

Irish Churchmen will note with interest that the Portuguese Reformers have adopted in the text the liberty which their Church gives its ministers in the preface to the Irish Prayer-Book. This liberty of interpretation of the baptismal formularies and the ordinal has been one of the most precious benefits the Church of Ireland derived from Disestablishment, and has made the position of many of its ministers much easier. What has been secured to English Churchmen by the Gorham judgment is officially declared by the Church of Ireland to be the right of all her sons.

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(To be continued.)



ART. VI.—AFTER THE CHURCH CONGRESS: “ONE THING IS NEEDFUL.”¹

IT is a vivid and touching picture which is presented to us at the close of this evening's Second Lesson, of our Lord's reception in the household of Martha and Mary. “He entered into a certain village, and a certain woman named Martha received Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to Him, and said, Lord, dost Thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me.” It is evident that the two sisters were similarly devoted to our Lord, and thankful to have Him with them. But their devotion to Him took very different forms. In Martha it took the form of eagerness to serve Him. “She was cumbered about much serving,” or, as our Lord said, she was “careful and troubled about many things.” The Lord whom she loved and honoured was in her house, and she could not do enough for Him; no anxiety or care or toil could be too much to bestow upon Him. But the other sister was chiefly sensible of the supreme privilege of being able, in the quiet of the home, to sit at His feet and hear His word. Both sisters had heard Him in His public ministry, and He had won the devotion of both their hearts. But Martha's instinct was at once to make some return for the blessings she had received,

¹ A sermon preached in Peterborough Cathedral on the evening of Sunday, October 12, 1902.

and to testify her affection and homage in unstinted service. With Mary, on the other hand, what she had already heard had aroused a profound craving in her soul. It did not seem to occur to her that He could need anything: she was not sensible of the infinite need of her own heart, and the moment He was in her house she was at His feet, listening to His words, and drinking the water of life which flowed from His lips. To Martha this attitude of Mary seemed a selfish one, and she almost reproaches our Lord Himself for allowing it. "Dost Thou not care," she said, "that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me." It was a very natural remonstrance, and we may well feel some sympathy with the generous heart that could not make enough of an opportunity for serving her Master, and was jealous of what to her seemed her sister's selfishness. But our Lord's answer, while recognising, with all His graciousness, Martha's care of Him and devotion to Him, yet indicates that His approval rested chiefly on the sister whose main anxiety was to receive from Him and not to give to Him, to hear Him rather than to serve Him. "Martha, Martha," He said, "thou art careful and troubled about many things, but one thing is needful, and Mary hath chosen that good part which shall not be taken away from her." If, indeed, it were a matter of doing Him honour, the highest honour that could be paid Him was to look to Him for more and more faith and life, to sit humbly at His feet and to receive His gifts. It was not, after all, mere selfishness which brought Mary to His feet; it was a sense, and a just sense, of the soul's need, and of the infinite gifts the Saviour had to bestow. He, after all, wanted nothing—she wanted everything; she had chosen the good portion, and the Saviour's sympathy rested upon her.

It is to be borne in mind, then, in learning the lesson of this story for ourselves, that the example set before us is that of two types of genuine Christian devotion. The contrast between the two sisters is not between a worldly and a devout character, not between a woman whose mind was entirely engaged in her household cares, and another whose soul was wholly absorbed in religious devotion; but between two women who were similarly devoted to the Saviour, and who showed that devotion in distinct manners—one by being wholly occupied with the thought of what she could do for the Saviour, of the service she could render Him; the other being overpowered by the thought of what the Saviour could do for her, of the enlightenment He could bring to her, the life He could pour into her soul, of the immeasurable

blessing of sitting at His feet. Is it not a lesson we have need to take to heart, that the sympathy, if not the approbation, of our Lord is given rather to the second type of devotion than to the former? Is there not a tendency in us, not unconnected, as has been said, with generous impulses, to think that the nobler type is the one that gives, rather than the one that receives, and that to be cumbered about much service, when that service is rendered to One who is worthy to receive all honour and homage, is something nobler than simply to ask for more blessings, to crave for more grace and more life? But in our Lord's answer to Martha He intimates that such a judgment rests on a very inadequate sense on our part of the relations between us, of His infinite grace and of our infinite need. All the service that we can render Him, all that we can give Him, are as nothing in comparison with Him. As David exclaimed, when dedicating the treasure he had prepared for the Temple, "Who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? For all things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee. . . . All this store that we have prepared cometh of Thine hand and is all Thine own." On the other hand, we render Him the deepest of all homage when, in this conviction that all things come from Him, we open our hearts, our minds, our whole natures, to His gracious influences, to His word, to His Spirit, when we seek to be moulded by Him into the character, the image and the likeness, for which He has designed us; and when, consequently, we make it our chief object to sit at His feet, to listen to Him, and to be inspired by Him. And if, like Mary, we go so far as even to subordinate our service of Him and worship of Him to hearing His word and receiving His grace, we may be sure, at least, of the sympathy and, perhaps, of the approval of the Saviour.

