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THE DUTY OF THANKSGIVING.

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE FOUNDLING-HOSPITAL

DECEMBER 19, 1797.

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PREACHED AT THE FOUNDLING-HOSPITAL
DECEMBER 19, 1797.

Being the Day appointed for a General Thanksgiving.

By the Rev. JOHN HEWLETT, B. D.

MORNING PREACHER TO THE SAID CHARITY,
AND LECTURER OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF ST. VEDAST
AND ST. MICHAEL LE QUERN.

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A SERMON, &c.

PSALM cxxxvi. 26.

*O give thanks unto the God of heaven, for
his mercy endureth for ever.*

THE duty of Thanksgiving to our Great Creator is generally acknowledged, and is confirmed by the precepts and example of devout men in all ages. DAVID, though exposed to greater vicissitudes of fortune than almost any other monarch; though alternately afflicted and exalted by such events as have most influence in distressing, or gladdening the human heart, is yet always ready, both in prosperity and adversity, to utter the song of praise and thanksgiving to God.

It is a duty, indeed, which, in every situation of life, arises from a well-placed confidence in the Divine Attributes. Sensible that we are under the providence and protection of infinite wisdom and infinite power, we may rest assured, that “all things shall work together for good to them that love God,” and therefore may, with equal devotion, bless the arm that chastens, or supports us. Hence it was that the holy JOB could say, in the midst of his affliction, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” And hence it was that PAUL and SILAS, when unjustly thrust into the inner prison,” we read, “and with their feet made fast in the stocks, prayed at midnight, and sang praises unto God.”

IF the duty of praise and thanksgiving be so universal as to extend to every difficulty and distress, if it be required of us when
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groaning under oppression, and sinking under the weight of misfortune and calamity, surely its obligations will be felt with double force when we are enjoying, under the divine mercy, apparent benefits and blessings. Under such circumstances, it becomes one of the most pleasing exercises of the devotional spirit; it is immediately connected with every principle of gratitude and love to God, and naturally extends its influence to works of charity and active good-will to man.

WITHOUT dwelling, therefore, at present, on the duty of the Psalmist's precept in general, and "giving thanks unto the God of heaven," at all times and in all situations, from the steadfast assurance, "that his mercy endureth for ever," which, by the way, is the most devout, as well as the sublimest motive we can act from; let us consider some of the ordinary inducements we have to thanksgiving, when

we are in the daily habit of enjoying comforts ; when the Almighty Father may be said, in the poetical language of scripture, to “ open his hand, and we are filled with “ good.”

AND first, let us consider the many benefits and blessings that are communicated individually to ourselves. These should by no means be confined to the *extraordinary* instances of divine mercy, to the successful pursuits of ambition, the acquisition of honours, and the grant of superfluous wealth ; but should extend to the common advantages and the *ordinary* enjoyments of life. Among these let us never forget the primary blessing of HEALTH ; without which all others would be of little avail, and in which a man may truly say, “ I have no “ pleasure.” In the next place, let us be ever thankful for food and raiment ; for every instance of success that might have attended the laudable exertions of industry
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in our respective callings; for deliverance out of danger and victory over temptation; for the pure and varied pleasures of our intellectual faculties, as well as the lively gratifications of appetite and passion, when confined within the boundaries of innocence and moderation.

NOR from the wide circle of private enjoyments, which spring from “the riches of divine goodness,” let us exclude the comforts of domestic life. Whatever pleasures or advantages a man meets with in his intercourse with the world, they must be casual and incidental. HOME is, with every one, the principal scene of happiness, or misery. Other causes may produce occasional additions or diminutions; but here, chiefly, the sum, the estimate and value of life will be formed. This value will be always more or less, according as we have been virtuous, or vicious; wise, or foolish; fortunate, or unfortunate. With those
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who, from whatever cause, cannot think of HOME without feelings of anxiety, mortification, and regret, I have at present nothing to do; but you who enjoy the pure delights, the unbounded confidence and exalted satisfactions of conjugal affection; you who, in addition to this, feel a parent's love, and experience the fond caresses of a child, learn, in these endearing ties, to trace the goodness of God; and let them be one motive with you, among a thousand others, to offer up the daily song of thanksgiving. Remember HE is the ultimate "giver of all good." Whatever might be the proximate and apparent cause, HE is the original author of that mind and those dispositions, which are formed for giving and receiving mutual happiness. HE and HE only could give the strong, but mysterious, CAPACITY of feeling and enjoying it. HE is indeed the gracious author of every thing lovely and attractive
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in nature; and it is the characters of his hand that the fond father reads, when he views those smiles of innocence, which fill his heart with tenderness and love.

