

THE
FIRST MIRACLE OF CHRIST
AND
PROHIBITION:

A SERMON PREACHED IN ST. PETER'S CHURCH, BROCKVILLE,
ON THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
(17TH JANUARY), 1886.

BY
GEORGE J. LOW, *Rector.*

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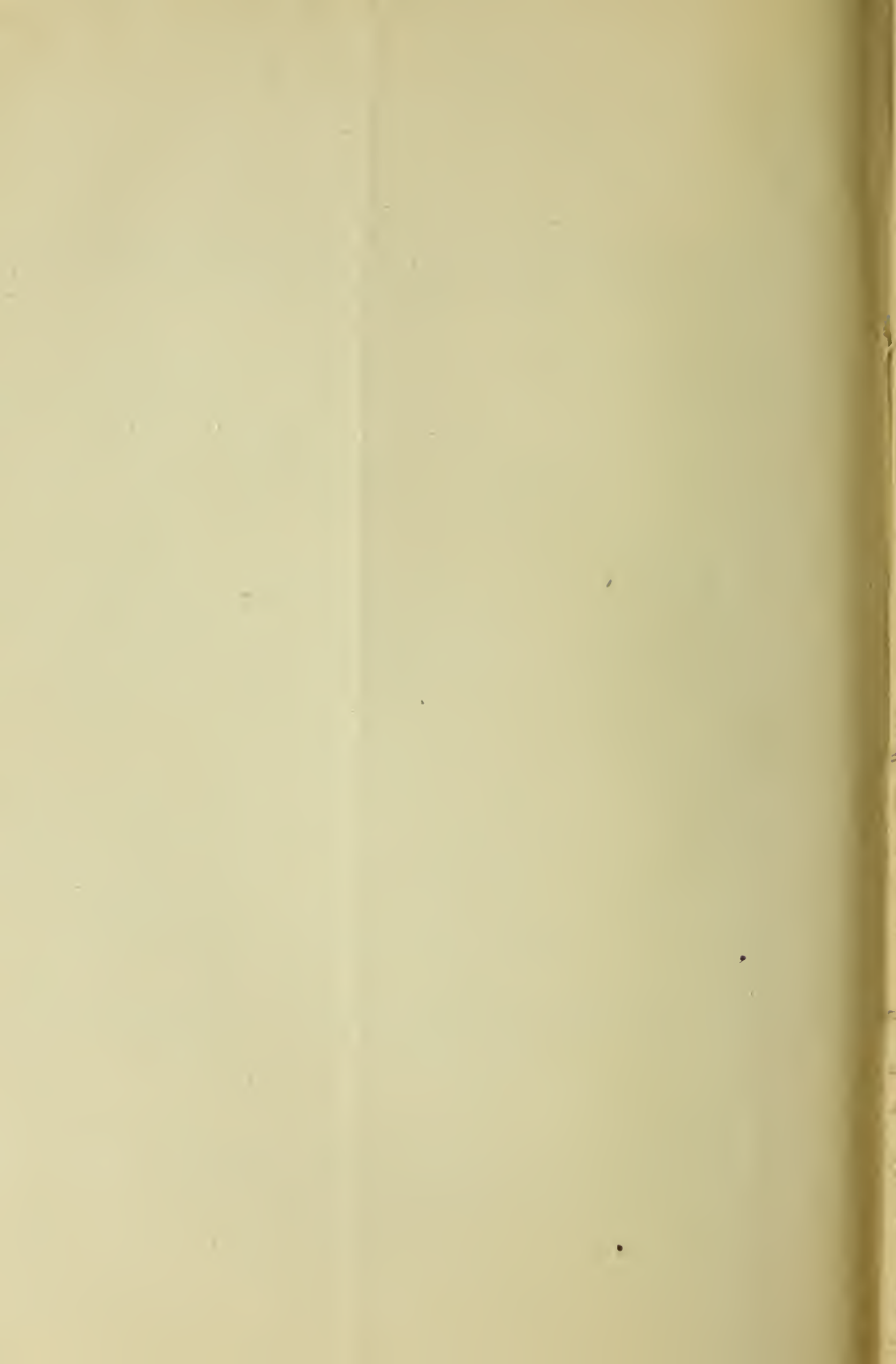
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“This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth His glory.”—St. John ii. 11.

