

---

This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

Google™ books

<https://books.google.com>



A. M. D. G.

7

A

**SERMON**

PREACHED AT THE OPENING OF

**ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH,**

**IN DERBY,**

OCTOBER 9, MDCCCXXXIX,

BY

**NICHOLAS WISEMAN, D.D.**

72

DERBY :

PRINTED BY JAMES STORER, No. 3, ST. PETER'S STREET.

SOLD BY DOLMAN, NEW BOND STREET; KEATING AND BROWN, DUKE STREET, GROSVENOR SQUARE; JONES, PATERNOSTER-RROW; ANDREWS, DUKE STREET, LITTLE BRITAIN, LONDON; AND BY ALL CATHOLIC BOOKSELLERS.



# A SERMON,

&c.

---

MATTHEW, xiii. 31, 32.

*“The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard-seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; which is, indeed, the least of all seeds; but when it is grown up, it is greater than all herbs, and becometh a tree.”*

THE excellence of our blessed Redeemer's parables is by nothing more demonstrated, than by this; that the more they are considered, and viewed under different aspects, the more they apply to a variety of circumstances, and a multiplicity of instruction, so as to grow in beauty and expand in usefulness, in proportion as they are studied. And in this way may they be themselves likened to the grain of mustard-seed, whereof he here speaks, little in their first application to the immediate topic which suggested them, but increasing and enlarging till they embrace many purposes, and extend over the entire surface of Christian precepts and Christian truths. And so this parable, spoken originally of the prospects of christianity, presents itself naturally to our minds, as most appropriate to our present circumstances; and allows at the same time, of a most consoling application to our past history, and may not a little cheer us in our future exertions. It will not, therefore, I trust, be deemed an inappropriate theme for our consideration this day, when every thing around us speaks to our senses and to our hearts of rapid and encouraging growth in our holy religion, from concealment to manifestation, from reproach to favour, from timidity to confidence, and from poverty to magnificence.

The kingdom of heaven here mentioned is undoubt-

edly the church or religion of Christ. Its beginnings were small and inconsiderable; its means of propagation insignificant; and yet, in a few years, it astonished the world by the immensity of its growth; for it even became as the vine, whereof the Psalmist says, that "it filled the land, the shadow of it covered the trees, and the branches thereof the cedars of God. It stretched forth its branches unto the sea, and its boughs unto the river:" lxxix. 10—12. Such no doubt is the primary and most obvious application of this excellent parable, which may be considered as the counterpart of that vision interpreted by Daniel, wherein a little stone, cut out of the mountain without hands, threw down the statue that represented the great successive empires of the world, and covering their place "became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth:" Dan. ii. 35. But the image so happily chosen by our Saviour, may suggest a more enlarged and varied contemplation of the growth of christianity in its moral structure, as well as in its outward relations; by which I mean, that the religion of Christ will be found to possess a marvellous power of developing, when a proper occasion presents itself, germs of great principles latent within it, adapted to the circumstances in which Providence shall place it. And as the nature of this investigation leads us to consider order of time rather than systematic arrangement of matters; so will I not confine your attention to any definite heads, but indulge in such more varied views as may best illustrate this noble property of Christ's religion.

It was a primary tendency of the Jewish religion to tie down the entire man in the fetters of an unchangeable system. Every thing in it was defined; its worship, its duties, its influence on society, and on domestic manners. When Israel dwelt in tents in the

wilderness, God, their sovereign, would dwell likewise in a tabernacle. When the people had settled themselves in the promised land, and had built themselves their houses of stone, it was natural that a similar modification should have been made in the habitation of God among them, and that the great change in the condition of the people should have produced a corresponding improvement in their place of worship. But the law was too inflexible to warrant even so natural an alteration; the tabernacle remained in Silo; and when David could no longer brook the idea, that God's ark should dwell under skins, while he reposed beneath a cedar roof, and therefore determined to erect a temple worthy of God, of his own devotion, and of the power and riches of his nation, he was reprov'd for having ventured to propose so natural a deviation from what had been till then established. For Nathan was sent to him, to say, "Thus saith the Lord, shalt thou build me a house to dwell in? whereas I have not dwelt in a house from the day that I brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt, even to this day. Did I ever speak a word to any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to feed my people Israel, saying, Why have ye not built me a house of cedar?" 2 Kings, vii. 5—7. And hence when Solomon, by divine appointment, did erect a magnificent temple, it was not the result of any gradual growth in the splendour of divine worship; but a change, by sudden and unprepared transision, from one to another state.

