

The Verification of the Spirit.¹

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"Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him. But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit."—I COR. ii. 9, 10.

MANY of us cannot help connecting this great saying of St. Paul with a poem which we learned in the school-room long ago. A mother is answering the curious questions of her little son, who in the profuse imagery of boyish fancy attempts to conceive and to locate "the better land." He pictures heaven far away on some tropical shore of palms and coral, or in fairy regions where the rivers wander over sands of gold. And she lifts his thoughts above all earthly scenes to realms unseen.

"Eye hath not seen it, my gentle boy,
Ear hath not heard its deep songs of joy. . .
Time doth not breathe on its fadeless bloom,
Far beyond the clouds and beyond the tomb—
It is there, it is there, my child."

It is a telling and touching use of the Apostle's words. But you have only to read the whole passage carefully to see that he is not, like the poetess,² thinking of a heavenly paradise, lapped with the shining waters of bliss and beauty beyond the tomb. You cannot, except indirectly, identify it with the promise of heaven. This is an unimaginable glory, which has dawned upon earth; these are things beyond all hearing which have been heard by mortal ears; these are inconceivable things which have entered into and become the possession of human hearts. "The things which God hath prepared for them that love Him" are not postponed beyond death. They are part

¹ Sermon preached in Westminster Abbey on Sunday morning, June 28, 1914.

² Mrs. Hemans.

and parcel of our life here and now. They are the revelation of God Himself, and of man as he becomes when he enters into the experience of life by Christ's Cross through the Spirit. Eye did not see them, for they do not come within the evidence of the senses. Ear did not hear them, and they did not form a part of any tradition that passed from man to man, for God's levels are higher than the highest point that man has ever reached without Him. Nor did they enter into man's heart, for they exceed all his expectations and aspirations, and transcend his brightest dreams. But God has prepared them for those who love Him, and now in Christ He has taught us His hidden secrets. This is His answer to "the riddle of the painful earth," given through His Spirit, "for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God."

I.

Why is it that the spiritual so often seems to us to be the unreal? We are told that certain parts of Scripture are to be understood spiritually, and not literally, and straightway we incline to pass on to something more tangible and definite, because we feel that we have broken contact with reality, and cannot find a foothold upon fact. We like to walk upon solid earth; and doubtless it is a true instinct which prompts this, for life is real and is no dream. God has satisfied this instinct in the Incarnation of His Son, Who in His own Person links together the world of spirit and the world which, with our limited outlook, we call the real world. But if we have learned at all to discern the presence of the Risen Lord, and have followed Him with heart and mind thither where He "sitteth at the right hand of God," we ought to be the last to fail to realize His purpose to teach us that the spiritual is indeed the real. It is a strange blindness that, living in a world which in Christ has become a living sacrament of God, yet stays to touch and handle the outward and visible sign without passing on to meet the inward and spiritual grace which is its only true

meaning and reason and worth. How slow we are to give the response of a full, unflinching faith to God when He meets us with the challenge of a real unveiling of Himself, and offers us the witness of a revelation by His Spirit!

Let us try so to pass through the Apostle's words that we may perceive something of the experience which inspired them. For they do describe a great experience. The one thing certain about the New Testament is that it is the expression of a new and wonderful life. The scholar with his historical apparatus for analyzing the story of the early Church, however he explains it, must needs leave to us the central certainty that we have in it the record of an extraordinary influx into the world of spiritual energies. These men and women have become the possessors of a new power. In the Gospels they are quite commonplace people, very full of human frailties, and moving at no very exalted levels of character and ideals. But when we see them in the Acts and the Epistles, they have been transformed. They walked then; now they run. They crept then; now they soar. They were a feeble folk then, fluttering and afraid; now they are bold as lions. They mount up with wings as eagles, they run and are not faint. They have a power of spiritual movement and a certainty of spiritual touch which are altogether new. The closer we come to them, the more clearly we feel them to be men of a new spirit, with a wonderful fire of love and a grace of insight which are like nothing else that the world has ever seen.

All this lies open to the sympathetic reader of the New Testament. And it is only the beginning of the long experience of the Church since then, right down to our own time. No one who is not the victim of deep-dyed prejudice can fail to recognize that the community of Christ has always been, and still is, the storehouse of a spiritual experience which is quite unique. Wherever the disciples of Jesus have really lived by their faith, under whatever conditions, they have possessed spiritual secrets of faith and hope and love to which mankind otherwise has been a stranger. To pass from the biography of

the non-Christian to that of the Christian saint is to enter another world. I do not forget either the faults and follies of Christian men, or the manifold operations of the Spirit in all times and among all souls, or the universal presence of Him who is "the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world." But this fact is no mere fragment of a general illumination of the race of men. It is a thing which stands alone and apart, wherever Christ and His Spirit are at work through the ministry of grace. "The Church," says one of our wisest modern teachers, "was not created by the inward light; it was not created by the Spirit of God alone. It was created by the Holy Spirit through an apostolic word of Jesus Christ crucified; it was created by the redeeming Lord as the Spirit."¹ You can recognize this spiritual experience when you meet it; and, amidst all kinds of superficial differences, it has its own marks and characteristics that separate it entirely from everything else. Thank God we are no strangers to it in our own day. Christ crucified and risen is still mighty to save; and the Spirit Whom He has given makes for Himself temples of human spirits in the world we know as really and as persistently as He has ever done in ages past. "I believe in the Holy Ghost" is no obsolete theological formula; it is the articulate confession of a divine life which knows itself to be due to a personal Agent and Minister of grace and power.

