

Bunyan's Message for To-day.¹

IT is inevitable that we should ask such a question as that which now concerns us:—What is the message of John Bunyan for to-day?—inevitable so long as our interest in the past is deeper than that of the antiquarian. There are, of course, those who love the old for its own sake: they feel an interest in remote centuries just because they are remote. But most of us are interested in what is old because of that principle of continuity which determines all history in the true sense. We are interested in the past because it is the precursor of the present. We like to regard life as a stream, and therefore if our attention is drawn to the 17th century it cannot remain there, but is impelled forward until we have related the 17th to the 18th, the 18th to the 19th, and so on. This is the true historic sense which finds the meaning of the past in the situations of the present. So in all our Bunyan Tercentenary celebrations there is always lurking at the back of our minds this question: What is it all about? What bearing have the Bunyan group of incidents and the Bunyan literary contributions upon the peculiar difficulties of religion and life to-day?

It is always a matter of interest, and it is often difficult to foresee, how much in any writer will survive him. Even greatness has transient as well as permanent elements, and the ever-present problem of criticism is the disentanglement of the various strands in any great life. Every man is in some sense the child of his age: he will reveal this in language, in idiom and turn of speech, in prejudice here and there, as well as in the specific contribution he makes to the thought of the time. Our purpose is to select those elements in Bunyan which make him a figure, not of the 17th century, but of the 20th, and, indeed, of all time.

R. H. Coats has invited us to imagine the surprise Bunyan would feel if he could survey our modern world. It is indeed difficult to imagine Bunyan riding through Bedford in a Morris-Oxford, or listening-in. Between his century and ours there is a great difference, and it is by considering one element in this difference that we may gain a clue to Bunyan's valuable contribution to the special situation which confronts us to-day. Much of our modern difficulty in religion arises from the remarkable development of scientific knowledge and the application of scientific principles to life in general. To understand this develop-

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ment we are compelled to go back to Bunyan's own time. I think it may be shown that his age, through its scientific genius, is partly responsible for the scientific trend of modern times, and it may not be without interest to ask whether he has anything to say to us in regard to those perplexities for which his own generation was so largely responsible.

It is agreed that Bunyan's century was a century of genius, but this is usually explained by reference to the stirring fight for freedom, political and religious, which called out some of the greatest men in our British history. But it is probably not so commonly realised that Bunyan's century was a century of scientific genius. A. N. Whitehead has stated (*Science and the Modern World*) that for two and a quarter centuries we have been living on the scientific capital accumulated in the 17th century. Think of a few figures on that crowded stage. A year after Shakespeare published the first quarto edition of *Hamlet*, Bacon had published his *Advancement of Learning*. In the year of Shakespeare's death Harvey is believed to have expounded his theory of the circulation of the blood before the College of Physicians in London. Galileo died in 1642, but (as if to compensate for this great loss), the same year saw the birth of Isaac Newton. One year before this Descartes had published his *Meditations*, and a year or two later came his *Principia Philosophiæ*. Think of some of these names—Bacon, Harvey, Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Pascal, Boyle, Newton, Locke, Spinoza, Leibnitz—and you gain some idea of the scientific and philosophic possibility of this century. It was during Bunyan's century that there began that strong scientific movement which was ultimately to result in scientific materialism. At the time the full implications for religion of these great scientific discoveries were not realised. For a long time biological and chemical researches went on almost unnoticed by the Church, and although physical and astronomical advances had early attracted the attention of religious men, it was quite possible to keep science and religion in two compartments of human knowledge without realising the problems involved. Witness that remarkable prayer with which Kepler concluded one of his astronomical treatises:—

“Behold, I have here completed a work of my calling with as much of intellectual strength as Thou hast granted me. I have declared the praise of Thy works to the men who will read the evidences of it, so far as my finite spirit could comprehend them in their infinity . . . but if anything unworthy of Thee has been taught by me . . . do Thou teach me that I may correct it. Have I been seduced into presumption by the admirable beauty of Thy works, or have I sought my own glory among men, in the construction of a

work designed for Thine honour? O then graciously and mercifully forgive me, and finally grant me this favour, that this work may never be injurious, but may conduce to Thy glory and the good of souls."

Such a prayer is evidence of an attitude on the part of a distinguished scientist which it would be difficult to match two centuries later. In the intervening period the deeper scientific knowledge had been brought to bear upon the problems of religion with the result, as Dr. Gore points out (*Belief in God*, ch. 1) that religion experienced a series of shocks. We have not yet fully recovered from these shocks. Thus we may claim that the movement in which Bunyan's contemporaries played so important a part has resulted in an extremely critical attitude to the tenets of orthodox Christianity. The "conflict between Religion and Science" is by no means over. Only a false optimism could think that this conflict had ceased. What has really happened is that the basis of attack has been changed, so that we look rather to certain modern psychologists than to the physicists for the really virile attack: as a matter of fact the physicists are far too busy among themselves readjusting their own basic principles to speak with that air of confident dogmatism that once characterised them.

However this may be, it is certain that (in popular as well as in academic circles) the last century or two has altered the religious perspective. This may be illustrated by reference to three points, and it may not be without value to point out how Bunyan's emphasis will go far to correct the weaknesses of some modern tendencies.

