

Reunion with our Own in Another Life.

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THERE is hardly any subject familiarly connected with religion which requires careful examination and re-statement so much as this. So much is asserted, so much more is assumed, for no better reason than that it is desired. The merest shreds of argument, pitifully unconvincing in themselves, are held sufficient to establish positions which are so welcome to the hearers or readers of sermons. All opposition, all hesitation even, is resented with bitter dislike as treason against the one necessary demand of the human heart. Undoubtedly the strength of the position lies here—in the demand of the human heart that it shall find its loved and lost again. This demand is natural, and beautiful. It is closely intertwined with what is most admirable and most lovable in human life and character. It deserves to be treated with the utmost respect and sympathy.

Nevertheless, it ought to be treated—it deserves to be treated—with frankness and honesty: not with pitying indulgence, like a sickly child that must not be 'countered' however unreasonable it be. If as Christians we are to cherish the expectation of 'reunion with our own' as an integral part, the most valued part maybe, of our hope for eternity, we must know on what this hope is based: the hope itself must, like everything else, be subject unto Christ; it must be rooted and grounded in 'the truth as it is in Jesus,' it must be brought into line and touch and vital union with the rest of our faith. No doubt this assertion will be denied by a vast multitude of people; it will be met with the counter-assertion that the expectation of reunion in another life needs no support from creeds or scriptures: that it finds its own proof in the imperative demand of so vast a multitude of men and women, who themselves have loved and lost, who know what it means to them. The nature of this demand will be examined by and by: for the present it is conceded. But we note at once that it is not in any way peculiar to Christians: it is found in its most beautiful and most poignant form amongst people who are just children of nature, who have little or no religious belief: in a word, it is not at all Christian in itself, although it is widely held by Christian people. Now it is obviously an

unfair and misleading thing to mix up desires and expectations of the natural man with the hopes and rewards of Christianity. The former are not for a moment to be scouted, but they stand on a quite different footing from the latter, and require quite different treatment. But this erroneous method is rampant in the religion of to-day. Reunion with our relatives is habitually put upon the same level as reunion with Christ, as though both were part of the Christian faith. In point of fact they spring as expectations from utterly different sources, and must rely for support upon arguments which are absolutely different.

Let us take the Christian position first. There is not a single word in the Creeds, or in the Bible, to support the assertion that we shall find our own again in another world. It is timidly suggested that it may lie hid in the Communion of Saints. Whatever this blessed fellowship may involve of personal knowledge, intercourse, intimacy, hereafter (as to which we know almost nothing), it is clear that it will be based upon a spiritual order. The 'company of heaven' will not be arranged on any system recognized on earth, but according to their advance in holiness and their likeness to Christ. No one will question this: no one will seriously suggest that the Risen with Christ will be *grouped in families* for the high and spiritual ends of the Communion of Saints. There are again those who endeavour to deduce from certain texts the assurance that there will be mutual recognition in the unseen. The effort would be contemptible if it were not so pitiful. To be reduced to *this* in behalf of a great hope! To find in such miserable and paltry sophistries as these the solace of broken hearts! They take, *e.g.*, the parable of Dives and Lazarus, and point out that these departed ones recognized one another across the impassable gulf which separated Hades from Abraham's bosom. They shut their eyes to the obvious fact that our Lord, in telling this story to the Jews, for His own tremendous purposes deliberately adopted the crude materialistic language which then passed current. If we were to accept that picture-language literally it would throw the whole of Christian teaching about the future life into utter confusion.

It is childish as well as dishonest to pick out the statement that the rich man recognized Lazarus, and to ignore the other statement that these disembodied souls had tongues and fingers and were concerned about a drop of water. Who does not see that all this is picture-language most admirably adapted to subserve the great moral lessons of the parable? Equally unconvincing, for an entirely different reason, is the argument (if such it may be called) founded on our Lord's resurrection appearances, coupled with Phil. 3²¹. It would seem that our Lord was recognized only when He wished to be. In any case He was (as far as we may judge) not yet glorified when the Apostles recognized Him. The circumstances of our future resurrection will be very different from His; and it is to the 'body of His glory' that ours are to be conformed. The whole subject of the risen body is so difficult and doubtful that any argument about it must needs be in the highest degree precarious. Dismissing these trifles (for such they really are), the great, outstanding fact is that the New Testament writers have never a word or a thought to bestow upon the subject of recognition in heaven. That they looked forward, and with eagerness, to the rewards of the life to come, is certain. St. Paul was very willing to remain here for the sake of his converts: for himself he had not the slightest doubt that it was 'far better' to depart this life and to be 'with Christ.' Elsewhere he looks forward to receiving a crown of righteousness, but its value to him lay in the fact that the Lord would bestow it on him. It was, of course, no material crown, but the counterpart of the 'Well done, good and faithful servant' of which the Lord Himself had spoken. Always our Lord had spoken in that sense, and in that sense exclusively, as that He Himself, and His companionship, should be *the* reward, *the* joy, of heaven. It is acknowledged no doubt by all that He spoke in this sense, but it is not realized how *exclusively* He spoke in this sense. Not once did He ever allude to our meeting one another hereafter: not once is the subject mentioned by any of the New Testament writers. This absolute silence, on a matter which is bound to employ and interest the natural man, has a tremendous significance. It means that it lies altogether outside the sphere and scope of Christian revelation. But even that is not all. In two directions our Lord set Himself to stem the tide (if I may use the expression) of natural—of family—affection. That this was

