

TEACHING WITH A VIEW TO EVANGELISM.

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ST. MARK closes his account of our Lord's ministry at Nazareth with these significant words: "He could there do no mighty works, save that He laid His hands upon a few sick folk and healed them. And He marvelled because of their unbelief. And He went round about the villages teaching" (St. Mark vi. 5, 6).

Teaching was His remedy for the unbelief which held back the forces of the Kingdom then. It is our remedy for a like situation to-day. The question is: "*What must the teaching be?*"

A PRELIMINARY POINT.

There is one preliminary and fundamental thing which I feel ought to be an axiom of all our thinking on this matter. Christianity is primarily a religion of experience; a religion in which things happen; and the other side of this truth is that God is, not a philosophical abstraction, but a real Person who does things. That leads me to the first part of my subject—

I. OUR TEACHING ABOUT GOD.

We must teach people about God, because our aim is to bring them to God; and "he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" (Heb. xi. 6). It is *no good taking too much for granted* on this point. Though science is not, and cannot be, antagonistic to belief in God, the modern emphasis on natural law has temporarily eclipsed the sense of the reality of God. Our aim must be to restore this. We can of course only do it in so far as God is a living reality to ourselves. But I want to submit *two other considerations which I think need special attention in our teaching about God to-day.*

(a) *Our presentation of God must be great enough to commend itself to the modern world-outlook.*

The thoughts of men have widened immensely during the last fifty years. We must take care that the thought of God underlying our evangelism has at least kept pace with that widening process.

The Bible, as archæology has made increasingly clear, comes to us from periods of great world-outlook. Therefore we have only to go back to our Bibles to discover afresh by the revealing of the Holy Spirit those great thoughts about God needed for the great world of to-day.

(b) *We must present God in the environment of a real spiritual world or unseen kingdom.*

We have grown too Sadducean in our theology. We are too silent about the unseen world and its ordered life. One lamentable reaction from this is seen in the growth of spiritism. It is true that otherworldliness has been distasteful to the practical temper of modern times; and people have not hesitated to tell us so. But after all, if there is, as Jesus taught, a real unseen world, to which all are swiftly moving, and which closely affects life here, we ought to tell people about it. My reason, however, for speaking of this now is that it is indispensable to our teaching about God. We want to make God real to people. But the mind cannot properly realize a person apart from his environment. And I believe one difficulty people feel about the realization of God is that, if I may use such an expression without irreverence, they cannot "place" God. Even if they recognize that His presence pervades the whole material universe, that does not really meet the difficulty. They know God is eternal and perfect, and they know the material universe is neither. We must give them back a real heaven or they will not be able to grasp the fundamental truth of evangelism, that God is a real Person.

II. OUR TEACHING ABOUT SALVATION.

This is rooted in our teaching about God. Out of the two great truths of His righteousness and His love—out of their eternal union—springs the glorious Gospel of Salvation. The earliest Apostolic preaching was careful to relate its evangel very closely to the eternal fact of God. We cannot be too careful to do the same. There must never be the least suspicion that the Gospel is an afterthought of God, or that God only began to love and forgive sinners when Christ died. The Atonement itself is as eternal as God is eternal. The Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. xiii. 8). What the Cross expressed and did in history was in the mind of God throughout eternity.

Now if the content of the Gospel is eternal, what is it that makes it "news"? *What new thing has happened?*

St. Mark tells us that our Lord began His ministry "proclaiming the good news of God and saying the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near" (i. 14 and 15). The new thing, then, was that the kingdom of God had come near. But what is the kingdom of God?

A Divergence—the Gospel of the Kingdom and the Gospel of Salvation.

