A SERMON OF 1879

by J.W. COLENSO, BISHOP OF NATAL

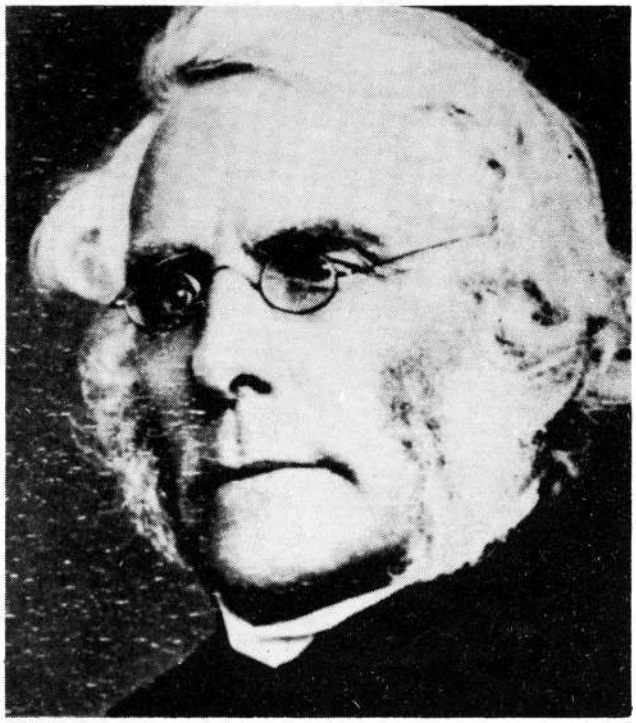
(We reprint below the text of a sermon, entitled 'What doth the Lord require of us?', given by the Right Reverend J. W. Colenso, Bishop of Natal, at a memorial service in St. Peter's cathedral, Pietermaritzburg, in March 1879, two months after the British defeat at Isandlwana – editors.)

This day has been appointed by him who rules in the Queen's name over us 'to be a day set apart for the purposes of prayer and humiliation'; and, as a 'minister of religion,' I have been specially 'invited' by him, with 'others, Her Majesty's loving subjects,' to 'join in observing the same accordingly.'

Most heartily do I respond to the call of our Governor, who has spoken, I am sure, out of the fullness of his own heart. He has done, we believe, his utmost, as a Christian man, a lover of peace, a lover of justice to prevent by wise and friendly measures this dreadful war. And we know also that his hopes have been disappointed, and all his efforts to settle the matters in dispute amicably and righteously, keeping good faith, the faith of Englishmen, even with a savage King and People, have been made in vain. And, I doubt not, he feels deeply himself what he calls upon us to express before God, a sense of those sins which, as a people, we have committed, and to the consciousness of which our late disaster has roused us – a sense of 'our manifold transgressions,' not in our private, but in our public capacity. Truly, the 'great calamity which has befallen us as a Colony' has brought home these sins to us sharply, having filled many homes, both here and in England, with mourning and woe, and spread over us all a gloomy cloud of dread and anxiety, which, though for the moment lightened by the recent news from England, has by no means yet been cleared away.

****

Have we then been 'doing justly' in the past? What colonist doubts that what had led directly to this Zulu war, and thus to the late great disaster, had been the annexation of the Transvaal, by which, as the Boers complain, we came by stealth, 'as a thief in the night,' and deprived them of their rights, and took possession of their land? We all know that while the Secretary of State on April 23, 1877, was saying in his place in the House of Lords that 'as to the supposed threat of annexing the Transvaal, the language of the Special Commissioner had been greatly exeggerated,' it had already been annexed on April 12th, under authority issued months before by himself. No doubt, he had been beguiled by the semblance of great unanimity, of the general desire for annexation, among the Transvaal people; whereas the expression of such a desire, we know, came chiefly from Englishmen, most of them recent arrivals in the land, and not from the great body of old Dutch residents. He had also been, of course, very deeply impressed by the reports which had reached him about the state of the country, the weakness of the government, its empty exchequer, its failure in warlike measures against the natives, and the cruel outrages committed by individual Boers in some of these conflicts. But these outrages were reprobated by their own fellow-countrymen. And the friendly services, advice, and



John William Colenso, Bishop of Natal from 1853 to 1883.

