

COMFORT FROM THE WORD

The Psalm we have just been singing (Hymn 19) touches a point of common experience which is very present to us when we come together after a week of toil to have our memory of divine things refreshed. It speaks of thirst and weariness in a dry parched land. This is the reverse of a pleasant experience, and unless we treat it in an enlightened manner, it is liable to be hurtful to us. It is somewhat of an incessant experience, and we are liable, almost unconsciously sometimes, to wonder at the fact, and to think that all is not right with us. The fact is that this experience of vanity belongs inherently to the present state of things. It is here, that the apostolic message comes in with such reason, and such power, and such comfort. This is a message founded upon a dispensation of power, that, namely, which Paul refers to in speaking of the first-fruits of the Spirit. He said they had these first-fruits, and yet groaned within themselves, waiting for the adoption. What these first-fruits were is disclosed to us in a way that enables us to see that the apostolic hope is not an affair of philosophy or opinion, but as much an affair of fact as our present perception of evil. On the Day of Pentecost the Spirit came with power, causing illiterate men to speak with tongues, and feeble men to heal multitudes of the sick. It enabled Paul *“through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, to fully preach the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem and round about unto Illyricum (Rom. 15:19).* It dwelt with the communities developed by his labours, in harmony with the promise of Christ, that he would send the Spirit to be with them as a comforter and a guide. There were diversities of gifts, he informs us in 1 Cor. 12, but the same Spirit, and these gifts were one and all of that real and substantial character that left no room for mistake as to the real and actual character of the phenomena.

Take, for example, verse 10,

“To another by the same Spirit the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discerning of spirits, to another divers kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.”

What human power can work miracles, or prophesy, or speak languages without learning them, or interpret tongues with which one is not acquainted? This indicates the kind of basis upon which the apostolic hope stands, a basis as real as the experiences we have of present actual existence. We can therefore listen with open hearts, free from all reserve or doubt, to the words of comfort that came both by prophet and apostle. The apostles speak to us most directly, bringing the prophets with them. The apostles say that we are saved by hope, and that all things meanwhile work together for good to those who are the holders of this hope. Connected with it is every good thing. Paul breaks out into a kind of ecstasy on the subject:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

It is impossible to emphasise too strongly the contrast between this way of looking at life, and the way common to the wise of this world. There is none of the warmth of love in their system. They of course recognise love between human beings, but even this not very strongly, and at its strongest, what is it compared with the love of God to human beings? Their philosophy is like the coldness of empty space, in which we are told the temperature is at about 200 degrees below zero, whereas the gospel of Christ glows with the warmth of divine sunshine. For the lack of this the world is perishing, and we ourselves are liable to faint and fail for lack of its full realisation. This lack is part of the weakness of present faculty; our strength is soon spent, and our feeble minds are easily overpowered by the conditions of the moment, which conditions are the reverse of all the aspects in which God is exhibited to us. We live in a world lying in wickedness. We live in a world sitting in darkness. We live in a world in which God is silent, except in so far as He speaks with the quiet voice of His manifest wisdom in creation. The Bible is the only institution at present in which we come into touch

with Him. It may be regarded as a temple in the wilderness, in which we hear His voice and feel His hand.

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," saith He, in our reading from the prophets. Let us dwell for a moment in the presence of this comforting voice, and endeavour to take out of it all that there is in it. It is addressed to *"My people."* By whatever method of interpretation we understand these words, we may find ourselves included. They are addressed primarily to Jerusalem, *"Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem."* Proximately, this is the Jewish capital and the Jewish race, but are we not included in either? The Jewish race has numbered countless millions, only a very small proportion of which is of interest to God. A whole generation fell in the wilderness, because of their unbelief and disobedience. Who, in all their generations, are interesting to Him? This is plainly revealed,

"The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear Him."

They are not all Israel that are of Israel, neither because they are the seed of Abraham are they all children. They must have Abraham's faith as well as Abraham's blood. It may be said that we have not Abraham's blood; this is true, but we know that by the hand of the apostles God visited the Gentiles to take out from amongst them a class who should be adopted into Abraham's family, on the principle of faith. We have been included in the operation of this principle through the knowledge and belief and obedience of the gospel, so that, as Paul says,

"Ye are grafted upon the good olive tree, and are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the household of God."

If, then, we are objects of God's favour, we are included in His eyes in the phrase, *"My people,"* and *"Jerusalem."* As the brethren of Christ, we stand directly related to Jerusalem, for he is its king, and we are its children. We are comprehended in three words of Isaiah 66,

"Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her; rejoice ye for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her."

To call upon people that mourn to rejoice may seem strange, but the strangeness vanishes before the reason.

"Ye shall be delighted with the abundance of her glory, for thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream. As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you, and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem."

Let us open our minds, then, to the sweet adjuration of Isaiah 40,

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God."

The present time is evil and troublous, but the future is bright with glory.