Here I must diverge for a moment. There has been a rather unfortunate tendency during the last few years to draw a distinction between the Gospel of the Kingdom and the Gospel of Salvation. It arose out of the special circumstances of our time. For various reasons, some intellectual, some practical, many people had been looking for the coming of a better social order, and they naturally seized on the phrase—"the kingdom of God"—to give religious expression to this great hope. The rise of a better social order is, of course, closely connected with the kingdom of God. It can only come through the coming of God's kingdom; and when it comes it will be a part of that kingdom. But the kingdom of God is not merely a synonym for a better social order. For it is clear that our Lord thought of it as already in existence, or He could not have said that it had come near. Besides, on two occasions (St. Luke xvii. 20, and St. John xviii. 36), He distinctly said that the kingdom is spiritual. It is, in fact, the unseen world where God is, where His will is done and where righteousness, peace and joy are the ruling features of life (Rom. xiv. 17). There can be no real distinction between the Gospel of such a kingdom and the Gospel of Salvation. The coming of that kingdom is salvation. For it is the coming of righteousness, peace and joy—the coming of God Himself, by the Holy Ghost, into the hearts of men and into the social order.

Now this divine work of Salvation has *two parts*—first, what God has done for us; and, second, what God does in us.

(a) *What God has done for us.*—The opening words of our Lord's public ministry implied that the kingdom of God had come into a new relation with human life. The reason of that lies in His Incarnation, using that word for the moment in its widest meaning. By the birth of the Son of God a permanent point of contact and communication had been established between God and man (St. John i. 51). By His atoning death the veil was rent in twain (St.

Matt. xxvii. 51) and a new and living way into the holiest was consecrated (Heb. x. 20) for us. As we sing in the Te Deum :

“ When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death

Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.”

This is the news which makes Christianity a Gospel. Something has happened. God’s love has triumphed. He has effected an entrance into a world estranged by sin. He has put away the barrier which sin had created. He has thrown open the kingdom with all its boundless resources of grace and truth, of life and power (Eph. i. 19). Salvation on its objective side is a “ finished ” work. And yet this is not all. The other side of salvation is—

(b) *God’s Work in us.*—It isn’t enough to tell men that the kingdom is open. The world, the flesh, and the devil drag them back. The memory of past failures quickly quenches new-born hopes. Worst of all, they have no real appetite for the things of God. The natural heart is cold and dead. “ Unless you can tell me of a God who can change me,” they say, “ your Gospel is no use.” Thank God that is exactly what we can tell them. “ God who commanded light to shine out of darkness hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ ” (2 Cor. iv. 6). There is the answer of the true evangelist : “ God has changed me : He can change you.” The nature of the change is sometimes described as awakening from sleep, sometimes as the breaking in of light, sometimes as a new birth or resurrection, that is as the coming of a new life. The last appears to be the most fundamental. The essential change needed is the gift of life. “ Except a man be born again He cannot see the kingdom of God ” (St. John iii. 3).

1. *The Truth of the New Birth—God’s Gift of Life.*

There can be no revival in our day until the truth of the new birth is restored to its right place. But that is no easy thing. Though the heart needs it, the heart shrinks from it. And though in reality one of the most splendid truths of Christianity, the Devil contrives unceasingly to discredit it. May I venture two suggestions ?—

(a) *Show the reasonableness of it.*—Our Lord taught it in close connection with the truth of the kingdom of God ; and it is in this setting that the reasonableness of the doctrine of the new

birth is most readily seen. The kingdom is spiritual. Human nature in its fallen state is not spiritual. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." "The natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit, neither can he know them" (1 Cor. ii. 14). It may be a humiliating fact. But it shows the necessity and the reasonableness of the new birth. It would help to win for this great truth its right place, if it were not used too exclusively as a subject for personal appeal, but more often treated as the subject of thoughtful teaching. We must show its reasonableness, and so "justify the ways of God to men."

(b) *We must show its Blessedness.*—It is in reality a most wonderful bit of the "good news" that God can, and desires to, make us new creatures. Our destiny is not limited to the bettering of our natural state. There is a higher life here and hereafter. Sin has left us spiritually dead; but God can give us life. Sin has made us spiritually blind; but God can open our eyes. "Things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, and which have not entered into the heart of man to conceive, things which God hath prepared for them that love Him, He hath revealed unto us by His Spirit" (1 Cor. ii. 9 and 10). O, that we could let men see the surpassing beauty and attractiveness of this higher life! Surely it would make them welcome the good news that we can be born again. And then there is the eternal side of the matter. We are immortal. Death does not end life. What about the life beyond? God has designed it as a life that is not only spiritual in its conditions, but spiritual in its character. Surely it is a blessed thing to know that we can become spiritual now; that we can have within us now the Holy Spirit, as "the earnest of our inheritance" (Eph. i. 14); and that the full heritage beyond is no longer a strange land but a home to which we already belong in heart and mind.

