

## The Poet and the Preacher.

G. K. CHESTERTON, in his book on Browning, specifies as one of his characteristics, an ardent and headlong conventionality. A poet must, by the nature of things, be conventional. What Chesterton means by conventional we see from other remarks of his in the same chapter. "If a poet really had an original emotion, if, for example, a poet suddenly fell in love with the buffers of a railway train, it would take him considerably more time than his allotted three score years and ten to communicate his feelings." Whatever emotions the poet or preacher seeks to express with any hope of success, must be those which his audience shares with him and if they are not common to both, one is a member of a kingdom, the other cannot enter; so that the limitations of our knowing are to some extent of our own making. Not only is it true that as I am I see, but I can only know those things, the beginnings of which are in myself. If there be no kinship between me and the external objects, they can never become real to my consciousness. The man who declared that poetry was but a convenient way of talking nonsense, declared at the same time, that the spirit of the muses had never warmed and illumined the chambers of his soul.

But such an idea of poetry is not at all uncommon. To a great number the poet is a long-haired dreamer and idler, walking through this practical world with his head in the air, and while, to the great toiling numbers, "life is real," to him it is but a day dream, with neither reality nor earnestness in it. To such people poetry is a mere ornamentation of literature, something for effeminate young gentlemen, with no particular calling in life, to aspire after; something that might be taken out of our national possessions, and affect our national life and character no more than the taking away of brooch and earrings would affect the lady who wore them.

But many of those holding those ideas of poetry have similar ideas of preaching. To them the preacher is one of the necessary parts of society, it is the proper thing to have churches and with the church comes the preacher—but there is no practical utility in either him or the church, the only purpose they serve is that of the spire in Gothic architecture.

If such ideas be true, is it not strange that the poet and the preacher have held such a place in the world's life and history? Must it not be that the higher kingdoms of life and thought have not been entered by vast numbers of those around? Every age has had its great preachers; the listening ears have

heard trumpet voices burdened with messages from God, and the slopes of Parnassus have never been without the poets of song, who have sung to "many harps in diverse tones."

These men have been more than ornamental appendages and dreaming songsters. They have touched life at the springs and the influence has been cleansing and quickening. There have been exceptional periods when they have been the very soul of their age, and the powers and glory of kings and assemblies have paled before the presence and power of poet and preacher, whose names have grown more luminous with passing years, while the names of princes and monarchs have been as the stars of the night which the dawn has wiped out one by one.

For an illustration of this we cannot do better than turn to Italy and especially to Florence. In Dante and Savonarola, the poet and the preacher, you have the two most mighty personalities connected with that wonderful city; they were not merely the ornaments of the city, but the moulders of its life, the shapers of its constitution and, in the case of the latter especially, the fountain of its noblest impulses and efforts for freedom. Who will deny that the richest possession of that fair city at the present day, is the memory of those two great sons of God. How poverty stricken would be that period in Italian history without those two men, whose names are so great and renowned, notwithstanding the fact of the alleged greatness of the family of the Medici and other personalities striving for peace and influence.

Some perhaps may be surprised that these two great offices of poet and preacher should be linked together, for there are no doubt many who see no relationship between the two. But we must admit that these two men have been brought into close relationship with one another; they have walked side by side in the march of the ages. Is it natural or accidental that they have been brought much together? Has it been affinity of soul that has drawn them and bound them, or merely external circumstances? Have they drawn their inspiration from the same fount, has it been in the same sphere that they have directed their energies, are those essential elements common to both, qualities of soul without which the poet can never become a great poet, nor a preacher a great preacher? It is out of a growing belief that such is the case that I have been led to write this essay.

