

## LESSONS OF RUSH-BEARING.<sup>1</sup>

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Ps. civ. 24.—“O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all: the earth is full of Thy riches.”

A STRANGER, coming among us to-day, might well ask the question: “What mean ye by this service? What mean the flowers and rushes with which your church is decorated?” It is our Church Festival, we come to give praise to God for His goodness. But even natives of our village, who have attended the Rush-bearing year after year for many years, and who have made a point of bringing their children as soon as they are old enough to carry a “bearing” may have done so for no other reason than because it has become a custom with them, and the old customs have taken deep root in their lives; and yet they may have failed to penetrate the deep significance of the old custom or learned the lessons which are suggested by the Service. The flowers in themselves by their varied beauty reveal the beauty of God, His wisdom, and His goodness, the riches of His glory. The setting in which the ceremony is enacted, with all the charm of fell and waterfall, lake and woodland, should stir within us feelings of wonder and reverence. It should make us, as I overheard some one remark a few weeks ago on a particularly fine day in face of a glorious view, “It should make us want to say our prayers,” to thank and praise God for His glory. The beauties of Nature have been the inspiration of much poetry. Poetry is the language of emotion; and emotion is stirred by the beauty of natural scenery; thought is provoked and finds relief in utterance. Feeling is so intense that the language in which it is expressed takes an elevated tone as the imagination soars to greater heights. Wonder, too, is created, and wonder is not satisfied with merely dwelling upon the beautiful sight, it desires to explain what is presented to the eye. So wonder became the mother of philosophy; and philosophy is the attempt to explain the universe and the relation in which we stand to it. Then science also came to

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the birth, with its patient investigation of the outward phenomena of Nature. And science may rest content with the investigation of the outward phenomena, and the explanation of what it has discovered. It may “reach forth its arm to feel from world to world, and charm its secret from the latest moon.” But will it go farther, and recognise that behind all the phenomena of Nature there is a Personal Power controlling them? All things end in mystery, and the more knowledge increases the deeper becomes the mystery in which all things are wrapped. Reason falters, and is compelled to give way to faith, and it is faith which bridges the gap between the known and the unknown.

The Hebrew knew next to nothing of science, but the sights presented to his gaze compelled his wonder. He had not the gift of patient research, but he had the instinct for religion. All that he saw was to him the expression of the mind of God. He bowed himself in adoring worship and broke out into praise. “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork.” “O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all: the earth is full of Thy riches.”

We may see what different effects are produced upon different minds by the sights and

sounds of Nature. The Greek merely describes what he sees: most charmingly in the most perfect form of poetry, which has made Greek literature one of the priceless possessions of mankind for all time. But he does not reflect upon what he describes. He almost suppresses his feeling. We cannot suppose that the Greek poet Sophocles was without feeling when he composed his exquisite lyrics on his native Colonus. He was in extreme old age. The shadow of death was eclipsing the sunshine of life and tinging his thoughts with solemnity, but he offers no comment as in his tragedy he brings the aged Ædipus to the place where he is to take leave of earth. He makes you feel that it is a haunt of ancient peace, but says nothing of his own feeling. "The meadows," he says, "are dewy, embroidered with crocus-flowers and narcissus; in the thickets of olive and laurel nightingales keep singing; and rivulets spread coolness in the midst of summer's heat. The whole wood is hushed, and very fresh and wild." It seems an appropriate place to die in. There is a solemn stillness about it, which must not be broken by the sound of any profane foot approaching.

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But the English poet wants to express the effect of what he sees and describes. He offers his reflections upon it, or imagines what the effect produced by the sight upon others may be. The emotions excited cannot but leave their traces upon the soul and even on the outward features. So Wordsworth believed, and we do not think he is wrong. The beauty of outward things cannot fail to beget an inward beauty in the soul of the appreciative, and a beauty which is expressed in the features.

"The floating clouds their state shall lend  
To her; for her the willow bend;  
Nor shall she fail to see  
Even in the motions of the storm  
Grace that shall mould the maiden's form  
By silent sympathy.

"The stars of midnight shall be dear  
To her; and she shall lean her ear  
In many a secret place  
Where Rivulets dance their wayward round,  
And beauty born of murmuring sound  
Shall pass into her face."

Wordsworth is a mystic, that is to say, he has his eyes open to the secret things of Nature, and into the life of things. "Outward things are symbols, outward manifestations of the unseen." What effect outward objects in Nature had upon him he has told us in his own lines:—

"Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe!  
Thou, Soul, that art the Eternity of thought!  
And givest to forms and images a breath  
And everlasting motion! not in vain,  
By day or starlight, thus from my first dawn

Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me  
The passions that build up our human soul  
Not with the mean and vulgar works of men,  
But with high objects, with enduring things,  
With life and nature; purifying thus  
The elements of feeling and of thought,  
And sanctifying by such discipline  
Both pain and fear,—until we recognise  
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.”