never, on any account, to stand in the way of whole-hearted devotion to Himself, He affirmed by the amazing paradox that no one could be His disciple who did not 'hate' his nearest relatives. Clearly as we recognize their paradoxical character, we can hardly even now read the words without a shudder. Certainly they cannot mean less than this, that a Christian must be always ready to renounce and to trample upon his dearest and most sacred family affections, if an absolute loyalty to Christ seems to demand the sacrifice. It has nothing to do *directly* with recognition and reunion hereafter, but *indirectly* it hits very hard indeed that overmastering affection of the natural man for his own which is the real source of the demand to have them again. A man who was attracted to Christ would look at the faces of his dear ones, and then he would say (very honestly, very wisely perhaps), 'No, I cannot be His disciple, I could not under any circumstances throw these over.' The great majority of us—if it really came home to us—would have to say the same. But our Lord made it abundantly plain that if any man would be His, he must be prepared to abandon even his wife and children.

In another way He sought to stem the tide of family affection, and that with direct reference to the future life. He declared that there would not be any husbands or wives in heaven because human nature would have become (in that respect) like the angelic. In other words, all that is of sex will have disappeared. His words are plain, and people do not dispute them. Of course (they say) the physical basis of marriage will have gone, but that is no reason why people should not love as dearly as before, or why they should not yearn to find one another again. If, however, what is desired and expected is just the old intimate and exclusive relationship, deprived only of its physical basis, then the question of the Sadducees returns in full force. You cannot get over the fact that numbers of men and women have two or three wives or husbands apiece. And you cannot get over the intolerable difficulty which this one fact would cause, if anything at all resembling the earthly relationship were to revive in heaven. The truth is that, according to the Bible and the Prayer Book, marriages are for time, *not* for eternity; they are for this life only. It may seem to many (who are themselves sincere and noble) that such a view is unworthy of that immortal love of men and women

which they are never tired of glorifying. Let us then consider of what elements married love consists, and ask which of these can really be immortal. First, there is the feeling, varying from raging passion to placid affection, which is directly based upon the physical relationship—which is, in a word, sexual. There is nothing whatever to be said against this, except in deprecation of its excess, but it is agreed that it cannot survive death or the resurrection-change. Secondly, there is (generally) that delightful ‘camaraderie,’ that community of interests and occupations and pre-occupations, which springs up between married people, and does not weaken with age. But this is not in itself religious, and moreover is indirectly rooted in that same physical basis of marriage. No one can give any reason why it should revive in heaven. Thirdly, there is (often) a self-denying, self-sacrificing love, a spiritual product of the marriage bond on its ideal side, which *is* quite fit to survive. It has become fused, so to speak, with the love of Christ. But this, however beautiful it be, however much it may enhance the joy and the blessedness of heaven, is too spiritual, too ‘disembodied’ to justify the common expectation of finding our own again in something very like the old relationships. Such spiritual love exists under all sorts of conditions, and is as common to the unmarried as to the married, to the desolate as to those with many ties. All married love, all love of parents and children, *ought* to grow up into this, but in so growing up it will be changed and glorified into an heavenly counterpart of itself and leave all its earthliness behind. To imagine that husbands and wives, mothers and children, will be husbands and wives, mothers and children, in heaven is simply to prefer human sentiment to Divine truth, to demand of God what has no sanction in His Word, what is contrary to the teaching of Christ, and what is inconsistent with common sense. The woman who has been loving and amiable, faithful and obedient, to two or three (consecutive) husbands cannot be ‘wife,’ in any intelligible sense, to all or any of them hereafter. The mother who has had to leave behind her the child of her love cannot find him again in the grown man who is equally eager to embrace once more his own little ones.* However one may try to think the matter out, one *cannot* honestly reconstruct the family grouping in another world. One can only, by successive surrenders, come at last to a purely spiritual affection, stripped

of all ‘domestic’ character, which would not in the very least satisfy the yearning of the natural man to find ‘his own’ again. That is the very crux of the situation. The Christian religion (as it is taught) is desperately anxious to commend itself to what is good and lovable in the eager desires of ordinary people. It is therefore continually engaged in offering to them (without any authority) reunion with their own in heaven. And as continually, when these offers are examined, they are found to be as unsatisfying as they are unauthorized. There is no getting away from that.

