

## The Presence to Believers.<sup>1</sup>

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WE have seen reasons why those who enjoy the Indwelling Presence of Christ by His Spirit should feel drawn to a fuller realization of this Presence by fellowship with the Church. But there is an additional reason which we are now to try and draw out. There is a Presence of Christ with His Church which makes this fellowship of infinite value. It is possible that some might reply, "With the Presence of Christ within me I need no external Presence. He gives me all I want." And yet, if it were known that Christ were actually in Palestine or in Russia or Italy, these would be amongst the first to seek Him out. The confirmation of His Indwelling Presence by an interview with Him would be of infinite value, just that which they hope to gain when they pass through the veil. But this they know to be denied. The Indwelling Presence of Christ by His Spirit was to be the substitute for the Objective Presence. Did He not say so? Did He not assert to His disciples who were grieving over His departure, that it was necessary that He should go away, and that if He went not away the Holy Ghost would not come to them? Was not the Holy Spirit to be His Substitute, to take His place? How unwise, then, to seek for that which God in His Providence has taken from us. We must rest, and rest of course with infinite satisfaction, on the truth of His Indwelling Presence.

There is no Objective Presence, that is gone. But may it not be said that when He said He would go away, that He was speaking of that particular kind of Presence with which they were familiar—namely, the Presence susceptible to sight and touch. That has gone—that passed with the Ascension. But is there no Presence but that which is revealed to hands and eyes? Ask the husband who has lost the wife who was

<sup>1</sup> From "The Shrine and the Presence," a New Work by Bishop Walpole. Ready November, 1913. 2s. 6d. net. London: Robert Scott.

partner of all his thoughts. He will tell you that at times she is more present even than when she was by his side, and that this is not due to imagination or memory, for at times he is taken unawares and convinced of her presence without any thought of her. Now and again that sense comes with irresistible force. He feels it at special times and in special places, and no one will convince him that it is unreal. But this is only one of many illustrations with which history and experience abounds.

I do not refer here simply to the many spiritual manifestations that have been made to the living during the passing of someone dear to them, of which there are too many examples to allow us to put them by as deceptions or impostures, but to the many acts of what we may call projected presence, when by a sustained effort of earnest thought someone has, as it were, forced himself upon our thinking. Such communications force us to feel that presence is not confined to sensible manifestations. And to this might be added the numberless examples of the revelation of God to His servants with which the Old Testament abounds. With the exception of the Incarnate Lord, the greatest and most striking examples of Personal Presence have been independent of a body.

Our Lord, then, when He said, "It is expedient for you that I go away," may have only meant that "I go away as far as the body is concerned." "For if I go not thus away the Spirit will not come unto you"—*i.e.*, "You will never gain a spiritual conception of Me, for the Flesh would be a hindrance, not only confining, or appearing to confine, My Presence to a particular place or spot, but so identifying it with expression, speech, or touch, that it would be difficult for you to realize a Presence unless shown in that way." For the recognition, a purely Spiritual presence, it was necessary that the limitations and hindrances of the body should be away.

Such an interpretation of the words is possible, and is made certain by other declarations.

Is it not true that again and again it is necessary for the proper appreciation of some friend who has been living with us

it is needful that he go away? When he is gone the Spirit within us at once interprets him in a larger way than before was possible. We see things we never saw before, hear meanings in his words that were never plain to us, discover points of character that were hidden from us. We feel ashamed at our want of discernment. Such is the effect of the disappearance of this outward form. That of itself is sufficient to enable the Spirit to give the interpretation. If our friend's spiritual presence could be preserved whilst his bodily presence was removed; if we could lose the outward and yet keep the inward, we should, while not having all we want, have a great gain. And there is no reason in itself why this should not be so with ourselves, but for it we have no proof. In the case of our Lord it is different. His own words and the experience of His disciples after the Resurrection make it almost certain.

The teaching He gave on the eve of His Passion is full of instruction in this particular matter. The disciples were in gloom and despair at the thought of His leaving them. They were in the position of the friends of Socrates, who gather about him as he prepares himself for the poison. Socrates, however, can give them no comfort. "Which is the better off, he who is going or those who remain behind?" He cannot say, but what is certain is, he will see them no more. Christ, on the other hand, speaks of returning. "I will not leave you comfortless," He says, "I will come to you—not in the old way (for the world will never see Me again)—but in some new, secret way, for you will behold Me." And then one of His disciples, puzzled over this new mode of Presence, which they could penetrate but which would veil Him from the world, asks: "How is it possible? How can you manifest yourself to us privately and yet not to the world?" And our Lord replies that the discovery of His Presence will be made to Love. Therefore, they were not to be troubled by the thought of His going away, for though it was true He would go away, it was also true that He would return. "I go away and I come unto you." From this it is clear that, though not with them again

after the old way, yet He would not leave them, but be with them in some new way.

