

## THE PREMIER IDEAS OF JESUS.

### I. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CHARACTER.

CHRISTIANS with a sense of fitness are not ambitious to claim originality for their Master, and have forgotten themselves when they ground Jesus' position on the brilliancy of His thought. They shrink, as by an instinct, from entering Jesus for competition with other teachers, and have Him so enshrined in the soul that to praise Him seems profanity. When a biographer of Jesus, more distinguished perhaps by his laborious detail than his insight into truth, seriously recommends Jesus to the notice of the world by certificates from Rousseau and Napoleon, or some light-hearted man of letters embroiders a needy paragraph with a string of names where Jesus is wedged in between Zoroaster and Goethe, the Christian consciousness is aghast. This treatment is not merely bad taste; it is impossible by any canon of thought; it is as if one should compare the sun with electric light, or the colour of Titian with the bloom of the rose. We criticise every other teacher; we have an intuition of Jesus. He is not a subject of study, He is a revelation to the soul—that or nothing. One does not dream of claiming intellectual pre-eminence for Jesus; one is ready, at this point, to make the largest admissions. Jesus is not a greater than Socrates; He does not come within the same category, raising no subtle problems, nor making fine swordplay with words. It is open to debate, indeed, whether Jesus said anything absolutely new, save when He taught the individual to call God Father. Very likely, with the exception of a few *obiter dicta*, you could piece out the Sermon on the Mount from the Old Testament; certainly Plato has a remarkable anticipation of the Cross. Why should we force the battle of parallel columns on the pedantic minority who depreciate Jesus and put them to

the labour of wearisome quotation from the sacred books of the East. Granted, we cry at once, that this saying and the other can be duplicated; for even stout hearts are now beginning to fail at a hint of S'akyamuni. We abandon the plain before the heavy artillery lumbers up, without any sense of loss. Originality is not an addition to knowledge; it is only a new arrangement of colour.

Originality in literature is called discovery in science, and the lonely supremacy of Jesus rests not on what He said but on what He did. Jesus is absolute Master in the sphere of religion, which is a science dealing not with intellectual conceptions but with spiritual facts. His ideas are not words, they are laws; they are not thoughts, they are forces. He did not suggest, He asserted what He had seen at first sight. He did not propose, He commanded as one who knew there was no other way. One of His chief discoveries was a new type of character, His greatest achievement its creation. It is now nineteen centuries since He lived on earth, but to-day in every country of the western world there are men differing from their neighbours, as Jesus did from His contemporaries. Jesus was a type by Himself, and they are of the same type. One of course does not mean that the type can be recognised in every Christian or that it can be seen complete in any, but that if you take a sufficient number of Jesus' disciples you will discover in their habits of thinking and acting a certain trend of character, which was not known before Jesus came and apart from His Spirit could not now exist, which also would die out in three generations, were His Spirit withdrawn. He presented to the world a solitary ideal and in innumerable lives has made it real.

When Jesus began to be a force in human life, there were four existent types on which men formed themselves and which are still in evidence. One is the moral, and has the

Jew for its supreme illustration, with his faith in the eternal, and his devotion to the law of righteousness. The next is the intellectual, and was seen to perfection in the Greek, whose restless curiosity searched out the reason of things and whose æsthetic taste identified beauty and divinity. The third is the political, and stood enthroned at Rome, where a nation was born in the purple and dictated order to the world. And the last is the commercial, and had its forerunner in the Phœnician, who was the first to teach the power of enterprise and the fascination of wealth. Any other man born at the beginning of the first century could be dropped into his class, but Jesus defied classification. As He moved among the synagogues of Galilee, He was an endless perplexity. One could never anticipate Him. One was in despair to explain Him. Whence is He? the people whispered with a vague sense of the problem, for He marked the introduction of a new form of life. He was not referable to type: He was the beginning of a time.

Jesus did not repeat the rôle of Moses. He did not forbid His disciples to steal or tell lies; it would have been a waste of His power to teach the alphabet of morals. He takes morality for granted, and carves what Moses has hewn. His great discourse moves not in the sphere of duty but in the atmosphere of love. "It hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour. . . . I say unto you, Love your enemies." His disciples' righteousness must "exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees." They must not only do as much as, but "more than others" (St. Matt. v. 43, 44, 20, 47). The legal measure is morality, and the overflow Christianity. Jesus stands above Judaism, and He is as alien to Hellenism. Writers without any sense of proportion have tried to graft Greek culture on St. Paul because he was born at Tarsus, and quoted once or twice from Greek poets, but no one has suggested

that Jesus owed anything to letters. He wrote no book ; He formed no system ; His words were jets of truth, and chose their own forms. The Empire was not within the consciousness of Jesus : His only point of contact with Rome was the Cross. When His following wished to make Him a King, He shuddered and fled as from an insult. As for wealth, it seemed so dangerous that He laid poverty as a condition on His disciples, and Himself knew not where to lay His head. You cannot trace Jesus : you cannot analyse Jesus. His intense spirituality of soul, His simplicity of thought, His continual self-abnegation and His unaffected humility descended on a worn-out, hopeless world, like dew upon the dry grass.

