

The Duty of Forgiveness. -- Sensational Scene at Birkenhead.

by Gwilym Hughes

The sermon emphasized the critical duty of forgiveness as a pathway to spiritual renewal and community healing during a powerful revival meeting in Birkenhead.

Scripture: Matthew 6:14, Mark 11:25, Luke 17:3, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13

Topics: "Forgiveness", "Repentance"

Description

Gwilym Hughes preaches about the duty of forgiveness, emphasizing the importance of clearing obstacles such as unforgiveness to make room for God's presence. The sensational scene at Birkenhead during the Welsh revivalist mission reveals a powerful moment of repentance and reconciliation, with individuals fervently praying for forgiveness and unity. The congregation experiences a deep spiritual awakening, leading to tearful confessions and a collective effort to forgive and seek God's mercy. The service culminates in a moving rendition of hymns and prayers, highlighting the transformative power of forgiveness and the unity found in Christ.

Transcript

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BIRKENHEAD, Friday, March 31, 1905.

Throughout all the great centres of population skirting the banks of the Mersey, Evan Roberts, the Welsh revivalist, is undeniably the hero of the hour. His name is on every lip, his pictures are exhibited in hundreds of shop windows, and repeatedly to-day have I heard the regret expressed that the mission is not conducted in the universal language of the Saxon, and held in the Torrey-Alexander pavilion, which is still up, and in which 14,000 people could be accommodated. Evan Roberts has, however, come to Liverpool to conduct a mission to the Welsh people in the language they know best, and, as to the second point, the Welsh revivalist has not yet, except in one solitary instance at Bridgend, conducted a service since the beginning of the revival in any building not habitually used as a place of public worship. The Liverpool Committee, in arranging a series of suburban gatherings in preference to any central demonstration, are not only carrying out the wishes of the revivalist himself, but are keeping the movement in Liverpool and district strictly on the lines that have led to success in the towns and valleys of Wales.

The scene of operations to-day was changed from Liverpool to Birkenhead, and we are assembled this evening in the spacious chapel of the English Primitive Methodists in Grange Road. It is yet but six o'clock. The revivalist is not due for another hour, but the building was packed, and all the doors closed half an hour ago. Since then thousands have been turned away. Two other chapels in the vicinity, we are informed, are also crowded out. They are the English Baptist Chapel, Grange Road, and the Welsh Wesleyan Chapel, Claughton Road. In which of these three chapels will the revivalist appear? Anyone knowing the secret, and willing to part with it for a consideration, could have added considerably to his wealth during the last few hours. But the committee have kept their secret well, and there are not many, even in this congregation, who know that this is the chapel which the missionary will favour.

Looking around I recognise in the solitary occupant of the pulpit pew the form and features of the Rev. Thomas Gray, of Birkenhead, who must now be numbered among the veterans of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist ministry. He is "in charge" pending the missionary's arrival, but the congregation is already aflame with the spirit of the revival, and any attempt at leading would be out of place. An eloquent prayer for "the lessening of immorality and ungodliness in the town" is offered by the Rev. William Watson, the well-known Presbyterian minister of Claughton, but this is the only English we hear during the first hour, though there must be a large number of Englishmen present. The next prayer is in Welsh, and he who offers it, a middle-aged man of the artisan class, is evidently a recent convert. In the fluent, vigorous phrases that fall from him, we glean a bit of his personal history. For 20 years he had been a pronounced infidel, but two months ago the light came, darkness and doubt were for ever-dispelled and faith and conviction had been enthroned. It is a great prayer of thanksgiving, and the congregation is deeply stirred. The joy of the last two months is poetically depicted, but we are told that the only true happiness is that derived from bringing other souls within reach of the mercy of God. We must all be fishers of men and winners of souls. The same altruistic note is struck in many other prayers.

