

The Church and the Poor.

A SERIES OF HISTORICAL SKETCHES.

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I.

I. INTRODUCTORY.

WE are constantly being told, and apparently with much truth, that no subject is of wider interest at the present time than that which is usually described as "the social problem." The term is an unfortunate one because it is so vague; and vagueness of terminology is generally either an excuse for loose thinking, or leads to looseness of thought. Actually what should be meant by "the social problem" is two very closely related problems: first, that of right relationships—how to secure that the relationships between individuals, classes, and even nations, may be what they should be; secondly, that of the right use of the possessions and opportunities of life. Both these problems are, of course, ultimately problems of character, and if they are to be satisfactorily and permanently solved, they must be approached from the point of view of character. In short, they are *moral* problems. And this is why it is the Church's duty to do what in her lies to help to solve them.

A very little reflection will show that these are actually the two problems which enter into all our dealings with the poor, into all our attempts to help them, or to assist them to help themselves. Our relationships to them and their relationships to us and to one another must first be rightly conceived, and then rightly discharged. Also our opportunities, including the physical, intellectual, and spiritual possessions of life, must be rightly used toward them; we must also try to teach them to use their opportunities with true wisdom.

The chief work of the Church is to be a witness or exponent, in life and teaching, of the Christian faith—that is, of the

doctrines or principles of Christianity. The object of this and the following articles is to try to show, by a series of brief historical sketches, the importance of a firm conviction of the truth of the Christian Creed—the sum total of the doctrines of Christianity—as the only adequate inspiration and guide to any effort to solve the two problems I have already described.

As an example of what I mean, let us consider the problem of right relationships in the light of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Because I believe in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity I believe that within the Godhead there exist certain primary or fundamental and Divine relationships,¹ and that therefore these (as being within the Godhead) are infinitely sacred. Also, because I believe that man was made in the image of God,² and that man was made a social being with social capacities,³ I am justified in seeing a likeness between Divine and human relationships. Hence all *legitimate* human relationships are sacred. Thus one chief object of the work and teaching of the Church must be to try to make all legitimate human relationships actually what they should be.

As a second example, we will regard the use of the opportunities, including the possessions of life, in the light of the doctrine of the Incarnation. What is the meaning, or, shall I say, the chief issue, of the Incarnation? Is it not the sanctification of everything upon which human nature depends and which ministers to its right or true development? And this will include not only all the opportunities of life, but also all the physical materials, as well as the physical, intellectual, and moral forces of the universe.

As I wish to pursue the historical method, I may here point out a connection between the influence of two great Christian teachers and the two doctrines I have just cited. That the Church in our own country to-day is taking a far wider and deeper, and, I would add, a far more spiritual interest in the welfare of the people, and especially in the welfare of the poor, is largely due to the teaching of Professor F. D. Maurice and

¹ John v. 20, xv. 26, xvi. 13.

² Gen. i. 26; Eph. iv. 24.

³ Gen. ii. 18.

of Bishop Westcott. But to what, more than to anything else, is the great, and, I believe, the still growing, influence of these two leaders due? To this: that both approached the subject from the point of view of *Christian doctrine*. The social teaching of Professor Maurice arose from his profound belief in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and his equally profound insight into the practical issues of this doctrine. Similarly, the social teaching of Bishop Westcott arose chiefly from his insight into the meaning of the Incarnation and its inevitable consequences.

Both Maurice and Westcott were great theologians, and both were extremely able Christian philosophers *before* they became Christian social teachers. I mention these facts here simply as examples of the truth of the thesis I have already implied, that what is termed Christian social work (and of this work, that on behalf of the poor is the chief part), if it is to be wisely done and with permanently good results, must be the issue of a real faith in the whole Christian Creed. Of the actual work done by these two great teachers I hope to speak in later articles.

