

Rev. Josiah Orton Parks

Transcription of obituary published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Robert Parks

BIOGRAPHY heightens the pleasure, and greatly increases the importance of life. It enables us to live in the mysterious past, and brings us into hallowed association with the good and great who have gone before us. Their lives exert an undefinable influence over us, and their thoughts, become an important part of our own existence, mingling with the volitions of our inner being, and shaping our higher and immortal destiny. But, to faithfully portray the life, and correctly represent the character of loved ones gone before us, is a task so difficult, and all but impossible, that we dare not to indulge the hope of approaching to perfection in our present undertaking. Our difficulty is vastly increased by the endearing relation of the subject of this memoir to its afflicted writer, and by the painful brevity of his earthly and ministerial career. But should any of our readers consider our delineation of his character too strong, or our estimate of his worth too great, they must charitably attribute it to the strong and undying affection of a bereft and sorrowing father, for a most dutiful and devoted son.

“For if ’twere sweet
To have a son on earth, where every ill,
Might point a sword against his heart, and pierce
My own through his, am I not doubly blest
To have a son in heaven?”

My first-born and deeply-lamented son Josiah was born at Melton Mowbray, in the county of Leicester, on the 31st of January, 1841, and was converted to God in the George street Sunday-school, Leicester, in the early part of 1850. On the evening of Easter Monday in that year, he took a very prominent part in a juvenile missionary meeting held in the George street Chapel; and as that service was unusually interesting and impressive, there can be no doubt of its greatly influencing his future and ministerial life, for during the brief period of his public ministry, the missionary work was peculiarly dear to him, and on several particular occasions he felt an ardent desire to enter the foreign field.

After leaving the town of Leicester, and during our station in the Chesterfield circuit, he neglected the duties of his high and holy calling, but never shook off his early and good impressions, for he was frequently the subject of deep and poignant convictions. Shortly after attaining his fourteenth year, and whilst a resident with us in Nottingham, he was mercifully restored to the Divine favour, and re-united to the visible Church. Several of the Hockley local preachers formed an intimate acquaintance with him, and occasionally took him to their country appointments, allotting to him a portion of the public service. Nor were his youthful exercises unacceptable and fruitless; but he was well received by the people, and honoured by the conversion of one soul as the direct result of his pulpit efforts. He also accompanied his friends in their frequent visits to the homes of affliction and distress, and his conversations, readings and prayers were sanctified to the unhappy sufferers in several instances.

In the spring of the same year business directed him to an untried path, and he sorrowfully proved that, “the world is no friend of grace, to help us on to God.” He was apprenticed to a lace merchant at Nottingham, in whose establishment a number of godless young persons were employed; and the temptations, revilings, provocations and persecutions to which he was continuously subjected, chafed and perplexed him, until he lost his confidence and wandered in devious paths, enduring great misery and distress. During our subsequent station in Nottingham 1st circuit, and after my preaching in Canaan street Chapel one Sunday evening, the conscience-stricken backslider wept his way to the mercy seat, and after pouring out the sorrows of his wounded spirit for some time, the Lord in mercy to his soul delivered him

from the bondage of corruption, and filled him with peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. From that eventful hour, his long divided heart rested on its blissful centre, nor again departed from its forgiving Saviour; but,

“High heaven that heard that solemn vow,
That vow renewed did daily hear;
Till in life’s latest hour he bowed,
And blest in death a bond so dear.”

Shortly after this renewal of his covenant with the God of his fathers, we were removed to Sheffield, but he remained in Nottingham pursuing the even tenor of his way with such satisfaction to the circuit authorities, that they gave him a place on their preachers’ plan with several more youths of his own age, one of whom was brother John Bacon, who is now a travelling preacher in the Boston circuit.

