

for he is one with the ever-growing life of humanity which consists in the progressive conquest of evil by the living power of goodness.' If that is all that one can say of Christ, then from that point of view the interpretation of Christian religious experience is impossible. Communion with Christ as a living Person is a fact of religious experience, attested by testimony in all the Christian ages. Christ after the flesh, he says, has passed away. Has He? We know that from the time of Strauss and Baur it has become a commonplace of some kinds of criticism that it was through the Messianic conception that Christianity attained to concreteness and universality. Our contention, on the contrary, is that it is through the real historic figure depicted in the Gospels that Christianity became a religion for humanity. There were many forms of Messiaisms in the first century, but these have now only an antiquarian interest. That form of Messiaism which we call Christianity has become perpetual just because at the heart of it is the Man of Nazareth, that gracious thorn-crowned figure who lived and died for men. The abstract Christ of the paragraph would be powerless to effect the ends which Dr. Watson describes so sympathetically. We need the human Christ, who

died and rose again, who lives still, and with whom men can hold communion to-day. He lives and works to-day, and the power of Christianity lies just in this that men can truly say and realize that Christ is a person who can help, save, and make men blessed to-day.

The process of turning historic facts and persons into ideas began very early in the Christian Church. One finds the process described and repudiated in the First Epistle of John. We find it in full swing amid the Gnostics; we find it through the ages, and we find it again in full bloom in the lectures of Dr. Watson. But whenever this tendency has obtained predominance in the Church, then the Church's aggressive mission has almost ceased. It was only when men returned to the New Testament, and took the Jesus of the Gospels seriously, that the Church could perform her gracious healing work. For after all has been said ideas are only Ghosts that pass athwart us in their vapour, and leave us untouched and cold. So we cannot accept the idealistic Christ presented to us by Dr. Watson. We think we can justify the reality of Christ on grounds of reason, and certainly we need Him if we are to have an adequate explanation of our religious experience.

## The Great Text Commentary.

### THE GREAT TEXTS OF ACTS.

#### ACTS x. 34, 35.

And Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him.

#### I.

I. THE place in which the remarkable vision (vv.<sup>10-15</sup>) appeared to St. Peter was peculiarly adapted for its purpose. The outward circumstances most appropriately clothed and expressed the inner meaning of the vision. The harbour of Joppa was the only one on the sea-board of Palestine—the only point of contact between the exclusive Jews and the outlying nations. The difficulty of going in and out—owing to its wild rocks and stormy waters—symbolized, as it were,

the difficulties of creed and race which lay in the way of the extension of the Divine kingdom. It was by the way of Joppa that the Gentiles of Syria landed the cedar and the pine-wood which Solomon employed in building the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem. It was by the way of Joppa that similar materials were conveyed, by permission of the Gentile Cyrus, for the rebuilding of the second temple under Zerubbabel. It was by the way of Joppa that Jonah went to preach salvation to the Gentile Ninevites. And now it was by the way of Joppa that the Jews were appointed to convey to the Gentiles the glorious gospel of Him who was typified by the temple, who had tabernacled with men, and by His life and death had united in bonds of brotherly love the estranged nations which He had made of one blood. In this port-

town many sailors, traders, and artisans of other nations resided, some of whom, by becoming proselytes to the Jewish faith, formed the link connecting the Jews with the Gentiles, the law of Moses with the gospel, the synagogue with the Church.

2. The heavenly vision and message took shape from the natural condition of the apostle at the time. He had been fasting and praying for several hours, and was in consequence worn out with fatigue and faint with hunger. The higher want of his spirit was therefore supplied by a vision suggested by the want of his lower nature. The Divine light which, breaking through the misty atmosphere of traditional notions, was about to rise upon his soul displayed itself, as Neander says, in the mirror of sensuous images proceeding from the hunger of his body. Probably, too, the form of the vision—the mould in which it was cast—was determined by the circumstances in which he was placed. He was living in the house of Simon the *tanner*, a man whose occupation was regarded by the stricter Jews as unclean. The Levitical law forbade contact with death in any shape lest defilement should be contracted; but here was a man whose calling exposed him to constant contamination. He prepared the skins of animals—clean and unclean without distinction, we may suppose, if they suited his purpose.

