

Passiontide Sermons
By Henry Parry Liddon, D.D., D.C.L., LL.D.
Late Canon and Chancellor of St. Paul's.

London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1891

SERMON XIII.
RELIGIOUS EMOTION.
Preached at St. Paul's on Passion Sunday, April 11, 1881.

St. Matt. xxi. 9.

And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord; Hosanna in the Highest.

IN our Lord's public entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, five days before His Crucifixion, two things, among others, are especially remarkable. The first, the emotion of the multitude that welcomed Him. The second, the practical worthlessness of much of this emotion, as shown by all what followed.

I.

That which calls forth emotion in a multitude of men is first of all the consciousness, of having a common object. And it is natural to ask ourselves, Why should a multitude of persons have left their homes, and have gone out to meet our Lord on His Entry into Jerusalem? If they had believed all that we Christians know to be the truth about His Work and Person, it would have been easy to account for their enthusiasm. But for them He was merely a new Prophet, with a certain reputation attaching to Him among the peasantry of a northern province. London is not generally forward to echo the judgments of Wales or Northumberland; and why the approach of the Prophet of Nazareth to the Jewish capital should have provoked a public demonstration, and have been the occasion of a great public holiday, is at first sight unintelligible.

The answer is that the appearance of a new prophet was an occurrence beyond all others grateful to the Jewish people, at least in the later times of their history. The nations of the ancient world, like those of modern times, had each of them a specific enthusiasm which was roused by the occurrence of particular events, or the appearance of a particular sort of personage. Accordingly, what the foundation of a new colony was to Carthage, or the conquest of a new province to Home, or the completion of a masterpiece by a poet or sculptor to Athens—that and more was the appearance of a prophet, or even of a man who claimed to be so, on the soil of Palestine. For Israel was the people of Revelation, just as Carthage was the home of commercial enterprise, and Rome the seat of Empire, and Greece the nurse of art and of letters. Israel knew itself to be the people of Revelation; that was its distinctive glory among the nations of the world; and of this Revelation, which had been made not once for all at the beginning of its history, but gradually during a long sequence of centuries, in which first this and then that addition was contributed to it, the prophets were mainly, and in later times exclusively, the organs,

When a prophet appeared the nation expected to learn something that it did not know before about the Will of God: about His Nature, His Attributes, His Ways: about its own destinies and prospects; about the fortunes of other nations around it. And especially when the days of its own national glory had passed, and Palestine had come to be only a province of the great Empire of Rome, the Jews fell back with more and more attachment on all that recalled their great religious past, and the new prophet received a welcome which would certainly not have been given him in the days of David or Jehoshaphat. Often indeed it happened that this public enthusiasm was grossly abused, and that the people followed some worthless adventurer until he led them to the brink of political catastrophe. But their devotion to the Baptist was a fair test of the popular temper: once let it be proclaimed that “a great prophet hath risen up among us, and the Lord hath visited His people,” and the heart of Israel, the depository of God’s ancient Revelations, and the expectant heir of His Revelations to come, was at once touched. To look on the prophet’s face, to listen to his words, men would leave their occupations and their homes; and so universal was this feeling that it was strong enough to set aside the poor opinion which then, as now, the inhabitants of a capital commonly entertained for the judgment of provincials. This was the object which brought the multitude together—the attraction which the reported appearance of a new prophet always exercised over the countrymen of Isaiah and Jeremiah—the vague hope of hearing some new utterance of the Mind of God.

