

SECOND
CURLERS' CHURCH SERVICE

SERMON TO CURLERS

Delivered in
Woodside Parish Church
(Rev. J. Mitchell Kerr, B.D.)
Great Western Road, Glasgow
on the evening of
Sunday, 15th November, 1936,
by
Rev. A. Gordon Mitchell, D.D.
(Killearn Old Manse, Stirlingshire)
Chaplain of The Royal Caledonian Curling Club.

David and Goliath—1 *Samuel XVII-49.*

The devotional part of the service was conducted by Rev. J. Mitchell Kerr, B.D. The scripture lesson was read by Mr. James Gourley, the Secretary of The Scottish Ice Rink.

The Praise was led by Woodside Church Male Voice Choir—

Organist—Mr. Robert Innes.

A pair of curling stones, with besoms, were placed in front of the Communion Table, which was decorated with white chrysanthemums—subsequently sent out to Mr. John B. Paul at Killearn.

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“ *And David put his hand in his bag and took thence a stone, and slang it, and smote the Philistine in his forehead, that the stone sank into his forehead; and he fell on his face to the earth* ” (I Samuel xvii., 49).

BROTHER—AND SISTER CURLERS,

I have chosen for my text the familiar but never stale story of the encounter between David and Goliath, because I wish to speak to you about the humanising influences of curling. From the sacred narrative of what a stone accomplished in Old Testament history we may learn what a curling-stone can do in the difficult and dangerous times through which we are passing.

What is curling? It is not only a game, and one of the noblest, manliest and most kindly of games, but it is also a passion, a spirit, a social institution.

It is a game of scrupulous *fairness*. The spirit of cheaterly in every shape and form is alien to the game. A true curler would not give a snap of his fingers for any success that was due to sharp practice of any kind. Every curler is eager to win, but would much rather lose than insult the game he loves, by stooping to any course that deviated by one hair-breadth from rectitude.

Curling is a game of *forethought*: to knock out is something; but it is more to curl in under a guard at the same time, in other words, “to kill two dogs with one stone.” Impetuosity often defeats its own end, and frequently a straight stone is lost by being played with too much *vim*. It sometimes misses its mark, and sometimes, even when it finds the winner, it does

not lie itself, but flies at a tangent out of the house, perhaps carrying with it in its career one or two of its neighbours.

Every skip knows the importance of planning—of building up a head. Straightness—not going agley—is a great point in curling, but it is not everything. There must be *balance* as well as straightness: 'Steady your hand' is a grand maxim in curling. Think of the importance of true aim and balance when you have to negotiate a port, and, it may be, not only to get through it, as it were, between Seylla and Charybdis, but to pass through it at such an angle as to take a wick off a stone nearer the tee. All this implies self-discipline, and, in particular, obedience to the skip. Presumably the skip was chosen as such, because he has more knowledge of the game than have his men. You may take a good shot at a time, disconform to his directions, but, even by so doing, you may have deranged the plan of the skip. For one thing, it stands to reason that the skip, standing as he does within the ring, knows more about the ins and outs of the general position of the game than you do. Curling is essentially a game of *team-work*. The 'lone wolf'—the man who plays for his own hand—is ignorant of the spirit of curling. The idea of *leading*, for example, is not to win a personal victory over your opponent. You may do that and yet leave the position worse for the succeeding players of your rink; e.g., one leader may get into the house on the further side of the tee, another may lay his stones just outside the front ring. Technically the first leader has beaten his opponent, but in reality the second leader has, in regard to strategic position, the better of his neighbour. The second and third players who may have to ride out a stone should always remember the importance of steadying the hand, so as to lie within the ring, and, if possible, guarded. Merely to ride out a stone without lying yourself is to leave your work half done.