BUT, secondly, let us be ever willing and happy to indulge the pleasing disposition of thanksgiving to God for such blessings as may be showered down upon our neighbour. Though this is a duty whose obligations rest on the clearest evidence of reason, and are enforced by the divine precept, which bids us “rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep:” yet so lamentable is the depravity of human nature, that many, instead of thanksgiving, on such occasions, feel a tendency to indulge a contrary disposition. Then it is that the evil passions of jealousy and envy are excited in the bosoms of some. So far from feeling any devotional gratitude on contemplating the blessings which Providence may confer on a fellow-creature, they

they are apt to murmur and repine at them, or experience all the mortification of a proud, selfish, and discontented spirit. But if that which should beget good in us, generates only evil; and if that which should enforce the practice of the most pleasing duty, leads only to the transgression of it, we may judge at once of the heinous nature of sin, and the dreadful corruption of that mind, in which the motives to godliness and virtue are thus liable to be perverted.

MAY we not only shun these evil dispositions, but be always happy when we see others so. Expressions of gratitude and joy when our neighbour acknowledges the bounties of God, and marks of sympathy when he is sinking under affliction, is one of the easiest ways of shewing our "good-will to men." The extensive spirit of Christian charity will require us to do much more. We must not only wish

good, and be thankful when it is done, but we must embrace every opportunity of doing it ourselves.

LET us therefore cultivate that genuine benevolence, which would render it an exercise of the most pleasing duty to rejoice in our neighbour's prosperity; to be thankful for his recovery from sickness, difficulties, and dangers; to be happy when we hear that he has been enabled, by divine assistance, to correct his former failings and mistakes; and, in short, to interest ourselves with the best feelings of humanity in every thing that relates to his happiness, and that might serve to promote his welfare.

THE cultivation of this virtuous habit is of more importance, perhaps, when considered relatively, than it is in itself. It is generally associated with every friendly disposition, and is the preparatory step to "every good word and work." It effectually excludes the malevolence of envy, and the
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repinings of discontent, and opens the mind to the generous sentiments of friendship and brotherly love.

LASTLY, let us learn to extend the pious principle of thanksgiving for blessings received by ourselves and those with whom we live, to any benefits and advantages which the divine goodness may think fit to confer on our COUNTRY. When we “sing praises unto the God of “heaven” on such occasions, we may be said to extend the limits without diminishing the ardor of our devotion: for not to mention that almost every one partakes, more or less, in public blessings; and that therefore our thanksgiving combines the motives and the interest both of private and social gratitude; it superadds a peculiar fervor arising from the attachment which we all feel to our NATIVE LAND. The love of our country, in this sense, was wisely implanted in us for the best of purposes, and is a common principle of human

man nature. So powerful, indeed, is it, that there is not a savage, or civilised being, from the boundaries of one frozen zone to the other, perhaps, that does not feel a predilection for the pathless wilds, and snowy mountains, among which he was born, and where the days of his youth were passed.

IF this passion, then, is so extensive, as to be strongly felt by human beings in every climate, and under circumstances of barbarism and oppression, that appear to us shocking to humanity; what additional motives must not we have to love our COUNTRY, and to thank God that our lot is fallen on so fair a ground? Whether we consider those advantages which come immediately from the Almighty, and which we could have no hand in producing; such as our insular situation, the extent of our country, the diversified beauties of its rivers, hills and valleys, the temperateness of its climate, and the importance of its
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natural productions; or whether we consider other blessings which we are permitted (under his gracious providence) to enjoy, and which result from the active energy and power of the people, their public confidence, and private worth; such as our extensive wealth and commerce; the advanced state of every art and science that contributes to the ornament and utility of civilised society, the weight and importance of the English name among the nations of Europe; but above all, when we consider the admirable establishment of our Protestant Church, the solemn and impartial distribution of justice, the venerable fabric of our laws, and that CONSTITUTION under which we became a great, a wise, a religious, and munificent people; when we consider these, and many other particulars, we shall indeed have more abundant cause, perhaps, than any nation on earth, to “give thanks
“unto the God of heaven; and to confess
“that his mercy endureth for ever.”

