

The Perfect Friendship.

BY THE REV. JAMES STRAHAN, M.A., EDINBURGH.

'Ye are my friends . . . I have called you friends.'
JN 15^{14, 15}.

WHEN Christ says to His disciples, 'No longer do I call you servants,' He is not cancelling the relationship which has hitherto subsisted between Him and them. He is setting aside none of His dignity and authority. 'Ye call me, Teacher, and, Lord (ὁ διδάσκαλος, καὶ ὁ κύριος): and ye say well; for so I am' (Jn 13¹⁸). These titles retain all their force. And the apostles never cease to glory in the fact that He is for ever the Master, and they for ever the servants. 'Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ' (Ro 1¹). 'Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus' (Ph 1¹). 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ' (Ja 1¹). And when John was spending his years of exile in the island of Patmos, and there received glimpses of the unseen and eternal world with its conditions, it was revealed to him that the old relationship to Christ is enduring. 'And his servants shall serve him; and they shall see his face; and his name shall be on their foreheads' (Rev 22⁴). We therefore peremptorily dismiss the idea that Christ thinks of rescinding an iota of His lordship.

But what He does say is that lordship is not all. He is about to send His disciples out into the vast world to undertake the greatest task ever entrusted to human beings—the founding of His kingdom on earth. He commissions them to go to humanity, with all its sin, all its culture, all its hoary faiths and superstitions, and to conquer it for Him. And ere He sends them away, He assures them that they go not only as His servants but as His friends. He gives them all the joy and power of this revelation. He wishes their ministry to be for ever irradiated by a Divine friendship.

In this friendship He has necessarily taken the initiative. 'Ye did not choose me, but I chose you.' It is the prerogative of the great to choose their own friends. When King Edward VII. died, the *Graphic* published a gallery of portraits, under which were written the words, 'The friends of the King.' They had not chosen him, but he had chosen them. He had made them the men of his

counsel, visited them at their houses, rejoiced with them in their joys, sympathized with them in their sorrows, and to the end of their life they will no doubt count this the greatest honour ever conferred upon them, that they were thought worthy to be 'the king's friends' (cf. 1 K 4⁵). But what is the highest earthly comradeship in comparison with the friendship of Jesus of Nazareth? There is a beautiful tradition in the first book of the Bible, to the effect that God drew near to a shepherd on the plain of Shinar, revealed to him something of His mind and character, and gave him wonderful promises which were received in faith; and in after ages that spiritual pioneer was known to prophets and apostles as 'the friend of God' (יְהוָה, Is 41⁸; φίλος θεοῦ, Ja 2²³). To this day the Arabs habitually speak of him as 'El Khalil,' 'The Friend.' This was a title reserved for one who was believed to have been admitted into a peculiarly intimate communion with God.

But a new era dawned when the Son of Man, who had, in the language of modern theology, 'the value of God,' who was, in finer apostolic phraseology, 'the brightness of God's glory and the very image of his substance,' and who came to sojourn among men as 'the Word made flesh,' offered nothing less than a Divine friendship to all His disciples, an offer conditioned only by faith. As He lived and taught in Galilee and Judea, His jealous adversaries pointed at Him the finger of scorn, and said, 'Behold a friend of publicans and sinners' (Lk 7³⁴). It is probable that no title indicative of eternal power and glory ever gave Him greater pleasure than this name which was flung at Him as a bitter gibe, for it expressed with perfect accuracy the true end and aim of His life. The 'sinners,' who knew well that the 'righteous' Pharisees were their implacable enemies, quickly learned, as by intuition, that the Prophet of Nazareth was their Friend. His pure life, His holy spirit judged them, but His heart loved them. They knew that He loved the least, the last, the lowest, the most utterly lost of them. His friendship awakened the spiritual instinct which was not dead but only dormant, and in some of them created a manifold faith—in Him,

in themselves, in the redemption of the most broken and wasted lives, in the infinite goodness and patience of God. His friendship meant nothing less than salvation to them, and perfected itself by making them worthy to be His friends. With all the power of God, He redeemed their lives from destruction, He crowned them with loving-kindness and tender mercy. And they never for a moment imagined that they entered the charmed circle of His friends merely of their own accord. They were called to it, they were chosen for it, they were irresistibly drawn into it. The impulse and the inspiration of the new life came to them through the grace of God, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth.

