

The Epistle of Truth

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TRUTH AND OURSELVES

(2 St. John, verses 4-5)

THERE can be little doubt that the Apostle was fully aware of the human factor when he wrote this letter. He took into account the waywardness and fickleness of human beings. Plans are often ruined because of the human factor. No matter how carefully they are made, it is almost impossible to be sure that all will proceed according to plan. Many a missionary has found it hard to leave his work because of the uncertainty that all will go well, or because there may possibly be a lapse on the part of the converts. It is a characteristic of all humanity that, in climbing up the steep of the hill of God, it is painfully easy to slip back or to retrace the steps. Anxiety for the safety of the flock is not limited to the Mission Field. The possibility and even the probability of a lapse is not confined to the newly converted. We, who have centuries of Christian inheritance behind us, need to pray for God's grace side by side with the members of the younger Churches, even as the Book of Common Prayer often reminds us. It is humbling for us, yet perfectly fitting, that we should pray in the attitude set by the Collect for the first Sunday after Trinity: "O God, the strength of all them that put their trust in Thee, mercifully accept our prayers; and because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without Thee, grant us the help of Thy grace, that in keeping of Thy commandments we may please Thee, both in will and deed; through

Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen." The weakness of our mortal nature is ever intruding itself. But to dwell on that side alone would present a sad picture. The other side is equally true, for we note the facts of regeneration both in the Bible and in history. Tennyson stated them finely :

" I held it truth, with him who sings
To one clear harp in divers tones,
That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things."¹

All Christian workers feel the desire for results to be forthcoming. This is perfectly natural and human. But after all, the real issue rests with God. " One soweth and another reapeth " is still a condition of life. In her book, " God's Candlelights," Mabel Shaw puts the matter most eloquently from the missionary point of view, but the same is very true of almost all Christian work. " In spite of ourselves we are obsessed by the thought of results, we want to have something to show ; we are dismayed and distraught when things do not go as we imagine they should. A relapse into what we call ' heathenism,' an outbreak of behaviour that is to us contrary to the teaching we have given them ; a setting up of their wills against ours : these things not only distress us, but arouse our indignation. We expect to see a redeemed people in our own short lifetime. We do not think greatly enough. We do not see far enough, and we forget that while we work within the limitations of time and space, we can still, if we will, feel the throb and pulse of the Life Eternal ; our spirits can stand upon the threshold of the uncharted realms of the Unseen and Eternal."² St. John was anxious for his converts, and wished to protect them from actual dangers. It was that loving care which prompted his letter. He rejoiced to have found some of these people walking in truth. Yet the stern warnings of his communication seem to suggest that some were not so loyal to the truth God had revealed to the world in Christ.

There is a great responsibility involved in any contact with the Truth. Having heard Him Who is the Truth, we are bound to acknowledge that His truth has a claim upon our beliefs, our lives and our conduct. " No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the king-

¹ *In Memoriam*, 1.

² p. 150.

dom of God."¹ It is no mean matter to have met Him. His claims on us are paramount, for in Him God has spoken to men and given a perfect revelation both of Himself and His will. Because of this, our relation to the truth in Christ is of the utmost importance. "He that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son."² The converse is equally true. "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God."

The old question is still as significant as ever: "What think ye of the Christ?"³ Perhaps it is natural that we should first approach matters from our own point of view. But after all, even in the ordinary affairs of life we have to take other matters into consideration. None of us can be a law unto ourselves, though some seem to wish that it were so, and others live as far as possible as though it were so. It is only as people are willing to be governed by the laws of the community that order is at all possible in any state of society. A breach of those laws is an offence against the order of the community and against society as a whole. He who commits such a breach is an offender not only against himself but also against his fellows, and it might be necessary to apply pressure to convince the offender of the fact. Even where differences of opinion are possible, as in the matter of merit in music or art, there are certain realms of activity where differences of opinion are impossible. These are matters of finality and truth. Conscience and reason recognize their establishment as such. Yet these are not of human making. They are standards imposed from outside. Dr. Matthews has stressed this matter for us. "Any thinker who makes general statements about the universe or about knowledge must assume that there is absolute truth and that it can appear in the mind of a person, who is the product of evolution and subject to the conditions of time and space. But every time we do an addition sum we make the same assumption. 'Two and two make four' is finally true. We may come to know more about it, we may understand more of its implications, but no advance of knowledge abolishes the truth of the initial statement."⁴ If there is

¹ St. Luke ix. 62.

