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"THE SPHERE AND DUTIES OF
CHRISTIAN WOMEN."

A SERMON

PREACHED IN NORWICH CATHEDRAL,

JANUARY 8th, 1882,

BEING THE SUNDAY AFTER THE FUNERAL OF

MARGARET CLIFFORD MELVILLE ROBINSON,

BY

Edward Meyrick Goulburn, D.D., D.C.L.,

DEAN OF NORWICH.

[Reprinted from the *Norfolk Chronicle*, Jan. 14th, 1882.]

SERMON.

LUKE ii., 19, and 1 PETER iii., 4 :

“ Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart ; ” “ The ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. ”

“ MAN proposes,” says the good old proverb, “ God disposes.” And more than this. God’s disposing is better than man’s proposing. I have sketched out my scheme of duty for the day,—so much work to be got through before nightfall. A wholly unexpected incident occurs which drives me off the lines of my scheme. I have done nothing when nightfall comes, or next to nothing, of what I hoped and intended to do. But very possibly I may have done better. Certainly I have done better, if I have worked in a quarter of the field indicated by the finger of God’s providence instead of one indicated by the promptings of my own mind. People looking at the records of our Lord’s life in the Gospels have observed that it seems to have been a very planless life. Jesus went about doing good, not whithersoever He Himself designed, but whithersoever the Father summoned and guided Him. It must be better that God should direct our steps than that our own heart should devise our way.—This, then, is

the apology which I offer to you for digressing from the path which I last Sunday marked out for our January sermons. I had studied the second of the Christmas Psalms, with the view of speaking to you about it, when the tidings came of a mournful event, which at once filled my mind, as I have no doubt it fills many of yours, with another interest. What I say to you cannot be wholly alien from that interest. My thoughts must flow in the channel which events have carved out for them, if the word is to be a living word; and none but a living word can be a life-giving word.—The society of a Cathedral Close is of necessity a small one. It is well also if it is a happy and harmonious one. And, I think, that by God's great goodness to us, we are, perhaps, more favoured in this respect than some other societies of a similar character. To lose out of so small a society one whom to know was to love,—whose bright, sunny, sprightly nature, corresponding, I have often thought, with the summer months of her husband's residence, shed some portion of its brightness upon all with whom she came in contact; and made all sad to lose her when the residence terminated, and joyful to greet her when it re-commenced,—one who combined in a rather unusual degree an enthusiastic warmth of friendship for some who were not akin to her, with a wife's devotion to her husband and a mother's tenderness for her children,—the loss of such an one will for all who were her friends create a very serious gap. There are probably many of us who feel that in May, June, and July, Norwich will be no more to us quite what it has been hitherto. It was her brightness of temperament, and not any weakness of Christian faith, which made the fear of death, or rather of the physical process of dying, all her life long a bondage to her. I say, not any weakness of Christian faith; for, as her husband read to her but a few hours before her

death the 23rd Psalm, the sweet smile, which spread itself over her features at those words, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me," indicated that she took the gracious promise to herself, and found peace in so doing. But her nature recoiled from the thought of the *process* of dying, as sunny natures so commonly do; and it is, therefore, satisfactory to know that, in God's mercy, the trial which she so much dreaded was spared her, and that she passed out of life in a placid and tranquil sleep; wearied, apparently, from bodily exhaustion, and yielding to a feeling of fatigue, which passed, by almost imperceptible stages, without a sigh or a struggle, into the final collapse. "It was like her sweet, calm life," writes her husband, "to die thus." "Her sweet, calm life!" A most true commendation, though coming from one so likely to be blinded to the truth by partiality. And I have put it together in my mind with another trait of her character, which requires to be distinctly stated in order to a true apprehension of it. Assuredly sweetness and calmness were compatible with great vivacity, and with a spark of genuine enthusiasm about persons or subjects which interested her. There was nothing languid or mawkish in her character, nor did she fail to express her sympathy with those healthy forms of activity by which the members of her sex are at present doing so much to serve the Church, and help forward the kingdom of the Lord Jesus. Several years ago a sermon was preached in the nave of this Cathedral, which gave some particulars of the work of the London Deaconesses' Institution in Burton Crescent. I shall not soon forget the lively interest which she expressed in these particulars, and the enthusiasm which the work of a deaconess seemed to kindle in her mind. "In short," she said, in her usual