The Mission of the Welsh, it has often been written, is to counteract materialism, and to deepen the spirituality of the human race. If this be so, then the revival helps the nation to fulfil its destiny. A writer in a Liverpool daily to-day claims to have found the secret of the revival. It is, he asserts, the power of the Welsh people to sing. Had he made the remark after hearing this Birkenhead congregation to-night, one might be tempted to pardon him. In all my experience of the revival I have certainly heard no more inspiring singing than this. Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that there is here a large number of visitors from Festiniog and other North Wales centres, though I am reminded, by the way, that the Welsh vocalists of Birkenhead have on more than one occasion asserted their superiority in the chief choral and the ladies' choral competitions of the National Eisteddfod. In the prayers, as in the hymns, there is in every word an unmistakable heart-throb, and occasionally the building re-echoes to the sound of loudly-proclaimed "Amenau."

It was a few minutes past seven when the missionary arrived. He at once took his seat, with the Rev. John Williams, in the pulpit. Miss Annie Davies was accommodated with a seat in the front. For some reason the missionary's sister is to-night absent. The arrival of the missionary causes an unusual flutter of excitement, and his features are closely scanned, and his every movement eagerly followed by an excited throng -- but only for a moment. A fervent prayer is heard in the galleries "that we may look to Thee, oh Lord, and not to Thy servant," and thus recalled to the spiritual aspect of the gathering, the congregation abandons itself once more to an ecstasy of praise. In a subdued voice Miss Annie Davies gives an exquisite rendering of Sankey's "I hear Thy tender voice," and a solemn hush falls upon the assembly as it drinks in every warbling note that trills from the throat of the youthful singer.

In the audience are scores of young men and women from Rhos, aflame with the fire of the revival, kindled there simultaneously with the outbreak at Loughor. They are easily distinguishable by the fervency of their prayers, and presently four or five of them are heard addressing the Throne of Grace in voices pitched in a high, tremulous key, pulsating with emotion.

We begin to feel that this is going to be an unusual service, for the atmosphere is surcharged with that indefinable something so frequently experienced, at Evan Roberts's meetings. Call it hypnotism, magnetism, or what you will, or apply to it the revivalist's own description, "the Operation of the Holy Spirit," the effect is unmistakably manifest. Hearts beat quick and faces grow pale. There is a catch in the throat, and a deep consciousness that something is about to happen. A silence supervenes that is positively painful -- the tension is at breaking point.

Half a dozen voices start a hymn, the congregation makes an effort to follow, and anon the, revivalist, rising suddenly from his seat, excitedly seizes the pulpit Bible and quickly turns o'er its leaves, as if in search of a text that is eluding him. Then, surveying the congregation, with face twitching as if with pain, and eyes full of pathos and sorrow, he sternly demands "silence, stop!"

The congregation is startled, and looks up. The hymn is abruptly stopped in the middle of a line. "Stop," repeats the missionary. "Stop, we must first clear this place before we can sing. A moment ago a friend over there beseeched God to come nearer, but He will not come nearer until some things here are cleared out of the way."

What is amiss? Each man looks with wonder at his neighbour, and we seem to read in the astonished faces that are turned towards the pulpit the startling question, "And is this man in the confidence of the Almighty?" Presently, the missionary proceeds to explain. "There are some here to-night who cannot pray the Lord's prayer, 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us.' Why? Because they will not forgive those that have trespassed against them, and they are here to-night, and are obstacles in the way. Think not this is imagination, say not this is a flight of fancy; it is KNOWLEDGE. They are here, as certain as I am here, as certain as God is here," and, proceeding, he urges those thus alluded to, to forgive at once.

The scene that follows baffles description. Frantic prayers are heard from many parts of the building. List to some of the phrases, "Bend them, oh Lord." "Forgive us and strengthen us to forgive." "Pardon our hypocrisy." "Bend the entire congregation." A little boy of eleven, who is in the gallery behind the pulpit, offers a prayer that is beautiful and touching. "Let love prevail like the ocean," he cries, "to enable us all to forgive and forget trespasses, and to think only of the infinite love of God. "

Again the congregation, with more than half of its members in tears, starts a hymn, and again, the missionary imperatively intervenes. "These people decline to forgive, and some of them are important personages, too. Let them beware lest the Spirit compels them to stand up and publicly denounce their own iniquity, nor must they be surprised if their names are given me. God is revealing Himself in wonderful ways these days."

