

Thomas Greenfield the Teacher

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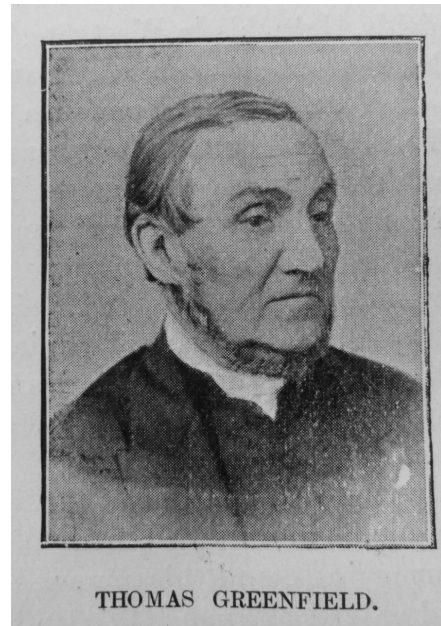
“A man profitable to God . . . he that is wise.” – JOB.

HAWTHORNE says: “All of us have our places, and are to move onward under the direction of the Chief Marshal. The grand difficulty results from the invariably mistaken principles on which the deputy marshals seek to arrange the immense concourse of people. Its members are classified by the merest external circumstances, according to certain apparent relations, some artificial badge which the world and themselves, learn to consider as a genuine characteristic. Fixing our attention on such outside shows of similarity or difference, we lose sight of those realities by which nature, fortune, fate, or providence has constituted for every man a brotherhood, wherein it is one great office of human wisdom to classify him.”

And so it is, humankind is not a motley crowd but a living procession, in which every man may, and should, find his place and keep step in the march. However, it is obviously true that too often blundering in characterisation and classification occasions jostling and jumbling. The Chief Marshal is oftentimes too little recognised and regarded, and so the principles of classification become more artificial than real, and the characterisation more superficial than correct.

Some men do find their destined places, and march along a destined path with an unobscured consciousness of destiny. The difficulty of distinguishing and describing, locating and labelling them is not present, they wear the badge and express the *noblesse* of the brotherhood to which they belong. The mark is on them, the spirit is in them, the service is rendered by them, of the holy and destined fraternity of which they are the sworn and surrendered members. They are not men who have mistaken their vocation, who have been wrongly located, who wear the uniform of a class to which they do not belong, and who render not the services, and who share not in the aims of the community into which they have accidentally but evidently disastrously found a location.

The man whose portrait we would attempt to sketch, was one who found his God-destined place, and served in it, as one conscious of his high calling. Thomas Greenfield found his work and did it. Some men it is difficult, almost impossible, to characterise, and far from easy to classify. About them is so much of the artificial and make-believe. Ambition has overleaped itself, or indolence has cramped every energy; false standards have perverted or diverted what was possible to them. Not so such men as Thomas Greenfield. Early in life and throughout the years of it, they hear the voice of the Chief Marshal and follow, thinking and expressing in unswerving loyalty, “To this end was I born and for this came I into the World.”



“These are the souls that seem to dwell
Above this world - so rich a spell
Floats round their steps where'er they move,
From hopes fulfilled and constant love.”

Thomas Greenfield was a scion of the North country, there he was born, lived, and there he spent the whole of his long and honoured ministry in our church. He was born at Ballast Hill, Newcastle-on-Tyne, in the year 1813. When but seventeen years of age he became consciously saved by divine grace.

In the year 1836 he was called into the ministry of the Primitive Methodist Church, commencing his ministerial probation in the Westgate Circuit. His probation also comprised labours in the Sunderland and Ripon circuits, where he served with remarkable acceptance and success.

In the year 1840, having finished his probationary term, he was received into the ordained ranks of the ministry at the Conference of that year. He consequently laboured on the following stations, Whitehaven, Shotley Bridge, Berwick-on-Tweed, North Shields, Haltwhistle, Westgate, Whitby, Newcastle, Alston, Gateshead, Darlington, Stockton-on-Tees, and Durham. In 1876 he became Theological Tutor at our Sunderland Institute. Then, subsequently in 1881, he became Principal of that training institution for our ministers in those days. He was superannuated in the year 1884, being then seventy-two years of age, and having spent forty-eight years in strenuous and abundant service for God in the ministry of our denomination.

