the heritage of truth and grace was a free gift of revelation to mankind; and therefore the earliest was a receiving generation. Men can give nothing that they did not first receive.

And this at once suggests our opening reflection: that all the ages of time are in their unceasing flow

M

recipients of parcels and fragments of one great manifestation of God in the glory of His name, His works, and His redeeming grace. That is the theme to which this psalm strictly limits our thoughts. From its first verse to its last there is not even a sideglance at anything else. Nothing besides is counted of any moment in human history. This is the one sole developing secret in human affairs: the gradual return of God the Holy Trinity to His place in this fallen world. The ages are indeed freighted with many other burdens. They carry with them the spreading tide of sin, making sad the successive races of men with ten thousand times ten thousand forms of misery. They tell their tale from century to century of the advancement of science and art and civilization: and a marvellous record it is, accumulating its wonders until wonder almost swoons under its burden. They chronicle also the annals of the struggles of nations for supremacy on the face of the earth: where many kingdoms are successive competitors for empire, but one Kingdom alone in silent majesty is surviving and vanquishing them all. Our psalm speaks only of this latter: "Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom." It knows nothing of all other secrets that the ages transmit. We must accept and glory in the limitation. The strain of this hymn is that before and behind, above and beneath, everything else there runs through human affairs a manifestation of God becoming from age to age more perfect. What vain philosophy is struggling after is the strict truth, rightly interpreted. The burden of the ages is the evolution of God in history: of God incarnate in

due time ; but, before that, approving His majesty, His providence, His mercy, His love by tokens known and read of all men. The earliest race heard of His first great disclosure of Himself in creation : long ages had gradually prepared the scene for the last creature in the image of his Creator, with the One Eternal Image of God as a Saviour behind him. The manifestations of God in His dealings with a sinning race take up the story ; and are the thread that binds all the leaves of history into one record, becoming as it grows more luminous. This was the "dark saying of old," dark in its brightness, of which the psalmist elsewhere speaks as if about to explain it before the time. We, brethren, look back upon the traditions of ages as bearing steadily onwards one diversified disclosure of the divine secrets in one great continuous evolution. We are taught by our psalm to see and to hear nothing else in the past history of our race. This has been its one commanding theme from the beginning until now.

But this revelation has not flowed on equably from age to age. There have been great critical periods in this general evolution of the majesty of God's revelation, accumulating through the centuries ; and we in our day inherit the last and best tradition. It may be said in a certain sense that the final secret has been laid bare to the wonder of angels and of men. The tradition given to the first generation disclosed man in the image of God : our new Book of Genesis shows us God in the image of Man. Now we see the Divine Majesty, strange to say, as it was never seen till in the human form.

Time is rich in its last great secret ; and St. Paul, both as a philosopher of history, and as the apostle of the dispensation of that fulness of the time, puts into our psalm a meaning it never had to those who sang it first. Our generation has received from the generations before the final and finished disclosure of the wonderful works of God. When Pentecost was fully come time reached its fulness : it has no other great revelation behind. He then showed us in very deed "the power of His works." They sang that day in many tongues "the wonderful works of God." In many tongues : to represent the many voices that were gathered from the past into one, and the unity from which many voices would spring in the future. Time had received its last birth from eternity ; and the generations their last tradition. We throw all this into our psalm, and then how it dilates and throbs and expands, rejoicing in the interpretation it waited for. Its "majesty" is the triune glory of God ; its "works" are redemption ; its "praises" the Pentecostal hymn ; its "proclamation" the Gospel ; its "mercy over all His works" redemption for every creature ; its "kingdom" the kingdom that cannot be moved. All this is what we have received from our ancient fathers. That dark saying of Ps. lxxviii. is now as bright as it will ever be till another day shall declare it anew.

But on this occasion I must narrow the theme, and remind my hearers that the past generations have bequeathed to us as a people a special heritage in the general unfolding of the ways and works of God. In common with the Christian generations we

