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A
S E R M O N
PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,
AT SAINT MARY'S,

NOV. 5th, MDCCLXXXI.

BY WILLIAM CROWE, LL.B.

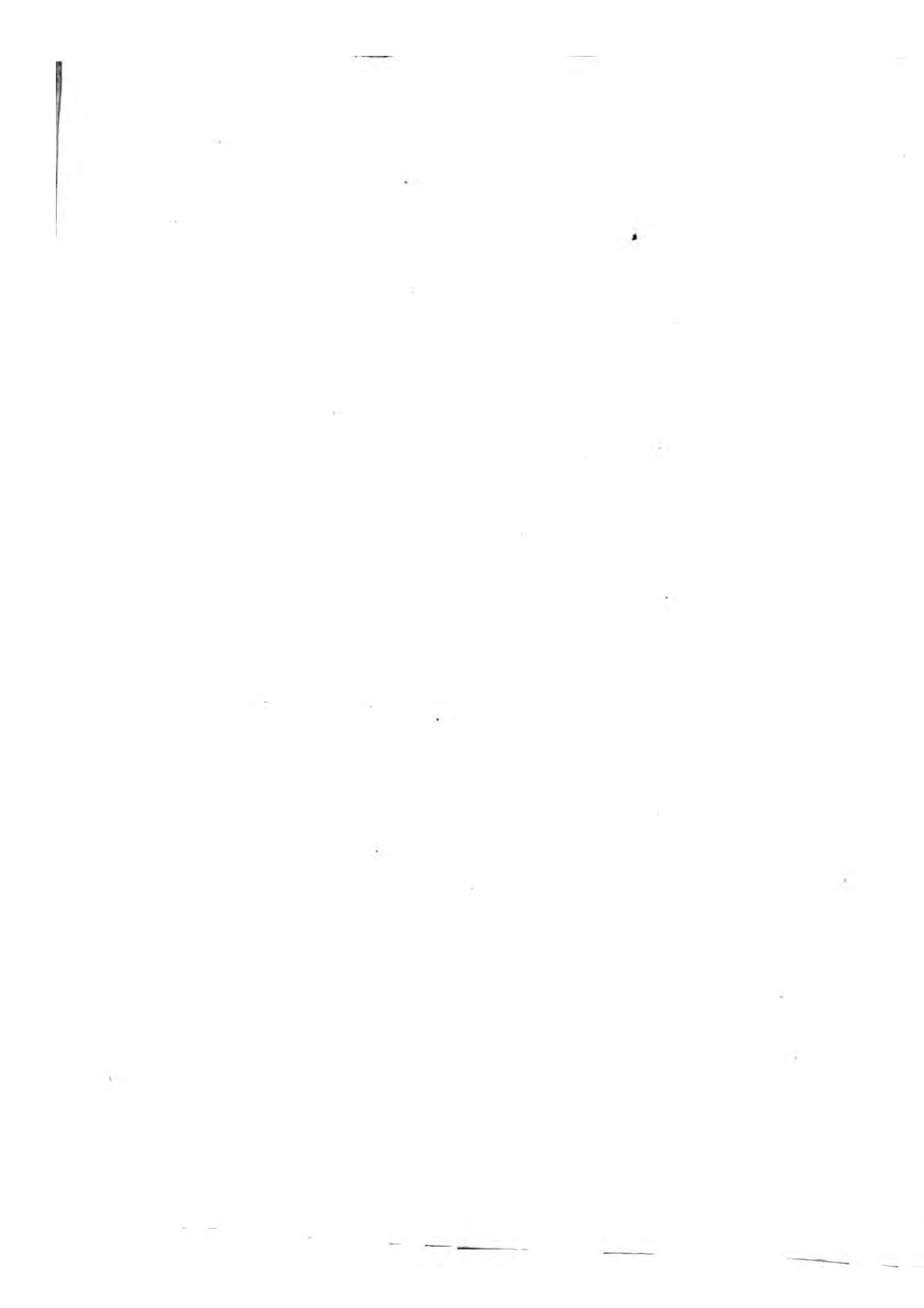
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L O N D O N :

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MDCCLXXXI.



A S E R M O N, &c.

EXOD. XII. Ver. 24, &c.

Ye shall observe this thing for an Ordinance to thee and to thy Sons for ever. And it shall come to pass when ye be come to the Land which the Lord will give you, according as he hath promised, that ye shall keep this Service. And it shall come to pass when your Children shall say unto you, What mean you by this Service? That ye shall say, It is the Service of the Lord's Passover, who passed over the Houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our Houses.

