

1868-02-19

An address delivered on the occasion of the funeral of the Rev. William James

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/562>

Downloaded from DSpace Repository, DSpace Institution's institutional repository

A D D R E S S .

It was an acknowledged characteristic of the Christian ministry, in apostolic times, that it possessed "a diversity of gifts;" and this characteristic, though essentially modified by the passing away of the miraculous dispensation, still remains. Not that it is peculiar, in its present form, to the ministry—for it pervades every profession and every occupation—indeed it is an attribute of the common humanity; but its bearings on the ministry are peculiar, and well deserve a distinct consideration. It will not, I trust, be an unsuitable preparation for what I am about to say of the revered and beloved minister in the presence of whose unburied remains we are assembled, that I should show very briefly in what this diversity of gifts in the ministry consists, and how it illustrates the riches of Divine wisdom.

It begins with the intellect — while men's minds are, in the main, constituted alike, — that is, with the same general powers of discernment and activity, there is a vast difference, not only in the degrees of strength in which particular faculties exist in different minds, but in the aggregate amount of intellectual force or ability. There are some ministers, and eminently useful ministers too, who, though their minds are well formed and well trained, have no striking characteristics; and therefore their course is comparatively a silent one; and their only earthly record is in the memories and hearts of those whose interests they serve. But there are others whose minds are cast in a mould of uncommon strength, or versatility, or grandeur; who are at home in the regions of abstract thought and philosophical inquiry, or who can sway the multitude by their eloquence as the trees of the forest are moved by a mighty wind — men of this stamp not only impress themselves on the character of their generation, but leave behind them a name for posterity to admire and honour. Here are men bearing the same office, recognizing the same authority, engaged in

the same work, and yet, in consequence of their different intellectual capabilities and acquirements, they differ greatly in the facility with which they prosecute their labours, as well as in the results by which their labours are crowned.

This diversity extends also to the moral constitution. While different habits of thought generate different habits of feeling, and the feelings, in turn, have much to do in giving direction to the thoughts, there is an original difference in the structure of our moral nature, that goes far to account for the variety of character actually manifested. One is constituted with open and demonstrative tendencies; another is thoughtful and cautious and reticent. One is gentle and conciliatory in all his intercourse; another has a degree of sensitiveness to injury that is sometimes scarcely distinguishable from the spirit of retaliation. One falters and faints at the sight of any obstacle; another has a measure of perseverance that the presence of the most formidable obstacles serves only to quicken and intensify. Now as the various qualities, of which these are a specimen, help to form the character of the man, so it is

evident that the prevalence of any of them must materially modify the character of the minister. Whatever his more striking moral proclivities may be, they will be sure to manifest themselves amidst his professional engagements, and of course will go far to determine the complexion of his ministry.

I only add that there is a diversity in the degrees of spiritual influence imparted to different ministers of the Gospel. We are obliged, indeed, to acknowledge that it is quite possible that an unforgiven sinner should hold the office of a Christian minister; for we know that there was a Judas even among our Lord's own disciples; but we have no right to presume on the existence of such a case until the conviction is forced upon us by evidence absolutely irresistible. Still, we cannot doubt, whether we consult the recorded experience of ministers, or the results of our own observation, that, among those who preach the Gospel, the spirit of the Gospel is exhibited in very unequal measure; in other words, that there is among them a variety of Christian character, corresponding to that which is witnessed in the

Church at large. While some seem to be in constant communion with God's gracious Spirit, and to be receiving all the time fresh tokens of his love and gaining brighter evidences of their adoption, others — if appearances are a true index — have much less of faith and fervour than would minister most effectually to their own comfort or the best interests of those committed to their care. Though I speak here of the influences of the Spirit as God's gracious gift, we are not to lose sight of the fact that this involves co-operation, and of course responsibility, on the part of the individual who is thus favoured. Neither ministers nor private Christians can expect the constant indwelling of the Spirit in their hearts, unless they are vigilant and earnest to secure his gracious presence.

Now let us consider, for a moment, how this feature of the Divine economy, in respect to the Christian ministry, is illustrative of the Divine wisdom; or how this diversity of gifts among the ambassadors of Christ is made to subserve God's gracious purposes.

