

THE GOSPEL CONFRONTS THE INDIVIDUAL

“WHAT MANNER OF PERSONS OUGHT YE TO BE.”

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THE Gospel is the Message of God to man. His authentic and final message. The Good News of Salvation wrought for man by a Saviour crucified, risen, ascended and returning. It takes priority over everything else. It touches us at every point. It is absolutely relevant. And unless its challenge is met, everything else is irrelevant. It faces all the facts. There is nothing outside its scope. It does not give a complete answer to every question or a final solution to every problem, here and now. That will not happen until the Day of the Lord. “For now we see through a glass darkly ; but then face to face : now I know in part ; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” But the Good News heard and responded to furnishes us with a satisfying provisional answer to every question and solves our major problem. It gives us the *right way of approach*. When the Gospel is faced and embraced, the difficulty of forming opinions is enormously simplified.

“What manner of persons ought ye to be.” The context of these words, and the words themselves, determine the point of view from which we consider the Gospel as confronting the individual. The Gospel stands over against a world-order which is destined to perish. Something vastly different will succeed it. There will be “a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.” Attempts are being made in many ways to make this earth a better place. And from many points of view it *is* a much better place. But there is another side. There has been loss as well as gain. Who will survey the modern world and declare with conviction—“Behold it is very good.” Indeed, what is happening all round us, and under our very eyes, is sufficient to show that so far from being on the highway to perfection we are heading for disaster, unless God, in His mercy, decisively intervenes.

It is evident that the futility of belief in a gradual glide by easy stages into the Millennium is being increasingly recognized. As a result some, in disappointment at the miscarriage of their schemes for setting up a kingdom without a King, are eating, drinking and being merry in anticipation of inevitable death ; some are enlisting under the banner of Might and Force ; while others are turning back to the Gospel as the world’s only Hope. For once again, as always, the Gospel confronts us. The future, it says, is safe. The best is yet to be. God will carry out His programme in His own time and in His own way. Much of it, doubtless, by human instrumentality, but under His supervision and

control. He does not ask us to do things that we cannot do ; nor the things that He Himself will do. In mercy He offers us an opportunity—a few short days of opportunity. He bids us go one step at a time, and to take the first step first. The first step is to *get right with God*. The second is to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.”

In this day of big things we sometimes wonder whether the individual, as such, can possibly survive. He is an insignificant unit in a population of teeming millions. He is called upon to contribute his infinitesimal mite to support a National expenditure which is “colossal.” He scans the columns of a newspaper whose circulation is “mammoth.” He lends his tiny aid in a humble capacity to a business concern whose operations are “world-wide.” He takes his recreation by helping to swell a crowd whose proportions are “gigantic.” Centrally controlled and directed at every step and in every way from the cradle to the grave, does the individual count at all? Sometimes we are tempted to think he does not. And yet in our bones we have a deep respect for individuality. The odious tyranny of a Dictatorship, whether of the Left or of the Right, is abhorrent to us all. It is the denial of that personal liberty which is still our most cherished possession. And if standardization or bureaucracy is eliminating the individual, we are ready to cry out and bid him pull himself together and reassert his individuality.

In this revulsion against the suppression of the individual, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is our most powerful ally. It is the Love of Jesus for the individual that in the last resort makes Christianity what it is. The Gospel deals and can only deal with the individual. And unless the Church—which is the blessed company of all faithful *individuals*—is touching the individual, her real work is not being done. The Lord Jesus Christ spent much of His time dealing with individuals, to some of whom He imparted His deepest teaching. His method was not to write a book, or set forth a policy, or create a machine, but to draw to Himself a few individuals and to send them forth in His name. Straightly and sternly does He press home the literally vital importance of individual decision. And we are confronted with His call to-day. The individual must be found of God before he can find himself. The demand of Christ is absolute. But when it is met the individual becomes possessed of :

1. *Conviction.*

The man who can say, “I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day,” is the man whom God will use. This conviction is based upon facts, deepened by experience, and confirmed by a “cloud of witnesses.”

2. *Courage.*

We are miserable cowards by nature. But Christ makes the weakest strong. The victim of inhibitions finds release, for Christ sets free the prisoner of fear and arms him with a power not his own.

3. *Cogency.*

The dialectical gifts of the Christian may or may not be strongly developed. One genuine servant of Christ does more to influence others than a score who have only opinions to offer. He has the message of God on his lips and the love of Christ in his heart. His whole being is united and enlisted in one great aim, and his argument has a cogency that only consecration can give.

