

SERMON IV.

ST. STEPHEN.
MARTYRDOM.

HEB. xi. 37.

They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword.

ST. STEPHEN, who was one of the seven Deacons, is called the Protomartyr, as having first suffered death in the cause of the Gospel. Let me take the opportunity of his festival to make some remarks upon Martyrdom generally.

The word Martyr *properly* means "a witness," but is used to denote exclusively one who has suffered *death* for the Christian faith. Those who have witnessed boldly for Christ without suffering death, are called *Confessors*; a title, which the early Martyrs often made their own, before their last solemn confession unto death, or Martyrdom. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the chief and most glorious of Martyrs, as having "before Pontius

Pilate witnessed a good confession¹;" but we do not call Him a Martyr, as being much more than a Martyr. True it is, He died for the truth; but that was not the chief purpose of His death. He died to save us sinners from the wrath of God. He was not only a Martyr; He was an Atoning Sacrifice.

He is the supreme object of our love, gratitude, and reverence.—Next to Him we honor the noble army of Martyrs; not indeed comparing them to Him, "who is above all, God blessed for ever," or as if they in suffering had any part in the work of reconciliation, but because they have approached most closely to His pattern of all His servants. They have shed their blood for the Church, fulfilling the text, "He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren²." They have followed His steps, and claim our grateful remembrance. Had St. Stephen shrunk from the trial put upon him, and recanted to save his life, no one can estimate the consequences of such a defection. Perhaps (humanly speaking) the cause of the Gospel would have been lost; the Church might have perished; and, though Christ had died for the world, the world might not have received the knowledge or the benefit of His death. The channels of grace might have been destroyed, the Sacraments withdrawn from the feeble and corrupt race which has such need of them.

¹ 1 Tim. vi. 13.

² 1 John iii. 16.

Now it may be said, that many men suffer pain, as great as Martyrdom, from disease, and in other ways : again, that it does not follow that those who happened to be martyred were always the most useful and active defenders of the faith ; and therefore, that in honoring the Martyrs, we are honoring with especial honor those to whom indeed we *may* be peculiarly indebted, (as in the case of Apostles,) but nevertheless who may have been but ordinary men, who happened to stand in the most exposed place, in the way of persecution, and were slain as if by chance, because the sword met them first. But this, it is plain, would be a strange way of reasoning in any parallel case. We are grateful to those who have done us favors, rather than to those who might or would, if it had so happened. We have no concern with the question, whether the Martyrs were the best of men or not, or whether others would have been Martyrs too, had it been allowed them. We are grateful to those who were such, from the plain matter of fact that they were such, that they did so through much suffering, in order that the world might gain an inestimable benefit, the light of the Gospel.

But in truth, if we would view the matter considerately, we shall find that, (as far as human judgment can decide on such a point,) the Martyrs of the primitive times, were, as such, men of a very elevated faith ; not only our benefactors, but far our superiors. The utmost to which any such

objection as that I have stated, goes, is this ; to show that others who were not martyred, might be equal to them, (St. Philip the Deacon, for instance, equal to his associate St. Stephen,) not that the Martyrs were not men eminently gifted with the Spirit of Christ. For let us consider what it was then to be a Martyr.

First, it was to be a *voluntary* sufferer. Men, perhaps, suffer in various diseases more than the Martyrs did, but they cannot help themselves. Again, it has frequently happened that men have been persecuted for their religion without having expected it, or being able to avert it. These in one sense indeed are Martyrs ; and we naturally think affectionately of those who have suffered in our cause, whether voluntary or not. But this was not the case with the primitive Martyrs. They knew beforehand clearly enough the consequences of preaching the gospel ; they had frequent warnings brought home to them of the sufferings in store for them, if they persevered in their labours of brotherly love. Their Lord and Master had suffered before them ; and, besides suffering Himself, had expressly *foretold their* sufferings ; “ If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you ¹.” They were repeatedly warned and strictly charged by the chief priests and rulers, not to preach in Christ’s name. They had experience

¹ John xv. 20.

of lesser punishments from their adversaries in earnest of the greater ; and at length they saw their brethren, one by one, slain for persevering in their faithfulness to Christ. Yet they continued to keep the faith, though they might be victims of their obedience any day.

All this must be considered when we speak of their sufferings. They lived under a continual trial, a daily exercise of faith, which we, living in peaceable times, can scarcely understand. Christ had said to His Apostles, " Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat¹." Consider what is meant by sifting, which is a continued agitation, a shaking about to separate the mass of corn into two parts. Such was the early discipline inflicted on the Church. No mere sudden stroke came upon it ; but it was solicited day by day, in all its members, by every argument of hope and fear, by threats and inducements, to desert it. This was the lot of the Martyrs. Death, their final suffering, was but the consummation of a life of anticipated death. Consider how distressing anxiety is ; how irritating and wearing it is to be in constant excitement, with the duty of maintaining calmness and steadiness in the midst of it ; and how especially inviting any prospect of tranquillity would appear in such circumstances ; and then we shall have some notion of a Christian's

¹ Luke xxii. 31.