The true preacher is the prophet of God. Without some of the prophetic element in him, without the insight of the seer, no man can hope to be a successful preacher. The part of human life which is of first interest and consideration to the preacher is that which makes possible a fellowship between the human and Divine. If there were no religious instinct in human

life, nothing but that which could be satisfied with the things of time and sense, there would be no need of the preacher. If men's relationships with God were right, the preacher would be superfluous, and if men were independent of God, the preacher would be an audacious intruder. The work of the preacher is essentially religious and spiritual. Is the work of the poet the same? If so, there must be some vital relationship between poetry and religion. Religion and music were cradled together. Can the same be said of religion and poetry? One thing that we are sure about is that many of the greatest poets, in the greatest of their poems, have been largely dependent for the framework of their poems upon the current theological ideas of their age; and while theology differs as much from religion as a treatise about life differs from life itself, we know that those who are interested in the forms in which men have expressed their thoughts and feelings about religion, must have some interest in that which is at the bottom of all their trowing, i.e., religion itself. There have been poets who have ignored religion, and religious people to whom poetry is obnoxious, but these facts prove nothing save the limitations of those concerned. In what does the poet find his interest, to what fields does he go for his themes? The whole range of existence, wherever the sensations, thoughts, feelings of man can travel, there the poet may be at his side, and find material for his faculties to work on. To the true poet there are no limitations. Every part of nature makes some appeal to him; every opening flower and every grey dawn; every stream and every star; but you will not surely shut him out from that human nature which presents the greatest variety and interest? Here he finds his richest themes; here his imaginative faculty is most stirred out of the mystery he encounters. But as soon as he becomes interested in the problems of life and destiny, he becomes interested in the problems of religion. So the truly great poet becomes the religious poet, and one is not surprised to find, as we constantly do, the highest forms of poetic art springing from the religious emotions and that religion and poetry are linked, not by mere accidental circumstances, but by affinities that are old and strong and deep and lasting. As one well qualified to speak on this subject has said: "The poetical and religious feeling join hands. They may not be indispensably necessary to one another. Indeed they are not. . . . Poetry may be lusty and strong, while quite indifferent to religion, but nevertheless, they cannot remain long sundered." Poetry has been glad to use the sublime elements of Religion to build up its most noble work; she has found in the deep religious problems of life her most invigorating food; she has reached her loftiest flights when religion has impelled

her wings. Nor is the benefit solely on one side. Poetry repays her debt, and religion finds in poetry her ally and evangelist. She has wrought some of her profoundest and most enduring impressings by the aid of poetry.

"A verse may find him who a sermon flies," and it is through the aid of poetry that religion has been able to rouse ardour and revive courage: and times without number the lonely heart of the exiled and weary warrior of the faith has been comforted and quickened by hearing one of the Songs of Zion.

It is needful, before proceeding further, to get some clear and definite idea of what poetry is. We must first of all get rid of the idea that it is simply rhyme and rhythm. These are aids to memory, and poetry will usually express itself in them. Rhythm is quite natural in times of intense feeling and passion. Language gains a certain rhythmic movement in all intense hours, and corresponds to the movements of the Soul. Intense anger and love give a certain eloquence to almost every man. So while rhyme and rhythm usually accompany poetry, they do not constitute it, nor are they essential to it. Poetry is the fittest human expression of the highest and strongest, deepest thoughts and feelings of which we are capable. Wordsworth calls it "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge." Coleridge says, "it is the blossom and fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language." Another has defined it "the fine wine that is served at the banquet of human life." All real poetry is truth, dressed in her wedding garments. Theodore Watts Dunton, than whom there is no higher authority on this subject, says "absolute poetry is the concrete and artistic expression of the human mind in emotional and rhythmical language." The only question regarding this definition is, as to the meaning Dunton attaches to the word—mind. If he gives to it a spiritual as well as intellectual meaning, then one is bound to admire the definition.

But, for the discovery of truth, do we not depend upon the intellectual faculties, and is poetry a child of the intellect? In the acquiring of knowledge, too much emphasis has been laid upon the intellectual faculties and too little upon the other parts of our being. There is a knowledge, say of nature which is gained simply by scientific processes, but the knowledge of nature thus gained may not be exhaustive; beauty is never seen by analysis, but by a faculty which groups together all the knowledge you have gained simply by the intellectual faculty. Principal Shairp tells us, "Imagination in its essence seems to be from the first intellect and feeling blended and interpenetrating each other. Thus it would seem that purely intellectual acts belong to the surface and outside of nature: as you pass inward

