

SERMON IV.

GEORGE MARSH, THE MARTYR OF DEANE.
CONSTANCY.

"He being dead, yet speaketh."—Hebrews xi. 4.

"GOD at this present, here in England, hath His fan in His hand, and after His great harvest, whereinto these years past He hath sent His labourers, is now sifting the corn from the chaff, and purging His floor, and ready to gather the wheat into His garner, and to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire." So spake George Marsh three hundred years ago. So, being dead, he yet speaketh to us this night. So present times and circumstances speak, almost as loudly and as clearly as those three hundred years ago. We were told by the Martyr himself last Sunday what, under these trying circumstances, he did; and thence, I trust, learned what we ought to do. He took the Bible and proved the doctrine, and at once rejected all which was not found therein: the mass, and every thing connected with it or leading to it. To-night the blessed Martyr shall himself unfold to us the secret workings of his own mind,—the weakness of the flesh, the wish to avoid the bitter cup, the wavering purpose, the sources of strength and consolation, the gradually increasing firmness and determination, the bold assertion of truth, the disregard alike of the solicitations of friends and the threatenings of enemies, and at length, even at the eleventh hour, the refusal of life at the cost of apostacy. 46 He being dead, yet speaketh."

"They advised and counselled me," he speaks of his friends, "to depart and flee the country." Considering the awful character of the doom which he was pretty sure to draw down upon himself by remaining, it is no wonder that he adds, "To those counsels my weak flesh would gladly have consented, but my spirit did not agree;" and, "I was thus, with their advice and counsel, and the cogitations and counsels of my own mind, drawn as it were divers ways." It was then that, as before related, he consulted with one of his friends on Deane Moor, "not, as he describes it, without hearty prayer, kneeling on our knees;" and, as if in answer to that earnest supplication, after a night of "ill-rest," early the next morning was permitted by God, who can raise up wise and faithful friends as well as the contrary, to derive from the same source, namely friendship, as much encouragement as he had just before derived perplexity and discomfort. "So at my first awaking, he says, one came to me from a faithful friend of mine with letters, which I never read nor yet looked on, who said this: my friend's advice was, that I should in nowise flee, but abide and boldly confess the faith of Jesus Christ. At whose words I was so confirmed and established in my conscience, that from thenceforth I consulted no more, whether it were better to fly or to tarry, but was at a point with myself that I would not flee but go to Mr. Barton, who did seek for me, and there present myself and patiently bear such cross as it should please God to lay upon my shoulders. Whereupon my mind and conscience, which before were uneasy and troubled, were now cheerful and in a quiet state." Still, even now, he had not acquired the degree of boldness which was requisite for the emergency. After his first examination before the Earl of Derby, he speaks of his own state of mind thus—"And so after much other communication I departed, much more troubled in my spirit than before, because I had not with more boldness confessed Christ, but in such sort as my adversaries thereby thought they should prevail against me, whereat I was much grieved: for hitherto I went about, as much as in me lay, to rid myself out of their hands, if by any means, without open denying of Christ and His Word, it could be done." So powerfully and perseveringly, even in this good and faithful man, did the flesh lust against the spirit.

It was on this occasion that, as before related, he says of himself—"This considered, I cried more earnestly unto God by prayer, desiring Him to strengthen me with His Holy Spirit, with boldness to confess Him; and to deliver me from their enticing words, and that I were not spoiled through their philosophy and deceitful vanity, after the traditions of men and ordinances of the world, and not