The multitude thus came together in quest of a common object, and then a second source of emotion came into play, viz., the sense, which was thus roused in each individual man, that he was one of a multitude. To be a unit in a multitude, gathered together for a common purpose, stirs the heart and soul of man,—in some cases consciously and powerfully, in all cases to some extent. There are faculties and inclinations in each of us—social instincts we now call them—which are roused into active conscious self-assertion when we find ourselves surrounded by a number of our fellow-creatures. While we are alone, or living only with a few, the social instincts are more or less dormant in average men: but when a man is brought into intimate contact with many others, assembled together for a common purpose, that which is merely personal in him falls into the background, and all that associates him with others comes to the front. We all know as an abstract truth that we are each of us members of the great human family spread throughout all climes and countries of the world; but this conviction is a very shadowy one until it is in a manner thrown into a visible and concrete form by our becoming part of a great assembly of human beings: mind thinking side by side with mind; heart throbbing side by side with heart; will resolving, struggling, nerving itself side by side with will: as though individual life had merged itself for the time being in a common life, or at least that each man in the multitude were leading two lives at one and the same time, a personal life and a corporate or social one, while of these the latter was for the moment by far the more powerful and constraining.

The emotion which is produced by a sense of belonging to a great multitude is a force which no reasonable man will underrate. In all free countries this is shown by the jealousy with which men guard the right of public meeting. Often enough the thought which is produced at a public meeting is much less entitled to real attention, much less thorough, finished, and true, than that which a solitary student works out alone in his library. But in the meeting there is the element of emotion, which more than atones for what may be defective or turbid in the thought, since it is a real source of strength. It is

not only that two men are stronger than one, but each man is stronger through this fellowship with the rest; his sense of brotherhood, thus brought home to him by the presence of his fellow-men, quickens and enlarges his stock of power, whether of head or heart: he is more of a man for being thus in close contact with his brother men. This is the secret of what they call the spirit of the corps in the army; this is, in part, though not, by any means, altogether, the secret of the value of public worship. Every such assembly as that which is gathered here to-day, invests, or may invest, each person who composes it with a force which he would not have if he were alone: a great congregation of men, believing in One Lord, and hoping through His Mercy for a blessed life after death, and loving Him because He is what He is, and other men for His sake, is not merely an aggregate of praying souls, but a great productive source of spiritual sympathy. As we meet within these walls the pettier aspects of life surely fall away, and we lose ourselves in the vision of "one Body and One Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling, One Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of all, Who is above all, and through all, and in all;" we see before our eyes an earthly representation of that great multitude which no man could number, of all kindreds, and nations, and people, and tongues, standing before the Throne of God and of the Lamb, with palms in their hands, and singing the new song of the Life Eternal. In a great congregation the fire of a sacred brotherhood passes from soul to soul: it is easy to understand how much would be lost by forsaking "the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is." No doubt, too, on that first Palm Sunday, the Jewish multitude, because it was a multitude, was conscious of an emotion all its own, an emotion distinct from that which was created by the purpose that had drawn it together, and from that which followed on the common act of homage to Jesus which it provoked.

To these sources of emotion—the quest of a common object, and the sense of forming part of a multitude—a third must be added: a common action. This common action is the product of previously existing emotion, and it reacts in greatly increasing it. And the first common action of a multitude moved by deep feeling is exclamation. It matters little who supplies the watchword: it is uttered, it is taken up, and becomes common property. When the Christians of Milan were in doubt whom to elect for their bishop, and Ambrose, a layman governor of the city, was present, simply to keep order, a little child cried out, "Ambrose is Bishop." So exalted was his character, so obvious was the fitness of the appointment, that the cry was at once-echoed on all sides: "Ambrose is Bishop!" In ignorance of the real speaker, it was even said to be the suggestion of an Angel: and in spite of his sincere resistance, he was within a week ordained and consecrated Archbishop of Milan. A multitude, having vaguely before it a common purpose, and animated by that emotion which the sense of numbers of itself produces, soon finds a voice. The suggestion may, too easily, come from below. Who was it that first cried "Crucify Him!" on the day at Calvary? Who was it who suggested, at a critical moment that the mob of Paris should march on the Tuileries? It is sometimes easy to lead, as always to follow, a multitude to do evil. For evil or for good, a multitude finds a voice; and then this voice, raised in rude but substantial harmony under the presence of a common body of feeling, reacts powerfully upon every member of that multitude. We all of us know the difference between a hymn sung by a single performer, or by a select choir, and a hymn sung in unison by four thousand people. In the latter case it is a sensible embodiment of the feeling of fellowship in a common object; and public worship

is a spiritual blessing in the proportion in which it can succeed in appropriating this great power of common spiritual effort embodied in voice. The ancient Christians set great store on this. St. Ambrose compares the responses of the people, as they sang the psalms in public worship, to the breaking of the waves at regular intervals upon the sea-shore:¹ and St. Augustine has told us how much the hymns sung by St. Ambrose and the people of the Church at Milan touched his heart and drew him up to God, when he was yet some way from his conversion.²

