

# THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.

---

## Notes of Recent Exposition.

THE Lord's Prayer has been all along a favourite subject with the Christian expositor. So much so that one does not turn excitedly or with great expectancy to a new exposition. But it is at least interesting to come across an exposition under the name of Mr. Gerald HEARD; and a perusal of the volume leaves one with the impression that here is something at once unusual and challenging.

*The Creed of Christ* (Cassell; 6s. net) professes to be an 'interpretation' of the Lord's Prayer; and 'interpretation' is in this case a more fitting word than 'exposition,' if it be understood that in interpretation more should be allowed to the subjective factor. The interpretation which is here offered may be described in brief as a reading of the various clauses of the Lord's Prayer in the light of mystical religion.

The author of this book looks upon Christ as the prototype of a new and higher humanity, in which the relation of men to God is describable as that of Sons, not of Friends, much less of Servants. It is through mystical fellowship with God in Christ that this relation and state may be attained. As those who know the author's other writings would anticipate, this position is expounded with striking eloquence and by the frequent aid of scientific instance.

We shall not attempt to analyse the contents of the book, in which the attempt is made—to use

Mr. HEARD's language—to decode and apply the fivefold formula of the signature prayer. But a few selected quotations will serve to give an impression of the contents. Referring to the petition, 'Hallowed be thy name,' he says characteristically, 'That first clause tells us the key in which this prayer is to be prayed; it is an indication of the carrying-wave in which any message from time to eternity must be transmitted.'

Here is another characteristic reference, this time to the prayer as a whole: 'Not only is every clause fraught with intense meaning, but the meaning of the whole is so vital that the very order of the clauses is in itself intensely important and revealing. . . . Indeed, the whole prayer is such a living, germinal force that we may rightly compare its structure to what to-day we know about that other basic germinal force, the chromosome rod which lies in the centre of each life-bearing seed and which carries in it the precise potentialities of the full-grown plant or animal. We now know about the chromosomes that they carry in themselves a series of nodes or clauses—the genes—each one of which is a packet of some vital characteristic that will appear fully manifest in the developed creature which springs from the seed; and we know also that, not only is each of these genes vitally important, but the very order which they occupy in the chromosome rod is itself important and profoundly affects how they will manifest themselves in the full-grown creature.'

College, Cambridge, writes from a Burmese frontier station to those 'whose faith in Almighty God has been shaken by the suffering of this present time.' He has thought long and deeply on the subject and has many suggestions of value to offer.

We approach the problem as Christians, and it is for Christians that the problem becomes most acute. 'As Christians we believe in the divine goodness. God is love. We see Him in the face of Jesus Christ, and we believe that He has for all mankind a fully beneficent purpose. He plans and intends their well-being. It is inconceivable that He could purpose their hurt. He can neither plan nor think evil. And because He is God, He is almighty. He can fulfil His purpose. He created the universe and He controls it.' How in the face of this can we account for the evils and sufferings that so greatly abound? The stern facts of life seem to give the lie direct to our Christian faith, leading many to renounce that faith while others hold on to it with fear and difficulty.

Now it is highly important to observe that the conflict is between our conceptions of the facts and not necessarily the facts themselves. That is to say, we have certain beliefs about the character and purpose of God, and we have certain impressions of the manifold evils in the world. It is these beliefs and these impressions which are in conflict. The question then naturally arises, whether these ideas of ours in regard to God and evil truly represent the fact or whether we may not be under some personal misconceptions which would disappear in the light of fuller knowledge. 'The problem may read differently if we change our conceptions of divine love and power, and revise our estimate of those things and events which we have dismissed as evil.'

Before we break out and say, 'I cannot believe in God when there is so much innocent suffering in the world,' we need to examine and it may be revise the articles of our faith. What kind of a God do we believe in, and what do we expect Him to do? As soon as we look into these questions

we begin to discover that we harbour many misconceptions and cherish many unwarranted expectations.