have received the records of finished truth as it is in Jesus ; but as our own peculiarity we have received a mass of holy tradition which at such a time as this it is appropriate that we should dwell upon. We have seen that the ages of the gradual manifestation of God are not to be regarded as flowing on in uniform and monotonous succession. Within the economies of time generally, and viewed merely as such, there are interior and subordinate economies. Within the Christian generations there have been generations of constant and permanent fellowships having their separate traditions. We as a people are now in the third or fourth generation of our special tradition. There was the first while the Founder was in the midst of his assistants. There was the second, when they were transmitting a society with all the elements in it of a church. There was the third generation when all was consolidated, much as all now is. And we are in a fourth, which is industriously shaping the old traditions into new forms of adaptation. We have inherited from our fathers the common Christianity of the fulness of time : in a form containing as we think all the elements of truth as in Jesus truth is defined and sanctified. We may take our psalm into our hands, as interpreted by the Gospel, and thank God that our work in the world is what is here described : whether as to the worship offered or the testimony preached. We have an organization that has for its end the manifestation of God to all nations as the God of redemption. We have had a commission to proclaim distinctly the grace " that is over all His works ; " to teach men how to receive the personal

salvation and utter the personal testimony that glows through this ancient hymn ; to make emphatic some points of great doctrinal importance on which this testimony is based ; and to fight withal the fight of faith against every form of infidelity without and unfaithfulness within, which would exclude God from His universe. I do not say that we have within the dispensation of Christianity an elect dispensation more privileged and better than others. It is enough that we have our own cast of the Christian doctrine, and worship, and life which, whatever others may think of it, we hold to be a tradition of inestimable value. This is, so to speak, the clothing that all the religious traditions of the past wear in their transmission to us. This old place of worship and preaching has for a hundred years and one borne witness to these traditions.

It is necessary, however, now that we look more particularly at what is meant by the receiving generation and at the obligation the reception involves. Why does heaven pour out upon us its stores of truth and grace ? Why have the crowning revelations of His name and mercy been given to us ? What is the duty that is imposed on us by all this ?

The first obligation of every age and of ours is to glorify God for the privileges thus transmitted. One generation is here said to transmit the praise of His name and works to another : not simply to hand on the record of its own praises but to give matter of praise for themselves to those who come after. Our duty is to make divine revelations the theme of our constant rejoicing. The history of the past is the material of the worship of the present. "He is

faithful that promised." Every generation has a "new song," the burden of each of which is still a response to the word of Jesus : "Said I not, If thou wouldst believe thou shouldst see the salvation of God." The first Christian generation set us the example, occupying all the forenoon of the feast of Pentecost in praising the wonderful works of God. The Lord loves to receive the accumulating tributes of time. They do not introduce a discordant strain into the more ancient worship of heaven. They break into the blessed monotony, and add new tones that enrich the chorus. Much of our worship is supplication for our own mercy. But all our praise must be gathered from the manifestation of Himself in ages past : you know how large a part of the psalms is thus made up. The note is always "Our fathers have declared unto us !" But what had their fathers told them in comparison with what has reached our ears from all the companies of the redeemed in every age ! And how much reason have we, at the end of the century which closes with this ancient house, to magnify the God of our fathers and the deliverance He wrought through them !

But all this we cannot do unless we use these privileges aright. The past transmits not only its works, that we may praise God for them ; but its testimonies that we may be encouraged also to put our trust in Him who wrought them. The God of the fathers is our God. There was no work wrought in their day which is not wrought now. That is the meaning of the psalm. Not that the contemporaries of David might look back in blank astonishment at

deeds formerly done. But that they might expect the same to be wrought in their day. "Thou who leddest Joseph like a flock through the wondering waters, shine forth now!" is the universal law. Let that be our joy: that there was nothing done in the annals of our fathers that we may not expect to see repeated in our own. No age has any exclusive prerogative; save one indeed, the Pentecostal age. That had its crowning display of power which we can emulate only in minor Pentecosts. But we may expect even its influence now: if not the sound and glory of its name, if not its visible tongues, yet its invisible grace more mighty than the signs. The last note, "it filled them all," is more than "it sate upon" each of them. While, brethren, we magnify the triumphs of God in the critical eras of Christendom we must expect the same triumphs in other forms. Say not "the former times were better than these." Be sure that no grace was given to them which is denied to us. The signs and many wonders and divers miracles, so to speak, may be wanting; but here again the last is best; the "gifts of the Holy Ghost" are common to every age. And they are ours by many tokens.

