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SERMON LXXXIX.  
GOD'S GLORIES IN INFANTS SET FORTH IN THE HOLY  
INNOCENTS.

REV. xiv. 4.

"These are they which follow the Lamb, whithersoever He goeth: these were redeemed from among men, being the first-fruits unto GOD, and unto the Lamb."

ALL our festivals are in some way in honour of our LORD; yea, every thing which the Church hath, or does, or is, is in some way in honour of HIM, her LORD; for HE is her Husband, her Maker, her light, her life; apart from HIM she were nothing; in HIM she hath her being, the breath of her life; how then should she be thought of separate from HIM, or how should she seek to be any thing of herself, out of HIM? Her holiness she hath from HIM; her Sacraments have their efficacy from HIM; she baptizeth not in her own Name, but in His; it is His Holy Supper to which she invites; when she catechizes, it is to bring children to HIM; her Creeds are confessions of the Glory of GOD, the FATHER, the SON, and the HOLY GHOST; her priests are set to prepare a people for HIM, commemorate and plead His Sacrifice; her fruit-bearing members, in all they do, are ministering to HIM; relieving, visiting, clothing, comforting HIM in His poor, sick, naked, afflicted members, or furnishing the means whereby His scattered sheep may be gathered into His fold; all, priests and people, Apostles, Prophets, Patriarchs, Martyrs, Confessors, form but one Holy, Universal Church in earth or in Paradise, whose one office amid all their several trials, duties, sufferings, victories, be they the highest in man's sight or the lowest—is to praise HIM: when she fasts, it is in memory of His sufferings, to be like HIM, in what degree she may, in bodily affliction, and by that affliction, in mind also to become more like HIM; when she watches, as of late, it is for HIM and His Coming; when she keeps festival, it is reverently to share His triumph or to thank HIM. She joys in His Birth at this time with exceeding joy, because then, though there was deep humiliation, there was no suffering. She consecrates the first, day of the year with the thought of HIM, His circumcision, and obedience to the law for man; she is amazed at the condescension of His Baptism, is thankful for His manifestation to us Gentiles, rises with His Resurrection, follows HIM when, ascending, awaits and celebrates His gifts at Pentecost, and so, on the festival of the Holy Trinity, enters already on the prelude of her endless song, praise to the holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, FATHER, SON, and HOLY GHOST.

Yet not only in those Festivals, which relate to the holy actions or deeds of mercy, or glory of her incarnate LORD, but in all, HE is the object of her thoughts and praise. It is the province of faith to discover HIM in every thing; His afflictions amid so much which

is often loathsome and revolting to our bodily sense, in human suffering; His outcast and destitute state, (when HE had not where to lay His sacred Head) amid the undignified and degraded exterior of human wretchedness; His friend in Lazarus; His medicinal hand in our afflictions; His presence in His Holy place, where nothing is present to our eyes, but” two or three gathered together in His Name;” His Body and Blood, where to touch and taste there are only the creatures which HE formed; so also His might in human weakness, His truth in human frailty, His holiness imparted to them whom HE has made His. The truth of Evangelists, the labours of Apostles, the death of Martyrs, was not theirs but His; His SPIRIT spoke in the Evangelists, and made them faithful and obedient to His Words: “I laboured more abundantly than they all,” says St. Paul, “yet not I but the grace of GOD which was in me;” “These are they,” it is said of the martyrs, “which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb;” and hence was martyrdom ever believed to have a baptismal efficacy, in effacing every spot of sin, because the blood shed for CHRIST was by HIM joined with His own Blood, and so the defiled robes were again “made white in the Blood of the Lamb.” “We celebrate,” it was said of old time truly, “not the martyrs, but the GOD of the Martyrs:” and as on the one hand our Church celebrates even thus, those only who were nearest the Person of their and our LORD,—His Evangelists, His Martyrs, His Apostles, those who came so near to the Sun of Righteousness, that they shine most plainly only in His light; so, on the other, in her several collects, she has been guided to lead the mind through them to HIM. It is as *His* Holy Apostles, His Evangelists, His servants,<sup>1</sup> as “obeying” HIM, “following” HIM, “receiving grace from” HIM, “endued by HIM with singular gifts of the HOLY GHOST,” that our Church sets them forth as patterns to us, teaches us to thank GOD for them, to praise HIM in them, to pray to HIM that we may be like them.