to the depths, the more vital places of the soul, the intellectual, the emotional, and the moral elements, are all equally at work; and this in virtue of their greater reality, their more essential truth, their nearer contact with the centre of things." There is no kind of discovery which is not accompanied by a certain quickening of our sensibilities, certain thrills which are usually of gladness. We never come into contact with reality or fact, even in relation to the physical world, without some experience of that thrill of our inner nature. When, however, we pass the surface, "and pass onward to the depths, the more vital places of the soul," and come with our whole being into contact with fact and reality at the centre and heart of things, how intense then must be those thrills! The highest poetry is the most fitting human expression of those thrills, those strange glows of emotion which mean souls cannot experience, but which great and noble souls often experience and without which there can be no poet. It matters not whether he be the poet of imagination whose production belongs to the romantic school, or the poet of nature, whose work is chiefly interpretative and descriptive narrative, or whether he be the poet of life, dealing with life in all its variety and relationships and thus belonging chiefly to the dramatic school, there must be that contact of the whole soul with great realities, "that real apprehension of truths as opposed to the merely notional assent to them," which becomes the genesis of that atmosphere and spirit out of which all true poetry is born.

Mr. W. Bagehote divides poetry into three classes—the pure—the ornate—the grotesque. In the school of pure poetry he places Wordsworth as the supreme illustration. The scenery and characters of Wordsworth's poetry could be seen by any one visiting the district Wordsworth loved so much and in which he lived so long. His characters were real more than ideal. He opened men's eyes to see the real around them, to which they had so long been blind, but which he had seen and had his soul thrilled with the vision. Under the second head he takes Tennyson as his illustration, and makes good use of "Enoch Arden." Enoch Arden is not the man you meet with in actual life, though in poetry he may hawk fish in the streets and go out as a common sailor upon the deep. The man you meet selling fish and the man you know who goes out as a common sailor upon the deep is of a much lower order than the Enoch Arden of Tennyson fame. The poet deals with the ideal more than the real, his poetry is more ornate than pure. Perhaps you may easily divine where he turns for his illustration of the grotesque. It is to Browning and Browning's "Caliban upon Setebos." In that poem, the poet makes Caliban's ideas of God

simply grotesque because of their crudeness in comparison with the revelation given in Christ. Caliban's God is a God made out of the crude thoughts and more crude feelings of a savage, and from such grotesqueness there is a rebound to the truth and reality about God as revealed in Christ.

But however many divisions of poetry we may make, we are always driven into that inner realm of fact and reality behind and beyond all visible appearances for its birth. "Whenever the soul comes into living contact with fact and truth, whenever it realises these with more than usual vividness, there arises a thrill of joy, a glow of emotion, and the expression of these is poetry." To the poet outward nature is but a garment, a spectacle, an appearance; but behind there is a great world of reality and in that world his soul finds its life and highest fellowship, and this and this alone, satisfies him: and his works are the literary expressions of his soul's experiences in that great world of living reality.

We now pass on to the consideration of another part of our subject, viz., What is Religion? Briefly by Religion I mean the sense of God, the Fountain of all life, with Whom human relationship is possible and unto Whom we are responsible. These two ideas of relationship and responsibility at once transfer the whole subject to the inner realms of life, and there the springs of religion and poetry cluster. There may be poetry of certain kinds which has no relationship with religion, but religious life which is intense cannot long do without song as a channel of expression. There has never been a great religious revival which has not been accompanied with music and poetry. Every true preacher must have something of the poet about him. Sometimes the two have been rolled into one and we have had our poet preachers, like Thomas Jones, of Swansea, and Robertson, of Irvine, and may we not put George Macdonald with them? great organ souls where heavenly music slumbered, which has often found release by the pressing sorrows of sinful men.

