

Sermons on Saints' Days. No. 3, St Mark's Day

by J.H. Newman

The sermon emphasizes the importance of Apostolical succession in maintaining stability and unity in sound doctrine, and warns against the consequences of dispensing with it.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:13

Topics: "Sound Doctrine", "Apostolic Ministry"

Description

J.H. Newman preaches about the importance of stability in sound doctrine, emphasizing the need for Christians to prove their faith and love by believing in the genuine Gospel and adoring the true Savior. He warns against the common notion that faith in the heart is everything while neglecting doctrinal accuracy, highlighting the scriptural emphasis on guarding the doctrines delivered to the Saints. Newman discusses the Apostolical ministry as a means to guard the foundations of faith and enable believers to press forward to perfection, contrasting the effects of dispensing with episcopal succession in various churches and the doctrinal deviations that followed.

Transcript

"That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine."—Ephes. iv. 14.

THE Church, in her Collect for this day, directs us how to pray for stability in sound doctrine, as a sign, and indispensable requisite, of something better than mere childhood in religion. She would not have Christians to content themselves with a consciousness of faith, however devout, or with a feeling of love, however fervent, but she wishes every man to prove his faith and love; i. e. to see to it, that he believe the genuine Gospel, and love and adore the true and only Saviour.

Daily experience shows that it is very possible for men, and serious men too, forgetting this caution, to think all is right, if only certain pious impressions are produced, sufficient, apparently, to lead the mind upwards, and, at the same time, to enforce the relative duties of life. If that be done, say they, all is done. Why go on to perplex good people with questions of mere doctrinal accuracy? This is a very common way of speaking and thinking just at present: and it finds ready acceptance, especially among, the many who dislike trouble.

For in Christian doctrine, as in other things, it is some trouble to be accurate. Common, however, and acceptable as the notion is, that the temper of faith in the heart is every thing, and the substance of faith in

the creed comparatively nothing; it is a notion at once proved unscriptural and wrong, were it only by this simple consideration; that so much care has been taken in Scripture, and by GOD'S Providence guiding His Church in all ages, to guard the doctrines once for all delivered to the Saints, and keep men steady and uniform in them.

If this were not a principal object in the eye of Divine Wisdom, is it conceivable that the great Apostle should have introduced it as he has done when speaking to the Ephesians as one main result of the coming of the HOLY GHOST, the very bond between heaven and earth? It is one of the passages, in which he writes like one soaring majestically upward, flight after flight beyond what he had at first intended: "Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of CHRIST ;" i. e., according to that portion of special infused grace which GOD sees needful for our several callings in His Church.

"Wherefore he saith, When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men." What gifts? Surely, to those who think slightly of Apostolical order in the Church, the answer must appear very surprising. "He gave some, Apostles, and some, Prophets, and some, Evangelists, and some, Pastors and Teachers." I do not of course press this text as proving by itself the Apostolical authority of our three orders. But thus much, undoubtedly, it proves, that some kind of order was instituted in the beginning, of so important and beneficial tendency, as to deserve a very high place in the enumeration of those royal gifts, by which the Holy Comforter solemnized the inauguration of the SON of GOD.

We may, or we may not, enjoy that order still. We may have irrecoverably lost it by God's Providence justly visiting human abuse of it: in which case it might not strike us as a practical topic of inquiry: but to suppose that it still exists, or may be recovered, and yet to speak of it as an idle dream, a worn out theory, or (still worse) a profane superstition--this is not what one should expect from those who reverence the Divine Inspirer of this and similar passages in St.

Paul. But to proceed; the Apostle goes on to mention unity of doctrine, as one main final cause of the institution of this Apostolical system. The Apostles, Prophets, and the rest, were given to the Church by the Holy Ghost, "that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, by cunning craftiness, according to the wily system of deceit: but speaking the truth in love, may grow up unto Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ:" i. e. may daily go on unto perfection in serving and copying our adorable Saviour, and in nearer and nearer communion with Him.