aid, which were at first supposed, and were, in fact, professed to be offered, might have done much to straighten what was crooked, and strengthen what was weak, in the machinery of government, and rectify the other evils complained of. And thus would have been laid at the same time the foundation of a deep and lasting friendship between the two white peoples, which before long would have resulted – if not in a willing Union, yet, in all events a happy Confederation under the British flag, an event to be desired by all when the time is ripe for it. But no! we could not wait; Confederation was desired at once; it was the idol of the hour. It would have been too long to look for it to be brought about, in the ordinary course of things, by those gradual, though sure, processes of change which nature loves. And so the deed was done, and we sent some of our officials to help in the work, and twenty-five of our Mounted Police, a small body indeed in appearance, but quite enough of armed force for the purpose in view with a body of soldiers stationed within call on our northern frontier, and with the armies of England at their back; for we know full well, and the Boer knew, that, if one single shot had been fired in anger at the escort, the violent subjugation, and perhaps desolation, of their land would have surely and speedily followed.

So we annexed the Transvaal, and that act brought with it as its Nemesis the Zulu difficulty, with respect to the territory disputed with the Boers. Have we 'done justly' here? I assume what is stated in the published Award that the three English Commissioners have reported their opinion that the land in question south of the Pongola – almost identically what was claimed by the Zulus – belongs

of strict right to them and not to the Boers. I assume that our Commissioners conscientiously discharged their duty in the matter, heard and considered carefully all the evidence produced on both sides, and produced in the presence of the representatives of both, an essential requisite in such an enquiry, and came to the deliberate conclusion that the Transvaal claim had not been sustained, and that the Zulu claim was justified. But how have we been acting all along in respect of this matter? From the year 1861, in which the Boer claim was first made, and in which also the Zulus first complained to this Government of Boer encroachments, sixteen years were allowed to pass before we took any effectual steps to settle the dispute – we, the Dominant Power in South Africa. During all that time, with one exception, we quietly looked on, allowing these alleged encroachments upon the land of those, who were looking up to us for justice, to grow and be established, as if they were acknowledged rights, while the Zulu King and People were sending to our Government continually their complaints and protests, as shown by official documents. From year to year we allowed this question to smoulder on, the feelings of both peoples getting hotter and hotter, but we did not 'do justly', as from our commanding position we were bound to have done – we did not interfere in the interests of peace, and insist on settling equitably this difference between our white and black neighbours. And in 1876, the 15th year, our Secretary for Native Affairs reported as follows:– 'This Government has for years past invariably and incessantly urged upon Cetshwayo the necessity for preserving the peace, and so far with great success. But messages from the Zulu king are becoming more frequent and more urgent, and the replies he receives seem to him to be both temporising and evasive.'

In those fifteen years eighteen messages were sent by the Zulu King on this subject, the fourth of which, on July 5, 1869, nearly ten years ago, contained these words:–

'The Heads of the Zulu People have met in Council with their Chiefs, and unanimously resolved to appeal to the kind offices of the Government of Natal, to assist them to avert a state of things which otherwise appears inevitable.

'They beg the friendly intervention and arbitration of this Government between them and the Boer Government.

'They beg that the Lieutenant-Governor will send a Commission to confer with both sides, and decide, with the concurrence of the Zulus, what their future boundary shall be, and that this decision shall be definite and final as regards them.

'They beg that the Governor will take a strip of country, the length and breadth of which to be agreed upon between the Zulus and the Commissioners sent from Natal, so as to interfere in all its length between the Boers and the Zulus, and to be governed by the Colony of Natal, and form a portion of it, if thought desirable.

'The Zulu People earnestly pray that this arrangement may be carried out immediately; because they have been neighbours of Natal for so many years, separated only by a stream of water, and no question of boundary or other serious difficulty has arisen between them and the Government of Natal; they know that, where the boundary is fixed by agreement with the English, there it will remain.

'Panda, Cetshwayo, and all the Heads of the Zulu People assembled directed us to urge in the most earnest manner upon the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal the prayer we have stated.'

Our then Lieutenant-Governor, the late Mr Keate – all honour be to his memory! – on the receipt of this request, promised to take steps in the matter, and did so. For two years and a half a correspondence was carried on with the Boer Government on the subject; arbitration was agreed to, Lieutenant-Governor Keate himself to be the arbitrator; the requisite papers were promised to be sent, the time for the arbitration was settled. But all came to nothing; the promised papers were never sent; the arbitration never took place; Lieutenant-Governor Keate's term of office came to an end in 1872; and on May 25, 1875, the Acting President issued a Proclamation annexing the land in dispute to the Transvaal!

