

Memoir of the Rev. William Lonsdale

Transcription of obituary published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by W Sanderson

HIDDEN among the hills of Durham is a fertile dale of great natural beauty; to a traveller, in winter, the surrounding hills present a stern and frowning aspect, but in summer time the influence of a mild sun, of balmy breezes, of a murmuring river, of rich meadows and extensive pastures, make Weardale lovely. Its people, too, are manly and vigorous, being employed partly in lead mining, and partly in pastoral farming; they love music and singing, and it is delightful to hear them, as you sit on the mountain side, uplifting their united voices till the valley rings, as they return from their worship. Their simple manners and retired habits exert a favourable influence on their relative character. But Weardale possesses the still higher attraction of having been the scene of several religious revivals.

In this beautiful dale; Mr. Lonsdale was born. His parents, John and Susanna Lonsdale, resided at the time at High Mount-Pleasant, Westgate. His father was a very amiable man, of irreproachable character. William's youth was spent in honest industry, but he knew little of business and nothing of anxiety. He was fond of rural sports, and excelled in running and leaping. He was popular in village debate, was a musician, and could sing sweetly. On the whole he was a pleasant companion, nor did he neglect to say his prayers and attend the chapel. He could tell many interesting stories of Oxtoby, Batty, Suddards, and Flesher, and many others, who had preached in the dale prior to his conversion. His mind was gentle and generous, and to some extent it had surrendered itself to the influences of these good men.

William was converted in a religious revival. One Sunday night he became greatly alarmed as if overwhelmed with shame, grief, and fear; he obtained a full view of his own heart and life, and refused to be comforted; but after much prayer he found peace. His conversion was thorough. His peace passed understanding; his joy was unspeakable and full of glory. This truly evangelical conversion had much to do with making him a soul-saving minister, as well as in supporting him in seasons of temptation and trial. William joined his brother Thomas's class, and in this he did well, for Thomas deservedly bore a very high character for Christian simplicity and fervent piety. William was very humble, and sought much to be taught of God. While others went to their books he went to the throne of grace; with him the Bible was a supreme authority. The prospects of his life soon began to shape themselves definitely in the direction of the Christian ministry. In his application to be taken on the list of approved preachers he gives the following account of himself:- "I was converted," he says, "on the 14th of March, 1830, under the ministry of Mr. William Sanderson. I was put on the local preachers' plan in December, 1831, and was taken into the Itinerancy by Hull Circuit, in March, 1833, and was stationed to travel in my own native dale."

The quality of his mind showed itself by the preference it ever gave to the great truths of religion. In his sermons there was freshness and power; he was never dry or long; he was more given to proving than to painting. Genius would sometimes have given more graceful forms to his thoughts, and taste would sometimes have made greater use of the lights of science; but he sought not such helps. He excelled in homeliness; he spoke much in the parabolic style. He had a good head, a very good heart, and by no means a feeble imagination. Perhaps it was not of a lofty type, but it was potent of its kind; very apt in making common things available for illustration. "One day," says W.T., "he was on his way to a camp-meeting, where he was expected to speak to a number of infidels, some of whom were mechanics; he plucked a flower, and when called upon to speak, he held it up to the view of the congregation, and said, 'Can any of you make a flower like this? It is not large, and many of you are ingenious, can you do anything in this way? It has form, colour, scent, life, and is sustained in the storm by a feeble stem. To the God that made this flower I bow my knee;' an infidel in the congregation bowed his also, and gave his heart to God."

He was remarkably earnest; his tearful eyes, his lifted hands, his troubled accents, and every lineament of his countenance indicated the depth of his feelings. Salvation, present, free, and full, by faith in Christ, was the favorite theme of his ministry; he had no notion of delays, exceptions, or limits, his great cry was "Come." He was never very clerical in his appearance, there was no assumed air of decorum; he was much in the style of a north country farmer, his dress was usually a little behind the fashion; to be sure he honoured the cloth and the necktie, but he was not near

so dainty in such matters as some of his brethren. He honoured all men, but his preferences were with the pious poor; he ridiculed the idea of human condescension. A humble brother told him one day of the condescension of one of our talented ministers in chatting freely with some pious old women, "Pshaw! my friend," said Mr. Lonsdale, "where had my good brother been that he had to come down to talk with his people? It is no coming down to talk with the humblest saint."

