

DO NOT LET ANYTHING DISPLACE GOD

We do unwisely as well as sinfully if we neglect this table of the Lord spread for us in the wilderness. It represents the only stable point in life for us. All else is change, perpetual change, and worse than change: weariness, decay, death. Everyone finds it out at last, though they may wish to resist the fact for a while. We could not find satisfaction in the present order of things even if it lasted; with God silent and man rebellious, it is not possible, constituted as we are, that we could find the full joy of life. But when in addition to the darkness of God's hidden face, we have the darkness of physical weakness, and feeble-mindedness, and bad men on every hand, and an absurd and mischief-working system of government in vogue, we see our case to be evil indeed when our eyes are full open. It does not mend the case if we shut our eyes. We cannot arrest the working of things by shutting ourselves up in a shell. Onward sweeps the stream of change and vanity and death whether we note it or neglect.

But here at this table, we are moored as to a rock:

"Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and for ever."

We cannot see him under present circumstances: we have not heard from him in a direct manner. Nevertheless, he is before the eyes of the mind in a very tangible manner. The very spreading of this table is in a manner a monument of him, for the act of spreading it will be found on reflection to be this end of a long chain that leads right away back into his own very presence "on that dark and mournful night" when he first appointed it. Why has it been spread this morning? Not from any notion formed by us, but because of the command that has moved millions before us. And that command is traceable to the Lord's own mouth, and nowhere else. We are not relying on uncertain tradition. We rest on a writing which has been unchanged in the hands of disciples for eighteen centuries. Paul's own hand wrote,

"I have received of THE LORD that which I have delivered unto you that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread," &c., "saying, Do this in remembrance of me."

Therefore this very spread table is a token of Christ's present living existence. It is a proof of his presence at the Father's right hand. The caviller might tell us that it is only a proof of our conviction, since it was we who spread the table and not the Lord. Our caviller would be technically correct, but we compel him to admit our contention when we point to the ground of our conviction. He cannot deny that Paul, the apostle, flourished in the first century, and that Paul wrote the letter to the Corinthians which has been in circulation among Christians from that day to this; and that, therefore, 1800 years ago, Paul said,

"I have received of the Lord that which I have delivered unto you" (the ordinance of the breaking of bread).

He would have to prove Paul a speaker of untruths before he could interfere with our foundation. To do this is an absolute impossibility. A man has only to try the experiment to find this out. A man may, of course, sincerely hold in a loose way the opinion derived from superficial reading—that Paul's testimony is not a matter to be trusted. But it is a different matter when he treats the matter judicially, as a judge on the bench is bound to treat any case of accusation coming before him. A judge has to go by the evidence. A man going into the facts of Paul's case in this way, will hold a very different view (if he be a man with eyes and a conscience), from the man who carelessly skims his opinions from other people's milk pails.

The case of the late Lord Lyttelton is always a most valuable illustration of this. He was one of a group of unbelievers who made up their minds to publish an attack on the faith of Christ. To him was assigned the case of Paul. He was to set to work to confute the testimony of Paul to Christ. To do this, he had to study it. He studied it, and the result was, he could not write his attack, but wrote a demonstration of the absolute unassailability of Paul's testimony. Lord Lyttelton's defence of Paul is a master-piece. Our cavillers may cavil when they only know the case superficially; but let them go into the facts thoroughly, and take everything into account, and they must shut their mouths if they are honest men.

Paul was an apostle “*born out of due time*” as he says; that is, he was made an apostle when, naturally speaking, he could no longer become an apostle. The qualification of an apostle, as defined at the meeting of the apostles convened to appoint a successor to Judas, was that he should have “*companied with the apostles all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John unto that same day that he was taken up from us*” (Acts 1:21-22). The necessity for this qualification arose from the fact that he had to be “*A WITNESS with us of his resurrection.*” A man could not be a witness of Christ’s resurrection who could not speak from personal knowledge. The “*due time*” for the constitution of an apostle was, therefore, the lifetime of Christ, and the man to be made an apostle must have been with him during the three years and a half of his mortal work. There is, therefore, great force in Paul’s remark that he was “*one born out of due time.*” If it be asked, But how could he even be “*born out of due time?*” How could he be made a witness of that which he had not seen? The answer is, he was permitted to see after the time, and appointed a witness of that which he did see. “*The Lord appeared unto him by the way*” as he went to Damascus to arrest the friends of Christ (Acts 9:17). And the Lord said—

“*I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of those things which thou hast seen,*” &c. (Acts 26:16).

