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All Saints', 1914.¹

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"These all, having had witness borne to them through their faith, did not receive the promise, God having foreseen and arranged some better thing in connection with us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

"Therefore let us also . . . run with patience the race which is set before us, looking unto the author and finisher of our faith, Jesus."

HEB. xi. 39-xii. 2.

HAVE you ever found yourself set dreaming by something, and then wandering off whither the spirit of your dream might carry you, until you seemed to be miles and miles away from the real and the actual ; and then, suddenly, while still in the dream, you stumbled across some thought which in a moment flashed you back to your real self, with an almost painful reminder of something *waiting to be done* ?

That, I think, is rather the experience one goes through in passing from the eleventh to the twelfth of Hebrews (as in this morning's second lesson). The writer of the Epistle has given ten chapters to elaborate argument, leading up to the great truth he specially wants to bring home—the fact that "faith is the secret of true life." And then, in the famous eleventh chapter, he illustrates his point from the lives of the great men and women of God down the ages, who did live by faith, and "by faith subdued kingdoms . . . out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned aside invasions of aliens." They were people of extraordinarily different types—Abraham the nomad chief, Moses the Prince of Egypt, Rahab the harlot, Gideon the farmer's lad—but they were all one in this, that they "endured as seeing Him Who is invisible." "This was the victory that overcame the world, even their *faith*."

And yet, somehow, they did not get all they wanted and hoped for. "These all, having had witness borne to them through their faith, yet did *not* receive the promise, God having

¹ A sermon preached in Hertford College Chapel on All Saints' Day.

foreseen and arranged some better thing in connection with *us*, that apart from us they should not be made perfect." And then comes the sudden turn of thought which flashes us back to the present and the actual: "*Therefore* let us also, seeing that we have all around us such a great cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight. . . ."

In other words, the lesson of All Saints' Day is a severely practical one. It comes to remind us of all God's servants departed this life in His faith and fear; for do let us remember that "all saints" simply means "all true Christians," for every Christian is "called to be a saint," and to confine the term "All Saints" to the people, sometimes mythical, who happen to be enshrined in calendars, is to rob the festival of all real meaning for ourselves. It comes to remind us, I say, of all God's true servants who have gone before, and are now in the light with Him. But it does so, not just to stir up an emotional interest in them, not just to soothe us with the picture of their reward and joy, but to remind us continually that we, too, have the work of a saint to do and the cross of a saint to bear; nay, more, that so long as we shirk our sainthood, we are not only surrendering our own "inheritance with the saints in light," but helping to keep them out of theirs.

Let me try and explain. Our present circumstances may help us to understand what the text means when it says that God has so arranged that, apart from us, they cannot be made perfect.

We have been watching, for just three months, how thousands of our best—some of them also our dearest—have been giving up everything to go and help forward a cause which we all hold sacred, and we have seen hundreds of them "counting not their lives dear unto the death." And they have died, "not having received the promise." The issue of the war is still in the balances—they will never see the victory, if God gives it us, and they can do no more now to help it nearer. But what is the effect of this thought on ourselves, on any of us, that is, with one spark of nobility in us? Surely, an added

determination that their service and sacrifice *shall not* have been in vain ; that so far as we, at least, are concerned, the thing shall be seen through, for *their* sakes even more than for our own. Isn't that part, at least, of the inner meaning of what so regularly happens—that after a reverse or disaster recruits stream in in far larger numbers ? Most of the men so actuated, no doubt, do not stop to reason why ; but I think they are, subconsciously, following the very reasoning of our text.

“ These all . . . received *not* the promise, God having provided some better thing in connection with us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. *Therefore* let us also . . . ”

Do you see now what I mean by saying that the true lesson of All Saints' Day is a severely practical one—an urgent reminder that *we*, too, are “ called to be saints,” with all that sainthood means, and an appeal to a motive which is half gratitude, half common honesty, I mean a sense that we *must* not “ betray,” and deprive of what they fought and died for, those who have been along the way of the Cross before us.