And this, as on other days, so is it especially visible on this, the Feast of the Holy Innocents; on other Holy days the Church thanks GOD for those who have fought the good fight, have “rested from their labours, and their works do follow them;” this day she praises GOD, for those who had no works, were withdrawn before “the burthen and heat of the day,” and the perils of that fight, and yet are “made equal to them who had borne “it, nay, “were the first-fruits unto GOD and unto the Lamb,” the first and nearest of His train. And thus would she teach “him that glorieth, to glory in the LORD,” Who anticipated His Passion to make them partakers of it; gave them the works, which by reason of their age they could not perform; and making martyrdom His choicest gift,—the very sharing of His Cup, the being baptized with His Baptism,—bestowed it first on these Innocents, bestowed it freely on all, who were nearest the spot and the time of His Birth, bestowed it on those, who while yet in the flesh knew not what HE bestowed upon them, or HIM Who bestowed it, or themselves who received it—like herein, many ways, to us, who understand so little the mysterious dignity conferred upon our nature, so little of the true nature of His gifts, or of HIM Who giveth them; we “see yet but through a

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<sup>1</sup> Collect for John the Baptist’s day.

glass darkly;" would that it may one day be "face to face!" These, the earliest in His noble army of Martyrs, HE crowned without their deserts, that so we might the more feel, that to those who followed in that glorious train HE gave the deserts which in them HE crowned. An especial instructiveness then of this day's Festival consists in its very mysteriousness, the greatness of the gift, the littleness and unconsciousness of those to whom it was given. For even when men have learnt to renounce, as they hope, their own merits and their own works, and would be nothing of themselves, but for all depend upon CHRIST, still self in the one or other subtle way creeps in; yea, often the more creeps in, because people think they have, once for all, renounced self, and rely rather on the good profession which they have made and make, than on earnest continued subdual of self. We think much of our own clear faith, our knowledge of Gospel truth, our confession and our reliance upon our Redeemer, even where we think little of our own tarnished works, and our unprofitable services; and we are apt, at the same time, to think little of infantine faith, of the purity of Infant-Baptism, of the blessedness of un-defilement from actual sins, of their confidingness, their speechless trust and thanksgiving, their meek repose, their freshness from their Maker's hands; but thus we do come to think much of what is realized in ourselves, what is in some sense our own, and little of that in which, since there is nothing of man's, there is purely GOD'S gift. And so GOD, Who in so many ways employs the weak things of the world to confound the mighty, has set an especial token of His favour upon young children. To parents HE gives them as His especial "gift and heritage;" throughout the Old Testament HE taught the pious women to long for them; to those without them, or who for His sake forewent them, HE promises a yet higher gift to replace them, "a place and a name better than of sons and daughters;" when fatherless, HE is their Father; of their Angels only are we told, that they have a special nearness to the presence of the FATHER; "their angels do always behold the face of My FATHER Which is in heaven; "in prophecy, their weak voices—"the mouths of babes and sucklings"—are singled out as the means whereby HE, "Whose glory is above the heavens," should "still the enemy and the avenger; "in the fulfilment, it was when "the children cried out in the temple, Hosanna to the Son of David!" that "the chief priests and scribes were sore displeased," because by them His "praise was perfected;" when the Holy David would express complete resignation to the will of GOD, and weanedness from his own will, thoughts, desires, and ways, he is taught to liken himself to *these*; "my soul lieth on me like a weaned child; "a little child our LORD chose as the pattern for His Apostles, the converters of the world; a little child as the emblem of all who should ever enter His kingdom; a little child as His own representative, which,—even *one* such little child—whosoever should receive in His Name received HIM, whosoever caused to offend, it were better that he should die the death of the accursed, die the death of brutes, "a millstone hanged around his neck," and he "drowned in the midst of the sea." These are they whom our LORD gave as His especial charge to His Church, that they should be brought unto HIM; others HE invited to come, if they would become like them, these HE commanded to be brought: "Suffer little children to come unto ME and forbid them not,