So no doubt it was at our Lord's entry into Jerusalem. Perhaps cue of the disciples, thronging round our Lord, gave the signal: from them it spread to the crowd around. "The multitudes that went before and that followed cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is He That cometh in the Name of the Lord: Hosanna in the Highest." It was at once a prayer and an act of praise: it was vague enough to be used by those who knew least about the new Prophet, while yet it satisfied those who knew most about Him: it expressed the twofold feeling in the minds of the multitude, who were at once delighted with a new Ambassador from above, and withal hopeful that He might brighten their national future. But as it rose upon the breeze, from the lips of the multitude who thronged around the advancing Redeemer, it must have quickened the emotion that produced it, and raised it to its highest point of intensity and fervour. Each man who joined in it felt, as we may feel, how much lies in that word of the Psalmist's. "My praise is of Thee in the great congregation."

The temper of us Englishmen leads us to regard emotion with a certain distrust; and in the last century there was a school of writers who especially attacked its connection with religion. The one great object of their apprehension might have seemed to be religious enthusiasm. Religion, they said, ought to be based entirely upon reason: and reason is the traditional foe of enthusiasm and all its ways. An English prelate wrote a work, in which he claimed for the Church of England a superiority over Methodism on the one hand, and "Roman Catholicism on the other, on the ground that while these religious systems encouraged enthusiasm, the Church of England was free from it."³ "Few good or prudent Churchmen in the present day would think that a very effective apology for the English or any other Christian Church: but it represented the temper of a cold and somewhat heartless age—a temper, from the prevalence of which the Church unhappily did not altogether escape. Strange indeed we must deem it that any Christian with the New Testament in his hands could bring himself to denounce religious fervour or emotion, or could regard it as anything but a great and precious gift of God. How can we read the Gospel accounts of the raising of Lazarus, or the description in the Acts of the Apostles of St. Paul's fare well to the presbyters at Ephesus on the shore at Miletus without being conscious that the tenderest feelings of our natures are stirred, much more powerfully than our reasoning faculty? And if religion undertakes to improve man as a whole, how could she ignore the life of feeling and address herself exclusively to the life of thought? Certainly, emotion is not necessarily religious: but the best and highest use of emotion is in the service of religion, to which, indeed, it contributes some very important elements. What is it that constitutes the felt difference between hard morality and really religious conduct? The presence of emotion. What is it that makes the mental attitude of

¹ St. Ambrose, *Hexaem.* iii. 9.

² Confessions of St. Augustine, Book ix. §[vi.] 14.

³ Dissertation on Enthusiasm, by Dr. Green, Bishop of Lincoln.

us Christians towards the truths of faith so different from that of a man of science or of letters towards the conclusions of philosophy?

Emotion. What is it within the soul that speaks to God in true heart-felt prayer? Emotion. What is the un-definable charm which everywhere marks the active operation of religion on the human heart? Emotion. What is it that now and then visits us, we know not how or why, and for the time makes us better, nobler, truer, than our wonted selves? Viewed from without, it is emotion. Surely, brethren, we, most of us, do not live so near to Heaven that we need nothing to lift us up out of the earthly nets in which our poor spirits get so often, as it seems, hopelessly imbedded and fixed; surely we are too often bound and chained down to the life of sense and the life of habit, which is based on and intertwined with sense: and a lever that can give our hearts and minds a few hours' liberty to regain something of that air of Heaven which God created them to breathe must be a blessing. Reason, after all, is only a faculty of the soul: a royal faculty, if you will, but by no means able to do duty for the whole complex life of man in the matter of religion: and when men have attempted to base religion wholly upon reason, religion soon has shrivelled up into the proportions and likeness of a thin philosophy that has vainly endeavoured to secure the approbation of a few coteries of learned critics, at the cost of forfeiting all claim whatever to touch the heart of the mass of mankind. That which swayed the Jewish multitude as they sang Hosanna before Jesus Christ on Palm Sunday was a deep emotion; and, so far as it went, it was assuredly a great blessing—at least a great possible source of blessing—for all who took part in it.

