

# The Small Number of the Elect

by Jean-Baptiste Massillon (1663-1742)

Introduction by Edward Peach<sup>1</sup>

IT IS A SUBJECT of general astonishment and regret that the English-speaking Catholic has never been presented with a translation of the sermons of Massillon. The applause with which they were received on the Continent is the most unequivocal proof of their merit. His sermons for Lent were preached with unparalleled and undiminished success twenty years successively before a most voluptuous court and before one of the most polished audiences in the Christian world; and the whole of his works have been, from the time of their publication, the delight and admiration of the pious and well informed in every country where the French language is understood. This is the greatest commendation which can be adduced in favour of works of this kind. An inferior preacher may sometimes attract attention and, unless his merit is eclipsed by the lustre of superior genius, may maintain his reputation for a time and receive flattering applause of the public; but the power of extorting the admiration and riveting the attention of the most voluptuous, the most irreligious, the most fickle votaries of pleasure is a talent possessed by a few; and to be held up as a model of spiritual eloquence, even after death, by men of all nations and religions is an honour which is attained only by extraordinary merit. This distinguished pre-eminence was due to the talents of Massillon, and is acknowledged as candidly by the learned Protestant as by the Catholic.

Never, perhaps, was there a Christian orator who possessed a more perfect knowledge of the heart of man. He insinuates himself into its inmost

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<sup>1</sup> This introduction to Massillon's sermon is by its translator, Rev. Edward Peach: Birmingham, 1807. The text of the sermon itself will be posted next week.

Edward Peach was born in 1771 in Gloucestershire (England) and attended Douay College in France from 1791. On 4 August 1793, during the French revolution, he proceeded with nine other refugees to Old Green Hall, where he was ordained a priest on 15 August 1796. His first mission was to Husbands Bosworth in Leicestershire; then in September 1806 he was appointed to establish a mission in Birmingham. Three years later he built Saint Chad's chapel, where he remained for nearly thirty years. He died on 8 September 1839. His many translations of works from the French include Abbé Progart's *The Virtuous Scholar* (1801), Abbé Carron's *Pious Biography* (1804), Fénelon's *Letters to the Bishop of Arras*, as well as several other works by Jean-Baptiste Massillon.

recesses: he explores and lays open every avenue to public inspection. He delineates the affections, describes the first causes of the corruption, and displays the inward workings of the mind with such precision and clearness that every individual who has departed from the ways of virtue beholds as exact a delineation of his own features as if the picture had been designed for him alone.

In the arrangement of his discourses Massillon attends more to sentiments than words. He prepares his audience for hearing plain truths by a short exposition of his subject; and, instead of demonstrating the existence of the law or the necessity of implicitly submitting to its conjunctions, of which he supposes that his auditory is already convinced, he immediately proceeds to combat the pretexts which the violators of it allege in justification of their conduct.

The style of Massillon is animated, chaste, and flowing; and, although dignified and worthy of the Christian pulpit, it is simple and adapted to the understanding of the unlearned. The liveliness of his imagination adorns it sufficiently to please the man of taste and education, but he rejects those decorations which contribute only to throw a veil over the subject and to raise it above the comprehension of the multitude. He studies not to please the ear, but to convey instruction and sublime conceptions, which elevate the soul and fix her attention immovably on the important truths which he announces.

Every sentiment is illustrated and enforced by the authority of the Scriptures. The similitudes and the quotations which he adduces from the inspired writings are never sought after; they always rise from the subject and immediately strike, sometimes by the novelty and always by the justness of their application.

An orator of such distinguished talents, eloquence, and piety could not fail of success. It is, therefore, unnecessary to say that his audience was always absorbed in attention, that the just were comforted, the tepid undeceived, and the wicked confounded. When on Septuagesima Sunday, 1704, he delivered his sermon *On the Small Number of the Elect* before the voluptuous court of Versailles, the powers of his eloquence were manifested in the most extraordinary manner. So complete was the imagination of his august assembly affected by his awful description that, at length terrified and struck as it were by an electric shock, they started involuntarily from their seats and, by their loud and continued murmurs of astonishment and applause, obliged him for a time to desist; he however was not abashed, but concluded his discourse in the most pathetic and masterly manner. A more wonderful instance of the effects of oratory perhaps is not recorded in

history. The fruits which always accompanied his ministry were great and lasting. After the conclusion of a discourse, the people did not form themselves into parties in order to canvass its merits and defects, but all retired in silence, with pensive looks, downcast eyes, and sorrowful countenances. They thought not of the preacher; their attention was immovably fixed on the great and sublime truths which he had delivered. These silent commendations, if they may be so called, are more expressive merits of an orator than any public

applause. The one only flatters the speaker and assures him that he has pleased his auditory; the other imparts the sweetest consolation to his mind and assures him that he has touched the heart. "I have heard many distinguished orators," said Louis XIV, addressing himself to Massillon when he preached his first Advent before the court in the year 1702, "I have heard many distinguished orators in my chapel, who gave me very great satisfaction; but when I hear you, I am dissatisfied with myself."

Respecting the doctrine of Massillon, I fear that its severity will be criticized and reproved, for he preaches the Gospel of its genuine purity. Like another Jeremiah and Ezekiel he announces the precepts of the Lord without fear, and without disguise. He knows that the laws of the Gospel are unalterable and that every letter must be fulfilled in the last age of Christianity as well as in the first. He refuses to make any composition with the tepid and slothful degeneracy of the times because, in the first place, he had received no authority for that purpose and secondly because the mercies of the Lord were extended to their utmost limits when he consented to receive us into favour by the fulfilment of the conditions contained in the Scriptures. He is therefore severe: but he is severe because the Gospel is severe, because his duty compelled him to be severe.

In the exercise, however, of his painful ministry he is actuated by that charity which seeks not only the instruction, but also the salvation of men. He displays the most rigid precepts of the Gospel in the most engaging colours, and he exposes the follies and pleasures of the world in a light that

*Louis XIV*



is calculated to create aversion and disgust. He exhibits the just man adorned with honour and glory, and happy in the sweet enjoyments of peace and innocence; and he represents the sinner covered with ignominy and shame, tortured with the never-dying worm of anxiety and remorse. Under his pencil the character of the just man assumes a new and surprising lustre. He comes forth in all his native greatness, the champion of truth and justice, the brave and valiant soldier of Jesus Christ, patiently enduring the fatigues of the Christian warfare, encountering with joy every obstacle that opposes him, and finally subduing all the enemies of his soul—the world, the flesh and the Devil. The sinner, on the other hand, appears in the attitude and dress of a listless, ignominious coward whose only delight is sensual pleasure, whose courage fails at the first call to arms, and who shrinks with terror when he is summoned to quit the bed of ease and encounter the enemies of his salvation. The features of the true Christian appear dignified and composed, and the enjoyments which give pleasure to his soul rational, noble, and sublime; the features of the sinner, on the other hand, appear relaxed by luxury, distorted by solicitude and fear and by the pleasures which excite the longings of his ignoble soul: disgusting, momentary, unworthy of a rational being, and productive of misery both in this world and the next. In this manner the pious and eloquent Massillon softens and decks with charms the severities of God's law. He compels sinners to acknowledge the folly and madness of a sinful life; he instills into their minds a hatred and disgust of the cruel tyrant under whose despotism they have long languished; he convinces them that sin is the fatal enemy of their peace, and he describes in such plain and energetic terms their blindness, ingratitude, and misery that they are in a manner constrained to throw themselves into the arms of piety as the only means of asserting the dignity of their nature and of acquiring peace and happiness, here as well as hereafter. ❧