sprightly way, "if I were not a canoness, I should apply to be made a deaconess." It struck me at the time that the words, though so playfully spoken, as was her wont, probably expressed more of the speaker's mind than she intended to convey. It shewed her sympathy with the Christian activities going on around her, and especially with the efforts now making to bring those activities within the sphere of women. But the "If I were not a canoness," had a meaning also. It shewed that she had the steadying as well as the impulsive principle in her character,—the ballast as well as the breeze,—that she appreciated her providential position as one which had sacred duties annexed to it, from which she would not, if she could, be free, and that devotion to those duties constituted for her the state of life to which it had pleased God to call her.—But enough has been said, and I am sure with your concurrence, to exhibit the grounds of the affectionate regard in which all who knew her hold her memory; and I proceed to the subject of discourse, which reflection on her example has suggested to me. For, believe me, I am mindful of the indictment so often and so justly brought against funeral sermons, that they are for the most part repertoires of flimsy, sometimes of false, sentiment, and offer as a general rule no solid instruction to the listener, no protest against rampant sin, no persuasive to holy living. I will speak, then, to you of the sphere and duties of Christian women; and it will be in keeping with the season, when our thoughts are fixed on our Blessed Lord's childhood, and with the Gospel of the day, in which are preserved some of the few authentic words of Christ's mother, if I propose to you that holy woman as having been, in God's design, a model for her sex. If it can be substantiated that the Blessed Virgin was, in God's design, an example for Christian women, then it will be abundantly clear that the attempt now so often made to bring women out of their natural retirement, and to thrust them into spheres long considered to be the peculiar spheres of men,—to withdraw them from domestic life, and to devolve upon them, as much as possible, professional pursuits, and even the administration of public affairs,—is contrary to the Divine ideal of the sex, and, therefore, however specious and plausible the arguments by

which it may be defended, must and will certainly end in mischief. For the greatest benefactress of the human race, who was God's honoured instrument of bringing the Saviour into the world, lies in the shade altogether; occupies quite the background, not the foreground, of the evangelical narratives. We augur, indeed, from the text, and one or two similar passages, that she was a pensive character,—one who treasured up in her heart, and devoutly pondered, the works and ways of God, and the wise and gracious utterances of her Divine Son. And in her very few brief sayings we trace womanly interest in a newly-wedded pair; motherly solicitude about her Son while a child; great expectations of Him, founded on the extraordinary developements of His character, which she had deeply and duly noted,—these things in the way of natural feeling,—and in the way of spiritual feeling, a believing acquiescence in God's testimony, even when it entirely baffled human reason, and an ecstatic joy in the fulfilment of His promises to her forefathers, of which he had condescended to make her the instrument. Legend and fiction, always ready to supply the large demands made by human curiosity, have been busy about her history; but what I have stated is all that we know for certain of her, whom all generations should call, and have called, blessed. It is true, no doubt, that there was a special reason for the withdrawal of the Virgin into the background of the Gospel narratives; that reason being the foresight which the Holy Spirit had, while inspiring the Evangelists, of the dreadful corruptions both of faith and practice which would gather round her figure in mediæval times, and of the idolatrous worship which would be paid to her as a kind of second mediator between God and man. There was so evidently here a reason for the greatest reticence and reserve in speaking about her, lest any pretext for so false a conception should be afforded by the written word of God, that her case must be admitted to be a peculiar one; and if it stood alone, little or nothing could be founded on it in the way of argument for feminine retirement and reserve in general. But it does not stand alone. Witness St. Peter's words in the text, which, while they make not the remotest allusion to the Virgin, might have been written for her, so completely do they tally with the few notices of her