It was Christ's purpose that His friendship with all His followers should be based upon a perfect mutual understanding. 'I have called you friends,' He said to His disciples, 'for all things that I heard from my Father I have made known unto you.' He makes a clear distinction between two things which are both admirable—service and friendship. He never utters a disparaging word about service. He says elsewhere that it is good and faithful servants who enter into the joy of their lord (Mt 25^{21, 23}). But He plainly indicates that there is something higher than service. There is a nearer and dearer relationship, into which it is the privilege of all His disciples to enter. To this He bids them aspire. A servant is one who receives his instructions at the beginning of the day, is expected to carry them out to the letter, whether he understands their scope and purpose or not. He may or may not have a personal interest in his work, he may or may not sympathize with his master's aims; in either case his obligation is perfect obedience. And Christianity has often been illustrated by the familiar words, 'Their's not to reason why, their's not to make reply.' The soldier's life of service certainly displays the absolute ideal of implicit, unquestioning obedience. But there is something higher even than that. With all reverence the followers of Christ may say, 'Ours *is* to reason why, ours *is* to make reply.' Their Lord Himself so wills it. He is their Teacher as well as their Master, and they know that while they dare not set aside any moral imperative which He addresses to their conscience, a blind, unintelligent submission is the last thing that He desires of them. During His years of familiar intercourse with the Twelve,

He listened to a thousand questions and answers. He encouraged them to state all their difficulties and reason everything out. He sought to make His revelation perfectly clear to their minds; He wished their service to be based on an ever-increasing enlightenment. They were students at once of His life and His teaching, to whom He told all His secrets, explained all His purposes, unfolded all His ideals, in so far as they were 'able to bear' the instruction; and at the end He could say to them, 'No longer do I call you servants, but I have called you friends, for *all things* that I heard of my Father I have made known to you.' Our Catholic fellow-Christians are surely much maligned when they are represented as saying that 'ignorance is the mother of devotion.' At any rate the exact opposite of that is the truth—knowledge is the mother of devotion. Let it grow from more to more. Christ wishes every follower of His to consider the facts of Christianity again and again till they become sun-clear to his intelligence, till they beget the fullest persuasion in his own mind. Thus the servant of Christ becomes His friend.

Scarcely any words are adequate to represent the effects of this Divine friendship. It is redeeming, uplifting, purifying, transfiguring. Human friendship at its best has always something redemptive in it. It is related that Charles Kingsley was once asked by Mrs. Browning, 'What is your secret?' Her question meant, 'What is it that explains you, that accounts for all that is highest, noblest, best in you, that makes you the man, the writer, the teacher you are?' He answered very simply and sufficiently, 'I had a friend.' He meant that at the critical time of his career, when life's great decisions were being made, when character was being moulded for better or for worse, God in His good providence gave him a wise and true friend, who constrained him to what was good, and restrained him from what was evil, who in some sense embodied for him the Christian ideal, and drew him upwards to what was pure and holy, so that he ever afterwards felt that that friendship was the determining factor in his personal experience. And Kingsley gives us all, in our choice of friends, a somewhat strange and startling advice. He advises us to choose those of whom we are at first rather afraid, that is, those in whose presence we dare not speak a false word or to do a base deed, those whom we shall

reverence as well as love, to whom we shall look up rather than down, whose example will encourage and stimulate us to whatsoever things are true and lovely and of good report. We naturally and inevitably become like that which we sincerely and cordially admire. And if a human friendship does so much, what can a Divine friendship not do? 'We all, with unveiled face reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image' (2 Co 3¹⁸). 'Changed' is too weak a word. The same term is used to describe the transfiguration of Christ (Mk 9²). As we reflect the glory of His moral and spiritual perfection, we are 'transfigured.' If we abide in uninterrupted fellowship with Christ, we come to have the mind (*νοûς*) of our Divine Friend. It has often been noted that the husband and wife who have shared each other's inmost thoughts and feelings for half a lifetime, have the same expression in their faces, which mirror the two souls that love long ago made one. Montaigne, with tender memories of a youthful friend who was his *alter ego*, writes wistfully of the 'sacrament' of friendship, but he had too little faith to realize his own fine conception. Christ calls all His followers to participate in a Divine friendship which consummates itself by making them partakers of His Divine nature.

This Divine and redeeming friendship is, of course, lasting. It is everlasting. On the day after Christ said to His disciples, 'I have called you friends,' He died. But that could terminate the sweet and holy relationship. For a brief space His death interrupted it, but He rose again to renew and perfect it. Probably all pure love is in its very nature enduring. 'Amavimus, amamus, amabimus.' Tennyson was bereaved of his friend Hallam, and for a time the perplexity of his mind equalled the grief of his heart. But he could not finally doubt his intuitions of immortality. 'Peace!' he cried, 'let it be! for I loved him, and love him for ever; the dead are not dead, but alive.' Christ's victory over death confirms that instinctive conviction. In spite of many waters and floods, Divine love is unquenchable. The friends of Christ share all the power of His resurrection-life. He will not let them be resolved into a handful of dust and cease to be. His covenant of friendship cannot be broken. Here are 'ties which nought can sever.'