after Christ." It was then likewise, without doubt, that he derived strength and consolation from such topics and considerations as these following, which are quoted from the letters which he has left behind. In one place he writes—"But He has provided me, I perceive it, to taste of a far other cup; for by violence hath he yet once again driven me out of that glorious Babylon, that I should not taste too much of her wanton pleasures, but with His most dearly beloved disciples to have my inward rejoicing in the cross of His Son Jesus Christ/" Again he writes, 4'It is verily, saith the Apostle, a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble us, and rest to us that be troubled. For after this life the godly, being delivered from their tribulations, shall have a most quiet and joyful rest; whereas the wicked and ungodly contrariwise shall be tormented for ever more with intolerable and unspeakable pains, as Christ by the parable of the rich glutton and wretched Lazarus doth plainly declare and teach. These ought we to have before our eyes always, that in time of adversity and persecution, whereof all that will be the children of God shall be partakers, and wherewith it hath pleased God to put some of us in use already, we may stand stedfast in the Lord, and endure even unto the end, that we may be saved. For unless we, like good warriors of Jesus Christ, will endeavour ourselves to please Him who hath chosen us to be soldiers, and fight the good fight of faith even unto the end, we shall not obtain that crown of righteousness which the Lord, who is a righteous Judge, shall give to all them that love His coming." Again he writes to some of his friends, " And seeing, brethren, that it hath pleased God to set me and that most worthy minister of Christ, John Bradford, your countrymen, in the forefront of this battle, where for the time is most danger, I beseech you all in the bowels of Christ to help us, and all other our fellow-soldiers standing in like perilous place, with your prayers to God for us, that we may girt ourselves like men in the Lord, and give some example of boldness and constancy mingled with patience in the fear of God, that ye and others our brethren, through our example, may be so encouraged and strengthened to follow us, that ye also may leave example to your weak brethren in the world to follow you. Amen." In another place he says, " As we have a notable example in the Apostle St. Paul, unto whom God sent Agabus, who prophesied unto him of the imprisonment and bonds that he should suffer at Jerusalem, in whom we have also a good example of constancy and steadfastness, who, regarding nothing the tears of his familiar friends, nor yet the peril of his own life, did through fire and water go on still to set forth the glory of God. And he being delivered from the hands of his ungodly and blood-thirsty enemies and so many times, is in conclusion fain to commit himself to the rough waters of the sea, where he was a long season in great peril and jeopardy of his own life. But God was always, to the great comfort of all that shall hear of it, most ready to help and succour him. For He did send him a most friendly and sweet company—I mean Aristarchus and Lucas— so ruling the heart of the under captain, Julius, that he courteously entreated him, and gave him liberty to go to his friends and to refresh himself; and he was beneficial to him at all times. In like manner was God with Joseph, and delivered him from all his adversities, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, insomuch that he made him governor over all Egypt and over all his household. In like manner was he with Jeremiah and Daniel in their great troubles, and appointed men for them in their most troubles to relieve, succour, and help them, to their singular comfort." And again—" I rejoice greatly in the Lord when I do perceive how my sweet Saviour Christ doth stir up the minds, not only of my familiar friends in times past, but also of sundry and divers heretofore to me unknown and unacquainted, to bear part with me in this my painful and costly imprisonment, sending me things not only necessary for this present life, but also comfortable letters, encouraging and exhorting me to continue grounded and established in the faith, and not to be moved away from the hope of the Gospel, whereof, according to my small talent, I have been a minister; and daily I call and cry unto the Lord, in whom is all my trust, and without whom I can do nothing, that He, who hath begun a good work in me, would vouchsafe to go forth with it until the day of Jesus Christ, being surely certified in my conscience of this, that He will do so, forasmuch as He hath given me that not only I should believe on Him, but also suffer for His sake. The Lord strengthen me with His Holy Spirit that I may be one of the number of those blessed, who, enduring to the end, shall be saved." Again— "Trouble and affliction doth prove, try,

instruct, confirm, and strengthen the faith; provoke and stir up prayer; drive and force us to amendment of life, to the fear of God, to meekness, to patience, to constancy, to gentleness, soberness, temperance, and all manner of virtues; and are the occasion of exceeding much good, as well transitory as eternal, in this world as in the world to come."

