

must be so completely different from those to which I have been led during the whole of a studious life, that any further argument would evidently be useless.

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ANCIENT AND MODERN PROPHETS.

WE are not concerned with the idea of prediction, nor again with those ecstatic outbursts of dancing, music, and song, which are not wholly without a place even in Hebrew and Christian prophecy. The special attribute of the prophet on which we wish to dwell may be roughly expressed in the words, "Preacher of Righteousness." The received etymology of the common Hebrew word for prophet suggests fluent and fervid utterance, the utterance of truth in the fervour of God-sent enthusiasm; again the Greek word describes one who speaks for another, the interpreter or ambassador of the Divine will. In other cases the prophet is called a seer, and this name, however used at the time, may fairly remind us that an essential condition of the enthusiastic utterance of truth is that the speaker shall have beheld the Divine vision of the truth.

Insight, the ambassador's mission, the gift and duty of utterance, these have been the characteristics of the prophets of every age and nation. And the men who have borne the name of Prophet have been busy with all the business of life, from strayed asses to changing dynasties, from rites and ceremonies to the vindication of the liberties of the oppressed, to the foreshadowing of the suffering Messiah, to the open vision of the glory of God. The prophet has been as it were a manifestation of the Living Word, lending to the Divine message the fire of human emotion and the energy of human conviction, as when at

last the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. In as far as the Christian minister to-day consecrates emotion and faith to the delivery of a message learnt from experience of God in righteousness and truth, so is he of the children of the prophets.

We notice further as to the prophets that they were the historians of the nation, and their works are either embodied in the Old Testament or constantly referred to therein; they appear as men of action upon the scene of practical politics, they anoint and depose kings. Above all else they were public speakers, almost the only public speakers of whom we read in the Old Testament, the only orators of the nation whose words left any trace upon its records.

There are public speakers to-day, there is scope and necessity to-day for the work the prophets wrought in Israel; let us inquire whether this work is being done, how it is being done, and by whom. But before we begin we must remember that the line sometimes drawn between the region of religion and that of secular life was unknown to the Israelites; that the prophets found that God had a message for men of every rank, profession, and office—a message dealing with every duty and privilege of life, with all its toil and suffering. Hence the prophets themselves took their share in many public duties, wherein some now maintain that only a false and weak sentiment ventures to introduce religious and Christian ideas. They were preachers doubtless, they were likewise statesmen. The concentrated passion of which their words were the expression gave to these words the spirit and sometimes the form of poetry, and thus their writings were the foundation and indeed the chief portion of the national literature.

Having spoken of the prophets as the statesmen, the poets and the preachers of Israel, our subject naturally shapes itself into the question: How far may we find in

the statesmen, the poets and the preachers of to-day successors of the ancient prophets?

We must remember especially one great change in the conditions under which men influence their fellow men. When the ancient prophet proclaimed his message he depended chiefly upon opportunities of speaking to them face to face; now the printing press and the newspaper and the advertisement hoarding give men a nation for their audience. The forerunners in the nineteenth century do not lift up their voices in the wilderness, they placard huge bills on dead walls. Speakers, even those most effective in their delivery, exercise their greatest influence through the printed reports of their speeches; so it is with great speeches of Gladstone and Chamberlain—the effect on the immediate audience is a small part of the result produced; so too is it with the sermons of Robertson, Maclaren, Spurgeon. On the other hand, such a document as Gladstone's manifesto is virtually a speech in print. A speech read or delivered *memoriter* is a connecting link between the extempore speech and written documents; it illustrates the relation between the two; its eloquence and fervour are not due to the magnetic influence of an audience, to the personal sympathy developed by their actual presence, but is due to their imagined presence, as the future audience is present to the speaker writing out his speech in his study. And so now the poet, the political or theological author, writes as if he stood in spirit before an audience of his fellow men—their needs, their human character and emotion are a burden upon his heart, a stimulus to his pen, and he too is in spirit an orator.