But yet, in spite of this severity, which prevented any great expansion of the outward manifestation of religion among the Jews, it was impossible that the part of its influence which acts upon the soul and feelings of man, could be kept under similar restraints. Accordingly, we find this portion varying its forms, its

tendencies, and its influences according to the varying position of the people. It is not, for instance, till the time of David, that we discover fully displayed the deep feelings of a penitential spirit. Again and again the entire nation had sinned, or its rulers; Moses had interceded for them in sorrow; Phineas and his Levites had, in their zeal, avenged with the point of the sword, the outrage done to God; and the multitude had confessed their sin under the teeth of fiery serpents. But even Moses calls for mercy only lest the Egyptians should deride both God and his people: Numb. xiv. 13; nor in the sentiments of the others is any deep sense of sin discernible. But when the penitent king, who loved his God so truly, composed those sacred songs which were to form the devotional liturgy of the Israelites, he infused into them that deep contrition, that loving sorrow for offence against God, which makes his psalms the truest expression of even Christian repentance. And from thenceforth that sentiment pervades the writings of every prophet, increasing in depth and intensity with the swelling prevarications of the people. And the same course may be shown to have been followed, in a still more marked manner, in the expectations of the nation of a deliverer—expectations which the gradual unfolding of God's intentions regarding him, caused to increase in clearness and liveliness as his time approached.

To have imagined christianity devoid of a power similar to this, would have been to place it in a lower sphere of energy, and of adaptation to man's wants, than its imperfect precursor. On the contrary, it was to be expected that within its bosom would lie the congregated seeds of many admirable institutions and active principles, which required various periods of fostering care, till the moment arrived of a proper

warmth, or even of a more chilling season, requisite for making each vegetate, grow up, and bear fruit, according to its kind. For, as regarding the instances I proposed from the old law, there is no doubt but the germs or principles of those and any other developments which in it took place, existed already in the system; as the fundamental doctrine of all repentance—that sin is an enormous evil, was clearly demonstrated in the very punishments which earlier penitents deprecated or suffered; as the promise of a Redeemer was the very corner-stone of all the Jewish polity; yet these principles seemed to lie neglected, till gradually brought forth by circumstances into a clearer light, and made leading ideas of the first importance; so in the new law we might be led to expect a similar course, and not be surprised if we have to trace practices or feelings, become at particular times the leading characteristics of religious thought, to doctrines or principles which originally lurked as one seed in the furrow, among others of greater magnitude. And many causes of error will be effectually cut off, by the right understanding of this principle. For nothing is more common, yet nothing is more mistaken, than to confound the greater manifestation of things with their first origin, and to date belief or practice from the period when circumstances give to either, a more decided prominence in public view, or a new estimation in men's hearts. Of such misapprehension abundant instances will be found, if necessary.

If, from the very day of the Holy Ghost's descent, the church, like a grain of mustard-seed, commenced its system of outward growth; so did its increase no less begin in the order of interior development. Every thing was gradual. At first the Jewish worship was attended, and many of its ceremonial rites observed, with scrupulous precision. The interior resources of



the Christian system, for as majestic and most noble worship, were not at once called upon ; but this was left gradually to unfold itself by time and experience. The hierarchy was not planted by our Saviour, nor by the apostles themselves, in a systematic form ; but the episcopal body,\* if I may so speak, evolved from itself, in due season, the priestly order ; and when the expediency of circumstances called for it, the third degree, till then reserved, was constituted, in the nomination of the deacons. The very doctrines of Christianity were communicated with a similar proportion ; there was a milk of doctrine, to use the figure of scripture, and a more solid food, that formed a gradation of spiritual nourishment, suited to the powers of different converts. Time soon gave perfection to the happy beginning made.