for of such is the kingdom of Heaven.” When, in the days of the Gospel, “the wolf should dwell with the lamb, and the leopard should lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the falling together,” such as these, “a little child should lead them; “by such as these should all be turned and lay aside their own nature, and be guided by such as, of themselves, could not guide themselves. It was because the Apostles were such as these, that our LORD offered His solemn thanksgiving; “I thank THEE, FATHER, Lord of heaven and earth, that THOU hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes; “this was the condescending title, by which, so soon as the traitor Judas was gone forth from among them, HE addressed His Apostles who remained; “Little children, yet a little while I am with you” (as the beloved disciple closes his own Epistle of love with the same title, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols”); and of little children, they were the weakest, most helpless, most infantine, to whom HE so soon gave the glories of martyrdom, and made the foremost in that His noble Army of willing and blood-stained warriors.

The mysteriousness and instructiveness of this day’s festival is, that it is the martyrdom of infants.

And, as in other mysteries, its outward appearance is very simple. Taken as outward history, it seems but the savage command of a jealous king, who, to secure the one object of his fears, gathers in one un pitying massacre the infants of a whole district, cuts off the hopes of whole families; mothers weeping for their children, “and would not be comforted, because they were not; “a poor, helpless band of innocents, mown down before they were sprung up, their star of life setting when it had scarce risen. It is a touching tale of woe, such as we can well realise, and grieve with the grief of the mothers of Bethlehem. It must indeed of necessity be more as a history of Providence. It is the history of one madly seeking to destroy HIM, through Whom Alone he could live; one jealous for his petty sovereignty over a tributary people, fearing lest that everlasting Kingdom, which was to embrace the whole earth, and gather into one all the kingdoms of the world, should interfere with his brief narrow rule. It is man fighting against GOD, — and, as so fighting, baffled; making all every way sure, and missing the one object which he would thereby attain; destroying all, not of the age only of HIM he sought, but much above it; not of the place only where HE was born, but “all the coasts thereof;” and, by all this accumulated bloodshedding, staining himself with the blood of every child, except that One, Whom in all he sought and Whom GOD guarded. It is, alas! herein the picture and type of much of human sin, how Satan leads men on after some phantom, plunges them into sin to attain it, guard it, and themselves in it, while GOD’S righteous retribution all the while waits patiently, withholds just the one thing they seek, and when the fitting time comes, folds the entangled web which they had woven, around their own heads. Such is the history in this world; but the book of the Revelations (as interpreted by the Church) lifts the veil which hides from us the other world, and exhibits to us the bright band of these slaughtered, (and, as we now know, martyred) infants, “following the Lamb whithersoever He goeth, as the first-fruits unto GOD and unto the Lamb.” Great then in

GOD'S sight is what is slight in man's. On earth, "Rachel weeping for her children and would not be comforted, because they were not; "from heaven the voice saying, "Refrain thy voice from weeping and thine eyes from tears;—there is hope in thine end, saith the LORD." On earth, slaughtered babes; in heaven, an army of Martyrs; on earth, the objects of pity and of parents' grief; in heaven, welcomed by the heavenly hosts, as "the first-fruits" of man's redeemed race; on earth, the mangled forms of speechless infants; in heaven, the foremost of that band, which had learned the new song and sang it before the THRONE; on earth, as we deem, knowing nothing; in Heaven, knowing all which is worth knowing, knowing that new song which none but those like them can learn, awaiting for a while the Coming of their redeeming LORD, and then for ever "following HIM whithersoever HE goeth."

