

"The Invisible World"
Parochial and Plain Sermons vol. IV sermon 13
St. John Henry Newman

1 "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for
2 the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." 2
3 Cor. iv. 18.

4 THERE are two worlds, "the visible, and the invisible," as the Creed speaks,—the world
5 we see, and the world we do not see; and the world we do not see as really exists as
6 the world we do see. It really exists, though we see it not. The world we see we know to
7 exist, *because* we see it. We have but to lift up our eyes and look around us, and we
8 have proof of it: our eyes tell us. We see the sun, moon and stars, earth and sky, hills
9 and valleys, woods and plains, seas and rivers. And again, we see men, and the works
10 of men. We see cities, and stately buildings, and their inhabitants; men running to and
11 fro, and busying themselves to provide for themselves and their families, or to
12 accomplish great designs, or for the very business' sake. All that meets our eyes forms
13 one world. It is an immense world; it reaches to the stars. Thousands on thousands of
14 years might we speed up the sky, and though we were swifter than the light itself, we
15 should not reach them all. They are at distances from us greater than any that is
16 assignable. So high, so wide, so deep is the world; and yet it also comes near and close
17 to us. It is every where; and it seems to leave no room for any other world.

18 And yet in spite of this universal world which we see, there is another world, quite as
19 far-spreading, quite as close to us, and more wonderful; another world all around us,
20 though we see it not, and more wonderful than the world we see, for this reason if for no
21 other, that we do not see it. All around us are numberless objects, coming and going,
22 watching, working or waiting, which we see not: this is that other world, which the eyes
23 reach not unto, but faith only.

24 Let us dwell upon this thought. We are born into a world of sense; that is, of the real
25 things which lie round about us, one great department comes to us, accosts us, through
26 our bodily organs, our eyes, ears, and fingers. We feel, hear, and see them; and we
27 know they exist, because we do thus perceive them. Things innumerable lie about us,
28 animate and inanimate; but one particular class of these innumerable things is thus
29 brought home to us through our senses. And moreover, while they act upon us, they
30 make their presence known. We are sensible of them at the time, we are conscious that
31 we perceive them. We not only see, but know that we see them; we not only hold
32 intercourse, but know that we do. We are among men, and we know that we are. We
33 feel cold and hunger; we know what sensible things remove them. We eat, drink, clothe
34 ourselves, dwell in houses, converse and act with others, and perform the duties of
35 social life; and we feel vividly that we are doing so, while we do so. Such is our relation
36 towards one part of the innumerable beings which lie around us. They act upon us, and
37 we know it; and we act upon them in turn, and know we do.

38 But all this does not interfere with the existence of that other world which I speak of,
39 acting upon us, yet not impressing us with the consciousness that it does so. It may as
40 really be present and exert an influence as that which reveals itself to us. And that such
41 a world there is, Scripture tells us. Do you ask what it is, and what it contains? I will not
42 say that all that belongs to it is vastly more important than what we see, for among
43 things visible are our fellow-men, and nothing created is more precious and noble than
44 a son of man. But still, taking the things which we see altogether, and the things we do
45 not see altogether, the world we do not see is on the whole a much higher world than
46 that which we do see. For, first of all, He is there who is above all beings, who has
47 created all, before whom they all are as nothing, and with whom nothing can be
48 compared. Almighty God, we know, exists more really and absolutely than any of those
49 fellow-men whose existence is conveyed to us through the senses; yet we see Him not,
50 hear Him not, we do but "feel after Him," yet without finding Him. It appears, then, that
51 the things which are seen are but a part, and but a secondary part of the beings about
52 us, were it only on this ground, that God Almighty, the Being of beings, is not in their
53 number, but among "the things which are not seen." Once, and once only, for thirty-
54 three years, has He condescended to become one of the beings which are seen, when
55 he, the second Person of the Ever-blessed Trinity, was, by an unspeakable mercy, born
56 of the Virgin Mary into this sensible world. And then He was seen, heard, handled; He
57 ate, He drank, He slept, He conversed, He went about, He acted as other men; but
58 excepting this brief period, His presence has never been perceptible; He has never
59 made us conscious of His existence by means of our senses. He came, and He retired
60 beyond the veil: and to us individually, it is as if He had never showed Himself; we have
61 as little sensible experience of His presence. Yet "He liveth evermore."

