

The Ancient Church

by
Thomas Arnold

Preached in Rugby Chapel,
April 5th, 1840.

*“And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple,
and breaking bread from house to house,
did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,
praising God, and having favour with all the people.”*

— Acts ii. 46, 47.

It has always seemed to me one of the great advantages of the course of study generally pursued in our English schools, that it draws our minds so continually to dwell upon the past. Every day we are engaged in the history, and the lived nearly or more years ago; if we have to customs, about works are the laws, customs, of existing nations, but has been long since difficulty which is often found in realizing the things of which we read, the difficulty of representing to ourselves times so remote, and so unlike, in many respects, to our own, shows how much the mind requires such a



upon the past. Every studying the languages, thoughts of men who than two thousand inquire about laws or of art or science, they arts, and sciences, not of those whose course ended. And the very

This text is unabridged and reprinted from Thomas Arnold, *Sermons, Chiefly on the Interpretation of Scripture*, 2nd ed. (London: B. Fellowes, 1845): Sermon. xxiii, 241-51.

discipline, and how naturally it rests contented with the scenes immediately around it. On the other hand, there are some who study the books which relate to past times very diligently, but who have no real understanding of the times themselves, because they do not know or understand their own. What they raise up to themselves being drawn wholly from books, is a dead and imperfect image; and when they would set up this image as a model by which to fashion the present state of things, the folly of the proceeding is almost ridiculous. Nay, of the two, he is a wiser man and a safer guide, who, knowing nothing of the past, has yet had a large experience of the present, and has observed it carefully, rather than the other, who is blind to the very world in which he lives, and therefore is perfectly incapable, with all his reading, of understanding a world in which he does not live.

Again, in studying the past as a guide for the present, it is of importance that we study it widely and fully. In this respect our classical reading, though not without its imperfections, is on the whole conducted wisely. That is to say, although we are led to study some periods of ancient history more than others, yet in the main we are led to an acquaintance with all its periods, we study it in its beginning, middle, and end. Where this is not done, the knowledge gained will be often delusive; we see things taken just at the moment when they were going on well or ill, and we are shut out from that farther prospect which would have taught us how that seeming good was full of the seeds of centuries of after mischief; or how that seeming evil was but the short and cheap price paid for a long futurity of good. To study one single period of history, is to take a passage apart from its context, and thus to lose its real sense and purport. We cannot judge of what history has to teach us, if we only stop to listen to her for a short time, and go away before she has concluded her instruction.

These thoughts present themselves when we are led to consider that important subject, the study of Christian antiquity. Important it is, and indeed indispensable to a thorough understanding of the Church in its actual condition, of its good and of its evil. But it is not to be understood itself without a lively sense of what the Church is actually; so that from what we do know and see, the varieties of human character and their connexion with particular lines of opinion, we may be able to fill up and to comprehend the scanty information which the actual writings of the early Church can furnish, and image to ourselves truly the picture of what the early Church really was. Nor, again, must we leave these two periods, the age of

the primitive Church and our own, unconnected with one another. Seventeen centuries are the link between them; a continuous link, by which, if I may so speak, the electric power of the earlier age is continued on to us; yet having other properties in them than those of simply transmitting from the ages before them, to the ages after them; something they have added, something, perhaps, taken away; and if they have not affected the quality of that which is transmitted, they have at least greatly affected our character and circumstances who are to be the receivers of it. Their error was great, who, passing over nearly fifteen centuries, used to leap at once in their studies from the Apostles to the Reformers; but theirs would be much greater, who, studying carefully the records of the Church from the first century to the fifth, were then to break off, and to apply their supposed knowledge and experience for the guidance of the Church now.

Some, perhaps, will have already anticipated me in their application of these remarks to the words of my text. Those words contain a description of the Church at Jerusalem, almost immediately after the ascension of our Lord. We see and feel at once how different a state of things is here described from that which we actually witness. We feel farther,—that is, all who can think and feel upon such matters,—we feel farther that this description cannot be wholly indifferent to us, that the Church, so soon after its foundation, with Christ's words as it were still sounding in its ears, guided by Christ's own apostles, and having so lately received the promised baptism of His Spirit, must be in many points capable of serving as our model: that if we are wholly unlike it, the difference must in great measure at least be matter of regret or blame. And then comes the natural and earnest question, How can we lessen or remove this difference? how can we bring ourselves back to the standard of primitive Christianity?

Then we look at all the facts which we can possibly recover from the darkness of time, relating to the early church; all its institutions, all its practices; the very names of its offices, the very style of its language. "All these," we may say, "belonged to the primitive Church; let us restore them all." But this is absolutely impossible; the very past will not live again. If we were to insist on restoring it altogether, it would be like those who should unbury the dead; we should restore not the living friend, whom we loved and honoured, but only a lifeless corpse. But the thing is impossible. We do not raise our friends' bodies out of their graves; we cannot bring back the actual image and exact outward resemblance of departed ages.

Are therefore past ages for ever lost to us? Must we look at what is good and wise and holy in them, as on that which we must only lament in vain, and can never hope to restore? And this too, above all, in Christ's holy Church; as if God's hand were shortened now that He could not save, or as if our Lord was no longer exalted at God's right hand, with all power in heaven and in earth? God forbid! there is no reason for such despair; there is no impossibility in the restoration of all that was good in the primitive Church. We may become the true descendants of our fathers, though we cannot become our fathers themselves, nor make our age theirs.