Let us then in considering the presence or absence of prophetic characteristics in our statesmen, poets and preachers remember that we are dealing with them as public speakers in this extended sense. Let us remember too what these prophetic characteristics are. An insight

into the Divine realities that underlie the passing shows of nature and history; an insight only granted to some measure of personal and practical righteousness, for "if any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God." Next the prophet having gained this Divine knowledge receives it as a Divine message, he is God's ambassador—these truths are not to be made the materials for personal advancement, or to be used for party purposes; and thus there is laid upon him the necessity of utterance for God and for man; the truth is from God, the principles that shall guide and inspire the prophet in his utterance must be learnt of God, all is begun, continued and ended in Him. For most men and in part for all men this insight into Divine things must be gained by a pure and Christian life, by a bold loyalty to truth, and a patient study of truth; faith, hope, love, reason, patience, and experience all contribute their share to the wisdom that is from above. The same graces that enable a man to learn the truth will prompt him to utterance and guide him in his utterance, so that he uses the truth loyally and honestly.

We begin then with the statesman, confining ourselves to his work in guiding and forming public opinion and excluding his function of executing the will of the people. We include under this head all who by speaking and writing influence the people, we specially include the public press, whose work as champion of public liberty and righteousness has been expressly compared to that of the Hebrew prophets.

There is great scope for the prophet in modern politics; perhaps this time is one of those special crises at which some prophetic word is specially indispensable. We are driven to reconsider the very fundamental principles of society, individual liberty, freedom of contract, the rights of property. Through the free play of these principles there have arisen or exist great privileged classes; the landowners,

the capitalists and the trades unions of skilled artisans. There are other classes less able to hold their own: the agricultural population, the middle classes, the labourers. Partly perhaps through a too eager selfishness, chiefly through the pressure of circumstances, the privileged classes exert a cruel pressure upon the rest of the community. At the same time classes and individuals maintain a warfare of competition that threatens to bring about their mutual destruction.

Under these circumstances it appears that some new departure may be necessary, and it is of the highest importance that it should be taken in a spirit of patience and righteousness, mutual sympathy and help; not to gratify the selfish interests or passions of any class, and least of all to afford new weapons to political ambition. In other words, it is a matter of life and death that in this crisis the inspiration should be from above and not from below, that the voice of the prophet should overrule selfishness and ambition.

I do not know that the outlook is very encouraging; high sounding statements of principle are bandied to and fro, but neither the press nor politicians seem anxious to get at the truth; such truth as they find is distorted to suit party views and used for party ends. There is no sure word of prophecy.

That is speaking generally, there are no doubt exceptions; probably most of our statesmen have their moments of insight and inspiration and prophetic utterance; but the power and effect of these is narrowed and enfeebled by selfishness and party spirit. Leaving for the moment present politics, we may take as an example of the political prophet of righteousness William Wilberforce, who induced England to sacrifice £20,000,000 in order to enfranchise the West Indian slaves.

We need to protest most of all against those who say to

the prophets, prophesy not, who maintain that conventional morality is a sufficient basis for our politics, who deny that the enthusiasm of service and sacrifice can have any place in our policy at home or abroad. When the fountains of the great deep are broken up we must go back to something more fundamental than conventional morality, and as the Religious Reformation fostered the growth of modern liberty, so some Divine truth and Divine message are necessary for our Social Reformation.

We pass on to the poets; I want to use this term also in a very elastic sense, and include under it such writers as Carlyle, Ruskin, and George Eliot. Serious poetry has always had a large religious element. In Homer and Virgil the deities appear as rival Providences to their favourite nations and heroes, Dante writes of heaven and hell, Milton of Paradise Lost and Regained. Poetry is essentially the expression of men's deepest feelings, and the feelings that assert themselves most strongly in a passionate nature are religious, hence it is inevitable that theology and poetry should often minister to one another.