It is clear that if the Apostolical ministry does guard effectually the foundations of our faith, it so far gives room and opportunity for all to go on to perfection. It puts men on a vantage ground, disencumbers them of cares and anxieties about that which is behind, and enables them with undivided energy to press forward to that which is before. As a mere witness, the Apostolical system, supposing it really such, must have this effect: and we must not forget, that, on the same supposition, especial helps from Divine Grace may be looked for as likely to be vouchsafed to those who humbly endeavour to go on by its aid. Now, that the great Head of the Church has hitherto made use of the succession of Bishops as a singular mean for guarding the doctrine of His Incarnation in particular, was shown on a former occasion, by reference to the ancient Church: where it was proved, that both as indisputable witnesses, and as commissioned and responsible guardians, the Bishops of the three first centuries effectually maintained the truth for us. The same conclusion is now to be deduced from a more painful set of experiments, in which modern times, unfortunately, have too much abounded. We are to consider what has been the doctrinal result in those

Churches which have been so bold as to dispense with primitive discipline and government. If we find them marked, in the great majority of cases, by great unsteadiness and vacillation of doctrinal views, even on those points which contain the very essence of our faith: will not this be an additional lesson to us, that by forsaking the Apostolical ministry we are but giving ourselves up to be "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine?"

Now, first, although, as I said before, the heretics of the first ages dared not openly dispense with Apostolical succession, the times, as they well knew, not enduring it: yet they showed in some remarkable instances, how little they really cared for it. The following is the complaint of Tertullian in the second century: "It may be right here to add some account of the practical system of the heretics, how futile it is, how altogether earthly and human; destitute of weight, of authority, of discipline: as well agreeing with their system of doctrine. First, who among them is a Catechumen, who a complete Christian, is a thing uncertain: they come to Church: hear the sermon, join in the prayers, indiscriminately: even should heathens chance to come in, they will throw their holy things to the dogs, and their pearls (which, indeed, are but counterfeits) before swine. They hold the overthrow of discipline to be [Christian] simplicity; and our reverence for the same, meretricious art. Every where, and with all kinds of persons, they affect to be on good terms. For it makes no difference to them how they disagree in their own expositions, provided they can but unite for the overthrow of one thing, viz. TRUTH. All are puffed up: all profess knowledge. Their Catechumens become complete Christians before they have quite learned their lessons. The very women among the heretics, how forward are they! daring to teach, to dispute, to exercise, to make show of gifts of healing: perhaps, even to baptize. Their ordinations are off-handed, light, variable; sometimes mere novices are raised by them to Church office, sometimes men engaged in worldly business, sometimes deserters from our ranks; whom they hope to make sure of by the compliment, having no reality" [of spiritual power] "to offer. In fact, promotion is nowhere so easy as in the camp of rebels; since the very act of being there is rewardable service. Accordingly, one man shall be their Bishop to-day, another to-morrow: to-day a Deacon, to-morrow a reader: to-day a Presbyter, to-morrow a mere layman. For in laymen also they will vest the powers and functions of the Priesthood."

As an instance of what is thus generally stated by Tertullian, take the behaviour of Novatian, Presbyter in the Church of Rome, who, about the year 252, was the founder of a sect which professed especial strictness of moral discipline. The testimony concerning him, of his own Bishop, Cornelius, a prelate of the highest character in the Church, is as follows: "Never in so short a time was so great a change seen, as we witnessed in Novatian. He was continually pledging himself by certain fearful oaths, that the Bishoprick was no object to him: and now, on a sudden, as it were by some stage trick, he comes forward in public a Bishop! Reformer as he is of doctrine, and champion of pure Church principles, having entered on a scheme for making himself a Bishop, without Divine sanction, by underhand means, he selects two, as desperate as himself, and sends them into certain small and insignificant dioceses of Italy: where, lighting on three Bishops, (the requisite number for consecration,) " men rustic, and very simple, he persuades them to come with all speed to Rome, as though by their mediation some present dispute in that Church might be composed. Being there come he surrounds them with men like himself, provided for the purpose; and at a late hour, after a full meal, when they were off their guard, compels them to make him Bishop, by I know not what imaginary and vain ordination."