Sir Cyril Norwood, speaking to the Union Society of the University of London recently, uttered an impressive warning against some dangers of to-day. He felt that democracy in these Islands was living in a fool's paradise. "The old standards had been shaken off, and there was nothing as yet to put in their place. Spiritual sanctions were in abeyance for the majority, and morality was a matter of opinion, to be decided by self interest. The old social ties which were the cement of commonwealth, such as marriage and the family, duty and patriotism, commercial and international good faith, had become just old clothes. As the result of the industrial revolution there had been a swarming of mass-man, mass-produced, and thinking mass-thoughts. Not only morality but reason was dethroned, for the mass-man was not concerned with reason or truth. The need to-day was of a spiritual re-birth, for individuals and for nations." What an indictment! And if true, what a challenge to the Church! Spiritual re-birth for individuals! Is the Church, in its multiplicity of laudable endeavours, reaching the individual? The Church to-day is attempting big tasks on a big scale. Large sums of money are being raised. Spectacular services are being staged. Magnificent Cathedrals are rising up. World conferences are being held. Machinery is being overhauled and brought up to date. Doubtless means to an end, but is the end being attained? Are individuals being confronted with the Gospel?

Our National Church has a special responsibility in this regard. To her the winning of the individual is all important. Her ministry has ever been parochial, pastoral, personal. Some of us, at the most solemn moment of our lives, were addressed by our Father in God in these heart-searching words—"See that you never cease your labour, your care and diligence, until you have done all that lieth in you, according to your bounden duty, to bring all such as are or shall be committed to your charge, unto that agreement into the faith and knowledge of God, and to that ripeness and perfectness of age in Christ, that there be no place left among you, either for error in religion or for viciousness in life." Could any words declare an ideal more lofty; or, alas! reveal a failure more pathetic? "No place left among you either for error in religion, or for viciousness in life." As we look at Town or Village in the light of this solemn charge, do we not feel inclined to scrap everything else and concentrate on personal work of the most intensive kind?

✠ The Gospel confronts the Individual. In the long run everything depends upon the individual. In the earliest age of the Christian Church it was the quality of life manifested by individuals that impressed the heathen world. And so it is to-day.

There are three outstanding characteristics of the individual confronted and converted by the Gospel.

1. Serenity of Outlook.

He is serene because he looks for the "Day of God." He has staked his all upon One who has never failed, One in whom all the promises of God are Yea and Amen. How great is the influence of the calmness which comes from the Peace within, which peace is the Saviour's unique gift to each one who receives Him. This calmness does not mean coldness. The Christian is sensitive to all that goes on around him and has a warmth of heart that shows itself in sympathy and love. Rather is it an indication of strength—the strength that comes from the certainty that "the world passeth away and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever" (1 John ii. 17).

2. Seriousness of Purpose.

Nothing in this world is done without concentration and hard work. The Christian who would be taken seriously must take his Christianity seriously. His life is yielded to the Lord. He has, therefore, a purpose to fulfil. To carry it out he needs abundant grace. This God has promised to supply. The cause of Christ has often been injured through carelessness and forgetfulness and levity. The Christian must never forget whose he is and whom he serves. He must be an enthusiast; as eager to establish the Kingdom of God as any man of the world to conquer a territory. The Christian must not be a crank—no one will pay attention to him if he is. Nor a bore. To be one is effectually to defeat his object. But he can and should, by the very greatness of his calling, put to rout the frivolities and inanities which bear unhappy sway in so many lives, destroying their happiness and usefulness.

3. Separation from the World.

There *must* be a distinction between the Christian and the world, though it may not be possible to define it in words. In essence it is surely this: absolute fidelity to Jesus Christ in everything. The Christian has to act for himself according to his own special circumstances. He cannot delegate his responsibility to anyone else. In some respects he must run counter to the world's opinion. Wherever the honour of his Lord is concerned; the truth of His message; the welfare of those for whom He died, the Christian will find it necessary to draw a line of demarcation. Let each one be severe with himself and not censorious concerning others. But do let each of us remember that every consideration of decency and loyalty and comradeship should predispose us to give support to a Christian brother who is fighting a battle for his Lord. Too often it has happened that a stronger brother has acted contemptuously towards, rather than come to the rescue of a weaker brother. Such things ought not to be. Puritans (with a sense of humour and of proportion) are sadly needed to-day. For, as Bishop

Moule said in a letter to *The Times*, August 21st, 1915 : "The heart of the Puritan principle is close akin to the essence of Apostolic Christianity. It is the deep conviction that common life, personal and social, should be brought, all through and all over, into loyal obedience to the law of Christ."