The Sermon on the Mount has been until lately very much skied by theologians, but it remains the manifesto of Jesus' religion, and carries in spirit His own irresistible charm—the freshness of a new revelation. “Blessed,” said Jesus, opening His mouth with intention, and no one could have guessed what would follow. The world had its own idea of blessedness. Blessed is the man who is always right. Blessed is the man who is satisfied with himself. Blessed is the man who is strong. Blessed is the man who rules. Blessed is the man who is rich. Blessed is the man who is popular. Blessed is the man who enjoys life. These are the beatitudes of sight and this present world. It comes with a shock and opens a new realm of thought, that not one of these men entered Jesus' mind when He treated of blessedness. “Blessed,” said Jesus, “is the man who thinks lowly of himself ; who has passed through great trials ; who gives in and endures ; who longs for perfection ; who carries a tender heart ; who has a passion for holiness ; who sweetens human life ; who dares to be true to conscience.” What a conception of character ! Blessed are the humble, the penitents, the victims, the mystics, the philanthropists, the saints, the mediators, the confessors.

For the first time a halo rests on gentleness, patience, kindness, and sanctity, and the eight men of the beatitudes divide the kingdom of God.

Jesus afterwards focussed the new type of character in a lovely illustration which is not always appreciated at its full value, because we deny it perspective. Every reader of the Gospels has marked the sympathy of Jesus with children. How He watched their games. How angry He was with His disciples for belittling them. How He used to warn men, whatever they did, never to hurt a little child. How grateful were children's praises when all others had turned against Him. One is apt to admire the beautiful sentiment, and to forget that children were more to Jesus than helpless and gentle creatures to be loved and protected. They were His chief parable of the kingdom of heaven. As a type of character the kingdom was like unto a little child, and the greatest in the kingdom would be the most child-like. According to Jesus, a well-conditioned child illustrates better than anything else on earth the distinctive features of Christian character. Because he does not assert nor aggrandise himself. Because he has no memory for injuries, and no room in his heart for a grudge. Because he has no previous opinions, and is not ashamed to confess his ignorance. Because he can imagine, and has the key of another world, entering in through the ivory gate and living amid the things unseen and eternal. The new society of Jesus was a magnificent imagination, and he who entered it must lay aside the world standards and ideals of character, and become as a little child.

Jesus was an absolute and unreserved believer in character, and was never weary of insisting that a man's soul was more than his environment, and that he must be judged not by what he held and had, but by what he was and did. Nothing could be easier than to say, "Lord, Lord," but that did not count. Jesus' demand was to do the "will of

My Father which is in heaven" (St. Matt. vii. 21), and all of this kind made one family (St. Matt. xii. 50). He only has founded a kingdom on the basis of character; He only has dared to believe that character will be omnipotent. No weapon in Jesus' view would be so winsome, so irresistible as the beatitudes in action. His disciples were to use no kind of force, neither tradition, nor miracles, nor the sword, nor money. They were to live as He lived, and influence would conquer the world. Jesus elected twelve men—one was a failure—and trained them till they thought with Him, and saw with Him. St. John did not imitate Jesus, he assimilated Jesus. Each disciple became a centre himself, and so the kingdom grows by multiplying and widening circles of influence. The aggression of Jesus is the propagation of character. "Ye are the salt of the earth," "Ye are the light of the world" (St. Matt. v. 13, 14). The victory of Jesus is to be the victory of character. "In the regeneration (Utopia) when the Son of Man shall sit in the throne of His glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (St. Matt. xix. 28).