There is one illusion in relation to the poet that needs shattering and applies almost equally to the preacher. It is that the poet depends almost simply upon one faculty for his power, as though his gift could be perfected by the development of one part of his nature which was quite separate from the rest. Francis Turner Palgrave, in one of his letters, wisely says, "The impression Turner made on me was that of great general ability and quickness. This confirms me in my general view of art, that it is less the product of a special artistic faculty than of a powerful or general nature expressing itself through paint or marble." In this respect Palgrave is at one with Goethe, for this was his idea of genius. Great poetry or great preaching

must spring from a great nature. It can never be that they are the work of a mean little man with one abnormal faculty; in each case it is the work of a great nature whose energies have been focussed into one channel. Chopin was constantly advising his pupils to study widely and beyond the range of their own profession. What sort of men were Browning, Tennyson and Wordsworth? Not small men with one abnormal faculty, but great men with ever widening sympathies and interests. The same has to be said of our Pulpit Princes. Nothing could injure them as men which did not injure them as poets and preachers. After the Edinburgh period of dissipation, Burns never sang as he had done before it. Burns had shrivelled as a man, he could not concentrate his mind the same; that period of dissipation marked the turning point in his career as a poet. Occasionally he relived some of his golden moments, but the fountain of song he felt was closing within him. As R.L.S. says, speaking of his life after the Edinburgh period, "He knew and knew bitterly that the best was out of him; he refused to make another volume, for he felt it would be a disappointment."

Now let us look at some of the qualifications of poet and preacher. The first of these is *intensity of realising power*, so that whatever is laid hold of becomes real and vital. The intensity and strength of this power settles the rank of both poet and preacher. This is not a power possessed exclusively by these men; the historian and novelist alike, are almost as dependent upon this power. What is to be made real and vital by either of them, must be a burning, living reality in their own souls, and this realising power of facts and truths of making the past throb with active life, of making imaginary men and women as vital and real as those we rub against in the midst of bustling days, depends not simply upon the intellectual faculty, but upon the intensity of the whole man. Such like apprehension makes a demand upon the highest and deepest and most vital within us.

No doubt this power is possessed in some measure by all men. No one, for instance, can read of the struggles in the past in this England of ours for civil and religious liberty, without entering into the past in some measure. But the man who is going to tell others of that past, and move and stir the souls of men, must enter into the past and re-live the old experiences; the men who made that past must be living to him; the truths which moved them must move him; he must enter into their battles and their struggles, the iron must enter his soul as it entered into theirs, and just in the degree he vitalises his knowledge and makes real the past, in that degree can he hope to move men by his word and his song. Without the possession of this intense realising power neither *Robinson Crusoe* nor *The*

*Pilgrim's Progress* would have ever been written or have possessed their undying interest. The poet and preacher must be men of intense and vivid soul. Wordsworth says of the poet—“He is distinguished from other men, not by any peculiar gifts, but by greater promptness and intensity in thinking and feeling those things which other men think and feel, and by a greater power of expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him.”

It is this power which makes the poet into a creator and maker and gives to mortal man his immortality of influence. Robertson of Irvine, in his lecture on Poetry, says, “And yet there is a kind of life your poetic genius creates, and though not real life, it has a marvellous influence for good or evil in it. . . . Raphael is dead, but his Madonnas still live, shedding their wonderful beauty into the eyes of thousands; Dante is dead, but lovely Beatrice still lives, walking through heaven; Shakespeare is dead, but his Hamlet is still talking to the gravedigger and shall hold on and talk so long as there are graves to dig and sheeted dead to lay in them and thoughtful men to stand beside them and to wonder ‘in that sleep of death what dreams may come.’” But why are not these creatures dead? Because the men who created them, possessed in an eminent degree this intensity of realising power. To whichever branch of poetry we may turn, whether the romantic, the descriptive, or the dramatic; we find that those who have succeeded the best are those who possessed this power to the greatest extent.

To show that what applies to the poet applies also to the preacher will surely be unnecessary. It must be self-evident out of our own experience. Just as we have realised the truth as it is in Christ, have we felt its power and glory and become equipped for making others feel and realise the same. The preacher must realise the Divine presence and in so far as he does he will make others realise it. One who does not possess this power cannot become a great religious force, but he whose intensity of realising power is such that the things of the spirit world are to him the greatest of all realities, and can create in others the same feelings, has got the one great lever to move men's souls.