character which we find in the writings of the Evangelists. He is speaking against excessive dress, then, as now, the besetting weakness of the sex, and which has been, as we all know, with many a poor girl the first step towards her ruin; and he says,—(his words are gems I think;—no gems can be so beautiful),—“Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; but let it be”—what? Something on the surface? something which shews outwardly, makes a noise, arrests attention? Quite the reverse. “Let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.” Your women, ye disciples of Christ, are not to be in the foreground of social life, but in the background,—as “our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you,” they are to be “keepers at home.”—And let it be considered to what class of duties the notices of other holy women by the Evangelists lead our thoughts. Mary of Bethany, sitting at our Lord’s feet and hearing His word, and commended for so doing, seems to reproduce for us her namesake’s pensive habit of mind,—“Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.” Anna, the prophetess, was a recluse, “who departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.” St. Mary Magdalene and the other holy women at the sepulchre, although in some sense apostles to the Apostles, inasmuch as they brought them the tidings of the resurrection, were none of them actually charged with the apostolic office; and though it is quite true that at the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Ghost, no distinction of sex was observed, that the words of the Prophet Joel might be fulfilled, “And your sons *and your daughters* shall prophesy,”—as also because it must of necessity be shewn that women, no less than men, have their share in the gift of the Spirit as well as in the gift of the Son (for, indeed, “in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female,”)—it is very observable that even then, when women were endowed with the miraculous gift of prophecy, the inspired Apostle should lay an inhibition upon the exercise of that gift in the congregation;—“Let your women keep silence

in the churches : for it is not permitted unto them to speak ; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. . . . It is a shame for women to speak in the church." "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." It is impossible to have stronger proof than is furnished by these passages, that whatever be the gifts and graces possessed by woman, public offices of trust and responsibility are not her appointed place.— But because women are thus, by God's own ordinance, removed from the eye of the world, and have assigned to them the life of domestic seclusion, as their true sphere, are they, therefore, precluded from usefulness in the body politic of the Church and the State? To harbour such a notion as this would be as contrary to the true theory of the manner in which men are helped and benefited, as to the indications of women's work which are given us in the New Testament. Phebe, the deaconess of the Church of Cenchrea, "hath been a succourer of many and of myself also," says St. Paul. Priscilla, as well as Aquila, was his "helper in Christ Jesus." Nay, did not certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, attend upon our Lord in one of his circuits through the country, and minister to Him of their substance? And what a mistake is it to imagine that benefactors of mankind on a large scale are not to be looked for, except in positions which challenge observation, as being notoriously positions of public trust! If this restless, pushing, ostentatious age could only be persuaded to believe it, a position of the deepest retirement is often charged with the most healing influences for the whole body politic. It may be hoped that even now in some precincts of our Cathedral and Collegiate churches there still linger, quite out of the eyes of the world, men of prayer and theological study,—(there will be none soon, if contemplated changes take effect),—whose prayers, perhaps, fetch down blessings, not on themselves only, but on the Church and nation, and whose studies open new veins of thought in that fathomless mine of wisdom, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. Such men are unknown beyond the cities of their residence; but they die the benefactors of their race as much as if

they had moved in more prominent and stirring positions. Woman's sphere is, and it was from the first beginning of things, the family. And do you think it of little or no consequence to the well-being of the body politic that our families should be well-administered?—that there should be at the head of them a wife like that described in the last chapter of Proverbs, whose “price is far above rubies,” and in whom “the heart of her husband doth safely trust;” that habits of devotion, thrift, industry, should be instilled into children and servants; and that the atmosphere of home should glow with the warm tinge of mother's love, mother's guardianship, mother's good counsel and good example? Is this, or is it not, a security for your State?—a better security than the most long-headed politicians can devise, than the most powerful armies and navies can afford, than even the wisest and best-administered laws can furnish? And, if you grant that it is such a security, to whom are these benefits to society to be ascribed? Under God, to the influence of Christian women. They are not in the high places of the world, but in its nooks and corners; nobody ever hears their names; their work of beneficence is done silently and noiselessly, and their only panegyrists are their own nearest and dearest;—“Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.” As if to confound human pride and ambition, and to shew that the greatest and most far-reaching blessings can be conferred upon the human race by those “meek souls” who “recline in life's stillest shade,” and whose sphere is not the market-place or the senate, but the home, it was ordained that the most precious of all blessings should come to mankind through a woman; and through a woman of whom all that it is given us to know is, that she was most pure, most devout, and that she sensitively shrank from observation. I say that she “sensitively shrank from observation;” for although it is true that we can trace a special design of God in giving us such scanty information respecting her, doubtless that scantiness of information was in great measure brought about, as God always brings about His results, by the operation of providential and natural causes. The blessed Mary courted privacy and retirement, and the Evangelists

