

The War and the Other World.

4. CAN THOSE WHO ARE IN ONE WORLD INFLUENCE THOSE WHO ARE IN THE OTHER ?

WE now come to the question to which the previous questions have led us. In what relation do the inmates of the two worlds stand to one another? Can the inmates of this world be of any service to those who are now in the other, and especially to those whom they have known and loved? And is it possible that those who have gone before can render any service to those who remain here? It is very widely believed that, whether or no those whom we call the dead know anything about us and desire to help us, we certainly know nothing about them, and to suppose that we can do anything to help them is presumptuous folly, or at least idle superstition.

It is conceivable that they may be able to help us in more ways than one. They may be able to watch over us as guardian spirits, warding off temptations and other dangers, suggesting holy and wise thoughts, etc.; and this idea is sometimes cherished by bereaved persons and encouraged by poets and painters. The spirit of a dead mother is thought of as still watching over her surviving children. All this is credible. But we can most readily believe that the way in which the inmates of the other world always do us service is by praying for us. They prayed for us while they were with us, and we are confident that they wish to pray for us still. It is unreasonable to suppose that God would forbid them to gratify such a wish. He listened to them when, in obedience to His commands and walking by faith, they prayed for their brethren in this world. It is not likely that He would prohibit what He had commanded because, though our need of intercession for us remains as great as ever it was, the intercessors are now more fully in His Presence. Are the spirits of the just to take no part in the intercessions which are continually offered for us by the Divine Advocates, the Son (1 John ii. 1) and the Spirit (John xiv. 16; Rom. viii. 26)? "In the ancient Church it was a widespread opinion, if not an article of faith, that the dead in Christ pray for the living. . . . No belief which was not actually an

article of faith was more general or more deeply cherished in ancient Christendom " (Swete, *The Holy Catholic Church*, pp. 221, 222).

There are probably not many Christians who would care to dispute the reasonableness of this belief. Nearly all religious persons would be willing to admit the possibility that our fellow-Christians in the other world endeavour to assist us with their prayers for us, and that God hears such prayers. They would regard this as highly probable. It is the complement of this highly probable hypothesis that is regarded with suspicion, and in many cases with vehement hostility. That God allows the dead to pray for us, and listens to their prayers, is credible enough. But that He allows us to pray for them, and will listen to us if we do—that is incredible; and to practise such intercession is rank superstition and a foolish waste of time. It is probable that in a large number of minds there lurks the conviction that the practice of praying for the dead is Romish and therefore wrong. But it will hardly be maintained that all things which members of the Roman Church believe and do are wrong. Respecting nine-tenths of Christian belief and practice we and they are agreed. Let us look at the matter from other points of view. Let us look at it as a matter of common sense. One thing, and perhaps only one thing, is absolutely certain with regard to this question. Praying for the dead can do them no harm. Another is so eminently probable in itself, and has been so often proved true by those who have tried it, that it may be regarded as certain. Praying for the dead does good to the person who prays. Such a person is doing what he believes to be in accordance with God's will, he is praying for spiritual blessings to be bestowed on other souls, and he knows of nothing which requires him to believe that it is in accordance with God's will that such prayers are to be restricted to the souls of those who are still alive in this world. This would imply an enormous limitation; for the souls of the living are only a small fragment of those whom God has created and in other ways made His own. Nothing short of express prohibition would seem to justify such a limitation. Even if it could be made probable that such prayers can do no good to those who are prayed for, we may believe that they bring a blessing on those who offer them in good faith, just as we believe that the little child is blessed who, in all simplicity, prays that its

penny may be turned into a pound, that mother may be able to pay the rent (Luke x. 5, 6; Ps. xxxv. 13).

Talk not of wasted affection, affection never was wasted;
 If it enrich not the heart of another, its waters returning
 Back to their springs, like the rain, shall fill them full of refreshment.
 (Longfellow, *Evangeline* ii. 1.)

And it cannot be made probable that such prayers do no good to those who are prayed for. Those whom we call the dead are still alive (Mark xii. 26, 27, and parallels, Luke xxiii. 43; Rev. vi. 9, 10, xx. 4). In this world, life means growth; whatever lives grows. An organism which ceases to grow, which ceases to replace by growth what has been lost by waste, is already on the road to dissolution, and death is only a question of time. We have no reason to suppose that it is otherwise in the other world. Souls which are alive are capable of growth, and are progressing towards the ineffable ideal set before them by Christ: "Ye shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. v. 48). The ideal is unattainable, but there is all eternity in which to be getting nearer to it. Is it reasonable to believe that our prayers can help the spiritual progress of souls that are with us in this world, and yet can give no help to those that have passed into the other? It would seem, therefore, that from the point of view of common sense those who pray for the departed have a good deal in their favour. Even without the few references to Scripture which have been inserted by way of confirmation, the case is a strong one.