I may say, in the first place, it does this, inasmuch as it includes the amplest provision for

the moral renovation of the world. It is God's revealed purpose that, through the instrumentality of the Gospel, this world shall ultimately be reclaimed to the full dominion of the Messiah; and the ministry, as it is now constituted, is perfectly fitted to accomplish this end. The general duty of ministers is indeed the same in all cases, — preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ, and thus endeavouring to convert sinners to God, and to build up the Church in faith and holiness; and hence the general qualifications for the ministry must always be the same; and yet there must be a variety, corresponding somewhat to the variety of taste and talent with which they are brought in contact. For instance, there are those whose minds are far reaching and profound, and whose tastes incline them to study Divine truth not only in its great fundamental principles, but in its more abstract relations; and in the latter case as well as the former their sanctification is carried forward — there are ministers whose tastes and talents qualify them to meet such an exigency as this, either in public or in private — with the lips or with the

pen. There are institutions to be projected, established, sustained, with which the advancement of Christ's cause is signally identified — there are ministers whose practical tastes and talents eminently qualify them for such service, and whose wisdom and energy never falter in the performance of it. In short, there is no field in the wide world that calls for occupancy, for which God, in the distribution of his gifts, has not made full provision; and while some are at home with any minds with which they can be brought in contact, or in any sphere of labour to which they can be introduced, others are evidently designed to occupy a narrower field, but are no less diligent in the cultivation of it. And thus it is that there is no work necessary to be done on earth, to secure the Mediator's complete triumph, that is not already amply provided for.

Here also — in the variety of talent and character that we find in the ministry — there is provision made for drawing all the labourers in Christ's vineyard into the nearest relations, thus rendering them fellow helpers unto the kingdom of God. They have all in view the same ultimate end,—

the establishment of Christ's universal reign; and though their course of labour is generally the same, yet it varies in many of its details, according to the diversity of their gifts and circumstances. What they have to do is to render this diversity auxiliary to their common usefulness and their reciprocal good will. They are to labour together, while yet each performs his own appropriate duties, and, according to his ability, becomes a helper of those with whom he is united in the bonds of a common brotherhood.

Let me add that, in this arrangement of which I am speaking, God has made provision to magnify his grace. For the effect of this inequality of distribution is that large numbers of Christ's ministers are found in the walks of humble mediocrity, and they never aspire to any thing beyond it; and yet some of these very men are constantly gathering jewels to their immortal crowns. Their utterances, though never aspiring to any thing beyond simplicity and godly sincerity, are really a most successful wielding of the Sword of the Spirit; and in the train of them come conviction and conversion, and the joy in Heaven, and the

rapid enlargement of the Church. What but God's abounding grace is to be acknowledged in such mighty good, accomplished through such an humble instrumentality?

I have led you into this train of thought from a conviction that the friend whom we lament was signally favoured in respect to original gifts, and that, in the bestowment of those gifts,—in other words, through his peculiar intellectual and moral constitution, was communicated the impulse toward profound thought and benevolent action, to which he has been so long and so assiduously devoted. You will allow me to present you a very general outline of his life and a summary view of his character.

WILLIAM JAMES, a son of William and Elizabeth (Tighman) James, was born in this city, on the 1st of June, 1797. His father had emigrated from Ireland to this country in 1793, and was for many years among our most wealthy and influential citizens. William spent his earliest years at home, and, during part of the time, enjoyed the instruction of that justly celebrated scholar and teacher, formerly Pastor of the First

Presbyterian Church, the Rev. John McDonald. At the age of fourteen, he was admitted a member of Dr. Banks' Academy at Florida; where he completed his course preparatory to entering College. In 1813 he joined the Sophomore Class of Princeton College, and in 1816 was admitted to the degree of Bachelor of Arts; having for his classmates Governor McDowell of Virginia, Bishop McIlvaine of Ohio, Dr. McLean, the late President of the College, and several others of distinguished name. He had had religious impressions, at different periods, from early childhood, but it was not till the memorable revival of 1815 in the College of which he was a member, that he allowed himself to hope that he had become the subject of a spiritual renovation, and, as a consequence, made a public profession of his faith. He joined the Theological Seminary at Princeton in 1816, shortly after his graduation, and, having completed his course there, and spent a short time in prosecuting his studies elsewhere, he was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Albany in September, 1820. His health being, at this time, considerably impaired, he crossed the ocean almost immediately

after his licensure, and passed about twenty months, chiefly in Scotland, dividing his time between Glasgow and Edinburgh. During this period he lived in comparative retirement, conversing more with books than with men; and though within a few minutes' walk of some of the greatest spirits of the age, he seems to have studiously avoided even an introduction to them.

