

SERMONS *Maine*

ON

SEVERAL SUBJECTS.

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BY THE RIGHT REVEREND

BEILBY PORTEUS, D. D.

*BISHOP OF LONDON.*

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## SERMON XII.

MATTH. X. 34.

*Think not that I am come to send peace on earth ; I came not to send peace, but a sword.*

WE may, without the smallest hesitation, conclude, that the words of the text cannot possibly have that signification which, at the first view, and as they here stand single and unconnected, they appear to have. It would be the extremity of weakness to suppose, that he whose whole life and doctrine breathed nothing but peace and gentleness, and who declared at another time, in the most positive terms, that “ he came not to destroy men’s lives, but to save “ them \*,” should here mean to denounce war and desolation to the human species. And that, in fact, this is not the real import of the words before us, will be evident to any one who considers, with the least degree of attention, the whole passage from which they were taken, and the occasion on which they were spoken. It will be evident that they relate solely to the *first preachers of the Gospel*, to whom our Lord was then delivering their evangelical commission ; and were intended to apprise them of the calamities and persecutions to which the execution of that commission would infallibly expose them. “ They were sent forth “ as sheep among wolves ; they were to be delivered “ up to the councils, to be scourged in the synagogues, “ to be brought before governors and kings, to be

\* Luke ix. 56.

“hated of all men for Christ’s sake \*:” a treatment so totally opposite to that which their early prejudices led them to expect under the Messiah, THE PRINCE OF PEACE †, that it was highly necessary to set them right in this important point: and to forewarn them in plain terms, that although the *ultimate* effect of Christianity would indeed be PEACE in its utmost extent, and in every sense of the word, yet that to those who were charged with the first promulgation of the Gospel, it would bring not *peace*, but a *sword*.

But whatever interpretation may be given to these words, say the adversaries of our faith, they are eventually applicable to Christianity in their most obvious meaning. The Gospel did in fact *send a sword*, and a most destructive one, upon earth. It has deluged the world with blood. It has been the parent of as much misery and devastation, as if it had been purposely intended to harass and torment mankind, and has given rise to more dissensions, wars, and massacres, than any other single cause that can be named ‡.

This it must be owned, is a formidable charge. But formidable as it is, and heightened, as it seldom fails to be, with all the invidious colorings of false rhetoric and false wit, we need not fear to meet it in its full force. It will, I apprehend, be no difficult matter to convince every dispassionate enquirer, that when it is examined more closely and minutely, when it is divested of all the adventitious terrors with which it has been so industriously surrounded, and when all the abatements and deductions are made, which truth demands and candor must admit, it will be reduced to an objection of little or no importance.

I. Whenever the cruelties exercised by Christians against unbelievers, or against each other, are men-

\* Matth. x. 16—22. † Isaiah ix. 6.

‡ This argument is so great a favorite with all our philosophical sceptics, that it is every day dressed up in some new form, and repeated incessantly with an air of peculiar triumph and exultation. It is indeed in its very nature calculated to strike more generally, and to make deeper impressions, than any abstract reasoning; and has, I believe, in fact, created stronger prejudice against the Gospel, than all the other cavils of infidelity put together. For these reasons it seemed to deserve particular consideration.

tioned, it is generally insinuated at the same time, that they are not to be paralleled in any other religious persuasion, and that it was Christianity which first introduced the detestable practice of persecuting on account of religion. But how unfair such representations are, the most superficial acquaintance with history is sufficient to convince us. From the remotest ages down to the present, men of almost every sect and persuasion have treated those of contrary sentiments with no small degree of bitterness and inhumanity. It is well known, that Jews, Pagans, and Mahometans, have each in their turn made use of violence and coercion in matters of religion; and that the early Christians suffered the severest persecution from the two former, long before they began to inflict it on others. This indeed is no vindication of those Christians that had recourse to it; nor is it intended as such. Nothing ever *can* vindicate or justify them. But it may serve to show that others ought to bear a large share of that odium which is generally thrown exclusively on the disciples of Christ; and that it is not Christianity, but human nature, that is chargeable with the guilt of persecution\*. The truth is, religion, or *the pretence* of religion, has in almost all ages and all nations, been *one* cause, among many others, of those numberless dissensions and disputes which have laid waste the species: and although it may be matter of surprize to some, and of indignation to all, that what was intended for the protection and solace of mankind, should be

\* Even Pagans have persecuted Pagans on the score of religion, with the utmost bitterness and rancor. Besides the memorable instance of Socrates, and the several *holy or sacred wars* among the Grecian States, which had *some mixture* of superstitious zeal in them, we find that in Egypt the worship of different deities produced the most implacable hatred and most sanguinary contests between their respective votaries; that in Persia the disciples of every other religion except that of Zoroaster were punished, and almost exterminated, with the utmost cruelty; and that in later times the kings of Siam and Pegu contended for the honor of possessing a certain sacred relique, (of a nature too contemptible to be named here) with as much fury and obstinacy, as if the safety of their whole kingdoms, and every thing valuable to them, had been at stake. See *Plutarch in Solon. Thucyd. l. i. Juvenal Sat. xv. Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, vol. i. p. 208. and Mickle's translation of the Lucretius of Camoens, Introd. p. 94. note.*

converted to their destruction, yet it may be accounted for on the most common principles of human conduct.

