

*TURNING THE HEARTS OF THE CHILDREN
TO THEIR FATHERS.*¹

“He shall turn the heart of the children to the fathers.”—MAL. iv. 6.
“He shall turn the disobedient to walk in the wisdom of the just.”—
St. LUKE i. 17 (R.V.).

IN the second of these two texts we have evidently St. Luke’s view of the inner meaning of the Prophet. Malachi tells us that the alienation of children from pious and virtuous parents is alienation from God; and the restoration of such children by the “Elijah Mission” is restoration to God. Bad family life becomes bad national life, and thus brings upon a whole land the worst of interdicts—the ban and interdict of God.

The great object of the “Mothers’ Union” is the elevation of family life by the elevation of Motherhood. I desire on this occasion to speak of the help given to Christian mothers in the New Testament, by one example and one lovely sketch.

I.

The example to which I refer is that of the Mother of Jesus. And, indeed, the value of her witness to the Incarnate depends upon *that*.

How did the third Evangelist know about the idyll of Bethlehem? It is a question which is often asked now.

St. Luke’s was at least the mind of a real historian. Dr. Lightfoot says “the Acts probably affords greater means of testing its general character for truth than any other ancient narrative in existence, and in my opinion it satisfies the tests fully.”²

He therefore used documents. One has only to think

¹ A sermon preached in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, November 24, 1905; addressed to the members of the Mothers’ Union.

² *Epistle to Galatians*, p. 331.

of the letter of Lysias and the particulars of the narrative of the Ephesian riot.

Let us ask ourselves who are the best historians of childhood and children.

In humble homes there is often a child with big lustrous eyes, who utters strange sayings. The mother of such a child may be vulgar and commonplace. Such mothers have a memory which may remind us of a garden wheelbarrow—loaded with rubbish, but with beautiful flowers upon the top. Her child's sayings and doings are the flowers upon this mother's memory, and they are wet with drops from heaven. May we not see in those precious records in the first two chapters of St. Luke the hand and heart of the mother of Jesus ?

Let me recall to you a passage in the earliest Gospel, the second synoptical Evangelist. Those nearest to Jesus formed the design of laying some restraint upon that self-consuming energy. We are told vividly of the coming of His brethren and His mother, standing without and sending to Him. Think of the words which were uttered by Him—"Who is My mother, or My brethren?" "Behold My mother, and My brethren—for, whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is My brother, and sister, and mother." By a "Holy Family" we generally understand an Italian masterpiece of painting. But our Lord gives us something far larger and nobler. Whoever has Christ's likeness in the soul; whoever has the tremulous tones of His voice, and the gentle look of His face; whoever is ready, as far as in him lies, to wash every foot that is sullied with earth's dust, and to heal every foot that is stabbed with earth's thorns, is like His sister in self-devoted purity; like His brother in passions mastered, and selfishness cast out (like James, the brother of Jesus, as revealed to us in his Epistle by his great commentator—storing up His

words and repeating His ideas, until all his writing is spangled with them, as a tract of sky with stars);—nay, like His mother, in a birth of Jesus in a soul. We have heard much of the “Nelson-touch” lately. Mothers! it is hardly an exaggeration to say, that with you, under God, it may rest whether your children shall have “the Christ-touch” or not.

So far help in one example of the New Testament has been spoken of. How much remains to be said of womanly heroism, serene patience, deep thoughtfulness! One can say with some allowance for imagination, Wordsworth’s beautiful sonnet upon “The Virgin”; but the first two lines must be excluded by us.

Woman! whose virgin bosom was unhurt
By the least shade of thought to sin allied.

You can read the commentaries of two great lights of the Eastern and Western Churches upon the Marriage Feast at Cana. It has been beautifully said by an eminent living theologian, that when Mary seemed to interfere in her Son’s appointed work, she was “*gently waived aside*” by her Divine Son.

The two Fathers to whom I have referred go a good deal further!

II.

So far, I have spoken of help to mothers in one example in the New Testament.