62 And in that other world are the souls also of the dead. They too, when they depart
63 hence, do not cease to exist, but they retire from this visible scene of things; or, in other
64 words, they cease to act towards us and before us *through our senses*. They live as
65 they lived before; but that outward frame, through which they were able to hold
66 communion with other men, is in some way, we know not how, separated from them,
67 and dries away and shrivels up as leaves may drop off a tree. They remain, but without
68 the usual means of approach towards us, and correspondence with us. As when a man
69 loses his voice or hand, he still exists as before, but cannot any longer talk or write, or
70 otherwise hold intercourse with us; so when he loses not voice and hand only, but his
71 whole frame, or is said to die, there is nothing to show that he is gone, but we have lost
72 our means of apprehending him.

73 Again: Angels also are inhabitants of the world invisible, and concerning them much
74 more is told us than concerning the souls of the faithful departed, because the latter
75 "rest from their labours;" but the Angels are actively employed among us in the Church.
76 They are said to be "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs
77 of salvation." [Heb. i. 14.] No Christian is so humble but he has Angels to attend on him,
78 if he lives by faith and love. Though they are so great, so glorious, so pure, so
79 wonderful, that the very sight of them (if we were allowed to see them) would strike us
80 to the earth, as it did the prophet Daniel, holy and righteous as he was; yet they are our
81 "fellow-servants" and our fellow-workers, and they carefully watch over and defend even

82 the humblest of us, if we be Christ's. That they form a part of our unseen world, appears
83 from the vision seen by the patriarch Jacob. We are told that when he fled from his
84 brother Esau, "he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the
85 sun had set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and
86 lay down in that place to sleep." [Gen. xxviii. 11.] How little did he think that there was
87 any thing very wonderful in this spot! It looked like any other spot. It was a lone,
88 uncomfortable place: there was no house there: night was coming on; and he had to
89 sleep upon the bare rock. Yet how different was the truth! He saw but the world that is
90 seen; he saw not the world that is not seen; yet the world that is not seen was there. It
91 was there, though it did not at once make known its presence, but needed to be
92 supernaturally displayed to him. He saw it in his sleep. "He dreamed, and behold, a
93 ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached up to heaven; and behold, the
94 Angels of God ascending and descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it."
95 This was the other world. Now, let this be observed. Persons commonly speak as if the
96 other world did not exist now, but would after death. No: it exists now, though we see it
97 not. It is among us and around us. Jacob was shown this in his dream. Angels were all
98 about him, though he knew it not. And what Jacob saw in his sleep, that Elisha's servant
99 saw as if with his eyes; and the shepherds, at the time of the Nativity, not only saw, but
100 heard. They heard the voices of those blessed spirits who praise God day and night,
101 and whom we, in our lower state of being, are allowed to copy and assist.

102 We are then in a world of spirits, as well as in a world of sense, and we hold communion
103 with it, and take part in it, though we are not conscious of doing so. If this seems
104 strange to any one, let him reflect that we are undeniably taking part in a third world,
105 which we do indeed see, but about which we do not know more than about the Angelic
106 hosts,—the world of brute animals. Can any thing be more marvellous or startling,
107 unless we were used to it, than that we should have a race of beings about us whom we
108 do but see, and as little know their state, or can describe their interests, or their destiny,
109 as we can tell of the inhabitants of the sun and moon? It is indeed a very overpowering
110 thought, when we get to fix our minds on it, that we familiarly use, I may say hold
111 intercourse with creatures who are as much strangers to us, as mysterious, as if they
112 were the fabulous, unearthly beings, more powerful than man, yet his slaves, which
113 Eastern superstitions have invented. We have more real knowledge about the Angels
114 than about the brutes. They have apparently passions, habits, and a certain
115 accountableness, but all is mystery about them. We do not know whether they can sin
116 or not, whether they are under punishment, whether they are to live after this life. We
117 inflict very great sufferings on a portion of them, and they in turn, every now and then,
118 seem to retaliate upon us, as if by a wonderful law. We depend on them in various
119 important ways; we use their labour, we eat their flesh. This however relates to such of
120 them as come near us: cast your thoughts abroad on the whole number of them, large
121 and small, in vast forests, or in the water, or in the air; and then say whether the
122 presence of some countless multitudes, so various in their natures, so strange and wild
123 in their shapes, living on the earth without ascertainable object, is not as mysterious as
124 any thing which Scripture says about the Angels? Is it not plain to our senses that there
125 is a world inferior to us in the scale of beings, with which we are connected without

126 understanding what it is? and is it difficult to faith to admit the word of Scripture
127 concerning our connexion with a world superior to us?

