



Hilmarton Church, near Calne.

Obituary of Rev Francis Fisher

The death of the Rev Francis Fisher, vicar of Hilmarton, at the early age of 37, was recorded in our last week's obituary, and it is not well that so good a man – one so widely beloved, and so useful in his generation – should pass from us without such a slight homage of respect as our columns may be able to render to his memory.

He was son of the Ven Archdeacon Fisher, and grandson of the Bishop of Salisbury of that name. His father died whilst he was yet a boy, leaving four sons and two daughters to the sole care of a mother, who, if we may judge by the results, entered upon her responsibility, and fulfilled her task, with no ordinary courage, ability and discretion.

Francis Fisher was educated at the Charter House, and was subsequently admitted to Emmanuel College, and graduated at the University of Cambridge. His sweetness of temper and playful disposition, combined with a charming honesty and simplicity of character, endeared him in those days to many friends and augured well for his future career as “a wise winner souls”.

In the year 1845 he was ordained to the curacy of Bremhill, in this county, just at the time that the Rev Henry Drury entered upon the duties of that parish on the resignation of the Rev W L Bowles, whose great age and consequent non-residence had left ample scope for the energy and industry of his successor.

For five years did Francis Fisher work with his vicar in this field of labour with an untiring zeal and a singleness of purpose such as not only secured him the love and respect of every parishioner, but caused his ministrations to be crowned, even in that short time with a visible success. It was his more particular province to take charge of two small chapelries attached to the mother church of Bremhill. To these especially he applied himself with a conscientious earnestness deserving to be chronicled. There was not a household or member of a household, rich or poor, young or old, within his border, wherewith he had not soon established the most intimate ministerial relations. In humble imitation of “the Good Shepherd” his Master, he sought to know his sheep and be known of them, never sparing himself, by night or day, if only he could render service to the poor, or the sick, or the whole, to the penitent or impenitent, within his cure. With some pains and difficulty at first, he presently acquired a simple, effective style of preaching, and with a genuine love for children, he threw himself into the work of education, as though he were minded to master it thoroughly.

It happened that at Foxham – one of the above mentioned chapelries – in a border district of the Bowood property, the late Lady Lansdowne had established a school for the poor, in which, as in all other schemes of practical benevolence, she took marked interest. There was an admirable mistress in charge of it – a motherly woman, full of faith and diligence – and to superintend and encourage her labours, and to increase the general efficiency of the secular and religious instruction given was not only the duty but the daily delight of Francis Fisher. He devoted himself to the work with that hearty goodwill which is the first and surest element of success. The thing was done indeed in a corner, but it was not hid from the watchful eye of Lord Lansdowne. In an opportune moment a crown Living, adjoining the parish of Bremhill, became vacant, and the faithful curate, one day invited to dine and sleep at Bowood, on the next, to his exceeding joy and surprise, returned to report himself the vicar-elect of Hilmarton. Never was patronage more judiciously or more generously bestowed. - He was emphatically the right man in the right place.

To a firm undeviating loyalty to the principles and disciplines of the church of England he unites a liberality and largeness of heart which none could gainsay. He shrunk from no duty, however painful, in reproof and rebuking every form of vice, or in seeking to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to the work of God; and the simple eloquence of one of his parishioners, “It will be a bad job for us poor folk if Mr Fisher be taken from us”, will sufficiently describe the rest. He had many difficulties to contend with, and much opposition to encounter, and there is little doubt that these often preyed over much upon a temperament naturally nervous and anxious to a fault; but still he kept the even tenor of his way; and, cheered and comforted and aly seconded by a discreet and affectionate wife, he seemed to be rapidly extending a permanent influence, and acquiring a salutary ascendancy over the hearts and intellects of his people, when it pleased God mysteriously to translate him to a yet higher office in the church and assembly of the firstborn which are written in heaven. We doubt not that in order to satisfy some secret condition of the unseen worlds he is wisely and necessarily withdrawn from us. As our poet laureate had finely sung of our great commander:

“There must be other nobler work to do,
Than when he fought at Waterloo,
And victor he must ever be”.

But the loss sustained by his family, by his friends, by his parish, by the diocese, by the church, seems at first sight and to our limited apprehensions irreparable. Whoever shall succeed him at Hilmarton, if he hopes to carry out upon the same scale the parochial ministrations he shall inherit, must gird up his loins for the task. He must be an able man at the day school, and enthusiastic man at the night school, an indefatigable visitor from house to house, a plain and honest preacher, an uncompromising enemy of sin, a patient and much enduring friend of sinners, a trust almoner, and a cheerful giver, never weary of well doing. For this was his character as a clergyman whose memoir we are now indicting. And of his social qualities we have something also to say.

Who can ever forget, who has once known him, his open sunny countenance, his genial smile, his playful conversation, his fine appreciation of humour, his enjoyment of innocent fun, his kindness of manner, his humility of soul, his charity of speech! Who that has ever seen him playing with and caressing his children can calculate the loss of such a father? Who that has witnessed the virtues and amenities of his domestic life can fathom the depth of his widow's sorrow?

And to all these attractive qualities he added a very ingenious turn of mind. His leisure hours were much given to mechanical pursuits. He could make for his school children the best kite that ever swept the skies of Wiltshire. He was an excellent carpenter and carver in wood. The beautiful prayer desk and some poppy heads in Bremhill church are the work of his clever hand. The front of the communion table in the little chapel of Highway, and an elaborate font cover in Hilmarton Church, and a binding of graven oak enclosing the old black letter Bible chained to its desk, are several monuments he raised to himself, which we trust will ever be associated with his name.

In such profitable service, and such blameless recreation, was this wise and faithful servant occupied, when in an hour as he thought not his Lord came.

On Thursday Sept 9 he had a few friends to dine with him. He had been nursing a headache in the morning, but was in his usual cheerful spirits at night. The next day he took to the bed from which he never rose again alive. On Thursday Oct 1st they buried him. It was not permitted to his relations to monopolize the payment of the last sad offices to his remains. All the parish, with the squire at their head, formed themselves in two lines along the road from the vicarage to the church, and through that avenue of sable clad mourners, the body, preceded by many of the neighbouring clergy, was borne in solemn triumph to its grave. The service was read by his quondam yoke fellow and most deeply attached friend, the Vicar of Bremhill. Flowers the freshest and most fragrant – for flowers had been his passion in life – were showered thick as tears upon his coffin – the last tribute of respect – the last token of affection to all that was mortal of Francis Fisher. And they that buried him parted silently, with a voice from Heaven singing in their ears - “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: even so saith the spirit, for they rest from their labours”.

The moral is beautifully and appropriately summed up in the first chapter of the Book of Wisdom:-

“He being made perfect in a short time, fulfilled a long time. For his soul pleased the Lord, therefore hastened He to take him away from the wicked. This the people saw and understood not, neither laid them up in their minds, that His grace and mercy is with his saints and that He hath respect unto his chosen. Thus the righteous that is dead shall condemn the ungodly which are living, and youth that is soon perfected the many years and old age of the unrighteous”.

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