"They, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart." Now compare the language of the Psalmist in one of the Psalms of this very evening's service. "One thing have I desired of the Lord which I will require, even that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the fair beauty of the Lord, and to visit His temple." The prayer of the Psalmist, and the practice of the early Christians are, we see, exactly in accordance. But do we not feel that this dwelling in the house of the Lord, which he so desired, and that continuing daily in the temple, which the first Christians practised, are both of them, so to speak, typical; we must go farther before we arrive at the very reality. That reality undoubtedly is the daily walking with God, the daily abiding in God. And if we do not so walk and so abide, we undoubtedly have not that blessing for which the Psalmist prayed, nor do we truly imitate the example of Christ's early Church.

Farther, the early Christians continued "breaking bread from house to house"; that is, they assembled continually in each other's houses, and as they ate and drank together, so once in every day their eating and drinking together was that solemn act of Christian communion, which in the highest manner bound them to one another and to Christ. And doubtless the end of that communion was the end of every other commandment, namely, the increase of love towards Christ and towards one another.

I have purposely put these two parts of the life of the early Christians in this manner, because I would wish to show where the spiritual interpretation of scripture becomes often dangerous, and leads us away from the spirit which it professes to follow, no less than from the letter which it does not scruple to neglect. I have said that the essence of the Psalmist's prayer, and the early Christians' practice, was the walking with God, and the dwelling in God. I have said also that the essence of the Holy Communion

itself is the increase of love towards Christ, and towards our brethren. But the error of spiritual interpretation consists in supposing that if we clearly see the antitype or reality, we may at once cast aside the type as incapable of affording any instruction. For instance, it may be said that the walking with God is all that is important; the walking in the actual earthly temple is altogether indifferent. Now here is a point of the greatest difficulty, judging from experience, because the type has always been in danger of being idolized on the one hand, and despised on the other. The truth is, that the type itself is not wholly typical: it has a real affinity with that to which it points, greater or less in different instances, but always up to a certain measure. As in the case now before us; the walking in the visible temple is, it is true, typical of the walking in heart with God; but then there is a real resemblance between them. The one has a tendency towards the other; so that he who never walked in the visible temple would never be likely to walk with God in Spirit. And thus the true imitation of the practice of the primitive Church would be, no doubt, that we should all walk with God in heart. But in order to do this we have need of helps and means; and as the early Christians found that it kept God in their minds to dwell in His visible temple, so it is reasonable to think that to have churches constantly before our eyes, and to have them frequently opened for divine service, would with us also be a means of keeping God in our minds; and that if with all these helps we still should be in danger of forgetting Him, much more are we likely to forget Him if we use no help at all.

More frequent church services, more frequent communions, would then it seems be a real imitation of the primitive Church, and not merely a fond or formal one; because, with relation to the end aimed at by both the early Christians and us, namely, the walking with God in heart and spirit, we stand nearly in their case; and the same human nature in both of us, not being here affected by any difference of age or country, is likely to require in both the same helps. But in the meanwhile, for those who cannot alter the Church's ordinances, or if there be any causes which in any place render the imitation of the primitive Church as yet impracticable or inexpedient, then there is the proper place for the recollection that what is of the last necessity always, and to all, is the walking with God in heart and spirit. If our helps are fewer, it is our misfortune; but if we do not use such as we have, it is our fault. The chapel is opened but rarely; the communion is celebrated in it still more rarely. So much the more reason, then, why we should make the most of the occasions that are offered to us; why we should not be careless

of or inattentive during the short time in the week in which we can be in God's outward temple; why we should not turn away from the breaking of the bread of Christ's communion, on those rare occasions when we can partake of it. This we may all do; and to neglect this is our folly and our sin. God is not tied in His dealings with us to save by few or many. If He gives many opportunities and we neglect them, as not needing them, that is our own presumption; but if He gives but few, and we avail ourselves thankfully of these few, their power multiplies under His blessing, like the five loaves and two small fishes, which fed more than five thousand men; and, without continuing daily in the temple, or daily breaking the bread of Christ's communion, yet if we profit by such opportunities as we have of hearing His word, and partaking of His communion, we shall share the blessing of those who were in Christ, at the beginning, and we too, like them, shall eat our meat with joy and singleness of heart: we shall live in thankfulness to God, and having favour with all good men.



Rugby Chapel

And now, in conclusion, as I have in the case of the text taken the example of the early Church as applicable in more than its mere spirit to ourselves; or rather, as we have seen, not only that we should aim at the same end with the first

Christians, but that we should do well also to pursue it by the same means; to what purpose, it may be asked, were those cautions as to the study of antiquity, which I gave at the beginning of my sermon, as if the example of the early Church were not immediately applicable? The cautions were given because on very many occasions they are greatly needed; and when, referring in one instance to the example of the early Church, I wished to show how that example might always be consulted with advantage. Doubtless there are many points in which he may run who readeth, in

which the practice of the early Christians was so clearly good, and their circumstances respecting it so much the same as ours, that it would be our wisdom to follow their example closely. But their practice was not always good; or at any rate, difference of circumstances, in many instances, makes that which was most right and good in them no longer right or desirable for us. And here it is that a lively understanding of the present, and a comprehensive knowledge of the past, are, as I said, so necessary. I am most convinced of the wisdom of studying the remains of Christian antiquity; only it is to be desired that that study should be so conducted and united with so much of wider knowledge and lively understanding, that it may not sometimes mislead, and be useful only by chance, but may minister uniformly and according to fixed and intelligible principles, to edification and to truth.

End.