

Thanksgiving for the Union :

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

FEDERAL-STREET MEETINGHOUSE IN BOSTON,

ON THANKSGIVING - DAY,

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DISCOURSE.

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HOW GOODLY ARE THY TENTS, O JACOB, AND THY TABERNACLES, O ISRAEL!

BLESSINGS personal and social, domestic and public, civil and religious, are the themes for gratitude to expand on this day of annual thanksgiving. Even to glance at them all would be impossible; for who can recount the mercies of the Lord? In any selection which we may make, we must be directed by private feeling or by the needs of the time. Now, we may speak of the health and strength which God gives us; and now, of our intellectual endowments or our moral faculties. Now it may be the delights of home, and now the privileges of a wider relationship to our fellow-men, from which we gather the materials for thankfulness. Now the providence of the Heavenly Father, and now the gospel of Christ, may enkindle our praise. Now we may look over the

past, and now gaze into the future, to find occasion for rejoicing. They are all suitable and profitable topics. That which I choose to-day is one to which the pulpit has usually contented itself with adverting, rather than made it a subject of special remark.

There have been two reasons for this silence: first, that what all are supposed to hold in admiration, we do not think it necessary to treat as if any were ignorant of its worth; and, secondly, that there are some things so sacred in our estimation, that a discussion of their merits, which might seem to involve or might create a distrust of their excellence, is instinctively avoided. For these reasons, probably, the grounds of thanksgiving for our national Union have seldom been exhibited at any length on this anniversary, proper as the occasion might appear for such a purpose. A few years ago, it was thought that the whole country was inspired with a sentiment of patriotism that would prompt every one to exclaim, as he overlooked the situation of our confederate tribes, in the words which were wrung from Balaam by his reluctant vision of the greatness of the chosen people, "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel!" Then, to inquire into the value of the Union was held to be unwise, because the bare fact of such an inquiry might impair the feeling of loyal attachment. Of late, however, the value of

the Union has become a subject of debate, and even of denial; and a calm consideration of its claims on our regard is now demanded of us by the self-respect that will not sacrifice cherished habits, except for reasons the force of which it perceives. Thanksgiving for the Union I still believe to be a duty; and an exposition of this duty seems to me a fit office to be undertaken on this day, and one which may be executed in such a manner, that, if all should not agree with what may be said, no one shall take offence. I would show the propriety of giving thanks to Almighty God for the American Union, by indicating the grounds on which it is entitled to our warm and grateful attachment. No candid hearer will in advance charge me with a misuse of the opportunity which I enjoy through my occupation of the pulpit; and no such hearer, I hope, will be able to say at the close that I have abused my privilege.

I love the American Union for the historical and biographical associations which cluster around its origin. I need not narrate the circumstances of that period, nor repeat the names of the men who framed the Constitution of the United States. They are familiar to us: may they never be forgotten! I do not go back to the days of the Revolution, where the lover of peace laments over the presumed necessity of securing the independence of the American Colonies

by the sword. At a later day, when the Articles of Confederation, adopted amidst the exigencies of the war which knit the Colonies together, had been found insufficient for the purposes of a permanent government, a new instrument was prepared by a body of delegates whose wisdom was as profound as their integrity was unquestionable. They were not common men. At their head was George Washington, whom the world has agreed to place first among patriots and rulers. With him were associated those who had read and thought and acted, — men of great political sagacity, and, what was far more important, of a loftiness of purpose and a breadth of comprehension that could not be deluded by any narrow theory of freedom on the one hand, or of government on the other. They were men who understood the nature of civil liberty, who felt the importance of social order, with whom the rights and the duties of citizenship were matters of practical interest, and who poured the fruits of reflection and experience into the deliberations of a Convention on which devolved as serious and perhaps as difficult a duty as was ever entrusted to a representative body. The Constitution which they drafted is the result of their good sense, their large discernment, their sound culture, and their generous spirit. Such men a country may honor as its benefactors, while posterity continues to look back on

their proceedings with mingled admiration and gratitude. I thank Heaven for the Convention which sat at Philadelphia in 1787, for the character of its members, and for the foundations of truth and justice on which they reared the superstructure of this Union.