IT is a thing for which we ought to be very thankful, brethren, that the Church's yearly system of teaching brings before us every incident of our dear Lord's life, and forces into prominence, each in turn, every saying, every work of His, whether we personally care to view it or not. In these days, when there are so many different kinds of religion, I think we may without much difficulty discern that each particular kind of religion has its own special “hobby,” so to speak. It takes one or two “texts,” and out of them manufactures its own theology: every other text must be made to fit into that, and is warped and twisted and turned until it does, after a fashion, fit in; and if, after all the manipulation, this cannot be effected, then it is summarily dismissed from the count as a “Judaism,” or a “metaphor,” or an “Oriental hyperbole,” or something of that sort.

And as in other bodies, so in the Church of England, individual preachers have their “hobbies,” their favourite doctrines, their favourite “texts.” It is human nature after all; we are

all partialists, more or less ; and if we were left unrestricted, our congregations would too often be fed with some particular kind of spiritual diet, which might be wholesome and beneficial in due proportion, but if persisted in to the exclusion of all other kinds of food, would produce spiritual dyspepsia—a morbid unhealthy state—no matter what that particular doctrine may be.

Now what a grand and wholesome corrective to the individual preacher's fancies is the system of the Church, which forces us, whether we will or no, to take in every species of food which the Holy Scriptures contain. For to me this is one of the greatest evidences of the Divine origin of the Scriptures, that they are so multiform, so complex, so many-sided. Our spiritual nature is like our physical nature, very complex ; and he who imagines he can administer to every mind diseased by one prescription, is as great a charlatan as he who thinks he can cure every kind of physical ill by one particular dose. The Bible is not of this nature ; it is very complex, and rightly so ; it contains elements apparently antagonistic to one another ; just as our food for our bodies must contain many diverse elements, acid and alkaline, sweet and bitter. He that prophesieth, says St. Paul in the Epistle for this day, should prophesy (*i.e.*, preach) “ according to the proportion of faith.” The true Churchman, then, I conceive, should endeavour, as a rule, to put himself *en rapport* with the liturgical services of the day, and like St. Chrysostom and other mighty preachers of old, make the pulpit reëcho the teachings of the lectern and the altar.

Now what is the great lesson of to-day, this second Sunday after Epiphany ? What is the keynote which the Church strikes, to which we should attune our harmonies ? The Gospel for the day furnishes it to us, and our text is the essence of that Gospel. This whole Epiphany season is but an elaboration of the great song of praise begun at Christmastide : “ Glory to

God in the highest, and on earth peace." "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He hath visited and redeemed His people: and hath raised up a mighty salvation for us." "The Dayspring from on high hath visited us." The manifestation of God in the flesh is the theme: the different modes and degrees of that manifestation the elaboration of the theme. Manifest first to the shepherds of Bethlehem; then to the Eastern sages; then, after twelve years, to the doctors of the Temple, if only they had had eyes to see; then after a long period of obscurity manifest to all the beholders at this marriage feast in Cana of Galilee, when His Divinity shone forth in this first miracle that He wrought. Let us view this light as it then burst forth, so unexpectedly; let us analyze its rays and see what we can learn therefrom.

"This *beginning* of miracles." Our Lord Jesus Christ, then, never performed a single miracle—never let the world know that He was the Messiah—until He was thirty years of age. All that long period of time, from His birth, when "all the sons of God shouted for joy," until His baptism, when the voice from heaven was heard saying, "Thou art My beloved Son" (Luke iii. 22), is wrapt in obscurity, save that one gleam which we catch of the Holy Child when He was twelve years of age, and went up, "after the custom of the feast," to His confirmation at Jerusalem. We dwelt upon this on Sunday last. Does He not by this very obscurity reveal Himself—to speak in paradox? Does He not manifest Himself as the typical, the representative, the perfect human character? Does He not show us hereby that He does not countenance precociousness in children and youths? Does He not teach us that even if we think we have a call from God we must bide our time until the outward call comes? "So also Christ glorified not Himself to be made an High Priest, but He that said unto Him, Thou art My Son" (Heb. v. 5).

Next let us consider the circumstances under which He “manifested forth His glory.”