That discipline is necessary to one who would penetrate to the mysteries of Nature is dwelt upon by Dean Inge in his study of Wordsworth as a mystic. The teaching of Wordsworth was the fruit of a discipline continued and severe. But the teaching is intended to stimulate to moral action, not merely to soothe or charm. But still in Wordsworth thought seems to be centred upon man. Man is not made to rise out of himself and direct his whole being towards the Power of which the heavens and the earth are the manifestations and the

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revelation. That is the respect in which the Hebrew differs from the poets we have mentioned. He is touched with the beauty of the outward things. He is stirred to the depths of his soul. He himself slips into the background. He is moved to wonder that he should be considered at all in the scheme of things. He appears so insignificant in comparison. “When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained; what is man that Thou art mindful of him? And the son of man that Thou visitest him?” The wonder is increased that man, so insignificant in comparison with heaven and earth in their magnificence, should have the dominion over them. “For Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands: Thou hast put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field: the fowl of the air and the fish of the sea and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Thy Name in all the earth.” “O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all: the earth is full of Thy riches.” The Hebrew felt bound to worship Him Who has so manifested Himself in wisdom and goodness, in power and beauty. He breaks out into praise.

That is, surely, the spirit in which we should regard the beautiful world in which we live. We should bring ourselves into harmony with what manifests the working of an orderly harmonious spirit. We must be in sympathy with Nature if we expect from her that sympathy which we so much desire. If we have that sympathy then we can feel how Nature in her many moods, in her unchanging variety, corresponds with our own. We cannot help looking upon Nature in a personal way. The Hebrew in particular thinks of her in terms of human nature and gives her all the feelings by which man is moved. “The valleys stand so thick with corn that they shall laugh and sing.” “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together.” “Ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into

singing; and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." When the spirit of man is stirred to praise by the beauty of the

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things he sees round him he feels that even what he is accustomed to think of as inanimate things are themselves joining in with him in a great chorus of praise. The Hebrew was stirred by what he saw to thoughts of God. Everything was fraught with the deepest lessons of spiritual truth to the one whose heart was attuned to God. Our Lord drew some of His greatest lessons from the birds and from the lilies of the field. In their lives was revealed the watchful and loving providence of a heavenly Father. "Consider the lilies of the field how they grow. They toil not neither do they spin and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to-day is and to-morrow is cast into the oven, shall He not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith." "Behold the fowls of the air for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns: yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?" "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings and not one of them falleth to the ground without your Father." "Wherefore be not anxious about the morrow. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof." God is the Father of all alike; of the sparrow and the lily no less than of the man. Again we may note what love of the mountains was implanted in the Hebrew, but again they spoke to him of God. "The hills stand about Jerusalem, even so the Lord is round about His people." "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help. My help cometh even from the Lord, who hath made heaven and earth." Our Lord Himself was not unaffected by the mountains. On a mountain He was tempted; on a mountain He preached; to the mountain top He retired to pray; on a mountain He was Transfigured; on a mountain He wept over Jerusalem; on a mountain He suffered; from a mountain He ascended into Heaven. From the mountain on which Nazareth was built He watched the roads which passed along the foot of it. Along those roads He would descry the king's armies marching on their errand of vengeance; the merchant travelling in search of goodly pearls; the prodigal son limping home from the far country.

And all that He saw from the mountains of Nazareth was woven into His teaching. In the simplest objects He saw the most profound truths; from them He drew His greatest lessons of God and His dealings with mankind.

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And are we unaffected by the mountains in our own neighbourhood, the play of light and shadow upon them, as the wind chases the clouds along the sky; or snow-crowned in winter with the sunbeams or moonbeams turning them to silver and gold, or casting shadows of ebony in the ghylls and chimneys; with the voice of many waters sounding amongst them? Do not the mountains bring peace to the soul, and the little hills speak righteousness, so much are they in accord with the will of God, obeying His laws, revealing His beauty? And the lakes and tarns at their foot, with their waters wind-driven or lying placid, sun-steeped, blue as the heaven above, and again the mountains mirrored in their clear surface; and the waters are suggestive of healing, cleansing and refreshing. But our thoughts again should be not of ourselves and the effect of such variety of beauty upon us but of God who gives us richly all things to enjoy. "O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom has Thou made them all: The earth is full of Thy riches." He has given them to inflame our love and inspire our worship.

“Lord I have loved all things Thy word made lovely,  
Wind in the barley, green of new-born bracken,  
Poppies aflame, and rain-washed almond blossom,  
Daybreak and sundown.

“Sea-foam on sun-bright shores, and waveless waters,  
Mirroring noon beneath Thy hills’ high silence;  
Untrodden snow, the woodlands’ frost-bound wonder,  
Cloud-rift and sunshine.

“Lord, I give thanks for earth’s unending beauty,  
Glad of all these, and gladder for Thy giving,  
Laughter and love of friends, and breath to praise Thee  
Seeing Thy glory.”

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<sup>1</sup> Preached at St. Mary’s, Ambleside, St. James’ Day, July 25th, 1926, “Rush-bearing Sunday.”