II. THE OLD TESTAMENT.

In a historical survey of the Church's efforts to help the poor, and of her teaching upon the duty of making efforts to do this, where should be our starting-point? "With the New Testament," would at first sight seem to be the natural reply. But actually we must go farther back than this. I have shown elsewhere¹ that if we would have an adequate conception of Christianity, we must not regard it as beginning with the coming in the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ into the world. The Incarnation is not the *first* event, it is rather the greatest event in the history of Christianity.² For the Incarnation there was a long Divinely ordered preparation; and the issues of it, though immeasurably great, are even yet incomplete. Among the greatest factors in the preparation for the Incarnation stands the

¹ "Social Relationships in the Light of Christianity" (Hulsean Lectures). p. 94 *et seq.*

² Westcott, "Study of the Gospels," p. 47.

teaching of the Hebrew Prophets. In this teaching the need of right relationships between class and class, and the necessity for a wise discharge of the responsibility of opportunities and possessions, hold a prominent place. A great part of the contents of such books as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah deals with the duty of social righteousness, with the claims of social justice. Hence a satisfactory answer to the question, What is the teaching of Christianity upon our duty to the poor? must, at any rate, take account of the teaching of the Prophets of the Old Testament.¹ It cannot, I think, be denied that Christ assumed in His hearers a knowledge of this teaching—in fact, that He based His own teaching upon it as a sufficient foundation. He assumed it as certainly as He assumed a knowledge of the Ten Commandments and of the obligation to keep them. Only when all this is remembered will the wonderful completeness of Christ's teaching be recognized. St. John the Baptist was the last representative of the old line of the Prophets of Israel, and everyone will admit that his work was essential for the work of Christ. But the Baptist's message, as given in detail in the third chapter of St. Luke, is just a series of demands for social justice.

I am not going to dwell upon the teaching of the Old Testament Prophets. All I would say in reference to it here is, that when we speak of "the social teaching of Christianity," their teaching must be included as an essential part of this. And as Christ assumed a knowledge of their teaching in His hearers, so must those who profess to work in His Name be careful to see that not only do they possess this knowledge, but that they are careful in their dealings with others to act according to this teaching.

¹ "Our Lord deliberately took His stand on the Old Testament. . . . Our Lord assumed all that the Old Testament laid down. The Law and the Prophets had been struggling after the establishment of a great social system on a strong moral basis. The Old Testament is full of teaching about wages and human life, full of doctrines of social and individual righteousness. . . . Christ could assume all this, and He did assume it. He takes it for granted. It is the point at which He starts." (From a recent address by the Bishop of Oxford.)

III. THE NEW TESTAMENT.

The social teaching of the New Testament has of recent years been so fully treated that there is no need for me to dwell upon it at any length. There are, however, a few points upon which it seems to be important that stress should be laid, and therefore that attention should be called to them.

First, in our Lord's teaching as given in the Gospels. Here I would notice four :—

1. When He spoke of the blessing of poverty,¹ we must not imagine that He was thinking of the kind of poverty that meets us daily in the slums of our great cities, and against whose causes and results we are continually waging war. Much more probably the words were addressed to those who "belonged to what we should call the well-to-do artisan class, with excellent prospects, open-air life, hard work, . . . with the consciousness that by an honest day's work they could earn a good day's wage . . . who could pray, 'Give me day by day the bread for to-morrow,' with the sure sense that they were praying for something within the reach of those who would work, and could trust in the ordinary order of the Divine Providence."² Have we a single trace in the Gospels, in Palestine,³ of that hopeless and often helpless and rightly-termed "degrading" poverty of which our own country offers so many examples at the present moment? At the same time we must remember our Lord's definite injunctions to alleviate every kind of misfortune which prevents people living a full and thoroughly useful life.⁴

2. Christ's conception of life is full and complete. He says: "I came that they may have life."⁵ He does not speak of physical, and intellectual, and moral, and spiritual life. He knows that for its fulness each of these factors of life is largely dependent upon the fulness of all the others. He views life synthetically—*i.e.*, as a whole, and not analytically, as we are

¹ Luke vi. 20.

² From an address by the Bishop of Oxford.

³ Luke xv. 14 refers to a "far country."

⁴ Matt. x. 8.

⁵ John x. 10.

apt to do. Christ is essentially the "Life-giver" in the most comprehensive sense of the word. He bestows physical health, intellectual wealth, and the highest moral power. To use a modern philosophical term, Christ is an "Interactionist." Under present conditions He teaches the interdependence of the spiritual and the physical, and of which His own incarnate life is the outstanding example and witness. Consequently, Christ teaches the need of adequate sustenance for the *whole* of human nature, if the true work and entire purpose of life is to be accomplished. A careful study of the Lord's Prayer, especially of the connection between its successive clauses, will prove this.¹