It is no mean commendation of him to know that God could use him without the danger of destroying him by pride and vanity, and that his friends could entertain him without the danger of destroying him by their generous hospitality. He was a great lover of the prayer meeting. Being fruitful in expedients and illustrations, he assisted the understanding and strengthened the confidence of many a penitent; he fully believed that his faith could bring a degree of gracious help to the mourning soul, and so assist the vessel in taking the bar and entering the harbour.

In June, 1837, Mr. Lonsdale was married to Elizabeth Baty, of Nenthead. Elizabeth was good girl, but of delicate health; she was brought up chiefly by her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Harrison, who were among the few first and fast friends of the early preachers. They were rich and without children of their own, and they brought Elizabeth up in a delicate way, so that in some respects she was very unfit for the discomforts of the early Itinerancy. She bore two children, Harrison and William, and died a most triumphant death, October 5th, 1841.

Mr. L. travelled in Westgate, twice in Driffield, in Canterbury, twice in Scotter, in Whitehaven, Barnard Castle, Bradford, Whitby, twice in Gainsborough, in Doncaster, twice in Swinefleet, in Grimsby, Pocklington, Brigg, and Hornsea. Several good chapels were built under his superintendency. His station at Canterbury was a failure; he was sent to that city to open a mission, but his health failed; so also to some extent did his heart and hope. After six months, he was re-stationed for Driffield. During his station in Whitby, Mr. Harrison died, and Mrs. Harrison who had undertaken to make a home for Lonsdale's children, under the severity of the shock and the importance of her undertaking, prevailed on Lonsdale to resign his ministry and go home. She meant well but advised ill; she was a kind woman, but like winter fruit she ripened late. But thank God she did ripen, and died well in a good old age. This was the most serious mistake in Lonsdale's religious career; he went to a good home, to plenty of land, and trade, and money, but he could not be happy out of the ministry. He resigned in 1842, and in December of the same year he went to Scotter Circuit as a hired local preacher, and at the Conference of 1843, he was again restored to the ministry as a probationer. In August, 1844, he married Mrs. Longmires, one of the earliest and best of our female preachers.

Mr. Gibson, of Liverpool, says, "Dear Sanderson, — Having heard that you are requested to prepare a memoir of Mr. Lonsdale, I think it my duty to say, that it was my good fortune and great pleasure to travel with him two years in the Driffield Circuit; he was a devout, humble-minded man; a laborious, acceptable, and successful preacher. When we entered the station we found the members in a very agitated and unhappy state; Mr. Lonsdale led the way to much prayer, family visiting, circumspect walking, kindness, and faithfulness. I well remember his saying to us on one occasion, 'Now, my lads, we are one hundred members below last March, and except we pray much, visit much, and in every sermon aim at saving souls, we shall be down at the district meeting.' We united in effort, the work broke out, and scores were saved; so we were able to report an increase. He was an efficient family visitor; his words were few but appropriate; his prayers were brief, simple, pointed, and often powerful. He was mighty in the prayer meetings; and for sweet singing and powerful praying few could surpass him. He once said to me, 'I have never been able to raise a circuit without paying special attention to Sunday night prayer meetings.' On the whole he was a superior man. JOSEPH GIBSON."

Mr. Waumsley, of Swinefleet, says, "My departed friend was dear to me; he was every inch a man and a Christian. He was true to the Connexion, a kind superintendent, and to me a father. He knew the great truths of Christianity, and how to place them within the grasp of a child. Many in this circuit acknowledge him as their father in Christ: his crown won't be starless. I have gone through the reports of his stations since 1843, and find that he never had but once to report a decrease; he once had a decrease of five members, but in every other instance he had an increase, and some of them large—making in the whole many hundreds. THOMAS WAUMSLEY."

