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OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF HON. JOHN QUINCY ADAMS.

MAN, AT HIS BEST STATE, VANITY.

Verily, every man, at his best state, is altogether vanity. Psalm xxxix. 5.

THE practical judgment of men is not always in accordance with the divine testimony, even on subjects connected with their own experience. If I mistake not, this truth is strikingly illustrated by the common estimate of the declaration which I have now read to you. You do not indeed formally withhold your assent from this declaration; you do not venture even to attempt to frame an argument to prove that it is not true; nay, perhaps you have never detected in your own mind the semblance of any thing like skepticism in respect to it. And up to a certain point you have not been deceived. You have really felt, when you have paused here and there amidst life's sadder scenes, that every thing connected with man's condition bears the impress of vanity. But then again, whenever you have looked at the brighter side,—when the glory of the world has passed beneath your eye and you have felt it acting like a charm upon your heart, you have not spoken out all that was in your innermost soul, if you have not claimed something

more for the world, something more for man, than the text allows. You have been ready to say, "Be it so that man is '*vanity*,' but leave out the '*altogether*.' Be it so that he is vanity in *some conditions*, but say not that he is so in his '*best state*.' Surely I would not covet vanity; but I see *that* in the world that my heart aches to possess.'"

My business, this morning, is to vindicate the divine testimony on this subject, and to show you that, in just so far as your practical judgment differs from it, you are deceived. We will first contemplate man in his best state, and then look for the marks of vanity.

I. *Man, in his best state—what is he?* In other words, what are some of those qualities and circumstances which confer upon man his highest worldly importance?

The first in the order of time at least, is *illustrious descent*. There is that in human nature that makes us instinctively allow something to the child for the parent's sake. This occurs, not merely where the great and good qualities of a parent constitute part of the child's inheritance, but where the character bears a mere negative stamp, or even where some dark and revolting image is impressed upon it. That wreck of a man who drags himself through the streets, the victim of sensuality, you pass without any other feeling than disgust mingled with pity; but when some one tells you that he is the son of some mighty prince, or some illustrious statesman, or some eminent benefactor of his race, you turn round and look at him again; and though what you have heard may heighten rather than diminish your sense of his guilt and degradation, you seem to imagine that there *must* be something there after all to venerate; and if your scrutinizing eye can detect none of the *qualities* of the father, your spirit will linger gratefully, yet painfully, upon his honored *name*. I know that the distinctions of rank growing out of the circumstance of mere birth, do not exist in this country as in most other countries; and that they do not, is one of the characteristics of our lot, for which we have to give thanks; and I know too that even the degree of importance that is attached to descent among ourselves, often operates as a blight upon improvement, usefulness and happiness; but that distinguished parentage does confer important advantages, after all, no one can reasonably question. The child of the menial may indeed finally rival the child of the prince, and may even change

places with him ; but the one is born to an honorable name or to a lofty station,—the other has to earn it.

Another of the elements of worldly greatness is *high intellectual endowments and acquirements*. The mass of men exhibit perhaps something like an equality of intellect ; but while there are some who originally fall below, there are others who greatly exceed the ordinary intellectual stature : in some one of the faculties, or perhaps in all, they are so pre-eminent as to become, with some the objects of envy, with others the objects of admiration. And then it sometimes happens that persons of this high order of intellect are equally distinguished in respect to the means of culture ; they breathe the atmosphere of intelligence from their earliest years, and affection and assiduity and affluence are all laid under contribution in aid of the formation of a high intellectual character. And in addition to all this, perhaps they are gifted with some uncommon moral qualities, or rather they possess them in an eminent degree ;—particularly with an indomitable energy and an unflinching perseverance, which are well nigh a security for the accomplishment of any object to which they address themselves. Now I admit that such cases as I am here supposing,—cases which unite genius and culture and great strength of purpose, are rare ; but they do sometimes exist ; and they are regarded, by common consent, as among the most favored cases in the history of the race. Let a man of such character stand forth before the world, and he is felt to be a man of power ; the eyes of all are turned upon him for his greatness ; for men generally render a homage to intellect which they deny to virtue. And then, how much is such a person able to accomplish ! Let him move in whatever direction he will, he is sure to move to purpose. He can explore depths which other minds cannot fathom. He can ascend to heights which other minds cannot reach. He can wield mighty influences in any of the departments of human life, which will vibrate in every direction, and make him felt by a whole community, even by the world. I repeat,—there is great importance attached to such a man any where ; the whole world are ready to pay a tribute to his greatness.

