

WITHOUT GOD, ALL IS VANITY **AND VEXATION OF SPIRIT**

The meeting this morning, as we know, is a meeting for “*remembrance*”—as Christ said,

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

In remembering him in a truly intelligent manner, we remember many things, for he is the converging point of many things—things concerning ourselves; things concerning the nations; things concerning the race, things concerning God. He never would have been born but for such things; and we cannot Scripturally understand him apart from these things. One of these things is before us in a very unlikely part of our reading this morning, and in a very unpromising item.

“There is a time to be born and a time to die.”

Birth, life and death describe the circle of human experience as it now is. It was because of this experience that he was manifested; but we must take it widely enough to see the bearing. We have children born and ourselves have been born of our parents; our parents, of their parents, and so backward till we get to the starting point of the process. The Bible only gives us this starting point in a reliable and reasonable form. All human thoughts on the subject are speculations, and self-destructive speculations when thoroughly reasoned out, as Argyll and Hall and others show. The Bible gives us a first pair at a distance of time corresponding with the multiplication of posterity that has since taken place; and it accounts to us for the sad marring of that posterity that we see before our eyes. It shows us the will of God set at nought—in a small matter to be sure; but the smallness matters not, the principle of disobedience is the same in small as in large matters (and to God, the source and container of all, there cannot be large matters and small matters). And it shows us the vital paramountcy of that will in a light that nothing but sentence of death could have made so strong. In the channel of this sentence, we are born; for death is a physical thing and runs in the constitution. Our “*time to be born*” is therefore a time to come under the dominion of evil. Of this we cannot complain, as the unwise do. Before we were born we were nothing. It is better to be born mortal beings than not to come into existence at all, for the goodness of God prevails over his holy severity even in mortal existence. It is the plan God has adopted in working towards the final upshot of His wisdom, and who can say unto God, “*What doest Thou?*”

To this process of mortal generation, Christ stands related. Our “*time to be born*” unto this evil state, brings Christ with it in the association of things, for it is because of this our lot that Christ was “*made of woman, made under the law, that he might redeem them that are under the law.*” It was the “one man’s disobedience” that necessitated the arrangement for one man’s obedience, that whereas chaos and death have come by the one, life, love and order might come by the other. Christ’s life in this sense comes out of ours. It was because of poor, afflicted, dying man upon the earth that the angels were able to say to the shepherds,

“Unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”

Without Adam the first, there would have been no Adam the second. Without the continuance of his posterity “*made subject to vanity, but not willingly,*” there would have been no remedial provision such as God made when “*of the seed of David according to the flesh he raised unto Israel a saviour.*” We remember this when we remember Christ in the breaking of bread. And it is not difficult or unprofitable to glide from his birth to our own. His birth was a great event, ours was not; but there is this much of advantage in reflecting on the arrival of our “*time to be born*” that it is good for every man to look back and behold himself

a feeble, puling infant in the cradle It helps him to that modesty of reasonable feeling which is beautiful always, but which is rarely to be seen in the world as it now is, when the habit is to swagger and swell up to an insufferable degree of arrogant self-importance—odious alike both to God and man. The poor little baby that has been allowed to grow up ought not to behave like that, but to be humble and kindly, godly and wise, and rational in all his ways. The recollection of the cradle will help. How much more, the recollection of the coffin? Some people make a shudder as if you did an unpardonable violence to good taste when you speak of the coffin. Why should it be so? Because true enlightenment, which consists in the knowledge and recognition and logical allowance of all truth, is scarce. Most of the “good taste” so called will be found to be the fostering and fondling of flattering illusions. People like to think of themselves as noble, pure, undecaying, angelic. They deck up and cosmetique poor mortality. They don’t like to be brought down to the humiliating level of the actual truth, that they are decaying organisms, evanescent forms of life, living in a state in which the curse of God prevails. They are shocked at the familiar introduction of the coffin. Well, to a certain extent, it is possible to sympathise with their susceptibility. It springs from the latent aspiration to be something better than they are—an aspiration that can only be gratified in reconciliation with God. But, at the same time, when it rebels against the Truth, it is a nuisance to be put aside. *“There is a time to die,”* and it is well to remember it. The man who remembers it is wiser every way than the man who habitually dismisses and ignores it. It is for this reason that it is written:

“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men and the living will lay it to his heart . . . The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning: but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.”