The trade in which St. Peter's host was engaged may have suggested the great sheet let down from heaven, knit at the four corners, filled with all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air; just as the shepherd's ordinary watch-fire, and the natural thorny growth of the desert formed the outward vehicle by which God revealed Himself to Moses. The fact that he was the guest of such a man indicated that he had lost much of his old Pharisaic strictness—that the events of Pentecost, the conversion of the Samaritans, and, more than all, the new element in the teaching of Stephen sealed by his death of martyrdom, had somewhat enlarged his heart, and dispelled some of the most bitter of his Jewish prejudices. The house of Simon the tanner at Joppa was not only physically, but morally a half-way house between Jerusalem and Cæsarea, between the temple of the Jews and the house of Cornelius the Roman centurion. And yet, notwithstanding the inconsistency of his conduct in dwelling in the house

of an unclean person, the Jewish instincts of St. Peter recoiled with abhorrence from the vision which presented in such a palpable shape before him what he had been taught and accustomed to avoid carefully as a source of moral infection.

It is Christianity alone which, as the religion of humanity, as the religion of no caste, of no chosen people, has taught us to study the history of mankind, as our own, to discover the traces of a divine wisdom and love in the development of all the races of the world, and to recognize, if possible, even in the lowest and crudest forms of religious belief, not the work of the devil, but something that indicates a divine guidance, something that makes us perceive, with St. Peter, 'that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him.'<sup>1</sup>

## II.

1. Cornelius was a centurion. He was in command of a company of Italian soldiers, and was stationed at Cæsarea, a city situated on the Palestine coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and built by Herod the Great. Judging by the name he bore, which takes us back to the name of some of the most illustrious families of Rome, the centurion himself was an Italian. He was evidently an intelligent, sober-minded man, calm in his disposition, serious in his purpose, and of a singularly deep religious nature. Like others of the worthy remnant of his morally decaying nation who had not followed the leaders of opinion into a wholly despairing mood or a scornful indifference to Divine things, he hungered in his inmost soul for God, and in virtue of this feeling his heart responded warmly to the spiritual ideas and habits of the people who were about him. He came to be known as a man of marked piety and great reverence, as one who ordered his house in godliness, who had an open hand for the poor, and who kept his heart in communion with the Father through prayer. These are the qualities and characteristics ascribed to him, and this is the beautiful language in which the Scriptures have immortalized his memory: 'A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, who gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always.'

2. Cornelius was keeping the stated hour of prayer, three o'clock in the afternoon, according to the Jewish custom. He was one of those who are always praying and *therefore* observe stated

<sup>1</sup> Max Müller, *Science of Religion*, 29.

times of prayer. It is only people who are always praying to whom stated hours of prayer seem essential and fruitful. And, while he was praying, there came to him a vision, such as is not unknown to-day to those who have pressed through, in continuous supplication, into the secret shrine of prayer. There seemed to be a man standing before him, in shining garments, who told him that his prayers and his almsgiving had been accepted by God; and now, if he wished for further light, he should send to Joppa, and fetch Peter from the house of one Simon the tanner.

### III.

1. Turn back for a moment to Peter. Not all at once did he learn his lesson. Few men ever do. It takes time to come into the mastery, and still more to yield to the mastery, of conceptions which are new and revolutionary. He was 'perplexed.' The vision was a mystery to him, and the secret or intent of his strange experience he could not quite divine. But he was not long to remain in doubt and confusion of mind. For thirty-five miles down the coast, at Cæsarea, God, whose ways are not our ways, had been working, as we have already seen, on another heart and getting it ready, not only to receive a great and crowning blessing, but to interpret to this bewildered apostle the meaning and purpose of what he had seen. As a result of this preparation which had been going on at Cæsarea, and while Peter was still agonizing over the problem of his vision, three men stood at the gate of the tanner's house and asked for the guest whom he was entertaining. They had come from Cornelius.

2. The following morning Peter returned with them to Cæsarea, taking with him a number, six in all, of Jewish brethren. They were all day travelling, and passed the night, Lumbly thinks, at Apollonia. The next day they arrived at Cæsarea, and entered the house of Cornelius, who had gathered his friends and household servants together to hear the whole counsel of God. What a congregation! They were in sympathy with the Word, and they were there to obey the Word. They had not come together to be entertained, neither had they come together as critics, but as men anxious to know the truth and to obey it. Each rehearsed his story. Peter reminded those present of the unlawfulness—this was under current

interpretation of the Levitical law—of what he had done in coming to them and entering into these relations with them; but instructed by his vision, and reassured and urged on by the Spirit, he was there 'without gainsaying,' so he declared, to learn what was desired of him. Speaking for himself and the others, Cornelius said, 'We are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all things that have been commanded thee of the Lord.'

