

## SPIRITUAL FORCES.

ST. MATT. xi. 12.

THE kingdom of heaven is immaterial, impalpable, spiritual; how, then, can it be touched by violence or force? Nay, this kingdom being the kingdom of heaven, having, therefore, a Divine purity and majesty, how shall any man dare to assail and force it? Of this kingdom, if of anything, we may surely say,—

“We do it wrong, being so majestic,  
To offer it the show of violence;  
For it is, as the air, invulnerable,  
And our vain blows malicious mockery.”

Yet, in the verse before us, our Lord describes it as suffering violence, and seems to approve of those who take it by force: nay, more, He implies that *only* as we are violent, and use force, can we enter the kingdom of heaven.

But perhaps our English Version does not accurately render the original Greek?

It does not; nor is it easy, if it be possible, to give an accurate translation of our Lord's words. Perhaps the exactest rendering of them would be this: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven *is energised, and the energetic seize it by force;*” or this: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven *puts forth force, and men of force strongly lay hold upon it.*” And each of these translations asserts both that the kingdom of heaven, although it is spiritual and impalpable, uses force, and that it suffers force, despite its inherent majesty.

How, then, are we to understand such words as these? In what sense did the kingdom of heaven, from the coming of the Baptist, begin to use force? and in what sense did those who followed John and Jesus lay hold upon it with a force amounting to violence? The answer to these questions is to be found in the spiritual history of that period; in the new marvellous development of spiritual truth and life which then took place, and in the new and more earnest spirit which alone prepared men to welcome that development and to profit by it.

1. Under the term "kingdom of heaven" we include all manifestations of the Divine Truth and Love made to men, all disclosures of the Divine Will, whether these disclosures took the form of law or grace, of warning or invitation; and all "administrations" of the Divine Spirit, whether these "administrations" took the form of special gifts—as prophecies, miracles, psalms, or the more common and the more valuable gifts of strength to resist evil, to follow after holiness, to order the life in the fear and love of God. In short, all that we now mean by such terms as "religion" and the "religious life" was, and is, the kingdom of heaven on the earth. Obviously, therefore, there has *always* been a kingdom of heaven among men; to some extent, in some sense, there has always been a kingdom of heaven in *every* man. Among the Heathen, the recognition of the Divine Existence and Will, the sense of right and wrong, the love and approbation of virtue, the foreboding of evil when the inward law was broken, the faint intermittent hope of a happy future as the reward of a virtuous life—these, and the like intui-

tions and convictions, were their kingdom of heaven, their spiritual realm and possession ; from this they drew the motive and inspiration of all that was truest in them and best. Among the Jews this heavenly kingdom, this spiritual realm, was larger, its foundations were more strongly laid, its laws more distinctly and more authoritatively pronounced. They knew God, and God's word, and God's will, far more clearly, and their present duty, and, at least in the later stages of their history, the hope of a future life. They were not left to the discoveries and deductions of reason, nor to the dictates of an imperfect and varying moral sense ; they were taught by holy men, who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. But when John the Baptist came, preaching repentance and faith, and, still more, when the Lord Jesus came, preaching salvation from every form and taint of evil, this kingdom of heaven was *energized* ; that is, all its elements and constituents were quickened into a more intense activity ; it put forth new and unprecedented force ; it revealed God, and man's duty to God, the life man might live and the immortality to which he might aspire, with a precision and an authority before unknown : it compelled men to make a more decisive choice between earth and heaven, between God's will and their own will, between the glaring shows of time and the softened splendours of eternity. The heavenly kingdom, heretofore restrained by the local laws and national ceremonies in which it was expressed, burst from its restraints, appealed to the universal conscience of humanity, and proclaimed a salvation for men of every blood and every class.

The scene is so remote from us, and the Lord Jesus bore Himself with a composure so meek and invariable, that we too often forget, or fail to realize, the amazing energy, the tremendous force, which must have been latent in Him—in his life, in his word—in order that it might change and raise the whole life of man, that it might lift the whole world nearer heaven. But, so soon as we think of it, we know and feel that the kingdom of God must indeed have been strongly energized, that it must have put forth an intense and divine activity, before it could have conquered and absorbed all the kingdoms of the earth.