There are seasons when the husbandman that really desires his crop to flourish, on looking up to heaven, will desire, not so much a continuation of its serenity, as its clouds and storms of rain. And so did the heavenly husbandman, with whom to wish is to do, act in regard to his new-sown field. He sent it its first rain in the rage of the persecutor, and its latter rain in the assaults of heresy ; and both came in due season, to advance and ripen his harvest. Not only were those virtues, which had formed the solid foundation of the church from the beginning, such as constancy, charity, and piety, still further consolidated by these trials ; but new feelings were brought into play, which otherwise would have continued to lie dormant. It is almost impossible to enumerate the modifications which the Christian's worship underwent from their admiration and love of their martyrs. The form and the number of their churches and oratorios, the celebration of their festivals, the observance of feasts, the very liturgy itself, both in substance and

structure, received such strong impressions, as yet to remain marked, more or less, upon every form of christianity, in proportion as it has more or less preserved of early usages. It is not improbable that, had not persecution assailed the church in its infancy, there would have been no opportunity of developing to such an extent that feeling of admiration, love, and reverence to the friends and champions of Christ, which so soon came forth. And yet it would not have been less true, that its principle had existed in the Christian religion from the beginning, even if several centuries of peace, instead of a few years, had intervened between its establishment and the opportunity to display that principle.

In like manner, no sooner was peace restored, than error took its turn to attack the church of Christ; and thus gave occasion to her to unfold and display all the rich stores of traditional learning which, for three centuries, **had lain buried in her bosom**, and which might have been delayed in its production, but for the early occurrence of such a cause. When once unlocked, the tide of eloquence, vigour of reasoning, and variety of learning, went swelling on from year to year, till it formed the golden period of ecclesiastical literature. And, during these two periods, all the visible beauty of religion had been gradually growing to perfection; its forms of prayer, through the piety and genius of successive Pontiffs, improved in dignity and feeling, **without the unity of thought being in the least impaired**; the times and rules of penitential observances, in various parts, had imperceptibly arranged themselves into a system; the offices of the hierarchy, and the limits of respective jurisdictions, had been settled without contest or noise; so that the internal power of development, inherent in the church, acted unceasingly, till it produced that grand harmonious

whole, which, while it grew up without effort, so far from exhausting, only recruited its original vigour.

Now, as far as this period, few will be so unreflecting as to refuse their admiration to this marvellous energy. They will consider it most just, that religion should have unfolded new faculties, and displayed varying tendencies, down to a certain period; but whatever came after that was a corruption, a superstition, a human invention. Had religion been the work of man, you might have thought of limiting its development. You may say to the sculptor whom you employ, Strike not again with your chisel, and leave those features rude and ill-defined. Ye may say to him that buildeth you a house, Lay not another stone, for I will have it low. But to the work of God ye may say not so. It would be madness if all the powers on earth combined hoped to be heard, were they to say to the meanest shrub, Stay when thou hast put forth thy spring leaves, and shoot not further forth; and the flowers of summer, and the fruits of autumn, see thou restrain from appearing. And just as fond would it be to fancy, that all earthly might could have ever prevented or ever will, the religion of Christ from bringing forth in each season, its befitting fruit of holiness. So long as the once revealed doctrine remains unabated and unincreased, so long as a secure foundation of faith preserved, and openly, though less prominently, taught from the beginning in the church, be accurately kept, the working of the religious spirit, breathing where it will, must vary with the exigencies of time, and place, and persons, still ever preserving a harmonious combination.

While the Christian religion was struggling, to speak humanly, for life or death with external violence, its energies were greatly occupied in its resistance; when peace and prosperity became its lot, its prolific

vigour was unchecked, and its inward powers sought on every side the means and opportunity of manifestation. During those ages so unjustly taxed with barbarism and superstition, religion had become the reigning principle and rule of action; and consequently they presented every facility for evolving into increasing power, many ideas which for want of such occasion, had theretofore appeared of only secondary importance. Let us look at a few obvious examples.