Closely related to teaching about the new birth is teaching about repentance and faith, which, like the former, need to be made the subject of teaching as well as of appeal. People do not know how to repent and to believe.

2. *Repentance and Faith.*

And, first, what is repentance? It is, as our Catechism puts it, that "whereby we forsake sin." Before I repent I am more or less

on the side of my sin. Even though I hate it, I defend it, I excuse it. However secret and almost unperceived even by myself, there is something that links me to it. But when I repent, the link is broken. I forsake it. I condemn it. I begin to see my life without it. I have caught a glimpse of something higher.¹ But this change of attitude towards sin is rooted in something deeper. There is an inner hardness of the natural heart, of which we may be quite unaware. St. Paul associates it very closely with impenitence in Romans ii. 5, and points to it in Eph. iv. 18, as the deepest cause of the natural man's alienation from the life of God. When we repent, this hardness begins to break up. Like the ploughed¹ field, it becomes receptive of the living seed.²

There we touch the point in the soul's experience where repentance and faith meet. Faith is trust in a personal God and Saviour. Trust in God involves much that is implicit in repentance—the abandonment of all suspicion or self-will, or pride, or enmity towards God, a real surrender to Him, an acknowledgment that we are in the wrong, a readiness to be at peace with Him on His terms. But faith is more than all this. It rests itself on God's mercy. It yields itself to God's love, unknown or resisted before. It clasps, with the two hands of love and need, God in Christ, the Incarnate Saviour. It claims His merits. It hides itself in Him. It opens all the avenues of its being to the inflow of His cleansing and His life. And like "the violent" in our Lord's parable, it takes the kingdom of heaven by force and claims its blessings and its powers for salvation and victory, holiness and service. In fact, repentance and faith are respectively the negative and the positive sides of that changed attitude of soul towards God which, not only at the beginning but throughout Christian discipleship, is the indispensable condition of salvation and of life.

There are three things I should like to add about the teaching of this subject:—

(1) We must be careful not to represent repentance as a gloomy thing. It is often stern, but never gloomy (Lam. iii. 21). It is in reality a release, a relief, a joy. It is "repentance unto remission

¹ It should be added that teaching on repentance must insist on action—calling on people "to do works meet for repentance" (Acts xxvi. 20).

² For a singularly beautiful description of this experience of repentance see Masefield's poem, "The Everlasting Mercy," pp. 72-75.

of sins" (St. Luke xxiv. 47), "repentance unto life" (Acts xi. 18).

(2) We must be careful not to represent faith as something abnormal. Sin and the repentance which sin necessitates do indeed introduce into faith certain abnormal elements. But faith itself and in its essence is not something abnormal but rather a return to man's right and normal attitude towards God.

(3) We must be careful to make plain (for this is an important part of the good news) that both repentance and faith are God's gifts (Acts v. 31 and xi. 18, and Eph ii. 8). We can neither truly repent nor truly believe, but by the help of the Holy Spirit. He only can,

"Convince us all of sin
Then lead to Jesus's blood
And to our wondering souls reveal
The secret love of God."

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus of the new birth into the kingdom, and of repentance¹ and of faith, He led his thoughts to the uplifting of the brazen serpent in the wilderness as a picture of the great truth of Calvary. The Lamb of God uplifted first on the Cross and then on the Throne is the one hope of a world perishing through sin. To that central truth the Holy Spirit ever seeks to lead men's hearts and minds. There only are true repentance and living faith found and renewed. There only is eternal life received. The words of the old mission hymn are abidingly true in experience:

"There is life for a look at the Crucified One,
There is life at this moment for thee."

I once asked a Chaplain who was preaching every week to a thousand Army Cadets during the war, what was the line of preaching he found best to use. After a moment's thought he answered: "The easiest is to preach Christ as our Example. The hardest is to preach the Cross." "But," he added, "that is the thing that tells."