3. There is one conclusion, at any rate, which we cannot but draw from this meeting. It is a lesson of *the need and value of prayer*. These two praying men met. I have all sympathy with unbelievers, but no sympathy with unbelievers who do not pray. You need no dogma to teach you to pray; it is part of the very instinct of the human heart; it is an impulse which you have to repress, not to create. If, being an unbeliever, you do not pray, you are never likely to know. Cornelius, not knowing, still prayed, and therefore knew. There are many among us to-day, who have no more religion than Cornelius had. They say, 'We know, or we believe in, God; we feel that that is a truth of the reason. We know and we believe in righteousness; we know that that is a truth of the conscience. And yet, we do not believe in Christ, we do not accept the great revelation of God.' No, I will not quarrel with you, if you do not accept that revelation as yet; always provided that, believing in God, as you say you do, you are continually praying to Him for light; and believing in righteousness, as you say you do, you are living the life of purity and truth. We will make no quarrel with the unbeliever who prays, who knows what is right, and therefore does it. As certainly as the sun rises in the heavens, to such a man Christ will rise, with healing in His wings; and He will be the solution of all the difficulties, as He was to Cornelius, the Roman centurion. And, equally, those of us who believe in Christ, like Peter, and who wish that we might serve Him and bring other souls to Him—we must pray, and pray for them. We cannot do much, alone. We do not know which men to speak to. We do not know which is the opportunity; and when the opportunity comes, we do not know what to say. Prayerless men make a constant bungle of religious talk. No one should talk religion who is not always talking to God, and is not always hearing Him speak. Pray God

will teach you whom to seek and what to say. For the most part, we poor human beings live deep down in the dark cells of human life, and insuperable barriers are between us which we cannot pierce, so that we cannot touch our brother, or be touched by him. But God says, 'Mount up on the wings of prayer, get up into the higher atmosphere.' There, in the higher air, we meet with one another, and our hearts are opened to one another, and we can speak of the things that touch us deeply, and we can win our brother to God.<sup>1</sup>

## IV.

It was just as characteristic of St. Peter to be slow in finding out new principles, and tenacious in holding by old prejudices, where it was a question of mind and will, as it was for him to be hasty and impulsive in action where the affections were called in question. It is difficult for us to estimate how much it had cost him to break through his ceremonial pride and accompany the messengers of Cornelius; so much so that he was even unable to lay it aside without mention after entering the house of the centurion. But, to whatever extent Peter had suffered on the journey and before, through laying aside his pride, he must have felt some compensation when he found the reception which awaited him. 'Thou hast well done that thou art come,' said Cornelius, 'now, therefore, we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all things that have been commanded of thee of the Lord.' No preacher could desire more favourable circumstances for preaching a sermon.

Then Peter opened his mouth and gave unhesitating utterance to the large and gracious thought into which he had been led. 'Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him.'<sup>2</sup>

1. *God is no respecter of persons.* A little while ago he was saying, 'Not so, Lord.' Nothing common or unclean must pass his lips. He could share in no intimacy of association, and no free and fraternal mingling, with pagans. Now he was avowing it as a fresh 'perception' or discovery, and by implication a fact to be recognized in all intercourse with all races and in all labours for the salvation of souls, and the extension of the

<sup>1</sup> R. F. Horton.<sup>2</sup> F. A. Noble.

Kingdom of Christ, that God has an open heart and an open hand for the people of all nations, and that no man, speaking in the name of the Father and of the Son and under the guidance of the Divine Spirit, may venture to call any other man common or unclean. This broad principle which St. Peter was led to enunciate at Cæsarea, is one of the fundamental principles of St. Paul's teaching. His position in the matter throughout was impregnable and unswerving. If the Gentile Christians submitted to the condition of circumcision, they not only threw away their natural freedom, but they embraced Salvation on a false basis, they put the Law before the Gospel, and entered upon membership in the Church through the gate in the Synagogue, not through faith in the free gift in Christ Jesus. Thus St. Paul saw that a universal principle was being assailed; not for the Gentile only, but for the Jew, and for all men, Christ has superseded the Law. For the Jew, then, it was not circumcision that constituted his right to membership in the Church, nor on the other hand was it a barrier to him, for he, being born under the law, had come naturally under the ordinances of the law. The case of the Gentile was not so, if he willingly put himself under the law, he bound himself to fulfil the whole ritual of the law—a condition amounting almost to a natural impossibility, and certainly leading to insincerity.

St. Paul's views on this subject are clearly and forcefully stated in his letter to the Galatians, who had also been perverted by this strange doctrine. Here he vindicates the doctrine which he has taught them before, which he 'received not from man, but through revelation of Jesus Christ.' 'Though we,' he says, 'or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema.' St. Peter himself had been partially carried away by this Judaizing influence. St. Paul's revelation was clearer than that of the elder apostle's; he was able by an unanswerable argument to convince St. Peter that he was acting inconsistently (Gal 2<sup>14</sup>)—an argument that appealed so strongly to St. Peter that he put it forth again, with his own embellishment, to convince the Jerusalem Council: 'Why tempt ye God, that ye should put a yoke on the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?' (Ac 15<sup>13</sup>).