Comforted and strengthened from such sources as these extracts from his own writings disclose, prayers both his own and those of his friends, godly considerations of the lives and examples of holy men, texts of Scripture and the encouraging words of godly men both acquaintances and strangers, and by these various means brought day by day more closely in union with, as he touchingly calls him, his "sweet Saviour Christ," George Marsh, as we shall presently see, increased day by day in constancy and boldness. We have already heard the decided and uncompromising answers which he gave to the four solemn questions, on his replies to which depended life or death. The solicitations of his friends were almost more difficult to resist. "They much exhorted me to leave my opinions, saying I was much deceived, understanding the Scriptures amiss, and much counselled me to follow the Catholic Church of Christ, and to do as others did. I answered, my faith in Christ, conceived by His Holy Word, I neither could nor would deny, alter or change, for any living creature, whatsoever he were." Again—"I, answered, that I believed and leaned only to the Scriptures, not judging things by prosperity or adversity; but they earnestly advised me to refuse my opinions, and not to let for any worldly shame. I answered that that which I did, I did it not for the avoiding of any worldly shame, saying, my soul and life were dearer to me than avoiding of any worldly shame; neither yet did I it for any vain praise of the world, but in the reverent fear of God." Mr. Sherburn said—"That it was a pity such a well-favoured young man, and one that might have been living and do good, would foolishly cast myself away, sticking so hard to foolish opinions. I answered, as I had done to my Lord before and to his Council, that my life, mother, children, brethren, sisters, and friends, with other delights of life, were as dear and sweet unto me as unto any other man; and that I would be as loath to lose them as any other would, if I might hold them with good conscience and without the ignominy of Christ; and, seeing I could not do that, my trust was, that God would strengthen me with His Holy Spirit to lose them all for His sake. For I take myself for a sheep appointed to be slain, patiently to suffer what cross soever it shall please my merciful Father to lay upon me." Again: "Furthermore, while I was at Lancaster this session time, many came to me to talk with me, some of good-will towards me, but without knowledge, gave me such like counsel as Peter gave Christ as He went up to Jerusalem; when he took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Master, favour thyself; this thing shall not be unto thee.' But I answered with Christ's sharp answer unto Peter again, who turning about said unto Peter, 'Come behind me, Satan;' and, perceiving that they were an hindrance unto me, and that they favoured not the things which are of God but the things which are of men, I made them plain answer that I neither could nor would follow their counsel; but by God's grace I would both live and die with a clear conscience, and accordingly as I have hitherto believed and professed. For we ought in nowise to flatter and bear with them, though they love us ever so well, who go about to pluck us away from the obedience we owe unto God and to His word, but after Christ's example sharply to rebuke them for their counsel." In addition to these most enticing solicitations of friends, he had to contend at the same time against the wily arguments of enemies. "There came also many priests to me, he says, by two, three, four, five, or six at once." "There came to him divers times one Massey a fatherly old man, one Wrench the schoolmaster, one Henshaw the bishop's chaplain, and the Archdeacon, with many more; who, with all probability of words and philosophy, or worldly wisdom and deceitful vanity, after the traditions of men and the beggarly ordinances of the world, but not after Christ, as it were all singing one song, went about to persuade him to submit himself to the Church of Rome, and to acknowledge the Pope to be the head thereof, and to interpret the Scriptures none otherwise than that Church did—with many such like arguments and persuasions of godly wisdom. To whom the said George Marsh answered, that he did acknowledge and believe, though much evil be withal annexed, one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, without which there is

no salvation; and that this Church is but one because it hath, doth, and shall, confess and believe one only God, and Him only worship, and one only Messiah, and in Him only trust for salvation : which Church also is ruled and led by one Spirit, one Word, and one Faith; and that this Church is Universal and Catholic, because it ever hath been since the world's beginning, is, and shall endure to the world's end; and comprehending within it all nations, kindreds, and languages, degrees, states, and conditions of men; and that this Church is builded only upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ Himself being the head corner-stone, and not upon the Romish laws and decrees, the Bishop of Rome being the supreme head." "He was thrust at with all violence of craft and subtlety, but yet the Lord upheld Him and delivered Him. Everlasting thanks be to that merciful and faithful Lord who suffereth us not to be tempted above our might; but, in the midst of our troubles, strengthens us with His Holy Spirit of comfort and patience, giveth us a mouth and wisdom how and what to speak, where against all His adversaries were not able to resist." In the trying circumstances in which George Marsh was placed, there was no temptation, perhaps, greater than the solicitations of friends and the wily arguments of enemies, such as have now been enumerated. Even in ordinary circumstances they are, we are well aware, the fruitful source of leading multitudes away from the path of duty. What must have been their power when they offered, as the reward of compliance, escape from a most terrible death?