Great mystery of redeeming love! full of comfort for us and for our children; amid the losses of our little ones, their mysterious sufferings; or to ourselves amid our own shortcomings. Things are not, then, what they seem: those who, in the outset of their years, dropped out of sight, need not have been losers, because, perhaps to chasten us, they were removed; GOD needs not years, or our visible trials, to prove all who are His; HE needeth not to expose to the fiery trial of this life all whom HE perfecteth; HE provideth for some in this manner, for others in that manner: in the weakness of some HE manifesteth here His own strength; the weakness of others HE accepts and perfecteth untried. "In His house are many mansions;" some HE leaveth for a while to our frail care; yet neither (as we may hope) is the lot of those less bright, whom HE taketh at once out of this world, and giveth, sparkling with the sanctifying dew of their Baptism, into the immediate care of their angels. Happy those whom HE traineth here as "young plants in the courts of His house;" yet happy those too whom HE transplanteth ere yet any decay of sin have tainted them. For the sacrifice which HE accepted this day, casts a mysterious light around the rest of that pure happy band, of which the first-fruits were so hallowed. They were the objects of His tenderest ears: the shepherds "returned glorifying and praising God," "to make known the saying which had been told them concerning this child;" the kings of the East worshipped, offered their gifts, and departed home on the way GOD appointed them: but these lingered not here; they were at once perfected; they were the heralds of His mercy, not to those on earth but to the heavenly hosts. Scarcely had our LORD appeared upon earth, but, so large were the overflowings of His goodness, that they could not be restrained. His new-born mercies reached to all, so far like HIMSELF, new-born; not one was lost; all fell under the shadow of His Cross; all tasted it for one moment of bitterness; and then all, through its imparted virtue, were lifted at once, bedewed with His holy Blood, from earth to paradise, speechless witnesses to the blessedness of His Cross, the privilege of being nigh to HIM, the unspeakable greatness of being any how involved in His sufferings. "They," says an ancient bishop,<sup>2</sup> "could die for HIM, who could not as yet confess HIM. Thus CHRIST, that no period might be destitute of

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<sup>2</sup> S. Leo, Serm. 32. in Epiph. iii. c. 3. 3 1, c.

miracles, before HE used His speech, in silence exercised the power of the Word, and as although HE already spake, ‘Suffer little children to come unto ME,’ HE called forth infants by a new glory, and from His own commencing life, HE consecrated the first-fruits of infancy,—those whom the ungodly king removed from the earth, CHRIST enrolled in the heavens; and to those for whom HE had not yet paid the redemption of His Blood, HE gave already the glory of martyrdom.”

And are we, then, to look upon this as so entirely an insulated case, that we must gaze on it, and wonder, and gain no comfort? Rather is it not a pledge of His mercy to all our infants, whom HE allows to be brought near unto HIM? Is it not an encouragement the more to bring them to HIM, a proof the rather that HE does accept and HIMSELF baptize our infants, teaching us, as the same bishop says,<sup>3</sup> “that none of man’s race is incapable of receiving the Divine Sacrament, when that age was found fit for the glory of martyrdom?” HE would teach us by this the more, not to trust our mere senses, but to trust in HIM, Who, being invisible, acteth invisibly. His mysteries cast light the one upon the other, not by explaining them, but by teaching us to receive them unexplained. If these poor mangled forms of speechless clay were, indeed, the first chosen witnesses of His mercy, His martyrs, why should it seem a strange thing to say (which the Church has ever believed)”, that all our baptized infants should thereby become His members? If our Lord, when HE condescended to be an infant like them, did thereby extend such privilege to them, how not much more now to such as them, now that HE has resumed His throne, and hath “all power given HIM in heaven and in earth?” If such were the first-fruits of His incarnation and humiliation, how much more of His exaltation and glory! No signs of martyrdom were seen on these infants; their crown of glory streamed not down on their pale earthly forms; to the world’s eye they were but mangled corpses; and so what matters it, though, when we received back our infants, we saw them in nothing changed? yet was not less that mightiest change wrought, whereby they too were translated from earth to the kingdom of heaven, made members of their LORD, and in HIM children of GOD, heirs of heaven. And since they are such, henceforth we may readily trust GOD with every thing of theirs besides, their sickness or their health, their ease or their sufferings, their lives or their death, since how should HE not have “freely given all things “to those whom HE has made members of His SON? Yea, if we be faithful, we may look up with comfort even amid their sins, assured, that the secret leaven of His SPIRIT is hidden within them, and that though it as yet imperfectly discover itself, as being hidden, yet, if our prayers and toil be not wanting, it will, unperceived, quicken the whole lump of our mortality, until the whole body and soul be leavened. This, then, is one great lesson of the festival, the great dignity of children. We are met to celebrate how little ones, like our own, were called upon, in a way not vouchsafed to us, to “glorify GOD by their deaths;” and in the dignity so conferred upon them, we should see the great value and worth of those entrusted to us. In them our LORD ennobled the whole age of childhood, as HE