He was, therefore, a fully qualified apostle, though “*born out of due time.*” He could say,

“*Am I not an apostle?.. Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?*” (1 Cor. 9:1).

And he could allege,

“*Truly, the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, and in signs and wonders and mighty deeds*”

(2 Cor. 12:12).

We stand, therefore, on unassailable ground in standing on the apostle Paul with regard to our observance of this ordinance of the breaking of bread. But this is only a small part of our strong foundation. There were other apostles before Paul who had done a great work of testimony to the resurrection of Christ while Paul was yet “*breathing out threatenings and slaughter*” against the disciples of the Lord. There were many, even besides the twelve, who had companied with them, “*all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among them.*” Let us realise the greatness and breadth of this foundation, by the side of which Paul’s case appears as a mere slab. I will not say that one man might be mistaken: because there are things in everyday life about which it is not possible for a man to be mistaken, especially things happening like Paul’s interview with Christ in the presence of others who were affected by it. Still, the case of one man is weaker than the case of many. And we have the case of many alongside the case of Paul. The apostolic twelve were only the kernel of a body of 500 witnesses to whom Christ showed himself after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:6): and they again are only the central ring of a vast body of people who for three-and-a-half years attended on the preaching of Christ, and came from all quarters “*to see the miracles which he did*” (Matt. 4:23-24, and many other places). This vast body of evidence is brought to a focus in the narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which were published in the lifetime of the generation that saw these things and were never contradicted.

And you know well there are deeper foundations even than these. As Paul says,

“*We are built on the foundations of apostles and prophets;*”

And as Peter says,

“*We have also a more sure word of prophecy.*”

When we take our stand in the apostolic age, and look backward upon the wonderful history of God’s work with Israel for a thousand years to the very days of Moses, and consider the fulfilled messages of the prophets whom he raised up in their midst, we then feel the overpowering force of Peter’s declaration that this is not by any possibility a case of “*cunningly devised fable,*” nor a case to be explained by Festus’s shout in open court:

“*Paul, thou art beside thyself.*”

Reason must endorse the **rejoinder** of Paul:

“*I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.*”

This being the undoubted state of the case—the testimony for Christ being an uncontradictable element of the actual system of things—we must drill ourselves into harmony with it, and not allow appearances of any kind to cheat us out of it. This one truth is ultimately the one

important truth for us—Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life—the mediator between God and man, who ever liveth to make intercession for us, according to the will of God. There are many things that will cheat us out of it if we are not strictly on our guard—things small and things great—things petty and things noble—things grovelling and things high and aspiring and grand.

Domestic life is at our steps every moment. Its incessant and legitimate demands are liable to degenerate to incessant and debasing worries that will not only absorb all the time, but take all our mental force, and bring us to a state in which Christ is invisible, like the sun in a heavily-laden sky. We must learn to say to domestic cares: “Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further.” So much of you is good, but so much is enough; and with that amount you must be content. If I gave in to you, you will suffocate me like charcoal. One thing is needful—that is, indispensable; and you positively must stand aside while I give the necessary attention to “*that good part which shall not be taken away.*” In this, we have Christ’s clear guidance in the house of Martha and Mary.

The world out of doors will make certain appeals to our sympathy. Full of life and colour, it all seems so real, and to say of Christ that he is unreal. We must command the illusion to begone. We must say: “Old world, you are a deceiver. You look stable, but you are passing away all the time; you look well, but you are smitten with a consuming disease; you look friendly, but you are hollow and treacherous; you offer tempting prizes, but those who hold out their hands for them find they clutch ashes. If I follow you, you will smile while all is well; but in my time of need, you will vanish like a mocking spectre, and I will discover that you have cheated me of Christ.”

To business, we have to learn to say: “You are important in your place. You are even one of the factors in the problem of spiritual life, for by thee God gives opportunity for that development of character which is the basis of His purpose with us. But you may most easily become something very different. You may deaden my heart to God. You may harden me against my neighbour. You may ensnare my affections in the idolatry of gold. You may draw me into the crime of covetousness. You may so overwhelm and corrupt my mind as to rob me of the object of living in the mere fever of acquiring the means of living. Therefore, while I shall be ‘*not slothful in business,*’ as commanded, I must take care that I shall not give to you that overweening amount of attention that will change you from being a helper into being a destroyer. I command and insist that you keep your proper place: I cannot tolerate your robbing me of Christ. Fire is good in the grate, but not among the curtains.”