But let me most earnestly remind you that all this is an individual matter. Mark how David blends himself, his individual self, with the generations. There is nothing in the psalm more beautiful or impressive than this. It begins and ends with his own tribute. He thought of the marvels in Egypt, and before Egypt to the patriarchs; and the sublime harmonies of singing generations; but ever and anon glides into "I also will magnify His name." That is

the lesson for you and me. Paying our tribute to the worship of ages past, we must add "I will sing aloud unto the Lord my strength." Let us not lose ourselves in the generation. Let us fight against that common tendency. This age of churches and organizations tends to dwarf the individual, and indeed there is a sense in which he is nothing. But, on the other hand, in another sense, he is all. The units make the company : "say not a confederacy" too emphatically as if forgetting yourself. What is the "Holy, Holy, Holy," in the upper temple if the poor prophet below with unclean lips cannot join it and cries "woe is me!" See to it that you enjoy your personal blessing. Let me urge you to-day. The last hour of this house may be distinguished by you for ever as the hour of your new and better devotion.

II.

Now let us turn our thoughts to the future. The receiving generation is the transmitter also. Each is a link in the golden chain that eternity let down into time and which from time is ascending to eternity again. Each age receives only what it has to pass on to the next.

For here there is a general law of the divine government in the economy of revelation. We have been dwelling entirely on the great gift of truth dispensed from age to age : as if heaven were unrolling before men in slow and successive degrees what men have only to receive in silent wonder and adoration : dividing to each age severally as He will. Nor am I going to revise or retract that funda-

mental truth. The mystery of it is unfathomable ; and we cannot take one sure step in the consideration of our duty unless we consent to receive it with profound submission. But there is another and counter-part aspect of the same truth. It has pleased God to make every generation a trustee for the generations to come. And all sacred history attests that the gradual unfolding of the name and works of God has been bound up with the fidelity of the successive depositaries of the divine counsel. Without involving myself and you in the inextricable difficulties of this subject, let me say that there is no law more patent in the administration of the moral government of the world than that each generation receives its portion in due season from its predecessor, and is responsible only for that; secondly, that each generation impresses its own influence for good or evil on what it receives ; and thirdly that it must needs transmit what it received to the generation following with the impress of its own character. It is evident that the responsibility rests mainly on the second of these points : the influence of the present generation on the truth it receives.

Not of course for what it receives as such. The responsibility of the light or darkness, or darkness mingled with the light, which is the heritage of every generation coming into the world, rests with its predecessors. The Judge of all the earth will do right ; and that is a thought of unspeakable value to us when we are forced to reflect upon the infinite variety of the relations of people and of men to the one common truth. [There is a sense in which I may dare to say that God Himself is responsible for

multitudes unvisited by external revelation : or, if such still bolder language be allowed, He shares the responsibility with the tardy messengers of His will. A very large proportion of the generations of men neither received nor transmitted more than the dim suggestions of nature. It was not their fault that they were left to the interior light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world. They will be judged by no higher standard than that which their nature gave them without an external Law or Rule of Faith.

But all generations have been responsible, and will be held responsible, for the use they made of their advantages and the impress they stamped upon the heritage of truth which they received. Each age has more or less moulded what came into its hands. There is a tone or tendency in every generation which perfectly distinguishes it from every other. We cannot do better than take St. John's illustration of this. The modern word "spirit of the age" might have come from him, only that he multiplies the spirit into spirits. He speaks of the spirits abroad controlling and swaying the minds of his own generation : each spirit having its own sphere. And he speaks of the one Spirit of the truth counterworking all these as manifestations of Antichrist.

The impress each age stamps upon its own Christianity is of various kinds, for good or evil. It would take too long only to sum up the several spirits that have reigned in past ages, and moulded successively the Faith which has been transmitted to us. Suffice that the result of all the influences of all the generations is on our present religion. The

church, of our day as an organ of preaching, and as a sphere of worship is what the accumulated impresses of all past ages have made it. Every generation transmits the heritage it received either as better or worse. I state only the simple fact. Such is the law of Providence. It is useless to appeal against this, and say that He will provide for His own truth and see that it takes no harm in passing through the hands of men. Useless, I say: not untrue. He certainly will see to it that the gates of hell shall not prevail against His cause; and in spite of all human perverseness the faith shall hold on its way. But still the stern truth remains that every generation forms its own character as a transmitter of the one heritage. Not that any historian of any age can precisely say what impress Christianity received from it. We cannot mark off one generation from another; or define when one begins and another ends. But the general idea is quite enough here; and for a moment we may be content with an abstraction. Whether we can understand it or not, we are taught that there is a responsibility resting on each generation. The most impressive of all teachers of this is our Lord Himself. "The men of this generation" in His lips has a peculiar meaning: chiefly as to their responsibility for what they received, but not without reference to what they handed on.