We have now a very different task before us: we have to face the fact that natural religion (quite apart from Christianity) demands, not only the immortality of the individual, but in a certain sense the immortality of the family. In the days of barbarism, when a chief was buried his wives and servants were sacrificed on his grave in order that they might still be his in the spirit world. Life there, without these enlargements, would not be worth living. Just as barbarism has been softened and ennobled into our present highly civilized condition, so has that brutal procedure been transformed into the quasi-religious assurance that we shall find again our wives, our children, and our friends in heaven. The instinctive feeling which really lay below is the same. What makes life dear and valuable is its affections, and those affections are centred and embodied in those whom we call our own. Love is stronger than Death: it refuses to give way to him; it persists, with invincible obstinacy, in demanding that its loved ones shall be given back to it. And here we stand, humbly and reverently, before one of the very few universal and fundamental facts of human nature. Love is the greatest thing in the world. Degraded as it everywhere is, it is everywhere capable of flinging off all its degradation, of developing a courage, a purity, a self-devotion which are too beautiful for words. It is impossible to think that true love can die: it *must* be immortal. That is so, and Christianity tells us why it is so. God Himself is love: it is His very essence. Whatsoever, therefore, in human love is pure and unselfish is of God: not only *from* Him, but *of* Him. It cannot possibly die: it must survive, if anything human survive at all. Like most (or all) of the fundamental tenets of true religion, it depends wholly upon the character of God. Its guarantee is simply what God

is, unchangeably, always, everywhere. Love *must* survive: love cannot die, any more than God can. This we acknowledge, not only with conviction, but with eagerness, with an inexpressible thankfulness. It remains to correlate this foundation truth with the expectation of 'reunion with our own.' In the first place, we are bound to acknowledge, what poets and novelists are so eager to prove to us, that true love—love of the unselfish, self-sacrificing order—is found in all manner of human relationships, some of them very irregular, very sinful. There is many a poor fallen woman who will lavish all that she has, or is, upon a worthless man with an 'abandon,' a carelessness of self, a gladness of sacrifice, which might make the angels weep for pity—and for joy. The 'adultery' novel which is so immensely popular to-day may serve to drive home this truth at least, that love does sometimes show its brightest and most heavenly features under the basest conditions. No one, surely, will assert that these irregular and sinful unions, which are so often a cruel wrong to others, will be revived in a better world. But the true love entangled in them must survive—somehow. In the second place, we recall the fact, known by experience to so many of us, that the very truest love has no fulfilment, never becomes 'domestic.' It is a truism that few people marry their first loves. But it is precisely this first love, of early youth, of boy and girl belike, which is most true to the divine original, most pure, most unselfish, most beautiful. It has the ineffable charm and freshness, the stainless purity, of a summer's dawn. There is not anything like it in the world for fragrance, for sweetness. It is as delightful as it is impossible. They go their separate ways, these two, and Time with his slow, kindly healing assuages the bitter pain. Later on they marry other people whom they love well enough; and if they ever meet one another again it is probably with a sense of surprise, of disillusion. Their love had no fulfilment on earth, and can have none in heaven; but the love

itself is immortal, it must survive. It remains for us to acknowledge that no conceivable arrangement or re-arrangement of individuals in any sort of domestic or family grouping would be tolerable in heaven. Love itself will survive, so far as it is true and worthy of God, but love must be wholly disentangled from all that belongs—directly or indirectly—to sex. God Himself made us male and female, made us to be husbands and wives, parents and children—but for this life only. It is under the conditions of sex that love (which is of God) habitually finds its training and its fulfilment here. These conditions are absolutely to cease, and all relations directly or indirectly dependent on them will cease too. All true love will (we know not how, and cannot even guess) be disentangled, and will survive. It will somehow be found again as part and parcel of the love of Christ.

Such a conclusion, founded as it is alike on Scripture and on reason, will not satisfy the many—because what they really want is, not to depart and to be with Christ, but to abide here in the pleasant resting-places they have found. It is very natural. But let them think *this*. Jesus Christ is no stranger to them. They know how kind He was, how sympathetic. He was not one who ever held aloof from the common wants or sorrows of mankind. Once and again He fed the hungry. He helped on the gaiety of that wedding at Cana. He was mindful of His dear mother in His dying hour. He is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. He says indeed nothing whatever about reunion with our loved and lost in heaven. He simply proposes Himself, His Presence, His care, as *the* Prize of our up-calling. Can we not trust Him? Must we not believe that *with Him* God will also give us all other things, and all other people, that we want, so far as is possible, and good, for us? We may not expect the old relationships, or anything like them, but in the companionship of heaven all true love will find room for itself, and room to expand a thousandfold.