The call of Josiah to the public ministry was both clear and striking. When listening to an address in Canaan street Chapel, from the Rev. K. Barrass, of Canada, God spoke so directly to his heart, that he felt constrained to surrender himself at the imperative call, and to lay himself at once on the missionary altar. So powerful was the impression then made upon his mind, and so earnest was his purpose to obey the heavenly mandate that he would willingly have returned with Mr. Barrass to Canada, and have entered at once upon the work which had now become so desirable to him; but, acting on paternal advice, he prayerfully waited the indications of Providence, and in a few months’ time a wide and effectual door was opened before him. Without solicitation, and contrary to all expectation, his master desired him to write his father and say, “that if there should be an opening for him to our ministry, he would release him from his engagement, as he believed that the ministry was his proper sphere.” In about three months after this communication from his employer, a call was received from Berwick-upon Tweed, and another from the Horncastle circuit. The latter was accepted, and on our going to Nottingham to make the necessary arrangements with his master, that gentleman cancelled his indentures without hesitation or conditions, remarking as he did so, “Now, Mr. Parks, I wish you to distinctly understand that I was led to make this proposal to Josiah from a direct impression made upon my own mind that he ought to be in your ministry, for no one had ever spoken to me on the subject. Besides, you are only just in time with your application, for in a few days more I should have completed my arrangements for the approaching season, and then I could not have spared him.”

The way being thus plainly opened before him, he entered on his sacred duties in the Horncastle circuit, March 3rd, 1860, with great fear and trembling but by prayerful and diligent application, he laboured with a good degree of acceptance and usefulness on the station for fifteen months. Soon after his decease we received a letter from the Rev. R. Ducker, stating, “I was much affected this morning on receiving a memorial card respecting the death of your dear son. His life is soon cut off; but thank God, he has not lived in vain nor spent his strength for nought. I became acquainted with him in the Horncastle circuit, where he has left behind him a good name, and souls for his hire. We all thought well of him, and looked forward to days of great usefulness ; but his work is done and his reward is sure.”

His next sphere of labour was Burton-upon-Trent, and in looking over his journal I find that he was blessed with some conversions; but in consequence of not feeling himself at home in this metropolis of Bacchus, he declined an invitation for a second year’s station, and the following Conference appointed him to Rotherham. This station was more in harmony with his tastes and feelings, and afforded him greater facilities for improvement and usefulness. He highly appreciated the kindness of his numerous friends, and his persevering toll was crowned with considerable success.

The Rev. J. Thomason, the present superintendent at Rotherham, writes —“November 2nd, 1866. We have this morning received the melancholy tidings that your Josiah is taken from you and from the church militant. This will doubtless be a great trial to your feelings and those of Mrs. Parks and family, as it will be a source of sorrow to a very great number of friends which he has made during the short time he has been in the itinerancy. His memory is revered by many in this circuit, and the church has sustained a loss in his early death.”

After spending two happy and prosperous years in Rotherham circuit, he was stationed for Derby, in which circuit he was in labours more abundant. His excessive preaching services, both in-doors and out—his onerous official duties, with their consequent responsibilities—and his untold sorrows and anxieties, arising from various and painful causes, told fearfully and fatally on his sensitive and over-wrought system, and at the end of two years he left this exhausting field of labour with the hand of death visibly upon him, leaving behind him a number of admiring friends, some of whom are the seals of his apostleship, and will be the crown of his rejoicing in the day of the Lord.

His last connexional station was Ripley circuit, and his last earthly residence the town of Alfreton in that circuit. Thither he removed in July last, and was heartily welcomed by a warm-hearted and generous people. These devoted and sympathising friends, with their kind and brotherly superintendent, perceived at once that: Josiah was seriously ill and fearfully emaciated, and they urgently requested him to desist from labour, and take immediate and sufficient rest. Had he wisely taken that advice, it is just possible that his valuable life might have been prolonged for a little season; but it is also probable that he had worked too long already, and that his broken constitution was too much shattered to be permanently resuscitated. But work was his pleasure, and working for Christ his supreme delight; and work he would, despite the entreaties and remonstrances of his anxious friends. Love for souls constrained him—hope of recovery allured him—and an indomitable spirit sustained him, but insidious consumption flattered and deceived him. This is apparent from the following letter written by him on the 17th of October, and only thirteen days before his lamented departure.

