

SERMON I.

GEORGE MARSH, THE MARTYR OF DEANE.

PRAYER.

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

HE is dead. He has been dead nearly three hundred years. He once lived in this very place. He was born in the parish of Deane. He commenced life as a farmer; but he "afterwards went to the University of Cambridge, where he studied and much increased in learning and godly virtues. He then became a minister of God's holy word and sacraments, in which condition he continued for a space, earnestly setting forth God's true religion, to the defacing of Antichrist's false doctrine, by his godly readings and sermons " in this very place. He bore a name still very common in this neighbourhood—the name of Marsh; and was very likely akin to some of those who are now listening to me. You will by this time profit of my neighbours and brethren in the world, and obtaining of my eternal salvation by Christ in heaven." Think of these two Christian friends, brethren, kneeling down on the bare ground on yonder Moor which you just now crossed on your way to church—that Moor, not as now enclosed and cultivated, but as it was three hundred years ago—bare, bleak, and lonely: think of this, brethren, and then never deem that any either place or time is unfit for prayer. Having, in answer to these earnest prayers, received such guidance from above as had quite determined him that, at a time when the very existence of the truth was at stake, it was his duty not to run away from the danger, as under more ordinary circumstances might have been allowable, but by facing it boldly afford an unquestionable proof of the sincerity and steadfastness of his faith, we nevertheless find the future martyr, none the less earnestly and by exactly the same means, preparing himself for the difficulties and trials which he was well aware were now awaiting him. "So betimes in the morning, he says, I arose, and after I had said the English Litany, as my custom was with other prayers, kneeling on my knees by my friend's bedside, I prepared myself to go towards Smithills; and, as I was going thitherward, I went into the houses of Harry Widdows, of my Mother-in-law, of Ralph Yeton, and of the wife of Thomas Richardson, desiring them to pray for me." From Smithills he was summoned to Lathom, at that time the residence of the Popish Earl of Derby, concerning which he says; "So the next day, which was Wednesday, we arose, prayed, and came to Lathom." The daily use of the Litany as a part of his private devotion is a striking proof of the value which these faithful men were wont to set on, and the comfort they were accustomed to derive from the incomparable Liturgy of the Reformed Church of England. It serves to give also a useful hint to those who complain that the services of the Church are long and wearisome, or fancy that they are not sufficiently plain and pointed to form an edifying part of domestic or private devotion. Those who, like George Marsh, were in hourly danger of sealing their testimony with their blood, found these prayers neither long, wearisome, nor inapplicable; but very edifying and full of comfort.

George Marsh was now repeatedly examined before the Earl of Derby and his Popish counsellors at Lathom; and afterwards at Chester, before Dr. Cotes, the bishop of that place and a most bigoted and persecuting Papist. In the intervals he was imprisoned, first at Lathom, in, as he describes the place, "a cold, windy, stone-house, where there was very little room; and here I lay two nights, it was early in March, without any bed, saving a few great canvass tent-cloths ; but afterwards I had a pair of sheets but no woollen cloths, and so continued till Palm Sunday, occupying myself as well as I could in meditation, prayer, and study; for no man was suffered to come to me but my keeper twice a day when he brought me meat and drink." At Lancaster he was brought up before the court in the company of "common malefactors." Christ was crucified between thieves, and so they that confessed him were tried in the same company. Of his imprisonment at Lancaster, he says, " The truth is, I and my fellow prisoner Warburton, every day kneeling on our knees did read morning and evening prayer with the English Litany, every day twice, both before noon and after, with other

prayers more." In the course of his examinations, and in the intervals between them, he was much harrassed and perplexed by the subtle questions and arguments of wily priests, and by the solicitations at once of his enemies and his friends, who both strongly pressed upon him the expediency of denying his faith in order to save his life, and left no stone unturned to induce him to recant: the one, in order to glory in his shame; the other, out of a sincere though mistaken affection for his person. In these, perhaps, almost the greatest of the trials allotted to him, he did not neglect the means which had already so much contributed to his strength and confidence. To his friends he writes from his prison at Lancaster, begging them thus, " Pray for me, and all that be in bonds, that God would assist us with His Holy Spirit, that we may with boldness confess His holy name, and that Christ may be magnified in our bodies; that we may stand full and perfect in all the will of God, to whom be all honour and glory, world without end—Amen." And after his mind had been very much harrassed, during and after one of the many examinations to which he was subjected, by the wily questions of his judges and the entreaties of his friends, he says, u This considered, I cried more earnestly unto my 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." And now at length this man of prayer—whose daily habit having been to " come boldly unto the throne of grace," had so found " grace to help him in time of need," that neither the arguments of the most wily Papists could convince him, nor the entreaties of the most affectionate friends move him, nor threats even of faggot and fire seduce him from " holding fast the profession of his faith without wavering," or frighten him into shrinking from the " good fight of faith," and laying hold " on eternal life "—was given up as hopeless, and condemned, and sentenced, as an heretic. " So the Bishop of Chester read out his sentence, and straight after said unto him, 'Now will I no more pray for thee than will I for a dog.' And Marsh answered that, ' notwithstanding, he would pray for his lord-ship.' "How truly and wonderfully one of the most lovely features in the face of the Divine Master was here reflected in the countenance of the poor and persecuted disciple! "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." "I can pray for your lordship." The first words were those of the blessed Jesus, in behalf of those who not only nailed Him to the cross, but mocked at Him in the midst of His excruciating agonies. The others were the prayers of a Protestant martyr for the Popish bishop who not only sentenced him to the stake, but in doing so added the unprovoked insult—" Now I will no more pray for thee than I will for a dog."