condition, under a persecuting heathen government. I put aside for the present the peculiar reproach and contempt which was the lot of the primitive Church, and the actual privations. Let us merely consider it as *harassed*, shaken as wheat in a sieve. Under such circumstances, the stoutest hearts are in danger of failing. They could steel themselves against certain definite sufferings, or prepare themselves to meet one expected crisis; but they yield to the incessant annoyance which the apprehension of persecution, and the importunity of friends inflict on them. They sigh for peace; they gradually come to believe that the world is not so wrong as some men say it is, and that it is possible to be over-strict and over-nice. They learn to temporize and be double-minded. First one falls, then another; and such instances come as an additional argument for concession to those that remain firm as yet, who of course feel dispirited, lonely, and begin to doubt the correctness of their own judgment; while on the other hand, those who have fallen, in self-defence become their tempters. Thus the Church is sifted, the cowardly falling off, the faithful continuing firm, though in dejection and perplexity. Among these latter are the Martyrs; not accidental victims, taken at random, but the picked and choice ones, the elect remnant, a sacrifice well pleasing to God, because a costly gift, the finest wheat flour of the Church: men who have been warned what to expect from their profession,

and have had many opportunities of relinquishing it, but have "borne and had patience, and for Christ's name's sake have laboured and have not fainted¹." Such was St. Stephen, not entrapped into a confession and slain (as it were) in ambuscade, but boldly confronting his persecutors, and, in spite of circumstances that foreboded death, awaiting their fury. And if Martyrdom is not to be considered the chance unexpected death of one who happened to profess the Christian faith, much less is it to be compared to the sufferings of disease, be they greater or not. No one is maintaining that the mere undergoing pain is a great thing. A man cannot help himself, when in pain; he cannot escape from it, be he as desirous to do so as he may. The devils bear pain against their will. But to be a Martyr, is to feel the storm coming, and willingly to endure it at the call of duty, for Christ's sake, and for the good of the brethren; and this is a kind of firmness which we have no means of displaying at the present day, though our deficiency in it may be, and is continually evidenced, as often as we yield (which is not seldom) to inferior and ordinary temptations.

2. But, in the next place, the suffering itself of Martyrdom was in some respects peculiar. It was a death, cruel in itself, publicly inflicted; and heightened by the fierce exultation of a malevolent

¹ Rev. ii. 3.

populace. When we are in pain, we can lie in peace by ourselves. We receive the sympathy and kind services of those about us ; and if we like it, we can retire altogether from the sight of others, and suffer without a witness to interrupt us. But the sufferings of Martyrdom were for the most part public, attended with every circumstance of ignominy and popular triumph, as well as with torture. Criminals indeed are put to death without kind thoughts from bystanders ; still, for the most part, even criminals receive commiseration and a sort of respect. But the early Christians had to endure “the shame” after their Master’s pattern. They had to die in the midst of enemies who reviled them, and in mockery, bid them (as in Christ’s case) come down from the cross. They were supported on no easy couch, soothed by no attentive friends ; and considering how much the depressing power of pain depends on the imagination, this circumstance alone at once separates their sufferings widely from all instances of pain in disease. The unseen God alone was their Comforter, and this invests the scene of their suffering with supernatural majesty, and awes us when we think of them. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ; *for Thou art with me*”. A Martyrdom is a season of God’s especial power in the eye of faith, as great as if a miracle were visibly

¹ Psalm xxiii. 4.

wrought. It is a fellowship of Christ's sufferings, a commemoration of His death, a representation filling up in figure, that which is behind of His afflictions, for His body's sake, which is the Church¹." And thus, being an august solemnity in itself, and a kind of Sacrament, a baptism of blood, it worthily finishes that long searching trial which I have already described as being its usual forerunner in primitive times.

I have spoken only of the early Martyrs, because this Festival leads me to do so; and, besides, because, though there have been (Praise to our pardoning, God!) Martyrs among us since, yet, from the time that Kings have become the nursing fathers of the Church, the history of Confessors and Martyrs is so implicated with state affairs, that their conduct is not so easily separable *by us* from the world around them, nor are we given to know them so clearly: though this difficulty of discerning them should invest their memory with peculiar interest when we do discern them, and their connexion with civil matters, far from diminishing the high spiritual excellence of such true sons of the Church, in some respects even increases it.

To conclude.—It is useful to reflect on subjects such as that I have now laid before you, in order to humble ourselves. "We have not resisted unto blood, striving against sin²". What are our petty

¹ Col. i. 24. ² Hebr. xii. 4.

sufferings which we make so much of, to their pains and sorrows, who lost their friends, and then their own lives for Christ's sake ; who were assaulted by all kind of temptations, the sophistry of Antichrist, the blandishments of the world, the terrors of the sword, the weariness of suspense, and yet fainted not ? How far above ours are both their afflictions, and their consolations under them ! Now, I know that such reflections are at once, and with far deeper reason, raised by the thought of the sufferings of Christ Himself ; but commonly, His transcendent holiness and depth of woe do not immediately affect us, from the very greatness of them. We sum them up in a few words, and speak without understanding. On the other hand we rise somewhat towards the comprehension of them, when we make use of that heavenly ladder by which His Saints have made their way towards Him. By contemplating the lowest of His true servants, and seeing how far any one of them surpasses ourselves, we learn to shrink before His ineffable purity, who is infinitely holier than the first of Saints ; and to confess ourselves (with a sincere mind) to be unworthy of the least of all His mercies. Thus His Martyrs lead us to Himself, the chief of Martyrs and the king of Saints.

May God give us grace to receive these thoughts into our hearts, and to display the fruit of them in our conduct ! What are we but sinful dust and ashes, grovellers who are creeping on to Heaven, not with any noble sacrifice for Christ's cause, but

without pain, without trouble, in the midst of worldly blessings! Well;—but He can save in the humblest paths of life, and in the most tranquil times. There is enough for us to do, far more than we fulfil, in our own ordinary course. Let us strive to be more humble, faithful, merciful, meek, self-denying than we are. Let us “crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts¹.” This, to be sure, is sorry Martyrdom; yet God accepts it for His Son’s sake. Notwithstanding, after all, if we get to Heaven, surely we shall be the lowest of the Saints there assembled; and, if all are unprofitable servants, we verily shall be the most unprofitable of all.

¹ Gal. v. 24.