

BEGINNINGS THAT VITALLY AFFECT US

Today we begin a new year. The fact is suggestive in a variety of ways. We stand related to various beginnings, all of which are more or less important to have in memory. Our own life had a beginning. There may not seem much in that. There is more in it than may appear. We are liable to forget that we appeared on this scene only a few years back, comparatively. It is in the natural order of things we shall disappear as entirely as if we had never existed. When we distinctly and habitually remember the fact, it is a great help in the wise direction of our steps; we bear evils more lightly, and burdens less heavily, and honours more modestly when we remember that "*we are but of yesterday,*" and that "*our life is but a vapour that appeareth but a little while and then vanisheth away.*" The semi-unconscious feeling that we have always been here, and that we shall always be here, makes the task of life in an evil time much more difficult every way.

Then we have to remember that our race has had a beginning—that the procession of human life, generation after generation, has not always been a visible phenomenon upon the face of the earth—that the time was when there was not a human being to be met throughout this wide-lying, moon-lit planet. This fact has to be admitted by every class of speculator. Some may take the beginning of the human race further back than others, and may have special views of how it came on the scene, but the beginning itself they cannot deny; if they are bound to admit. And with this incontrovertible fact in view we are bound to have special thoughts—it may be special surmises and special sadnesses, if we were among those unhappily unable to receive the Bible information, that the present race of man appeared upon the earth about 6,000 years ago in the creation of the first human pair Adam and Eve. The special sadness would arise from this reflection, that if the appearance of man on the earth was otherwise than the Bible relates, we have a noble race with the unhappy future before them of finding themselves at last too numerous for the globe they inhabit, and without means of easing the press by emigration elsewhere. This is a mathematical certainty if there be no reigning and superintending power at work, since we have here a race with indefinite capacity of multiplication on an earth of fixed limits of food-production and habitable space. These two blind facts must come into collision some day if the wisdom that has produced man entertains no plan for the regulation of his destiny in the ages to come. The philosophy of our day would deny the existence of this regulating intelligence in creation, and would compel us, either to shut our eyes to the manifest issue of things, or to give ourselves up to the grievousness of inevitable disaster. While admitting the wisdom that has contrived the wonderful planet we inhabit, and the certainty that our race had a start a while back, it denies that the same wisdom has made any provision for the avoidance of inevitable cataclysm.

But we are under no necessity of listening to such unhappy doctrines. They are the outcome of speculation on limited facts. Even if the facts taken into account were complete, speculation is never a foundation to build on, though some people eagerly build on speculation if the speculator excludes God and leaves man sole master of his own actions. Speculation is a guess, a plausible guess it may be, but only a guess, and therefore uncertain, with almost the certainty that in the stupendous matters of a measureless universe, all human guessing is likely to be wrong. But what shall we say to speculation that omits one of the principal elements of the problem? The existence of the Bible and all that pertains to it is a fact that cannot be ignored in the operations of true intelligence. This Bible gives us an account of a beginning for the human race which both fits the state of facts we find upon the earth at the present time, and admits the reasonable presumption arising out of the past, namely, that the power and wisdom that placed man upon the earth has provided also for the endless future that lies before. And the Bible that does this is not a thing of theory or of poetry or of any flimsy character whatever, but a thing of stubborn historical facts and unsurmountable intrinsic character, both in a literary and ethical sense that cannot be set aside. The Bible absolutely cannot be disposed of at all. Particular men or classes of men may neglect it, or may forget it, or may affect to leave it entirely out of account; but the thing is here as an astounding fact of which there is no rational explanation at all, in rigid and accurate process of reasoning, except the explanation that what it testifies of itself is true, that it is a book recording things that really happened and given by inspiration of God.

Among other things, it tells us of the beginning of human affairs upon the earth which no other book upon earth professes to tell or can tell. Its very first phrase is "*In the beginning.*" It

requires an inspired book to tell us of a beginning when there was no man present to witness it. The beginning of things on the earth about 6,000 years ago is suggestive of that other beginning to which the mind cannot help occasionally turning, as it contemplates the measureless ages behind us and the vast immensities of space around us. With this beginning we have no power to grapple. We are stunned and paralysed by the least glimpse of it. That there must have been a beginning to the universe as we see it is manifest from the marks of progress and development everywhere visible in heaven and earth, and that there is a plan and coherency in it all is equally apparent, for the immensity, though we talk of it as infinite, is made up of measurable parts, and each part is characterised by rational plan down to its smallest fibre or atom. But beyond the conclusion that it is all in the grasp of an intelligent unity, we cannot get. We have no faculty at present for dealing with such magnitudes of time and space, and therefore they stagger us. But let us be on our guard against too much staggering. Some people turn the terrible greatness to quite an illogical use. Because they cannot measure God, they cannot trust themselves to believe in Him. Because the earth is so small a part of the infinite whole, they cannot receive the idea that God should attend to it and provide for it in the way revealed in the gospel.