It was at a marriage feast. In the East such entertainments often lasted a whole week. What a strange environment, judging with human judgment, does the Lord select for manifesting forth His glory! A scene of festivity, a time of making merry—of congratulations—of eating and drinking! What a contrast to his precursor, John the Baptist—the last prophet of the old dispensation—the connecting link between the Law and the Gospel—who comes into view in the dreary wilderness, clad in camel’s-hair cloth and leathern girdle—hermit-like in his clothing and in his diet—ascetic, austere. To quote the words of Dean Alford’s Commentary: “Our Lord at once opens His ministry with the character which He gives of Himself” (Luke vii. 33, 34, 35). “John the Baptist,” says He to the Pharisees, “came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, He hath a devil: the Son of Man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold, a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! But wisdom is justified of all her children.” “He also,” as Archbishop Trench admirably remarks, “gives us His own testimony against the tendency which our indolence ever favours, of giving up those things and occasions to the world and the devil, which we have not Christian boldness to mingle in and purify . . . And such is the verdict of modern religionism, which would keep the leaven distinct from the lump, for fear *it* should become *unleavened*.”

We are not given the name of the host, or of the bride or bridegroom. Doubtless they were relatives or connections of our Lord according to the flesh. Cana was not very far from Nazareth: and the Virgin Mother had evidently considerable authority in the household. (St. John ii. 1, “There was a marriage . . . and the mother of Jesus was there”; again, verse 5, “His mother saith unto the servants,” etc.) Our Lord was invited to this wedding feast, and He went.

“And when they wanted wine.” This does not mean that there was none originally supplied, but that, for some reason or other, the wine ran short: either the festivities lasted longer, or the guests were more numerous, than had been calculated for. You will observe the Revised Version renders the passage correctly: “And when the wine *failed*.” Here let me quote a passage of Archdeacon Farrar’s “Life of Christ”: “Whether the marriage festival lasted for seven days, as was usual among those who could afford it, or only for one or two, as was the case among the poorer classes, we cannot tell; but at some period of the entertainment the wine suddenly ran short. None but those who know how sacred in the East is the duty of lavish hospitality, and how passionately the obligation to exercise it to the utmost is felt, can realize the gloom which this incident would have thrown over the occasion, or the misery and mortification which it would have caused to the wedded pair. They would have felt it to be, as in the East it would still be felt to be, a bitter and indelible disgrace.”

In order to avert this threatened disaster—in order to dissipate the gloom impending over this festive gathering—in order to enhance their joy and happiness—in order to show that He entered heartily into all their lawful pleasures, and sanctioned their innocent enjoyments—the Son of God, the Eternal Word made flesh, “manifested forth His glory.” And how did He do so? I must answer this question with a statement which, I know, will shock the feelings of many modern religionists—a statement opposed to the spirit of the age—one which may possibly call forth a storm of vituperation, and yet it must be said; for it is the truth—the truth of God and of His Holy Word.

Our Lord Jesus Christ began His Messianic career—began that glorious and dazzling series of mercy-giving, life-prolonging, pain-destroying, evil-dispelling miracles—with the production

of an alcoholic, intoxicating drink. And that in no mean quantity: on the lowest computation the amount of wine thus divinely manufactured was one hundred and twenty gallons. (See Alford *in loc.*)

Now let us face this fact; for faced it must be. Our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we all confess to be God, of God, and yet very man, began his official career as the Messiah with the miraculous creation of an intoxicating element: He was all through His official life assailed by the Pharisees as a "wine-bibber": and His last official act was His consecrating that same intoxicating element to be the sacrament of His own most precious blood.

Now what are we to make of this? Was Christ mistaken? Was He ignorant of the laws of hygiene and physiology? Is His doctrine behind the times? For there is of necessity a terrible mistake somewhere. Either our modern moral reformers are wrong, or Jesus Christ was wrong. I put it plainly, but so it is. The *Dominion Churchman* very truly said last week: If Christ had worked that miracle to-day in one of our Scott Act counties He would have been convicted of a crime. And so it is. If Jesus Christ was right, Prohibition is wrong. If Prohibition is right, Jesus Christ was wrong. That is simply the naked truth.