Again, I admire the Union for the history of which it has been the source, through a period covering more than half a century. There are passages of that history which I read with sorrow; but, as a whole, it has no parallel in the annals of mankind, for the evidence which it gives of growth and prosperity. In population, in territory, in wealth, in the accumulation and development of material resources, has there ever been such an example of steady and rapid increase? Look at the United States of sixty years ago, and the United States of to-day. The difference would exceed belief, if it were not for the stubborn facts of authentic history. A large part of the change which has come over the face of half a continent must be ascribed, indeed, to the energies of the people, and the remarkable opportunity they have enjoyed for the exercise of those energies in the immense region thrown into their hands, to be redeemed from its native wildness, and converted into the home of industry, comfort, civilization, and Christianity. But, if the Union had not given encou-

agement and protection to those energies, this grand opportunity would never have been used, nor understood. It is as the American Union that this republic has grown in two generations to be one of the first-rate powers of the world, that it has become as remarkable for its vigor as for its size, and that it has received into its bosom, and changed into happy freemen, millions who forsook injustice and wretchedness in the Eastern continent for the blessings which they have found here. With all that is dark in the history of this republic, it has been a splendid history; and I thank God it is the history of my native land.

I farther rejoice and glory in this Union for the illustration which it has given of the capacity of man for self-government, and the practicability of maintaining free popular institutions. The experiment, which was regarded with scornful distrust by many in this country, and by all but a few far in advance of their age in the Old World, has been crowned with entire success. Free institutions have been perpetuated. Popular institutions have been extended. The political system which it was thought would not be able to bear the ordinary friction of government, has borne shocks such as have prostrated thrones and dynasties, and has stood unharmed while they have passed away. Nothing, as it seems to me, is more remarkable in the history of these States than the

extreme occasions which have arisen, as if to put the stability of our institutions to the test. Within the present year, we have seen three examples of the indestructible vitality which distinguishes them. On the other side of the continent, separated from the republic, not of sixty years, but of a twelvemonth ago, by almost impassable mountains and inhospitable deserts, a new State has grown up, prepared itself as in a day to become a member of the Union, and been admitted as such, without requiring the slightest change in the functions of the general government. Within the same period, the chief magistrate of the land has been suddenly removed by death, and the responsibilities of his high office have passed into the hands of his constitutional successor, without the disturbance of a single motion in the complicated machinery of our political order. And, at a still more recent date, an election has taken place in our Commonwealth, which has transferred the control of legislation and the whole executive power to a different political party from that which has held them for several years; and, whatever disappointment may be felt, no one fears that the essential interests of the Commonwealth will in consequence suffer damage. The confidence which the people feel in the strength of their institutions is equalled only by the confidence which the Constitution expresses in the people. The

whole of that remarkable instrument proceeds on the idea that popular government is practicable. There is not a word that betrays a suspicion of failure. The people are trusted, and sixty years have shown that they may be trusted, — trusted with every thing; for there is nothing behind or above the people on which the country can throw itself for protection, if the people be false to themselves. With the Constitution on the one side, and revolution on the other, between which they must constantly choose, there is nothing to save them from the latter, if they forsake the former. The more worthy of notice, then, is it that, through peace and war, through changes of administration and changes in the relative weight of different sections of the Union, through trials and perils, the principles of the Constitution have carried the Union safely and triumphantly. Those principles, how simple and fundamental! — the principles on which rest human rights and human hopes. Simple, and therefore mighty, therefore successful. It is an instructive fact, that not the tendency alone, but the effect, of our institutions from the first has been to secure for the democratic or popular element in our political system a fuller expression. The conservative party in the country has rendered invaluable service; but, under whatever name, it has only acted as a needful balance and check upon the more radical

party to which it was opposed. So decisive a proof has this Union presented of the practicability, efficiency, and safety of popular government.