I come now to the third and last part of our subject.

III. OUR TEACHING ABOUT THE SACRAMENTS.

This is an integral part of teaching that has evangelism as its objective. The sacraments are inseparable from the Gospel. They are the Gospel in outward sign as preaching is the Gospel in spoken word. They centre in the person of Christ. They present in clear

¹ The words of St. John iii. 5, "born of water"—would suggest this to Nicodemus.

and vivid outline the fact of redemption by His death. They are His own appointed means of grace, whereby God "doth work invisibly in us and doth not only quicken but also strengthen and confirm our faith in Him" (Article XXV). Let us use them to the full in the work of evangelism.

First, Baptism. It is God's act. Its outward sign is a visible assurance of the reality of God's gifts of cleansing and of life. The words of the service point the soul to the Cross and Resurrection as the secret of salvation. They call to a life of dying from sin and rising to righteousness through union with Christ, into whose body, the Church, baptism incorporates; and the very fact of its administration in infancy is a standing witness of the doctrine of free grace, showing us concretely that truth which lies at the heart of the Gospel, that it is always God who takes the first step in man's salvation.

Second, Confirmation. I take leave to speak of it at this point. Though not a Sacrament according to the teaching of our Church, it is the natural link between the sacraments—itsself, as I think the late Bishop Handley Moule described it, "quasi-sacramental" in character. It witnesses to a most important evangelistic truth—the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is not the privilege of the few but the birthright of all believers. There would be fewer lapses and backslidings, if it were made clearer in our evangelism both that none can live the Christian life without the Holy Spirit and that all may have that gift by faith. Here lies the opportunity of Confirmation.

Just in the moment of public confession of Christ by the renewal of the baptismal vow comes the offer and the assurance of the gift of the Holy Ghost in the laying-on of hands. Moreover, it comes with that suggestion of service to which we have been learning lately to give a larger place in the preaching of the Gospel. For confirmation is, as it has been sometimes called, the ordination of the laity, the definite commissioning of the believer for active service in the Church; reminding him that the Church is not merely an ark of safety, nor merely the home of spiritual life, but God's fighting force for the conquest of evil and the extension of His kingdom of truth and love.

Third, the Holy Communion. Its importance for evangelism lies in this—it expresses in outward sign and act God's giving and

man's taking of salvation. Every true Communion is a coming to Jesus. If we were propagating Christianity in a new country, the climax of our evangelism would be a call to Baptism. But here in England we are dealing with people who for the most part have been baptized in infancy, and many of whom have been confirmed. We bid them come to Christ. We offer them in His name the gift of salvation. But we are speaking of things unseen. Here lies the difficulty with many seeking souls. They crave for something that helps to actualize the gift and their reception of it. Surely our answer is to bid them to the Lord's Supper. There is no more powerful presentation of the Gospel than the Service of Holy Communion. There the penitent sinner confesses his sin. There he receives the declaration of divine forgiveness, and listens to the comfortable words of assurance. There he acknowledges his unworthiness and utter dependence on God's mercy. And then after the great corporate act of commemoration of redemption there are given into his hands and he receives and appropriates the very signs and seals of the new covenant of forgiveness and of life. "Now I know," he can say, "that God's promise is true and that its blessings are mine."

"Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face;
 Here faith can touch and handle things unseen;
 Here would I grasp with firmer hand Thy grace,
 And all my weariness upon Thee lean."

Surely it is the uniquely fitting opportunity for the awakened soul to make the great venture of faith and claim the gift of salvation and of life. The Church's best penitent form is the kneeling place before the Holy Table. This need not involve an administration at the time. But as a place of decision it has a great value. There the convert comes the next Sunday, or it may be after Confirmation or special preparation, to renew that first coming or return to Christ, under the same hallowed associations. It helps to correlate those three elements of individual discipleship which ought never to be separated—our coming to Christ, our feeding upon Christ, and our consecration to His service, and it invests our discipleship with that true dignity and inspiration which comes from the realization of our fellowship in the worshipping life of the whole Church of God throughout this world and within the veil.