And what escape can be framed from this dilemma, viz.: that not only our Lord Jesus Christ, but the whole Word of God, from beginning to end, countenances and makes provision for the drinking of intoxicating liquor: therefore either the consumption of such liquor is lawful and right, or the Word of God is wrong. There are three efforts to answer this:

1. The effort of some to prove that there are two kinds of "wine" and "strong drink" mentioned in the Bible, one alcoholic and the other non-alcoholic; that whenever "wine" is commended it means the unfermented juice of the grape. I

have only to say of this that such a plea is beneath contempt. No accurate scholar would ever think of thus "handling the Word of God deceitfully." A great deal of capital has been made by some of the fact that two words, in special, occur to designate "wine" in the Hebrew—the one "Yayin" and the other "Tirosch"; and they claim that one of these—it makes no matter which—is alcoholic and the other non-alcoholic. The Rev. Dr. Carry, of Port Perry, has lately issued a pamphlet which effectually disposes of all this sophistry. But it needs no learned Hebraist to understand the matter nowadays. The Rev. Dr. Young, a Presbyterian minister, has within the last few years published a most valuable Analytical Concordance; and any ordinary English scholar, by looking up the words "wine" and "strong drink" in the said Concordance, can see for himself what an amount of special pleading and prevarication they are guilty of who resort to this line of argument. Prohibitionism, it seems, like many other "hobbies," has a demoralizing tendency: it blunts all sense of manliness and truth.

2. The second effort to escape from our dilemma is one not quite so dishonest as the last, but equally short-sighted, and equally opposed to the truth of the Scriptures. It alleges: "We admit that the Bible seems to allow the use of alcoholic beverages; we admit that Christ used them and countenanced their use when He was on earth. But if He had lived now, and seen the evil effects of the practice, He would have done differently." Surely this argument has only to be thus stated in its simplicity to meet its own repudiation at the hands of any honest Christian man. Is it not strange—passing strange—that men who arrogate to themselves the title of "Christians"—men who fancy they have a monopoly of "The Gospel"—men who look upon all those who cannot pronounce their shibboleth as "unsaved"—men who boast of "the Bible and the Bible alone"—should thus speak of "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and for

ever"?—that such as they should think the Scriptures need supplementing?—that they should make the Word of God of none effect through their tradition?

3. The third answer to this dilemma is that of the Infidel Prohibitionists; and their reply is: "It is true that the Bible allows the use of intoxicants; and so much the worse for the Bible." Well, this answer has the merit, at all events, of being straightforward and logical. But you see to what it leads. Perhaps you may be surprised to hear of Infidel Prohibitionists; yet there are very many of them in the United States. They have a very extensive literature of their own—newspapers, novels, etc.—all inculcating total abstinence and atheism. The late D. M. Bennett, in his lifetime the editor of an agnostic paper called the *Truth Seeker*, founded a town in the State of Missouri, called Liberal, on a prohibitionist and atheistic basis. And this town of Liberal was advertised in the various freethinking papers (such as *Man*, *This World*, etc.) in terms to this effect: that in the said town there were "no churches, no saloons, no preachers, no spirit-sellers, no alcohol, no devil, *no Christ*, *NO GOD!*" What think you of that for Prohibition?

Now, in order to answer this third and last argument, that of Prohibitionist Infidels—which at any rate is more honest than either of the others—we must, of course, meet them on some common ground. We answer it by an appeal to facts and history, and show how the Divine Wisdom has been justified of her children. Prohibition is no new thing: it has been tried for a thousand years and more. Over one thousand years ago there were two rival systems of religion, each with its own Scriptures, struggling for supremacy in the East. One was the Church of Christ with its Bible; the other Mohammedanism with its Koran. The Church of Christ said to its adherents: "Take this element of alcohol; use it, and it will be a blessing; abuse it, and, like every other gift of God, it will become a curse.

Exercise your manliness, your self-control, in dependence on the grace of God." The other religious system, Mohammedanism, said: "Wine and strong drink are an unmitigated curse; I prohibit their use. No follower of mine can buy, or sell, or manufacture, or consume, intoxicating drink. My religion is an improvement upon that of Jesus Christ. If He had lived to-day He would do as I do."

We know from history how this last-named religion, in the flush of its first enthusiasm of Prohibition, seemed likely to wipe out Christianity from the face of the earth. But, after the lapse of a thousand years, what are the relative positions, morally and intellectually, of those two religious systems to-day? Who was right in the end, Christ or Mohammed? Apart from all consideration of the religious aspect of the question—for we are now addressing ourselves to the infidel argument—let me ask: Would you not rather, a thousand times, be a descendant of four hundred generations of the "drunken" English, or the "drunken" Irish, or the "drunken" Scotch, or the "drunken" Germans, than of four hundred generations of the total abstaining but unspeakable Turk?