Let us now look at the lovely sketch in St. Peter’s First Epistle (iii. 1 sqq.).

Take such points as these—

“Beholding”; the word means, literally, “initiation into a mystery,” a secret unknown to those to whom Christianity is unknown. “Chaste conversation coupled with fear”; surely that cannot mean continuing fear of a husband; but timidity which fears any fleck or spot

upon so white a thing—an ever-tremulous purity. The great Latin historian showed a fine appreciation when he said of a Roman lady, “she danced with more studied attractiveness than quite beseemed a Roman matron.” Look carefully at St. John’s Second Epistle. It is a little feather in the great cloud of feathers ever blown about by the world’s posts ; but it is a little golden feather from an eagle’s wing !

Such are examples from the New Testament ; such the Galilean fisherman’s ideal of what beseemed a lady of station, when Poppea was Nero’s empress. And from this the long procession of Shakespeare’s heroines ; the exquisite sweetness and pathos of Wordsworth’s “Lucy.” “A dream of Fair Women” is a poet’s fine fancy ; a real union of good women is the world’s best hope of a regenerated human society.

Such a work as the “Mothers’ Union” finds—I will not say its best or most fitting context—but a good and fitting context in that part of the Divine society to which we belong. What links in a golden chain are the Baptismal Service ; the dear, wise old Catechism ; the Confirmation Service, with its seven “for evers !” How well I remember, in the Revision Committee, the great and good Bishop O’Brien detailing the story of his prolonged grappling with the subject, and how he came to his ultimate view. I can see him, his tall frame bent, twisting a pen round and round. The Baptismal gospel was, he said, the key of the Church’s view—very young children brought for a blessing. That blessing was, he said, individual, impartial, real, continuing—to each and all ; not this to one and that to another—indefinable ; yet *a true gift, no mockery* ; and the beginning of a mode of dealing which is the same for ever with Him who is the same yesterday, to-day and for ever, and called, in the language of the Church, *regenera-*

tion. And thus *infant*, rather than *adult*, is the norm of the idea of Baptism.

It is, I repeat, a fit beginning for the Elijah Mission, which is for turning "the hearts of children to their fathers."

III.

So far, we have spoken of the elevation of family life by the elevation of Motherhood; and help in the New Testament by characters and by sketches so lovely as that of St. Peter.

But something more remains to be said.

Three objects of the Mothers' Union are specifically laid down: the deepening sense of marriage sanctity; the recognition of parental responsibility to children; the organizing bands of mothers in all churches of our communion for united prayer and communication. At the beginning of the year the members associated in this work were 235,000; probably by New Year's Day they may be close to 300,000. Truly there is a sense in which we may say—"The Lord gave the word: great was the company of those who published it; she that tarried at home divided the spoil."

Does not the text give a hint of the duty of children to their parents?

The duty of children to their parents is given in a very downright form by St. Paul: "Children! obey your parents in the Lord." I know that he proceeds to remind them that the fifth commandment is the first commandment with promise, and is the first in the second table. I know that he adverts to the blessing incident upon the obedience, "that it may be *well* with thee"; and at the word "*well*," the most pregnant of all commentators cries, "*attende, juventus!*" But St. Paul, at the beginning, confines himself to one small word—"right"—"for this is *right*."