One of the charms of curling is the endless series of permutations and combinations presented by each head. In these a skilful skip takes as much pleasure as a chess-player in the disposition of the pieces on a chess-board. There is a great deal more in the dynamics and kinetics of curling than some people are aware of. The grand old song speaks about 'rip-rappin' on frae random wicks'; but sometimes the 'wicks' are not 'random,' but planned and thought-out. To give or take the exact angle at which a stone must be struck, sometimes complicated by the circumstance that a port has to be drawn before that stone is reached, is no easy task either for the skip or his player. Hence the importance of the aimer's keeping his eye on the kowe in the act of delivering his stone. Let it not be forgotten that the kowe performs a twofold function in the game—that, namely, of directing as well as sooping—and the one is equal in importance to the other.

The element of luck or fluke has certainly a place in curling, but, of course, in inverse proportion to the skill with which the game is played. A head may be built up admirably, shots may lie guarded or double-guarded, and yet one last shot, delivered by a skilful or lucky hand, may work its way round the guards, and change places with the winner. In that case, if the shot was played for, and was not merely a stroke of luck, the verdict is, 'the skip deserved that end.'

One beauty of the game is its *friendliness*. What endless trouble is taken to soop a cautious stone over the hog-score, and to help it on to the desired spot! What skill is exerted to give an out-lying stone a kindly in-ring to the tee! There is, it is true, a particular case in which the kowe is employed in an unfriendly manner, namely, when it crosses the sweeping-score, but, even then, most curlers would prefer to see the skip sooping, than to see him regard a stone as not worth wasting

the besom on. What contention while the game is going on! and what warm handclasps between victors and vanquished when it is over! The same friendliness characterises conferences of curlers. Sometimes controversy develops almost into a wrangle; yet all sharp words are forgotten, and are seen not to have left a sting behind, when curlers meet in a social capacity. Those that were present at the Annual Meetings when heated discussions took place on the then burning question of the delivery of the stone will remember the delightful social meetings that followed, at which it was apparent that both sides of controversialists were one in good fellowship—one in brotherhood—one in the love of the game.

Paraphrasing the words of Tennyson, one might say.—

‘The curler in a golden clime was born,
 With golden stars above,
 Dowered with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn,
 The love of love.’

Curling is a game of goodwill. Defeat after a keen fight leaves no soreness of feeling behind, but rather reinforces and cements cordiality of sentiment between the players of the opposing sides. There is a remarkable amount of freemasonry—of mutual understanding—among curlers. They all alike recognise the slippery character of the game, and those who are up to-day are aware that they may be down on the morrow. There is nothing more delightful in curling experience than to see the way in which a really first-class skip takes a beating after a well-contested game. One might almost form the impression that he was pleased to lose. That, of course, is not the case, for he was as keen to win as his neighbour. The fact is that his knowledge and experience of the game render him an expert, not only in play, but in the graceful acceptance of ‘the fortunes of war.’

A great deal of pleasure can be got out of the game, even by men who are not what one might call curlers by instinct. Look at two beginners. In the case of one you see from the start that he is a born curler. He takes to the game as a duck takes to water. It seems no difficulty for him, in soling his stone, to keep to the line of the skip's kowe. In the case of the other, there is an awkwardness of delivery—a tendency to curvature which is fatal to straight play. This tendency may be combated by diligent practice, but even when it is to a great extent overcome, you have still the difference between a curler that is made and a curler that is born. What is said of the poet may also be said of the curler—*Nascitur non fit*—he is born not made. In second and third players, and above all in skips there are certainly qualities which are not easily acquired, but which come to some men almost like a second nature. Accuracy of aim depending on a subtle correlation between eye and hand is the *sine quâ non* of the finished curler. A similar quality makes the accomplished billiard player and the rifle marksman. Without that, it is no small credit to a man to develop into a trustworthy leader in curling. Leading is in itself not easy, and it says much for a man who does not possess the qualifications for other positions in the rink to acquire a steady and well-balanced style of leading.

One might indefinitely extend observations such as I have made as regards curling; for I think you will agree with me that the subject is practically inexhaustible. I believe that the best curlers and the best skips are the men that feel they are always learning something more about curling. The unexpected is generally a factor in the game, the infinite variety of which prevents it from ever growing tame or stale. Curling demands accuracy of aim, delicacy of touch, rapidity of decision, refinement of balance; it demands patience, planning, foresight and sagacity.