Another quality which must be held in common by poet and preacher is that of *intense sympathy*. Without it the higher forms of knowledge are never acquired. We all know of natures who draw themselves within themselves in the presence of those whose love and sympathy they do not possess. He who goes forth in a search for the knowledge of men, but leaves behind him the mystic powers of love and sympathy, goes out attempting

to open locked doors for which he has no key. The same applies to the study of nature. To begin with, the scientist and the poet are both observers and there is a certain kind of knowledge which can only be gained by close attention to details. But there is a mystic side of nature with which the scientist as scientist has no concern. His concern is with details for their own sake, but to the poet the full knowledge of details is not the end. From the synthesis of all these details and the outgoing of his sympathy, there is that thrill of joy from the new vision of beauty which is generative of all true poetry. The botanist and poet are both observers of flowers, but for different ends. The end of the poet "is to see and express the loveliness that is in the flower, not only of beauty and form, but the sentiment which so to speak, looks out from it and which is meant to awaken in us an answering emotion." It is the poet's privilege, not only to describe the outward image, but to draw out some of the many meanings that lie hid in it and so render them as to win response from his fellow men. All our highest knowledge of men and nature is gained by sympathy and love, or to use the more recognised term, by intuition. We have sometimes heard and read a great deal about an individual, and perhaps read some of his books, and we have come to think we know the man. Then at last we have met the man and he was very different from anything we had imagined; but after a few minutes we have come away conscious of this; that our souls have met and now we know the man in a fuller and deeper sense. Our sympathy and love have unlocked the doors of life's inner sanctuary and the life lived within has grown clear.

If in these lower realms sympathy is so essential in the acquirement of knowledge, must it not be more so in acquiring the richest knowledge of the spiritual Kingdom. And this is the knowledge to enrich the soul of the preacher and qualify him for his life's work. Without this intense sympathy there may be a rhymester and a man who stands in a pulpit, but no poet and no preacher.

The next common feature of the two is that both poet and preacher *deal with things that are primal*. Both work in the same inner realm of human life; behind and beyond the material, the passing show of things; with those elements in life that are permanent; with love and hope and hunger and sorrow. The influence of both poetry and religion upon the life upon the surface depends upon, and is determined by, their influence in the minor sanctuaries of life. Both influence life upon the surface by influencing life beneath the surface, and colour and sweeten the streams by what they pour in at the springs.

Again the influence of both depends largely upon the *faculty of expression*, for while poetry is very far from being simply a matter of rhyme, and preaching a matter of the tongue and the lips, the power and influence of both are very largely crippled if the faculties of expression are very imperfect. Great as Browning may be as a poet, his influence and power would have been very much extended if he had had the same faculty of expression as his great contemporary. But it is very doubtful if he ever laboured as Tennyson did with this part of his work. Browning was more interested in the thought than the expression, but Tennyson was interested in both. And while Browning rushed as far as possible from the standard of some, who look upon form as everything, as though literature was the art of having *nothing* to say but saying it gracefully, it is a matter to be regretted that more attention was not paid to this part of his work.

It is tenaciously held by some that the intense emotion of the poet and faculty of expression, come into existence at the same time, and if there be not an exceptional faculty of expression there can be no poet; and that the poet differs from other men in this, that he can musically express what others have also felt but which has before been struggling for expression at dumb lips. Wordsworth maintained that there were many men endowed with highest gifts, the vision and the faculty divine, yet wanting the accomplishment of verse. But without the verse they are but dumb poets, which is as great a contradiction of terms as a dumb preacher.

Even though it may be truthfully said that no great preacher was ever made in an elocutionary class, it might be said that there was never a great preacher who did not possess, or who was altogether neglectful of the power and art of elocution. One of the first essentials of a great preacher is the capacity to feel the grandeur of great truths. Having this capacity, he is never without theme, for there are always great truths needing to be uttered, and he must feel the inward compulsion of uttering them, but if his message stumbles at the threshold, and this faculty of expression is one he does not possess nor seeks to cultivate, he cannot hope to be effective.

The poet and preacher are among God's best gifts to any generation, and we must not forget that.

Each new age must its new thought, in new words tell,  
 And the grand primary heart tones in new music swell,  
 And in grander theologies must the higher truth be shown,  
 But unchanged in all changes God's heart and our own.

MORTON GLEDHILL.