"The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

Or as it is more definitely said,

"Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but Yahweh shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising."

In the presence of these glorious outlinings of the future, we are apt to feel the present to be a languishing and dispiriting affair. No wonder, for it is so in itself, and nothing else; but in this it is not strange; it is in the programme. It is the very background of the picture of glory shown to us in Isaiah 40, for what is the proclamation there made as the adjunct of its exhibition?

"All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof as the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth."

While groaning under the vanity, let us not despair, nor give in to its oppressiveness. The word of our God shall stand for ever. This confidence is rooted in our confidence in God Himself. God Himself is exhibited before us in this chapter as the ground and rock of our hope. *"To whom will ye liken me?"* He asks. He asks this after appealing to the underived wisdom and power that have organised heaven and earth.

"Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being His counsellor hath taught Him? With whom took He counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of judgment, or showed unto Him the way of understanding?"

He carries the appeal to a still higher altitude.

“Lift up your eyes on high and behold; who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number, not one of which faileth, because He is strong in power.”

He then declares Himself, *“The everlasting God who fainteth not, neither is weary, and there is no searching of His understanding;”* and upon this ground the inspiring declaration that they who wait upon Him will renew their strength when all human power fails.

“They shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, and walk and not faint.”

What hinders our perfect rest on those great and precious promises? Is it not an evil heart of unbelief, against which Paul puts on our guard? This evil heart of unbelief is a piece of native barbarism. Ignorance belongs to uninstructed brains. A baby is born without knowledge, and will continue without knowledge up to manhood and hoar hairs if it come not within range of its enlightening touch. This is true of natural things; how much more of spiritual? Spiritual things are based on knowledge as much as natural; hence it is that we find John in our New Testament reading introducing the gospel which he and his fellow apostles had to preach as *“that which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the word of life.”* Again he says, *“which we have seen and heard declare we unto you.”* This you see, is a matter of actual knowledge, the truth of which is beyond all question when the facts are considered. First of all are the words of John, as proved by the fact that they have been in the hands of Christians from the very day they were written. There has always been a numerous community, true or false, since the day the apostles went out as Christ’s witnesses, in obedience to Christ’s command. This community has always from that time been a numerous body. There has therefore been from the very beginning a multitude of witnesses to the fact of these words being John’s words. It might seem as if the mention of a false church weakened the argument, but in truth it makes it stronger, for these false churches in various parts of the world have been jealous of each other, and have watched each other in the quotation of apostolic words, in defence of their several crotchets, and have therefore been a check upon each other, as regards the preservation of the actual words written by John and the other apostles, from which it has come to pass that whether you look at the New Testament in the Nestorian Church, or the Greek Church, or the Armenian Church, or the Roman Catholic Church, it is the same.

Being John’s words, the next question is, “Are they true?” “Did he see and hear and handle Christ?” If he had been alone in the matter, there might have been some room to doubt, but he was only one of many who said and wrote the same thing, most of whom gave to subsequent generations the indubitable pledge of their sincerity in the matter by submitting to death. It did not require this to prove the sincerity of their words, for the enterprise to which they devoted their lives was pledge enough in itself. This enterprise was to turn men from darkness to light, from sin to righteousness, in hope of the manifestation of the glory of God, at the coming of Christ. None but sincere men could take part in such an enterprise, and therefore there is every pledge of which the case is susceptible, that we are in the presence of the simple truth, when we read that *“God was manifest in Christ,”* by whom God performed many signs and wonders, concluding with the crowning one of raising him from the dead after his crucifixion.

Thus we go back to Isaiah 40, and open our eager mouths to drink the refreshing water of life in the thirsty desert, waters of comfort and strength.

“Comfort ye my people.”

There is nothing that comforts so much as good tidings, and here it is nothing but good tidings poured into our ears.

“O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain. O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, and be not afraid. Behold the Lord God will come with a strong hand. His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. He shall feed His flock like a shepherd. He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and gather them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.”

Are we faint and weary and desolate? Often, no doubt most of us are, but let us never give in to the feeling that this experience is strange or unnatural or out of place. We may sometimes chide ourselves by reason of our misery, as it were; this is only needlessly adding to our affliction. All the children of God have been oppressed by the insufficiency of fainting, failing human nature. Even

David, whose voice we know embodies the voice of Christ, had to rally himself in God in the midst of his distress.

“Whom have I in Heaven but Thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.”

We are not the first whose feelings could only be expressed by the powerful expletive: *“O wretched man that I am.”* The very prince of the apostles had to confess that he groaned within himself under the weary burden of imperfect human nature. But in the midst of his misery he rejoiced because of its spiritual pressure forcing him to rest on the only consolation associated with the prospect so beautifully painted in these words,

“These are they that have come out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple, and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more; neither thirst any more, neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them and shall lead them unto living fountains of water, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Rev. 7: 14-17).

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Pages 21-26

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