Curling is a game in which success sometimes comes in cycles. One has witnessed a game in which one side counted an unbroken series of six or even more ends, and, notwithstanding, the other side ultimately came out winners. It is a game that calls for the exercise of forbearance. Neither skips nor players are infallible and should make allowance for each other. They are the minority of curlers who have not an occasional day off—a day in which they do not master the run of the ice—a day in which they do not get their hand in.

Patience is not only the right, kindly thing, but it is also the best policy; for when a rink start to indulge in mutual reeriminations, they will soon discover that these do more harm than good. I recall the stock-phrase of a kindly skip,—‘Man, that’s a guid shot—a vera guid shot; If I could play as weel as that, I could tak’ a shot—whiles.’ A good curler fights keenly, loses gracefully, and wins modestly. Curling demands qualities of truth, and temperance, and judgment, which come within the sphere of morality itself. Indeed, being a game that has been bequeathed to us by a straight-living, wise-thinking and God-fearing ancestry, it is, to a pre-eminent extent, a game of high ethical quality, the playing of which is a sacrament of friendship and a seal of camaraderie.

Curling demands balance—not only of hand, but of temper and character. It is a ‘roaring game’; but it is not always the noisiest curler that is the best player. I knew a splendid skip who, although a keen, keen curler, seldom or never spoke above his natural tone of voice. In contrast with this I have heard of a curler—he happened to be a gravedigger—who was a very vociferous player. On one occasion he followed his stone up the ice, shouting at the pitch of his voice,—“Oh! I’m hoggin’—I’m hoggin.” “Wheesht! Wheesht! Tammas,” said an old curler, who was watching the game, “*Ye’ll wauken yer customers!*”

It was remarked with what balance and equanimity the curlers who—after travelling from various parts of the country to Carsebreek in the January of 1928 were unexpectedly deprived of their game by a sudden thaw—accepted their disappointment. Curling is a fine training in discipline of character.

I think I hear some of my listeners say, 'These observations are all very well, but what of your text? What of David and Goliath?' I have failed in my object if I have not made it clear that, in making these observations, I have been leading up to the application of my text. My thesis is that, just as young David put his hand in his bag and took thence a stone and slang it and smote the Philistine in his forehead, so the game of curling aims and delivers a deadly blow at various Goliaths, and

I. *At the Goliath of Ill-health.*

I do not, of course, claim that curling is a panacea for all the ills that flesh is heir to, but it is in many cases a marvellous remedial agency. I have heard a story of a curler lying in bed under a mountain of blankets and feeling badly out of sorts, to whom came the news that the ice was bearing and the rinks were mustering. Flinging the bed-clothes from him, he sprang out of bed, dressed, secured his handles and kowe, and curled away his ailments, so that he was able to take a vigorous part in all the bonspiels of a lengthy 'tid' of frost. Personally, my experience has been that sometimes I have taken my place on the rink, coughing and snuffling, only to find to my joy, before the game was finished, that my body was all aglow, and that my incipient cold had vanished. 'Doctor Curling' is not a physician to be by any means despised. The David of Curling often levels a deadly blow at the minor ailments of life.

II. *The Goliath of Care.*

You may search the Scriptures in vain for any mention of the word 'pastime.' Sometimes one hears it said of a form

of amusement, 'it passes the time.' It is a sorry account of any game, if no more can be said in its favour than that. Time is too precious—too sacred a thing to be merely 'passed' or 'killed.' Curling is not a pastime, but a recreation. It invigorates the mind, it clears the brain, it braces the body, it makes us fitter to engage in the serious work of life. How many a man goes to the rink harassed and jaded by business cares or domestic anxieties to find that 'Doctor Curling' smooths away the furrows from the brow—tones up the heart and brain with new strength and hope and resolution to grapple with the problems and difficulties that confront us on the slippery rink of daily existence! Adapting the words of Burns, we might say—

'Gie me a cannie hour at e'en
 Upon the rink sae cheerie,
 An' warldly cares an' warldly men
 May a' gang tapsalteerie.'