Surely it is a good thing to have duty put fair and square, with no glitter of glory, or flash of flamboyant eloquence. Men declaim most about those virtues which they practise least. Of all varieties of coxcombs, the ethical coxcomb is perhaps the most mischievous. Bishop Butler says in immortal words: "Going over the theory of virtue in one's thoughts, talking well, and drawing fine pictures of it; this is so far from necessarily, or certainly, conducing to form a habit of it in him who thus employs himself, that it may harden the mind in a contrary course, and render it gradually more insensible; that is, form a habit of insensibility to all moral considerations." This proposition he proceeds to establish by one of the most perfect arguments in the science of morals. Unreality, like hypocrisy, delights in the most sublime speculations; for never intending to go beyond speculation, it costs nothing to have it magnificent. A novel of the day gives us a powerful illustration of this. A man who is actually on his way to do the foulest wrong to a friend, and who at that moment is walking with the same friend, sees this in a street of London—an emaciated and bedraggled woman, with an enormous bundle of clothes to be carried for a considerable way. The man with the sinful intention so near to his heart calls a cab, thrusts the bundle into it, and puts the woman into the cab, with a fantastical chivalry. The ethical coxcomb has habitually two fatal errors working in his heart; the first of these errors is vanity. He wishes to be observed, and to win the D.S.O. in the Army of Virtue. The second error is apt to be one of the crudest and most misleading errors of the doctrine of supererogation. He thinks that he gains the right to do far less than the simplest duty in one respect, because in another he has done something splendidly beyond his duty. The most fearfully ironical of any page of English is that in which a generally delightful writer addressed these questions

to a man of remarkable genius. "Whether the Seraphim do not transact their virtue by way of vision? Whether 'practice' be not a sub-celestial, and merely human virtue? Whether an immortal human soul may not come to be damned at last, and the man never suspect it?"¹ Now our blessed Lord Himself speaks with scathing irony of what was probably an ethical coxcombry of this kind. "Moses said, 'Honour thy father and thy mother'; but ye say, 'If a man shall say to his father or mother, "That wherewith thou mightest have been profited by me, is corban"—that is to say, given to God—ye no longer suffer him to do aught for his father or for his mother.'" It is of this that He says, "Full well do ye reject the commandment of God. . . ." *Full-well!*² it is one of the words used with the deepest and most scathing irony. The transgressor in such cases was, no doubt, in many cases, an ethical coxcomb, who desired to find means for a popular form of virtue, and to think no more about his homely duty.

Let me give (though it does not come under this division), a specimen of difference in a father's and mother's duty. The first is, the duty of a father when a boy goes to a public school. The father can enter into many details, kindly as well as wisely. There are people who would say to such a father, "You may put evil into the boy's head." Perhaps—but the first bad boy whom the lad meets may put it into his heart, which is rather worse. The other instance to which I refer is that of a mother. A great preacher and writer has said, that the best and only safe confessional is, as a general rule, in a mother's room.³ Perhaps some young person has memories which make her face flush, and her heart beat; she thinks about her secret; she says to

¹ Lucas, *Life of C. Lamb*, i. 133.

² καλῶς.

³ Dean Vaughan, *Authorised or Revised*.

herself, "How dare I tell my mother, she hates this so!" Perhaps so, but she hates concealment more, so that one's advice in any such case would be, "My daughter, go to the best confessor for you—go to your mother and tell her."

It seems to be by the Mothers' Union that the "Elijah Mission" may best be fulfilled, if I have given you the right interpretation of the text. Melancthon tells a touching story in one of his letters. A little child of his, "*Infantula mea*," he calls her, came in unnoticed when her father was silently weeping, and wiped off his tears with her bib. This, says Melancthon, pierced my very soul. Is not this one way in which the hearts of the children are turned to their fathers?

WILLIAM ARMAGH.

THE FAITHLESSNESS OF THE AVERAGE MAN.

(MATTHEW XXV. 18, AND XXIV. 30.)

THE trend of this parable is surely not in the way of our familiar and customary thought. The popular indictment is hurled against the culpability of the rich, the lazy and criminal indifference of the much-endowed. We are prone to shake our heads over the failings and the failures of the children of advantage, the luxurious waste of the well-to-do. It is the wilfulness and degeneracy of the man with the five talents which is usually depicted by our novelists, and the man with the one talent is made to climb the shining gradient of honour and renown. But this parable of the Lord enshrines the impeachment of the average man. The outstandingly gifted man, the five-talented man, does his work and wins his crown. It is the average man, the mediocre man, the man without brilliance and prominent parts, the one talent man, who shirks his responsibility, and buries his powers in a self-made grave. Our Lord indicts the