Is it not plain that this person would have rejected the episcopal succession at once, if he could have compassed his ends without it? So far, therefore, he is an instance of the fact, that disrespect to that succession is a part of the heretical character. And although it is not exactly to the present purpose, I

cannot refrain from adding also a circumstance which betrays his mind regarding the sacraments of CHRIST. Having set himself up as a schismatical rival to Cornelius, the true Bishop of Rome, this was his method of securing to himself partisans: in the act of solemnizing the holy Eucharist, "when he had made the offerings, and was distributing to each communicant his portion, and conveying it to him, he compels the unfortunate men, instead of giving thanks, to utter the following oath: he holding both their hands, and not letting them go until they repeated the words of asseveration after him: and these are his very words: 'Swear to me by the body and blood of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, that thou wilt never forsake me and return to Cornelius.' Nor is the poor man allowed to taste, before he shall have thus pronounced an imprecation on himself. And when he receives that bread, instead of saying, Amen, he is made to say, I will never return to Cornelius."

It is frightful, but surely it is very instructive, to see how one kind of profaneness thus draws on another. Contempt of Apostolical authority was joined, we see, in this case, with contempt of the Sacraments of CHRIST. In the worse case which followed, that of Arius, the same evil temper led, as every one knows, to a direct assault on the holiest truths of Christianity. The immediate occasion of Arius' promulgating his blasphemy is said to have been his vexation at failing to succeed to the episcopal throne of Alexandria.

This exasperated him so, that he laid in wait for an opportunity of disturbing the person preferred to him, Alexander, a man of true primitive energy. And he took occasion from certain expositions of Scripture, in which, as he, Arius, pretended to think, the Bishop had too much magnified the SON of GOD. The first spring, therefore, of his heresy was a rebellious and envious feeling towards his Bishop. And although for the same reason, probably, as Novatian, his followers never renounced the Apostolical succession; their proceedings were marked all along by a thorough disdain of Apostolical privileges.

Witness their unscrupulous use of the civil power, or even of the fury of the populace, wherever it suited their purposes to carry an episcopal election, or control a synod, by such means: witness again the licence they encouraged of profane and libellous scoffing, both in prose and verse: by which, added to their improper appointments, they gradually depreciated the character of the most sacred office; so that it is quite melancholy to read the accounts given of what Bishops were at Constantinople in 381, as compared with what they had been at Nicea, about sixty years before.

All was no more than might be expected from a party, whose first overt proceedings are thus related by an eye-witness. "They could not endure any longer to remain in submission to the Church; but having builded for themselves dens of thieves, there they hold their meetings continually, by day and by night exercising themselves in calumnies against CHRIST and us.... They try to pervert those Scriptures which affirm our LORD'S eternal Godhead and unspeakable glory with His FATHER.

Thus encouraging the impious opinions of Jews and Heathens concerning CHRIST, they lay themselves out to the uttermost to be praised by them: making the most of those points, which the unbelievers are most apt to ridicule; and daily exciting tumults and factions against us. One of their methods is, to get up actions at law against us, on the complaint of simple women, disorderly persons, whom they have perverted. Another, to expose the Christian profession to scorn, by permitting the younger persons among them to run irreverently about all the streets," i. e., as it would seem, from one conventicle to another

"And while they thus set themselves against the Divinity of the SON of GOD, of course they shrink not from uttering unseemly rudeness against us. Nay, they disdain to compare themselves even with any of the ancients, or to be put on a level with those, whom we from children have revered as our guides. As

to their fellow-servants of this time, in whatever country or Church, they do not consider a single one to have attained any measure of true wisdom: calling themselves the only wise, the only disdainers of worldly wealth, the only discoverers of doctrinal truths to themselves, they say, alone are revealed things which in their nature never could have come into the mind of any other under the sun."

Such were the original Arians, the first powerful impugners of the Divinity of JESUS CHRIST; such their conduct towards their Bishops, and their reverence for Apostolical authority. The list of examples might be greatly enlarged; but it is time to go on to more modern times, and see what the result has been, where that was done, (I do not say from motives like theirs,) which Novatian and Arius clearly would have done if they had dared.

The largest experiments yet made in the world on the doctrinal result of dispensing with episcopal succession, are the Lutheran Churches of North Germany, the Presbyterian or Reformed Churches of Switzerland, Holland and Scotland, with their offshoots in France, Germany, England and Ireland, and the Congregational or Independent Churches, in this island, and in America. I am not now going to dispute the necessity of what was done at the Reformation, (although it would be wrong to allow such necessity, without proof quite overwhelming,) but simply to state, as matter of fact, what has ensued in each instance in regard of the great doctrine of our LORD'S Incarnation.