Someone may say, "That is not separation from the world, but approximation to it." Precisely not. The world will never be won by assimilation to its low standards. That is not the meaning of "loyal obedience to the law of Christ." The Church would do well to strike out on a line of her own and eschew dubious methods. She should act up to her high profession, "the law of Christ" in everything. And what is true of the whole Church is true of the individual who is part of the Church.

We have fallen upon evil days so far as things spiritual are concerned. The Lord's Day has been turned into Man's Day. Public Worship is attended by a mere fraction of the population. Many old-fashioned customs, such as Grace before Meat, and Family Prayers have become increasingly rare. Possibly much of the discarded practice was merely conventional. But, explain it how we will, comfort ourselves how we may, the fact remains that the Christian Faith is not much more than a convention in many homes. That certain laudable habits of Christian piety should have fallen into desuetude might not in itself matter much if the people were being confronted with the Gospel and brought into living touch with Jesus Christ. But are they? Is it possible on any showing to assert that a strong, earnest Christian spirit animates the bulk of our population? Is not Sir Cyril Norwood nearer the mark when he says (in words already quoted) "the old standards have been shaken off and there was nothing as yet to put in their place. Spiritual sanctions were in abeyance for the majority, and morality was a matter of opinion to be decided by self-interest"? The crying need of the age is to restore the "old standards" which have been shaken off. For there is no guarantee, nor indeed any reasonable expectation, of righteousness, national or personal, unless it be based on the revealed will of God.

"God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself." That is our standing ground. That is our final resting place. "Be ye reconciled to God." That is the building on to the foundation of the individual. It is fundamental. Unless the foundation is well and truly laid the superstructure will fall. The weakness of the Church largely consists in a defective foundation. In our Church of England it often begins at Baptism, and is carried a stage further at Confirmation. Then the defects begin to be seen; nominal Christians; nominal Communicants; nominal Churchmen. Yet each one ought to be manifesting the Christ life.

Praise God for all His faithful people in the Church Catholic. They are the salt of the earth. Many a beautiful life of peace and joy, and purity and love irradiates a hallowed influence and is a perpetual benediction. But we cannot be content with things as they are. The great desideratum is a multiplication of the Saints. Faithful

dealing, plain speaking, willingness to suffer, a definite taking-up of the Cross by each one, ordained and unordained alike, must characterize every Christian in times like these. The Christian fight is a soldier's battle. Skilful generalship, modern equipment, perfect organization, exemplary discipline do not count for so much as individual fidelity and initiative. Each one has his assigned post and his definite duty. From each one the message must pass to others until individuals are confronted with the Gospel, not only in England but throughout the world, and the Lord's people are gathered in to make up the number of His elect.

The Four Recorders is a little book on the four Gospels by J. B. Lancelot, M.A., Examining Chaplain to the Bishop of Liverpool and Hon. Canon of the Cathedral. It is issued by the Church Book Room (1s. 6d. net). He believes that there must be intelligent laity who while busy with other pursuits are yet ready to be interested in New Testament studies provided results are set before them in language that is neither too speculative nor too academic. These addresses were given in his own church in order to meet the need which exists, and they are well calculated to effect their purpose. In quite simple fashion an account is given of the views held by scholars to-day in regard to the composition, order and purpose of the four Gospels. He gives an account of St. Mark as the oldest of the writings and explains its relation to the other synoptists. St. John's Gospel is in quite another category and its characteristics are simply explained. The Acts of the Apostles are brought in to explain the relationship between St. Paul and St. Luke and the special qualities of St. Luke's writing is set out. Two useful addresses are added; one on the question, "Do the Gospel Miracles really Matter?" and the other "A Study in Titles." In this an interesting account is given of the various titles applied to our Lord. In an Epilogue he urges a more complete study of the Gospels, as one of our needs to-day is a real knowledge of the Person and Work of Christ. A wide circle of readers should find Canon Lancelot's book stimulating and instructive.

What a Layman Should Believe is the title of the Bishop of London's examination of the Report of the Commission of Doctrine in the Church of England (Longmans, 3s. 6d. net). He sets out the teaching of the Church on some of the vital matters of the Creed and denies that the Report leaves people free to reject articles of the Faith.

Dr. Claude Jenkins delivered the Maurice Lectures, 1938, on *Frederick Denison and The New Reformation* (S.P.C.K., 3s. 6d. net). He gives an interesting and instructive account of Maurice's views on Theology, Socialism and Education. As one of the most influential personalities of the Church in the nineteenth century, Maurice deserves the careful study of his thought which Dr. Jenkins provides.