Shortly after his return to this country, he commenced preaching in the Murray Street Church, New York, where Dr. Mason had previously exercised his ministry, and continued thus engaged for six months. For a year and a half after this, he preached as a stated supply to a congregation formed partly from Clarkson and partly from Brockport, in the Western part of this State, and then removed to Rochester, and became the Pastor of the Second Church there, in which relation he continued for six years. In January, 1831, he resigned this charge and came to Schenectady, where he occupied the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church, much to the satisfaction of the congregation, till July, 1832. He left this position by reason of the failure of

his health; and, after a few months, returned to this his native place, and, in the fall of 1833, accepted a call to become the Pastor of our Third Church. Here he remained till February, 1835, when he resigned the last charge he ever held, though he continued to have his home in the midst of us till the close of life. During the twenty-three years that have passed since that time, he has devoted himself much to philosophical and theological research, though I am not aware that any of the results of these labours have been given to the world; and whenever he has consented to occupy the pulpits of any of his brethren, here or elsewhere, I believe he has been uniformly listened to, not only with fixed attention but with marked admiration. Of his last illness I need not speak—you all know the alternate hope and anxiety that have been expressed concerning him on every side, and how his malady has resisted all medical skill, until it has finally had its issue in his being brought hither on his way to the grave.

I trust it will not be thought an infringement of the proprieties of the hour, that I here

state briefly some of my own personal recollections and impressions concerning our departed friend, that have been accumulating during a familiar acquaintance of upwards of half a century. Our first meeting was when we both joined the Theological Seminary at Princeton in the fall of 1816. During the first month or two after we became thus associated, I had scarcely any knowledge of him except from meeting him in the class; but even then and there he developed traits of character that seemed to foreshadow the man of mark. Our acquaintance, however, after it commenced, soon became intimate; and one of the first revelations he made to me was that he was doubtful and dissatisfied in respect to his own spiritual condition. I knew of his going to unburden his spirit to our venerable Professor, Dr. Alexander, whose familiar acquaintance with all the various phases of Christian experience rendered him a most competent counsellor. I do not think that this season of darkness was of very long continuance, though I believe his religious exercises often took on a morbid cast, and always received a tinge, in a greater or less degree, from

his peculiar, I might almost say unique, intellectual and moral constitution. His career in the Seminary left no one who witnessed it in doubt that he possessed talents of a very high order, especially the talent for writing and public speaking; and, if my memory is not at fault, the very finest specimens of pulpit oratory that I ever heard from him, were before he had yet entered a pulpit. Shortly after I was settled in the ministry, he came to visit me at my new home; and we passed a few days delightfully together; and he, being in an uncommonly genial and vivacious mood, became an attraction to all whom he met. He occupied my pulpit also, and thrilled the audience by two very able and eloquent discourses. Not long after my removal to this city, he became a Pastor here by the side of me, and I accounted it a privilege that I was permitted to assist in introducing him to his new charge. During his ministry here and ever since, the same fraternal relations between us that commenced at Princeton have been preserved. He has often accommodated me, and gratified my congregation, by occupying my pulpit when I have been absent;

and though, when I have asked this favour of him, he has several times given me a negative answer, yet, I believe in nearly every instance, reflection has brought his kindly spirit into such vigorous exercise as to suggest to him some way in which the obstacles to a compliance with my request could be surmounted. I have seen him in every stage of his last illness, from the time that his daily labours were only occasionally interrupted by suffering, until he had fallen into that iron sleep that was ominous of immediate death; and what has impressed me, during the whole, more than any thing else, has been the perfect naturalness of his whole demeanour—in the aged suffering minister whom I saw before me I could recognize every characteristic of my friend and classmate of 1816. I always found him cheerful, and retaining a deep interest in the past, while yet it was manifest that his thoughts were much upon the invisible and eternal. In one of our last interviews he expressed to me, in the strongest terms possible, the sense of his own unworthiness, but added that, in God's revealed truth, he found all the needed comfort and hope.