say little of her, because in truth there was little to say. You cannot chronicle a life of pensive devotion; and yet a life of pensive devotion is, if we could only see the forces which set great movements in action, most fruitful of results. And did the woman's Seed Himself, the only sinless partaker of our nature, "the single perfect flower," as Archbishop Trench so beautifully says,—“the single perfect flower that ever unfolded itself out of the stalk of humanity,”—did He at all perpetuate woman's retiring character? We have ample assurance that He did. Though Christ was a Benefactor, whose benefits necessarily came abroad, and filled all minds with wonder, all mouths with praise, He loved to work noiselessly. He enjoined restored patients over and over again that they should not make Him known; He did “not strive nor cry; neither did any man hear His voice in the streets;” He sought the seclusion of the mountain-fastness, when He perceived that they would come and take Him by force to make Him a king; and the words, expressive of His human character and habit of mind, which are put, by prophetic anticipation, into His mouth, are these—“Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty; neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me. But I refrain my soul, and keep it low, like as a child that is weaned from his mother: yea, my soul is even as a weaned child.”—In conclusion, let me not be supposed to imply, by anything I have said, that a woman throws herself out of her true sphere, when she engages in works of active Christian benevolence. There could not be a more serious or fatal misapprehension. If one Apostle tells us that the truest ornament of women is to be “of a meek and quiet spirit,” another expressly adds that they are to “adorn themselves with good works.” But it will be found, I think, that the duties recognised by Holy Scripture as appropriate to women are all of a *ministrant* character. They are to be, as we have seen, “helpers” and “succourers,” words which imply subordination to some one in charge, and not the chief management or control. There were deaconesses, doubtless, in the primitive Church, (Phebe, as we have seen, was one), but a deaconess's office, judging from the name, must be analogous to a deacon's, and the very notion of

a deacon, the fundamental idea of the primitive diaconate, is that of assistant in the subordinate part of a great function. And let it be observed that this ministrant function of women is only a recurrence to the design of God in creating the sex, and thus to the primitive ideal, which the Apostles everywhere show themselves curiously anxious to maintain. Holy Scripture, as being all the work of one Spirit, is entirely consistent with itself throughout. The chord which it strikes at the beginning of a subject continues to sound, as often as that subject comes under discussion. Woman was made originally as a help for man;—"I will make him a help meet for him," and it was said to her, after her fall, "he shall rule over thee." It is these chords of Genesis, which vibrate still in the apostolic notices of women's sphere and women's work already quoted;—"they are commanded to be under obedience," "she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also." Whether it is not an infringement of this primitive ideal to place women, as is now so often done, in the position of rulers of a religious community,—a position apt to foster ecclesiastical ambition, and to turn a woman into a Wolsey; than which what transformation can be more hideous?—I myself have the gravest doubts. But, whatever difference of opinion may exist among good and thoughtful men, as to the application of the principle, there can be no doubt, I think, that this should be the principle upon which woman's work should be organised,—that *she is ordained to be a help to man, as in the domestic and social sphere, so also in the work of the Church of Christ*;—and that she does shew herself such a help in thousands of parishes quite noiselessly and unostentatiously, without organisation, without distinctive costume, without any external note to draw attention to her agency, save the blessings and general good influence which are diffused by it,—this is one of the truest glories of the Church of England, and one of her greatest securities in the affections of the English people, that I may not say, in the favour of God!

The Benediction was pronounced by the Lord Bishop of the Diocese, and the "Dead March" in Saul was played upon the organ as the congregation departed.