128 When, indeed, persons feel it so difficult to conceive the existence among us of the
129 world of spirits, because they are not aware of it, they should recollect how many worlds
130 all at once are in fact contained in human society itself. We speak of the political world,
131 the scientific, the learned, the literary, the religious world; and suitably: for men are so
132 closely united with some men, and so divided from others, they have such distinct
133 objects of pursuit one from another, and such distinct principles and engagements in
134 consequence, that in one and the same place there exist together a number of circles or
135 (as they may be called) worlds, made up of invisible men, but themselves invisible,
136 unknown, nay, unintelligible to each other. Men move about in the common paths of life,
137 and look the same; but there is little community of feeling between them; each knows
138 little about what goes on in any other sphere than his own; and a stranger coming into
139 any neighbourhood would, according to his own pursuits or acquaintances, go away
140 with an utterly distinct, or a reverse impression of it, viewed as a whole. Or again, leave
141 for a while the political and commercial excitement of some large city, and take refuge in
142 a secluded village; and there, in the absence of news of the day, consider the mode of
143 life and habits of mind, the employments and views of its inhabitants; and say whether
144 the world, when regarded in its separate portions, is not more unlike itself than it is
145 unlike the world of Angels which Scripture places in the midst of it?

146 The world of spirits then, though unseen, is present; present, not future, not distant. It is
147 not above the sky, it is not beyond the grave; it is now and here; the kingdom of God is
148 among us. Of this the text speaks;—"We look," says St. Paul, "not at the things which
149 are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are
150 temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." You see he regarded it as a
151 practical truth, which was to influence our conduct. Not only does he speak of the world
152 invisible, but of the duty of "looking at" it; not only does he contrast the things of time
153 with it, but says that their belonging to time is a reason, not for looking at, but for looking
154 off them. Eternity was not distant because it reached to the future; nor the unseen state
155 without its influence on us, because it was impalpable. In like manner, he says in
156 another Epistle, "Our conversation is in heaven." And again, "God hath raised us up
157 together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." And again,
158 "Your life is hid with Christ in God." And to the same purport are St. Peter's words,
159 "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see Him not, yet believing, ye
160 rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." And again, St. Paul speaking of the
161 Apostles, "We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to Angels, and to men." And
162 again in words already quoted, he speaks of the Angels as "ministering spirits sent forth
163 to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation." [Phil. iii. 20. Eph. ii. 6. Col. iii. 3. 1
164 Pet. i. 8. 1 Cor. iv. 9. Heb. i. 14.]

165 Such is the hidden kingdom of God; and, as it is now hidden, so in due season it shall
166 be revealed. Men think that they are lords of the world, and may do as they will. They
167 think this earth their property, and its movements in their power; whereas it has other
168 lords besides them, and is the scene of a higher conflict than they are capable of

169 conceiving. It contains Christ's little ones whom they despise, and His Angels whom
170 they disbelieve; and these at length shall take possession of it and be manifested. At
171 present, "all things," to appearance, "continue as they were from the beginning of the
172 creation;" and scoffers ask, "Where is the promise of His coming?" but at the appointed
173 time there will be a "manifestation of the sons of God," and the hidden saints "shall
174 shine out as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." When the Angels appeared to the
175 shepherds, it was a sudden appearance,—"*Suddenly* there was with the Angel a
176 multitude of the heavenly host." How wonderful a sight! The night had before that
177 seemed just like any other night; as the evening on which Jacob saw the vision seemed
178 like any other evening. They were keeping watch over their sheep; they were watching
179 the night as it passed. The stars moved on,—it was midnight. They had no idea of such
180 a thing when the Angel appeared. Such are the power and virtue hidden in things which
181 are seen, and at God's will they are manifested. They were manifested for a moment to
182 Jacob, for a moment to Elisha's servant, for a moment to the shepherds. They will be
183 manifested for ever when Christ comes at the Last Day "in the glory of His Father with
184 the holy Angels." Then this world will fade away and the other world will shine forth.

