

A SPIRITUAL HOUSE.

(1 PETER II. 5.)

IN passages like this we discover the true ideal of Christian character. They are among the most practical passages in the New Testament. They affect every province of conduct. For we learn how we ought to live by learning what we are. And passages like this not only give the law of Christian perfection; they contribute the motives, they sustain the spiritual force, by which Christian perfection is achieved.

To this ideal greatness and sanctity we are called. If we have come to Christ, we have come to Him "*as a living stone, rejected indeed of men, but with God elect, precious,*"—or "*honourable*"; and we also, "*as living stones,*" are to be "*built up*" on Him "*a spiritual house,*" "*to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*"

"*The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner.*" The quotation is from Psalm cxviii.—a psalm written for some great festival, after the return of the Jewish people from exile. It is a psalm full of natural exultation and magnificent hope. To the great powers which seemed to hold the fortunes of the world in their hands, there was nothing in the Jewish nation to honour or to fear. It counted for nothing. They refused to give it any place in the political order. "But the stone which the builders rejected is become the head stone of the corner." In the divine order, the elect nation had a greater place than the secular empires which surrounded it, and its destinies were more august. Rejected of men, it was to be the corner stone of the great structure of human history which was rising under the Divine hand.

And Peter quotes the words as being still truer of Christ than of the nation. Christ, who was rejected of men, is the corner stone of that great spiritual house which is the very home of the Eternal. Yes, the true home of God in this world is that spiritual society which consists of all who have "come to" Christ—to use Peter's words—and who are built on Christ: God lives in them.

When Christ was visibly present among men God lived in Christ. The glory of God dwelt in Him. The power and perfection of God were revealed through Him. Approaching Him, men approached God. Those who really saw Him saw God. And now the power and perfection of God are revealed, though imperfectly, in Christian men. Now the glory of God dwells in them. For they are one with Christ. They are living stones in the spiritual house of which He is the chief corner stone.

They are made one with Him. They do not merely acknowledge His authority with reverence; nor do they merely rely on Him with a confident faith; nor do they merely love Him with a passionate love. It is not merely by some isolated acts of their spiritual life that they are connected with Him. They themselves, according to the Divine idea and purpose, are one with Him. The union—as suggested by this passage—is as close as that which we could conceive of as binding together the foundations and walls of some stately building, if the stones began to live, and if a common life extended through them all. Together, they and Christ constitute a spiritual house, in which God dwells.

A spiritual, not a material house. For the home of God is in no visible temple; and to suppose that in these Christian times there can be any real sanctity in a mere building is to Judaize. During Christ's earthly life He declared that He Himself was greater than that temple which had been in a sense the home of God; for God

really dwelt in Him, while in the temple there was only the visible symbol of the Divine presence. And now the greatness which belonged and still belongs to Christ is extended to all the living stones in the spiritual house in which Christ is the head of the corner. God dwells in every one of us. And so the obscurest, humblest Christian man is greater than the most venerable and splendid of the buildings which kings and nobles and great nations have enriched with gold and silver and costly marbles, which have been adorned by the genius of famous painters, and in which many generations of men have worshipped God. It is man who is sacred,—man when made one with Christ. God is a Spirit; and He dwells not in material buildings, no matter by what solemn and mysterious rites it may be attempted to consecrate them. He, a Spirit, dwells in the spirit of man, and reveals His righteousness and love in the life of man. Yes, to me the poor seamstress that turns into Westminster Abbey for half an hour's quiet and peace and meditation on Christ, who has saved her, is more sacred than the venerable building which is associated with the most famous events in the history of our country; she should be treated with greater reverence. To me the beggar in her rags on the steps of St. Peter's is more sacred than the vast church which is the material centre of a communion extending over the whole world. In the Christian man is the true Shekinah; even the visible glory—which was the symbol of the unseen—has now passed away; the inner life of the Christian is the true Holy of Holies: God is there.

And while this may be said of every individual Christian—for each one is the temple of the Holy Spirit—the Divine thought is still more nobly fulfilled in the whole company of the faithful. Together, through this union with Christ, they form one great spiritual house. The whole flock of God is not to be found in any visible fold: in the East and

the West, among Catholics and Protestants, in Churches of every name, all that have come to Christ are built into one noble and glorious structure in which God dwells. And it becomes us to remember that they form part of that spiritual house as well as ourselves. We should hold together in the life of the spirit, however widely we may be separated in the life of the flesh.