When Jesus grounds His religion on character He gives a radiant proof of His sanity and wins at once the suffrages of reasonable men. There is nothing on which we differ so hopelessly as creed, nothing on which we agree so utterly as character. Impanel twelve men of clean conscience and average intelligence and ask them to try some person by his opinions, and they may as well be discharged at once. They will not agree till the Greek Kalends. Ask them to take the standard of conduct, and they will bring in a verdict in five minutes. They have agreed in anticipation. Just as he approximates to the beatitudes they will pronounce the man good; just as he diverges will they declare him less than good. Were any one to insinuate a reference to his opinions, it would be instantly dismissed as an irrelevance, and worse, an immorality, an attempt to confuse

the issues of justice. According to the consistent teaching of Jesus a Christian is one of the same likeness as Himself, and nothing will more certainly debauch the religious sense than any shifting of labels, so that one who keeps Jesus' commandments is denied His name, and one in whom there is no resemblance to Jesus receives it on grounds of incorrect or correct thinking. One cannot imagine our Master requiring the world to accept a disciple on the ground of the man's declaration of faith; He would offer to the world the test of the man's life. When one puts in his faith as evidence he is giving a cheque on a bank beyond reach; when he puts in His character he pays in gold. The reasonableness of Jesus carries everything before it. "Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit." "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (St. Matt. vii. 16-20).

With His appreciation of character Jesus affords us a ground of certitude which can be found nowhere else in religion. This is where Christian ethics have an enormous advantage over Christian theology. One generation may build up a doctrine with the most conscientious labour, but it has no guarantee that the next—equally earnest and intelligent—may not reverse it, laying the emphasis on other texts, or influenced by some other spirit. There can be no finality in theology: this is one of its glories. Therefore it must ever be an uncertain ground of judgment: this is one of its disabilities. One century a Christian is burned because he does not believe in the Mass, and in the next another is executed because he does. It were patent injustice to bind up salvation with a fluctuating science: condemnation might then hinge on the date of a man's birth, not the attitude of his soul. There are only two departments in which the human mind can arrive at certainty: one is pure mathematics, and the other is pure

ethics. The whole must be greater than its part, not only in this world but in every other where the same rational order prevails, and there can be no place within the moral order where the man of the beatitudes will not be judged perfect. At no time and in no circumstances can he be condemned or depreciated. Yesterday, to-day and for ever he is the bright excellency of manhood. Again, without effort and without argument, Jesus carries conviction to reason and conscience. "Whosoever heareth these sayings of Mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock" (St. Matt. vii. 24).

It would, however, be a shallow inference that the premium Jesus set on character meant a discount on faith, or that Jesus has originated that exasperating contrast between creed and life. If Jesus, magnifying character, said in one discourse, "Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (St. Matt. v. 48), He made it plain in another how character is formed, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you" (St. John vi. 53). He insisted on being and also on believing, and in His mind they fell into order. Faith in Him was the process, and character was the product, and Jesus with His supreme reasonableness taught that the finished product and not the varying process should be the material of judgment. It is vain to expatiate on the ingenuity of the machinery if the sample of corn be badly milled; and if it be well done the criticism on the machinery may be spared. If any one is so fortunate as to hold in his heart and in its fulness the Catholic faith concerning Jesus, his richly developed character will be the unanswerable vindication of his creed. If one, less fortunate, should miss that full vision of Jesus, which is the inheritance of the saints, then it will be the less necessary to criticise his creed, since a frost-bitten and poverty-stricken character will be its swift condemnation.



“He that abideth in Me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit” (St. John xv. 5) is Jesus’ reconciliation of creed and character.

One cannot yield to the force of Jesus’ teaching on character without facing its last application and asking, Will the final Assize be held on faith or character? As a matter of fact, the best public mind under all religions has judged by character, and has done so with a keen sense of justice and a conviction of paramount authority. When the individual has to form an estimate of his neighbour in critical circumstances he ignores his opinions and weighs his virtues. No one, for instance, would leave his wife and children to a trustee because he happened to be a Trinitarian, but only because his friend was a true man before God. It is a working principle of life that judgment goes by character, and if in the end it should go by faith it might be in keeping with some higher justice we know not here; but it would cover our moral sense with confusion and add another to the unintentional wrongs men have endured, in this world, at their fellows’ hands. It were useless to argue about a matter of which we know nothing, and where speculation is vain. We must simply accept the words of Jesus, and it is an unspeakable relief to find our Master crowning His teaching on character with the scene of the Last Judgment. The prophecy of conscience will not be put to shame, nor the continuity of this life be broken. When the parabolic form is reduced and the accidental details laid aside, it remains that the Book of Judgment is the Sermon on the Mount, and that each soul is tried by its likeness to the Judge Himself. Jesus has prepared the world for a startling surprise, but it will not be the contradiction of our present moral experience: it will be the revelation of our present hidden character.

JOHN WATSON.