There are the years outlined, but who can fill in the details of this vast map of consecrated journeyings, and this immense plan of varied and valued toilings? To do Thomas Greenfield ample or fitting justice we dare not pretend to attempt. To picture him as he deserves we claim no ability. Still, the impossibility of being a worthy artist shall not deter us from essaying to describe him as best we may, desiring and hoping nothing more and wishing nothing less, than to sketch to the reader one of the grandest of the grand old men, who may be fittingly called the makers of Primitive Methodism. Men they were:

“Patient as the insects that build islands in the deep:
They hurled not the bolted thunder, but their silent way they keep,
So on the rock primeval they built; there its bases be;
Block by block these holy toilers built it up to what we see.”

It is oftimes said, “the child is father to the man,” and though it is such a commonplace expression it is abidingly true, and its truth is most conspicuous in Thomas Greenfield. As a child he attended a Sunday School in connection with the Established Church, and during these years of childhood was consciously under the nurture and influences of the Divine Spirit. Thus early his young mind was filled with serious thoughts, which being crystallised into resolves took shape in earnest consecration to God. He was of an unusually meditative and serious turn of mind. His mind was alive and active in a remarkable degree for such budding years. He looked within and wondered at the strange movements of his own breast. And he looked without on the earth upon which he lived, and the vast heavens above stretching in radiant and solemn grandeur, and he felt his feet standing within the vestibule of a temple. The heavens with their stars and sunshine, and the earth with its

trees and flowers, and hills and valleys were the symbols of a celestial language he fain would learn. His heart swelled as he thought, as if under some secret touch, the touch of God, which brought to him more than he could hold in its child limits, even as the world around him was not immense enough to hold the heart that swelled in its breast.

Some speak of the thoughtlessness of childhood, but the term is not descriptive even as a rule. In many instances the child-mind is most active and begins to learn the greatest of life's lessons, that God is the beginning and end, the root and cause, the source and giver, the ever present one and loving one, and life's one supreme duty and perennial bliss to love Him and obey His Will. Childhood may be the season of shadowy, unformed, and dreamy beginnings of life, the time of playthings and fugitive fancy, but it is a season also of questionings and longings which are the spring flowers that prophesy the summer. Such is no exaggerated picture of the childhood of Thomas Greenfield; indeed as a child in special degree, he began to hunger for, and to seek God.

His early years were not lived amid the advantages which wealth and position can afford. The reverse rather is the truth, he knew the inconveniences of limited means, the drudgery and exactions of hard work for a livelihood, the little time and meagre opportunities for self-culture, but in him was the imperious will and the determined purpose, and these made him the victor and not the victim of every untoward and hindering circumstance.

As a boy there was in him the promise of the man - much about him which distinguished him from the boy-life around him. Some of the men among whom he worked said "he would make a good actor," referring probably to the power of mimicry and imitation he evinced. However, there was a godly man among the workmen who saw worthier possibilities in the lad and told him "that there was something nobler for him than that." The counsels and influence of this pious old man no doubt had much to do with Thomas Greenfield's thoughts and decisions in those formative years, and proved among the anchoring forces which prevented his drifting on the sea of a careless, if not a wicked life.

He was seventeen years of age when a friend invited him to go to our Primitive Methodist Sunday School at Ballast Hill. He went, and that was the hour of destiny to him, for from that time he dates the epoch of his conversion.

The time of spiritual conversion brought with it a mental quickening. He became aware of the need and importance of improving his mind. The heart and head are more closely related than many suspect. A man is a unity. The heart condition vitally affects his mentality, and the mind-life equally influences the moral states of the individual. Religion is the most powerful of intellectual stimulants and guides.

Multitudes date their mind-birth to the hour of their spiritual regeneration. Conversion to them is not simply a changed direction, but an enlarged being, a door into a new world of thoughts, hopes and efforts. To the man is discovered a higher personal value, which induces an endeavour to reach the nobler ends which the new change intimates.