Such a proof could not be set before the world, without producing a change in the convictions and feelings of the spectators. I find a fourth cause of gratitude for the existence of this Union in the instruction which it has afforded to other nations. Instruction of a threefold kind this has been: first, by the great political truths which it has made familiar to their ears and eyes, through our books, speeches, laws, and constitutions; secondly, as we have just noticed, by the practical application of these truths to civil affairs; and, thirdly, by the mistakes which we have corrected or survived. Our theory and our experience have been a constant study to statesmen, and a constant excitement to the desire for free institutions, in Europe. The effect of our establishment of a republican form of government was seen in the history of France at the close of the last century; and, ever since, the light which this country has thrown across the ocean has either awakened or guided the movements that have taken place in assertion of the rights which a prescriptive legitimacy withholds from the people. It is not freedom alone which this land has taught the people of the Old World to desire and demand. It has taught them to

ask for *constitutional* freedom. A double security has been given for the advancement of the race. It is not the mere exercise of popular rights that distinguishes, or chiefly distinguishes, the American people; but the exercise of these rights under constitutional sanctions and restraints. A written charter, at once the guarantee and the limitation of the people's power, — this is the great American idea which is destined to change the character, not of European despotisms only, but of all despotic sway in whatever quarter of the globe. That admirable document, which declares in its own preamble that it is “ordained and established” “in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to the people of the United States,” and which also announces that it emanates from the people themselves, — their own act, by which they define their rights and recognize their duties, — has made the nations acquainted with the meaning of a phrase which even England but imperfectly understood so long as she learned its force only from her Magna Charta, — *constitutional liberty*. The exhibition of the true meaning of that phrase constitutes the claim which this country has on the gratitude of the world; and I account it a proper occasion of thanksgiving to God that this Union has been the means of propagat-

ing the ideas which that phrase conveys, — ideas which must, in the course of time, subvert every tyrannical usurpation on earth.

Now, since the American Union is regarded as the exemplification of political truths, on the practical acknowledgment of which in other countries the progress of the human race depends more than on any other influence, excepting only the spread of the gospel, I cannot contemplate its possible overthrow but as a calamity too great for the common speech of men to describe. I cling to the Union, and pray that it may be preserved from dissolution, because such an event would involve the disappointment of the dearest hopes of the philanthropist, and put back the world, that now seems to be coming to a comprehension of the blessings which the Creator intended it should enjoy, for I know not how many ages. I cannot foresee the extent of evil that would follow on the failure of this attempt to demonstrate the worth and durability of free institutions, — an attempt made on the grandest scale and under the most favorable circumstances. I can only hear the sorrowful regrets of those whose hope would be extinguished, and the exultant sneer of those who begrudge the people every right which they now have the power to exercise or the courage to demand. Not freedom only, but civilization, would suffer incalculable detriment.

The progress of opinion would be arrested, the sanguine would be disheartened, the energetic intimidated, and another period of apathetic gloom — to last, no one can tell for how many generations — might come over the nations. If this sound to any one like the language of extravagance, let him consider the position which America now holds in the regards of the civilized world, and he will be slow to pronounce such anticipations visionary.

But, whatever should be the result abroad, there can be no doubt respecting the consequences which would ensue here upon the overthrow of our present government. I, finally, cleave to the Union, both theoretically and practically, because these consequences are too dreadful to be anticipated without the keenest sense of misfortune. I esteem it a fit occasion for praise to the God of our fathers, that they constructed a Union, the preservation of which will prevent such terrible disasters. Should the Union be dissolved, it would be on sectional grounds. A geographical division would take place. The North and the South would withdraw from each other; the West would probably form one or more separate governments; an independent nation would arise on the shores of the Pacific. What would be the consequence? I will not speak of the financial embarrassment, the commercial distress, the check