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<sup>3</sup> l. c.

sanctified it by HIMSELF taking it upon HIM. We dare not, then, look upon them as what they seem; we may not dare to make them (as the blind world often makes them) playthings in their first years, playmates in the next, of which, soon after, it often wearies. Infancy and childhood are sacred things. They are born candidates for life everlasting; when reborn in baptism, they are members of HIM, Who filleth heaven and earth. This we should impress upon ourselves in all our treatment of them: they have been re-born to live for ever; we may not treat them lightly; not deceive them, though it seem to us for their good; not indulge them foolishly, though it cost us trouble; but must bear in mind—as we would avoid His woe on those “who cause any of these little ones to offend”—in all we do in their presence, toward them, with regard to them, that amid all their weakness, ignorance, helplessness, simplicity, they are not only the bodies which we see, and the souls which we believe, but spirits also from the Father of spirits, which are to be presented one day before the Presence of His glory; and woe he to us, if through our fault they are not “presented blameless.” They are temples of the HOLY GHOST, and woe is us if, through our negligence, they are denied. They are the special treasure of the Church. Of old time GOD pleaded with His impatient prophet, “Should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left?” The infants and children of Nineveh, who had no share in that “wickedness,” which “came up before GOD,” for a while stayed His hand, and caused HIM to give them time for, and a prophet of, repentance. And it may be, while we are thinking much of our petty contributions for His service, our regular attendance on the worship of the LORD’S day (while these holy days, and our weekly days of humiliation, and our daily service, are so sadly neglected), it may be, that GOD’S wrath is suspended from us, through the infants of our Church; that our six-score thousand, who cannot discern between their right hand and their left, have no senses for the things of this world, and so are the more undefiled with this world,—in our eyes, often trifling, in His, of great price, as His redeemed, members of His SON,—are the mute witnesses, who plead by their innocence and baptismal purity, that the wrath of GOD, due to our many and increasing provocations, fall not upon our Church and nation. They are not what they seem; their very words have meanings often far greater than they think: for they are the temples of God; we know but little what passes within them; “their FATHER Who seeth in secret, HIMSELF shall reward them openly.” But who knows whether, in their simple artless devotion, there be not a depth of piety (the deeper, because unconscious) which may put to shame the broken and distracted desires of many of elder years? Their victories are won through the same Cross; their self-denials are the bearing of the same Cross: it is too likely, that they bear it more simply, more faithfully, and so more acceptably. Who knows but that, in bearing their simple testimony to truth (as they often do), there may not be often unconscious confessors among them, as on this day, unconscious martyrs? And, therefore, the greater woe, and the more miserable is it for any nation, that their simplicity is destroyed or corrupted; that in the educated ranks the sacred period of childhood is broken in upon, not to make them prematurely Christian

men and women,—for, Christian warriors, saints, intercessors, “the salt” in their measure “of the earth,” “lights in the world,” and witnesses to CHRIST, they may from a very early age be,—but to give them a taste for the follies and vanities of the world, which were renounced in their name, and which their own unbiassed simplicity would reject; that in the lower ranks they are abandoned again to the devouring lion, out of whose paw they had been rescued, because we, who might readily furnish the means, will not abandon our luxury in order to rescue them, but let the lambs of their LORD’S flock wander out of the fold into which HE had brought them, because we feel not their value or its blessedness.

This day is especially a festival of children, as well as, in one way, that great festival of the Nativity of our LORD with which it is so closely joined, and from which, and from Whom, it borrows its lustre. On that day “unto us a child was born, unto us a son was given,” and being born a child, sanctified for ever the age of childhood. On this we celebrate the glories which HE imparted to children. And so a special duty which the thoughts of this day involve is, wherever we meet with them, to be heedful of children, recollecting whose image they bear, reverence them as GOD’S unspotted workmanship, at least speak nothing thoughtlessly to them or before them;—even a heathen moralist could say, “to childhood is due the deepest reverence;”—if we have the gift, benefit those we may; pray with our Church for “young children;” make sacrifices to keep any we can of the poorer within our LORD’S fold; consider it a privilege and high honour, ourselves to receive little children in His Name, and teach them ourselves if we may; take pains with them, bearing with their waywardness as but a slight image of our own; cherishing what is good in them as their SAVIOUR’S gift, and an earnest of their oneness with HIM, treating them with an anxious and awful reverence, as in them, receiving HIMSELF: ye, HE saith, “receive ME.”