3. Christ teaches the immense importance of a suitable environment for the true development of life. This is the lesson of the Parable of the Sower, the first and most fully recorded of His parables. In the statement of the parable the failure or success of the embryonic life, or that which contains the life-principle, to fulfil its purpose is entirely attributed to differences of environment. In the explanation of the parable the same truth is again emphasized, but it is somewhat differently conceived. While in the first the environment may be said to be the individual nature into which the life-principle enters, in the second it is the environment of the hearer with the seed implanted in him.²

I am well aware of the tendency at the present time to lay a disproportionate stress upon the influence of environment, with the consequence that the sense of personal responsibility is weakened and self-effort is discouraged. But there is a great difference between doing this and attaching a *due* importance to environment. To-day there is certainly one school of social workers who fail to attach even a sufficient importance to this factor in the problem. This being so, it is essential that we should remind ourselves that while Christ does not over-

¹ Maurice's "Sermons on the Lord's Prayer" were published during the troublous times of 1848.

² Matt. xiii. 20: ὁ δὲ ἐπὶ τὰ πετρώδη σπαρείς, οὐτός ἐστιν κ.τ.λ.; Luke viii. 12: οἱ δὲ παρὰ τὴν ὁδὸν κ.τ.λ.

estimate, neither does He under-estimate, this factor. He attaches to circumstances their proper weight, and evidently in His opinion this is not a light one.

When we turn from the Gospels to the Acts and Epistles, and see the organized Christian society at work, we find the two-fold problem of right relationships and the proper use of possessions at once confronting those in authority. But we also find the great leaders of the Church acting in each difficulty as it arose, strictly in accordance with the principles either enunciated or assumed by Christ. In fact, the social teaching of the second part of the New Testament may be regarded as simply the practical application to definite cases of the principles laid down by Christ.

It is important to remember that both the first recorded dissension and the first recorded sin among the members of the Church arose in connection with the subject with which we are dealing. The way in which the dissension is dealt with is extremely instructive. I refer more particularly to the *qualifications* which those who were to deal with the matter must possess. These are three: (1) They must have an unsullied reputation, their character and conduct must be beyond accusation;¹ (2) they must be full of the [Holy] Spirit, they must be really religious men, under the highest inspiration and guidance;² (3) they must be "full of wisdom,"³ they must be "skilful" through recognizing the necessity of obeying the Divine laws which govern human and so social welfare. Here we have clearly laid down once for all the essential qualifications of those who are to be responsible agents in what we may term the social work of the Church.

The incident of Ananias and Sapphira is not less important. Their punishment was severe because their sin was not only so great, it was also so comprehensive, and might so easily become

¹ Acts vi. 3: ἄνδρας ἐξ ὑμῶν μαρτυρουμένους.

² πλήρεις Πνεύματος.

³ καὶ σοφίας. On the Biblical meaning of this word see my "Pastoral Teaching of St. Paul," p. 358 *et seq.*

epidemic.¹ Their sin consisted in their desire to be regarded as saintly without the cost of self-sacrifice. They desired to be held in high repute, and at the same time to give way to avarice. To take an adequate part in the social work of Christianity demands a much higher degree of self-sacrifice (and that not only, indeed not chiefly, in money) than most people deem necessary. It is easy to simulate, and so to obtain, a reputation for desiring to do good.

One very important lesson to be learnt from the Acts is, that frequently the bitterest opposition is roused against Christian work because this endangers and diminishes nefarious pecuniary gains or interests. It is when these are lost or jeopardized that the most bitter persecution ensues. St. Paul experienced this both at Philippi² and at Ephesus.³ Now, one chief part of our work among the poor is to remove temptations which are placed before them—*e.g.*, to intemperance and impurity, by means of which other people enrich themselves—*i.e.*, through the poor being led to spend on these temptations their hardly-earned money. Frequently to-day the chief opposition to Christian social work emanates from those who have invested their capital⁴ in these degrading trades, and who see that as this work prospers their returns diminish.

Though there are many other passages in the Acts to which I should like to draw attention, I will mention only one, and that very briefly. It is not always remembered that it was upon a distinctly philanthropic mission that St. Paul visited Jerusalem for the last time, and in fulfilling which he risked his life.⁵ I only cite this to show of how important a nature he regarded this part of his work, a fact to which ample witness is borne in his epistles.

The social teaching in the apostolical epistles is very full,

¹ "Ananias has a great many descendants. . . . If they were all swept out of the Church as he was, there would be a number of pews occupied by 'leading citizens' empty and hung with black" (Dr. Maclaren, *in loc.*).