that would be given to all industrial pursuits. These inconveniences are so overshadowed by greater evils, that they scarcely deserve mention. More serious calamities than these would attend the disruption of the North American republic. Rival states would take its place, mutually jealous and mutually hostile, with causes of irritation springing out of their past history, and occasions of strife continually arising out of the new relations in which they would stand to one another; — rival states, between which, even if an amicable rupture of the bonds that now hold them together were possible, war would be enkindled before a year had expired, — war that would be marked by the atrocities which hatred, stimulated by opportunity, always begets. Border incursions would ripen into prolonged warfare. It has become a proverb, that they who were once nearest, when estranged, make the most bitter enemies. One cause of ill-will, especially, would gather force with every day. That institution which is the principal mark and ground of difference between the North and South would breed perpetual mischief, as those held in bondage on one side of a national boundary would escape to the other side, and what is now a source of vexation would then induce an immediate resort to arms. There is no need of calling in an exuberant imagination to describe the horrors that

must flow from the erection of two or more independent governments, whatever internal form they might take, out of the present United States. The dullest foresight may descry evils of such magnitude that the heart grows sick at their contemplation. Not only the lover of constitutional liberty, but every one who cares for peace or progress, for social order or individual comfort, must deprecate a result so fraught with miseries, as would then be witnessed, in the place of those blessings which we now possess; — possess, alas! without sufficiently appreciating their value, or rendering due thanks to Him through whose providence they have been bestowed.

And what would be gained as an equivalent for all that would be lost? Would the North be freer or happier, more prosperous or more religious, than it now is? Let the history of every period signalized by the prevalence of evil passions and the effusion of blood furnish the answer. Would the South grow richer, stronger, or more worthy of respect? With every disadvantage under which it now suffers aggravated, and the benefits for which it is indebted to the Union withdrawn, certainly not. Would philanthropy behold the accomplishment of its wishes, or oppression relax its grasp on those whom it dooms to perpetual servitude? On the contrary, when both the right and the opportunity of exerting some influ-

ence for the amelioration of the evils of Slavery, which the citizens of the Free States now have, should cease, and the colored race should be left to the interests and habits of masters who would then carefully exclude alike interference and observation, their condition would be more hopeless even than at present. Would Slavery become extinct through the speedy or gradual ruin of the Southern country, which, deprived of the alliance that now sends some currents of life through its languid veins, would sink into poverty and imbecility? Even if this should be the spectacle which the future would unroll, I do not envy him whose prophetic eye can look on such a result with satisfaction. Nothing would be gained by dissolving the Union — nothing — nothing. And much would be sacrificed, which, if it were possible that a time should come when the members of the republic thus rent in pieces would wish to restore its unity, could never be recovered. God save us from disunion! I know that Slavery is a political and a moral evil, a sin and curse; but disunion seems to me to be treason, not so much against the country, as against humanity. The curse would not be removed, the evil would not be abated, no one would be benefited, by it. And only the historian who should record the long series of misfortunes and crimes to which it would give rise could tell how much all would have lost.

Would I then maintain the integrity of the Union always and for ever? Are there no possible circumstances that would compel us to renounce our allegiance to the Constitution under which these States have risen to such greatness? I do not say this. But when I consider, on the one hand, that such a necessity could arise only on an occasion which would justify a people in casting themselves upon that ultimate right of revolution which is never to be exercised except in the last resort, and, on the other hand, perceive the suffering which must be entailed on the actors in such a revolutionary crisis and on their children,—I feel myself bound to see most clearly that such a necessity exists, before I adopt any measures that shall involve resistance to constitutional authority. I shall be asked, perhaps, if I would submit to every law which might find a place in the legislation of my country; and my answer would be in the negative. But there is a wide difference between refusal to comply with a law which we hold to be immoral, incurring, of course, the legal penalty of such refusal, (that we deem the law unsound is not a sufficient reason even for passive disobedience,) and an assault upon the institutions under which unwise legislators have had an opportunity of doing a wrong thing. If, now, the question be proposed, which many seem to think precludes any farther

