

SERMON IX

THE GREAT THEFT.

"Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that steal my words, every one from his neighbour." —Jeremiah xxiii. 3.

THE prophets in the Church of Rome make no secret of stealing God's words, every one from his neighbour. In the first place, they do not allow the authorized version as used amongst ourselves—a version made by the collective wisdom of the most pious and learned men of the age, and with greater labour and care than has ever since been bestowed upon any work whatever. But, in place of this, they substitute a translation of their own, which in many important parts will not bear the test of learning and scholarship; in which the original is evidently garbled for a special purpose; and the commonest rules of language violated in order to uphold peculiar views of doctrine. The authority of God's Word is further weakened by the Apocrypha, which is clearly destitute of all marks of inspiration, and the traditions of the Church, of the authenticity of which there is not the slightest proof, being set on the same level with it, and appealed to with equal deference and respect. This theft of God's Word is made, however, entire and complete by the refusal of the Scriptures, garbled even as they thus are, to the laity. The extent to which this refusal is carried is, of course, modified by times and circumstances. Much more liberty, for instance, is given in this, as well as in many other respects, in England than in Ireland; and more again in Ireland than in Spain or Mexico, Austria or Italy, or any other ignorant and priest-ridden countries. The Roman Church is very clever in either tightening or relaxing its grasp as times and circumstances and different countries require. But the vigour with which the priests lock up the Scriptures where they have the power to do so, and the bitter hostility which the present Pope and his advisers have uniformly shown to the Bible Society and all persons who have attempted to circulate the Word of God, is a plain proof that, if there are some countries in which the prophets of Rome do not steal from their neighbours the Word of God as rigorously and as completely as in others, it is for want of power, but not by any means for want of will. The spirit of Rome is in this, as in all other respects, the same as it ever was. If the Word of God be not everywhere stolen, it is only because, in some countries, popular opinion rules, that it shall have free course.

At the Reformation this theft in this country, as well as in all others to which the influence of that blessed change reached, was repaired. One of the first steps taken was the translation of God's Word. Indeed, it was the translation of God's Word, and the consequent familiarity with it, which led to the detection of the various abuses which had gained ground through ignorance of it. The Scriptures were translated into the mother tongue. The invention of printing contributed to the dissemination of them. The Word of God became public property. It was open to all who could read, and many who could not were induced, by their strong desire to search amongst these long-concealed treasures, to undergo the cost and labour of learning. Purged both from the Apocrypha and Tradition, the pure canonical-Word of God was acknowledged as the sole rule of faith and practice. Article VI.—“Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of the faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical books of the Old and New Testament of whose

authority was never any doubt in the Church." So the treasure which the prophets of Rome had stolen, the prophets of the Reformation restored. And they afterwards stood most gallantly to their prize. For, in the reign of Queen Mary, they defended their treasure with their blood. God grant that the glorious candle, which the Martyrs of the Reformation lighted up with their own bodies, may never again be put out!

If we are allowed, however, by the mercy of God, to retain possession of the inestimable treasure which our Reformers restored to us, it will not be for want of efforts to steal it away from us. And, sad to say, it is from prophets— from prophets, not of any foreign, but of our own Church—that the fraudulent act proceeds. The thieves are nursed in our own bosom. Nor is there any part of the Tractarian system which is more mischievous than that which is connected with the authority and use of God's Word. The attempt is all the more dangerous inasmuch as it is concealed and silently progressive. It is really quite surprising to trace the cunning with which the plan for robbing the English Protestant of his dearest treasure, by Protestant clergymen, is quietly carried on to a successful issue. First, it is proclaimed that it is quite a mistake to suppose that the whole of the Gospel is intended to be preached to all alike. To do this, it is pretended, is to cast our pearls before swine. Christ's own command, Mark xvi. 15, to "preach the Gospel to every creature," is coolly set aside. St. Paul's injunction to Timothy, 2 Timothy iv. 2, "Preach the Word," is limited to a portion of the Word. A portion of the Gospel must be reserved. Not every ear is fit to hear it all. The prophets are to be the judges of what is fit to be preached to each individual, and it is to be solely at their discretion whether the soul is to be starved or fed.

Next, an objection is made to anything like a general reading of the Scriptures. None, it is argued, except those who have been trained to the ministry, are in a position to form any judgment as to the meaning of God's Word. For a layman to sit down by himself with the Bible in his hand, and to endeavour, even after earnest prayer for God's guidance, to ascertain for himself the meaning of any particular passage of Scripture, is denounced as the height of arrogance and presumption. He must consult his pastor. He must learn the decisions of the ancient fathers. He must blindly submit his own judgment to that of men in no way less fallible than himself. The Holy Spirit promised, though He is to all who seek for Him as one who shall guide them into all truth, is no sure guide, it is said, in such matters as these. Thus, the pastors of Christ's flock, whose office it doubtless is to feed that flock, are the first to pull the food out of their mouths. Thus the prophets, who ought to supply all the Word of God without let or hindrance, steal it away. And the judgments of holy fathers and confessors which, used in a proper spirit and on the understanding that it is to be considered as nothing more than the word of pious and learned but yet fallible men, is without doubt an aid by no means to be slighted or cast aside, thus unduly exalted into a place which it was never designed to occupy, becomes a most dangerous weapon in the hands of those who are perpetrating the theft. The marked distinction which is to be made between the Word of God and the word of even the best and most learned men is set forth in striking words by St. Paul: 1 Thess. ii. 13—"For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the Word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the Word of God, which effectually work-eth also in you that believe."