The attachment of men to any particular object, will always increase according to the real or supposed value of that object; and their zeal in defending it from injury or corruption, will rise in the same proportion. Hence religion, which has ever been esteemed the most important of all human concerns, has for that very reason given the keenest edge to human resentments, and has wound up the passions of men to a degree of phrenzy, to which no motive less weighty was capable of raising them. And yet, at the same time, if we compare the dissensions and cruelties occasioned by *civil zeal*, with those occasioned by *religious zeal*, we shall find the latter to bear a much less proportion to the former than is generally imagined, and frequently insinuated\*. By far the greatest number of wars, as well as the longest, most obstinate, most extensive, and most sanguinary wars we know of, have been owing to causes *purely political*, and those too sometimes of the most trifling nature; and if we can allow men to harass and destroy one another for a mere point of honor, or a few acres of land, why should we think it strange to see them defending, with the same heat and bitterness, what they conceive to be the most essential requisite to happiness, both here and hereafter? If we will but consider religion in that single point of view, which is the only one that has any relation to this question, *as an object which men have very much at heart*: and will admit the operation of the same passions and prejudices as are excited by any *other* object that they have at heart, we shall no longer be at a loss for the source of those mischiefs that have been ascribed to it.

II. As the nature of the human mind furnishes a very obvious reason for religious bigotry, and cruelty

\* "*Political Society*, on a moderate calculation, has been the means of murdering several times the number of inhabitants now upon the earth." See that admirable piece of irony, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, by the late Mr. Edmund Burke; in which the argument against Christianity, drawn from the mischiefs occasioned by religious bigotry and persecution, is most ingeniously and completely overthrown.

in general, so may we, from the peculiar circumstances and situation of the earlier Christians, account for the origin of *their* propensity to it in particular.

Excess of happiness, or excess of misery, is frequently observed to give a savage turn to the temper. From the one, the mind is apt to contract a kind of hardness, and from the other a wantonness, which render it equally insensible to the feelings of humanity. It was from the agonies of a death-bed, amidst the pains of a most loathsome disease, and the still more insupportable torments of a wounded conscience, looking back on a life full of iniquity, that Herod gave orders for all the principal Jews to be massacred the moment he expired\*. And it was, on the contrary, from the midst of a luxurious and a voluptuous court, abounding with every thing that could minister to ease, magnificence, and delight, that the scourge of the last century, Louis the XIVth, gave orders for turning into a desert, the country of a prince, whose only crime it was to be his enemy †. So similar are the effects which flow from these two opposite extremes.

Both these extremes the Christian church experienced, about the time we are speaking of, and, what was still more trying, experienced them in a very quick succession. The members of that church, from being persecuted, tormented, afflicted, and treated as the off-scourings of the earth, became on a sudden the lords of it. Some, perhaps, *may* have fortitude enough to support great misery, or, what is perhaps no less difficult, extreme happiness, without any injury to their tempers. But it is very few that can bear a rapid transition from the one to the other, from indigence, distress, and oppression, to ease, security, and power. It was too much for the disciples even of the meek and humble Jesus. One might have thought,

\* Josephus. Antiq. l. xvii. c. 6.

† Voltaire, though a Frenchman, and of course an admirer of Louis, yet speaks of this barbarous devastation of the Palatinate in the terms it deserves. The natural and affecting picture he draws of that shocking scene, must strike every heart with horror. *Essai sur l'Histoire Generale, tom. v. c. 16.*

perhaps, that upon the civil establishment of their religion, the recent sense of their own sufferings would have taught them a lesson of mildness and moderation towards others. But it unhappily taught them the very same lesson that it has generally taught to every other people in the same circumstances, in all ages of the world. For it is a fact too notorious to be denied, that in most contentions for superiority, whether religious or civil, the suffering party, when raised to power by a reverse of fortune, has scarce ever failed to adopt that inhumanity under which they so lately groaned; and it is not so much oppression that is crushed, as the oppressor that is changed. Every one will, upon this occasion, recall to mind the well-known sanguinary struggles for power between the two rival states of Greece, and the still more sanguinary revolutions in the latter periods of the Roman republic; where the only contest seemed to be, which should exceed the other in cruelty; and where the remembrance of former massacres was obliterated, not by acts of mercy and forgiveness, but by massacres still more furious and unrelenting, by the almost entire annihilation of the vanquished faction.

When, therefore, our adversaries say that the Christians made no other use of the new-acquired assistance of the civil arm, than to harass one another, and oppress their enemies, what else do they say, than that Christians were men; that they only did what *men of all religions and denominations* have commonly done under the same circumstances and temptations; and that the spirit of the Gospel was lost in the corruption of human nature\*.

\* We find that even Julian, the *philosophic* Julian, though not a Christian, yet by some means or other became a most zealous bigot and persecutor. He was of opinion, it seems, that a *frantic patient* (that is a Christian) might sometimes be cured by *salutary violence*. He applied this remedy himself with no small degree of alacrity and vigour, and in some parts of his dominions allowed his provincial ministers to exercise the most brutal acts of cruelty towards the Christians with impunity, nay sometimes with applause. He even added insult to oppression. He condescended to employ against the *detested Galileans* (as he was pleased to call the Christians) the acrimony of his imperial pen, and made them feel, not only the whole weight of his sovereign power, but the utmost severity of his *ironical and*