1. It will not be denied that sin, in the popular conceptions of to-day, has lost much of the heinousness it once possessed. We listen to our scientists as they unfold the principles of heredity, and find ourselves (almost unconsciously) losing the sense of personal guilt. It is so much more comfortable for us if we can lay the blame for our misdemeanours a generation or two further back. Then the biologist steps in and tells us about our animal past: sin does not look quite so bad if you can speak of it as a persistence from some lower ancestry, and talk broadly about instincts. Finally the psychologist analyses our ailments, and when we have accustomed ourselves to his vocabulary, and learned to speak in terms of complexes, disorders and repressions, we find ourselves wondering if, after all, sin is not a matter for a doctor rather than a Saviour. Wise men everywhere will rejoice at the great advances of modern times, especially in the realm of the mind—theology can never afford to be ignorant of Psychology (as Augustine would tell us)—but they will be wise only if they realise the limits of modern science. In the nature of the case, it is not the business of a scientist or a

psychologist to point out to us the heinousness of sin, although, if unprejudiced, they will frankly recognise the entrance, with man, of reason and will into the evolutionary process, and the vital difference thus produced. The really vital matter in it all is that we should try to think of what sin is to the eye of a Holy God: not all the investigations into the origin, nor all our attempts to express the facts in new language, can alter the *moral fact*. If you take the Christian view, sin means something so heinous and deadly as to need a Cross and an Empty Tomb for its overcoming.

It is to this aspect of the matter that Bunyan so strongly urges us back. The man who wrote *Grace Abounding* had struggled in black and treacherous waters. Like Christian in the deep river, so had Bunyan struggled, and sometimes in despair of ever finding ground for his feet. But he did find that secure ground, and ever afterwards his strong conviction of the reality of sin was matched by his equally strong conviction of Divine Grace. It is quite likely that we shall use a different vocabulary from that used by Bunyan, but as for the great religious experiences themselves we shall be wise if we follow his guidance into the heart of reality.

2. A second feature of our modern attitude is a somewhat cold and rationalistic approach to religion. There is among us a lurking fear of anything that can be described as emotional. Perhaps this is a reaction from the emotional excitement that has sometimes characterised famous religious movements. The term "conversion" does not occur so frequently in our religious vocabulary as it once did: whether we use the exact term, of course, does not matter, but it is important that we regard the experience as real and fundamental. The same tendency is responsible for our rather "intellectualist" attitude to many of our famous hymns. We hesitate to sing "Rock of Ages," "I lift my heart to Thee, Saviour Divine," "Jesus, Lover of my Soul," because they are sentimental, or perhaps because their theology is "old-fashioned"! Most ministers meet this tendency in their churches, and it is not difficult to understand as a reaction from the crudities and excessive sentimentalism of earlier times. But we need to beware of a very real danger: religion is in danger of becoming a matter of speech, when it ought to be a matter of song. It is an advantage to learn careful articulation, but if in our careful articulation we lose the note of glad exultation, the loss is real. There is a place for intuition as well as reason, for poetry as well as prose, for imagination as well as logic.

Bunyan is calling us back to this. He recalls us to the power of poetry and imagination. He bids us be thankful that there were psalmists as well as legalists in the Hebrew race. He would argue that you cannot set out the Grace of God in a syllogism, or in a series of propositions: you have to write a poem about it, or

say it in an anthem. Our age is not likely to underestimate the advantages of scientific progress, and we must be careful lest the process of calculating, estimating, weighing arguments obscure the romance and poetry of life.

3. The need for Bunyan's emphasis is seen in a third feature of our modern attitude, our conception of life itself. There has developed among us a tendency to regard the world as a kind of vast laboratory wherein various forces act and react: man a kind of meeting-point of bio-chemical forces—with God like some great scientist looking on. We may be sure that Bunyan would not understand this. If anyone could have given him a prophetic picture of the world as the development of Newton's and Kepler's conceptions has made it, he would have declined to accept it. "When you have applied all your scientific theories," he would say, "life still remains for me a Pilgrimage." It is important to retain this idea of pilgrimage. It is valuable as setting out life as a progress towards a spiritual goal. The idea of progress, of course, is prominent enough in the scientific thought of the last seventy-five years, but too often the spiritual goal has been lost, as well as the essentially spiritual character of the development.

On these grounds, then, we may claim that Bunyan has a much needed message for to-day. His emphasis is so sound. He brings us at once to ourselves as needing God, and to God as yearning for our redemption. He will counsel us to look up at the stars and allow us to be guided by the astronomers: but will then ask us not to forget the God who made them in their myriad beauties. He will allow us to study the bones of animals and of man: but will then ask us not to forget the soul-life that makes man a child of God. Since Bunyan's day we have improved our roads: Science has levelled them and given them strength and solidity. But we are not to forget the paths by the stream and through the meadows. It is on account of this that a busy man, tired with the dust and heat of modern life, and bewildered by its speed, can still find refreshment in *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Grace Abounding*. These speak from out of the 17th century, and tell us of imagination, courage and love as the notes of the great life.

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