His means were scant, his advantages were meagre, his opportunities few and discouraging. At home there was no convenience for study, and he found there little sympathy in his newly-formed resolves to improve and unfold his mind in hard patient reading and thought. But these things were overcome by hiring a room, and furnishing it in a very modest fashion for a study; there he spent all his spare time in communion with what books he could get. We may not even imagine what of economy and sacrifice of necessary things, was required to maintain that modest sanctum. We can never, perhaps, dream of what transpired in that little room where Thomas Greenfield read and prayed. Only such as he, who have passed through similar experiences of lonely wrestlings with physical weariness and mental hungers, with the long contestings of the mind with great truths, with the patient and plodding endeavour to familiarise the thoughts with master themes and subjects, can form any idea of the secret things which that room stood for. However, of this the least imaginative of us can fancy that it was there he laid the base of his intellectual attainments, formed the habits of patient research, began to lay in the treasures of learning, and started to equip himself for the usefulness of the future.

It was not long after his conversion that he was put on the plan as a local preacher in the Newcastle Circuit. This to him was a solemn and sacred opportunity, not the opportunity of ambition and love of publicity, but the opportunity of an earnest soul to declare the message of God which he had heard in secret. It is said the text of his trial sermon was, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." There, at the beginning he reveals himself. The text not unfrequently, shapes the discourse but discovers the preacher. Nothing startling and fantastic - sensational and high flying about Thomas Greenfield, his text touches the realities, and opens up the things wherein is left no room for the trifling speaker, nor even the listless hearer. Nothing is left us concerning the sermon, but the text itself is a sermon, and shows us the bent and concepts of the young preacher's mind, as also the solemn earnestness of his spirit.

This period of Thomas Greenfield's life were years of remarkable progress and usefulness. The days were passed in hard, rough manual toil, the nights spent in study, more than sleep, while the Sabbaths saw him journeying to speak the message of salvation, wherever his circuit plan indicated. His hard, grinding labours were not sufficient to crush his mind, nor was his limited time for study enough to daunt his fervour to learn.

Some people say that there is no royal road to learning; it is much more true to say, that all the ways leading to learning, and every endeavour to possess it, are royal. The ways are found from the lowliest places, and the finding is the privilege of the brave, and the monopoly of none, however circumstantially favoured they may seem to be. The common-place duties, and narrow limitations of life need not be separated from high purposes; nor are they incompatible with the truest dignity and nobility. The humblest life may show a nobleness before which so-called rank appears mean indeed. Ruskin says of art what is equally true of life and service: "It does not matter whether a man paint a petal of a rose or the chasms of a precipice, so that love and admiration attend on him as he labours, and wait for ever on his work. It does not matter whether he toil for months on a few inches of his canvas, or cover a palace front with colour in a day, so only that it be with a solemn purpose that he have filled his heart with patience, or urged his hand to haste."

The truth which the apostle of art teaches was the truth which formed the secret joy and strength of these struggling and formative years of Thomas Greenfield's life. There was no vast area to cover, there were no dazzling prospects, but a solemn and resolute purpose filled his soul, and the attendant acolytes of patience and love were never absent. The purpose to make the most of himself, so that he might render the best of which he was capable to his God and his fellows, was his guiding star.

"Men cannot make, but may ennoble fate
By nobly bearing it. So let us trust
Not to ourselves, but God, and calmly wait
Love's orient out of darkness and of dust."

Like multitudes of others Thomas Greenfield owed nothing to external advantages; but everything to inborn qualities - an indomitable will, a patient and unwearied industry, a consecrated aim carried through to its end, and a whole-souled desire to serve his Master with all his might; and that he succeeded no one will question who was privileged to know him. He was one of nature's true nobles. Chivalry and courtesy, reverence and regalness, strength and sweetness, breadth and boldness, dignity and devotion blended in his character in exquisite harmony. And falsehood, flippancy, meanness, sordidness and selfishness were things of which he was incapable. Long years of self-culture and discipline had done much for him, and divine grace beautified and made attractive everything within and about him. He was the soul of honour. Frankness and fairness, grace and generosity characterised all his intercourse with men, and sincerity, devoutness, confidence and love all his relations to God.

Hardships never daunted, reverses never soured, suffering never distressed, and prosperity and honours never spoiled him. His was the unconquered and lordly will which yielded not to the paltry sway of trivial calls and claims. The tiresome round of common duties wrought in him no irritation, neither did the tedious iterations of irksome tasks annoy nor the small demands of unreasonable and exacting men destroy his native repose of soul. He knew nothing of trifling tasks, and of the restless sense of wasted time and powers. He would evade no difficulty, however frowning, nor delay a duty whatever the sacrifice it might demand of him. He seemed as if his ideal was to be the best he was able to be in every place and time. He, perhaps, never read the words, but the truth which the poet expresses was among the central elements of his soul.