We know very well how hard, for the most part, men are to move; how stiff in their habits, how sordid in their aims, how insensible to motives drawn from the unseen and the future. What upward movement in our own time can we remember which has not cost a vast and continuous expenditure of human energy? If, for example, a man gifted above his fellows sees some political truth more clearly than they do, and sets himself to secure free trade, or to educate the people, what years of toil it costs him before his thought wins the adhesion even of the intelligent! How many years of toil must *they* wear through before they can get their scheme espoused by the public and formulated into a law! How the truth they hold must be “energized,” into what an infinite variety of forms must it be thrown, what endless objections must it be strong enough and patient enough to subdue, with what “force” must it tell for good in any small experiment that may be adventured, before it can hope to

establish itself in the convictions and affections of men! When, for example, a Luther finds forgotten truths in a neglected Bible and devotes himself to the promulgation of these truths, his whole life becomes a labour, an agony of conflict against the base interests of the clerical caste and its adherents, nay, against the prejudices and habits of a continent. If he is to conquer, must not his truths be of a sovereign potency? must they not put forth all their energy? must they not have infused into them a divine strength, a patient unweariable force, which will sap every form of opposition, seize on every point of vantage, and know how to turn foes into friends and convert defeat into victory?

And when any such revolution in the thoughts and affections of men is on foot, who are those that, first, yield to it, and, then, further it? Surely it is the "men of force;" the men who have most of the champion and martyr spirit; men of so intense and active a temperament that they can make that which is unseen real and present to their minds; men of an ardour which enables them to break through the bonds of habit, to risk and, if need be, to sacrifice their private interests for the public good. *These* are they who strongly, or even violently, seize upon the new thought, the new truth, the new religious faith, and are ready to count all things but loss so that they may win it for themselves and give it to their neighbours.

Strangely, then, as this verse may sound when we first read it, it grows clear as we think about it; we understand that whenever the kingdom of heaven is energized, it is the energetic who will seize upon it

by force and gradually impose it on the world ; we understand that whenever God reveals new truth, or, rather, old truth in new forms, and puts an unwonted force into it, it is the "men of force"—the men of active, earnest, intense nature—who will be the first to run the risk of receiving it, the first to make the sacrifice of breaking away from that which is old in order to espouse and advocate that which is new. So soon as we apply this general rule to the case before us, all obscurity disappears from our Lord's words. When He manifested Himself to Israel, the kingdom of heaven was *energized*. There was a sudden development, a forcible and marvellous outburst of pent-up powers. All that was highest, purest, divinest in the law of Moses and the worship of the Temple was expressed in and by Him, but expressed in simpler, nobler, and more universal forms—in forms which made them the property of the whole world instead of the patrimony of a single race.

Take one or two illustrations of the new force, or energy, which was thus infused into the kingdom of heaven. By their very separation from other races, the Jews bore witness to the holiness of God, testified that moral purity was a law of his kingdom. But Christ, simply because He was really, and not formally, pure ; because He was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners, could mingle with sinners, instead of standing aloof from them, and make holiness inviting to them, and welcome the sinners of all ages and lands, not to his feet only, but to his heart. The Jews were taught to hold God for their Lord and Friend, because they served Him

and kept his commandments; but, in Christ, God revealed Himself as the tender forgiving Father even of the unloving and disobedient, as caring for the prodigal and erring children who had alienated themselves from Him, and as not simply longing for their return to Him, but as sacrificing what He loved best that they might return. The Jews were taught to trust in the mercy of God, to believe that He would forgive their sins if they expressed their sorrow for sin in the sacrifices He had appointed for them; but in Christ the mercy of God was disclosed, not as willing to forgive a man, or a nation, for the sake of the sacrifices they offered, but as itself making a sacrifice, as constraining Him to sacrifice *Himself*, in order to take away the sin of the whole world.