II.

And yet, in spite of this, I am sure that there is nothing in which we modern Christians are more lacking than in a vital and practical faith in the Holy Spirit. We find more difficulty than we are perhaps ready to confess, even to ourselves, in what St. Paul calls living and walking in the Spirit. And if we look back into the record of Christian life in the past, we discover that we are not alone in our slowness to commit ourselves to the Spirit, that He may do His work in us, and teach and guide us

¹ P. T. Forsyth, "The Principle of Authority," p. 282.

into the truth. There has always been a warfare between the flesh and the spirit. It has never been an easy thing to be spiritual ; it never will be.

But perhaps we are right when we feel that we have peculiar difficulties in our own time, and that the battle waxes very loud around us. We live in the midst of a practical materialism, which is the most deadly enemy of the Spirit's work. Mammon-worship, the love of ease and display, the cult of comfort as the one thing necessary, the idolatry of amusement, the sentimental abhorrence of discipline, the superstitious veneration of reason apart from conscience and spiritual intuition, the widespread absence of high moral aspiration, the lust for power—these are some of the elements of our modern life, which create our atmosphere and press hard upon our souls. Their natural offspring is the familiar gospel of what is called free development, which is so loudly preached to us, the freedom to be and to do whatever we like without reference to any moral or spiritual sanctions, whose embodiment is that negation of everything that is spiritual, the superman. How can spiritual experience develop in such surroundings, where everything seems to be so fundamentally against it? And when to this we add the noise and speed of life as we know it, with all its ferment of swiftly moving change and selfish competition, it may well seem that our difficulties are too deep-seated to allow us to hope to attain to more than a resolute grip upon the plainest and most practical truths of religion, with a prospect of something better when we have passed through the veil to "where beyond these voices there is peace."

We may not all be conscious of the factors that are working to create this atmosphere which is so alien from the spiritual life. But simple-minded people who are earnest do at least feel that it is stifling to the soul. They could not explain it, but they know the truth of Matthew Arnold's lines :

"'Tis the gradual furnace of the world,
In whose hot air our spirits are upcurled
Until they crumble, or else grow like steel—

Which kills in us the bloom, the youth, the spring—
 Which leaves the fierce necessity to feel
 But takes away the power."¹

They are dimly conscious that their Bibles are more difficult to read than their fathers found them. They know that they find it hard to pray, and that they are painfully reluctant to use the means of grace. And so they have to fight continually against the tendency to drift into a state of soul which is the condition of the great majority of English people at this moment—vaguely puzzled, coolly critical, faintly dissatisfied, unwilling to surrender faith, yet seemingly incapable to grasp and live in the great realities for which it stands.

III.

What we need beyond everything else is to face the facts. Each of us in his own way has this task to undertake, unless he is content to be a trifler, with the secret-shame and open loss which trifling brings in its train. To be dissatisfied with ourselves is the first step; to resolve at all costs to be serious is the next. And that means that we must ask questions. Why are we so powerless? Why does our religion so constantly fail to convince, I will not say the world, but even ourselves? We would not part with it. It is still a priceless possession without which we could not bear to face life. We could not imagine ourselves without its hopes, its uplift, its promise of good things to come. So far, so good. But is that all? Is this tepid, tremulous thing which we know our religious life to be the modern counterpart of Pentecost and all its power? Is it because it is so long since the wondrous gift was given that its strength is now abated and leaves us lukewarm? That is the one thing which is really impossible. Pentecost is either true for ever, or else it is a mere dream. God cannot give like that, and then recall His gift. God could not stultify His own revelation of Himself by sealing the fountain which He has once opened, so that in any age men might come to say, It is not

¹ "Tristram and Iseult," iii.

for us. When God has once given Himself there can be no withdrawal. He has given a pledge upon which He cannot go back. The reason of our failure must be in ourselves, and not in Him.

“The angels keep their ancient places,
Turn but a stone and start a wing,
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces
That miss the many-splendoured thing.”¹

He will not give us now the visible fiery tongues or the rushing mighty wind to signify the presence of His Spirit. But He waits with all His spiritual proofs to challenge our faith to claim Him that He may be ours.