His death was not sudden, his constitution broke up gently; the soft hands of angels might have untied the bands of animal life; for long there was no sigh, or pain, or doubt, nor did his mental energy ever fail. His last conversations were highly interesting; the bearing branch was purged into greater fruitfulness; he exhibited all the triumphs of faith, and greatly rejoiced in the promises. He was fully persuaded that his end was at hand; death accompanied him as a presence, both in his best and worst hours. Several of his old friends united with him during the last few days of his life in carrying the needed promises of the Bible to the mercy seat; and we ever found Heaven's broad windows wide open.

A few days before he died, I told him of an excellent article which had just appeared in the magazine on the late revival in Weardale. I said, "Mr. H. Philips, the writer of the article, says it is the mightiest revival there has ever been in Weardale." At this, his face grew bright; he shook his head, and said, "That was the greatest revival when I was converted." Of that wonderful revival he had some good stories. His preferences were very pardonable, and I confess is I looked on so good a relic, and thought of others of the same standing, and in many respects of equal credit, I was ready to subscribe to my friend's opinion. Of the living I say nothing, but it was no small affair to add a William Lonsdale to the church of Christ.

Mrs. Lonsdale says, "My dear husband's earliest struggles to obtain peace were intensely distressing, but he never afterwards lost the blessing. In speaking his experience I have often heard him exultingly exclaim, 'I feel I am converted; I have my trials, but I am converted; I feel I am failing fast, but I am converted; my head is getting grey, but I thank God I am converted'" This was a great, a living fact in his experience, and often he said to me with great emotion, 'As I get nearer eternity, my gratitude increases from the fact that I am converted, and that the greatest portion of my life has been spent in the service of God, and that I have not lived in vain.' He was full of zeal for God and pity for man; he was often in labours more abundant. I cannot forget with what gladness he was wont to hail the prodigal's return, and what pains he took in pointing the sinner to the Saviour. Many on his different stations have acknowledged him as their father in Christ. He was strictly just, 'Owe no man anything,' was in his way of reckoning as binding as repentance and faith.

"One day as I stood weeping at the prospect of my approaching widowhood, he affectionately urged me to look to the Lord, adding, 'Thou wilt soon follow me.' I said, 'My sorrows are crushing me, and I fear I shall not hold out.' He said, 'I too might fear; I have many defects, but it is all through mercy.'

"His confidence was unshaken, even in the near prospect of death. There was a grandeur in his character and movements which covered me with holy awe and reverence. He scarcely seemed, at times, like an inhabitant of earth; he assured me that Satan was not permitted to hurl a dart at him; that he was going home because his work was done. I saw that virtue (or rather piety) alone has majesty in death. He was a conqueror, and more. To an old friend, who asked him how he was, he said, 'just alive,' but added

"Tis done, the great transaction's done,
I am my Lord's, and he is mine.'

"At another time he said to me, 'My bodily sufferings are indescribable.' I said, 'I hope they are not intolerable. He said 'O no.' I said 'You feel Jesus is with you' He said, 'O yes; I had need. He is my constant companion;' and then added, 'The covenant is signed and sealed.' When he thought of the District Meeting, and of his application for superannuation, he said, 'It is most likely I shall cease at once to work and live.' He spoke of his departure as if he was going to take a pleasant journey. Towards the last he suffered much; but his mental powers remained unimpaired. About half-an-hour before he died he said with great solemnity, 'I have a conviction that I am going. And then in a tone of holy awe and gladness he exclaimed, 'He is coming!' And he ceased to live."

He died on Tuesday, May the 19th, 1863, nine days after he had attained the fifty-sixth year of his age. On the following Friday his body was buried in the cemetery at Gainsbro.' The service was performed by his friend the Rev. W. Harland.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1863/577