Another source of worldly elevation and importance is a *princely fortune*. It is true that this forms no part of a man's character ; it is nothing that belongs either to his intellectual or moral constitution, or that necessarily modifies either ; but it is a mighty element of power, notwithstanding. Wealth surrounds its possessor with

splendor; and there are multitudes whom splendor dazzles. Wealth furnishes the means of doing great evil and of doing great good; and as it is employed in one way or the other, it makes its possessor an object of dislike or terror, or an object of gratitude and complacency. You say of many a man, "He would be powerless but for his riches,—*they* make him formidable;" or else, "He would accomplish little but for his riches,—*they* make him useful;" or else, "He would never be heard of but for his riches,—*they* give him a reputation." And thus far you are right in your estimate of their importance. Wherever they are possessed, they give power; and to some they give nearly all the power in society that they have.

The same may be said of *exalted station*;—men covet *that* for the honor and influence that pertain to it. There is nothing more natural to man than the desire to exercise authority; and not unfrequently this desire becomes a passion, and the passion makes the tyrant. Besides, to civil office there pertains a real dignity; and religion as well as reason allows to those who hold it a large measure of respect. The office of a king, or an emperor, or any chief magistrate of a nation,—who does not contemplate it with an instinctive veneration? And other offices of less importance,—you cannot but feel that, in proportion to the responsibility they involve, they confer dignity upon those who hold them. And in a country like ours, where privileged orders and hereditary rights are not recognized, these high places acquire additional value, from the fact that the will of the people decides who shall occupy them; and we have a right to expect that the people will be true to their own interests, by placing there none but worthy occupants. Let a man be elevated by the voice of the nation or of the state to some one of the highest places of authority,—and though it is possible that a corrupt public sentiment or a phrenzied party spirit may have put him there, yet the presumption is that he is in some good degree worthy of his place; and thus the fact of his elevation becomes a high public testimony in his favor. You see then there is greatness, worldly greatness, pertaining to exalted station. They who attain to it manifest their sense of this in one way, and they who do not in another; but in respect to the general fact there is no difference of opinion.

I may mention, as another thing that contributes to the desirableness of one's lot in the world, a *vigorous constitution*,—*a long life*,

—*an active old age.* There are some who are born with diseased or enfeebled constitutions; and their whole life is a struggle with infirmity and pain. Most probably they find an early grave; or if they live to old age, it is an old age of extreme feebleness, worthy to be the close of an invalid's life. But there are others who are constitutionally vigorous and elastic, and gifted with an almost incredible power of endurance. They toil on from youth to manhood, and from manhood to old age, not only with a strength of purpose, but a strength of muscle, that seems almost to defy the action of time. When four score years have passed over them, you scarcely discover any diminution of their native elasticity,—of their ability to labor or their ability to endure. How much are they favored above those who are cut off in the morning of life, or whose history, if life be protracted, is a history of mere fruitless wishes and unfulfilled purposes and painful struggles!

I only add, that *posthumous fame* is regarded by multitudes as essential to crown the idea of worldly greatness. True it is that the dead are deaf alike to the voice of human censure and human applause; and yet it belongs to man's very nature that he desires to live in the grateful recollections of those who come after him; and more than that, multitudes, while they live, have their eye steadily fixed upon the bright offerings which they expect will be made to their memories after they are dead. There are some,—I was about to say, who are not disappointed; and yet we cannot say this, for there can be neither disappointment nor its opposite in connection with death's iron slumber;—I mean there are some, upon whose memory are heaped all the honors which their ambition would have claimed. When they die, the tidings of their death set the innermost heart of the nation to throbbing. Their funeral is a solemn pageant;—as you watch the mournful procession, it seems to you as if the end would never come; and, after the grave has received its honored deposit, the voice of eulogy is lifted up on every side, and the powers of the living are tasked to the utmost in praise of the dead; and ere long the monumental marble rises to bear *its* testimony to the greatness of the departed; and last of all, history sets *herself* to her work, and chronicles his doings in a permanent record, and sets that record afloat on the stream of time. This is posthumous fame in its very brightest form. There are few who attain to such a degree of it; but those who do, are generally regarded, no doubt, as among the most favored of the race.

Such is man in his best state. Such are the elements of that lot which the world looks at as most desirable; illustrious birth, high intellectual endowments and attainments, great affluence, exalted station, a vigorous physical constitution, continuing in well nigh undiminished strength through old age, and posthumous fame. Let a man possess any of these, and he is considered as a favored man. Let him possess them all, and I scarcely know what more there is for worldly ambition to covet.