But let us cease from abstraction and mere generality. What is our duty as transmitters of this heritage? Our duty, I say: for we must now keep in view our own special relations as a people and as individual Christians to this most important law of the divine economy.

You will anticipate that our first obligation is to transmit undefiled the pure deposit of truth. It is expected of the present generation that it be faithful to Christ in opposition to the special Antichrists of the age. The Head of the Church looks to us that we hand down His religion to our children unadulterated by the errors of the day. God holds us responsible that the Christian faith descends from us untarnished, as good as we received it. That is the great responsibility of any present time, and of this. The spirit of the age we live in is very lax on this head, and must be resisted: the fundamental doctrines, alas, are ceasing to be regarded as fundamental, and the tendency is one of undue tolerance. The supreme Divinity of Christ, His vicarious atonement, and the eternal penalties of its rejection, are challenged, criticized, and almost avowedly thrown aside as the obstructions of an obsolete orthodoxy. Orthodoxy itself is a term that is used only to point an epigram. Religion is no longer one and absolute; it is not allowed to use the Master's words: "I came forth from God;" "I am not of the world." All its forms are regarded as evolutions of the instinct for the infinite in all men: and it is very ominous that the favourite term now is, "The Science of Religion." These times are governed by the spirit of demonstration. Men will in another than the apostolic sense "prove all things, and hold fast that which is good:" that which is good to reason especially. The highest principles of all are in danger: God Himself must be proved; and, that being impossible, men are substituting an evolving law of fate for the living God. Science rules and the Bible stands at its bar. In their

anxiety to meet the arguments of science, and to elude the force of its attack on the Christian Scriptures which give positive teaching, the defenders of the faith are apt to make undue concessions, and even to renounce the absolute authority of Scripture. Now the sacred oracles are the great trust put into our hands to hold, and to transmit: the trust that enfolds all other trusts. Of the Jews it is said, "To them were entrusted the oracles of God." Strictly speaking, the only thing ever said to be thus committed to the trust of a generation is Holy Scripture. We must hand down the volume of the book as we received it.

But I must not forget the special purpose of the day; and on such an occasion as this may, without being accused of sectarianism, speak of our special responsibility as a religious community. We are bound, by the memory of the hundred years of this place, to hold fast our traditions; and transmit them in their integrity. We value our Christianity first, with its holy books: here is the main test of our fidelity. In comparison with this of course every other tradition is insignificant, however valuable in itself. But we have subordinate deposits of our own, and must transmit our traditions undefiled. They are few, but very important, and they are in danger. Our peculiar rule of fellowship is a trust which this generation is tempted to give up. So is our old system of an itinerant ministry. So is the pastoral government of Christ's flock. So are some other usages of old which God so greatly honoured that we ought to think long before we change them. We are bound to hand down our ancient cherished

institutions, and with this it is our duty to transmit our old literature, our missionary spirit, our aim to penetrate every hole and corner of the land with our testimonies. Some of these are sacred beyond price.

But is it enough that we simply transmit what we have received? That would be a hard and narrow saying. Every age is expected to improve upon its tradition in some respects, and we must cherish the sacred ambition of doing what we can to improve upon our fathers' models. You will think that perhaps hardly possible. But it is not only possible, it is necessary, if we are to administer our stewardship for the coming generation with clean hands. There are some things, as we have seen, that we cannot mend, which we are not permitted to think of mending. But there are some in which we are improving on the past, and shall transmit a better line of things to our successors. Granted that in what David calls the proclaiming the works and uttering the praises of God we cannot mend—that the essentials of preaching and the essentials of worship cannot be improved: all I ask is, that they go down the same—yet the manner of the proclamation and the style of the worship may be transmitted better to our children than we received it. None can make any reasonable objection to that. Within proper limits the idea of improvement in our methods is one which we may entertain. It is possible, for instance, that the new centre of evangelistic enterprise which will rise out of these ruins may be an improvement on the mission operations of this venerable preaching-house. It is possible that the

children may be better taught in catechisms; and that our various organizations of charity may improve; that our young men may be better guided; and that both preaching and worship may share in the general advance. It is not easy to say in what specific directions we may hand down our heritage as improved. Our text harps, as we have seen, upon two ideas: the proclamation and the worship. The new house will introduce little that is new in the latter. There will be a place of worship proper for the more habitual assembling of believers. There will be but little change there. But as to the methods of proclamation more may be said. We shall be faithful to our fathers' general plans: above all, like them keeping up the dignity of the cause of God. But in ways that cannot now be mentioned, we shall improve our methods, and realize, by God's grace, a high idea of the evangelization needful for these times. Then we shall care for our young men as they were never before cared for. We shall try to be better than our fathers as to education of those who are the link between one generation and another.