This is the mere illusion of human weakness. It is the result of arguing from how the universe strikes small man to how it must be to the interpenetrating strength and wisdom of Him who fills heaven and earth. It is a total mistake of reason. We might just as well leave off attending to our business and neglect to provide our daily meals, because the universe is so vast. Men do not make this mistake with regard to their personal affairs. Usually, the greatness of the universe has the reverse effect when realised. The man is driven to stick all the closer to his personal affairs. He is liable to say, "Well, the universe is very grand and indeed truly tremendous, but the only part that affects me is this little part which is called the earth, and even on the earth it is a very little part of it that affects me. I will look wisely after that little part and use the rest merely as an occasional diversion of mind." This is a wise attitude so far as it goes, but why should men not be equally wise in other matters that are equally practical and personal though for the moment a little more remote? Why should men attend to the meat that perisheth and neglect "*the living bread that came down from heaven, whereof if a man eat he shall live for ever?*" Why should men allow the greatness of the works of God to interfere with their attention to a message from the Maker of the works, and who is greater than all His works, who can attend to the minute details of His works as well as sustain them in their universal vastness? If they say, Where is the message—the answer is in every man's hand. It is not an idea—a guess—a supposition—a dream. It is an affair as practical and matter of fact as our being born, and sowing seed and reaping harvests and attending to the routine of our present mortal life.

This suggests another beginning which has been brought under our notice in the reading of the opening chapter of the New Testament,

"*The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,*" as Mark expresses it.

This thing had a beginning. We are accustomed to the phrase "the gospel" from the cradle. We are accustomed to the name of Christ from our earliest consciousness. We are so accustomed to it that we may have difficulty in realising distinctly that it had a beginning. The fact that it had a beginning is most important, for it brings with it the question—How did it begin? How is it that Europe, which was once an overgrown thicket of barbarous races, is now a community calling itself Christendom? How came it that the cross, an instrument of torture and the emblem of infamy, should have come to be the favourite ornament with millions, and the most honourable mark in all market places and on all public buildings? This actual present state of things had a beginning. Men did not start without a reason giving honour to the name of Christ, even if in ever so dim and conventional a way. They began to do it at a certain time for a certain reason. Men did not begin using the cross as a spontaneous fantasy for which they could not account. They began to do it as the result of palpable circumstances. When the matter is investigated, we are taken away back to the generation just before Tacitus and Pliny, for they found the thing in full operation with all the zest and momentum of an immediately recent origin. We find Paul at work. Just before him (though slightly contemporary with him), we find the apostles and their companions at work. Just before them, we find Christ himself at work. We have it in our power to judge of their work, in two ways, firstly by the effect it produced, secondly, by their own account of it in authentic documents which have been in the hands of the Christian community uninterruptedly during all the centuries which have since elapsed. That it produced an effect is beyond question, for Christendom is a continuation of that first effect. You cannot recognise the existence of Christendom

without recognising that the apostolic work produced an effect so strong as to revolutionise the beliefs and habits of civilised mankind in the beginning of the Christian era. Now it is but a primitive act of reason to argue that so strong an effect must have had a strong cause; what was it? If you guess any other than the one alleged by the apostles in their writings, you guess a cause unequal to the effect, and inconsistent with the character of the work as evident in their writings, for their work was self-evidently a work of intelligence and of righteousness.

The testimony of Paul is that Christ crucified by the Jews was raised from the dead. His testimony is based on personal experience.

"I have seen him."

The testimony of the apostles is precisely the same, but on different grounds. They were companions of Christ during his work on earth. They believed on him before his crucifixion on the ground indicated by Nicodemus,

"No man can do these miracles except God be with him."

They were staggered for a moment by the fact of his crucifixion, but they believed more firmly than ever after his crucifixion, for he appeared to them alive after the event, and talked to them and ate with them on a variety of occasions, lasting over a month and a half, and formally took farewell of them on the summit of the Mount of Olives, ordering them to proclaim the fact of his resurrection to the world, assuring them they would do so in the face of the deadliest opposition, but telling them not to begin the work till he should qualify them to make a convincing testimony by sending them power to work miracles in confirmation of their word.

The testimony of Christ himself is of the most unanswerable description, the testimony of his works. He said,

"If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not; but if I do, believe me for my works sake . . . The works that I do bear witness of me, that my Father hath sent me."

What works were they? Truly works *"that none other man did,"* as he said,

"Go tell John what ye see," said he to John's messenger when he sent from prison to ask if he really were the Messiah, *"the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached unto them."*

Beside these things, he walked the water; he multiplied a few loaves into sufficient food for thousands; he rebuked wickedness; he preached righteousness; he foretold his death, but said his death would be by his own consent because of the commandment received from the Father and that he would rise again the third day.

The joint testimony of the whole agency was that Christ was the divinely begotten and divinely sent Saviour of the world; the propitiary for the sins of mankind; the abolisher of death in harmony with the principles of God's supremacy, and the bringer of life everlasting through righteousness to all who should obey him; that in a word—

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them."

Such an explanation of the origin of Christendom is a reasonable one. Any other will be found irrational in the working out, or must deny the facts, and must therefore be a lie, however beautiful. The apostolic account of the beginning of the gospel is not only a reasonable account of the facts we see with our own eyes, but it brings with it, from the throne of the Eternal, the needed ground and guarantee of hope for man, that not only has the earth been formed by divine power and wisdom, but its affairs are so regulated by plan and beneficence, that the future, notwithstanding the clouds and darkness of its present sin-stricken state, is a future of cloudless sunshine and everlasting glory, with which we may humbly hope to have a portion if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end.

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