II. But great as man is, with the qualities and in the circumstances which I have supposed, the text still pronounces him "vanity," even "in his best state." What I propose, in the second place, is to point you to the marks of his vanity, in connection with those very things, which constitute the elements of the highest earthly distinction.

Let me ask, then, is there no vanity pertaining to the honor arising from illustrious descent? Recollect that the individual who is thus favored has no agency in conferring upon himself this distinction; and that it is God who, in the sovereignty of his providence, makes him to differ from the peasant's or the beggar's child. Recollect, too, that with the circumstance of mere birth, there is not necessarily associated any intellectual or moral superiority; for men who occupy high places, are not always great or good men; and besides, intellectual and moral qualities are far enough from being uniformly hereditary. Go out into the world, and you shall find beggars and drones and profligates almost without number, each of whom, when you come to scrutinize his history, will be found to have flowing in his veins the blood of some distinguished family. Is not this fact enough to inscribe "vanity" on mere distinguished parentage?

Look next at the distinction that originates in high intellectual endowments, and say whether there are no signs of vanity to be detected here. How feeble the capacities, how circumscribed the knowledge, of the most intellectual man on earth, when compared with the faculties and the attainments of higher orders of existence, or even with what man himself may hope to possess, in some more advanced stage of his being! Is it an uncommon thing for the vigorous and far-reaching intellect to prove itself erratic, to occupy itself upon things of trifling import, and to prefer a region of clouds and darkness as the field of its operations, to a region of light and glory? How often does the mind, in its attempt

to fathom some unexplored depth, become involved in the mist of error and absurdity! How quickly does it reach the farthest boundary of human knowledge on subjects of the most momentous interest; and when it would fain move onward, find itself arrested with "Hither shalt thou come, and no farther!" How its operations are often controlled by the power of prejudice and of passion, by reason of which the results at which it arrives, prove utterly untrustworthy! Surely, when man's intellect, even in its best state, is considered merely with reference to the present world, it is vanity. You may take into view all that it is, and all that it does here, and if there be no higher field on which its powers are hereafter to be developed and exercised, no good reason can be given why man should have been constituted an intellectual being at all.

And if there be nothing in man's intellect in the present world, even in its best state, but what has vanity mixed with it, what say you of mere earthly possessions; of silver and gold, of houses and lands,—any thing, the possession of which goes to constitute worldly affluence? There are two considerations that prove beyond a peradventure that all this is vanity. One is, that the tenure by which men hold riches is the most uncertain thing in the world; and that, in the changes of human life, the most opulent man in the community may be reduced to absolute want. The other is, that riches are as unsatisfying as they are uncertain; they reach none of the great wants of the immortal spirit; and considered merely in reference to the present world, the happiness which they confer is chiefly imaginary. I am inclined to think that if it were possible to institute an accurate comparison between the amount of happiness enjoyed by men in moderate circumstances, and by those who possess over-grown estates, you would find the balance in favor of the former; less care, less temptation, more real enjoyment. Truly man, in respect to the possession of wealth, is vanity.

Nor is he any thing better, when considered as the occupant of an exalted station. In some countries, I know that the highest places of authority come to men as an inheritance, independently of their own efforts or even volitions. But in such a state of society as that in which we live, the occupancy of such a place is generally the result of no inconsiderable degree of labor and sacrifice, and not unfrequently at the expense of encountering jealousy,

rivalry, keen opposition, at every step! Does not many a candidate for office rise up early, and sit up late, and eat the bread of carefulness, aye, and sometimes sleep on thorns and dream of defeat, before he reaches the place upon which his heart is fixed? And after he gets there,—after he has been arrayed in the robes of state, and has sat down in the chair of authority,—do you imagine that nothing ever overtakes him to remind him that he is walking in a vain show? I tell you, *that* man's life is, in all probability, a life of deep solicitude, of painful struggles, in proportion to the elevation to which he has risen. The collisions of interest, the strife of party, the poison of asps under the tongues of political opponents, sometimes give to his position an insecure and unstable character, and as the case may be, they work out a change which throws him back into the privacy of other days. Let the man who is clothed with the highest honors which his fellow citizens have at their disposal, testify, in view of all his responsibility and solicitude, as to the real value of the station he occupies, as a means of promoting his own happiness, and I venture to say, if you get the honest expression of his feelings, it will be "vanity—vanity and vexation of spirit."