We see the face of Europe, during those ages, covered with institutions, wherein men, retired from the world, were occupied in praising God, and in works of devotion and penance, or labouring in silence upon literature sacred and profane. **The ignorant, who have been taught to believe so from their infancy,** unhesitatingly declare that in all this was abominable or foolish superstition. The learned will perhaps say, that such things have no warrant in scripture, or in primitive practice. But the scripture tells men to pray always, and to love and seek poverty of spirit, and to fast, and to mortify the flesh, and to separate themselves, if necessary, from the world. This was the seed, the little grain, cast into the soil of the church; and as sure one day to produce practical fruit, as the corn sown in a good land is, under favourable circumstances. Immediately this could not be. To have collected the faithful into religious communities, to praise God day and night, during the times of relentless persecution, would have been to bring the sheep into one field, that the wolf might slaughter them with more ease. Yet it was not long before persecution itself drove forth the timid into the desert, and afforded them opportunity to practice, without molestation, the counsels of evangelical perfection. The Basils, the Jeromes, and others, who held the noblest views of religion, followed their example,

and the monastic state grew up, as a cherished institution, over all God's inheritance. But, at length the period arrived, when religion, unoccupied from without, tended chiefly to the development of the principle of inward life, to deeper contemplation of heavenly mysteries, and to the complete cultivation of the soul's affections in reference to God. Such a direction in the spirit of christianity could not fail to multiply the number of those who gave themselves up to its guidance, and cause an immense increase of those institutes of solitude and retirement, which presented the natural opportunity for seconding its impulse. Here then is the mustard-seed, cast in the beginning, but not growing to sufficient size for the birds of the air to gather in its branches, till after a fitting period of time, till its season came.

A charge was given to Peter to feed the flock of Christ. In their dogmatical sense, this and other commissions conferred upon him and his successors the supreme headship of the church; and this being matter of religious belief, it was firmly held from the beginning by all. But it was impossible not to see what immense developments such a doctrine might, under certain circumstances, receive. From the very earliest ages, the union of the sacerdotal with the kingly power had been familiar to man; christianity had, in addition, taught them to prefer the milder to the sterner rule. Society became so constituted as to love, on many occasions, a conscientious decision, rather than an appeal to strength; the weak desired a protector who could make the fellest aggressor quail; and the most daring believed that injustice was a crime against God, as against man, and might incur spiritual, as well as worldly, chastisement. These, and other converging religious sentiments, produced a necessary development of the high ecclesi-

astical jurisdiction, wherewith the Roman Pontiff is invested, that made it reach the interests of civil states, in strict accordance with the wants of the age, the condition of society, and the wishes of man. The germ only existed in the beginning; in the easy transition from the spiritual to the temporal in christianity, it was developed to a system of vast grandeur and power, as well as of immense public benefit, by the command of the times.

A similar judgment will be passed by a reflecting mind, upon the extraordinary expansion which peculiar practices of devotion have received at one time more than another. Nothing, for instance, can be more certain, that while, in the first ages, honour and reverence were paid to all the saints, a much greater portion was bestowed upon the Mother of God. Such prayers, addressed to her by the ancient fathers, as have come down in their writings, go far beyond any thing we now use in intensity of supplication, and confidence of patronage. Still it did not form as prominent a feature of devotion in those ages, as at a later period. There were causes that repressed the exuberance of such devotional feelings, such as the fear of giving any handle to the heathen for misunderstanding the faith of Christians. But no sooner did the Nestonian heresy wound together the honour of the Son and of the Mother, than the entire church rose to pay her new homage, and lead to the full growth of that seed which the angel cast, when he pronounced her blessed among women, and Jesus effectually prepared for fructifying, when he recommended his disciple to her as her son. Its growth increased till a time came when new heresies impugned her honour, and when, moreover, holy men loved to look at religion through the medium of the affections, as much as through dogmatical investiga-

tion, and gave full play to the finest feelings of the heart, in studying its mysteries. For, at the same time appeared, in all its splendour, an earnest and tenderer devotion to the passion of Christ, and to the mysteries of his life; such as we find in the writings of St. Bernard, and St. Bonaventure; a devotion which no one will censure as unbecoming a sound and virtuous Christian, though comparatively much less discoverable in the practices of an earlier age. It was a time, too, when the looks and thoughts of Christians were turned with wistful eyes towards the glorious land which gave him birth, but which the infidel then held in thralldom. Such meditations naturally led to a feeling of tenderer devotion, both towards Jesus himself, and towards the indivisible companion of his infancy and passion.