To friends, we must say: “You are sweet, and must have your place; but I must be on my guard. You are not, some of you, very deeply interested in Christ; and you are much interested in the merely passing objects of nature, which will all have vanished for you and me in the soon-coming day when the grave will claim us. I must take care that my love for you does not come between me and Christ. I must take care that my respect for your views and wishes does not interfere with that supreme regard for the will of Christ which he demands. He tells me I shall not be worthy of him if I love you more than him. I must have Christ whatever I have to sacrifice to get him.”

Even to those of our own flesh and blood, we have to be able to say, “You have a strong claim, but not the first. I will do my duty to you, but you must not come between me and my duty to Christ. Love to Christ is my first love: if it is so with you, you will entirely approve that he should be first with me. If it is not so, you will be a danger to me in making him second with me. Against this, I must be on my guard. You and I will part company for ever when we descend together to the dust; and I cannot let a transient tie like that which binds me to flesh and blood, interfere with the tie that binds me for ever to the Lord of heaven and earth. You may think me unnatural. The fault is not with me but with you. I have not lost the natural, but you have not attained to the spiritual. When you attain to the spiritual, you will not think me unnatural. You will see that I only put the natural into its place—the second place, because of the spiritual which claims the first place. The spiritual rules the natural, and will at last displace it: for the natural will perish, but the spiritual will endure for ever. I cannot expect you to enter into my view: but whether or no, Christ tells me that if any man come to him, he must be prepared to hate father, mother, wife and child, yea, and his own life also, when in any way, they come into competition with him.”

As for the glory of science and the delights of speculation as to the problems of nature, the conviction of the reality of Christ enables us to say, “We are not insensible to you, but we have got something better that you are liable to take from us.” We cannot allow you the large place you would usurp in our lives. You would eclipse Christ, and we cannot suffer this, even if you could give us wisdom. How much less when you can only give us human impressions of the inconceivable: human

guesses of the unknowable and human thoughts that destroy all hope and bewilder the mind to the verge of madness with bootless philosophy.

Even to stupendous nature itself, as we gaze into the dizzy depths of the universe, we must have a firm word to say. We must resist the impression which the overwhelming greatness would make upon our puny minds. We must say, "I am not going to trust the thoughts you would make me think. You are too great for me to handle altogether. You are so great as to whisper to me that Christ is too small, and the hope he has given me, a mere fain wish. I cannot listen to you.

1. Because, however great you are, the proof of Christ is with me here on earth, and it is not possible that a great truth can destroy a small one, even if it were small.
2. Because there is no true logic in the process of thought that would use the general greatness of the universe to exclude the details of which that general greatness is made up. When I stand upon a mountain top, I cannot see men in the valleys and plains beneath, or even houses. I might just as well say, there is no Court of Queen Victoria, because of the greatness of the hills, as to say Christ cannot be, because of the incalculable distance of Diomedea, or the multitude of sun and worlds that form the Milky Way. The greatness of the universe does not dispense with the necessity of food and clothing, or lessen the importance of having our personal affairs right; why should it be held to interfere with the far greater interest of life eternal? Nay; the thought is a mere fatigue of mortal faculty. True logic takes the thought the other way. Infinitude appertains to God; the very greatness of His works is the guarantee of their efficiency in detail. And it is certainly part of that efficiency that human life should be perfect upon earth, instead of its being the ineffectual and unsatisfactory and evil thing it is at present.
3. The human mind is incapable of reading the greatness correctly. It has not intellectual penetration sufficient, nor sufficient power to sustain the wide-reaching grasp of thought that is necessary. How absurd then to make our inability to read the great truth of the universe, a reason for dismissing the lesser truth belonging to the earth and human history. Wisdom lies in recognising our feebleness and holding on by that which our puny hands can hold. Hold fast by Christ while confessing with David as regards the greater things, that "*such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high. I cannot attain unto it.*"

While reading with rapture that "*neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities and 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,*" be it ours to resolve that neither domestic life with its petty cares and frets, nor the gay world outside with its varied but illusory charms, nor business, with its engrossing demands on time and strength, nor friends with their endearing charms, nor relations with their powerful claims, nor science with its intellectual charms and appeals to ambition, nor the vast universe of immeasurable glory and power, shall come between us and the unspeakable prize of "*glory, honour, and immortality*" offered to us through Christ on the basis of righteousness, holiness, love, and joy everlasting.

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