First, in North Germany, whatever may be supposed the cause, it is notorious that a lamentable falling off from the simplicity of evangelical truth prevailed during a considerable part of the eighteenth century. Views prevailed, which are commonly called Rationalist: i. e. which pretend to give an account, or principles of mere human reason, of Christianity and every thing connected with it. Of course the union of GOD and man in the Person of JESUS CHRIST was an object of scorn to a nation so led away by "philosophy and vain deceit." But it is a point well worth remarking, that, according to some who know much of German literature, the mischief was occasioned in good measure by the importation of Deistical books and opinions from England: books and opinions which England herself had rejected. Why so great a difference in the reception of the same error by two kindred races of people, lying very much under the same temptations? Is it unreasonable to suppose that the Apostolical succession and safeguards arising out of it, which England enjoys, had something to do with her comparative exemption from that most alarming error?

The next which occurs is the case of the Church of Geneva and it is, indeed, a most startling case. It appearing at the time morally impossible to get a sufficient number of episcopally ordained Pastors, Calvin was induced to neglect the Apostolic; Commission in his plan for the reformation of Geneva; or rather to search holy Scripture for a new view of that commission, which might make him quite independent of Bishops. In so doing, he made out for himself the platform of Presbyterian Discipline.

Having once established that as of exclusive divine right, he precluded himself from taking advantage of the avenue for returning to the true succession, which was soon after opened to him by his intercourse with the English reformers. It should seem that he could not help feeling how irreconcilable this his new form, Church government was with the general witness of the Fathers and hence, among other reasons, he contracted a kind of dislike of the ancient Church, and an impatience of being at all controlled by her decisions, which ultimately has proved of the worst consequence to the Genevan Church in particular.

For example, he feared not, in his prime work, the Institutes, to speak contemptuously of the Fathers of the Council of Nicaea, and to designate the capital article of their majestic creed as little better than "an

affected and childish sing-song." Another time he uttered a wish that the word "TRINITY" might be discontinued in the formularies of the Church. These and other symptoms of a desire to take liberties with antiquity were not unnoticed by a new sect, just then creeping out of the ground in Italy.

Socinus and his partisans, one after another, betook themselves to Geneva, as the soil most congenial to them: and the later years of Calvin, and almost all those of his successor, Beza, were disturbed by that heresy and others akin to it, both at home and among their spiritual colonies abroad: especially those in Poland and Transylvania. It is well known how violently some of these false teachers were attacked by Calvin, even to the death: and his letters altogether betray a soreness and anxiety on the subject, as if he were aware that the system of his Church was incomplete, and did not feel quite sure that it was not his own fault.

If such were Calvin's misgivings, the experience of later times has furnished a sad verification of them. After a gradual declension of many years, the Church of Geneva has now, it appears, sunk down to the very lowest standard of doctrine consistent with nominal Christianity. The Trinity, the Atonement, the Incarnation of the SON of GOD, are, or were lately, absolutely proscribed by authority as topics of preaching in the congregations there considered orthodox. Could such a downfall so easily have taken place, had not the authority of the Primitive Church, as a witness and interpreter of holy writ, been intentionally disparaged from the beginning, and private, that is to say, popular and fashionable judgment, set up instead, for strictly Presbyterian purposes? Episcopal sway, appealing as it must to antiquity, was surely just the thing needed to watch and check that evil leaven before it had spread so far.