² Acts xvi. 19 *et seq.*

³ *Ibid.*, xix. 26 *et seq.*

⁴ Workers in the temperance cause especially must be prepared for this opposition.

⁵ Acts xxiv. 17: "I came to bring alms to my nation and offerings."

but here again I must dwell briefly upon only a few points. What must be chiefly remembered is that everywhere it will be found that, directly or indirectly, Christian social duties are taught as simply the inevitable issues of a belief in definite Christian doctrines or principles; they are regarded as the natural results of these.

The incarnate life of Christ upon earth was one consistent expression of a combination of two great principles—the inspiration of love and the responsibility of stewardship. The magnificent social teaching in Rom. xii. and xiii. is really an application of the principle of complete self-sacrifice (or love) demanded in xii. 1. But this verse was evidently written under the inspiration of xi. 36: “For of Him, and through Him, and unto Him are all things,” and also of the appeal in the words, “by the mercies of God”—that is, by the tendernesses, the practical evidences, of the Divine Love. But this is the love which unites the Persons of the Trinity within Itself, and is the essential attitude of the Trinity towards man, as revealed in the infinite sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, a sacrifice in which each Person in the Trinity shares.

The so-called practical teaching in the three last chapters of the Epistle to the Ephesians is (as in Rom. xii.) introduced by the word “therefore,” which must point back to the doctrinal teaching, the principles, enunciated in the first three chapters. And even in these so-called practical chapters we constantly find St. Paul falling back upon some great doctrine as the source of an exhortation.

No sayings of St. Paul's are more frequently quoted than that which runs, “If any man will not work, neither let him eat,”¹ and that about not being weary in well doing.² But how many who quote these remember that both are prefaced not only by the words “we command you in the Name of the Lord Jesus”³ (which must mean all that the Lord Jesus may and ought to be to us), but that in each case the word “brethren” is also prefixed? It is in this word “brethren” and in the term “the

¹ 2 Thess. iii. 10.

² *Ibid.*, iii. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, iii. 6, 12.

Name of the Lord Jesus" that the appeal to principle is seen. Work, and especially work for others, is a sacred duty, a responsibility, because "My Father worketh until now and I work";¹ and not because of any utilitarian reason, but because we must do the will of our Father Who worketh, and copy the example of our Brother in Whom our right to the term "brethren" lies.

Similarly, the social teaching of the First Epistle of St. Peter is everywhere referred back to great principles—*e.g.*, to the principle of love, of humility, and of stewardship, each of which is a principle which governed the actions of Christ Himself. Then the responsibilities, the mutual services of a corporate life, are enjoined because God did not purchase for Himself a number of isolated individuals, but "a people,"² who as a people are to give the witness which only a corporate life can give, and which is the most powerful and convincing of all forms of witness. Our Lord stated that it was the mutual behaviour to each other of those who professed to follow Him that should prove their right to be termed His disciples.³

I pass to the Epistle of St. James. Its special key-note is struck in the fifth verse in the words, "If any of you lacketh wisdom, let him ask of God." Wisdom, which is the skilful conduct of life, comes from the revealed will of God. Wrong conduct, and this will cover both wrong relationships and the wrong use of possessions, is a transgression against the eternal Divine law of righteousness. The man who would "be blessed in his doing" (and of this "doing" social intercourse is a large part) will be a careful student and follower of this law, which, so far as it is concerned with the treatment of our fellow-men, is gathered up in the precept, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Where this precept is kept there will be no oppression of the poor. Jealousy and faction offend against the ideal wisdom, that which has a heavenly origin. Pride is yet another offence against the eternal law of righteousness. I need not go farther, for it is clear that in this epistle, if from a somewhat different point of view, we have the same lesson—*viz.*, the inspiration

¹ John v. 17.

² 1 Pet. ii. 9.

³ John xiii 35.

and guidance of social conduct by great and eternal Divine principles.

Thus the social teaching of the New Testament is that right conduct consists in obedience to the Divine Will ; and the Divine Will is expressed in the life and teaching of Christ, Who is the wisdom of God—that is, the revealed Will of God manifested in a human life which, if truly individual, was also concerned from first to last in the fulfilment of social duties—a life whose primary aim was to establish a right relationship between man and God, and then to get men through their sanctification by His Spirit to use aright—that is, with a full sense of high stewardship—all the gifts and opportunities with which God had entrusted them.

[The next article will deal with efforts to help the poor up to the time of the Reformation.]