II.

The religious value of emotion is beyond question; but the circumstances of our Lord's entry into Jerusalem appear to show that emotion by itself may not be worth much; that it requires other things as well if it is to be healthy in itself, and if it is to last. For we know that five days after there was emotion enough of a very different kind on the other side of Jerusalem; nor is it possible to doubt that it was shared in by some of those who had taken part in the Hosannas of Palm Sunday. What is it that emotion needs if it is to be retained in the service of true Religion?

I. First, then, religious emotion must centre in a definite conviction. Emotion is called out by some fact, whether it be an event or a person; but if the emotion is to last this person or event must be constantly present to the mind as real and definite. If the emotion is called out by a momentary impression, which presently becomes vague and indistinct, and then dies away, the emotion will share the fate of the impression, and will accompany it in the process of dissolution. Unless we Christians have a clear and definite idea about the Divine Person and Redeeming Work of our Lord Jesus Christ. about the power of His Precious Blood to wash away our sins, the presence of His Spirit to renew our hearts and lives, the virtue of His Sacraments to unite us to His Sacred Manhood in time and for eternity,—a few pulsations of objectless emotion will not help us long. Here is the value of the Christian Creeds: they fix in clear outline before the soul of the believer the great objects of his faith, which rouse in him movements of love and awe: they resist the tendencies of unassisted emotion to lose itself on what is vague and indistinct: they place, before him God, in His Essential Threefold Nature, and in His Redeeming and Sanctifying work, and in this way they sustain the living emotion of the

soul directed towards God, as revealed by Himself. The Creeds are not a series of detached propositions: they are a collection of statements which correspond to a living whole. To an unbeliever a creed only suggests the reflection: How many propositions—dogmas—for a man to believe! To a believer, before whose soul's eye the Divine Object described in the Creeds is livingly present, a Creed suggests the reflection: How impossible to omit any one of those elements of a description which the Reality demands!

Now it is at least probable that a great many of the people who accompanied our Lord on His entry into Jerusalem had very vague ideas of what—I do not say He is, or claimed to be, but—even of what His countrymen imagined Him to be. They joined the crowd because others around them did so: they were carried away by the impulse of the moment: others cried Hosanna, and they did: others cut down branches, and they threw themselves into the spirit of the moment, and followed the example. But the day declined, and they re-entered the Holy City and returned to their homes; and little remained with them in the way of a definite impression. The emotion of Palm Sunday had passed, for this among other reasons, because it had had no very definite object; and they were ready for another emotion—of a very different character—“when the chief priests would persuade the multitude that they should ask for the release of Barabbas and destroy Jesus.”

2. Next, religious emotion must not be divorced from morality and conscience. It is not necessarily connected with them. In the old Pagan world some of the most emotional forms of worship—such as those which came to Rome from Syria and Egypt—were also most closely allied with culpable forms of self-indulgence. And in Christendom the transition is easy—only too easy—from ardent religious emotion to very serious transgressions of the Divine law. The fact is that the raw material of the two opposite impulses is sometimes the same: the passion which when sanctified by grace pours itself out in adoration of the Eternal Beauty may easily, in its natural and selfish form, become an instrument of man's deepest degradation. Our composite nature, half-angel, half-brute, lives on the frontier of two worlds, and the impulse which may raise it to the Heaven of heavens is but a transformed and spiritualised form of the impulse that may bury it in all that is lowest and foulest on earth.