III. *The Goliath of Class-Estrangement.*

There are many influences that tend to keep the classes apart in our days, such as differences of circumstances, differences of education, differences of position. Some foolish, purse-proud people are apt to stand aloof from their neighbours, as if made of a finer clay, or to extend to them a patronage which is even more offensive than to give them the clean cut. On the other hand, the less fortunate classes are apt to feel a certain soreness that material circumstances should effect such a cleavage between themselves and those who are more highly-favoured by fortune. The young David of curling aims a stone from his sling against all such feelings: he slays the Goliath of class-estrangement. He makes men realise that they are all members of the one human family. The Shepherd lad who was such a true shot

with his stone alters people's conceptions of values : makes them feel that differences of fortune are as dust in the balance compared with the qualities that make the man ; loyalty to the skip and to the rink, truth of aim, balance of judgment, steadfastness of purpose, and that feeling of brotherhood and solidarity which is so striking a characteristic of our national game.

Curling provides a standing lesson that men are not to be judged by their outward trappings of superiority, their airs and graces of conversation, the texture of their garments, the external polish of their manners ; but by their clearness of eye, their skill of hand and arm, their truth of aim, their brotherly spirit, the grandeur of the beatings of their hearts. The man who is the keenest, straightest, truest curler, whatever be his social rank or position, is 'the king o' a' the core.'

Just as that fine spirit, John Skinner, felt that a good cure for the bitterness of political differences was a hearty dance. 'Let Whig and Tory a' agree, and cheerfu' sing along wi' me the reel of Tullochgorum,' so the great heart of Norman Macleod recognised the sweetening, reconciling influence of curling—

'———by my certes, ye'll see hoo a' pairties

Like brithers will love, and like brithers agree.'

IV. *The Goliath of International Animosity.*

There, perhaps, never was a time in the history of the world when a more intense spirit of mutual suspicion and mistrust was abroad among the peoples of the earth than the time through which we are passing. We witness the spectacle of even hitherto peaceful nations,—e.g. Switzerland—hastening to arm themselves against dangers which they conceive to be looming in the near future. And, it may be, when we reflect upon the situation, it is little to be wondered at. Man's development as an inventor

of weapons of offence and destruction has outrun his moral and spiritual development. We have entered upon the age of flying. Even islands of the sea that formerly considered themselves comparatively safe behind their ocean frontiers have now to contemplate the possibility of bombing attacks from the air. But what are the actual facts? The average man in this and other countries is, in the main, a friendly being—a being that wishes neither to destroy life, nor to have his own life destroyed. And it seems to me that if, instead of trying to work in the interests of peace by means of conferences, so much of which ends in hot air, or in treaties torn into shreds—instead of repressive and negative methods that invite comparison to filing the teeth which thereby may be rendered only the sharper to bite, or paring the claws which will only too soon grow again—if, instead of playing with the present bellicose tendencies of mankind, only, it may be, to drive the evil deeper in, and to make the danger more deadly than before—if, instead of this, we got into grips with the well-nigh universal friendly element in human nature, and worked upon that, appealing to men's better instincts and attempting to convince them that the things that alienate and embitter us are of infinitely less importance than the things that draw us together in the bonds of our common humanity, and that the noblest ambition that can animate mankind is not to destroy life, but to save, heal and ennoble it—then, in that case, the prospects of establishing peace upon sounder and more durable foundations would be immensely brighter and more hopeful than it is to-day. Now I am speaking about curling, and I have no hesitation in saying that that game, more than any other, has proved itself to be a reconciling, fraternising agency between man and man. The game has now proved its title to be international: let it become so to a greater and greater extent. Let international bonspiels become more

frequent and more general, and it is my conviction that more will thereby be done to promote the cause of peace and goodwill than by any amount of rhetoric about treaties and about disarmament. Let the young David of curling sling his stone and he will go far to stagger the Goliath of war, and to make him totter to his fall.

Gif curlin grew to get the due
 To whilk its titled weel, sirs,
 The Baltic sea wad pruive owre wee
 For humankind's bonspiel, sirs :
 An', near an' far, the game o' war
 Wad superseded be, sirs,
 An' a' disputes, withooten doobts,
 Decided at the Tee, sirs.