Next, let us look at the gigantic constitution, the long life, the vigorous old age, and see if there is nothing that tells of vanity here. A miracle of a man must he be indeed who passes through life without having ever felt the pains of disease, even though his sinews be brass and his frame be iron; upon whom the period of old age comes, and yet brings with it no evil days,—days of intellectual or bodily infirmity; but even admitting such cases to exist, there is one event that stamps "vanity" upon them after all. The longest life does, ere long, come to a close; and, instead of having been really long, it is like a dream when one awaketh. The most vigorous constitution after a while yields; the old man who, at the age of four score, walked about with the elasticity of middle life, and who seemed almost to be dreaming that he had a constitution which was proof not only against old age, but death itself, even that strong man at length bows before the destroyer, and the places that have known his wonderful activity know it no more. Go and look at his body, bathed in the death sweat, writhing in the death struggle, mouldering in the house appointed for all the living, and then tell me whether man, even in his best state of physical activity and endurance, be not vanity.

And, last of all, analyze that imaginary thing that we call posthumous fame; and see whether there is any thing but vanity here. The man has died and gone to his account. As an inhabitant of the grave, he knows not anything; as an inhabitant of the eternal world, he is mingling in scenes of such surpassing interest as to cast into the shade and render it utterly insignificant whatever relates merely to earth. Be it so that they have laid him in a decorated coffin, and are casting their garlands upon it in honor of his memory. Be it so that the voice of panegyric is lifted up concerning him, and the very air is fragrant with his praise. Be it so that his deeds are chronicled by the historian, and his name and his memory sacredly guarded and embalmed. But what matters all this to *him*, when he is shut up an insensible clod in his coffin? It is worthy of a man to do good and to be good, that his benign influence may be perpetuated after he is gone; but to be a seeker of posthumous fame for its own sake, as if it could affect, in a favorable way, the condition of the man after he has passed out of this world, were nothing better than the mad chasing of a shadow. There is no posthumous enjoyment in this phantom; the enjoyment is all in anticipation.

Is it not true, then, I ask, that "every man, at his best state, is altogether vanity?" Let him be whatever he will, or occupy whatever place he may, in reference merely to the present world he is vanity. But, surely this is not doing him full justice. If religion be not a dream, if there be any light even in man's reason, there is something to redeem him from insignificance. That something is immortality. Though, if this were the only state of being, man's intellect would seem to accomplish but little,—nothing of sufficient importance to justify infinite wisdom in creating it; yet, as it is destined to operate in another and a higher sphere, far away from this region of clouds and mists, and to develop itself in an endless career of improvement and bliss, it disconnects itself from all ideas of vanity, and gathers an importance and glory, such as, in its present infantile state, it is inadequate to conceive. Life is too much a scene of trouble to be in itself very desirable; and even if it were otherwise, it is too brief to be an object of great importance; but when considered as the germ of immortality, as the period of probation, as having in it the elements of deathless joy or wo,—no tongue can describe, no imagination can reach, the importance that pertains to it. Death *seems* to render it of little mo-

ment, because it terminates it so soon ; and yet it is death that redeems it from its vanity, that redeems *man* from *his* vanity, by not merely changing the mode, but greatly elevating the character of his existence.

I hardly need say, that the train of thought into which I have now led you, has been but an echo to the voice of Providence. An event has just occurred, which has shown us more impressively than mortal tongue could utter it, that "man, at his best state, is altogether vanity." In other words, a great man, an old man, a man upon whom the eyes of the nation, the eyes of the world, have long been fixed, has fallen at last. Death stole upon him while yet he had his harness on ; and already it has fallen upon the ear of millions, that the illustrious patriot and statesman of half a century has finished his course.

If we turn our eye backward and mark the progress of his career, it is impossible but that we must arrive at the conclusion that he has furnished a marked example of "man in his best state !" He was illustrious in his birth ; his father had been great before him ; had been one of the ruling spirits in the storm of the revolution ; had sat in the highest council of the nation, when the nation's life or death was the pending question ; had transacted business of high import in behalf of his country with foreign powers ; and finally had been elevated to the most responsible and the most honorable place to which human ambition could aspire. It were not a small thing surely to be the son of such a father. And then, he inherited, perhaps it is not too much to say, *all* his father's intellectual greatness ; or if in some respects the father was greater, in others the son exceeded him. He had a grasp of mind, an ability to grapple with difficult subjects, and to comprehend the remote relations of things, which few men of his own or any other age have ever evinced. He had a memory that received every thing,—that retained every thing ; and so varied and vast were his acquisitions, that it was not easy to start a subject upon which he was not thoroughly at home. He had an indomitable energy and perseverance, that never grew faint in the pursuit of any object, and that opposition served only to excite and quicken. His opportunities for intellectual culture were probably hardly exceeded by those of any other man in modern times ; for to say nothing of the fact that his mother as well as his father was pre-eminent for talents and accomplishments, and was most assiduous in conducting his early education, he was