And thus this matter, which might have been settled easily in 1861, was allowed to grow into very serious importance. Farm-houses were built and small townships founded within the Disputed Territory; and we – the Dominant Power – did nothing to check these proceedings, which were certain to embarrass greatly any future attempt to settle the dispute. At last, our present Governor, with a true Englishman's sense of right and justice, took the matter in hand, and at the end of 1877 proposed, and in due time appointed, the Boundary Commission, which reported in favour of the Zulus.

Did we even then 'do justly?' I must speak the truth this day before God, and honestly say that in my judgment we did not. Some time before the Commissioner's Report was made, the High Commissioner had said that we must be 'ready to defend ourselves against *further aggression*', that 'the delay caused by the Commission 'would have *compensating advantages*,' that 'it appeared almost certain that serious complications must shortly arise with the Zulus, which *will necessitate active operations*' – when all the while the Zulus were only claiming south of the Pongolo, land which has now been declared to be 'of strict right' their own, and, north of it, land east of the Drakensberg, which may as justly be their own, but respecting which no inquiry has yet been made. And we know that, before the Award was given, large bodies of troops had been collected on the frontier, our volunteers called out, our native levies raised; and that Award, which might have been the herald of peace, was converted, by the demands coupled with it, into a declaration of war. Nay, the Award itself was, in my judgment, stripped of almost all its value for the Zulus by a clause of the Memorandum, reserving under British guarantee all private rights acquired under the Boer Government, which had granted out in farms, it is said, the whole land in question though it had no right to grant any of it. The Zulu King would have had no control over it; he would not have been able to send any of his people to live on it, or any of his cattle to graze on it, or even to assign places in it to any Zulus who might have elected to move from the Transvaal to the Zulu side of the boundary.

II

'What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly and and to love mercy?' Have we shown ourselves in the character of men who 'love mercy'? Truly it would have been a noble work to have used the power and influence of England for improving the social and moral condition of the Zulu people. Having first 'done justly' in respect of the Award, we should have had a vantage-ground from which much might have been done by peaceful means in this direction. A Resident might have been placed in Zululand, with the hearty consent of the King and People, who had asked more than once for such an officer to be appointed on the border, to keep the peace between them and the Boers. His presence would have had great effect in forwarding such changes in the Zulu system of government as we all desire, being known to be backed by the whole power of England, then mysterious, untried, and therefore more to be respected; and his influence would have had the additional weight of that traditionary reverence for the English nation, which has been handed down among the Zulus from Chaka's time. Such changes usually, as the High Commissioner has said, 'like all great revolutions, require time and patience'. But even if, instead of waiting for the gradual improvement of the people, as wise men would do, we determined to enforce them at once, there was a way of

doing this which at one time indeed was talked of, as if it had been really contemplated, viz, by advancing into the country slowly and gradually, entrenching at short stages, neither killing people not plundering cattle, but repeating our demands from time to time, showing thus that we had only the welfare of the Zulus at heart, that we are Christian men, who loved justice and mercy, and only wished to bring about reforms which we knew to be good. Of course, if we took such a work in hand at all, we were bound not to heed any additional expenses such delay would entail, which, in point of fact, would have been as nothing to that which must now be incurred. The success, however, of such an experiment would, obviously, have greatly depended on our receiving daily the surrender of Chiefs and people wishing to shake off the yoke of the Zulu King and coming to seek our protection. And of such surrenders, so confidently expected at one time, we have seen as yet no sign whatever.