But in Homer and Virgil, Milton and Dante, the religious element is introduced because of the striking characters and situations it furnishes, because of its supreme dramatic value; their writings rather appeal to the imagination than touch the heart and conscience. But it is the characteristic of the Hebrew prophets, as it is of much modern poetry and allied literature, that the religious element is not introduced to add to the æsthetic power of the work, but the poetical form is the natural expression of high wrought religious feeling. We shall be able to see from a few examples how eager questionings and profound convictions burn in their hearts, how they press importunately for utterance and issue in words that are powerful to move their fellow men. We may say in all reverence that they (amidst many important differences) are like the prophets

of old, possessed by a Holy Spirit, they become the mouth-pieces of that Spirit, and God owns their ministry.

Take an illustration from the many messages of righteousness found in George Eliot's writings. There is a group of characters appearing in several of her works, with a repetition too varied to be tedious. Its leading representatives are Geoffrey Cass in *Silas Marner*, Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede*, Wybrow in *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story*, Stephen Guest in *The Mill on the Floss*, Tito Melema in *Romola*. The character is that of an apparently amiable, brilliant, popular man, who without intending any harm seeks to avoid trouble and pain, intends to indulge himself without harming any one else, and loves to bask in the sunshine of universal goodwill. We are shown the inherent meanness and inevitable failure of such a character. For a time we are allowed to admire and entertain a certain liking, they are popular with us as with the men about them.

But as the story develops, as each of those heroes ruins a woman's happiness and becomes the cause of wide-spreading sorrow, our admiration and liking give place to indignation and contempt; and these in turn give way to a mournful pity as we see the men themselves suffering the fruit of their deeds. The tendencies that ruined these men are common if not universal, and as we read their history it is as if our eyes had been opened to a precipice along the edge of which we were walking. No thoughtful man with any desires after an honourable life can read the story of Tito without renewing his determination to choose the right however painful, to fulfil duty however distasteful; no Christian man will read it without learning his weakness, and seeking to draw closer the bond between himself and the Higher grace and goodness.

The truth taught by Ruskin and Carlyle is akin to Savonarola's preaching as described by George Eliot, "that the

world was certainly not framed for the lasting convenience of hypocrites, libertines and oppressors." Many recognised exponents of current opinion hold that God's kingdom will not come on the earth. If this be so, either Christ was sadly mistaken when He taught men to pray "Thy kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven," or else we must understand that this clause of our constant prayer is excepted from the promise "Ask, and it shall be given unto you."

It seems to many that slums, a desperate struggle for bare existence, and other features of ancient and modern civilization, having existed so long as they can remember or discover records, it seems that such things are to be as invariable and perpetual as summer and winter, sowing and harvest. Carlyle and Ruskin refuse to rest in such a belief, refuse to tolerate the apathy, the letting-alone based on such a belief. They lay it upon us as a sacred duty to see that each man has his work and does his work and gets due provision for himself. They even seem to have some dim hope that such things are possible, or if they are not possible Carlyle and Ruskin seem to think it may rather be our duty to perish in trying to bring them about, than our right and privilege to secure to ourselves a place amongst the few who are comfortable apart from the many whose toil and misery form a broad and deep foundation for the comfort of the few.

In George Eliot, in Ruskin and Carlyle there is a sympathy with suffering, there is loathing of selfishness, however brilliant and successful. George Eliot treats the subject in its effect on individual lives, Ruskin and Carlyle in its effects on the community.

In Browning and Tennyson we find a still wider treatment of the same subject. The sin and suffering of man suggests to them deep problems as to the Nature of God and the Eternal Destiny of man, and they too have for



us a prophetic word of promise. Dimly and almost doubtfully they set before us the vision of a God whose work at last will be manifest to our eyes as very good, even as at first it was so manifest to Him. Their pages reflect the doubt and perplexity of our generation, and yet seem to record as well the triumph of faith, the attainment of the Vision of God. To such poets and writers our age owes very largely its inspiration of righteousness and renewal of faith. In them the religious feeling of the day has found its most powerful and permanent expression.