THIS is the institution of that great and solemn festival which they who hold to the Law of Moses still continue to celebrate, and which to us under the Christian dispensation is memorable, inasmuch as it prefigured our deliverance from a bondage worse than Egyptian. For our Almighty Father, agreeably to the nature of the religion he at that time established, did ordain this redemption of his peculiar people, to be a type of the spiritual redemption of all men from the dominion of sin and death.

But the primary and visible design of this ordinance was to perpetuate among the Children of Israel a memorial of

what happened when God brought them out of Egypt: not that they needed such, to keep alive their resentment against those severe oppressors; the forgiveness of injuries was as yet neither inculcated as a duty, nor applauded as a virtue. But to preserve a remembrance of God's wonderful power shewn in their deliverance, to mark his especial protection and care of them, and to awaken in their minds a proper and constant sense of their dependance upon him, and the gratitude due for such signal favours, it was necessary that a law as solemn and lasting as this should be established; it being a melancholy truth, and well confirmed in the history of this singular people, that often the affronts of men are remembered when the goodness of God is forgotten.

Moreover, this institution of an annual festival, the earliest on record, is also the most perfect in those essential circumstances which are requisite to give due force to such an ordinance. It was to commemorate a great and acknowledged benefit, and it was by an authority which had a right to bind the conscience: and thus it stands forth a pattern of what a national festival should be. It must be for an acknowledged benefit; because no man can honestly express a gratitude for that which he does not esteem to be a good: and it must be ordained by an authority that hath a right to bind the conscience, which this Jewish law most undoubtedly was, being from the direction of God himself. But where the divine command is wanting, as there is no authority in one man to bind the conscience of another, this religious

gious service must be left to the dictates of each man's judgment; and therefore general consent alone can hold the place of this authority, to establish a commemoration by a general act of religious worship.

And upon this ground it is that we perform (if we perform duly) the service of to-day, which two signal blessings have made dear to the people of this land, to judge of their value from the general acquiescence of all wise and good men in that thanksgiving which the legislative authority hath recommended. For on this day were We saved (like the Children of Israel) by a religious and a civil deliverance: first, when that remorseless conspiracy which darkly plotted against our Church was prevented and punished; and again, when that lawless power which had begun to hunt with havoc among our civil rights, was resisted and overthrown. It is hard to conceive there can be found that dull and unthankful mind which must not feel and acknowledge these benefits. Nevertheless, if this nation should contain any of so blind and cruel a zeal, as to believe that all means are justifiable for promoting religion, or any of so abject and slavish a spirit, as to think that all the evils which tyranny may inflict are to be endured in a passive obedience—to such (if any such there be) this day brings no just occasion of triumph: for so, they would rejoice in the defeat of that attempt which they cannot disapprove of, and in the success of that resistance which they condemn. Except the heart make thanksgiving here, the sacrifice of the

lips is a vain, if not a wicked oblation. No man ought to join in a religious service which he cannot conscientiously discharge: and so sacred is the right of private judgment in this matter, as pertaining to the personal concern between a man and his Maker, that no human authority whatever can controul it; nor command any man what he shall call good and what evil, to pray that God would grant him one, or avert the other.

But where the mind is convinced, and a man with the testimony of a good conscience can keep the service, it is not only allowable and fit, but indispensably his duty; both in reverence to the voice of national wisdom appointing it, and in acknowledgment of that Providence by which all things are governed: and hence arises the obligation to observe a religious ordinance; the end of which ordinance should be, to remind us of what we receive at the hands of God, rather than to commemorate what we have received from the hands of men; and therefore may exist long after the occasion that gave rise to it. Thus the observance of the Passover was to continue among the Jews after all their connection with Egypt had ceased; when time must have fully repaired the injuries they had sustained, and when all resentment must be obliterated. But the duty of praise and thanksgiving to God was a duty of perpetual obligation, and therefore made an act of religion for all their succeeding generations.

In like manner the commemoration of this day may well consist with perfect charity towards the Roman Catholics, and with some relaxation of those penalties by which their religion has been restrained. And if the lenient temper and liberal spirit of the age should farther operate in favour of a sect from whom so little is to be apprehended, what man of humanity would not rejoice? When dangers are gone by, can it be unfit to remove the severities that were set as a guard against them? However expedient the penal laws originally were, to protect an unsettled Reformation, or to prevent an evil that threatened the state; yet these ends being obtained, are they longer necessary? If they are not necessary they are unjust. The benevolence of our Religion and the generosity of our Country plead loudly for those fellow-subjects who have so many years endured their hard lot in patience and silence: cut off from the dearest rights of citizens, and living as aliens in their native land, only for retaining the religion of their fathers, and the old inhabitants of that land before them.

