

The Village Church

a poem by the Revd Charles Lesingham Smith,
Rector of Little Canfield

The poem was published in 1870 in a book
with other poems by the same author

It follows verses entitled "The Village School" and "The Village
Feast", to which reference is made in the first verse

Some of the Church furnishings were changed in the ensuing
century, but the windows remain the same

I

The VILLAGE SCHOOL and VILLAGE FEAST
Are shrin'd in song, and yet remains,
Ere from my task I be releas'd,
A theme demanding nobler pains.
O may the spirit of God, who deigns
To illumine the darkest in the search
For heav'nly truth, inspire my strains
While now I sing the VILLAGE CHURCH.

II

There's music in its very stones!
Those in the deep foundation cry
To passers by in startling tones
"Ye also in this earth must lie!"
And those which lightly pois'd on high
Build up the tall and graceful spire
Exclaim, while pointing to the sky,
"Thither be all thy soul's desire!"

III

The dripstones of each window end
In corbel'd saints who bid us keep
Close to God's house like them, and spend
The moments there undrows'd by sleep.
The dial-shadows, as they creep
Along the wall from notch to notch,
By holy motto sculptur'd deep
Say what was said by Jesus, "Watch!"

IV

Uplifted on each gable high,
And exquisitely carv'd in stone,
The Cross, beheld athwart the sky,
Tells of the Saviour's dying moan;
Tells us where'er we may be thrown
In life, on pathway bright or dim,
'Mid wealth or want, in crowds or lone,
"Take up thy Cross and follow Him!"

V

The sparrows, as in days of yore
When David sang, build many a nest
Beneath the jutting eaves, and o'er
The altars of Jehovah rest;
And Christ's unerring words attest
That e'en for these God careth still,
And that not one such humble guest
Falls to the ground without His will.

VI

The porch's richly panell'd wall
Unfolds an arched and shafted way,
Which, like the heav'nly gate, to all
Gives access ever in the day.
Through the open side-lights oft the ray
Of sunshine speeds with gladden'd look,
And small birds hie for rest or play,
Familiar with each coign and nook.

VII

Ere through the Norman door we pass,
 Note well the structure, plain and old,
 The time-worn stone, the oaken mass
 With iron hinge of graceful mould.
 Outside it, sleeps the world so cold!
 Inside, O what awakening lore
 Reminds us oft of Him who told
 His faithful flock, "I am the door!"

VIII

And now we stand within the nave!
 Its awful space is hush'd and lone!
 Beneath it many a hollow grave
 Is tenanted by mouldering bone!
 The dead, forgotten and unknown
 To their own place, for us leave room
 In turn to pray and make our moan
 For sin, and drop into the tomb!

IX

The font, a shape of ancient stone,
 On columns five is resting nigh,
 Where living waters oft are strown
 To cleanse from sin's infirmity.
 How sweetly there do infants lie
 Unconscious on the surplic'd arm,
 While o'er them sounds the lullaby,
 Releasing them from spiritual harm!

X

Behold yon roof! Though on its height
 Were ne'er three thousand people array'd,
 As on that roof which Samson's might
 Pull'd down, large art is there display'd.
 And though its beams are not inlaid
 With gold, nor wrought of cedar fine,
 A fair perspective is survey'd
 Of bays in mingled oak and pine.

XI

Nich'd in the basement of the tower
 An organ lifts its golden reeds,
 From which, with largely varied power,
 Note after note impell'd succeeds.
 Now hymning the Creator's deeds,
 Its loudest diapason rolls;
 Now melting into woe it pleads
 For mercy on despairing souls.

XII

The Western window, plain in hue,
 Spreads into tracery bold and fine;
 Above it, in triangle true
 Three lesser lights in one combine,
 Each trefoil'd; and these all enshrine
 The brightest tints that eye may see,
 Meet emblem of the United Trine,
 The Three in One - the One in Three!

XIII

Beneath, but rais'd above the ground
 In triple rows, on gradual seat
 The children make response, and sound
 The holy psalm with measur'd beat,
 While organ tones subdued and sweet
 Accompany their simple lays;
 And though to polish'd ears unmeet
 The music seem, it lacks not praise.

XIV

For here a sire, from home remote,
 On every Sabbath morn attends,
 As did his child ere her sweet note
 Was hush'd in death; and fancy blends
 Amid the music, as it wends
 Past him, the voice of his lost child,
 And o'er his furrow'd cheek descends
 The tear in sorrow unbeguil'd.