² 2 John ix.

³ St. Matthew xxii. 42.

⁴ *Essays in Construction*, p. 93.

ultimate truth and finality in a matter which can be apprehended by people of ordinary intelligence, it seems perfectly reasonable to believe that God, Who is Ultimate Truth, can reveal His truth to ordinary minds also. This has been done in various ways, but most clearly of all in Christ. Whilst Christians believe that God's revelation of truth through His Son has a standard of completeness and finality in itself, thus having a direct claim on our consideration of and obedience to it, most of them would be ready to admit that our human understanding has not grasped its entire significance. But even so, in the matter of apprehension of its content and meaning, as well as of its bearing upon life, no interpretation of truth can go beyond that which has been revealed in our Lord. That is why the first Christians were anxious to examine all things by the mind of Christ. In one of the most important decisions they were called upon to make, they felt themselves so very clearly to have been guided by the Spirit of Truth that they could issue their pronouncements with a tone and assurance of finality: "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us."¹ At our best, we all wish to know the ultimate truth. This is to be found in Christ, for "one of the elements in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is that this absoluteness and finality, which we find in human efforts to know and to create, has been achieved in a personal life. In Christ we are invited to see the absolute Personality."² From this point of view it is important that we should find our own personal answer to the question: "What think ye of Christ?"

Whilst the tendency is to view matters from our own standpoint, it is well to remember that there is another point of view. It is perhaps more important that we should seek to know what Christ thinks of us. His words and actions show His opinions of our needs. He went about doing good, healing both men's bodies and men's souls. Further, He pointed the way to God, and in His death removed the obstacle of sin and its penalty which blocked the way. It is when we recognize what we might have been and have failed to be that we realize how impotent we are. Christ then comes to our aid, and shows us the infinite love of God revealed in Himself. He assists us to a clearer

¹ Acts xv. 28.

² Dr. Matthews, *Essays in Construction*, p. 94.

realization of the truth, and enables us to live by it. What Christ thinks of our need humbles us ; but what He does to help us in our need ennobles us. " I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly."¹

The knowledge of the truth, which grows from more to more, thus becomes for us a moral influence on the subjective side. Such knowledge will permeate our whole lives and thus become an operative force from within. The more we know of it, the more we feel that we must live by it. In this way the subjective becomes objectively a vocation, a sphere in which life can be lived in its fullest form, and where self-expression in its truest sense can be realized. " When we were dead through our trespasses, God quickened us together with Christ (*by grace have ye been saved*), and raised us up with Him, and made us to sit with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."²

The psalmist's experience is often ours. He knew the longing for communion with The Truth, the truth which would issue in light and bring illumination to the darkness of life. Having found the way to that life of communion open to him, he followed it and rejoiced in the knowledge of God :

" O send out Thy light and Thy truth ; let them lead me :
Let them bring me unto Thy holy hill,
And to Thy tabernacles.
Then will I go unto the altar of God,
Unto God my exceeding joy :
And upon the harp will I praise Thee, O God, my God.
Why art thou cast down, O my soul ?
And why art thou disquieted within me ?
Hope thou in God : for I shall yet praise him,
Who is the health of my countenance, and my God."³

Yet the psalmist had not the fullest revelation. We have it given in Christ. Our heritage is greater than was his. It was in thankfulness for that revelation that St. John began his letter praising the Father for the truth made known in Christ, the truth which offered a sphere of life in which he and his converts alike could live a life of communion with Him.

¹ St. John x. 10.

² Ephesians ii. 5, 6.

³ Psalm xliii. 3-5.

“ The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth ; and not I only, but also all they that know the truth ; for the truth’s sake which abideth in us, and it shall be with us for ever : grace, mercy, and peace shall be with us, from God the Father, and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.”¹

THE COMMANDMENT OF TRUTH

(2 St. John, verse 6)