“Dear Father,—Here I am at Portland row; have been since Monday trying hard to get them up.—Go away to day, and purpose reaching home to-morrow night. On Saturday go to Mansfield, not for Missionary Deputation’s work, as appointed, but to open a new chapel at Pleasley, and preach in it for three or four nights.

“I write now for our Normanton friends. We want you to come some week-day, and preach in the afternoon, and give your lecture on Martin Luther in the evening. Do write and tell me when you can come: do, for I am deeply interested in Normanton. Things are looking black here just now. The Miners’ Union is doing us harm; what will be the ultimatum I dare not think. Friend Levi is very poorly—has not worked for a month, I fear he is breaking up. The circuit in one or two places is doing better; but still we are not moving as I desire.

“I am much better,—can do my preaching work, and visit my fifty or sixty families per week without much physical inconvenience. I trust all of you are well. My love to mother and you all. Now let me hear from you soon about Normanton.”

From the above extract it will be seen that his hope of recovery was in the ascendant, that his ministerial labours were unabridged, and that his heart was firmly set on the interests of his station. He went to Pleasley as indicated in his letter; attended tea and public meeting on the Saturday, preached twice on the Sunday, and took a service on each of the three succeeding evenings. The whole of these services were

performed with more than his usual energy and power, and made a deep and lasting impression on the town and neighbourhood. On Thursday, October 25th, he returned home, preaching at Normanton in his own circuit on the way; and on the following morning as he was rising from his bed a blood-vessel ruptured on his lungs. He lingered beside death's cold flood until the following Tuesday afternoon, and then fearlessly launched away without a struggle or a groan. The end was in harmony with the way.

Impulsive, determined, and active in life, his descent to the tomb was sudden, resistless, and rapid. But he had lived the pilgrim's life—seeking the city out of sight, and though the summons of his dismissal came at an unexpected hour, it found him with staff in hand, and his passport signed. When loved ones wept around him, he rejoiced; and whilst their grief found utterance in bitter lamentations, his triumph was expressed in fervent songs and blissful acclamations. His favourite hymns were the 128rd, the 303rd, and the 802nd; but on the day of his death he repeatedly sung with amazing power and sweetness,—

“Earth has many a scene of sorrow,
Toil, and care and storm;
But there will be a bright tomorrow;
In heaven it will be calm.
Soon the conflict will be over,
Only wait awhile;
Heaven's joys will last for ever;
Come then, Christians, smile.
Lovely, pretty, golden city, how I long for thee,
Earthly sorrow ne'er can reach thee, all in heaven are free.”

During the preceding night, he said to one of his attendants, “Brother, do you want to know my experience?” the reply was, “No, Mr. Parks, I do know that.” He immediately took his Bible, and with surprising rapidity turned to Isaiah xii. 1 and 2, then to 1 Corinthians xv. 55 to 57, and then to 2 Corinthians v. 1, saying, “that is my experience!” As he looked on his sorrow-stricken wife, soon to be left a widow with her fatherless children, he affectionately said, “I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better; nevertheless, to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.” To his afflicted and weeping mother he confidently exclaimed, “Oh, mother, all my family will be converted after my death! Tell them to meet me in heaven!”

When his medical attendant took his hand and kindly said, “You are very poorly, Mr. Parks,” he replied with a smile, “Yes, doctor, but my religion makes me happy.” To all who visited him—and they were many—he spoke of the blessedness of religion, and exhorted them to diligence in the heavenly calling. He also requested that it should be told to certain parties who had grievously injured him, that he freely and fully forgave their trespass. The only thing which interrupted his abounding joy was the painful consideration that his youthful widow and infant children would be left without support, in consequence of his not being a full member of our Preachers' Friendly Society; but when assured by his relatives that they should be provided for, he tenderly embraced them and said, “Now I can die in peace.”

As he had lived respected, he died lamented; and as a proof of the estimation in which he was held by the inhabitants of Ripley, Alfreton, and the surrounding villages, it is calculated that near 2,000 persons followed him to his grave, and loud and universal were the lamentations during the performance of the mournful service.