But the end draws near. The sentence was passed. The stake was driven. The pile was heaped up high around it. The sheriffs and other officers of justice took their places. With bills and pole-axes the ministers of the mild and merciful decrees of Rome went to the prison in the North Gate of Chester to summon their victim. "He came with them, we read, most humbly and meekly, with a lock upon his feet." Arrived at the place of execution without the city, near to Spittle-Broughton, "kneeling down he made his prayers." Prayer was still his main-stay. "He then put off his clothes unto his shirt, was chained unto the post, having a number of faggots under him, and a thing made like a firkin, with pitch and tar in the same, over his head; but, by reason of the fire being unskilfully made and the wind driving the flame to and fro, he suffered great extremity at his death, which, notwithstanding, he bore very patiently. Wherein this is to be noted, that when he had been a long time tormented in the fire without moving, having his flesh so broiled and puffed up that those who stood before him could scarcely see the chain wherewith he was bound, and, therefore, supposed no less but he had been dead: notwithstanding, suddenly he spread forth his arms, saying, ' Father of heaven, have mercy upon me;' and so yielded his spirit into the hands of the Lord." "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Such were the last words of Christ, and of Stephen, the first to suffer for His sake. Prayer, as we have seen, had been throughout his eventful life the support of the Protestant Martyr. Prayer had given him strength in weakness, comfort in distress, light in darkness; had, when duty was concerned, made his ear deaf, as well to the solicitations of friends as to the threats of enemies ; and taught his tongue to bless them that

cursed him, and pray for them that despitefully used him and persecuted him. Prayer, even when the faggot and flame were actually in his sight, had robbed of its terrors the chain which fastened him to the stake. At length all was well nigh finished. In the midst of tortures such as nothing but Popish malice could have devised, and the very mention of which makes the blood run cold, to the everlasting shame of those who gave it to be burned, the poor mortal body of George Marsh remained an heap of ashes. But, carried up more gloriously far than even in his chariot of fire and horses of fire the prophet of old, like his heavenly Master and the blessed Stephen, on the wings of prayer the never-dying spirit of the Protestant Martyr ascended to join " under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the Word of God, and for the testimony which they held " (Rev. vi. 9); and thence, "he being dead, yet speaketh."

Yes, brethren, he who once in this very pulpit, a living man, spoke to your forefathers by example, by faith, by the passages of his life just read to you, by his own words recorded by the historian and this evening recited by me, by his own prayer which shall presently be offered with you, though dead, speaketh to you this night. He speaketh to you on a very important subject, a subject without great attention to which you cannot possibly be prepared either to live the life which he lived, or, if called upon, to die the death which he died. He speaketh to you about prayer. His words are, "Pray without ceasing." Pray in private. Pray in the family. Pray in the congregation. Pray whenever you are in emergency and need: for comfort when you are in distress; for light, when you are in darkness; for boldness, when you are weak. Pray without ceasing. Pray this very night. Yes, in the very words of the Protestant Martyr himself, which happily are still on record, and which cannot but be dear to every inhabitant of Deane: in George Marsh's own words, when the hymn is over, join with me, his successor, in prayer this night.

THE MARTYR'S PRAYER.

O Lord Jesus Christ, who art the only physician of wounded consciences, we, miserable sinners, trusting in thy gracious goodness, do briefly open to thee the evil tree of our heart, with all the roots, boughs, leaves, and fruits, and with all the crooks, knots, and knours, all which thou knowest: for thou thoroughly perceivest as well the inward lusts, doubtings, and denying thy providence, as these gross outward sins which we commit inwardly and deadly. Wherefore, we beseech thee, according to the inward measure of our infirmity, although we be far unable and unapt to pray, that thou would mercifully circumcise our stony hearts, and for those old hearts create new within us, and replenish us with a new spirit, and water us and moisten us with the juice of heavenly grace and wells of spiritual waters, whereby the inward venom and noisome juice of the flesh may be dried up, and custom of the old man changed, and our hearts, always bringing forth thorns and briars to be burned with fire, from henceforth may bear spiritual fruits in righteousness and holiness, unto life everlasting. Amen.