I speak thus strongly, because I feel that in this question the honour and truth of Christ and of the Bible are involved; because every one who advocates Prohibition flings an insult in the face of his Lord: every such advocate declares that the religion of Christ is insufficient and needs supplementing. And because I feel that this whole Prohibition movement is a retrograde step in our civilization, our religion, our liberty. It is a returning to "the weak and beggarly elements of the law"; it is destructive of "the right of private judgment"; it is just another species of "priestcraft and popery." I no more want to be told what articles of food are prohibited than I want to be told what books are placed on the "prohibition list" of the Index Expurgatorius. I do not want to belong to a nation of slaves. I do not want a new Gospel.

With regard to those who from conscientious motives choose to practise the self-denial of total abstinence, either because they find it better for themselves, or because they would set an example to others, I have nothing but feelings of the highest respect and admiration. Only let them remember that self-denial is one thing, denial to others a very different thing. St. Paul appreciated this difference. He says, indeed: "If meat make my brother to offend, I will not eat meat while the world standeth." There is the spirit of self-denial. But St. Paul does *not* say "I will eat no meats, and I will see that nobody else shall, and I will agitate to get laws passed to that effect." No, his language is "Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth." "Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth." Indeed, he warns us that the "Prohibition" spirit will be a sign of the declension from the Truth: he says that "In the latter times some shall depart from the faith . . . forbidding to marry and *commanding to abstain* from meats." St. Paul himself did not marry; he advised others to abstain from marriage, but he did not "forbid." There are many earnest, saintly men and women devoted to celibacy. There are many clergymen of the English Church who, for the love of God and of His work, have determined never to marry—some who have taken pledges to that effect. I honour and venerate the holy zeal of such men; but if they were ever to attempt to pass a Canon of Synod—as was done in the Middle Ages—forbidding all clerymen to marry, I think most Churchmen would resist such an act of tyranny unto the death.

If I am asked, "Will not such doctrines encourage the drunkards?" I answer no; for they are the doctrines of Scripture. "Yea, let God be true, though every man a liar." If I am asked "Will you not admit that drunkenness would diminish if not disappear, were the temptation placed out of men's reach?" I

answer, most certainly, of course. If the tree of knowledge had been placed out of the reach of Adam and Eve they would never have fallen. But that was not God's way of training His children, and it is not His way now. We must face temptation, battle with it, and overcome it by the Grace of God, "which we must learn at all times to ask for by diligent prayer."

You will observe, brethren, I have only been speaking against *Prohibition*, which I hold to be not only unscriptural but anti-scriptural, an infringement of the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. I would not speak one word—God forbid—in depreciation of any honest, constitutional scheme for reforming the drunkard, for punishing the drunkard, or for diminishing the amount of this sin and its attendant evils. I, myself, have not much faith in the majority of these schemes. I believe there is one great remedy for this sin, as for all other sins, and that is the Grace of Christ, which we must obtain by using the means of Grace. Still, so long as Christian men and women labour on this behalf, on any lines consistent with the liberty of the Gospel, though I might not personally approve their particular method, I would bid them God-speed.

And now dismissing this subject, and turning our eyes again to the more grateful contemplation of the Light of the World as manifested in this miracle, let us view that loving and beautiful character, that Godhead veiled in flesh, scattering His blessings in the midst of this humble yet joyous gathering in Cana of Galilee. Let us see Him who "came not to be ministered unto but to minister," enhancing the enjoyments of this happy throng, and showing how to carry out the injunction of the Epistle for the day: "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep." Let us see in this first miracle that He wrought, not only an act of love and goodness, but a type of His whole work and office. He came into this world to bless, and ennoble, and sanctify human nature; to turn curses into blessings;

to turn the ordinary blessings which surround the daily life of each of us into still higher, and holier, and sweeter blessings ; to turn the water into wine. And He came to show us that He keeps the good wine until the last. For great and marvellous as have been the humanizing, and civilizing, and elevating, and ennobling effects of His religion even on this earth, they are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us, when this creation shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God ; when the marriage of the Lamb shall have come ; when He Himself shall drink the new wine with us in the Kingdom of God.