XV

Advance we through the central aisle
 Where seats unbarr'd by doors expand;
 Pass we where wrought in ruder style
 The reading-desk and pulpit stand:
 Then mark the screen by which is spann'd
 The Chancel-arch, how dark and old!
 Carv'd out of oak by cunning hand
 With pointed tracery rich and bold.

XVI

And ere we quit the nave, inspect
 Yon mural tablet o'er the pew,
 And from the names inroll'd select
 For contemplation chiefly two,
 Father and son, whose ages grew
 Each to a hundred years - to man
 A mighty stretch attain'd by few!
 To the' Infinite not e'en a span!

XVII

Arriv'd within the Chancel, lo!
 What holy objects we descry!
 What softly blended colours glow!
 What graceful form allures the eye!
 We seem while here to mount more nigh
 To God, and, like the Patriarch, trace
 The steps to heav'n, and with him cry,
 "Surely the Lord is in this place!"

XVIII

Woing the South, two windows rich
 In decoration both have two
 Main openings glass'd, in each of which
 One of the' Evangelists we view
 Reliev'd against a sky dark blue,
 And canopied with purple' and gold;
 And his own book divinely true
 Each in his hand is seen to hold.

XIX

Westward the sacred monogram
 Is deftly trac'd in the' upper light,
 To mind us of the spotless Lamb
 Now thron'd above the' empyreal height.
 Nor has a skill'd hand fail'd to write
 Alpha and Omega below,
 Those mystic letters, sharp and bright,
 Him first, Him also last to show.

XX

And read in trefoil'd space, above
 The figures more to the' East, the sign
 Of Pow'r with Wisdom join'd and Love,
 One God, the Unit in the Trine,
 Triangle fram'd with equal line,
 To which there intricately cleaves
 A curve tri-cusp'd, whose branches twine
 To fashion three co-equal leaves.

XXI

These windows flank on either side
 A beauteous work, the Chancel door,
 On which the workmen all have vied
 The riches of their skills to pour.
 A canopy with crockets o'er
 The arch aspires, and on a shield
 Inclos'd within it see once more
 The sacred monogram reveal'd.

XXII

The delicately slender shaft
 Is hewn from marble lightly red,
 And all the chisel's utmost craft
 Is lavish'd on its leafy head.
 The ball-flow'rs are profusely shed
 Along the moulding deep and fine,
 And angels, with their wings outspread
 As corbels, tell of things divine.

XXIII

The one with hands uplifted seems
 Absorb'd in pray'r for a lost race,
 And the sweet light of pity gleams
 O'er all the features of the face.
 In the other with clasp'd hands we trace
 Love mingled with desire to scan
 The marvels of redeeming grace
 Unfolded now to fallen man.

XXIV

Close to the window, quaintly nich'd,
 An old Piscina decks the wall,
 With foliate head not unenrich'd,
 Nor meanly moulded, though but small.
 The hole through which the Priest let fall
 The water which had cleans'd his hands;
 Or rins'd the holy vessels all
 For the Lord's Supper still expands.

XXV

But Eastward turn we now to view
 The grander orient window, dy'd
 With colours gorgeous all, 'tis true,
 Yet apt to pull down human pride.
 Aloft, Saint Paul's three virtues bide,
 Faith, Hope, and Charity; below,
 Scenes from the Saviour's life descried
 Speak two of joy, and one of woe.

XXVI

Faith, looking at a Cross, beholds
 Things to the natural eye unseen;
 Hope firmly to her anchor holds,
 Amid the storms of life serene;
 And Charity, with affection keen,
 Supports young orphans on her knee,
 And clasps them to her breast - I ween
 She is the greatest of the three.

XXVII

Below see first in hallow'd rest
 The new-born infant Jesus lie,
 While o'er Him bends His Mother blest,
 And Joseph, wrapt in thought, is nigh;
 The Shepherds in devotion vie,
 Rejoic'd to have found Him; and a throng
 Of angels in the azure sky
 With trumpets chant their holy song.