It was impossible, of course, that His disciples should be able to understand how this would be till they were taught by the revelations of His Presence after His Resurrection. These gave a kind of knowledge, though it left more unexplained than clear. In the first place, they were unseen by the world. Neither Pilate, nor Herod, nor Caiaphas, nor the Pharisees ever saw Christ again. And, in the second place, they were revealed in answer to human need. One who was broken-hearted over His loss found Him present to comfort her. Two disciples who were in despair over the mystery of the Cross and the strange rumours they had heard, found Him at hand to explain these difficulties and give them peace. Five friends who had passed a night of fruitless labour discovered that He had not only turned their disappointment into joy, but prepared them a refreshing meal. The Apostles assembled in doubt and perplexity, not knowing what to make of all they had heard, were at once reassured by His Presence.

This gracious gift of Presence was not, then, given to satisfy curiosity or in self-justification, as though He would prove how wrong and foolish they had been in their gloomy expectations, but to remove difficulty or to comfort sadness. And at first it was given in outward form. So far as they could discover, this was in no way different from that which they had known when He was with them. "Handle Me and see. Behold, it is I Myself," He said unto them. It was not a phantom appearance, but the full Christ, body and soul. It was a human Presence, but only discernible, as we have already said, to Love. For there were remarkable and quite unaccountable phenomena which differentiated it from all previous appearances. He came as suddenly as He went. And where He came from none ever knew. In fact, the coming was a manifestation of One Who was previously present, though hidden, rather than any advance from a distance. At one time He was in the garden, at another in the cottage at Emmaus, at another in the Upper Room, and no one

supposed that He had walked from place to place in order to be present, but that at His will He showed Himself where He pleased. It was as though we, by thinking of someone whom we loved, could project our personality and show ourselves to him without going to him, and also in such dress as we chose. These outward manifestations were obviously necessary for a time. It is difficult to see in what other way He could convince doubting disciples of the reality of His Resurrection. He must be seen, heard, and touched, in order that they might realize that it was not simply a manifestation of the Spirit of Jesus. But such accommodation to human weakness was only transient. One of his first messages was : " Go, tell My brethren that I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God"—*i.e.*, " that these outward manifestations which hide the full effulgence of My glory are passing and will cease." And so they did.

When all who loved had been convinced of the truth of His risen Body, then their object was attained. And so then came the last revelation, what we call the Ascension, when, by His going upward and His attitude of blessing, it was plain they had closed. Some have supposed that this last manifestation was an indication that He was now leaving the earth and going far, far away. Such words as—

" Lo, the heav'n its Lord receives,  
 Yet He loves the earth He leaves ;  
 Though returning to His throne,  
 Still He calls mankind His own.  
 Lord, though parted from our sight,  
 Far above the starry height,  
 Grant our hearts may thither rise,  
 Seeking Thee above the skies "

—give an impression of a passing away from the earth, up and up, beyond the planets, beyond the stars, to some Throne infinitely far off, to some mysterious centre of the Universe where the Incarnate Son of God reigns. But that is not the impression the Bible desires to leave. It is not that Christ is infinitely far off, but really nearer ; not that He is removed from the world,

but that He still belongs to it and cares for it. As Dr. Maclaren writes: "The Ascension is not a leaving of the earth, but a passing into the heavens, that He might more fully and for ever dwell with us on earth. It does not mean Christ's withdrawal from us, but it means the possibility of Christ's remaining with us in higher and nobler fashion." Or, to quote Dr. Swete: "As the Incarnation was not a physical descent, so the return of the Incarnate Son to the Father was not a physical elevation. The momentary lifting up of the risen Christ in the sight of the Eleven can only be regarded as the symbol of the lifting up of our Humanity in Him to that spiritual order which is as far above our present life as the visible heaven is above the earth."<sup>1</sup> So, again, Bishop Westcott, in his "Historic Faith," writes: "We are not to think of this Ascension of Christ as of a change of position . . . it is rather a change of the mode of existence." So Dr. Milligan: "When, therefore, we speak of our Lord's Ascension into Heaven, we have to think less of a transition from one locality to another than of a transition from one condition to another." The Ascension, then, did not contradict the impression left by the other appearances, of a Presence ever near and ever ready to be manifested, but only signaled the fact to which they all more or less pointed, that Christ had now withdrawn from the earthly side of things, that "order under which we live on this side of the grave," and had entered the heavenly places.