"Dream not of noble service elsewhere wrought,
The simple duty that awaits thy hand
Is God's voice uttering a divine command;
Life's common deeds built all that saints have thought.
The Paradise men seek, the city bright,
That gleams beyond the stars for longing eyes,
Is only human goodness in the skies,
Earth's deeds, well done, glow into heavenly light."

The word which we have used to characterise Thomas Greenfield is the word *teacher*. And this is the one pre-eminent and distinguishing feature about him, which thousands will remember him by who had the advantage of attending his ministry, and scores of us who knew him in the theological advantage of attending his ministry, and scores of us who knew him in the theological class. In the

pulpit he was the teacher, no less than in the seminary. He was a born teacher. It is not learning which constitutes a teacher. There may be vast stores of knowledge without any aptitude, or capacity of communicating it. The ability to acquire knowledge is not the same with the ability to impart it. And even more than the capacity to communicate knowledge it is necessary that a teacher possess the power to inflame the learner with a hunger and zest for learning. It is the *personnel* of the man which tells in this vocation. The real teacher is infectious, stimulating and inciting to his scholars. He will guide and instruct, but what is equally necessary, he will inspire. In this broadest sense Thomas Greenfield was a teacher. Aptitude to communicate knowledge was his forte, and power to awaken enthusiasm in the scholar was no less a distinguishing characteristic in him.

His ministry was a teaching ministry. His preaching was almost entirely expository, always illuminative, and never anything else but edifying. His Bible was from the beginning the book of his heart, the book he most read, the book which he loved most to unfold in his public ministry. He knew his Bible as even few ministers do. He was wide and broad in the scope of his studies, and immense in the area of his literary interests, and wealthy in his attainments and possessions of knowledge. But his Bible was the fount of his own illumination, and the store-house from which he fed his people. To make Bible truths plain and to bring them within the comprehension of his hearers was the one aim of his study in private, and his endeavours in public. His insight into truth was remarkable. He had a wonderful power of seeing into the heart of a subject, and of making other people to see. As a church we have had our great preachers, and burning evangelists, but Thomas Greenfield takes front place among those who have been our Bible scholars and teachers. Men whose ministry has not been a passing shower, or a transient gleam of brightness, but the nourishment and moulding of souls for ever.

To some of us Thomas Greenfield will be immortally remembered in connection with Sunderland College. It was there we knew him and came under his influence. He came among us, and we never dreaded his coming. There was no unapproachableness about him, no false and assumed dignity, nothing forbidding, but everything inviting. He came down to our level without patronage to us, or loss of influence and power to himself. He stooped to us to raise us to himself. He taught not out of a book, but out of his own richly-stored mind and experience. Ever simple and luminous, the deep and abstruse subjects became transparent under his analysis, and what was dark, at least dim, flashed as brightness as he explained it to us. The old Sunderland Institution had its modest place in the early efforts of our Church to advance the education of its ministry, and Thomas Greenfield's share in its work cannot be too highly estimated, nor too well remembered. The years have wrought their changes, new times bring new needs and new men. Vast have been our improved opportunities and resources, but some of us think of the old Institution as our Alma Mater, and Thomas Greenfield's name and work are concentered in its history.

He retired from active service in 1884 and continued his residence in Sunderland. He was seventy-two years of age, and had served the Church for forty-eight years wisely and mightily. Occasionally he preached to the pleasure and profit of the people. He was exemplary in his attendance at the public worship of the sanctuary, and the private means of grace. His unobtrusive piety, ripened culture, and kingly graciousness made him to be revered, and loved by all. He attended his class on Monday April 9th, 1894, although in very indifferent health. The next morning, soon after breakfast he was suddenly called to his recompense in the eighty-second year of his age. He was interred in

Bishopwearmouth Cemetery on Friday, April 18th, 1894, amid the regret of a host who had learned to love him as one who had been their friend and counsellor.

“After life's fitful fever thou sleep'st well!
We may not mourn thee! Sceptred chiefs, from whom
The earth received her destiny, and fell
Before them trembling - to a sterner doom
Have oft been called.
But thou didst fall unfettered, armed and free,
And kingly, to the last, loved and beloved by all.”

References

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