XXVIII

In the mid space on fatal tree,
 With crown of thorns on His meek head,
 And hands and feet all bleeding, see
 The suffering Saviour well-nigh dead!
 Here is the Roman banner spread,
 And men with threat'ning looks advance;
 There on a steed, inspiring dread,
 A mounted warrior lifts his lance:

XXIX

The Virgin Mother, simply clad
 In sombre raiment, swoons below:
 With tender aid the young and sad
 Saint John supports her in her woe;
 And Mary Magdalen, not slow
 To feel her misery and loss,
 Falls down, while tears of anguish flow,
 To kiss the dying Saviour's Cross.

XXX

But every trace of grief and gloom
 Has melted yonder on the right,
 Where gazing upward from the Tomb,
 Now void, the Apostles watch the flight
 Of Jesus glorified in light
 And rising slowly in His shroud,
 Until the vision from their sight
 Evanesce in the curling cloud.

XXXI

Now all the windows thus array'd
 Are mirror'd on the polish'd floor
 Encaustic, whence the whole is made
 A scene twice richer than before:
 And oft to enhance the splendour more
 A sunbeam through each opening throws
 The tints far onward till all o'er
 With rainbow light the Chancel glows.

XXXII

Nor think this decoration vain,
 Or only meet for taste refin'd:
 The poor draw thence a solid gain
 Through the eye into their simple mind;
 The deaf too may, in pray'rs consign'd
 To books, join with the common mass,
 But all the sermon which they find,
 Is written on the pictur'd glass.

XXXIII

The reredos at the Eastern wall
 Enclasps the window: grav'n on stone
 In letters legible to all
 Is writ the pray'r Christ taught to His own:
 And here th' Apostles' Creed is shown,
 And also as penn'd (O thought of awe!)
 By God's own hand from Sinai's throne,
 The ten commandments of the Law.

XXXIV

How simply is yon table spread!
 And when array'd in linen fine
 With paten for the mystic bread,
 And golden chalice for the wine,
 'Tis simple still! O Feast divine,
 Where body and soul alike are fed,
 And Christ reveals by holy sign
 That He has suffer'd in our stead!

XXXV

How many a sad and fainting soul
 Has knelt before this goodly rail,
 And here been made by Jesus whole
 From leprous guilt and deadly bale!
 What numbers here have joy'd to hail
 The Spirit descending from above,
 And through the Crucial thorn and nail
 Have known at last that God is love!

XXXVI

Here oft before the altar stand
 The youthful bridegroom and the bride,
 And twain conjoining hand with hand
 Into one holy knot are tied:
 And faithful friends are at their side,
 And words of blessing thrill the ear,
 And warning then succeeds to guide
 Their steps in holy love and fear.

XXXVII

Observe beneath, amid the gloom,
 And minding us of our own goal,
 A stone inlaid with brass, the tomb
 Of one yclept in ancient scroll
 "Lord of this town." For centuries whole
 Have ceas'd his earthly joys pains:
 His flesh is dust, and sleeps his soul;
 Of his abode no trace remains!

XXXVIII

Carv'd in the Chancel's Northern wall
 In precinct hallow'd and retir'd,
 And like a mural tomb (though small,
 Were space for effigy requir'd)
 A niche recedes, with roof admir'd
 For flowery pendent, moulded groin,
 And all of grace which love untir'd
 Could throw on panel, shaft, and coign.

XXXIX

Contrasting with the paler stone,
 The marble rising dark behind,
 Records on graven scroll the moan
 A son makes for a Mother kind;
 Describes the music of her mind
 Which made his home one summer song,
 And tells how sweetly she resign'd
 A life as guileless as 'twas long.

XL

Pierc'd through the wall, near this, a stair
 Winds upward to the Vestry floor,
 Where lie preserv'd with reverent care
 The records of parochial lore:
 Most quaint are those from days of yore
 Matching yon aged wooden chest
 With triple lock, which heretofore
 Held holy plate and priestly vest.

XLI

Besides the sculptures thus detail'd
 Which make the Chancel's richest dower,
 The thoughtful builder has not fail'd
 Elsewhere to' exert creative power,
 To fling life-forms around, and shower
 On corbel, capital, and string
 The ivy, vine, and passion-flower,
 All emblems of some holy thing.

XLII

Returning to the Chancel, mark
 That other structure in the wall,
 West of the stair, a funeral ark
 With decorated arch for pall,
 Rear'd by a brother to recall
 A sister's worth; its brassy chart
 Proclaims from holy writ to all
 How "blessed are the pure in heart."