We are not, then, to think of the right hand of the Throne of the Majesty in the heavens where He is set as some central of the Universe, but rather adopt St. Augustus's interpretation: "*Dextra Dei ubique.*" Nor are we to suppose that the holy place into which Christ has entered is some place in a far-off celestial heaven, but that it rather refers to every place on the earth where, through His ministry, He pleads His sacrifice before the Father. The Sanctuary and the true Tabernacle which the Lord pitched, and not man, of which He is the Minister (Heb. viii. 2), is not some ethereal, supernal region

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Swete, "The Ascended Christ," p. 8.

above the clouds, but the Church, His Body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.

The heavenly places, far above all principality, power, might and dominion, and every name that is named where Christ is set (Eph. i. 20, 21) are not places infinitely removed by millions of miles from our planet, but those same places in the spiritual order where He has made us to sit (Eph. ii. 6).

In other words, Christ has not changed his relationship to the earth, is not now governing it from a distance instead of near at hand, but is amongst us to-day more perfectly than in the days of His flesh. It is well to be reminded of the fact.

We are all more or less inclined to think of Christ's Presence, so far as we think of it at all, as either in some distant sphere, or so universally diffused as to be in no way different from that of the Father, in which we live and move and have our being. He is present to our planet as He is present to Mars, Saturn, or Sirius. "He is present as He was before the Incarnation—neither less nor more. The warm intimacy of the days of His flesh is over. The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us for thirty-three years, and then departed, leaving His Spirit, as every great personality does when he dies. The earth was once irradiated by the Light of the World, but now the Light is withdrawn, like some distant star that can only be discerned with the telescope. The romance of the world has departed. In a brief period, those who were in the secret came to Him, showed Him of all their troubles, and were comforted and relieved; but that was the Golden Age, which has passed away, like that older age of which the races of the world have still traditions. And so the spiritual atmosphere is tainted with doubts and denials."

If some Mary Magdalen, grieving over some great spiritual loss, were to say that she had found Him in the Garden, or some band of devoted disciples in great perplexity had steadfastly affirmed that He was in the room with them and gave them His Peace, then we at once cry out against a localized

Presence. "You do not mean you found Him in that place, but only that you imagined that He was there, just as I imagine Him to be here." It is not a question of reality, but only fancy. And so, too, the preaching in our Churches seems to imply an absent Christ. We hear of what Christ did nearly two thousand years ago, and of what He will do when He comes again, but apparently there are comparatively few who speak of what He is doing now. We hear of the Church, but as though it were a society separate from Christ. Its dignity, its importance, its age, and the lustre that has gathered about it in all lands, these are themes for praise and gratitude; but as the instrument of Christ, as the means whereby He reveals His Presence and does His work, as His shrine where He dwells, how partially is this recognized throughout Christendom!

And yet there is no truth of anything like the same practical importance. Outward presence is as necessary to us so long as we are in the body as inward presence. We are so made that the reality of the best blessings we know is more or less dependent upon their confirmation in experience. I have a sense of beauty, and can recall beautiful scenes before my mind, and a picture, photograph, or poem will help much to enable me to realize the mental picture, but it is when the place is present to me that my enjoyment is complete. I may think of my friend, call to mind his delightful traits of character, his considerateness, good humour, sincerity, but when I pass into his presence, or he into mine, it is then my thoughts gain distinctness and strength.

Presence is, of course, always much more than propinquity. When we are led to say of someone, "I don't care whether he is present or not," his presence will be nothing to us, even though he were standing close beside us. Indeed, so dependent is presence on mutual thought and sympathy, that even when there is no dislike or moral repulsion, even then we may be surprised on learning that one whom we greatly wished to see us was sitting almost beside us without our knowledge. Presence necessarily depends on sympathy, that subtle com-



munion of spirits that eagerly desire to share common thoughts and aspirations. Only friends can be present with one another. Husbands and wives living with one another may yet never be present to one another. In such a case, when one leaves the home no difference is made to the other by his or her departure, except a feeling of constraint is removed. But though presence depends on sympathy, and can be enjoyed without physical nearness, it is greatly helped by it. Doubts are removed, fears vanish, anxieties disappear now that our friend is with us. The truth, then, of Christ's Presence—*i.e.*, of Christ coming to us, and not simply indwelling us, is one of transcendent interest. Men have rightly felt that they were ready to contend to the uttermost for it, that they would rather give up than be deprived of it, that worldly honours or pleasures were not to be thought of in comparison with it.

