

OPERA FORIS.

MATERIALS FOR THE PREACHER.

IX.

EXOD. xxii. 28 : *Thou shalt not curse a ruler of thy people.*

This injunction is quoted against himself by Paul, in Acts xxiii. 5, from the LXX version : *Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.* Respectfulness is the main note of the counsel. A certain deference is due to authorities in virtue of their position ; for without this a man would become an irreligious and anti-social Ishmaelite. The habit of decrying the government or of running down one's own country, which is the opposite extreme of passive obedience, is more than unpatriotic ; it tends to loosen the fibres of national and social well-being, and also to lower the standard of public morality.

Professor Lowell, of Harvard, brings this out, from a modern point of view, in his recent work upon *The Government of England*. He speaks, in one passage (vol. ii. pp. 506 f.), of the American habit, which still prevails to some extent, of decrying the corruptions latent and patent in the United States government, a temper of mind which, for all its elements of justice, has often led Americans "to credit and repeat any charge of misconduct, until a spotted surface seemed wholly dark. In Great Britain one is impressed by the opposite tone of mind in regard to public life." Englishmen, as he notices, are willing, probably too willing, to admit their industrial defects, but they are proud of their government, and this pride helps, to some extent, to keep that government honest and pure. The average Briton has his own opinion upon the party in office. He disagrees often with its policy, if he chances to belong to the opposite side. "But he is certain that the general

form of government is well-nigh perfect, and he has an unshaken confidence in the personal integrity of statesmen. On this point he lays to heart the text: 'Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.' Such a frame of mind has an excellent effect upon the rising generation, for it makes them regard a lack of probity in public affairs as the unpardonable sin which no respectable person ever commits." This "general assumption that everybody speaks the truth" strikes Professor Lowell as a distinct English characteristic. While it does not check healthy criticism or opposition, it operates wholesomely by setting up a high standard of public morals.¹ Now and then a particular individual may abuse his position, but this is not allowed to shake the general confidence, nor does it lead to indiscriminate suspicion of all authorities. The application of this to the church, as well as to the state, is too obvious to need any comment.

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Eccles. iv. 4-6. These three verses may be taken as a reflection upon the extremes of ambition and indolence and the *via media* of true contentment. All work undertaken for the purpose of rivalling or outshining another person is vanity. It never satisfies. Such is the thought of verse 4, as in the margin of the R.V. *Then I saw all labour and every successful work, that it cometh of a man's rivalry with his neighbour.* It not only provokes ill-will, but it is secretly intended to do so. The writer is thinking of men who seek success in order mainly to get the better of others or to display their own superiority in the matter of gaining wealth or of managing some department of public business. There is no true happiness in that sort of acti-

¹ Or, as Burke puts it in one of his great sentences, "The degree of estimation in which any profession is held, becomes the standard of the estimation in which the professors hold themselves."

vity :¹ it merely provokes jealousy, and it fails to satisfy the worker's own heart, because its motive is wrong. What then? Are we to sit still and do nothing at all? No, adds the writer, that is the fool's alternative. *The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh.* He reduces himself to poverty, sooner than bestir himself to labour. But indolence is not the only cure for overweening ambition. *Better is a handful with quietness, than two handfuls with labour and striving after wind.* One hand full, not two hands folded. The moderate competence of a man who is wise enough not to spoil it by vain ambitions, is a superior lot either to the easy-going fool or to the aspiring, eager man, who measures success by the number of people whose income or abilities he can manage to surpass.²

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Micah ii. 1 : *Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds ! when the morning is light, they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand.*

The prophet seizes upon two heinous elements in the crime of these powerful men in Israel. (i.) Their evil practices were no sudden result of passion, but deliberately planned. Temptation did not need to lie in wait for them ; they went to meet it. They were not carried away by a momentary impulse. They went over the details of their purpose in cold blood before they rose from bed in the morning. (ii.) There was no public opinion strong enough to check them. Society ought to make sin harder than ever to commit, not only by drawing up laws to protect the weak

¹ So Wildeboer in the *Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum AT*, on Eccles. iv. 4-5.

² Cf. Mr. Thomas Hardy's lines :—

" It surely is far sweeter and more wise
To water love, than toil to leave anon
A name whose glory-gleam will but advise
Invidious minds to quench it with their own."

but by creating a powerful sentiment against evil practices.¹ But these unjust and rapacious characters had everything in their own hands. There was none to gainsay them, as they took advantage of their weaker neighbours. Their set purpose of evil was *in the power of their hand*, and any timid protest from their victims found no support in a well-formed public opinion which would visit such outrages with disapprobation and deterring condemnation.

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Matt. xi. 25-7:—*At that season Jesus answered and said :*

*I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth,
that thou didst hide these things (ταῦτα) from the wise
and understanding,
and didst reveal them unto babes ;*

Yea, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in thy sight.

*All things (πάντα) have been delivered (παρεδόθη) to me
by my Father.*

The πάντα in verse 27 refers, like the ταῦτα of the preceding words, not to any supernatural power, but to the knowledge of things divine, to “insight into the true nature of religion,” which, as Wellhausen points out, Jesus is here defending against the learned religion of the rabbinical scribes and probably also against contemporary tendencies of an esoteric character. “All doctrine and all knowledge is with the Jews παράδοσις (=kabbala), yet the παράδοσις of Jesus is derived directly from God, and not from man. It has only the name in common with the Jewish or mystic παράδοσις. In essence, it is entirely different.”² The

¹ “It is needful only to look around us,” said Huxley, “to see that the greatest restrainer of the anti-social tendencies of men is fear, not of the law, but of the opinion of their fellows.”