I was at his bedside after he had ceased to be conscious, and while the current of life was fast ebbing away; but I could not doubt that the sad demonstrations on which my eye rested, were only the preparation for the ascent of a ransomed spirit to its glorious, eternal home.

In what I have said of the life of our honoured friend, I have supplied the material from which may be formed at least a general estimate of his character; but you will allow me, notwithstanding, to add a few words, illustrative of some of its more striking features. His mind was generally teeming with profound thought, and was never in its element while moving in a beaten track. His taste in composition was so remarkably exact as to set at defiance the sternest criticism. His discourses for the pulpit were generally elaborated with the utmost care, and it must be acknowledged were better fitted to furnish material for thought to thoroughly disciplined minds, than to minister to the gratification of the superficial and emotional hearer; though I have scarcely known any preacher who was more generally acceptable to *all* classes than he. His manner was a striking

compound of earnestness and energy, that left no one in doubt that his utterances were from his inmost heart; and I have sometimes heard him, especially in his earlier days, when he rose to a pitch of enthusiasm that might have been likened to the rushing tempest. He had a large and generous heart, that responded readily to the claims of want and wo, not only in Christian sympathy but in liberal contributions. He was naturally impulsive, and sometimes "the sober second thought" changed his judgment and his purpose altogether; for he was too magnanimous to hold to an error for the sake of being consistent. He doubtless judged correctly in retiring from the regular duties of the ministry in his latter years; for, while he had great power in the pulpit, which he never ceased to exercise occasionally as long as his health would permit, he was fully aware that his peculiarities of temperament were not in harmony with the uniform routine of pastoral life. His high intelligence and genial spirit came out in his private intercourse, and he has left behind him many a friend who will hold these attractive qualities in grateful and enduring remembrance.

I cannot forbear to mention, in this connection, a circumstance, strikingly illustrative of his character, that has been communicated to me since his death. A gentleman, now occupying one of the highest military positions in the land, informed me that, while Mr. James was a Pastor at Rochester, he was himself brought to a deep sense of his sinfulness, and, through the kindness of some friend, was introduced to Mr. James as a counsellor. Instead of making particular inquiries concerning the state of his mind, as would have seemed natural, he looked at him for a few moments in silence, and then opened the Bible, and bade him read and study the first chapter of the Second Epistle of Peter, and endeavour to bring his heart and life into unison with its teachings and spirit; after which he offered a deeply solemn and fervent prayer in his behalf, and then allowed him to retire. That interview resulted in the conversion of one whose whole subsequent life has furnished the proof that there is a power in religion to withstand the temptations incident to the exercise of the highest military authority. I mention this, not so much as a gratifying instance

of the good effect of his ministry, as an illustration of the peculiar manner in which he exercised it. It is safe to say that his noble qualities of mind and heart have impressed themselves deeply on his contemporaries, while the peculiarity, I may say the originality, of his entire character will help to keep the impression more vivid, and to render it more enduring.

And now shall not our minds and our hearts all be open to the solemn teachings that are conveyed to us through these solemnities? First of all, let the widow and her children, and the surviving brothers and other near relatives, now that the light in which they have been privileged to rejoice so long, has been withdrawn, endeavour, by fervent prayer, to bring to themselves the comforts of God's gracious Spirit, and to make this a fresh starting point on their heavenly journey. Let the ministers of the Gospel with whom he has been associated, whether in earlier or later life, especially let those of us who have been accustomed to meet him in frequent intercourse, and have had the privilege to avail ourselves of his occasional labours, and sometimes to listen to

his profound discussions and stirring appeals, be admonished by his departure to renew our diligence in getting ready for our own. Let the members not only of the congregations to which he has sustained the pastoral relation, but of the several congregations who have enjoyed the benefit of his occasional services, call to remembrance, seriously and practically, the truths which they have heard from his lips, enforced as they now are by the voice that issues from his coffin. And, finally, let this whole community, in the midst of which the greater part of his life has been passed, let the Church at large, wherever he has been known and honoured, learn the lessons of his death and gratefully embalm his virtues. While we rejoice in the thought that his spirit has entered into glory, and while we leave his body in the keeping of the Resurrection and the Life, let us, as the best tribute we can render to his memory, as the best use we can make of his death, resolve to keep ourselves constantly girded to ascend in his upward track, and join him in ministrations around the throne.