The man who fully realises that he will soon be done with all the matters he has in hand will find it much easier to carry them lightly, and to act the part of righteousness than the man who suffers himself to be overpowered with the sense of this present existence as if it would never end. He will find it easier to remember God, to continue in His Word, to hold fast the Faith in all its service, to be kind, to be just, to be self-sacrificing, and everything else required of us by the Law of the Lord, if he have his end in view, than if he habitually draw the veil to the disagreeable aspects of life. From this we may readily deduce the unwisdom of association with the lovers of the present world, in whose company our perceptions will be blunted, our senses drowned in a flood of foolish excitements, and our hearts drawn away from the beautiful, wholesome, lasting, satisfying things of God, which, while they may have a present bitterness with them, as of the bitter herbs of the Passover, are even now a source of far deeper satisfaction than is to be derived from the ways of worldliness in all departments.

Between birth and death lies the region of life as it now is. The aspect of this region depends upon the eyes that look upon it. With which eyes should we seek to look? The eyes of children and fools? The eyes of the unwise and sinful? The eyes of the children of this world? Or the eyes of eternal wisdom? Surely there can be but one answer. And where shall we find the eyes of eternal wisdom. In Christ—in the apostles and prophets—in the men by whom God spoke. In what aspect then does life as it now is appear in their eyes? In a very different aspect from what it appears in the eyes of children, or in the eyes of men in general. Jesus speaks of its denizens *“walking in darkness;”* Solomon sums it up in the phrase *“the days of our vanity”* and says of it in general that it is *“all vanity and vexation of spirit.”* Let us consider this a little, so that we may not run away with mere phrases which are liable to degenerate to cant. We will look at it from another point of view.

Jesus declares of himself that he is *“the light of the world,”* and that without him darkness comes upon men. In our youthful days, perhaps we could not understand this. The words seemed to have no meaning. To our childish eyes, the sun seemed the light of the

world, and the only darkness the darkness that sets in when the sun sinks in the west. We knew nothing of any other night. But when we grew older, our view expanded. We found there was a night upon the earth far more frightful than the natural darkness that lasts from sunset to sunrise. The natural night ceased to be dreadful: nay, it acquired the character in our eyes of a welcome drawing of the curtain which we could not do without—a healing and restoring balm to the fever-stricken life of the day. But the other night of which the Bible speaks became apparent to our eyes and hearts with a sense of desolateness that no tongue can utter. What is this night? It is a figure of speech, of course, but descriptive of a very real and terrible thing. It is a figure derived from the analogy of nature. When the sun is in the heavens, all is physically bright and joyous. Its pouring beams seem to fill earth and air with an ocean of healing and cheering power, in which man and beast, insect and flower, rise to the full capacities of their enjoyment of life. But withdraw the sun, all is dark, dank and unwholesome. Life seems to have lost its charm, and the mind becomes an easy prey to depressing imaginations. Now, what is there in relation to human life that fills the part of the sun? Only those who discern and appreciate the answer to this will be able to feel the reality and bitterness of the night that prevails. We get the clue when David says,

“The Lord God is a sun and shield,” or when God says, *“Unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in his beams,”* or, *“Yahweh shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory.”*

If we will but closely consider the constitution of man, we shall discover a fact which in the statement thereof, may seem very trite, and which may fall with very little weight on the ear, but which, nevertheless, is a great and prevailing truth that furnishes the key to the perplexing enigma of human life as it now is. The fact is, that primarily, man was made for God, and that he cannot rise to the full gladness and effectiveness of his being in a state of insulation from Him.

What the constitution of man has to do with this, may be seen if we look at man as we know him. He is a bundle of powers, faculties, and capacities, among which there are such as are low, and such as are high. All his powers fulfil a good purpose in their right connections and subordinations; but some of them are manifestly fitted and intended to have the controlling place, while others put in this place are odious and destructive. Now, the very configuration of this brain tells us which were intended to be in the ascendant. The powers that distinguish man from the brute creation are all in the upper region. It is these that impart to him his characteristic beauty, not only in mental manifestations, but actually in physical contour. You cannot have true human beauty without amplitude in the upper region of the brain.

Now, the powers that lie in this upper part of the head are all those that have to do with objects considered and disparaged as “sentimental” by the civilisation now prevalent on the earth. In the very centre, looking straight away up to heaven, lies “veneration,” and the capacity to worship and adore, and having its most natural action in the recognition of God. By each side of it lie the organs of hope and faith, which unitedly give the capacity to realise the action of unseen power, and to base anticipation thereon, and in front of it, the faculty that gives the impulse of benevolence. Just behind it is the staying power of firmness, flanked by conscientiousness which gives sensitiveness with regard to right and wrong. The whole group is of angelic tendency when allied with enlightened intellect in the front of the brain. Of themselves, they have no definite or effective action. They require development like every other faculty or capacity in the human mind, and this development can only be attained by the education appropriate to their action. A man may have the faculty of music or arithmetic, or language, but if uneducated, it will lie dormant, or spend itself in abortive action. And the education suited to one will not act upon another. A purely musical education will not develop linguistic or mathematical ability. The upper brain must have education which by its

nature it requires and demands, and no education short of the knowledge of God is suited to those requirements. The whole group of the moral powers (and they are the dominating powers in the human organization), require God for their action. Without action you cannot have development; and without development, man cannot rise to the standard of His being.