argument, whether we are not bound by our reverence for the Divine authority to disown a human government that comes into conflict, or endeavors to bring us into collision, with that authority, — I reply that the question, simple as it appears in form, does not present the actual point of difficulty. To some persons it may be clear that disobedience to human law is obedience to the law of Heaven; but they who believe that submission to the constituted authorities of a land is among the duties prescribed by God may not be able to determine in a moment whether resistance to an odious law be or be not a part of the duty which they owe to the Supreme Ruler. No one denies the existence of a higher law than any which can proceed from human legislation. The real question at issue concerns the interpretation of that higher law. Does it abrogate loyalty to an earthly government, or does it add to the sentiment of loyalty the force of religious obligation? This is not a point on which conscience gives one decision, while worldly interest or personal cowardice gives another. There is conscience on both sides. My neighbor's conscience and mine may not pronounce the same sentence. Each of us may act from a sense of the highest obligation, and yet we may act very differently.

These remarks are, of course, suggested by recent occurrences, to which, however, I allude only for the

sake of drawing two practical conclusions which it appears to me we are too ready to overlook. The first has, in effect, just been brought under our notice. Let neither party in the controversy that is now threatening harm to the political fabric which our fathers constructed with so much care and skill, suppose that all the conscientious judgment is with itself. On one account I rejoice that this controversy has been pushed to an extreme issue. Whatever may have been true formerly, it is now a question of conscience on both sides, — one party conscientiously presenting and exciting opposition to a law of the national Congress, regardless of the ulterior effect of such opposition, or rather, perhaps, ready to bear the responsibility of the most painful consequences; the other as conscientiously standing by the Union, and vindicating the authority of the Constitution as the supreme law and only safeguard of the country. I say I am glad that each party plants itself on the high ground of principle. And believing that this is the ground which ought to be taken by each and by both, I draw thence my second conclusion, that as candor should be exercised, so violence should be avoided. That revolutionary right to which I have referred may be brought into exercise, only after the failure of every other means of redress. It is not an indication of wisdom or patriotism to use violent

methods, until all others have been proved to be ineffectual. It is a serious matter to adopt measures or to use language the obvious meaning of which is contempt for law and government, the only securities which society has for its own peaceful existence. That both law and government will be imperfect is what we should expect; for, though Divine in their origin, they are human in their form. But shall we, therefore, pour scorn and wrath upon them? Shall the inevitable frailty of man be no palliation of the mistakes he may make? Is the citizen absolved from his allegiance, because the government under which he lives has the taint of earth cleaving to it? I do not so read my duty, either in the mandates of conscience or on the pages of Scripture.

There is nothing, then, in the circumstances of the present hour which leads me to regard the Union with any other feelings than those of attachment and gratitude. I honor it for the sake of the men by whom the Constitution on which it stands was framed. I admire it for the development it has given to the resources of material prosperity that distinguish this country. I love it for the example it has presented of those principles of constitutional liberty which are interwoven with all hope of human progress. I rejoice in the influence which it has exerted on opinion in the Old World. I would uphold it,

from the dread I have of the shock that would be given to the reliance of noble hearts abroad by its downfall or decay. And I would preserve it from violent or insidious hostility, because I tremble and sicken at the prospect of the evils which would overwhelm the land, should this Union crumble or be shattered to pieces. I look over the wide heritage which I trust will come into the possession of those who are now the children of the land, to be by them transmitted to their descendants; and I exclaim, with a warmth of feeling into which I hope religious gratitude is largely infused, "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel!" On this day of public thanksgiving, I hold it to be a most proper theme of praise, that I am a citizen of these United States; and while from other pulpits acknowledgments shall be made to the Infinite Father (as, I trust, in our hearts also) for the abundant harvest with which he has laden our fields, for the homes in which he permits us to shelter our affections, and for the religion which he has sent us through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, let there be at least one voice that shall bless Him for the republican institutions under which we live, and shall lift up in the midst of the people, and with their consenting thought, the fervent prayer, -- God save the Union!