A like effect, proceeding as it may be thought very much from the same cause, may be seen in Holland, in the rise and growth of that school of divinity, commonly called Liberal or Latitudinarian: which began with Episcopius and others in the seventeenth century, and which has greatly tended to encourage a habit of explaining away the mysteries of the faith in almost all Protestant countries. The fact seems to be, that the extremes of the Predestinarian doctrine, violently pressed as they were at the Synod of Dort, produced their natural result, a violent reaction: and the minds of men not being prepossessed with the salutary antidote of reverence for primitive tradition, (which antidote had been systematically withholden, lest Presbyterianism should lose influence through it,) were ready to give up any thing else, when they had once given up the creeds and definitions of their own Churches. When these divines were pressed with the testimonies of the Fathers, the spirit of their answers were such as the following: "Never shall any advice drive me into the fruitless toil of studying the Fathers; which is more like grinding in a prison-house than any thing else I envy no man the credit he may acquire in such a frivolous insignificant pursuit. Others, for me, may have all the glory of much reading and great memory, whoever they are, who can find pleasure in wandering and rocking about in that vast ocean of Fathers and Councils." And (let it be well observed) this founder of the liberal school goes on distinctly to avow, that "he takes no great pains," nor ever did, "to acquaint himself with the writings of the Fathers:" whom, indeed, he grudges to call "the Fathers," accounting it a name of too much reverence. On this, our learned Bishop Bull remarks, what is much to our present purpose, as showing how cheap thoughts of the Primitive Church might naturally lead some steps towards heresy. "Much, indeed, were it to be wished that Episcopius had excepted the Fathers and writers of the three first centuries, at least. Had he spent more time on them, it would never have been regretted either by himself or the Church. For it would have saved him from representing the Arian and Socinian doctrines, regarding the Person of our SAVIOUR, as having been in the Judgment of the early Churches, erroneous indeed, but not so bad as heretical."

Passing over to our own island, we are met, at once, by a fact, which appears at first, as far as it goes, to tell against the preceding conclusions. The Church of Scotland, ever since the Revolution, has been altogether Presbyterian; and yet, by God's blessing, her Ministers never have been accused of such a defection as took place at Geneva. Allowing the many good parts of her system (which, be it observed, are all in a primitive spirit) full credit for this, yet one may be permitted to observe, that something naturally must be ascribed to the vicinity of our own Church diffusing a kind of wholesome contagion, the benefit of which has been acknowledged by some of the great lights of the Scottish establishment. And it may be doubted whether many of the laity of that country? and especially whether the leading schools of education, have not been all along gradually verging towards something like Genevan profaneness. A little time will probably show—certainly there are symptoms in Scotland at this moment, which would make an orthodox Englishman more than ever unwilling to part with that outwork of Apostolic Faith, which England, under circumstances in many respects peculiarly untoward, has hitherto found in the Apostolical Commission of her Clergy.

In England itself, it is hardly necessary to do more than notice the acknowledged state of the Presbyterian Churches. Not being subjected to the control of so strict a discipline as those of their communion in Scotland, and being moreover thrown into more hostile contact with the principles of ancient episcopal order, they have subsided, one after one another, into a cold and proud Socinianism. Three years ago, it was stated on dissenting authority, that the whole number of Presbyterian chapels in England was 258, out of whom 235 were in reality Unitarian.

Among the Independent or Congregational Churches (in which denomination, when speaking of Church government, the Baptists are of course included) no such avowed defection prevails. But their systematical disparagement of the holy Sacraments, their horror (for it is more than disregard) of authority and antiquity, and the tendency of their instructions and devotions to make Faith a matter of feeling rather than a strict relative duty towards the persons of the HOLY TRINITY: these and other causes are, I suspect, not very gradually preparing the way for lamentable results among them also. And it is most evident that all such causes act more strongly for the want of that check which a controlling Episcopacy supplies; such an Episcopacy I mean as may confidently make a continual appeal to the very Apostolical age.

But we are not left quite to conjecture on the doctrinal tendency of Congregational views of Church government. The experiment has been tried on a large scale in America; and in one part of it (New England) with something of that advantage which endowments may be supposed to yield towards stability of Orthodox doctrine. The result may be given in the words of a Socinian writer. "In the United States, where there are no obstructions to the progress of knowledge and truth, the spread of liberal doctrines has exceeded our most sanguine expectations." An account which is confirmed by the testimony of all parties. Now, it is allowed, that in the same United States the Independents and Baptists put together greatly exceed all other denominations of Christians. The only country, therefore, of Christendom where congregational principles of government entirely prevail, is likewise the only country which witnesses the rapid and unmitigated growth of Unitarian principles of doctrine. In other countries, generally speaking, the "God-denying, apostasy" finds more or less acceptance, in proportion as less or more remains of primitive order and respect for the Apostolical commission.