XLIII

Yes! beautiful indeed are these,
 And may by none be pass'd with scorn;
 Yet 'tis the living stones which please
 Our God, and most His temple' adorn.
 How sweet to mark each Sabbath morn,
 While from afar the chime is heard,
 God's people wending through the corn,
 And o'er the mead, to hear His word.

XLIV

They move on different paths which all
 Converge to one concentrated site,
 And much the greater part forestall
 The hour ordain'd for holy rite,
 So that whene'er the day is bright,
 They gather into groups and tell
 Their doings all, and change of plight,
 Since last they heard the Sabbath bell.

XLV

Within the porch, on either side,
 A bench of stone invites repose,
 After long walk in summer tide,
 Until "the Parson's ring" shall close:
 And old men seated on the rows
 Ask of each other how they fare,
 Discoursing, while the zephyr blows
 And gently lifts their silver hair.

XLVI

The bell is hush'd. Sedately now
 All enter, and as up the aisle
 Each old man moves, he makes his bow
 Towards the Priest in the olden style:
 Nor let the modern sceptic smile
 At usage so remote and dim;
 God sees there homage without guile,
 And reckons it as paid to Him.

XLVII

With rev'rence do they hear the pray'rs,
 And join in what they understand;
 But by such simple minds as their's
 The whole is seldom clearly scann'd.
 Yet still do they delight to stand,
 As did their sires, on the ancient ways;
 And what is dark to them seems grand,
 And meant for their Creator's praise.

XLVIII

So too the very word divine,
 The tuneful psalms, when sweetly sung,
 To those who know not line from line,
 Are accents of an unknown tongue:
 Yet when the voices of the young
 Blent with the organ tones arise,
 The darkest heart at times is wrung,
 And lifted nearer to the skies.

XLIX

But from the sermon all can win
 The utmost wealth which it contains;
 And e'en the sound of falling pin
 Be heard, so deep a silence reigns.
 For here the Preacher oft explains
 The mercies through the Gospel strown,
 And aye in homely Saxon strains
 Speaks to men's bosoms from his own.

L

And as he opens out his text,
 See yonder earnest listener rise
 From his own seat, and, on the next
 Supported, bend with eager eyes
 And ears to catch each sound that flies
 From lips that seem to him inspired,
 For bar'd he thinks his bosom lies
 With all its thoughts howe'er retired;

LI

Nor knows that the good man has drawn
 This portraiture exact and bold
 From his own conscience, which is gnawn
 By sins within itself inroll'd;
 For ah! to sinners none can hold
 The mirror up so well as he
 Who, tangled in the Serpent's fold,
 Has been by Mercy's arm set free.

LII

The sermon done, the blessing said,
 All homeward wend their several ways,
 And into lengthen'd lines are spread
 Diverging as the solar rays:
 Save that perchance a loiterer stays
 To view the tranquil scene, or lone
 And silent o'er the churchyard strays
 To scan there each recording stone.

LIII

God's acres are to thoughtful minds
 Epitomes of human life,
 Telling how loose the tie that binds
 Each pilgrim to this vale of strife;
 How busy Death is; and how rife
 The causes which invite his blow;
 How parents, husband, children, wife,
 All living, soon will sleep below.

LIV

Here infants, early laid to rest,
 Are cradled in Death's hollow cave;
 The worm is yonder maiden's guest,
 Whom youth and beauty could not save;
 A stalwart man has ceased to rave
 Of thrift and wealth beneath that mound;
 And age has found a peaceful grave
 Where nods yon tombstone o'er the ground.

LV

But hark! I hear the passing bell!
How loudly booms its fitful toll!
O mortal, ponder; 'tis the knell
Announcing a departed soul!
That speeds to its appointed goal;
Its vest will crumble to a clod;
Nor be resum'd until the roll
Of trumpet summon it to God.

LVI

Lo, yonder yawns an open grave
Which says to all men, Die ye must!
None shall escape, the young, the brave,
The rich, the grand, nor e'en the just.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust!
Yet through the gloom faith sees the light,
For whoso in his God shall trust
Will rise with Christ, and walk in white.

LVII

In glory when He comes with sound
Of trump, and all before Him stand,
May those who worship here be found
Elect to pass to His right hand!
And when their ransom'd souls expand
With boundless rapture, may they search
Not vainly mid the radiant band
For him who sang the VILLAGE CHURCH!