Now we have seen that there is nothing to show that our Lord's Ascension made any difference in this respect—*i.e.*, except, as Dr. Maclaren says, to make Him more near, more available, more accessible. This is, of course, what we should have supposed. He who loved human nature so much as to take it for his eternal tabernacle and to work and die for its purification and restoration, was not likely to make His Presence more remote when He went to His Father. He who knew the value of Presence, who engaged the home of Martha and Mary, who felt the want of His disciples' presence in His agony—"What, could ye not watch with Me one hour?"—was not likely to leave us without His own Presence. It is true that, in order that man might gain a true conception of His personality and character, He must withdraw the outward manifestation; we could no longer see Him face to face, no longer feel the touch of His hand—though even this was experienced by St. John in his old age—but every other blessing of Presence was to be ours. He would come to us at times and in places, and would reveal His coming. The worker, the sufferer, the lonely, the doubtful, might all have the comfort of His Presence, and something more immediate, more personal than the Universal Presence of Him in whom

we live and move and have our being. Only it would naturally depend upon the law of Presence—*i.e.*, love and sympathy. Unless a man love Christ he will never feel His Presence; to him there is no Presence; but, as our Lord promises: "If a man love Me . . . My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make our abode with him." He does not say "in him," but "with him"—*i.e.*, beside him. Bishop Westcott, commenting upon this passage, says: "The idea is that of a recognition without, so to speak, and not of the consciousness of the divine within. The Christian sees God by Him, he becomes and finds a dwelling-place for God, and does not only feel Him in him"; and he sees in it a fulfilment of that old promise that God gave His people centuries before: "I will set My tabernacle among you . . . and will walk among you, and be your God, and ye shall be My people" (Lev. xxvi. 11). Where there is need and where there is a loving recognition of Christ as the one who will answer our need, He comes as He came of old to Martha and Mary when they had lost, perhaps not immediately (in their case we know He stayed two days in the place where He was in order to do more for them by the delay than by the coming), but certainly.

And again and again there have been those whose faith has enabled them to recognize His Presence. St. Augustine had no doubt of it when he heard the words, "Tolle lege, Tolle lege"; the Staffordshire lad who was roasted by his mates before the furnace, and afterwards said that he had never felt Christ so near to him, was fully aware of it; mourner after mourner has testified to it. He came as He promised He would, and they knew that He came. No testimony that they could give would satisfy a man of the world; no testimony that Christ could give would satisfy Herod or Caiaphas. It was not given for that purpose. Men cannot be saved that way. If they do not believe the Bible, even the appearance of one risen from the dead will not convince them and lead them to repentance, and if they do they will have their own testimony.

The great truth that will amaze the unbeliever in the day when all things are made plain, will be the truth that Christ was

amongst us during our lifetime, and we knew Him not. We failed to recognize His comings to us, and we failed to recognize His identification with the Church. We shall then feel what a difference it would have made to our lives and thinking had we known it. Our inner spiritual experience would have been confirmed, our faith deepened, our love enlarged. Sometimes, when we see the botanist anxiously searching beside some burn that is tumbling down the mountain side for some specimen that will convince him of the reality of that of which he has read in books, or the historian carefully examining the contour of some field of battle which may reveal the presence of some great leader, or the scholar looking for some phrase which may show the presence of a writer whose authorship is questioned, we wonder whether the same earnest and determined spirit that finds treasures of which the world is ignorant might not find in their own personal history secrets infinitely more valuable in the disclosure of Christ's Presence to their soul. Christ has been with us on hundreds of occasions when our doubt or want of love kept Him hidden. St. Mary Magdalen would have never known He was near had she not heard her name called, and so her trust awakened. The two disciples at Emmaus did not know till He had vanished who had been their guest. St. Peter needed St. John's insight before he could see Him on the shore. All these incidents show how easily we may miss Him through lack of sympathy or perfect trust, but they all point to the reality and nearness of His Presence. The Christ within, then, is moved by the Christ without. As the sun is glorified by finding its reflection in the pool below, earth and heaven then meeting, so the Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, rejoices to find Himself mirrored in the individual soul that is moved by His Presence. These two, the outer and the inner, are, as Baron von Hegel says, necessary conditions for faith and love, the unconscious or variously obscure but most real, and when favoured, powerful presence within us of an inward Christ, pushing upwards and outwards with a view to joining hands with the outward Christ Who is pressing inwards, the one crying "Seek ye My face," the other "Thy Face, Lord, will I seek."