The Martyr had now fully made up his mind to the awful doom which awaited him, and, like his predecessor Stephen, Acts vii. 55, "was full of the Holy Ghost." "I commit my cause unto God, he said, who had numbered the hairs of my head, and appointed the days of my life." And again: « I made plain answers that, in matters of faith, I would give place to no earthly creature." And again: "God so strengthened me with His Spirit of boldness, according to my humble request and prayer before. Everlasting thanks be given, therefore, that I was nothing afraid to speak to any that came to me—no, not even the judges themselves, before whom I was thrice arraigned at the bar among the thieves, with irons on my feet, and put up my hands as others did; but yet with boldness I spake unto them, so long as they would suffer me." The great trial of his constancy was now at hand. He was brought up for final examination at Chester. "Then the Chancellor read all his former answers that he had made in that place at his former examination, and at every one he asked him whether he would stick to the same or no? To which he answered again—Yea, yea." This was, indeed, a trying moment. "The bishop took a writing out of his bosom, and began to read the sentence of condemnation. But when the bishop had read almost half thereof, the Chancellor called to him and said, ' Good, my lord—stay, stay; for if ye proceed any further it will be too late to call it again;' and so the bishop stopped. Then his Popish priests and many other of the ignorant people called upon Marsh with many earnest words to recant, and amongst others one Pullein, a shoe-maker, said to him, ' For shame, man, remember thyself and recant.' They bade him kneel down and pray, and they would pray for him. So they kneeled down, and he desired them to pray for him and he would pray for them." What a scene was this? Popish persecutors, ignorant time-servers, and a holy Martyr, all on their knees together: the many praying that the constancy of the man of God might fail, and the cause of the devil and the world prosper: the man of God asking for himself faith and boldness, and for those who were praying with him conversion and mercy. "The bishop then asked him again whether "he would not have the Queen's mercy in time; and he answered he did gladly desire the same, and did love her Grace as faithfully as any of them ; but yet he durst not deny his Saviour Christ, for losing His mercy everlasting and so merit everlasting death. Then the bishop read forward his sentence, about five or six lines, and there again the Chancellor, with a glavering and smiling countenance, called to the bishop and said, ' Yet good, my lord, once again stay ; for if that word be spoken all is past—no relenting will then serve.' Then the bishop said, «I would stay if it would be.' How sayest thou, quoth he, wilt thou recant?' Many of the priests and ignorant people bade him so do and call to God for grace, and pulled him by the sleeve, and bade him recant and save his life.

To whom he answered, I would as gladly live as you, if in so doing I should not deny my Master Christ; and again, He should deny me before His Father in heaven.' The lot was now irrevocably cast. The bishop read out his sentence unto the end."

All earthly comfort was from that moment denied to the man of God. He was immured "in the dungeon or dark prison. None that wished him good could speak with him, or at least do venture so to do for fear of accusation." But Jesus did not leave or forsake His faithful witness. The darkness of the dungeon could not quench the ray of light which beamed from heaven. The dreariness of the prison could not put out in the bosom of the saint the lamp of joy which the love of Christ had lighted. He was alone, the man of God was, in that dismal cell. Yet not alone, for Christ was with him. In the dungeon at Philippi, it is written, Acts xvi. 25, "At midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises unto God, and the prisoners heard them." And of George Marsh, we learn so that some of the citizens who loved him in God for the Gospel's sake, whereof there were but a few, although they were never acquainted with him, would sometimes in the evening, at a hole upon the wall of the city that went into the said dark prison, call to him and ask him how he did. And he would answer them most cheerfully that he did well, and thanked God most highly that he would vouchsafe of His mercy to appoint him to be a witness of His truth; and to suffer for the same, wherein he did most rejoice, beseeching Him that He would give him grace not to faint under the cross, but patiently bear the same to His glory, and comfort of His Church, with many other like godly sayings at sundry times, as one that most desired to be with Christ." Nor did the thick walls of the dungeon hinder that last earnest prayer for grace not to faint under the cross from reaching the ear of Him who heareth prayer. The last attempt which was made to induce him to swerve from his purpose and deny his Master, though made with every circumstance which could give it power and effect, was as unsuccessful as all before it. He stood, the man of God did, on the place of execution. The guards and the populace hemming him in, he stood, "as it were appointed to death"—"a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men" (1 Cor. iv. 9). The stake, the chain, the faggots, the firkin of pitch and tar, were all before him. The fire was at hand. It wanted but a word to kindle the flame and consume the victim. At that awful moment—a moment the terrible solemnity of which it is altogether out of our power to realise—"Vawdry, being then Deputy Chamberlain of Chester, showed Marsh a writing under a great seal, saying that it was a pardon for him if he would recant." At that same moment Marsh answered "that he would gladly accept the same, and further said that he loved the Queen; but, forasmuch as it tended to pluck him from God, he would not receive it upon that condition. The man of God was stripped. The chain was riveted. The fire was kindled. The flesh was broiled and puffed up. "Father of Heaven, have mercy upon me!"—were the last words of the victim. The body was consumed. The spirit was yielded into the hands of the Lord. "Upon this many of the people said that he was a Martyr, and died marvellous patient and godly." But the bishop shortly after made "a sermon in the cathedral church, and therein affirmed that the said Marsh was an heretic, burnt like an heretic, and was a fire-brand in hell." From amidst Martyrs then in heaven or fire-brands in hell, our fellow-parishioner, my predecessor, and the pastor of your ancestors in the Lord, George Marsh, "being dead, yet speaketh."