185 Let these be your thoughts, my brethren, especially in the spring season, when the
186 whole face of nature is so rich and beautiful. Once only in the year, yet once, does the
187 world which we see show forth its hidden powers, and in a manner manifest itself. Then
188 the leaves come out, and the blossoms on the fruit trees, and flowers; and the grass
189 and corn spring up. There is a sudden rush and burst outwardly of that hidden life which
190 God has lodged in the material world. Well, that shows you, as by a sample, what it can
191 do at God's command, when He gives the word. This earth, which now buds forth in
192 leaves and blossoms, will one day burst forth into a new world of light and glory, in
193 which, we shall see Saints and Angels dwelling. Who would think, except from his
194 experience of former springs all through his life, who could conceive two or three
195 months before, that it was possible that the face of nature, which then seemed so
196 lifeless, should become so splendid and varied? How different is a tree, how different is
197 a prospect, when leaves are on it and off it! How unlikely it would seem, before the
198 event, that the dry and naked branches should suddenly be clothed with what is so
199 bright and so refreshing! Yet in God's good time leaves come on the trees. The season
200 may delay, but come it will at last. So it is with the coming of that Eternal Spring, for
201 which all Christians are waiting. Come it will, though it delay; yet though it tarry, let us
202 wait for it, "because it will surely come, it will not tarry." Therefore we say day by day,
203 "Thy kingdom come;" which means,—O Lord, show Thyself; manifest Thyself; Thou that
204 sittest between the cherubim, show Thyself; stir up Thy strength and come and help us.
205 The earth that we see does not satisfy us; it is but a beginning; it is but a promise of
206 something beyond it; even when it is gayest, with all its blossoms on, and shows most
207 touchingly what lies hid in it, yet it is not enough. We know much more lies hid in it than
208 we see. A world of Saints and Angels, a glorious world, the palace of God, the mountain
209 of the Lord of Hosts, the heavenly Jerusalem, the throne of God and Christ, all these
210 wonders, everlasting, all-precious, mysterious, and incomprehensible, lie hid in what we
211 see. What we see is the outward shell of an eternal kingdom; and on that kingdom we
212 fix the eyes of our faith. Shine forth, O Lord, as when on Thy nativity Thine Angels
213 visited the shepherds; let Thy glory blossom forth as bloom and foliage on the trees;

214 change with Thy mighty power this visible world into that diviner world, which as yet we
215 see not; destroy what we see, that it may pass and be transformed into what we
216 believe. Bright as is the sun, and the sky, and the clouds; green as are the leaves and
217 the fields; sweet as is the singing of the birds; we know that they are not all, and we will
218 not take up with a part for the whole. They proceed from a centre of love and goodness,
219 which is God Himself; but they are not His fulness; they speak of heaven, but they are
220 not heaven; they are but as stray beams and dim reflections of His Image; they are but
221 crumbs from the table. We are looking for the coming of the day of God, when all this
222 outward world, fair though it be, shall perish; when the heavens shall be burnt, and the
223 earth melt away. We can bear the loss, for we know it will be but the removing of a veil.
224 We know that to remove the world which is seen, will be the manifestation of the world
225 which is not seen. We know that what we see is as a screen hiding from us God and
226 Christ, and His Saints and Angels. And we earnestly desire and pray for the dissolution
227 of all that we see, from our longing after that which we do not see.

228 O blessed they indeed, who are destined for the sight of those wonders in which they
229 now stand, at which they now look, but which they do not recognize! Blessed they who
230 shall at length behold what as yet mortal eye hath not seen, and faith only enjoys!
231 Those wonderful things of the new world are even now as they shall be then. They are
232 immortal and eternal; and the souls who shall then be made conscious of them, will see
233 them in their calmness and their majesty where they ever have been. But who can
234 express the surprise and rapture which will come upon those, who then at least
235 apprehend them for the first time, and to whose perceptions they are new! Who can
236 imagine by a stretch of fancy the feelings of those who having died in faith, wake up to
237 enjoyment! The life then begun, we know, will last for ever; yet surely if memory be to us
238 then what it is now, that will be a day much to be observed unto the Lord through all the
239 ages of eternity. We may increase indeed for ever in knowledge and in love, still that
240 first waking from the dead, the day at once of our birth and our espousals, will ever be
241 endeared and hallowed in our thoughts. When we find ourselves after long rest gifted
242 with fresh powers, vigorous with the seed of eternal life within us, able to love God as
243 we wish, conscious that all trouble, sorrow, pain, anxiety, bereavement, is over for ever,
244 blessed in the full affection of those earthly friends whom we loved so poorly, and could
245 protect so feebly, while they were with us in the flesh, and above all, visited by the
246 immediate visible ineffable Presence of God Almighty, with His Only-begotten Son our
247 Lord Jesus Christ, and his Co-equal Co-eternal Spirit, that great sight in which is the
248 fulness of joy and pleasure for evermore,—what deep, incommunicable, unimaginable
249 thoughts will be then upon us! what depths will be stirred up within us! what secret
250 harmonies awakened, of which human nature seemed incapable! Earthly words are
251 indeed all worthless to minister to such high anticipations. Let us close our eyes and
252 keep silence.

253 "All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field. The grass
254 withereth, the flower fadeth, because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the
255 people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the Word of our God shall
256 stand for ever." [Isa. xl. 6-8.]