

A Visit to — Church.

(For the Preston Chronicle.)

One fine Sunday morning, a few weeks ago, I resolved to attend divine service at the village church of —, situated a few miles from Preston. It was a charming April day, and a slight breeze from the west rapidly dried up the showers which had fallen during the preceding evening. My walk led me through a charming country of the most fertile description, the road laying sometimes with "gentle pastures" dotted with lambs; sometimes along the banks of the river, anon through a sylvan glade, now leading to the summit of an acclivity, and then descending into retired shady lanes, whose mossy sides were starred with primroses. The meadows were fast springing into verdure, and their surface had already become enamelled with wild flowers; while the trees, touched by the finger of spring, showed their obedience to its genial influence by bursting into leaf. The larch with its emerald tassels, and the elegant birch with its feathery sprays, waved round me, while, high above, the lark soared to the "gate of heaven," singing its song of praise to its Almighty maker. On every side nature showed herself clothed in early beauty, and the salubrious air, so pure in comparison with the smoky atmosphere of the town, braced up my nerves, and imported an additional relish for the lovely scenes through which I passed.

As I approached nearer to my destination, I overtook groups of the country people "going up to worship;" the elder branches of the families walking in together, busily discussing the occurrences, &c., of the previous week; while the children who accompanied them strolled in clusters by their sides. What an acceptable provision of the Almighty the sabbath appears to be; how refreshing to these "sons of the soil" is a stated cessation from labour. The toils of the past week seem to be forgotten; and as the mind unbends itself from the necessity of work, the spirits rise in gratitude to God for his mercies; and when tranquillized by the feeling of thankfulness, the heart is more prepared to receive the counsels, warnings, and advice which may be heard from the pulpit.

A little further on, I passed the Sunday scholars, who were proceeding slowly from the village school, marshalled in a long file, and watched with a jealous eye by the country schoolmaster, who, conscious of the dignity of his office, and anxious to maintain the importance with which he is regarded by the country people, departed himself with a becoming gravity. The children under his charge, attested by their complexions the salubrity of the air in which they lived; and there appeared something so rustic in almost all of them being decorated with a bouquet of flowers, gathered from the small gardens which ornamented the fronts of their dwellings. I could not but remark the contrast which existed between these sturdy "sons of the oak," and the sickly delicate creature who constitute the majority of attenders at our town's Sunday schools, — poor, emaciated children, the bloom of whose youth is withered by the sirocco of the factory. On the one hand, I saw the joyous glance, and the elastic step of youth, the eye beaming with delight and the cheek ruddy with health; on the other, my mind reverted to the glazed eye, the shambling gait, and the wan faces which I so frequently see in Preston: the one accustomed to the glorious and ever varying face of nature, to behold the sun in its power, and to breathe the pure oxygen of an unadulterated atmosphere; the other confined from sunrise to sunset, in hot crowded apartments, their ears deafened with the sound of jarring machinery, their eyes unaccustomed to behold "the map of creative nature," breathing hot vapours laden with dust, uncheered by the voice of the wild bird, unblest with the splendour of the sun's rays.

By the time that I had reached within a quarter of a mile of my destination, the bells of the church began to send forth their summons to worship. The distance that intervened caused their tones to sound "most musical, most melancholy;" now borne by the breeze they seemed to swell upon the ear, and to fill the air with the sweetest harmony, and dying away until almost inaudible. Their pealing harmony called up associations not displeasing to the mind, and a train of meditation was awakened while listening to their music. How often have those bells tolled forth to succeeding ages the hour of prayer. Generation after generation has sprung up, blossomed, matured, and died away, and still their voices remain unaltered, or nearly so. The babe, for whose birth they sent forth their clamorous joy, grew to manhood; and again their sound swung o'er the valleys proclaiming his marriage, shortly, after the lapse of a few years to be exchanged for the dull toll of his funeral peal. The rise and fall of monarchs, the accessions, coronations, and deaths of our kings and queens,—the jubilees for victories have been sounded forth by their employ. When the nation mourned for the death of Charles, or rejoiced for the restoration of his son, these very bells diffused the intelligence. How many eventful years have they "rung in" and "rung out?" how many May days have they ushered in, awaking the peasantry to the sports of the season? They have aided in celebrating events of all descriptions from the most important to the most trifling; from the coronation of a monarch to the election of a churchwarden; and from the victories of Marlborough, Nelson, Abercrombie, and Wellington, to the triumphs of the village wrestling match.