Now let us look more closely at the evidence of Scripture. It is often urged that nowhere in the Bible are we told to pray for the dead. But there are other things which we regard as duties which are not mentioned in the Bible. The really relevant fact is that nowhere in Scripture are we *forbidden* to pray for the dead. We are told to pray for one another, and there is no hint that our intercessions are to be confined to the living. This total absence of prohibition is all the more remarkable because it is certain that more than a century before the Birth of Christ—perhaps much more than a century—Jews had begun to pray for the dead. This is plainly stated in 2 Maccabees xii. 39-47, a book about which English people are sadly ignorant, owing to the unfortunate fact that the majority of English Bibles do not contain the Apocrypha, although these Books are indispensable for showing the trend of Jewish thought between the latest records in the Old Testament and the

earliest in the New. From the Gospels we know that Christ severely condemned a number of beliefs and practices which had grown up among the Jews ; but He nowhere condemns praying for the dead. It is difficult to suppose that He was ignorant of this practice, or that He would have been silent about it, if it is a mischievous superstition. The New Testament writers are equally silent about it, which is all the more remarkable when we remember how fierce at one time was the antagonism between Jews and Christians. St. Paul often taught in the synagogues, and it is unlikely that he knew nothing about such prayers. It is said that in Jewish liturgies prayers for the dead may be " at least as old as the time of our Lord " (G. Rawlinson ; cf. Farrar, *Eternal Hope*, p. 216). St. James, who for so many years was President of the Church at Jerusalem, can hardly have been ignorant of the fact that some Jews prayed for the dead. Yet, when he directs that the elders of the Church are to visit the sick and pray for them, he does not add any caution about ceasing to offer intercessions if the sick person should die (James v. 14-16). St. John, who is also likely to have known of this practice, does say that there may be a person for whom it might be hopeless to pray ; but this is not a dead person, but one who is so hardened against grace by a long course of deliberate rebellion that now he is incapable of receiving grace. Even in such a case St. John does not forbid intercession ; he says that he cannot advise it (1 John v. 16). Thus, just in those places in which prohibition of prayers for the dead might not unnaturally have occurred, we do not find anything of the kind. Let it be assumed (what is not very probable) that none of these Jewish Christian writers were aware that some Jews prayed for the dead, still the fact remains that, when they write about prayers and intercessions, they never hint that these are to be restricted to the living. The still more important fact remains that Christ, who often denounces Jewish superstitions, nowhere includes praying for the dead among them. The argument from silence, which always has to be used with caution, is in this case of very real force.

The irrelevant argument that nowhere in Scripture are we told to pray for the dead is sometimes coupled with the equally irrelevant statement that nowhere in Scripture do we find an instance of praying for the dead. It is not certain that this statement is correct. There is a possible instance in the Old Testament, and a

rather probable one in the New. In Psalm cxxxii. 1, we have the prayer, "Lord, remember David in all his trouble," or, according to a better rendering, "Lord, remember for David all his anxious care," viz., all the anxiety and care which he suffered on Jehovah's behalf, especially in providing a sanctuary for Him in Jerusalem and in preparing for the erection of the Temple; "Now, behold, in my affliction, I have prepared for the house of the Lord" (1 Chron. xxii. 14). This prayer might be understood as asking God to bestow on *David*, who was dead long before this Psalm was written, blessings in return for what David had done for God during his lifetime. More probably it asks God to fulfil the promises made to David by blessing *Israel* with benefits. For the promises see 2 Samuel vii. 8-16; 1 Chronicles xvii. 23-27. In thus being open to two interpretations this prayer is like the petition in the Litany, "Remember not, Lord, our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers," which may mean either, "Requite neither our offences on *us*, nor the offences of our forefathers on *them*," in which case we have a prayer for the dead, or, "Requite neither our own offences nor those of our forefathers on *us*," in which case we have no such prayer. Possibly, as in other places in the Prayer Book, the framers made the ambiguity deliberately, so that those who used the words might include the dead or not, according to their beliefs.