There is an ancient Jewish story repeated by Dean Stanley in *The Jewish Church* (where its origin and transmission are dealt with in a footnote)—which finely illustrates the impartiality of God.

'When Abraham sat at his tent door, according to his custom, waiting to entertain strangers, he espied an old man stooping and leaning upon his staff, weary with age and travel, coming towards him, who was an hundred years of age. He received him kindly, washed his feet, provided supper, caused him to sit down, but observing that the old man ate and prayed not, nor begged for a blessing on his meat, asked why he did not worship the God of Heaven? The old man told him that he worshipped the fire only, and acknowledged no other God; at which answer Abraham grew so zealously angry, that he thrust the old man out of his tent, and exposed him to all the evils of the night and an unguarded condition. When the old man was gone, God called to him and asked him where the stranger was; he replied, "I thrust him away, because he did not worship Thee." God answered, "I have suffered him these hundred years, though he dishonoured Me: and couldest thou not endure him for one night, when he gave thee no trouble?" Upon this, saith the story, Abraham fetched him back again, and gave him hospitable entertainment and wise instruction. Go and do thou likewise, and thy charity will be rewarded by the God of Abraham.'<sup>1</sup>

2. The Church does not yet in all respects live up to the great principle which St. Peter enunciated in his address to the household of Cornelius, but the sublime truth remains and will remain for ever that God is no respecter of persons, and that while all need to come to Him, all may come to Him and have share in the peace and glory of the everlasting inheritance.

The heavenly vision which appeared to St. Peter condemns the ceremonial distinctions which Christians still keep up. We break up life into fragments, and assign this part to the world, and that to God. We draw a line of demarcation between the secular and the sacred, as distinct as the line of verdure and the line of desert that run side by side, but never intermingle, all along the valley of the Nile. Such a division savours more of Pharisaism than of Christianity. Our Lord, by taking our nature and living our life, made them potentially divine. Ever since He broke the bread of common life and walked our earth, He made every meal a sacrament and every spot holy ground. As the body is one,

<sup>1</sup> Stanley's *Jewish Church*, i. 18.

so also is the Christian life. Physical health is the harmonious action of every member according to its natural law; and religion is the true health of our whole being—the sanctification of body, soul, and spirit. Religion is the consecration of everything to God—of the whole of life—its eating and drinking as well as its fasting, its working as well as its praying, its joys as well as its sorrows, its pleasures as well as its duties, its week-days as well as its Sundays. It alone gives to man the use of his whole being and of the universe around him, and shows to him that 'The true human completeness lies, not in the proscription of any of the elements of his being, but in their proper exercise, and in the right blending of the whole.'<sup>2</sup>

For religion all men are equal, as all pennies are equal, because the only value any of them have is that they bear the image of the King. Piety produces greatness, precisely because piety in itself is quite indifferent to greatness. The strength of Cromwell was that he cared for religion; but the strength of religion was that it did not care for Cromwell—did not care for him, that is, any more than for anybody else. It has often been said, very truly, that it is religion which makes the ordinary man feel extraordinary; but it is an equally important truth that it is religion which makes the extraordinary man feel ordinary.<sup>3</sup>

A little while ago I read an account of what happened to Pastor Funcke of Bremen, who is well known in Germany. He went to see a working-man, whom he describes as a tall, strong man, with a red beard, living in a miserable little place, up a flight of rickety stairs. The man would not listen to him at all, but flew into a passion, saying, 'I don't want to hear anything about your God. I don't believe there is a God.' Then, clenching his fist, he said, '*This* is my god!' and bringing it down on the table with a thump, he added, 'If ever I find you on these premises again, I will put my god into your face!' The pastor went away, but a few days later hearing that the man was out of employment, he busied himself in finding a situation for him. By and by the man heard of this. He went to him and said, 'Is it true, sir, that you took the trouble to find me this employment?' 'Why, yes, it is true.' 'Well,' he said, '*all* Christians are not hypocrites!' That was to him a discovery, it seems. He invited the pastor to his house, and listened to him. 'And now,' says Mr. Funcke, 'he, his wife, and children are amongst the best of my church members, and theirs is one of the happiest homes in the parish.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> H. Macmillan, *The Garden and the City*, 322.

<sup>3</sup> G. K. Chesterton.

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Monod.