This, we know from experience, is no idle threat; and we recall memories of that extraordinary meeting at Blaenannerch, when the missionary who now speaks actually pronounced a name under circumstances similar to these.

Again we hear a multitude of prayers. One of the number is by a young man, who is described to me as a leading official of the Free Church of the Welsh (Eglwys Rydd y Cymry), the section that recently seceded from the Calvinistic Methodist body in Liverpool. I look up and recognise him. He took a prominent part in the painful historic controversy that preceded that secession. We seem to be getting a glimmer of light on what is happening. Are hostile leaders in this meeting, with hearts still filled with bitterness and rancour? "Unite us, O Lord, unite us" is the young man's piercing cry, and again he repeats it, and again and again he is followed by loud "Amen's." Sounds of sobbing fall on the ear from all sides. He who prays proceeds: -- "We are in a hopeless tangle. Lord, reduce us to some semblance of order. We are in mortal fear of quitting this meeting until we are assured we are all brethren and sisters in Christ. Bend us all until every church in the district is ready to co-operate for the furtherance of Thy Kingdom." Is this a reference to the recent decision of the Welsh Free Church Council of Liverpool not to admit the Free Church of the Welsh into its ranks? Other rhapsodies in the same prayer are equally pointed.

After this it seemed the most natural thing in the world to hear prayer after prayer in which were heard the declarations, "I thank Thee, Lord, Thou hast given me the strength. I forgive all now. I beseech Thee to grant me Thy forgiveness." "No," declared the missionary, a little later, "It is not clear here yet. There are still some here who refuse to forgive. They are stubbornly resisting the promptings of the Holy Spirit. They must not expect any sleep to-night. God in His own good time will deal terribly with each of them. May He have mercy upon them."

The Rev. John Williams, speaking slowly and solemnly, asked the congregation to unite with him in the Lord's Prayer, and at once 1,800 people bent in supplication, and with faces lifted, offered in Welsh the Lord's Prayer, repeating with significant emphasis the passage referring to forgiveness. When the Welsh version is finished Miss Annie Davies leads the assembly in an equally fervent repetition of the same prayer in English. Then the revivalist, with face beaming with joy, exclaims, "At last, the Spirit is permitting us to sing. Let us then sing

"Ymgrymed pawb i lawr

I enw'r addfwyn Oen!

Yr Enw mwyaf mawr

Erioed a glywyd son:

Y clod, y mawl, y parch, a'r bri

Fo byth i enw',n Harglwydd ni!"

In the rendering of this noble hymn, the missionary himself leads the congregation, and then the incident is closed by Miss Annie Davies with an exquisite rendering of "Dyma Feibl Anwyl Iesu" wedded to the music of "The Last Rose of Summer."

"Will those who would like to love Jesus, put their hands up?" The question is put by the Rev. John Williams, and there is prompt response. Every arm in the building is uplifted. The revivalist claps his hands with very joy.

Soon afterwards many converts were enrolled, among the names called out being that of Mr. ---- who, it was explained by the Rev. Thomas Gray, "is a brother of the Rev. ---- a well-known South Wales minister."

"Oh," retorts the missionary, "he has found a better brother in Jesus to-night. "

It was a long way past ten ere this remarkable service ended. While it proceeded members of the Y.M.C.A. of Birkenhead conducted an equally remarkable open-air service outside the chapel, where many thousands were gathered.

Old Feuds Healed. Saturday.

At the Birkenhead meeting last night the hindrance mentioned by the revivalist was the presence in the congregation of people who refused to forgive their enemies. To-day I have received full details (including names, addresses, etc.) of an incident which in this connection will be read with interest. There were present at the meeting a brother and a sister, both advanced in years, who for 20 years had not spoken to each other. Every effort at reconciliation had failed. During the stress of those never-to-be-forgotten moments, when the revivalist depicted the sinfulness of hatred and the duty of forgiveness, both agreed to forgive and forget, and to seek reconciliation. Outside the chapel the two accidentally met, mutually embraced, craved each other's pardon, and then walked home together linked arm-in-arm.

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