Such a lesson, perhaps, comes before us not inappropriately at the conclusion of a week in this Diocese in which a large gathering of clergy and laity have been discussing in Congress numerous questions of Christian duty and Christian life. A Church Congress is visible evidence that the members of the Church are careful and troubled about many things. The question of the mutual relations of the various bodies into which Christians in this country are unhappily divided; the question of public worship in the Church of England, its duty and its ideal, and whether that duty and that ideal are adequately realized in our Book of Common Prayer; the question of the relation of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount to our

social obligations and to economical problems; the question of temperance; the question of the maintenance of religion in the home under the conditions of modern life; the question of the elementary education of children throughout the country; the question of the compatibility with modern science of our belief in the miraculous acts recorded of our Lord—these are certainly sufficiently numerous and sufficiently grave problems to render men careful and troubled. In respect to many of them, we may well be described as, like Martha, cumbered about much serving. The energies and time of the clergy, in particular, are absorbed in many of such practical questions to a degree which, as they feel and lament, often hampers their spiritual life and devotion, and they might well echo Martha's cry to our Lord: "Dost Thou not care that I am left to serve alone? Bid others therefore that they help me." As this narrative in the Gospels well illustrates, there is a considerable danger in this intense activity in matters of public worship and national service. That danger is that we may be so cumbered with much serving as to have no sufficient time or thought left for the receptive side of the Christian life, for listening patiently to the teaching of God, for sitting at the feet of the Saviour, and obtaining from Him the guidance, the truth, and the life, which alone can enable us to deal aright with the practical problems by which we are encompassed and encumbered. We are in danger, in short, of forgetting that, however numerous and urgent the practical problems of the present day, it remains always true that there is one thing—one thing above all—needful, and that no activity, no devotion, no earnestness in service, can compensate for its neglect. That one thing needful is the portion which Mary chose, the truth, the grace, and the life which are derived from communion with the Saviour in the various ways of His appointment, in His Word, in His sacraments, and in prayer. This is the one test which we should do well to apply to every problem which we have to face, and to every course of action by which it is proposed to solve it. Are we leaving due room for the portion of Mary as well as for that of Martha, for the one thing needful, as well as for the much serving, and the "many things" which the claims of the day impose upon us? We shall often find that this simple test will be an invaluable guide, and will save us from many an error.

Take, for instance, the question of Education, by which the country is now so distracted, and which this week is once more to distract the thoughts and the energies of Parliament. Amidst all the confusions of the discussion, let us never forget

that there is one thing needful, and that is that the children of England should be brought up to sit at Jesus' feet and to hear His word. In the service of the children there are many other things about which statesmen and the friends of Education are anxious and troubled, and justly; and, like Martha, they are often impatient that the ministers and the friends of religion should seem occupied rather with questions of religious education than with those of secular instruction. No doubt that secular instruction is of incalculable importance to the material prosperity of the country; but its material prosperity would not last long if its moral and religious welfare were not maintained; and that of which true Christian men must all be convinced is that that moral and religious welfare is absolutely dependent on its children learning, in such a manner as never to forget it in after life, to sit at the feet of Jesus and to hear His word. Whatever other instruction may be required, this is, at least, the one thing needful. I ventured to say that all Christian men were convinced of this truth. But if they all took it to heart as they ought, could there be the lamentable dissensions, which are our danger and our shame, respecting the conditions under which the word and the will of Jesus should be taught to the children? If Christian men not merely acknowledged, but duly realized, the paramount importance to every human soul, the paramount need for every child, of knowing that the Lord Jesus is its only Saviour in this world and in the next, and of sitting at His feet in life and in death—if they duly realized this, would they not find some means of agreeing to let His words be heard in every school in the land, and of averting the awful danger, a danger of which some public men seem to speak with a light heart, of His words being banished from all schools which rest on public support. Let us, in the midst of this controversy, settle in our minds as the one thing needful, that, notwithstanding the "many things" required for the service of education, time and means should be found for bringing children to sit at Jesus' feet and to hear His word. Let us realize it as our primary duty to see that that portion is not taken away from the children of England. Let that obligation, that solemn responsibility, be realized, and we shall doubtless find the means of fulfilling it.

