

unknown works. Such a canon never has been and never would be accepted by any Christian Church. Our Lord and His disciples simply followed the customs of the times when they wrote and the societies to which they belonged ; their usage was never intended either by themselves or by the Holy Spirit to be binding on us.

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SOME PROPER NAMES.

“ Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes Patrobas, Hermas.”—*Rom.* xvi. 14.

THE chapter which contains these names, and a great number more just as lifeless and unsuggestive as these, is in our Bible. It is sometimes read to us as the second lesson upon Sunday morning. When you hear them read, what thought do they suggest to you? Do you even take the trouble to think, *Why* are we asked to listen to these names which are only noises, which tell us no more than an auctioneer's old catalogue might tell? Or do you fail even of this, even to miss from your lesson its usual teaching or inspiration? Is it much the same to you whether the clergyman reads out “ Philologos, Julias, Nereus and his sister,” or, “ The God of all comforts comfort you ” ?

For if so, this is a lesson which the catalogue teaches ; a very serious and alarming lesson.

But if you have noticed this apparent waste of force, you may have gone on to see that it is part of a much greater question : Why is the Bible written as it is ? Even the Gospels, even the four Lives of Christ—how much would we prefer some more of His own wonderful teaching ; as, for example, how upon the road to Emmaus He opened the minds of the two disciples concerning the Old Testament and Himself, until their hearts burned within them. Ah, tell us that, we might say, instead of the long wrangle

between the Pharisees and the blind man—"I told you before. . . . Will ye be His disciples too?" "Thou wast altogether born in sin, and dost Thou teach us?" There is a good deal, I am afraid, which we would gladly exchange for more important matters unrecorded.

Yet we can see clearly that the choice, however strange, was not made to gratify our idle curiosity; for its problems are utterly ignored.

When, beside Nain, the dead man (as St. Luke grandly puts it)—"the dead man sat up and began to speak." What was it that the dead man made so much haste to say? And when, once, the only time of which we know, Jesus wrote, what were the words He traced with His finger on the ground, and whose foot rubbed them out again? And when Peter and John, looking into the tomb, saw the linen cloths and the napkin folded, what hands folded them, and what robes had those great hands brought with them to array Him who lived and had become dead, and was now the Living One for ever and ever?

On earth we shall never know; the aim of the sacred writers was not the curiosity of man.

Passing from the Gospels, far more surprising is the structure of the Epistles.

Why, why must we distil for ourselves our theology, our doctrine of God and Christ, of sin, the atonement, and the eternal priesthood in the skies, out of letters to ancient Churches concerning a state of affairs entirely unlike our own?

This Epistle to the Romans was written to stop the jealousies of Jewish and Roman converts in the same Church, in which the Jew said, "Mine are the promises"; and the Gentile said, "Branches are broken off that I might be grafted in."

But St. Paul said, "Abraham is the father equally of us all; as it is written, A father of many nations, not only of

one, have I made thee." And again, "God hath shut up all in disobedience that He may have mercy upon all."

But what have we to do with these contemptible jealousies eighteen centuries out of date?

The Epistle to the Galatians was written to prevent them from striving, after being justified by faith, to be saved by the law of Moses. But there is little danger of our supposing that shell-fish endanger our souls, or keeping the days of unleavened bread.

And the Epistle to the Hebrews was written because the dazzling ritual of their accustomed service was drawing back, half-hypnotized, the converts from Judaism to Christ. But now they have abode many days without a sacrifice or an ephod ; their services are not impressive to us.

How much priceless theology we might have had, in the same space, in the shape of theological essays upon the Trinity, the Christian Sacraments, the Ministry, and so forth!

Why not? Why must we read about the foolish Galatians who were bewitched, and the Corinthian who was weak and ate herbs, and the Hebrew who needed milk because he could not bear strong meat? This is just an extreme case, that a page of the divine Book should go to the saluting of Asyncritus, and Phlegon, and the rest, when many of us, perhaps, could write on the same amount of paper enough to reconcile the Eastern and Western Churches, to establish our orders, to put an end to transubstantiation and the usurpation of the Pope.

This has not been done ; and again I ask, Why not, do you suppose?

Clearly because the Bible does not aim chiefly at making sound theologians, but holy men and women. It does surely teach theology, but it does so because theology helps our life, and as far as it helps this.

But it is possible to know accurately, for instance, the

whole Roman controversy, and to throw texts about in exactly the same temper in which ruder controversialists throw stones. And then it does not matter how accurately such texts are chosen and aimed : as long as I am in such a mood, they are mere weapons in a party riot. Though I have all knowledge, and understand all mysteries, and have not love, I am nothing ; I am noisy brass.