Many other similar instances might be brought, such as the devotion paid to the blessed Eucharist, and the rise of mystical or contemplative theology; but I pass them over that I may come to my conclusions.

The church of God had, for many centuries, advanced, as I have rapidly described it, adding every age to the previous manifestations it had made of its inexhaustible stores of grace and holiness. For this was indeed a beautiful quality of the principle I have explained, that though, as circumstances changed, the vivid impressions of one age grew faint under the influence of succeeding agencies, yet enough was left of the spirit of each to be borne down to succeeding generations, as a record of the various vicissitudes through which their religion had passed. In this way the very evidences of christianity partook of the character of all else connected with it, being themselves capable of increasing development, in the new monuments that proved its wonderful preservation, through the trials and dangers of so many succeeding ages.

But at length there arose men who differently thought. They imagined that whatever christianity had acquired in outward form, since its first foundation, must be an interpolation of its creed ; that whatever development in outward or inward life it had exhibited, was an addition to what God had revealed. If they could not find in his written word the practices observed, to their full extent, and in the very terms applied to them, as they admitted no power of development, they rejected all these its results, and generally with them the principles from which they had gradually evolved. They saw how religion had truly become in the words of the prophet, a “ tree great and strong, so that the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof was even to the ends of all the earth ; its leaves were most beautiful, and its fruit exceeding much, and in the branches thereof the fowls of the air had their abode :” Dan. iv. 8, 9 ; and they said, “ cut down the tree, and chop off the branches thereof ; shake off its leaves, and scatter its fruits ; let the birds fly away from its branches.” And then, in the very words of the same prophet, they went on to say, “ nevertheless leave the stump of its root in the earth, and let it be tied up with a band of iron and of brass :” ver. 12. Yes, such it would seem, was the idea of these men, who, in the sixteenth century, undertook to reform the church. Relentlessly they cut off the branches which ages of growth had produced upon this glorious tree, together with their precious bearing, whereby so many holy souls had been nourished to perfection, and having pared it down to what they considered the first naked, unadorned stem, that sprung from the little grain, bound it so fast in cold and straitening rivets, as effectually to restrain its again putting forth new branches. They treated, as though it should be a dead and sapless trunk, that



which the Lord of Hosts had planted. They thought to make that stationary which the Almighty hath set upon the rolling wheels of an eternal destiny, and impelled forward by his breath towards a distant consummation. And where their attempt was made, it too well succeeded. For in this respect they partook of that character, exactly opposite to the one I have described in Christ's church, which had been shown forth by every other system of error, that before them had afflicted that church. For, if you will consider them all, however different in time and place, you will find them to have displayed no small energy at their first rise, and so to have in part succeeded; but having once so far prevailed, they have ever sunk down into a state of cold stagnation, from which they rise no more. Such are at this day the sects of Asia, buried in apathy since their separation from the church; and among us, where the temper of men is more irritable, and their genius more active, where those separated from us have displayed great and various learning, what new or striking quality has their religion been made to present, suited to the exigencies of its state? Have not the most zealous in its behalf acknowledged in their writings, within this short time, that in many of the most holy ordinances of religion, as in the participation of the Eucharist, in the use of public prayer, or attendance on worship, in the practice of fasting, and in obedience to ecclesiastical rule, there has been only relaxation, decay, and ruinous neglect, while not a new manifestation of energy suited to the errors of the times, or of spiritual feeling proportioned to their coldness, has distinguished, in this long interval, the body of their church, whatever may be the conduct of individual members? Nay one of them has just owned, that after three hundred years it has not yet develop-

\* See "Tracts for the Times."

ed that spirit of poetic fervour, which so early distinguished the Christian church, the beautiful effusions of which it had unfeelingly rejected !\*

But gladly do I turn from the consideration of others to that of ourselves. Were not we but a few years ago as a grain of mustard-seed, in our island? May we not say that had not the Lord left us a seed, we should have been, in the completeness of our destruction, even as Sodom and Gomorrah? Were we not as a spark trodden under foot, which all men despised? And what have we done that we should so quickly have grown to be a great people? Who hath given us the power, quietly and unperceived to creep out above the earth, and to put forth our leaves and our branches, till our head has been lifted up? Who hath fanned us till our glow returned, and we have spread, and have communicated to many others our own fire? Who but the God of Israel who alone doth wonderful things? We are in union with his kingdom to which the promise of fruit hath been made. The power of man may dismember it, and maim it till it shall seem to have well nigh destroyed it; but let only one small fibre remain in the ground, and in the words of Job, "if its roots be old in the earth, and its stock be dead in the dust; at the scent of water it shall spring, and bring forth leaves, as when it was first planted:" Job, xiv. 8.