"But," it will be said, "what then becomes of the opposite case of the Church of Rome? She, too, has her grave doctrinal errors, deeply trenching on scriptural truth, awfully dangerous to the souls of men; and yet she is generally considered as the great champion of the Apostolical commission." The answer to this lies

in the fact, well-known, however little considered, that in the same degree as the Romish Church swerved as a church from Christian verity, she laboured also to induce her subject Bishops to part with their claim to a succession properly Apostolical. Many and earnest were the debates on this point, at Trent, in the year 1562: the Papal Legates labouring, on the one hand, to enforce a declaration that Episcopal authority was not of divine right immediately, but mediately through the See of Rome, the Bishops of Spain more especially, insisting on the contrary tenet. The matter was quieted by a kind of compromise through the intervention of the French Bishops, and is accordingly left undecided in the decrees of that Council. The debates, however, remain on record, a remarkable proof that the spirit of Popery, as of all Anti-Christian corruptions, shrinks back, as it were instinctively, from the presence of Apostolical principles of order.

If any one ask, " Why should all this be so? What has the Episcopal succession to do with doctrines, with the doctrine of our LORD'S Incarnation more especially?"--the answer has been partly given in the course of this brief sketch, especially in what related to Geneva. But, in general, the following considerations would appear to suffice.

First, As matter of direct argument, when once men have learned to think slightly of the testimony borne by the ancients to the primitive discipline, they will naturally lose some part of their respect for the testimony borne by the same ancients to the primitive interpretation of Scripture. Now the questions between us and Unitarians are, in a great measure, questions of Scripture interpretation. Is it not clear, then, in how great additional jeopardy we place the irreverent and the wavering, when, from whatever cause, we shake their confidence in the express testimony of the early Fathers?

Secondly, Looking at the whole subject as matter not of argument, but of feeling and temper; boldness and self-sufficiency in dealing with those who came next to the Apostles will prepare the mind to lay aside some portion of that deference with which we should approach the holy Apostles themselves. They and their writings will be treated more and more with a sort of hasty familiarity: inspiration will be less and less thought of; and naturally restless in discussion, and tormented with thoughts of his own ingenuity, the result is all but morally certain.

Thirdly: (the point must not be omitted, however the majority may agree to scoff at it, and however gravely some may blame it as uncharitable:) if there be such a thing as a true Apostolical commission, truly connected with the efficacy of CHRIST'S holy Sacraments; then we must suppose, that where that commission is wanting, especially if the want be through men's presumption or neglect, then the gracious assistance of the HOLY GHOST cannot be so certainly depended on, as for other sanctifying purposes, so for the guiding of the mind to doctrinal truth. Of course, then, the evil spirit and the tempting sophistry of the world will have the more power over men: so that if for no other reason, yet through the want or imperfection of the ordinary channels of grace, schism might be expected to lead to false doctrine and heresy.

Can it be necessary to add the obvious remark, that if the Church system were needful heretofore, it is but rendered the more evidently necessary for every advance in intellectual light and liberty, which the present age, from day to day, prides itself on making? Alas! if the appetite for knowledge of good and evil be indeed the great snare of all, then all the supernatural means and aids which our LORD has provided in His Church, instead of having gone out of date, are more than ever necessary to us; and those more heavily than ever responsible, who scorn any of those aids, or teach and encourage others to do so.

It is of GOD'S great mercy, that to such a perversion of mind is generally annexed what makes it its own punishment here, and so far gives it a fairer chance of better and more humble thoughts in time for hereafter. We are plainly taught by St. Paul, that those who permit themselves to disparage the heavenly gifts, conveyed to us by the SPIRIT of CHRIST through his Apostles, may expect to be, if no worse, yet all their lives "children, tossed to and fro, and carried away by every wind of doctrine:" or, as he elsewhere expresses it, "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of truth." Let us remember these things, when we hear, as we too often have heard, and must more and more expect to hear, of ingenious men letting go their hold, first, of Christian order, and then of Christian faith: and let us fear and prayer both for them and for ourselves.

OXFORD,

The Feast of the Annunciation.

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