IT were to be wished, indeed, that men could embrace the beneficent principles of christianity in their fullest extent, and consider the whole world as their country, in a political view, and every fellow creature as a fellow citizen. Every pious and good man would rejoice to see the glorious prospects of revelation realised, when there shall “ be no more leading into captivity, and no “ more complaining in our streets ;” but “ when the work of righteousness shall be “ PEACE, and the effect of righteousness “ quietness and assurance for ever.” This, however, depends not on one nation, we should remember, and can never be accomplished but by the general improvement of man in true wisdom, religion, and virtue ; and then only by union of sentiment and co-operation of efforts.

LITTLE is it to be expected at present, when the hostile passions of jealousy and ambition, the ferocious tyranny of some,

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and the selfish intrigues of others, have rendered wars, even in Christian countries, almost necessary, or at least unavoidable. Till men, therefore, shall be wiser and better, let us be contented to see their virtues confined within practical limits. By taking too wide a range we do nothing effectual; because our power is by no means commensurate with our wishes; and by confining our duties within too small a circle, we may contract the heart into selfishness, and favor the narrow views of a weak and worldly mind.

MAN is in every respect a finite creature. He may talk of infinity in every thing, but he comprehends it in nothing. It is a term which is resorted to from the imperfection of our nature, and is at the same time a confession of it. He, therefore, fulfils the measure of his duty most acceptably to God, and most usefully to man, who best proportions his means to his ends;
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who, knowing his own weakness, attempts not to make that a pretence for wilful neglect of duty; nor frustrates the object of his beneficence by idle professions, or vain attempts to do more than he can.

So that, on the present occasion, without harbouring any sentiments of ill-will to others (for are we not all children of the same Father?) and without attempting to pry into the ultimate ends of divine wisdom and power, we may be permitted to offer thanksgiving and praise at the throne of grace for any event that may happen to our country, and that seems to indicate the favor and protection of God. In particular, we should be very thankful, that in the midst of the most dreadful war that ever desolated the human species, its horrors have not approached our DWELLINGS; and if they have deprived us of some who were most dear to us, still the shocking scene of suffering and of death, of plunder

and devastation, is far removed from our view. We may sleep in peace, and wake with an assurance of our lives and property being secure.

THESE sentiments should give a livelier devotion to the thanksgiving which we are called upon by the proclamation and example of our gracious Sovereign to offer this day, in consequence of our late glorious victory by sea!—A victory that has taught us the inestimable importance of our great national bulwark; that has afforded another illustrious proof of the professional skill and intrepidity of our leaders; and (contrary to the apprehensions of all) given us the strongest assurance that we may again fully confide in the valor, loyalty, and discipline, of our matchless seamen—A victory that has wiped away from the mind of every rational man the terrors of invasion; the most dreadful of all political calamities, which, in the present instance, must have

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been attended with unusual horrors, from the ferocity, irreligion, the inveterate enmity, and, I may add, the unheard-of wickedness, of the invaders.

BUT while we offer praises and thanksgivings to God for this and every other national blessing, let us carefully guard against the worst of all pride, SPIRITUAL PRIDE, and every thing that may favour of arrogance, or pharisaical ostentation. Let our devotion be the offspring of a grateful, but humble mind. Let the presumption which too often attends success, and the vanity which swells the heart in the day of victory, be effectually checked, by considering that the wicked also have triumphed; that whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and “scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.” Let the religion of JESUS open our bosoms, at all times, to the sentiments of peace and reconciliation; and, having experienced the mercies of God, let us endeavour to imitate,

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as far as we can, the supreme Object of perfection, and give others cause for gratitude and love, by doing them all the good in our' power.

By thus regulating the exalted satisfactions of our thanksgiving to God by Christian humility, and fulfilling the divine precept of our Holy Redeemer, "Freely have ye received, freely give," we may rest assured, with humble confidence, that "the Lord will still be merciful unto us and bless us, and lift up the light of his countenance upon us."

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