Human life, as we know it, is set in a background of moral truth. For the regulation of that life many codes of conduct have been formulated. But, as Archbishop D’Arcy says, “ No one theory of morals has been able to command universal assent. Yet all agree that lying, stealing, and murder must be visited with the condemnation of society. In the ordinary moral conduct of life we, one and all, walk by faith and not by scientific demonstration.”² This is very true, and as Christians we walk by faith in our Lord, looking to Him for inspiration, guidance, and power, to reach a standard of successful living. It is to Christ’s teaching that we turn for an ultimate authority regarding our belief in God and the eternal verities of life. By His spirit we judge things, affairs, and movements, for Christianity is no cold system to be viewed abstractedly, but a life to be lived. There is no phase of human life in which ethical principles and codes of conduct can be wholly ignored. Christianity recognizes this fully, and so doing, presents to the world an ethical religion based upon belief in a moral God. For the Christian, the background of successful living is to be found in God as revealed by Jesus Christ. He sees that “ the ultimate values on which the Christian revelation rests belong to the eternal world,” and so “ the Ethics of Christianity are religious Ethics ; they have their centre in God.”³ Christ’s words, then, by which He taught of God and revealed His will, have an authority for us which cannot be questioned. Beyond them we cannot go. It has been thus ever since the time of the first disciples ;

¹ 2 John 1-3.

² *Christian Ethics and Modern Thought*, p. 10.

³ Dr. Inge, *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems*, p. 16.

and St. John evidently subscribed to such a belief. He gave to us what we might call "The Commandment of Truth" which came forth from God. "I rejoice greatly that I have found certain of thy children WALKING IN TRUTH, EVEN AS WE RECEIVED COMMANDMENT FROM THE FATHER."¹ The words "we received commandment" are most inclusive, and were evidently intended to include all the members of the Church to whom this Epistle was addressed. Further, as the aorist tense is used ("we received"), it seems to point to a definite time when the commandment was given and received. Those who had known the Lord in the flesh would be able to look back to the occasion in recollection; and for the rest, most probably it was at Baptism that the word was received. In these words, there seems to be an echo of one of Christ's sayings; for the Apostle clearly refers to the reception of this commandment of truth from the Father. Our Lord has said: "All things that I have heard from my Father I have made known unto you."² He had taken them into His confidence, giving them knowledge of the Father's will as they were able to receive it. The limitations placed upon man's reception of God's revelation are on the human side, where forces of a finite nature prevail, such as environment, standards of education, heredity, and locality. Yet the revelation of the truth stands firm in Christ. The message He brought was for all mankind, and it is "whosoever willeth" that can both hear and understand. In contrast with what was so frequently the case in other faiths, where the message was for the inner circle only, His message was ultimately to be proclaimed from the house-tops. That which was first communicated to the disciples was to be told by them in turn to the entire human creation. In His teaching, our Lord followed in the line of the prophets, but He deepened the meaning and widened the scope of much of the Old Testament teaching. A study of the Sermon on the Mount well reveals this, as for instance when He said: "Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you."¹ This teaching was quite revolutionary, and it was given with authority. Its

¹ 2 John 4.

² St. John xv. 15.

outcome was, as He said, "that ye may be sons of your Father which is in heaven."¹

A son is expected to reproduce the character of his Father, and the fundamental basis of our relationship with Him is a filial one. In another place Christ said "Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."² That is to be found in sonship; and that relationship is the greatest one possible in our approach to Him. St. John speaks of this on its natural side rather than from its legal aspect. We are children of the Father. Yet under Roman Law, adoption was thought of as conferring sonship in almost as real a manner as parentage, and by it, those who were adopted were received as sons. "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God: and such we are."³

This "Commandment of Truth" seems to mean that, as God is true in His character, so also must we be true. His holiness, justice, beauty, and even His mercy, were well-known attributes of His, revealed before Christ came. Our Lord's greatest work was to reveal Him as the Father who is Love; this He did by both precept and deed. It is no wonder, then, that St. John insists on the necessity for His character of love being reproduced in His children. Love for God and love for man are the two great demands made by Christ on man. These two commandments of the Law find expression in life, and so we have three key words in this Epistle which touch upon actual life. They are truth, love, and commandment. The last of these implies implicit obedience to God in every phase of life. Dr. Plummer presses this point in his commentary. "Love, truth and obedience; these are the three leading ideas, which partly imply, partly supplement one another. Obedience without love becomes servile; love without obedience becomes unreal: neither of them can flourish outside the realm of truth."⁴ Servility is not a characteristic of sons, even though the Apostles rejoice in speaking of themselves as bond-servants of Christ; their service rendered to Him was not

¹ St. Matthew v. 43-45.

² St. Matthew v. 48.

³ 1 John iii. 1. (It should be noted that in the Greek children and sons are different words.)