Thus closed the short and hopeful career of Josiah Orton Parks, on the 30th of October, 1866, in the twenty-sixth year of his age, and the seventh of his efficient and successful ministry. The dispensation is mysterious and painful to his bereft and sorrowing family, and were it not for the sure and certain hope we have of his joyful resurrection to eternal life, the separation would be insupportable. "But, as we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus, will God bring with him."

"We weep, 'tis nature weeps—but faith
Can pierce beyond the gloom of death,
And in yon world so fair and bright,
Behold him in refulgent light.
Nature stops at Jordan's tide,
Faith beholds the other side.
Nature hears farewells and sighs,
Faith hears his welcome to the skies.
Nature mourns a cruel blow,
Faith assures it is not so.
Nature never sees him more,
Faith only sees him gone before.
Nature tells'a dismal story,
Faith has visions full of glory.
Nature murmurs—faith gives meekness,
Strength is perfected in weakness.
Nature writhes and hates the rod,
Faith looks up and blesses God,
Sense looks downward—faith above,
That sees harshness—this sees love.
Oh may faith victorious be,
May it reign triumphantly!"

We will not attempt a summary of his character ourselves, lest our admiration of his many excellences should lead us beyond the bounds of propriety; but we will give the two following letters received immediately after his death instead.

"My dear Brother,— Greatly affected was I when I heard of the sudden departure of your excellent boy, and my beloved friend. I had got to like him, felt proud of him as a hopeful ornament of our ministry, and thought him well worthy of a place in my list of Specials, when the hand of death took him to join another circle of friends, and work in a higher field of service. Well, it is our Lord's doing, and must be right. What a comfort it must be to your stricken heart that he died, not a martyr to vice or dissipation, but in the service of the Saviour; and that, although his race here was short, yet his being continuing, he will have all the longer life in felicity and purity, perfect and undying. May God comfort you, his poor widow, and stricken mother; and may you have the bliss of an acquiescing heart granted you. My love to all, and I pray God to comfort you. Amen.

"Yours truly,
"JOHN SIMPSON."

“My dear Friend,—My heart is troubled for you and your dear wife in your present sorrow.

“That which has overtaken many of us, has now befallen you. The number of your loved ones is less, because ‘one is not.’ Fearfully and sorrowfully this is made familiar to our hearts. With something of Jacob’s sorrow, but not with his perplexity, we felt the words enter to our hearts with a lively yet crushing power.

“You know that He who has taken your eldest son had the right thus to do; and I know you will desire to say from the heart, ‘It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good.’

“My dear friend, you are honoured even whilst you mourn. Your son has fallen in the high places of the field—died with his armour on. His last work was for Christ, and now he is with him for ever. Not all are honoured as you are honoured. You mourn the loss of one who was a good son, a kind brother, an affectionate husband, and a loving father. Above all these, he was a devoted Christian, a diligent student, and a laborious, intelligent, faithful, and successful minister of Christ. God was gracious to him and to you, for he never dishonoured himself, nor you, nor the Church, nor his brethren in the ministry, nor Christ. His sun was shining clearly, and increasing in brightness, but it went down ere it was noon, because his Lord and ours required his presence within the inner shrine. I doubt not but you have sometimes thought that when your head was laid low, he would have wept and bewailed you, toiling on still in the work of the Lord. But he rests, and you must work. He is full of bliss, and you must sorrow.

“And now, my dear brother, what can I say unto you? The God of all comfort, comfort you. May your heart be borne more heavenward. May this great sorrow be rich in blessings to every member of your family. May some one of your sons rise up to fill the place of the dead. May your own heart and that of your dear wife be upheld and cheered amidst all your sorrows. The blessings of a Covenant God be upon you and yours.

“With very kind regards to Mrs. Parks and yourself, I am, my dear friend, yours affectionately,
“THOMAS MAYS.”

That his widow and her children, and his parents and their children, with the thousands to whom he has ministered, may meet my loved and lamented son in heaven, is the sincere prayer of ROBERT PARKS.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1867/230