Not as a fire-brand in hell—oh no! this cannot be, but as a blessed Martyr in heaven—yea, even from "under the altar," and from amidst "the souls of them that were slain for the Word of God and for the testimony which they held" Rev. vi. 9, George Marsh, dear brethren beloved, being dead, yet speaketh to us this night.

They are the Martyr's last words in this place. I pray of you take great heed of them. He says—I was young and prosperous. The world was all before me, and fortune smiled. I had kind friends, affectionate relatives, and everything which tends to render life happy. Could I have made up my mind to deny my Master Christ, I might have retained all these worldly comforts. I might have improved my position in life, risen perhaps to eminence, and been covered with honor. When the

fearful struggle began between the world and Christ—when the searching question was put, Wilt thou serve Mammon or God—there were not wanting inducements to make me take up with the easier part. The weak flesh rebelled stoutly against the spirit. Near and dear relations and friends pleaded earnestly for liberty and life. An aged mother entreated. Brothers and sisters wept. Little children climbed my knees and wailed. The ignorant laughed. The priest argued. The judge threatened. But the Bible pointed out the path of duty; and He to whom the prayer of faith is never offered in vain replied, "My grace is sufficient for thee," and made my strength "perfect in weakness." In vain henceforth the solicitations of friends—in vain the threatenings of enemies. In vain on one side the stake, the faggot, the fire; and on the other, at the price of apostacy, liberty, and life. Pardon was not to be received on that condition. I hugged the stake. I embraced the flames. I gloried in being permitted to suffer for the sake of Jesus who endured the cross for me. I died a cruel death. But, behold, I live a glorious life! And from that heaven into which, by the merits of my "sweet Saviour," I have been admitted, I being in body dead, but in spirit alive, with a voice as solemn as though the Judge had already come down, to each one of you here present this night speak and say—according as circumstances require—"Go and do thou likewise."

Popular tradition records that the blood-red foot-step of the Martyr, deeply imprinted on stone, still marks in the ancient house at Smithills, in this parish, the place where, having descended from his first night's imprisonment, on his road to Lathom, he boldly called heaven to witness the righteousness of his cause. It may or it may not be so. There is, at least, no reason why God should not, as He undoubtedly could, make the stone "cry out," Luke xix. 40, in honor of His faithful witness. Be this, however, as it may, that mysterious monument will not be without a salutary effect upon you, if, as often as you see or hear of it, it serves to recall to your minds how the Martyr suffered, why he suffered, and whence he derived strength, such as enabled him to rejoice in suffering—if it lead you to take for your rule of life the Martyr's words, "Therefore, now whosoever is ashamed of the cross of Christ and grieved therewith, the same is ashamed to have Christ for his fellow and companion, and therefore shall the Lord Jesus Christ be ashamed of him again at the last day"—if it remind you that the only way to heaven is red with an Almighty Martyr's blood—if it be as the Martyr's grave-stone and this the epitaph—

"He climbed the steep ascent of haven,
Through peril, toil, and pain:
O God!—to us may grace be given,
To follow in his train!

HEBER.