Or apply the same principle, again, to the question of the maintenance of religion in the home, under the conditions of modern life. We know what is meant by that reference to the conditions of modern life. We know that it refers to the strain, the hurry, the incessant occupation which modern life involves. It means that the man and woman and the whole household

are, like Martha, cumbered with much serving, and that time is grudged, and is hardly found, for the family prayer, and for the family reading of the Scriptures, which formed an essential part of the life of our fathers. But time would be found if we were convinced, as our fathers were, that to sit at the feet of Jesus and to hear His word is the one thing needed for the soundness, for the happiness, for the best graces of family life; and that unless the voice of Jesus is heard day by day, the warmth of His love and the light of His truth cannot be duly felt in the home. It is not merely, as Martha thought, in order to serve Him—though that is of itself an imperative duty—that the family should be gathered at His feet every day; but it is to hear His word, like Mary, to receive that good and gracious portion, which is the one thing needful, and which, through all the anxieties of the day, cannot be taken from us—it is for this that regular family prayer is the greatest of all necessities for the household. Look upon it only in the light of a duty, and you may be tempted to explain it away; you may reason that God does not need such service, or at least that He will excuse you from it under the pressure of your cares and labours. But look on it, like Mary, as your supreme privilege to have the opportunity, day by day, of bringing yourself and those who are dear to you to the feet of Jesus, to hear His word, and you will find the same time for that one thing needful for your souls as you do for all the things you feel to be needed for the body.

Or look again at another of the subjects which was the occasion of anxious discussion at the Congress—the question of the ideal of worship and the adequacy of our services in the Church of England. Approach that question from the point of view of Martha alone; look solely at the question of the service you are rendering to Almighty God, and you will find there are no limits to the development of it which are possible, and to the practical problems which may be presented to you. A grand cathedral like this is the best evidence of the extent to which men may go, and may nobly and religiously go, in devoting all the wealth of art and music, and ceremony and architecture, to the honour and glory of God. No check can well be placed upon the impulses of love and gratitude and adoration which led men in the past—and, thank God, lead them still—to offer, like David, the gold and the silver, and the precious stones and all manner of workmanship, as well as all the glories of music and ceremony, for the service of the house of God. But it has again and again happened in the history of the Christian

Church, and it may in too many cases be seen now, that while men are thus careful and laborious, in the spirit of Martha, in offering their service and making their sacrifices to God, they forget to give its due place to that other purpose for which churches are built and services ordered, that men and women may sit, like Mary, at the feet of Jesus and hear His word. The service we render to God may be so elaborated, and so crowded with ceremony and art and music, as not to leave an adequate place for that hearing of God's Word and that submission to His holy inspiration on which we may be assured that, as in the case of Mary, He looks with the deepest sympathy. After all, as Solomon exclaimed, "the heaven, and the heaven of heavens," cannot contain Him. How much less can our noblest temples and our most splendid worship be worthy of Him! But, as Isaiah says, if He dwells in the high and holy place, He dwells also "with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit; to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." That to which He loves to devote His glory and His grace is to comfort, to purify, to inspire the minds of those who wait upon Him, who sit at His feet, who crave for His truth and grace. Accordingly, to bring God's word and God's grace, through the Scriptures and the Sacraments, to the souls of all who come to worship at His feet may be regarded as one thing needful and indispensable in Divine service. If any developments of worship obscure or hinder that purpose they are wrong, and the fitness of all such developments may, to a great extent, be judged by the degree in which they are compatible with this object. It is the peculiar characteristic of the service of the Church of England that she makes more provision than any Church in the world for the reading of God's word to her children, and for the administration of the Sacraments in such a way as to impress upon all who receive them the manner and the purpose of their original institution by Christ Himself. It becomes us, moreover, individually, ever to be present in Church in the spirit of Mary, no less than in that of Martha, and never to be so cumbered about the many things involved in our service as to forget, with the deepest humility and devotion, to sit at Jesus' feet and to hear His word.

These are but illustrations of the manner in which this declaration by our Saviour of the one thing needful serves to guide us amidst the distractions of modern problems and difficulties. It is the privilege of the Christian Church that its Lord is with it always, even to the end of the world. Though He is not visible, His words are in our hands, and

His Spirit represents Him. Let us bear in mind that, side by side with all our activities, all our labours, all our sacrifices, if such there be, there remains one thing ever needful—to sit at Jesus' feet and to hear His word. All else will pass from us—all this visible world, with all its energies, its splendours, its infinite attractions; but if we choose as our own that one good portion of the word and the grace of the Lord, we shall possess that which shall never, not even by death, be taken away from us.

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