But if it be imagined that in good Policy the Catholics ought still to be held in a rigorous subjection, it must be either on account of their numbers, or their disposition, or the influence and practise of that Church with whom they hold communion. For their numbers—when that idle report of their increase some few years since induced the state to take an account of them, it appeared how inconsiderable they were, and how causeless was the alarm at that time.

Of their disposition, let their peaceable and loyal behaviour bear witness; but especially that dutiful and affectionate Address which they presented to the Throne, at a season when duty and affection were most welcome. A numerous and formidable armament appeared on our coasts, and the boasted strength of our navy shrunk from before it. We then began to perceive that even in our own dwellings we were not invulnerable, and the island was overcast with the terrors of an invasion. In that gloom of doubtfulness and danger, came forth the Roman Catholics, and by this Address gave proof of a resolution to stand or fall with their country. It was an offer of their fortunes and lives in its defence: it was a declaration of hostility against those to whom they were supposed to wish well; it therefore must have made them the peculiar objects of resentment to the invaders that then threatened us. It shewed that they had no foreign views or connections, but cast themselves into the hands of their own Government; and from that only sought their protection, and expected their relief. I trust that neither their sufferings nor their merit will be forgotten

For the power of the Roman Church, it is no longer an object of dread; that haughty Church described heretofore as ‘ a mint of woful factions and combustions, of treasonable conspiracies, of barbarous massacres, of horrid assassinations, of intestine rebellions, of foreign invasions, of savage tortures and butcheries, of holy leagues and pious
frauds

‘ frauds through Christendon’*—but her enchantments no longer prevail against reason and learning; and the kingdom is departed from her. She is fallen, unaided, for her power was pernicious, and unpitied, for in her greatness she felt no pity. Her own children have set themselves against her; and they whom she fostered in her tyranny have combined to spoil and insult her. She is abandoned to solitude and decay. She, whose word troubled the inhabitants of the earth, and who made the kings thereof her footstool, is now left without strength to resist, or reverence to awe, the weakest opposer; and only by the moderation, or the jealousy of her neighbours, is preserved from utter destruction.

Yet no sooner was a small relief granted to this suffering sect, whom both humanity and policy forbade us to persecute, than such a discontent and clamour was excited, as in their effects to threaten the very being of the State. A set of men, without the pretence of a grievance or the shadow of a danger, tumultuously importuned the Legislature to violate the faith, and sacrifice the dignity of its act to their unreasonable apprehensions; and in the obstinacy of their pursuit opened a way to the most dreadful and unexampled enormities. The Capital of the Protestant world was abandoned to rapine and flames; the Laws were without force; the Magistracy astonished; and this free Country looked then for safety and protection to a Power whom it had always re-

* Barrow's Works. Vol. I. p. 159.

garded with jealousy. Such were the consequences of that unhappy zeal, which after all was perhaps as much without knowledge, as it certainly was without discretion and without charity.

For if civil security be not the measure of religious restraint, to what other shall it be referred? Can the bounds of toleration be marked in the blindness of party; or shall our penal Code be dictated by the merciless policy of fear? There might be some pretence for the experiment, if by these means error could be rooted out, and true religion and peace could be planted in its stead. But Law, which speaketh the language of command and threatenng, hath no means of making profelytes to Truth, which is taught only by reason and persuasion.

It is indeed the duty of a State to guard itself against all probable dangers: but that ought to be done only by laws that are necessary, enforced by sanctions strictly proportioned to the offence and the peril. When the penalty exceeds that degree, or when it is designed to supply the duty of watchfulness in the Magistrate, that law is tyrannical. Happily the temper of the present time partakes more of indulgent liberality than of severe caution; and perhaps (the duties of religion and the rights of society being well understood, and our mutual forbearance and charity enlarged) that desirable period may arrive, when we shall all serve God, if not in

the unity of spirit, which is most perfect, yet in the bond of peace, which best becomes the disciples of Christ.

The true end of civil society is the preservation of the civil rights of its members ; and it is incumbent on the Magistrate, to whom the protection of those rights is entrusted, to exert his utmost vigilance, prudence, and fortitude in their defence : and he being bound, by the very nature and reason of his office, to make the welfare of the society the ultimate object of his care ; it is no less his duty to prevent the dangers he foresees, than to remedy the evils he cannot prevent : yet must he not interfere by discretionary acts of power, for the Magistrate's discretion may be made a scourge for the people ; nor yet in matters purely religious, for with such he has not, of right, any concern whatever.