Yet are not we of elder age excluded in our own persons even from this their festival. Some, it is to be hoped, in every congregation have yet, in the main, the innocency once bestowed upon them; and if most of us have, too probably, tarnished our baptismal purity, have in different degrees stained the white robe given us, and cannot, for the most part, pretend to the blessedness of those, “who have not defiled their garments, and they shall walk with ME in white, for they are worthy,” but most have lost some portion of their crown; yet to all is something left. If we have not the original purity of our white robes, we may wash their spots with our tears, and HE will cleanse them with His precious Blood. If we cannot be like them in purity and innocence, we may, at least, be like them in humility. “CHRIST,” says a good bishop,<sup>4</sup> “loveth infancy, which first HE took upon HIM in body and mind. CHRIST loveth infancy, the instructress in humility, the rule of innocence, the mould of meekness. CHRIST loveth infancy, by which HE fashioneth the conduct of elders, to which HE brings back the life of the aged, and bows down, after His own pattern, those whom HE raises up on high to His everlasting kingdom.”

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<sup>4</sup> S. Leo, Sermon 37. in Epiph. 7. c. 3.



Seek we, as our Church in the Baptismal service exhorts us, in CHRIST'S Name, to "copy their innocence; "study we their quick forgiveness of injuries, their thoughtlessness of self, their calm reposing confidence, their carelessness about the things of this world, their unambitious contentment, their tender yearning affection; above all, that humility, which our LORD chiefly commended in them, when HE set one of them in the midst which the LORD of glory recommended in His own Person, when HE was found in the fashion of our weak infancy. They care not, though man slight them; they forgive, if man misuses them; they wish not to be preferred one above the other; they are content, if things be denied them; they think not much of themselves, if they have them. Let us unlearn our thoughts of self; seek their guileless affection, and practise it with the self-denial suited to our own age; long for their innocency, if we have it not, yea, look with longing mournful eyes to the period when our own was given us; wish all since undone, undo what we can, which has been amiss; undo all by confessing to GOD that we have done what we ought not, not done what we ought; pray HIM to "wash us thoroughly from our wickedness and cleanse us from our sins." HE, by His acceptance on this day of their unconscious sufferings, has given us an earnest that all suffering is now a precious gift from HIM; that all suffering, borne submissively, whether voluntary or involuntary, undergone for His sake, or to humble ourselves, mental or bodily, the chastisements or (so to say) the natural consequences of our sins, or His chastening and just punishment of them, or the perfecting of His saints, or the messenger sent of Satan to buffet them, all now is blessed as bearing the impress of His Cross, all may bring its healing virtue in it; all have a mysterious efficacy in imparting to us its saving merits; all bring us nigh to HIM Who bore it for us; HE will, as we pray, "look graciously upon our afflictions, pitifully behold the sorrows of our hearts, mercifully forgive our sins;" HE will once again make us "Holy Innocents; "HE will "mortify and kill all vices in us;" give pardon for the past; for the present, innocency of lives; for the future, "constancy of faith even unto death; "He will retrace on our foreheads His FATHER'S Name, which was written on them and the hundred and forty-and-four thousand; and when HE cometh at His judgment-day, HE will own His own seal. He who loveth infants, will recognise in us the lowliness of infants, and love us; HE will exalt us, when we have abased ourselves; comfort those who have mourned; lift up those who have been bowed down, and in that awful hour, seeing His own mark of lowliness upon us, will place us among His sheep. HE who dwelleth in the highest heavens, will then take His full abode in the humble and contrite heart, and we too shall be able to learn, if so be, not *that* new song, which shall be sung by virgin and undefiled souls, yet, at least, HE will "put a new song in our mouths, even thanksgiving unto our GOD;" "Salvation" to our GOD, which sitteth upon the Throne, and to the LAMB." "Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our GOD for ever and ever." *Amen.*

Now to GOD The FATHER, GOD The SON, and GOD The HOLY GHOST, be ascribed, as is most due, all blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, for ever and ever. *Amen.*