We are not only a spiritual house in which God dwells : we are *priests*, and have immediate access to God in Christ. Every Christian man is a priest,—separated from the common world, consecrated to God's service. His life is not secular : it does not really belong to the visible order : it has a divine root and divine functions. And as in old Jewish times no man of his own will could become a priest, as the priesthood consisted of those and of those only who had been appointed to the priesthood by God Himself, so is it now ; we are priests by divine appointment and divine consecration. Each one of us is a priest, with the awful and glorious prerogatives of priesthood ; with access to God for ourselves, and with the duty of using that access for others. For priests did not approach God for themselves alone ; they represented all the people.

It has been suggested that while it is true that all Christians are in a sense priests, some are priests in a larger sense than others,—priests by office, with exceptional and mysterious powers. That has been the belief of a great part of Christendom for many centuries. It is the belief of large numbers of the English people at the present moment. The theory, I say, concedes that in a very true sense all Christians are priests, but asserts that their priestly functions and powers are exercised through the ministers of the Church who have been destined to priestly service. The Jewish nation was a nation of priests, and yet there was a separate priesthood which on behalf of the nation served at the altar of God.

In the case of the Jewish nation, however, no mistake was possible. A tribe a family, was separated from the rest of the nation by Divine authority, was consecrated to priestly duties. Laws, most explicit, most rigid, distinguished between the priests and the people. But where do we find in the New Testament, explicitly or by implication, any hint of such a distinction as that between the minister of the Church and ordinary Christians? Where does Christ affirm or imply any such distinction. Where do the apostles affirm or imply it? Surely when insisting that all Christians are priests, it would have been natural to suggest that some are priests in a sense in which others are not. If there were nothing more, some traces of it might have been found in the names by which the officers of the Church are denoted. But there is no trace of it. We read of apostles, evangelists, bishops or overseers, elders, deacons or servants, but of priests never.

No; this is the old Judaism again, and in one of its worst and most pernicious forms. Every Christian man is a priest in as true and full and noble and sacred a sense as any other Christian man is a priest. I could not be more of a priest than I am now if all the bishops, archbishops and patriarchs of Christendom laid their hands on my head. They could confer on me no sanctity that I have not received direct from the Spirit of God, no powers that have not been given by the infinite grace of Christ. And every Christian man or woman is as much a priest as I am.

The controversy is not about words; it is not about curious subjects of ecclesiastical antiquity and theological speculation; it affects the greatness and reality of the Christian redemption; it affects morals; it affects the Christian ideal of life. This distinction between the Christian priesthood and the Christian laity lies at the root of some of the worst evils which have corrupted Christendom.

If the ministers of the Church are priests,—consecrated to God in a sense in which other Christians are not,—then the life of the ordinary Christian may be less sacred, less completely devoted to God than the life of the minister. If the minister is a priest and the ordinary Christian is not, then the minister has a nearer, freer access to God than the ordinary Christian, and the ordinary Christian is under inferior obligations to worship and to pray. If the minister is a priest and the ordinary Christian is not, the priest will be required to illustrate a nobler idea of morality, and the ordinary Christian will suppose that he may be content with a less austere and less gracious righteousness.

We are the true Sacerdotalists—we who maintain that all Christian men are priests, through their union with Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. What priest, or bishop, or archbishop, or patriarch or pope, can assert or claim any priestly dignity that is not mine, through the great love of God? Has he immediate access to God? So have I. I have access to God in Christ, and he has no diviner prerogative. I do not need his intervention to enable me to find God: God is my Father, and the priest my brother. I can speak to God for myself. Has the priest the right to intercede with God for others? So have I. I can pray for others as well as for myself, in Christ's name; and the priest can urge no mightier, no diviner plea.

The promises that God will answer prayer are mine as well as his. Has he authority to tell men that their sins are forgiven? I have the same authority as he. I too can tell them in God's name that Christ died for the sins of the world; and I too can tell them that this is certain—that if they have trusted in the mercy of God to forgive and to save, they are really forgiven. And if he says more than that, he is imperilling the souls of men.

Does he tell me that by uttering words of mysterious

power he can secure the real presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper? I deny his claim. But I assert in answer a divine prerogative for the commonalty of the Church. Where two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, Christ Himself is among them. It is not the presence of the priest, but the presence of Christ, that makes the Lord's Supper a sacrament and means of grace. And, further, Christ is not in the bread; He is not in the wine: if He were, of what avail would it be? He is one of the company, and He draws the rest into closer union with Himself, and dwells, not in the material symbols, but in us.

Every Christian man is a priest; but together we constitute a "*priesthood.*" And in affirming our own dignity, we should remember that it is shared by all who have received the Christian faith, and who are made one with Christ. We resent and reject the special claims of those who assert that they are priests in a sense in which we are not, but we should thank God that they are priests as we are priests, and should rejoice in their sanctity as well as in our own. And when we meet to worship God, and to pray for ourselves and other men, we may find new courage and new faith when we remember the millions of other churches in this land and in other lands who also meet to worship and to pray, and we should unite our worship and prayers with theirs.