Now, we live in a state of society where these powers are not provided for. Modern life and modern education address themselves almost wholly to the lower range of the brain faculties—such as are located in the side, front and base. The objects pursued and the qualifications fostered have all to do with the lower relations of being—relations that are good when lower but that become evil when exalted to the leading place. Wife, family and business are all in all with the majority; a few add reputation and artistic refinement; few include God in the practical objects of their exertion and concern. The consequence is that human nature scarcely anywhere attains the beauty of development of which it is capable. The upper brain is checked in its action and dwarfed in development by the universal manners, and consequently the vast mass of human beings on earth are but insipid specimens of a noble race, unhappy in themselves and possessing only the capacity of being a trial and a nuisance to others. There is little intellect, less mercy, and less expansive and noble godliness anywhere. It is as the Scriptures testify. They are all gone astray, every one to his own way, which is as far as possible from the way God designed them to walk in.

It is night, it is dark. All things are out of course. Human life is not what it ought to be, and cannot be what it ought to be, under the conditions that prevail. Who will alter those conditions? Who can give us the conditions that are needed? What are they? We need God to take the world in charge. We need the bungling incapacities of man to be put on one side, and all power and authority vested in one government of His direct appointment—a government that cannot err, and that cannot be resisted, and that cannot be removed. Give us such a government, and you give us the sun, at whose bright presence, darkness will soon fly away. The reign of such a government will change the life of the world in a single generation. Such a government is coming.

“God hath appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom He hath ordained, whereof He hath given assurance unto all men in that He hath raised him from the dead.”

They were no empty words of poetical flourish that Jesus uttered when he said, *“I am the light of the world.”* He spoke the truth—absolute and unmixed. There is no light apart from him, in either individual or national relations. It is the individual bearing that most concerns us at present. What is life without him? A fevered dream—a bootless activity, having promise and incentive at its beginning, but gradually settling to a doleful vacuity at its end—a paleful gloom, as with spent power, we draw near to the grave in the clear perception that, without God, all is vanity and vexation of spirit. Introduce Christ and see how changed the scene. The love of Christ constrains; the obedience of Christ subdues and ennobles; the hope of Christ brightens, and imparts an interest to life we never knew before. We live no longer to ourselves; we yield no longer to ourselves; we surrender no longer to the gloom of a headless universe and an uncertain future. We open our hearts to God in faith and reconciliation, through Christ who died for us; we confide in his direction though unseen; we walk through the darkness in joyful trust and anticipation of the promised day when God will wipe away every tear and remove every curse. Letting Christ dwell in our hearts by faith, our darkness is dispelled, our coldness ended, our waywardness corrected, our loves purified, our whole life cleansed and redeemed from the ultimate corruption and abortiveness of mere natural power. He becomes our light and our life to whom we daily grow as thriving plant before the sun, seeking more and more *“to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge,” “counting all things but dung for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord,” “in whom is filled up all the fulness of the God-head bodily.”*

And looking out with unavailing pity and distress on the larger field of racial affliction, do we not see plainly that Christ is the light of the world? What darkness broods in all lands after the most prolonged and careful experiments in self-management. See the struggling masses of the poor shaking the clenched fist of desperation in the face of the educated and provided classes, and this, not in despotic and brutalised countries, but in “civilised” England and America. What hope is there in political systems? Henry George has his remedy, but it is only a theory which could not be enforced without successful bloodshed on a large scale, and which, even if established in practice, must, in human hands, inevitably run into the old, old grooves, for there is not a political experiment but what has at some time or other in the world’s history been tried and failed. The problem of human management is too intricate, too subtle, too difficult, for human power. It needs God who made man to successfully manage him, and God has purposed to do it at the right and the ripe time which is now near. Christ is His strong right arm for the work, and he comes anon to do it. He will “break” the current systems “*with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.*” He will then give the world such a system as it has never seen since the days of Adam’s departure from Eden—such a system as it exactly needs—a centralised system of invincible power and unerring wisdom which will promulgate and enforce the laws that are needed for the glory of God and the wellbeing of man without asking for the consent of parliaments or the suffrages of peoples. This system in the hands of immortal and infallible agents will soon cause the present desert of human life to rejoice and blossom as the rose. What an honour, what a dignity, what a prize, what an unspeakable glory to be chosen to act as the king’s representative in the day of light and gladness. To this we are called, and to this we shall attain if meanwhile, in faith and patience, we walk as children of the light.

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