After having initiated His disciples into this new

relationship, Christ was confident that He could send them into all the earth to found His Church, to establish His kingdom. Without it the task would have been impossible, but with it the issue could not for a moment be doubtful. The Church of Christ is just the communion of His saints, the fellowship of His friends. It cannot repose on a foundation of abstract dogma, however strong; it cannot win the world by an artistic ritual, however impressive. The secret of its strength and permanence is a human friendship which is the invariable concomitant of a Divine friendship. The minister of a seaport town in the east of Scotland was lately struck by the appearance at his week-night meeting of a stranger with the air of a foreigner, who seemed to be thoroughly entering into the spirit of the whole service. At the close, when the others had gone, the stranger waited to exchange greetings with the minister, who found to his astonishment that he did not know a single word of English. He was a Norseman who had stepped ashore for a day, and had somehow been led into that gathering of Christian folk. For a time the two men could only converse in dumb signs, till at length the stranger uttered two words which are the same in his Norse language as in our own English. The words were—'Jesus Christ.' There the two men were, with their different languages, their different nationalities, their different Churches—everything apparently different. Yet there was no difference, because they had one faith. There is no freemasonry to compare with that. The nearer the radii of a circle come to the centre, the nearer they come to one another. Christ is the Centre of the new humanity, which with all its diversities is one family. On a twofold friendship—that of Christ to His disciples, and that of His disciples to one another—the Catholic Church of God is broadly and deeply based. Christ was justified in His expectation. He sent His servants, whom He glorified as His friends, to bring forth fruit, and that their fruit should remain. They multiplied the friendship a thousandfold. They proved throughout the great world that Jew and Gentile, barbarian and Scythian, bond and free, are all unified in Christ Jesus.

Christ in this passage puts His finger upon what is lacking in the service of many of His followers. They are absolutely conscientious; they have a strong, unflinching sense of duty; they would no more neglect their obligations to God than their

responsibilities to their own flesh and blood. They live ever in the Taskmaster's sight. Still they have the unpleasant feeling that they have not discovered the secret which makes the yoke easy and the burden light. They confess to themselves, if not to others, that they find the service of God somewhat irksome. They scarcely realize the meaning of the words, 'To do thy will, O Lord, I take delight.' But Christ has something more to give them. Christianity is not merely a Divine Service; it is a Divine Service transfigured by a Divine Friendship. Nothing but the alchemy of love ever transmutes a leaden service into a golden. 'And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.' Whitefield was once asked, 'Do you never tire of your work for God?' He answered, 'Sometimes I tire in it, but never of it.' Christ's service is perfect liberty. No one can grow weary in well-doing who lives in the light of a friendship which changes all duties into delights. When Christ says, 'Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you,' the condition is added not to chill and daunt, but to encourage and inspire. 'As you obey my behests, assure yourselves always of my love.' Epictetus said, 'I am free and the friend of God, because I obey

Him willingly. We misunderstand our Lawgiver, the Lord of the Christian conscience, if ever we think Him a stern Master. Those words which Wordsworth addressed to abstract Duty are surely most applicable to Him:

'. . . Thou dost wear
The Godhead's most benignant grace,
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon Thy face.'

Arnold's lines in his *Rugby Chapel*, 'Servants of God!—or sons,' etc., have caught the secret, which would be expressed with equal truth in this form:

'Servants of Christ!—or friends,
Shall I not call you?
Since not as servants ye know
Your Master's innermost mind.'

This perfect friendship is the realization of one of Plato's noblest dreams (*Symposium*, Jowett's trans. 211-212). 'What if man had eyes to see the true beauty—the Divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed? . . . Do you not see that in that communion only . . . he will be enabled to bring forth not images of beauty, but realities . . . and bringing forth and nourishing virtue, to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may?'

Literature.

THE IDEAL OF JESUS.

The Ideal of Jesus (T. & T. Clark; 5s. net) is the title of a new book by Professor William Newton Clarke of Colgate University, the author of that most popular book, *An Outline of Christian Theology*, a book which has now reached its nineteenth edition.

This book is not less remarkable, and may be not less popular. We have heard much, though not so much lately, of the cry, 'Back to Christ.' Professor Clarke would repeat that cry. But in a new sense. 'Back to Christ' meant away from the Apostle Paul with his theology, to the historical facts and incidents of the Gospels. Dr. Clarke believes that we have very little concern with the outward events of Christ's life. They are the events of a Son of man upon the earth, but

they were never intended by Christ Himself to be reproduced by any other son of man. Christ did not do as Muhammad did, stereotype for all time the fashions of a particular period in history and a particular spot on the face of the earth. What He came to do, and what He did, was to furnish an ideal which every man and every generation of men should strive thereafter to fulfil according to their own ability and circumstances.

The test, therefore, of every man is this: Has a man the spirit of Christ, and does he interpret his life in accordance with that spirit, using his gifts and his experiences as the raw material out of which the mind of Christ shall be formed in him? And this is the test of every Church. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; the Ideal of Jesus striven for and in measure realized by the corporate body is everything.