We believe in the goodness and love of God, and rightly so. But how do we conceive that love and goodness? 'We shall find, I think, that most people expect the goodness of God to satisfy their desires and relieve their fears. The good God will give them all the happiness they crave. He will give them this happiness essentially in the form they seek it—wealth, fame, popularity, comfort, ease. Since they fear disturbance, He will not thwart them; He is essentially amiable. In other words our conception of goodness is often very sentimental.' This is a picture of the divine love far removed from that which is given in the gospel and exemplified in Christ. One of the first things to do, therefore, as we approach the problem of suffering, is to revise our conception of the divine love and goodness, changing it for one more in accord with the facts of life, the teaching of the Bible, and the full context of the Christian faith.

There are similar misconceptions in regard to the power of God. It is natural to argue, 'If God is almighty He can do anything. He can answer my prayer, and give me what I want here and now.' But that is really childish. It ignores the fact that even for God some things are impossible. He cannot contradict His own nature. He cannot be good, and not-good. He cannot be good and yet do some of the things His importunate worshippers demand. God has indeed the power as well as the will to help and save, and we do well to trust in Him. Indeed we should trust in Him more confidently and pray to Him more earnestly than we do. But we must be willing that He should help and save in His own time and way, not ours.

We must guard our minds against ideas which are sub-Christian and which cast their shadow upon our faith. 'Nazareth, Calvary, and Pentecost should save us from the torture of the thought that God does not care, or that He is powerless to help.' They remind us that history is not

a record of human suffering without intelligible purpose, unchallenged and unrelieved. On the contrary, it is a record of evil challenged and battled with not by human power alone, and finally made to subserve a divine purpose of good. The evil is there, has been there from the first, so vast and devilish that it can hardly be held to be solely due to human initiative. It cuts to the heart and makes war incessantly on man's well-being in every form. Yet men have held to their faith in God, because they have had proofs and signs indubitable of the goodness and love of God. The very fact that the human mind rebels against evil, and that the human heart is wounded by it, is evidence of a conviction that the universe is essentially a realm of reason and of love.

Our estimate of suffering depends on our estimate of life as a whole, and of what we conceive to be the end of life. 'If we see before man a glorious salvation, an eternal life beyond the grave which attracts the mind and inspires conduct, then a great deal which might otherwise be dismissed as altogether evil will be counted well worth the cost.' There is no doubt that many to-day feel the problem of human suffering to be unbearable for the reason that they regard this present life as all, and count suffering to be dead loss. The death of the young especially is unrelieved tragedy, and therefore the devastations of war make human life seem like 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' But an intelligent faith that can look forward to a heavenly future beyond the grave makes a world of difference,

and gives a new meaning to the trials and vicissitudes of this present life.

But when all is said that can be said it remains that we make a frank confession that the presence and prevalence of evil is a mystery, and that in particular we cannot explain human suffering, even with the light of the gospel. At the same time the fact that we do not know why God allows innocent suffering does not mean that we know nothing about God. So many people take for granted that if we are bewildered by the problem of evil we must become agnostics. But God is not wholly unknown, though there be 'clouds and darkness round about Him' in this mysterious world. If there are facts which arouse doubt, are there not also facts which confirm faith? Are there not manifest tokens of God's goodness, and is not His Spirit still at war with sin? We are all apt to regard the problem of suffering from too personal a point of view. If, like the first Christians, we learnt to look on life as a spiritual warfare in which we were called and privileged to fight on the side of God it would lessen the tension, and nerve our hearts to do and to endure. 'If we could regain a vision of the Church as the vehicle of divine activity, if, still more, the Church could become such a convincing, attractive activity that every time we saw it and thought of it, we should exclaim at once, "Surely God is in this place! in this world with all its defeats and suffering, in ceaseless combat against all that is evil"—then, I believe we should think less about the problem of evil and more about the mystery of good.'