Therefore your Bible gives you, not theories, doctrines stated so as learned books define them, but the active, working, practical side of truth, truth actually applied to the errors of ancient Rome and Corinth, not because these very errors would be constant (though it is wonderful how small the variety in human error really is), not for this, but in order to exhibit the truth at work as it ought to be at work in us. And again it shows us truth grappling with the very failings and vices which assail us, and shall assail men to the end of time—idleness and indulgence, pride and intellectual scorn.

“ Thy words were found, and I did eat them,” says the Prophet. Now men do not eat phosphorus, albumen, silica, and the various chemical ingredients of flesh and bone ; they eat bread, which conveys nourishment in a form convenient for us to absorb. Ask yourselves, Do I eat ? do I assimilate the truths I hold ?

There are books which lads are never tired of reading, which tell them how to play cricket, how to sail a boat, and so forth. But no one ever, I suppose, became a batsman or a sailor merely by reading such instructions : it is by watching skilled operators that one learns what to do, and by practice that one succeeds in doing it.

So it is with the soul.

And therefore, at the cost of something which theory might value more, but which is sufficiently given elsewhere, Scripture exhibits that sturdy blind man, unabashed by the frowning authorities from whom he used to beg ; and the

Apostle teaching and warning, applying the highest and most sacred truths to the humblest problems of everyday life, such life as yours and mine. And little is the Bible worth to any of us unless the truths we perhaps boast of holding really influence our lives, unless we are truer, gentler, more trustful by their help.

And now come back to the dull catalogue of names with which we started. With our thoughts thus set free from technicalities, they are not dull at all.

Think of the greatest and most lovable mere man who ever lived, wandering from land to land, homeless, very poor, sadly tried by the fickleness and thanklessness of his converts, and it will gladden and instruct you to know that he cherished so many friends. The list of them does one good to read over. I love to think that the heart of that strong and resolute man was as great as his great brain, and to see him treasuring in his memory so many names of obscure good people—so many, do you observe, in a city where he tells us that he had not yet preached, but into which folk drifted from all the world, into ancient Rome as into modern London. And he remembered that they were there. For many years, he said, he desired to come there, and now he is coming soon, and his heart has gone before him.

What a genuine man he is! How this chapter (which we began by half grudging to him) warms and brightens and puts heart into all the rest.

We are in danger of thinking of Paul as a sort of Napoleon in religion, founding Churches instead of kingdoms, and overthrowing superstitions instead of armies, an iron will, a purpose which trampled on its own heart, and every heart which obstructed it. It is nearer to the truth to think of him as an enthusiast, absorbed in the one sublime thought of the Master whom he saw once, and whom he should some day see again.

To speed thee on thy out-going race
 Christ shows the splendour of His face:
 What shall that face of splendour be
 When at the goal He welcomes thee?

And what mattered to him, we think, anything between? We are utterly wrong. Paul's love to Christ kept his heart fresh for all honest love. Some good woman, of whom we know nothing, not even her name, was kind to him, nursed him perhaps in illness, or soothed him when his heart was breaking; and he remembers, and writes, "Salute Rufus, the chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine." You ought to read all that he ever wrote with more hearty, real, human interest, for the sake of that most exquisite touch.

But these names also remind us what his work was like, for what cause he endured so much.

"He founded Churches," we say. Yes, truly; but his Churches consisted of living men and women whom he loved. His Churches were built, according to the Russian proverb, not of beams but of ribs. And what this chapter tells us most of all is the value of obscure lives, of the tradespeople like Lydia, and perhaps like Onesimus, the slaves of the first century.

As we read of the restless and splendid energies of the great first missionaries, we despair; we feel that religion in our day, or at least in us, cannot spread as broad a wing nor soar as high.

But Asyncritus and Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas and Hermas, it is mere guess-work if of any one, namely, the last, one intellectual effort survives. Only their names are left—and this, that they loved the great Apostle, and he loved them; that they lived holy lives, though silent, obscure, uncultivated, save with the rich culture of souls which are taught of Christ; and that in their simple bosoms swelled the tides of a nobler emotion than ever Seneca felt.

Listen to what is said of two of them—of whom, however, we know somewhat more: “Salute Prisca and Aquila, my fellow-labourers in Jesus Christ, who for my life laid down their own necks, unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the Churches of the Gentiles.” Would you not rather have that record than have spoken the Philippics or won the battle of Pharsalia?

But you may be sure that the great unknown exploit which thrilled with gratitude all the best and noblest hearts of that age was not due to superior ability—that is not required for laying down one’s neck—nor yet to a momentary impulse, though it may well have been the act of a moment. They had learned of Christ; and He had gradually made them, not eloquent or clever (about which he shows little comparative concern), but good, noble, and self-sacrificing. The splendour of that lightning flash was the revelation of electricity, stored up through many summer days of heat.

He can do the same for you, if you accept Him as your Teacher, here as in Rome, at the end of the nineteenth century as at the beginning of the first. For He, the Sun of Righteousness, whose glory alone makes radiant the faces of all the saints, He is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.

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