But let us be quite clear what it is that we may keep them out of by slackness, or help them on to by ourselves “ running with patience ” the same race now “ set before *us*.” It is not, in any sense, their personal salvation ; it is not their share in the blessedness of those who “ sleep in Jesus,” who have “ departed to be with Christ, which is far better.” That, thank God, is made theirs absolutely by the act of Christ in dying for them, and by their own act in accepting what He did as applying to themselves. If the dying thief was to pass straight to where his sinless Lord was going—“ *This day* shalt thou be *with Me* in Paradise ”—there can be no question of any interval of probation and possible pain, during which perhaps something we could do might help them on. I know it is what we call a “ natural view to take,” that there *is* such an interval : but it is not a Scriptural view, and if we are going to substitute “ natural views ” for Scriptural views, it is hard to see where we shall end. It is a “ natural view,” *if* you either do not grasp or will not accept the full meaning of the Atonement ; and as such it is

exactly parallel to "natural views" which people take nowadays of the Resurrection, through either failing to grasp or refusing to accept *its* full meaning in turn.

No, we need not worry about either the state or the progress of those who are "with Christ." We *can* go on talking to Him about them—of course we can, and we can't help it, if we love them still; and if that is all that is meant by "Prayers for the Dead," I for one have no objection to them, though "Prayer about the Dead" would be a much safer and more accurate expression for what I mean. We can, I say, go on talking to Him about them; and, because He knows our hearts and also theirs, and because His love cannot but will that which is for the greatest good and happiness of us both, we can even count on their hearing of us through Him, if that is really the best for them. The one thing we may be sure of is that we need not worry about their *salvation*.

What, then, is that which they have *not* received—that which, apart from us, they *cannot* receive, "God having arranged ahead some better thing in connection with us, that they, apart from us, should not be made perfect"?

Once more our present conditions, with death almost the chief fact that faces us daily, will help us to understand. It is true that we comfort ourselves about those who sleep in Christ by saying that we and they are still one:

"One family we dwell in Him,
One Church above, beneath,
Though now divided by the stream,
The narrow stream of death."

It is true that, in one sense, it is a narrow stream; but it is also true that it is *impassable*, and that, while it runs there across the landscape, it does cut our true life in two. While the "one family" is divided, it cannot realize fully its oneness, it cannot be *perfect*. How far from perfect that "narrow stream" can make life on this side of it some of us know. Do we suppose it is different on the other side? Surely not, if there is love there, and memory; and, without love and memory, can we

think of personality as really surviving? True, there must be conditions there which take the pain out of memory and out of love. Those who can see life from above would be able to enter into St. Paul's words about "our light affliction which is but for a moment," in a way that we, down amid the affliction, cannot yet. But it would wrong our own deepest instincts, and be untrue to what little the Bible tells us about the blessed dead, to think of them as either oblivious of, or indifferent to, those left behind on "the other side." Above all, if they are "in Christ," they cannot be unaware of the passion and pain still continuing in the heart of a God Who "is afflicted in the afflictions of His people," and Whose whole life (I say it in all reverence) is a fight and an agony. (Do we sometimes stop to think, "If it is true that not a sparrow falls to the ground without our Father, what must these last weeks be meaning to the heart of God?" It is a thought worth dwelling on now and then.) Surely, surely, if we follow out all that is implied by saying that those who are gone are "with God" and "in God," they must be looking out on us and our conditions with the outlook of the heart of God Himself; with a strong passion, that is, in the midst of all their peace—the passion that finds vent in the cry of the souls under the altar in the sixth of Revelation, "How long, O Lord, holy and true?" . . . "And it was said unto them"—the next verse goes on about those same souls of the martyrs—"that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled."

The thought behind our text is the same, when it says that "they without us may not be made perfect"; and that is why it goes straight on, "*therefore* let us also, seeing that we have round about us so great a cloud of witnesses, put aside every weight and the sin which doth most easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto the beginner and finisher of our faith, Jesus."

The pictured faces of the old heroes of faith on the walls begin to float in air before us, and become the faces of

spectators rising tier on tier above us in the crowded stadium. What we thought a picture-gallery turns out to be the racecourse of the world, and *we* are the runners, and the race is about to begin. And so, as the runner gathers in his thoughts from wandering, and sets himself for the supreme effort, the spectators themselves in their turn begin to melt into a long cloud on either hand, while just *one* figure stands out with startling clearness, as if nothing else existed in the world. In ancient Rome it would be the figure of the presiding magistrate of the games, who gave the signal for the start, and before whose daïs the race would end. For us it is "the starter and finisher of our faith, Jesus,"—for in the Greek the Name is held over dramatically to the end.