The Prayer Book, strange to say, that which was founded by our reformers upon God's Word, and intended to guide to a more practical knowledge of it, is wrested by the same parties into a means of stealing away the words of God. And the alteration made through this instrumentality is all the more dangerous in that it is entirely unexpected. I do not mean to say that there is any open attempt to place the Book of Common Prayer above, or even on a level with, the Bible. Such an attempt would be comparatively harmless, simply because of its being open. But there is a constant reference to the Prayer Book as to a book of paramount authority—a constant holding it up as an infallible guide—a sort of superstitious respect for every sentence and letter of it—a wish to make it appear that, wherever we so interpret Scripture as to be at variance with any assertion of the Prayer Book, it is impossible but that we must be wrong. In these ways, silently, gradually, imperceptibly, but none the less surely, the words of God are stolen away, and the words of man put in their place. How the Martyrs of olden time—they who in the cruel reign of Mary gave their bodies to be burned rather than surrender one jot or one tittle of the Word of God—how would they smite on their breasts and mourn, could they behold, as perhaps from their bright thrones of glory they are at this moment beholding, the truly scriptural but still fallible work of their own hands, not with the openness of the Papists, but artfully stolen into the place of that Word which was dearer to them than their lives! I value the Prayer Book as the first, by far the first, of all human compositions; but yet at an immeasurable distance from the Word of God.

It cannot be too carefully borne in mind that almost all the corruptions of the Church of Rome are owing to the very practice which is condemned in the text, and has been the subject of our consideration this day. Had not the prophets of that Church stolen God's words every one from his neighbour—had they not mistranslated them—had they not locked them up as far as possible from the laity—had they not mixed them up almost beyond the possibility of being recognised with the Apocrypha and Tradition, it would have been impossible for them to have led men as far away from the truth as they have done, or to have palmed upon the world the egregious fables with which their whole system is mixed. There is no surer way of tainting or drying up a river than to poison or cut off the fountain. And we may rest assured that there is no more certain way of again corrupting the simplicity of the Church of England than either to diminish the authority, or interdict the use, of the Scriptures. Once, to any extent, allow to the false prophets of the Church of England the liberty of stealing away the Word of God, and there is much more reason to tremble for the result than if we had sitting in the very midst of us a conclave of cardinals or a synod of Roman bishops.

No wonder, then, that in the text it is written "Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that steal my words every one from his neighbour." The sin is the same whether committed six hundred years before or eighteen hundred years after Christ. The theft is equally abhorred by God, whether perpetrated by the prophets of Judah, of Rome, or of England. The word of the King is law. The word of the King of kings is above all law. Who shall with impunity do it any dishonor? I tremble exceedingly for those amongst my fellow labourers in the Church of England who are at this moment pursuing a course by God so plainly and so sternly denounced. I pray earnestly that it may please Almighty God to turn them from a way so full of danger, not only to others, but to themselves. "Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord, and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces.

Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that steal my words every one from his neighbour." Such is the reason which immediately before the text God Himself gives for His indignation at those who steal His word. The only fire which can melt, the only hammer which can break the natural heart of stone, can those, who ought to be the first to fan the one and lift the other, extinguish and put them out of sight, and yet not feel the hand of the Lord heavy against them? I pray God that the prophets of our beloved Zion may have a better mind than this. Be this, however, as it may, to you, my friends, I plainly say, Suffer no man on any pretence whatever to steal from you the words of God. The Apochrypha, which I heartily wish were not ever bound up in the same volume as God's Word, or used for the daily lessons, regard as the writings of wise but uninspired men. The opinions of the fathers respect, as those of saints who lived nearer than any of ourselves to the source of truth; but still, nevertheless, fallible and not unfrequently in error. The Prayer Book use as the best, though still only a human, means for drawing the soul upwards to the throne of grace. But the Bible, as St. Paul says, receive, as it is in truth, as the Word of God. Sooner be yourselves locked up in the most dismal dungeon than allow your Bibles to be locked up from you! Sooner have restraint placed upon your limbs than upon your liberty of reading and judging of God's Word for yourselves! Sooner have all your food tainted with the most deadly poison than the pure and heavenly nourishment of the soul mixed up with anything human and uninspired! Let God's lire be brightly kindled and His hammer lifted up high amongst us, or He will be against us, and our hearts remain hard and unbroken.

Deane, Fourth Sunday in Lent.