Thus from time to time the world is startled by some great misconduct on the part of persons who have shown more or less devotion to religion; and men speak as if what had happened was as wonderful as it is startling. The explanation probably is that the religion in question was all emotion, having no relation to conscience and conduct. Philip II. of Spain, and Louis xiv. of France, had their times of sincere religious emotion—though we know what they were at other times too. And many people in this country who talk of their being justified by faith, ought, if they spoke quite accurately, to speak of their being justified by transient emotion. When St. Paul teaches us that faith is the condition of our justification, he means by faith not a mere movement of the intelligence, not a mere throbbing of the heart, not even an act of trust, but an adhesion of the whole inward being of man, of mind and heart, of will and of affection, to Jesus the Perfect Moral Being, Who obeyed the Divine Will even to death for love of us men. This is a very different thing from feeling “warmed up,” as people speak, after attending a very exciting service, and then going home to our old habits and states of mind; a different thing from bearing branches of palm-trees before the Redeemer, and going back to Jerusalem to obey the leading Jews when they are preparing to crucify the Lord of Glory.

There is much need for thinking of this just now, when we are entering the most solemn week in the Christian year. No man in whom the Christian sense is yet at all alive can pass through Holy Week with entire indifference; can be heedless and heartless, while Christendom is on its knees, throughout the world, before the Cross of Christ. If anything can touch a man, it is surely God's "inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ," which has placed within our reach "the means of grace," and which endows us with "the hope of glory:" it is the long and tragic history of the Passion, with its incalculable depths of shame and pain, willingly undergone for the love of us sinners, each and all. We may be but as among those who stood at the outer edge of the crowd on Palm Sunday, yet we must have some share in the emotion which the Object before us, the thousands around us, the sacred language of the Church, so powerfully and variously suggest. It is impossible not to believe that of the thousands who here in the heart of London, during this past week, have left their engrossing occupations to listen for a few minutes to the eloquent and sincere voice that day after day has set forth with unaccustomed power the mystery and virtue of the Cross of Christ, within the walls of the Cathedral,—some have not felt an enthusiasm to which they had before been strangers, and have desired to live hereafter more purely for the glory of their Crucified Lord. How important it is that their feelings should attach themselves to definite convictions, and should take shape in some real practical effort,—in the determination to form a new habit, to renounce a bad practice, to put on in some true way the new mail who after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. This emotion has not, believe it, dear brethren, been vouchsafed you for nothing; do not let it die away; do not part with it, only to meet it again, as one of your forgotten responsibilities in the hour of judgment.

Again, on Tuesday evening next, the particular commemoration of our Saviour's Sufferings, which has now become annual in St. Paul's, will take place;⁴ and a great German genius of a past age, set forth by English skill and genius of the present day, will doubtless, as in former years, draw numbers within these walls. On these occasions music does her noblest work as the handmaid of religion; and many a man, whom sermons fail to reach, finds his spirit awed and soothed by the language of harmonies which carry him far beyond the world of sense and time. Alas! how great will be our failure to have done anything real for God's glory, if those who come here are thinking only or chiefly of the music, and little of Him whose Sacred Sufferings it is designed to recall. How poor and worthless will have been the expenditure of emotion, if it should lavish itself altogether on the artistic performance, and never cross the threshold of the outer chambers of the spiritual world! Esthetic pleasure with a beautiful service differs altogether from the joy and satisfaction of the soul, when really in His presence to Whom all services should lead: this sort of Hosanna may always be easily and swiftly followed by "Crucify Him! crucify Him!" May our Crucified Lord enable all who are present on Tuesday evening at the "Passion-music" to do true and heartfelt honour to His sacred Sufferings: to turn any warm or tender feelings that He may graciously vouchsafe to them to some practical account; and to prepare themselves all the more carefully and reverently for the solemn hours of agony and silence on Good Friday, and for the transcendent joys of a good conscience at the Communion of Easter morning.

⁴ i.e. The Service at which Bach's "Passion-Music" is rehearsed.