Priests—and if priests, we are to "*offer sacrifices.*" The sacrifices are "*spiritual,*" like the temple in which they are offered. They originate in the spiritual life of man, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God; they are spiritual acts. Mere external acts, however striking, however splendid, however impressive, are worthless. Only if there is real spiritual grace in them can they be acceptable to God, and then only through Christ. The external pomp, the artistic beauty, are of no account; nor the excitement and

passion and delight which the pomp and beauty may create. The sacrifices we have to offer are spiritual.

They begin with the sacrifice of ourselves—our very life—to God. We have to part with all personal aims: these are no longer to be the great ends of life; to please God perfectly and to please Him in all things—this must be our supreme end. Then may come acts of worship; and their worth is measured, not by the stateliness and beauty of the words of adoration which are on our lips, but by the reverence and awe and trust and gratitude which are in our hearts: songs of thanksgiving and praise; and their worth is measured, not by the pathos or fire of the hymn, not by the passion and perfection of the music, but by an inward joy in God and in His great salvation: prayer for ourselves, intercession for others; and the vehemence, the energy, the fulness with which we speak—even though in our excitement tears may come—are nothing; the real question is, whether in our hearts we earnestly long for the blessings we ask for, and whether we trust God to bless us: acts of service, religious work, merciful deeds for the relief of suffering and the cheering of sorrow and the rescue of men from misery as well as sin,—these, too, may be spiritual sacrifices, but not unless they are prompted by a genuine inward devotion to God and man: gifts of money for the maintenance of worship, of missions at home and abroad, and of schools, of hospitals, and of all other institutions and agencies for getting the will of God done on earth as it is done in heaven,—these, too, may be "*spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ.*" But they must be spiritual; their original spring and motive must be in that region of your life from which worship comes, and prayer and thanksgiving. It is not the amount that is given that makes the gift acceptable through Christ, though the amount, if less than you ought to give, may prevent it from being acceptable; it is the spirit, it is the

purpose, with which it is given, that makes it spiritual; and it must be spiritual if it is to be acceptable through Christ.

I have said that every Christian man is a spiritual house—a temple of God—but that the great house of God is constituted of all Christian men; that every Christian man is a priest, but that we do not stand apart and alone—solitary priests, at a solitary altar; all Christian men constitute a holy priesthood. But intervening between the individual Christian and the great company of the faithful in all lands, there is the particular Church to which we belong; and, according to Christ's idea, it is through that Christian society that we are to realize the communion of saints with all the power and blessedness which that communion secures.

The Church with which we meet is by Christ's purpose a spiritual house. He is the great Head of the corner, a living stone; and we are all living stones built up in Him, and God dwells in us. In our personal life elsewhere we are to fulfil God's idea of what His temple should be in the individual Christian man; there we are to fulfil God's idea of what the temple should be in the Church. It is not the visible building which is the true house of God, but the Christian society that meets in it. We could repair the building without much difficulty if harm came to it, or build another; but it might be worth while for us to ask whether the walls of the true invisible building are sound; whether there is any sign that the walls are leaning away from the foundation; whether any of the living stones have forgotten that they belong to the building—have dropped out, leaving here and there ugly rents through which the wind and rain come, making it harder for the rest to stand erect; whether all the stones cling together in the power of their common life and of a strong mutual affection; whether any of us ever forget that it is no

common secular structure to which we belong, but a temple in which God dwells. It might be well to ask ourselves that question: we can judge ourselves; other people it is dangerous to judge.

We are priests together; do we remember our official functions? Do we faithfully discharge them? Are we never absent without necessity, when we ought to be blending our worship with the worship of our brethren, and our prayers and thanksgivings with theirs? When we seem to be present, are we sometimes absent—in the counting-house, in the manufactory; or while we appear to be sitting at the feet of Jesus like Mary, are we troubled about household cares like Martha? We keep a register of the actual attendance of the members of the choir who assist the expression of our praise: God keeps a register of the actual attendance of those who stand before Him to offer the inward praise; how many unnecessary absences does the register reveal?

The other spiritual sacrifices which as a Church we ought to offer to God—do we all take part in them, doing all the work for His sake that we might do; giving for His sake all that we might give? Or are there any of us who, through neglecting our own share of the work, leave others overcharged; and through withholding our own gifts, occasion anxiety and perplexity to others, and create obstacles and difficulties which, if we were faithful, would at once disappear? And to whatever degree of fidelity, earnestness, generosity and zeal, we may have attained, we are not already perfect. Let us remember God's own conception, and the great ideal which He has set before us. We are all "*living stones*"—all "*a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*"

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