I had by this time entered the avenue leading up to the church, and through glades in the wood caught a view of some of the finest landscapes in the county. A tract of champaign country ornamented with beautiful villas, and watered by the meandering sinuosities of the Ribble, the back ground to this elegant picture filled up with the towering of Pendle Hill, and Rivington Pike, lay spread beneath me. Here the first view of the church appears, producing a pleasing and solemn impression upon the mind. Embosomed in lofty trees, near the brow of a hill, its situation is at once striking and retired; and the old grey tower, with its time-worn pinnacles, showing like wrinkles in the cheek of age, served to give it an air of antiquity. On my entering the church-yard, the second peal commenced, and I could not but reflect, as my ears were stunned with vociferous noise, how different are our impressions about the beautiful and lovely, when in immediate contact with what has so much struck our fancy. Distance, like time, mellows down the asperities and deformities of objects, presenting only the most favourable and conspicuous points, while upon a close inspection, they present totally different aspects. So these bells, which had so musical an effect upon me when at a distance from them, now jangled most furiously in my ear, out of time and tune, causing the rooks, which built in the ivy-mantled tower, to come out of their nests, cawing, and flapping their dusky wings with great vehemence. The cemetery which surrounded the church, presented the rural aspect which generally marks the village burial place. Quiet graves, comfortably tucked up with ozers, were spread around, some marked by rude, moss-grown stones, inscribed simply with the initials of the deceased, while others were ornamented with more elaborate art, having epitaphs on the character of the occupier of the tomb, and decorated with those classical devices which are only produced by the trembling hands of country engravers. Here and there, surrounded with iron palisades, stood the tomb of some "great" man, who, having kept at a distance from his humble neighbours while living, seems determined to maintain the freezing dignity of wealth even in the grave. Fool! to suppose that the worm which batters on his corpse, treats him with more respect than it does the peasantry who moulder near him. Some of the grassy hillocks were planted with flowers, the affectionate testimonial of youthful grief to the memory of some dear parent slumbering below. More feeling is displayed by these juvenile tributes of love than in the pompous and high flown diction inscribed on the "storied urn of rank and power."—An open grave stood yawning for its prey, in one corner of the yard, its size betokening it to be intended for the reception of an adult, and as the country people arrived at the church, they almost all of them repaired to its edge, to contemplate the chasm at their feet, while the suppressed voice, and frequent shakes of the head, as they viewed it, seemed to tell of some quondam neighbour or friend about to be quietly entombed. People almost invariably gather round an open grave: it appears to be an object of interest to all classes,—their minds revert to the time when the portals of the tomb shall gape for them; when their bodies shall mingle with the clods of the valley, and melancholy thoughts are called up, which cannot fail to make an impression upon their

hearts. Seldom is the voice of levity heard at such a place: the laugh of thoughtlessness subsides into seriousness,—the sneer of the scoffer vanishes into a temporary reverence, and the recklessness of the profane is chilled by the feeling of awe.

From these "meditations among the tombs" I was aroused by the cessation of the bell, announcing the commencement of divine service; and, hastily quitting the place where I had been standing, I approached the venerable porch of the church. Seeing that I was a stranger, the country churchwarden, who was stationed at the entrance door, shewed me into the seat appropriated to the use of these functionaries of the church, and from which a good view of the interior is obtained. I was much struck with the appearance of this "old country church," and the air of venerable sanctity which pervaded the whole building. The rude, oak benches, which formed the majority of seats, seemed to have stood for centuries, and appeared likely to endure as many more; while "the dim, religious light," which illuminated the place, added to the effect, and sobered down into beauty many defects in their construction which would otherwise have been displeasing to the eye. The morning sun which streamed through the mullioned windows, was softened by passing through the old green glass of which they were composed, save where a resplendent glory was added to their beams by being transmitted through fragments of stained heraldic devices of quaint designs. Nearly underneath the arch which divides the body of the church from the chancel, stands the "Squire's" pew, of old-fashioned pannelled construction, having its corners decorated with vermicularly twisted pillars, supporting a carved top. It seems admirably adapted for the use of the lord of the manor: facing the congregation, the country people can see the punctuality with which this "fine old English gentleman" attends divine service, and the reverend attention which he pays to the liturgy of his church. Assembling his family and servants together, he appears to lead them in their devotions, "standing bolt upright and uttering the responses in an audible tone of voice." Over his pew hang the tattered escutcheons of his ancestors, many of which have almost crumbled to dust in the lapse of years, while handsome marble, mural, monuments specify the dates of their respective decease. Here, too, his remains will repose, when summoned from his earthly inheritance; his armorial ensignia will be added to those already affixed over head, while his son will "reign in his stead." Emblazoned on the wall at the east end of the body of the church, are the arms of England in the time of Charles I., which are interesting from the fact that they are one of the few which escaped destruction from the fanaticism of Cromwell's soldiers, who, in their fury against monarchical government, defaced all relics of it which came in their way. The finger of time and the damps of years have almost obliterated them, but the lion of England may still be traced on the plaster, frowning a proud defiance upon the enemies of the shield which it guards.