And this once more is a personal matter. I have been, as it were, addressing that abstract and intangible thing, the present generation. But you have all felt that the appeal has been to you individually. Lest, however, you should have failed to do so, let it now be brought home to you with emphasis. You are one by one concerned; nor is there any generation now living which does not look through your individual eyes, think in your minds, purpose in your hearts, and work with your hands.

Therefore we all, from the venerable few who connect us with a past generation down to the youngest convert who represents the generation which will carry on our labours when we are gone, must take anew the pledge of devotion to our common work : each feeling that he bears in himself, whether old or young, the burden of the responsibility of the present days. Nothing is more habitual than to rebuke the vices of the age, and mourn over the tendencies of the times, as if the age and the times were a personality separate and responsible. We are free enough to condemn the period we live in, and lay our faults upon it. Our Lord did sit in judgment on the generation : He had the right so to do ; the only member of a human generation who could bring it before the bar. But every one must ask himself these two questions : Do I protest against tendencies which I know to be wrong ? and that in every way possible to me in my sphere of life ? Secondly : Is my practice right ? To-day let each examine himself. What am I doing as a young man ? What as a father of a family ? What as a Christian minister and teacher of religion, what as a writer or lecturer, am I doing to help this generation to mould the next ? David, who ended the psalm by saying that he would praise God with all the rest, receiving the traditions of the past, says that, as a member of a transmitting generation, he would proclaim the name of God to all. Join him in this. And carry about more than you have done the burden of the responsibilities of the age you live in. Let this be to you the lesson of the day.

And now we may profitably close by returning

N

for a moment to the solemn subject of this festival, to the note struck at the commencement. We are reminded by the voice of the Eternal God in His word that we must lift our thoughts from the changes and chances of time to the fixed and unchangeable realities of eternity. Let us raise our minds from this our generation, and from all generations, to the eternal and steadfast future, when the ages shall have run out their course, and the mystery of time shall be wrought out to its final issues. Let us go forward in the strength of faith and of hope to the end of all our generations, and centuries, and millenniums; when the last receiving generation shall have caught up the voice of the last transmitting generation, and have no other coming behind it; but send into eternity the combined result of the whole tradition of all the ages since lost and redeemed Adam began the succession of time. Let us contemplate the prospect: not for duty, as we have done with that; not for reminder of responsibility, as we have done with that; but for the pure pleasure of the vision itself.

Undoubtedly there is much in the anticipation to mingle fear with the delight. The church of Christ may say what St. Paul said of himself: "I know that bonds and imprisonments await me!" She has always in her hand the scroll of the prophet John; and, feeling its twentieth chapter pressing on her heart, must indeed sometimes exceedingly fear and quake for the coming tribulation. Like Daniel, the Old Testament John, the sight of the vision may sometimes make her astonished and sick for many days. And we, as representing that church, may

have our spasms of apprehension when we look out into the unknown future. But, after all, to the eye of faith and hope the horizon is clear. We see beyond all intervening calamities the day which is at hand. In the immediate future we may forecast darkness ; then beyond it a time neither clear nor dark ; but in the ultimate future, to which Christian hope springs with a vigour and alacrity that no fear can weigh down, there is only day : broad, cloudless, eternal day. Let us leave this old house, glad with the prospect of the end. We shall see the building laid low, and not one stone left on another, while a better rises out of its dust : the time is coming, though not now is, when every house of prayer shall be closed for ever. We begin a new dispensation of Methodism in Manchester ; the time is coming when Methodism itself, and all the virgins her companions around the Queen, shall have ended their ministry for ever. The generations of witnesses and heralds and worshippers shall have exhausted their long tradition transmitted and received. Their generations of preaching shall cease eternally ; their generations of praise shall close into one note for the end of time, and begin again with the infinite melody of eternal ages. The old proclamation of our Lord shall be done away ; but there shall be a new song. May we, fellow-worshippers of God, and fellow-servants of Jesus in His kingdom and patience, be found in that eternal temple, and each add his strain to the universal harmony which will for ever ascend to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. Amen.