I repeat the question, Wherein, in our invasion of Zululand, have we shown that we are men who 'love mercy'? Did we not lay upon the people heavily, from the very moment we crossed their border, the terrible scourge of war? Have we not killed already, it is said 5 000 human beings, and plundered 10 000 head of cattle? It is true that, in that dreadful disaster, on account of which we are this day humbling ourselves before God, we ourselves have lost very many precious lives, and widows and orphans, parents, brothers, sisters, friends, are mourning bitterly their sad bereavements. But are there no griefs – no relatives that mourn their dead – in Zululand? Have we not heard how the wail has gone up in all parts of the country for those who have bravely died – no gallant soldier, no generous colonist, will deny this – have bravely and nobly died in repelling the invader and fighting for their King and fatherland? And shall we kill 10 000 more to avenge the losses of that dreadful day? Will that restore to us those we have lost? Will that endear their memories more to us? Will that please the spirits of any true men, true sons of God, among the dead? Above all, will that please God, who 'requires of us' that we 'do justly' and 'love mercy'? Will such vengeance be anything else but loathsome and abominable in His sight, a pandering to one of the basest passions of our nature, bringing us Christians below the level of the heathen with whom we fight? Alas! that great English statesman could find no nobler word, at such a time as this, than to speak of 'wiping out the stain', if he really meant that the stain on our name was to be 'wiped out' with the blood of a brave and loyal people, who had done us no harm, nor threatened to do us harm, before we invaded their land, – if he did not rather mean that our faults in the past should now, when our hands are made strong again, be redeemed with acts of true greatness, acts worthy of Englishmen, acts of Divine power, the just and merciful actions of Christian men.

III

'What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?'

Ah! 'to walk humbly with our God!' Our mother-country has wakened up at the cry of distress and terror which has reached her from Natal, when friends in England, and many here, were thinking but of a pleasant march, a military promenade, into Zululand. They were sending us vast reinforcements with all speed. To human eyes our power will be overwhelming, our victory triumphant and sure. But do we really believe in the Living God, who requires of us, if we would receive His blessing, 'to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with Him'? And have we left him out of our calculations, the Lord of the spirits of all flesh, to whom the Zulus belong, as well as the English? Let those, who will, bow down and worship their dumb idols, brute *force*, and proud *prestige*, and crafty *policy*. But we believe, I trust, in the Living God, and, if so, then we are sure that, not His blessing, but His judgment, will rest on us, if we are not just and merciful now, whatever we may have been in the past – *now*, when we have come into His Courts with a profession of sorrow for the wrongs we have done, and with prayer 'that no further disaster be allowed to befall us, and that peace may be speedily restored.'

The Zulu King, it is well known, has sued at our hands for peace. It may be that he has done this, as some think, because his army has suffered much – because his counsels are divided – because he fears that some of his great chiefs will desert him -- because he is laying some deep plot against us. But it may be, as I trust and believe, that he is sincere in his expression of grief for the present war, and the slaughter at Isandlwana. As far as I can read the obscure and evidently confused and incorrect reports of his message, which have appeared in the newspapers, he seems to say – 'This war is all a dreadful mistake – a horrible nightmare! Is it possible that I am fighting with my English Father, with whom I have lived all along in unbroken friendly intercourse? I have no wish whatever to do so. My young men did wrong in crossing at Rorke's Drift: I ordered them not to cross, and, when I struck, I struck only in self-defence, and as before, in my own and my father's time, so ever since that bloody day, the Zulus have never invaded Natal. As Englishmen, speak the word that no more blood be shed; let the war be brought to an end; and give me only such terms as I and my people can accept.'

I say that, with the very possibility of such feelings having impelled the Zulu King to send this message – and it closely agrees in tone with the last message which he sent before the Ultimatum was delivered – if we would 'walk humbly with God,' and put our trust in Him, and not in the God of force – we are bound to meet the Zulu King on the way, when he comes with a prayer for peace – to propose to him, from our higher and stronger position, such terms as it shall be within his power to accept – to show him that we Christians trust more in our strength Divine, as a just and merciful nation, than in mere military power - and, having done this, to leave the rest with God.

But if, after this solemn day, we will not do this – we, our kings and princes and prophets and priests – will not do what the Lord requires of us, will not 'do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with our God' – if we will go on killing and plundering those who have never seriously harmed us, or threatened to harm us, until we made war upon them – treating his message of peace with contempt and neglect, even with ridicule, ascribing it falsely to the promptings of men in our midst, judging unfairly and misrepresenting the Zulu King, both in the Colony and in words sent to England – if we will do these things – then indeed there will be reason to fear that some further great calamity may yet fall on us, and perhaps overwhelm us – by the assegai, famine, or pestilence – in what way we cannot tell, but so that we shall know the hand that smites us.

For 'Thus saith the Lord, let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the Lord who exercise loving-kindness and judgment and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, saith the Lord.' □