Does someone say, 'this is fantastic'? One moment, my friend. Did not quite a number of people, including Goliath of Gath himself, say, 'this is fantastic,' when they beheld the spectacle of the Shepherd lad facing the redoubtable champion? They forgot that, though he was only a stripling, Almighty God was behind and around him. If it be a dream that the friendly element in human nature can be appealed to with ultimate success, then righteousness, judgment and brotherly kindness are all a dream, and mankind are but a den of wild beasts, and a cage of unclean and hateful birds. Work, I say, upon the friendly element in human nature, and when in this way you have dispelled suspicion and allayed mistrust and fostered confidence and convinced your brethren of other nations that we are 'a John Tamson's bairns,' let them further know that, while we of these Islands and overseas Dominions are eager to do anything and everything in reason to meet our brethren in every helpful and fraternal way, one thing must

be clear. Our dominions, crown-colonies and mandated territories which we administer, not for vain-glory, but as a solemn obligation and responsibility from which we will not and dare not resile, do not come within the ambit of any possible discussion. More than this we do not say: but we say this. If we said less, our brethren in foreign lands would despise us, and, more than that, we would despise ourselves.

In conclusion, let me remind you that the work of destroying the Goliath of sin and death was reserved for, and performed by, a descendant of David—'great David's greater Son.' The women coming to His empty sepulchre found the stone rolled away, for it was very great. I can conceive that He who is enthroned at the right hand of God smiles upon every just attempt to set forward the brotherhood of man. A dying man once said to his minister, 'Wull we get curling in heaven?' 'Oh no,' was the reply, 'there will be far higher pleasures there.' 'I'm no sae sure o' that,' persisted the questioner, 'for I've been reading in Revelation that the streets are o' pure gless; so div ye no think we micht aiblins poalish a bit rink for oorsels?' The question is too deep for dogmatising upon: we may with confidence leave it to Him Who put it into the heart of man to devise the noble game of curling.

Lord St. Vigeans was inspired by a sunset at Carsebreck to say,

'Mayhap there are rinks in Elysian fields
Where we'll play as we used to do,
With jewelled stones and brooms of gold,
And a hog and crampit too.'

In the concluding words of his valedictory speech at Edinburgh, the late Lord Sempill, President of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club, who in his closing days spoke nothing but the braid Scottish mither-tongue, said,—'Perhaps curlers will enjoy

their game in their future existence.' Well, who knows? We had better leave it at this,—

When at the last great morn we ope our eyes,
And stand in rapt surprise
To hear the verdict of the dread assize.

As to our conduct on Life's slippery rink,
If it should be our Lord's behest
That, having done our best,
We should in Him for ever sweetly rest,
It will be well, I think.

Or if it be from the Eternal skip's
Holy and gracious lips
Comes the command,—'Get out the stones and grips,
And ring the tee of the celestial rink,'
And everyone in turn should kneel,
And joyously should feel
The crowning rapture of the Great Bonspiel,
It will be well, I think.

Almighty God, forgive what is ours; bless what is Thine. Bless the curling brotherhood and sisterhood all over the world. We thank Thee for putting it into the heart of man to devise this game of humanity, peace and goodwill. May curlers realise more and more that a stone, blessed and guided by Thee, can become mighty to the pulling down of strongholds of wickedness, and to the setting forward of Thy kingdom of righteousness, and peace, and love and joy in the Holy Ghost, through Thy Divine Son, the Peacemaker, Jesus Christ, our Lord.—*Amen.*

1870
The first of the year was a very dry one, and the crops were much injured. The weather was very hot, and the ground was very hard. The crops were much injured, and the yield was very small. The weather was very hot, and the ground was very hard. The crops were much injured, and the yield was very small.

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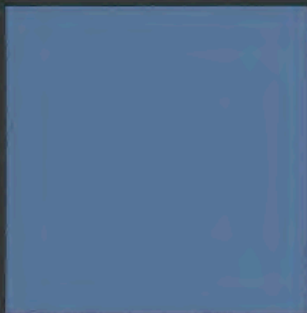
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