Such is the practical lesson of All Saints' Day, and such it has been, year after year, all down the centuries. But has it ever, I wonder, come with fuller force and appropriateness to any generation than it does in this tragic year, 1914, to ourselves?

As a generation, we are faced with a heavier burden and trial, a far more difficult and responsible task, than any generation before us for at least a hundred years. And the worst of it is that we shall have to work at this task short-handed. Some of the very best of those who were to have been builders are being laid to rest, as it were, among the foundations. Those of us who remain will have to work with the heavy handicap of clouded hearts, and with much of the light gone out of the sky. If there is one thing more than another we shall need, it is vision and inspiration.

And I think we have it here: first in the thought of our responsibility towards the dead, and then in the thought of Christ, "the author and finisher of our faith," at once the starter of our race and its goal.

"They without us may not be made perfect." They will have died in vain unless we, who profit by their sacrifice, undertake to see to it that the new age which their sacrifice makes possible is worth the price which is being paid. If it is going really to bring nearer all that we hope for when we pray, "Thy

kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth," then it will have been well worth while. But if it is merely going to lead to another comfortable and easy-going period, with a sluggish conscience and mean ideals—another period in which personal ambition will once more determine what each shall do, and money and power be the one standard by which to judge his success in doing it—then not only will the whole thing have failed most miserably, whatever be the issue of the fight, but we, the generation which lets it be so, shall be guilty of the blood of these just persons. We cannot allow men to fight and to die for us and for our children unless *we* are prepared to face life in the same spirit of complete self-denial with which they are facing death.

“*Therefore* let us also, seeing that we have round about us so great a cloud of witnesses”—far greater now than it was when the words were first written—“lay aside every weight.” That is the first thing—renunciation. There are many things which are certainly not wrong in themselves, but which are nevertheless sure to be in the way if you are out for serious business. It is not wrong to run a race in an overcoat ; but it is extremely bad policy if you really want to win. “No man serving on a campaign,” says St. Paul, “entangles himself in worldly business, that he may satisfy him who chose him to be a soldier.” In other words, it might be very nice to keep up your ordinary interests while you are in a training camp, but the conditions of service simply do not allow of it, and everything else has to yield to them.

Renunciation, then, is the first thing, and it is really the second also, for the purity which is essential for true service and sainthood is only possible by renunciation, sometimes of the fiercest and bitterest kind. “Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that *so easily gets round us*”—a word found nowhere else, but suggesting the way in which the weeds in a foul pond will get round the legs of the swimmer and drag him down. It is a strong simile, but probably some of us know enough about “besetting sin” to admit it is not an exaggerated one. If so,

there is but one course for us if we want to serve—we must *cut ourselves clear*.

And the third necessity is also, in a sense, renunciation over again; “let us run with *patience* the race that is set before us.” For isn’t patience really another name for *going on*, holding oneself down, refusing to give in to all the plentiful excuses which poor human nature supplies for “giving up trying,” for “falling out” of the race?

But the last of the four “things needful” is no longer negative, it is the positive which explains all the negatives, the absolute devotion which explains the absolute renunciation of everything else—“looking away from all else unto Him who both starts and perfects our faith, Jesus.” That is where the inspiration is to come from, which alone will account for and *keep* possible so much renunciation and patience. Our success in the race and the battle of life will be in proportion to our concentration on Him. For the earthly runner to let his eye, or even his thoughts, wander for a moment from the goal, is to lose momentum, and, maybe, to lose the prize. Our goal is Christ; but in this race wonderful things happen, and somehow we also find Him running by our side, nay, even as it were running *in* us, and by His Spirit keeping our vague attention fixed on Himself as the goal ahead, if only we will look up and meet His eye.

“Therefore,” remembering the great cloud of witnesses looking eagerly to us to carry on their work and see that their sacrifice is not in vain—“therefore let *us* also lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race which is set before us, looking unto the author and finisher of our faith, Jesus.”