a mere stripling when he was introduced into the diplomatic school, and, with the exception of the time that he passed at the university, he was always an active participator in the scenes and responsibilities of public life. He never knew any other condition than that of affluence; whatever wealth could furnish to gratify taste, to aid in a course of honorable ambition, or in any way to promote his enjoyment or usefulness, his fortune put within his reach. He occupied successively almost every high place, not excepting even the very highest, which the nation had in her gift; in this respect it is confidently believed that he stood pre-eminient among all his illustrious countrymen. And he had a physical constitution worthy of his intellectual; a constitution that seemed proof against hardship, and that rendered him active, strong, sometimes even terrible in his old age. And the news of his illness, and then the news of his death, diffused itself like lightning, *in* lightning, every where; and his name to-day hangs upon the lips of the nation. And presently we shall read the account of the imposing ceremonial, the solemn pageantry, amidst which his mortal remains will have been entombed; and then we shall have eulogy upon eulogy from every part of the land, until nothing more can be said in honor of his memory; and, last of all, his name, his character, his deeds of statemanship and patriotism and philanthropy, will descend on some of the brighter pages of his country's history to the end of time. I greatly doubt whether there is another individual living, who, in so many respects, furnishes an example of "man in his best state," as he whose death the nation now mourns.*

And yet the event that has just occurred, (for I will speak here of nothing else,) proves that man, in his best state, is vanity. There he is, exercising his faculties for the nation's weal;—an old man indeed,—but he has lived so long and done so much, that still more is expected of him. In an instant, it is seen that death has taken him in hand; and now the politics of the venerable sage are forgotten;—his political foes and his political friends share in common the agitation of the scene; he is conveyed to another

* The religious character of Mr. Adams is not particularly noticed in this discourse, because, at the time it was preached, the author knew too little of it to speak intelligently. Since that time, he, in connexion with the Christian community at large, has been gratified with the abundant evidence that has been furnished of Mr. A's. serious regard for the institutions of religion, and his daily and diligent study of the word of God, as well as the high sense of duty which controlled him in all the walks of life.

apartment; and because he is seen to be dying, the business of the nation stands still. He has lived long, and had a giant's strength; but he is dying at last. His brow is encircled with wreaths,—the gift of his grateful country; but the death sweat is there notwithstanding. It is a place of honor,—a place, perhaps, where never man died before, in which he is breathing out his life,—but death deals with him not a whit more leniently than he would with a beggar. The great men and the mighty crowd around, and one of the very chiefs, who, in other days, has been associated with him in office and in honor, grasps his palsied hand and weeps; but death mocks at the tears of friendship and keeps steadily at his work. At length the body becomes a clod, and the spirit flies off to mingle in eternal scenes. Come now, ye whom the world dazzles and bewilders, and see what this universal leveller has done. Join the long procession, if you will, that follows him to the grave, and remember that that is the end of “man in his best state;”—and answer it to your conscience, whether he be not “altogether vanity.”

Such an event as this, my friends, is monitory to the nation. If it proclaims most impressively that “man, at his best state, is vanity,” then it rebukes us as a nation for our trust in man, and charges us to place our ultimate confidence in God only. I rejoice in all the legitimate respect that is shown to our rulers. I rejoice that when a great and useful man dies, the voice of party is dumb, and they who opposed his measures, yet pay a willing tribute to his memory. I cannot but think that there was goodness in the providence that ordained that the extraordinary man who has now departed, should have been called away in circumstances that furnished an opportunity for such a beautiful and affecting tribute to his worth, in connection with his passage from one world to another. But, after all, I would that it were written upon the heart of every citizen, “Cease ye from man;—from man even in his best state; for his breath is in his nostrils.” Let your rulers be as great and useful as they may, they are, after all, but men; and in the very act of consulting your interests, they may be taken away to be dressed for the tomb. Render to them then a suitable homage; but I say again, put your ultimate trust in God. Commit your country continually to his care, and trust in him to direct its destiny; and, though all your rulers may die, *must* die, the nation will survive in strength and glory.