But if the Magistrate shall refuse to fulfil that great purpose of his institution (the protection of the people), and much more, if he shall betray the trust reposed in him, and become himself a danger to the state, in such circumstances the community is at liberty to act for itself ; and is justified, provided the members in their conscience believe, that less damage will follow from so doing, than from submitting to the evil.

It was this manner of acting (or in other words, the duty of self-preservation) that brought on the second great deliverance of this day ; when the people, having received

many provocations from the intrusion of papal superstitions, and sustained many injuries from the insolence of arbitrary power, arose to vindicate their truly indefeasible rights. And because they saw that their grievances had sprung as much from the assumed authority of the Prince as from his bigotry, they judged it expedient to secure themselves with equal precaution against both. They would no longer receive from his precarious bounty, that which they claimed and demanded as their right; nor would they allow the Head of their own Church to hold religious principles which made him the subject of another. The throne was placed on the firm basis of a Protestant religion and a bounded prerogative: and thus was completed for us that noble structure of freedom which the Revolution established. It was planned in wisdom, and founded in justice; and it was erected on the ruins of a royal house—a glorious and awful monument, to tell mankind—**THERE IS NO GREATNESS OR DOMINION ON EARTH SO SACRED, BUT IT MUST FALL BEFORE THE LIBERTIES OF THE PEOPLE.**

To us, who with grateful commemoration solemnize this day, it remains that we offer up the duty of praise and thanksgiving to God for these signal and repeated instances of his protection. And so just a claim has this day to every sentiment and expression of our joy, that it were devoutly to be wished there was no room for unwelcome reflections, and that every unquiet thought could be banished from it. But though it be our duty to rejoice in the day of prosperity, in

the day of adversity we are bid to consider; and God hath so set the one against the other before the people of this nation, that if we will rejoice in this day, we must rejoice with fear. For at what time were we so exposed to the dangers and calamities of war from the united attempts of so many and so powerful enemies? Or when did our unhappy divisions, and our other manifold sins and provocations, more conspire to bring down His judgments upon us? Awakened from the dreams of conquest, we behold the most thriving branch of our empire engrafted on the power of our natural foe, and defend with difficulty our remaining possessions. It is a war of apprehension and dismay; and even now is every one listening in the anxiety of fear for the news that the next hour may bring him of some heavy calamity. It will come; it will come quickly; and it will be but the beginning of sorrows.

And to what can we attribute this alarming situation, but to the just visitation of God for our offences? It is therefore every man's first duty to examine himself, and so to regulate his future life, that his guilt may not add more to the too heavy burden of this land. But this is not the whole matter: the causes of national prosperity and distress are often to be found (where they are naturally to be sought for) in national practices and principles. And surely that state cannot but be in a perilous condition, where, on one hand, Corruption maintains a wide and increasing influence, acknowledged but uncontrouled, and prodigal beyond example: on

the other, a people indulge themselves in idle and luxurious dissipation; so to avoid reflections too serious and too distressful, because they care not, or despair of the commonwealth. Yet these, and other practises as bad as these, are but as diseases which a sound constitution may throw off, and again recover its pristine health. Much worse is the case when national principles are vitiated; when (for instance) it is asserted with a wicked boldness that corruption is useful and necessary to the Government; or, when those plain and sacred doctrines of civil liberty, which no sophistry can perplex, and no strength of argument confute, are slandered with the injurious name of empty speculations.—These are dreadful and fatal tokens; and unless some antidote can subdue their malignity, the constitution in which they are found will soon decline into that state of agony and despair, when its evils shall be both intolerable and incurable.

Let us then turn to that Being for deliverance who hath so often interposed to save us; and implore him to give us that due sense of all his mercies, that hereafter we may shew forth his praise, not only with our lips but in our lives, that iniquity may not be our ruin. Let us look up to him for protection from the impending danger, and address ourselves to his goodness in this hour of our distress. If in justice and necessity we have drawn the sword, do thou, O God, go forth with our hosts. But if for our manifold sins it is thy pleasure to chastise us in this fearful war; if thou wilt destroy our greatness, and this renowned land must be humbled

bled before its enemies ; we beseech thee to teach us that true affection and dependance on thee, which must be our refuge in the time of our abasement ; and grant us grace to receive whatever thy secret wisdom hath appointed for us, with a contented mind, and a chearful resignation to thy will ; humbly hoping, that even in thy wrath thou wilt remember mercy ; and knowing assuredly, that whether in prosperity or afflictions, we still are instruments in thy hand, O Father Almighty, to promote thy gracious designs for the general good of thy creation.

T H E E N D.