Ah! it is no small matter to come to realize that. To do so is to be far on the way to the new life which we are seeking, the life which is so much nearer to us than we are aware. And close at hand there is in our own surroundings much more to help us than we think, when once we set ourselves to follow on to know the Lord. In the first place, along with all that is antagonistic, there is in our modern world a great and growing desire for spiritual light and life. Sometimes it chooses strange and fantastic forms of expression, but it is there for all who are alert to see it. Many of our most recent teachers and guides in matters of faith, like Rudolf Eucken, are putting their whole strength into the assertion of the reality and the needs of the spiritual life. We cannot fail to see the same fact in the widespread and growing interest in mysticism, and the alacrity with which so many welcome anything that seems to give a promise of contact with spiritual realities. This is more than a mere curious grasping after something new; on its deeper side it is a proof that the modern mind is conscious of greater needs than can be satisfied by material prosperity and critical denials of the faith of the past. Again, it is not for nothing that verification is a keynote of all our modern ways of thinking. The desire to verify, and put things to the proof, implies a reverence for fact, for truth, which is just what is needed to begin to understand

¹ Francis Thompson, “In No Strange Land.”

the things of the Spirit. To believe that reality may be reached by putting things to the proof may sometimes lead men to strange conclusions ; but it is the way above all others which, if it is faithfully followed, is most certain to lead them to God. "Jesus invariably bases Himself upon experience,"¹ and to be willing to verify what Jesus gives is the first qualification for a discipleship which moves toward faith. And then, thirdly, there is the experience of life that each of us has behind and within him, which in some measure is bound to be spiritual, because we are spirits and God has been always knocking at our doors. The witness of our own lives, if we would only attend to it, contains more to point us to Pentecost than any of us knows till he turns his face Godward, and begins to seek for those things which God has prepared for them that love Him and has revealed by His Spirit to those who believe.

Follow these three pathways and you will see how they converge upon faith in the Holy Ghost. Here is the answer to all our desire for a living and immediate experience of God, a better, a greater answer than eye hath seen, or ear heard, or than hath entered into the heart of man to conceive. You cannot verify, except as historical facts by historical tests, cloven tongues of fire and a rushing wind. And if God gave them to us again first-hand, they would leave us just where we were, if we were without the heart that tarries at Jerusalem to receive His gift. But you can turn your soul to that outflow of love and grace which has come to men from the Risen Lord and abides in His Church in all His true and faithful servants even now. You can consider yet again whether, in spite of all its glaring faults and failures, there is not here in the world, in that community of believers which Christ has made one in Himself, the work of God the Spirit, regenerating, transforming, sanctifying human souls. You can open upon your knees that Book which, after the last critical word has been said, remains unlike every other, because in ways so manifold and wonderful it is full of God. And you can look into your own life and see how its

¹ Matthew Arnold, "Literature and Dogma," vii.

experience, in all that it has known, points directly to Him who offers Himself that He may come and dwell within you, and in His coming brings with Him the love that enlightens and the life that empowers men to know God.

Some years ago in a train fast nearing London I sat and watched the sun setting behind the roofs and chimneys of the great city. All the skies were purple and ablaze, and the clouds piled high above the rows of sullen buildings were shot through and through with a mystic glory as of heaven itself. Was it a revelation of the world of spirit for once apparent above the ugly facts of that other world we know so well—the toil and struggle, the hard gamble for existence, the sordid pursuit of self-indulgence, which meet in the ferment of our city streets? It seemed so. Soon the train came to a standstill, and amid the confusion of departing passengers I caught sight of a woman's face. She was, I think, one of those social workers who sometimes wait in the great railway stations to welcome helpless girls on their way up from the country in search of a livelihood and offer to guide them to safety out of reach of the clutches of the harpies of vice. There was the world invisible made manifest right down upon the floor of life. So does the Spirit stir among us; so does He work on to His victory through the ministries of faith and love.

This, then, is God's challenge to us to-day, the call to verify the Spirit. "Prove Me herewith, saith the Lord." Put it to the test! Come and see! Do not stand there trembling in the battle, doubtful and hesitating and content with defeat. Here are the rivers of living water. "The Spirit and the Bride say, Come, and let him that is athirst come; and whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely." Here are the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him. Eye hath not seen them nor ear heard, but the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped, and the eyes of the blind shall see. Make your surrender and pay the price, for God gives His Spirit to them that love Him, and love must build its altar and present its offering before the fire of the Lord falls to consume the sacrifice. He is so near

you that you have missed Him, and gone far afield in quest of that which is already within. It needs but that the veil should drop at the touch of faith to find what you are seeking. God shall reveal it unto you by His Spirit.

“Dark is the world to thee, thyself art the reason why;
For is He not all but that which has power to feel, ‘I am I.’

“Glory about thee, without thee, and thou fulfillest thy doom,
Making Him broken gleams, and a stifled splendour and gloom.

“Speak to Him thou, for He hears, and spirit with spirit may meet,
Closer is He than breathing and nearer than hands and feet.”¹

¹ Tennyson, “The Higher Pantheism.”