In 2 Timothy i. 15-18, we have a twofold doubt, first as to whether Onesiphorus was dead when St. Paul wrote, and secondly as to whether "The Lord grant unto him to find mercy of the Lord in that day" ought to be regarded as a prayer, or as only a pious wish or expression of hope. Roman commentators and some Protestants answer both questions in the affirmative; most Protestants answer both in the negative. But if either question is negatived, there is here no instance of praying for the dead.

On the whole it seems to be probable that Onesiphorus was dead. The reasons for believing this are rather strong. St. Paul speaks of "the *house* of Onesiphorus" in connexion with the present, and of Onesiphorus himself only in connexion with the past. In the final salutations it is again "the house of Onesiphorus" and not himself that is saluted (iv. 19): in all the other cases it is the individual who is saluted. Again, the Apostle confines his desire for the reward of Onesiphorus' devotion to the day of judgment; he does not pray that he may be rewarded in this life, as the Elder

prays for Gaius (3 John 2). All this is natural, if Onesiphorus is dead ; it is strange, if he is still alive. And it seems to be a little like splitting hairs to contend that " May the Lord grant unto him " is not a prayer but only a wish.

However, it is not of serious moment whether we accept Psalm cxxxii. 1, or 2 Timothy i. 18, as an instance of praying for a person who is dead. Let us set both on one side as doubtful. The case for the *reasonableness* of the practice, and for its *lawfulness* so far as Scripture can guide us, remains intact and very strong.

There remains the evidence of Church tradition. It seems to have been the experience of Christians throughout the world and through all the ages, until the Reformation, that these prayers are useful, and indeed necessary for the completion of the Christian life and the full realization of that Communion of Saints in which we all profess to believe. We pray for people, known and unknown to us, who live in distant lands under conditions very different from our own, about the details of which we are very ignorant. May we not pray for persons, known and unknown to us, who possibly are far nearer to us than those who now live far away from us, although they live under conditions still more different from our own, about the whole of which we are, and must always remain, almost wholly ignorant ? The enormous majority of Christians, so far as we have evidence on the subject, have always believed, and still continue to believe, that we may. *Securus judicat orbis terrarum*. The question did not attract notice until a large number of Christians had died ; perhaps we may say until the Christians who had fallen asleep had become " the majority." For the first century and a half we have little or no evidence about that and a great many other things that we should like to know ; but from the second half of the second century our information is full and decisive. We have the express statements—in some cases several times repeated—of the Latin writers, Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome, and their successors, and of the Greek writers, Clement, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, and their successors ; and what they tell us is supplemented and confirmed by abundance of inscriptions in the catacombs, which show us the kind of prayers which simple Christians offered for their dear ones who had gone before.

The evidence supplied by these writers and inscriptions shows that there is no reason for suspecting that the prayers for the dead

which are such a marked feature in ancient liturgies may be the interpolations of a later age. The writers tell us that such prayers were habitually used in the public worship of the Church; the inscriptions show us the prayers of private individuals; the liturgies show us the forms which such intercessions assumed, when set forms of worship had become established. In these the usual petitions were that those in the other world might progress in holiness and knowledge, and receive refreshment and peace together with those good things which eye hath not seen nor ear heard.

It was the mediæval abuses connected with this Christian practice which caused Reformers to abolish the public use of such prayers, along with the abuses which had gathered round them. In England they were retained in the Prayer Book of 1549, but (probably owing to foreign influence) were abolished in 1552, with the exception of one or two ambiguous expressions, which could be understood as including the dead if any one desired to include them. But the Articles of 1553 left the private use of prayers for the dead uncondemned. Article XXII, as originally drafted, condemned the doctrine *de precatone pro defunctis*, but the words were struck out before the Article was passed and published, which "shows that the Church of England deliberately abstained from seeming to express any condemnation of the practice of praying for the departed" (Gibson, *The Thirty-nine Articles*, p. 538). But "the abandonment of public prayers for the faithful departed, however necessary or expedient that step may have been, could not but tend to lessen the hold of our people upon the oneness in Christ of the living and the dead" (Swete, *The Holy Catholic Church*, p. viii.).

It is only Protestants, and by no means all of them, who have scruples about praying for the dead. The war is doing much for the dissipation of these scruples; and we may hope that before it is ended there will be a very general restoration of this Christian and Catholic practice.

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