Now it needs no argument to prove that, by thus extending and fulfilling the Hebrew law, Christ poured into it a flood of spiritual and redeeming force which made it virtually a new revelation; we see at once that by his advent and teaching, his life and cross, the kingdom of heaven was energized, transformed, glorified.

And this new force in the kingdom called for new force in the men who would enter it; this new spirit in the revelation of God demanded a new heart and a new spirit in its recipients. No indolent or merely formal acquiescence, no mere observance of certain religious customs and ordinances, no idle repetition of creeds and prayers, would any longer suffice. The new Faith demanded a new and corresponding type of religious character. And this type was found both in John and in Jesus. Different as they

were in much, they had this in common—a perfect devotion to the truth. *They* did not waver and hang in poise between the world and God. They did not seek to condone moral defects by zeal for forms of belief or worship. They did not give nine-tenths of their time and energy to making a fortune or making a name, and the other tenth to the service of God and man. They did not trim between the favour of the Divine King and the favour of priests and princes. They loved God with all their heart and soul and strength. They consecrated their whole life to the proclamation and obedience of truth and righteousness. They put their hands to a plough from which they did not look back.

And their followers were of a kindred spirit. They esteemed the reproach of Christ above all the riches of the world. That they might know and serve the truth, they left all that they had,—home and synagogue, wives and children, the respect of their neighbours and the goodwill of rabbi and priest. With neither scrip nor purse, they followed One who had not where to lay his head—followed Him whithersoever He went, followed Him, through life, to death. They were emphatically “men of force,” men of supreme spiritual energy; and when Christ came and put a new force into the kingdom of heaven, these men of force responded to his call; the kingdom was energized, and they seized upon it with a sacred violence, and clung to it at the loss of all they once held dear; all that they had heretofore most gloried in, they did now count but dross that they might win Christ and be found in Him.



2. "*From the time of John the Baptist until now,*" says the Lord, "this was the law of the heavenly kingdom; it came with force, and it required a certain force of character to lay hold upon it." Is that law repealed, then? does it no longer bind men, or does it still run and hold? Has the kingdom of heaven lost, or abated, its energy? Have we fallen back to the level of the Jews, so that we may account ourselves citizens of the heavenly kingdom if only we lightly acquiesce in the truth Christ taught, if we recite the Christian creed and prayers, if we observe the forms of Christian worship? Or is the truth of Christ still vital, and the life of Christ still a sovereign and supreme energy in the world, demanding a hearty and energetic reception at our hands?

Let our own experience furnish a reply. It is very true that most of us are familiar with the elements of Divine truth from our very childhood, and that our minds and our habits are, in some good measure, insensibly formed by them as we rise in years. Even the world around us is largely dominated by Christian principle—as we may see if we compare our social conditions with those of ancient Greece and Rome—and imposes some wholesome restraints upon us, supplies us with some motives to virtue and purity. And our homes are, for the most part, far more distinctively Christian than the general world around us; in our domestic intercourse we constantly receive some pious impressions, not simply from the words we hear, but from the kindness, the patience, the horror of evil, the devotion and self-sacrifice we see in those whom we love. It

may well be, therefore, that we have grown up unconsciously into religious habits of thought and conduct; that, though we trust we have a sincere and cordial faith in Christ, we can point to no great interior change, to no sudden and overwhelming moment of conversion: and hence we may be apt to say, "No, the kingdom of heaven has never come to us with force; we have never violently seized hold upon it."

But before we witness this sad confession, let us consider ourselves somewhat more closely. For though we can point to no sudden sweeping change, though the renewing force may have come upon us so gradually as to be well-nigh imperceptible, yet if our heart and life be truly, though imperfectly, Christian,—must not some great force have been at work within us, to lift us above the lures of the senses, above the customs and habitual sins of a worldly and selfish life? If in character and conduct we can fairly meet the Christian tests, if we love God more than man, and truth more than gain, and duty more than pleasure; if we are sincerely endeavouring to correct the defects of our nature, to bring all its faculties and affections under law to Christ; if our faith makes the unseen visible to us, and brings the distant future into the present, so that during these fleeting hours of time we are acting on motives drawn from eternity: if, in short, we are Christian in more than name, is it, can it be, anything short of a Divine energy by which we have been thus renewed in the spirit of our mind? Must not the kingdom of God have exerted an amazing force upon us? Must not we have seized upon it

with answering force? If it had not come to us with power, if we had not strongly laid hold upon it, and clung to it, would not even the common temptations of life have sufficed to detach us from it long ago?