We come to our last class, the preachers. The modern preacher combines more of the prophetic functions than either statesman or poet. He comes before the people as the student of Divine truth, the subject of spiritual experiences; he claims a Divine call and a Divine mission; he is recognised as an essential and important part of the religious system of the times. Yet his position is in some respects more limited and more difficult than that of the ancient prophet. Eloquence, oratory, his special vehicles of truth, are shared by him with the politician and the lecturer, and these speak upon subjects which more easily than religion touch and stir the minds of men. These borrow his special topics, appeal to the emotions of righteousness and almost of spirituality which he seeks to move. The Sunday sermon with its abstractions often seems tame compared to the political speech which mingles appeals to the religious sentiment with the stirring sounds of party watchwords and the self-interest of material loss or gain. The preacher is debarred from poetic form and expression, he cannot preach an *In Memoriam*. The sermons produced rapidly in the intervals of pastoral work are unconsciously and unreasonably compared by some of his hearers to the most finished poetry and prose of the day, and men are inclined to neglect the sermon and seek inspiration and guidance in the novel or essay or poem.

I think I have stated these difficulties as boldly and as uncompromisingly as I well can; but in spite of them I maintain that the preacher still discharges an essential part of the prophet's work. As against the poet, he wields the magnetic influence of voice and manner, an influence not to be superseded by any beauty of style, or depth and force of meaning. In spoken address heart touches heart more rapidly and effectually than through any written word. As against the politician and the statesman, the preacher approaches religious questions with advantages of training, habits and object of life. The politician attempts mainly to convince the intellect and control the will; the preacher seeks to win heart and conscience. The preacher dealing with fewer people, better known to him, speaks with a more personal interest, and is met with a more personal response. It is his special privilege and special source of power that he labours for individual souls, and seeks to find for his message not the form that shall exert the widest influence over a nation, but the words that shall best serve the needs of his own people. The task may be humbler, it is none the less necessary; if its rewards are less glorious, they touch the preacher's heart more nearly and more gratefully than any reward that comes to the statesman.

There are two prophets in the Old Testament whose parallels are often found in all ages; there was Jonah who refused his mission, and Balaam who sought to sell the Divine gift and pervert the Divine message. The princes of Moab came to Balaam with the rewards of divination in their hands, and the prophet of to-day is exposed to like temptations. George Eliot says of Savonarola, "No man ever struggled to retain power over a mixed multitude without suffering vitiation; his standard must be their lower needs and not his own best insight." The statesman, the poet, the preacher are alike tempted by the prospect

of influence and popularity to be less careful about the quality of their influence, than about its extent. The rewards of divination to the statesman may be a seat in parliament or a place in the cabinet, those of the poet and novelist a wide circulation and a chorus of flattering reviews. To the preacher the princes of Moab may come attired as patrons of livings, or as deacons of Nonconformist churches, bringing with them as rewards of divination rich benefices or invitations to desirable churches or even the prospect that wealthy families may take sittings. The author of *Ecce Homo* speaks very strongly of any failure of duty on the part of the nation's prophets: "If the unlucky malefactor, who in mere brutality of ignorance or narrowness of nature or of culture has wronged his neighbour, excite our anger, how much deeper should be our indignation when intellect and eloquence are abused to selfish purposes, when studious leisure and learning and thought turn traitors to the cause of human well-being, and the wells of a nation's moral life are poisoned!"

But we base on long experience and emphatic promise a confidence that the succession of true prophets shall be unbroken, that each crisis of human history shall bring its Divine messenger and its Divine message, that Moses and Samuel, Elijah and Isaiah and Malachi, the Apostles and Fathers, Luther and Calvin, shall not fail of worthy successors; that ever as the need comes will God raise up unto us prophets like unto the greatest of the prophets.

And in this confidence we enter into the spirit of the ancient prophets, who ever looking forward saw in the distant future a greater than themselves, and knew that the times of men's anguish and failure and perplexity were not the preludes to ruin and despair, but to clearer and fuller revelations of the wisdom and truth, the power and love of God; so we as we stand confronted with what seem to be insoluble problems and hopeless misery and sin

beyond salvation, dare to believe that we may like the ancient prophets cherish and proclaim the hope of a Messiah, of the coming of prophets and the presence of a Saviour, through whom the problems shall be solved and despair give place to faith and sin to righteousness.

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