² So Schmiedel in *das vierte Evangelium* (pp. 51f.), who points out how this consciousness of a mission to impart God’s truth to men is genuinely synoptic. The ταῦτα must not be taken to refer to the δυνάμεις vainly shown to Capernaum, etc.

“tradition” of Jesus is part and parcel of his personal relation to the Father, and can only be mediated by intercourse.

Taken in this light, the passage thus becomes, as Harnack observes (*Sayings of Jesus*, pp. 218 f.), “one of the most important sources of our knowledge of the personality of our Lord,” since “it contains conceptions which fit in with our Lord’s genuine sphere of thought.”

It is this conscious certainty of his own mission which prepares the way for the following invitation, *Come unto me*. Those who are burdened by the vexatious traditions and external requirements of conventional religion are bidden come into touch with one whose message is for the *νήπιοι* or simple folk, and whose personality is divinely and uniquely equipped for the task of satisfying any genuine desire to know God the Father.¹ Jesus has in himself the source of insight into things divine, and the source is not esoteric. It presents no difficulties to those who approach it with teachable and humble minds. Let them be encouraged by this confidence which he has in himself. He has absolute faith in his mission and message; and these are of so accessible a nature as to inspire reasonable confidence in people whom other religious appeals only confuse.

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Matthew xxi. 2: *Then Jesus sent two disciples.*

The two disciples are sent to look after an animal for their Master to ride. This humble duty is graphically introduced; it seems to lie in dramatic juxtaposition with the preceding conversation. Not long before (Matt. xx. 20–8), the disciples had been agitated over the question

¹ Si l'on tient compte du contexte, l'on admettra même volontiers que l'objet de cette connaissance est, par rapport au Christ, Dieu en tant que Providence, réglant les conditions du salut des hommes, et par rapport au Père, Jésus en tant que Messie et agent principal des desseins providentiels” (Loisy, *Les Évangiles syn.*, i. p. 909).

of precedence in the messianic realm, allowing their minds to rest greedily upon anticipations of glorious authority and privilege. And now, the next time Jesus speaks to them, it is to send them upon this menial errand! They had to fetch an ass, not to ascend a throne. It was a practical illustration of what he had just told them, that they were *to minister, not to be ministered unto*. Their greatness was to lie in obedience to himself. They were not to give themselves airs or to suppose that they were now exempt from common duties and humble errands.

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Mark vi. 34: *He had compassion on them, and he began to teach them many things.*

The greatest need of human life is often to be taught. Material help is sometimes an inadequate method of showing pity. The greater charity is that of imparting timely knowledge. Christ saw here that what the people needed—whether they were conscious of their true need or not—was a prophet's function of instruction in the true way of God, moral guidance and spiritual impulse; they were blundering and hurting themselves by their lack of positive, clear direction in religion. Hence *he had compassion on them and he taught them*. Perhaps they expected food, or a miraculous display. If so, they got something better.

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Mark x. 22: *He went away.*

In this departure of the young man from Jesus we seem to hear the snapping of cords which might have been expected to bind him irrevocably to the Master.

He went away (i.) in spite of his moral earnestness. He had come running to Jesus (*προσδραμών*), such had been the initial fervour of his mind. This was no cool inquirer, but one evidently bent upon the attainment of goodness. He had come by himself, not because others brought him ;

he had made his way to Jesus apparently upon his own initiative, requiring no incentive or example from his friends. And he had come openly, as Jesus was on the road—not by night, for fear of ridicule from his companions. Yet even this earnest temper did not avail by itself to create a lasting tie between himself and Jesus.

He went away (ii.) in spite of his moral purity, which might have been expected to make him keenly susceptible to the claims and attractions of Jesus. He protested that he had kept all the commandments, and there is no reason to suppose that he was self-deceived in this assertion of his integrity.

He went away (iii.) in spite of his attachment to Christ. As he asked his question, he had knelt (*γονυπετήσας αὐτόν*), evincing his profound respect for the Master. He was no perfunctory or captious inquirer.

Finally, *he went away* (iv.) in spite of Christ's love for him. 'Ο δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἐμβλέψας αὐτῷ ἠγάπησεν αὐτόν. It is rather significant that the one man, outside the circle of his immediate friends and followers, whom Jesus is said to have loved, was a young man and a wealthy man, and a man who disappointed him. Matthew and Luke both omit the clause, probably because it seemed difficult to imagine how "this unique mention of Christ as 'loving' some one ends in what seems worse than nothing" (Abbott, *Johannine Vocabulary*, p. 258). Dr. Field proposed, upon inadequate grounds, to render ἠγάπησεν by "caressed," while an early tradition, reflected in Ephrem and Epiphanius, seems to have taken ἠγάπησεν αὐτόν as = "rejoiced." But these expedients do not remove the difficulty, which is, after all, not uncommon. The incident reminds us, among other things, how far a man may go in the direction of true faith, and yet fail to take the last, saving step.

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