And, again, we may be conscious of no startling revelation of truth, and of no sudden and convulsive response of our whole nature to it; but cannot we recall a time when our eyes were opened to recognize the immense value of the truths with which we had always been familiar, and of the spiritual gifts which we had unconsciously received? It may have been a quiet time; perchance the soul may have lain still and calm as the Divine disclosure dawned upon it: but was there not a time in which we were brought to a pause, and constrained to a conscious and heart-felt decision for truth, duty, Christ, God? Some friend spoke to us, it may be, and spoke so as to reach our heart, or some new influence fell upon our life, or clouds of sorrow darkened painfully over our head, and we were compelled to reflect, compelled to recognize, how much God had already taught us and given us; we felt ourselves urged, constrained, to make a distinct and conscious act of the will, to take Christ for our Lord and Friend and to avow ourselves believers in Him. We felt how much he had done for us, how much we were fain to do for Him; and, with a willing heart, we devoted ourselves to his service. When his truth and claims were thus pressed home upon us, and brought into conscious connection with our personal life, we rose to the occasion, and gave ourselves to Him who gave Himself for us. And what was that but the kingdom

of heaven coming with force to us personally, and our laying hold upon it with force?

Since then, at many times, in divers ways, that kingdom has been "energized" for us, and we have strangely and unwontedly felt its power; we have been made aware that, if we would fully enter into it, we must rise into a new type of character or into new degrees of devotion. What solemn moments come to us all in the quiet hours of meditation or worship, or in the excitements of intense joy, or in the depressions of profound grief! How often do we feel that, as yet, our hearts are torn by contending passions and aims; that, for men who profess to love truth and righteousness and God before all, we are too much under the influence of indolence, of habit, of forms, of moods and tempers; that we suffer the world to be too much with us; that our aims are too low, too many, too diverse; that our affections are not fixed firmly, and supremely, and unalterably on the things that are spiritual and eternal! And at such times, perhaps, a gracious influence sweeps over our souls; a light from heaven shines in upon us, and in that light we see our life, and its meaning and purpose, more distinctly: we feel that if only we were to break with evil once for all, to become perfect in our devotion to the Divine Will and to carry out our own deepest convictions, we might bring an unbroken unity into our lives, know the peace which passeth all understanding, and enter on a joy to which all joys of sense and time are gross and unclean.

*Thus* the kingdom of heaven "energizes" itself within us, clothes itself, with new force; and, if we

are men of force, we rise to the occasion; we re-double our endeavours to subdue the evil that is in us, and to foster the good; we give ourselves with new zeal to the service of Christ, and of that world which He has redeemed: for a little while duty grows easy to us, self-sacrifice at least possible, and we are absorbed in our resolve to live a truly Christian life.

Alas, it is but for a little while! Our goodness is like the morning dew, which soon passeth away. But, thank God, like the dew, if it soon pass, it also leaves a blessing behind it, and helps to make our character purer, stronger, and more fruitful toward God than it was before. S. COX.

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*STYLE AND CHARACTER OF ST. PETER.*

IT has been suggested in a previous article<sup>1</sup> that the Gospel of St. Mark was written by one who drew his information from an eye-witness of the events which he records, and that this eye-witness was, in all probability, the Apostle St. Peter. If this be so, there ought to be found in other parts of the New Testament, where that Apostle appears as a principal actor, peculiarities of style similar to those we have noticed in the Second Gospel. The sentences recorded by the other Evangelists as the utterances of St. Peter are too brief to supply us with any material for such an inquiry. They have their own value in helping us to determine the character of the man, and to judge what form any teaching which he gave would be likely to assume, and they will receive

<sup>1</sup> THE EXPOSITOR, vol. ii. pp. 269-284 (October 1875).