And so it is yet almost in the recollection of the aged, how our priests crept forth from their lurking places in the night, to administer the rites of our religion to their timid flocks, in private chambers, or in the concealment of the garret. Still more the time is yet remembered by the young amongst us, when four walls and a roof were considered abundantly sufficient to constitute a temple to the Lord of Hosts, nor durst we aspire after more. But the time soon came, when

\* Preface to "Hymni ex Breviario Parisiensi."

the God of our fathers looked down upon our affliction, and visited us in his mercies. He led us forth from our bondage, he wonderfully nourished and increased us, he inspired us with nobler thoughts and feelings, and gave us a yearning after the glory of his house. He sent us our Ooliabs and Beseleels, furnished with skill and with zeal to undertake and execute things not unworthy of our desires: he infused a generous spirit into our rich and our poor; he gave to pastors a firm reliance on his providence, and to the flocks a grace to peril and even sacrifice somewhat for the accomplishment of his work; and lo! not one sanctuary only, but many simultaneously arise over the land, that make us regret the less the lost inheritance of our fathers. And this even so, as that each successive edifice shall be, in majesty and grandeur, superior to its predecessor, as befits monuments which shall declare to future generations the gradual development of the catholic spirit in our own. For with each shall there be a corresponding expansion of the catholic heart, in feeling and in love; a warmer devotion, and a bolder practice; a more fearless approximation to the form and spirit of religion in catholic countries, and a return, within all legitimate bounds, to the early associations of our native land.

And with such assurances and such an experience, why shall we take thought about the morrow, as though Christ's promises could fail? When in those things which depend on man's ability we see symptoms of degeneracy or decay, our anxiety for their stability may be grounded. When we see that art has lost all recollections of its pure types and loftier feelings, we may be allowed to doubt whether it will again recover them. When we see the principles of quiet and peaceful government shaken throughout society, we may begin to entertain fears whether they will be re-

gained. But when the religion of Christ shall seem to be placed in the very thickest of perils ; when the malice of individuals, or the corruption of a people, or the tyranny of a ruler, or the indifference of mankind in general, shall seem to have placed it on the brink of destruction, lift up even then your heads for your salvation is at hand. It is a crisis perhaps the most fearful and painful—but they are the throes of a new birth, the rallying of great vital energies which cause it, and some new manifestation of religion's power will proceed from the convulsions of its elements. What this may be, God, he knoweth. Future ages will know how to characterize this by its proper marks, even as we do those that have preceded it. That from the annealing furnace wherein no inconsiderable portions of his church are being cleansed from their dross, they will come forth again, as did John from the seething cauldron, fresher and more vigorous, we cannot doubt ; whether it will be to conquer with might, or to win by beauty, or to invite by dignity, whether it will be a great and sudden display of new virtue, breaking on the world as the light when first created, or a slow and gradual unfolding of excellence, like the morning dawn spreading over the heavens ; of this we may be sure, that it will be suited to *our* wants, and appear most admirable to them that follow.

And if it be lawful to pray to the “sower of chaste counsels,” for one development rather than another, of the various energies yet reserved in his holy religion, methinks it should be for some splendid exhibition of its power to heal the long and slowly inflicted wounds of error and schism. It has been seen to crush heresy at its birth by its simple anathema ; it has gradually uprooted it when spread amidst the flock, but a mighty example is yet wanted of entire nations, once separated from the unity of faith, again returning to its pale.

Yes, let our prayer be for such a manifestation in our age, that, in the words of the prophet, "the places that have been desolate for ages may be built up in us, that we may raise up the foundation of generation and generation," and that our age may be hereafter called, "the repairer of fences, turning the paths into rest:" Is. lvii. 13.