⁴ *The Epistle of St. John*, p. 135.

that of cringing fear, but of glad obedience, arising out of a deep affection for Him. This is in line with Christ's words when He addressed His disciples as "friends."¹ In oriental lands the ministers, familiars and intimates of the king were called his "friends," a term which almost approached a title of dignity. One of the Papyri, a document recovered from the Serapeum in Memphis, uses the term "friends" for "Privy Councillors."² When our Lord spoke to His disciples as His "friends," rather than His servants, they would know that it meant their admittance into the secrets of His heart and mind. A great difference in status and relationship was implied. A slave obeyed without any knowledge of his master's will and intentions, just because he was a slave. But one admitted into the secrets and plans of his Lord, as a privy councillor is admitted into the confidence of his sovereign, knows his master's mind and acts out of love and loyalty. Christ's Friends had been admitted into the mysteries of the Kingdom of God which He came to found, and thus they knew their Lord's mind. "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God."³

It is in a life of love that this commandment of truth finds obedience to its summons. "This commandment have we from Him, that he who loveth God love his brother also."⁴ The Apostle was in the line of direct succession to his Lord's teaching. Christ gave God's commandments positively in His summary of the Law, and these find expression in terms of love; first, love for God, and arising from it, love for man. The second is dependent upon the first. It is not always easy either to love or trust our fellows. Yet it is to such a life that we are called, and it becomes possible when the love of God is in our hearts through Christ's redemption. Canon Barry says: "Christianity, when it is true to its own genius, is able to believe in Man recklessly, despite all that saddens and discourages, because it has seen the vision of God, the eternal source of worth and wonder—lifting us up to become sons of God."⁵ In love for God and love for man, the Christian scheme presents a matter which is for trial by

¹ St. John xv. 15.

² Milligan, *Greek Papyri*, p. 17.

³ St. Luke viii. 10.

⁴ 1 John iv. 21.

⁵ *The Relevance of Christianity*, p. 130.

experiment rather than a theory to be examined in abstraction. A mere theory has neither moral influence nor moral obligation in it. It is possible to have a very accurate knowledge of physics and yet be a bad man. The swindler may have a firm grip of the principles of accountancy, but yet be unwilling to handle accounts by its rules. It is possible to know a good deal about God and yet live an evil life. St. James said : " The devils also believe, and shudder."¹ To know about God is not sufficient. We are called to know God Himself, and knowing Him and His truth, it is essential that we should live by that truth in actual experience. Theory thus gives place to experiment, for knowledge of the truth brings with it the obligation to live by it. The son must reproduce the character of the Father.

The Christian knows that it is only as he has experienced the truth of Christ's redemption that he can live according to this standard. " Christianity is a religion of redemption. The heart and life of the Christian ethic is the redemption of our desires and wills, the transfiguration of our values, by God's power and presence in Christ Jesus. Nothing short of that can be called Christian, however friendly to the Christian spirit."² However, the cross is still an offence to those who find it either a stumbling-block or foolishness. Yet to those who follow Him, Christ crucified is both the power and the wisdom of God. The Father's scheme still stands, and in obedience to the commandment of truth we must seek to see things as He sees them. St. Paul stresses this point, and argues from human affairs to the eternal things of God. " Who among men knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man, which is in him ? even so the things of God none knoweth, save the spirit of God. But we received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God ; that we might know the things that are freely given to us by God. Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth ; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God ; for they are foolishness unto him ; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, and he himself is judged

¹ St. James ii. 19.

² Barry, *ul. supra*, p. 132.

of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ."¹ So if we would know God's truth in an experimental fashion, we must discard the habit of examining it as a theoretic abstraction, and plunge boldly into the life it indicates. Our outlook must be like that of James and John when Christ asked them of their preparedness to follow Him unflinchingly: "Are ye able to drink the cup that I am about to drink? They say unto him, We are able."² If this is our course, and we are willing to be obedient to the Commandment of Truth, the example is clear, even as is the way. Christ's teaching "sets before us a concrete moral order, a universe in which every individual is to find his place and do his duty in relation to God above him and to his fellows; it gives us the highest possible conception of such an order of things; and then it bids us make the attainment of that great end the supreme purpose of our lives. The end of all moral activities is the Kingdom of Love. In that glorious end all the potentialities of the individual are to find their realization. In it, too, humanity is to attain its perfection, and the will of God to be fully accomplished. 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'."³

¹ 1 Corinthians ii. 11-16.

² St. Matthew xx. 22.

³ D'Arcy, *ut supra*, p. 40.