In a few moments after my being seated, the old clerk, who looked as venerable as the church itself, proceeded, in a voice cracked with age and a delivery mumbling through the loss of his teeth, to give out the morning hymn, an announcement which was responded to by the choir in the gallery over my head. I was unable to obtain a view of the musicians, but, the sounds which they gave out, did not create a favourable impression of their skill; the tones which were elicited from a labouring "bass-viol" and an astmatic bassoon, were not of that sort which

"Might create a soul
Under the ribs of death."

However, their exertions seemed to afford satisfaction to the congregation, most of whom joined in the hymns and chants in a manner which indicated devotion and respect. The prayers were read by the curate, a young man, of benevolent countenance and humble demeanour, and the responses were "performed" by the old clerk before mentioned. The practice of turning toward the east, during the rehearsal of the creed is observed here, the minister and people all standing towards the chancel end. There is something primitive in the appearance of the congregation, turning round, while professing their belief, towards that quarter of the heavens from which popular opinion maintains that the Son of man will appear when he comes with power to judge the world; it is a custom, coeval, no doubt, with the practice of burying with the face eastward, and which has been probably sanctioned by the early preachers of the gospel. The universality of this mode of sepulture, proves it to be of great antiquity, prevailing, as it does, not only through "Christendom," but extending among the half-savage hordes which infest Arabia, and the surrounding countries.

The morning prayers having concluded, the "parson" of the parish (in the legal sense of the term) ascended the pulpit, and proceeded to deliver a most excellent discourse—not a violent, inflated, harangue, accompanied with furious gesticulation, and violent contortions of the body—but a calm, luminous, and polished discourse, elegant in its diction, yet adapted to the simplest understanding in his congregation. The appearance of the old gentleman was striking and interesting. He was of a spare habit of body, and rather above the middle height, had not a slight stoop in the shoulders diminished his stature a little. His features were regular, and his complexion ruddy, while the hand of time had bared his temples and silvered his hair, giving him a venerable and impressive appearance. The old pulpit in which he stood, with its carved front and lofty sounding-board, seemed to harmonise with his looks; an air of antiquity characterised them both. A younger man than he would not have looked well in it. The congregation was very orderly, and listened to the sermon with great attention, a deep silence pervading the whole building, save when some rebellious urchin among the scholars received a rap from the master's stick for some act of insubordination. The great doctrines of Christianity were enforced upon the hearers,—charity, that keystone of true religion was held up for their practice, and they were affectionately urged to live a life of "godliness, virtue, and sobriety."

At the conclusion of the service, I was struck with the alacrity which the old clerk displayed in getting out of his desk, and the evident haste he was in to get out of doors before the congregation, wondering what could be his intention in so doing. But the mystery was soon solved, for on my reaching the church gates, I found this worthy functionary standing on a small eminence, waiting for the assembling of a group of listeners, and holding in his hand a manuscript. By the time I had got up to him, he commenced in his "childish treble" to announce a sale, by auction, of "household goods, pots, pans, and other utensils; a stack of excellent hay, &c.," which was to take place during the week.—This method of "crying a sale" is peculiar to country places, where the distance which intervenes betwixt the farm houses, and the absence of any market-cross or obelisk, obliges advantage to be taken of the congregation leaving the church to make an announcement general; but still it had a ludicrous appearance to see the whole affair altogether,—the white-headed old man, in his spectacles, blundering through an elaborate looking manuscript, while the folks who gathered round regarded him with looks of the greatest gravity. As soon as he had got through his bill, he hurried back to the vestry with an air of the utmost importance. I lingered in the rear of the congregation, to witness their departure, and while I did so, the "squire" passed me, on foot. The people all appeared to regard him with great respect, and took off their hats as he moved to them with marked urbanity. I afterwards found upon enquiry that the old gentleman is much beloved by his tenantry, who generally seek his counsel and advice, in any matter of weight and moment, and that he invariably endeavours to promote their interests as much as he is able. A striking contrast is presented between the general deportment of an old established landed proprietor, and the assumed airs which many "mushroom" gentry give themselves,—that class of wealthy individuals who have, by a fortunate turn of the wheel of trade, been elevated from comparative insignificance to handsome competencies. The one is anxious to maintain the honourable good feeling which has subsisted between landlord and tenant, from successive generations,—the other wishes to convey an idea of aristocracy, by copying the airs of persons of quality. The one resides at the mansion of his ancestors, surrounded by venerable oaks; the other inhabits a smart, vulgar house, of fanciful design: the one is blessed with the good wishes of his tenantry, the other is unconscious of any aspirations, save "the sighs of the poor."

My road home presented no new object of interest, except that the sun which had been occasionally beclouded in the early part of the day, now shone with meridian brilliancy, adding fresh charms to the lovely landscape through which I passed. I reached Preston by three o'clock, both gratified and improved by what I had seen and heard; my animal spirits and bodily health refreshed by my walk, and invigorated for the week, and I hope my mind edified by what I had heard at church.