

THAT GOD SHALL BE SANCTIFIED

Amongst the various advantages connected with this breaking of bread, is that it gives us an opportunity of seeing things in their true light. Some times they appear in a very unnatural and false light indeed. As an extreme example, take the aspect in which they appear when we awake most mornings—to those of us at all events that are in middle age. Our view for the moment amounts to aberration—everything in a fog, and everything distorted; life a failure; no use going on. If we were to act on the depression of the moment, we should give in and do no more. But reason comes to our aid. We know it is but a cloud-bank we are in. With an effort of the will, we advance to the attack. We get up, we get our morning bath, the fog disappears. We find that all is comparatively well after all.

This is a case of physical disturbance. There are mental disturbances in which people are quite as much the subject of aberration, though quite sane in the ordinary sense. They see things in the wrong light. The present life seems so real; the prosperity of the ungodly seems so desirable: the promises of God seem so intangible; that if nothing happens to break in upon the fog, they will be liable to give in, and live a false life which will mock them at the last. One of those things is the breaking of bread. It is the centre and meeting point of many facts which enlighten the heart. We require to know facts, and many facts, in order to have correct views of life. Directly and indirectly, they are brought before us at this moment of leisure; and the calm and searching consideration of them will help us to get rid of the aberrations arising from merely natural life.

Naturally, we look to pleasure as the aim of our efforts; but here on this Table is pain. Here is the cross of Christ: his body broken, his blood poured out. We cling to life, and lo, here is death—death too, in a special and extraordinary connection: the crucifixion of one who did no evil, who only went about doing good. Here is something pressed upon our attention, to call for explanation—for deep consideration at the very least. And as we ponder it, and our view extends, we see that this case of pain and death is not alone. We discover that evil is not the exception but the rule in the lot of man. Our reading from Isaiah this morning (Ch. 15), gives us a picture of something that in one form or other is universal. It is a scene of pillage and bloodshed and ruin and tears—a whole district desolated in a single night, and the whole population out next day in bitter lamentation in the open fields.

“In the night Ar of Moab is laid waste and brought to silence.” Moab, “gone up to the high places to weep:”—

everyone weeping and howling, their voice heard even unto Jazer. Distress and care are not always to be seen in this acute form, but in some shape or other, in all countries, in every age, in our own age, every day, evil reigns. It reigns intensely. We learn how bitter and incurable it is when capacities to rightly read the situation, open with growth and experience. At times, the fact is overwhelming. It comes upon us with a force that crushes to the earth. It wrings from the heart the bitter wail of David.

“O Lord, wherefore hast Thou made all men in vain? Where are Thy mercies and Thy lovingkindness?”

The struggling mind asks the reason. Here is a fair and beautiful earth—the fit platform for a happy and glorious life. Here is man a noble creature—or a creature fundamentally intended for nobleness—with great capacities for intelligence and joy: with great aspirations for high things. Here he is, painfully struggling with abortion in every shape and form. It is no cant or hypochondriacal phrase that describes his lot as one of *“vanity and vexation of spirit.”* That is the verdict of wisdom: it is the lesson of experience. Only fools challenge it, only men of a limited mind think it an exaggeration. What is the explanation, then, of this distressing situation of things—that a creature formed for goodness—desiring goodness—striving for goodness in some shape and way everywhere, should be weltering in a bottomless bog of failure and evil?

There is a reason both simple and profound, at once satisfactory to wisdom and contemptible to the carnal mind. It is a reason arising out of a fact which we see most conspicuously of all when we look at Christ, especially when we look at him on the cross. The one fact visible above all others as

we look at him, is that God exists as well as man. If God exists, God must have rights as well as man. What are those rights? Here is where the natural man stumbles. The universal idea is that the universe exists for man, and that if there is a God, it is only as man's servant that He has any function. If this is the truth, the state of man as he now is upon the earth is a problem that defies solution. But it is not the truth. It seems as if the shallowest intellect ought to see that it cannot be the truth, but that only can be the truth which the Bible teaches, that all things exist for God, that His aims, His rights, His principles, and action must prevail. This indeed is forced upon reflection as the unquestionable truth, and as the only explanation of the evil state of things that now distresses us, for when we enquire, we find there is a history to this matter that is open to no other understanding.

The Bible is proved true in so many powerful ways that we only yield to a reasonable guidance in going back with it to Eden to find the root of the matter. God made man for His own purpose, and that purpose required first of all implicit subordination of man's will to God where God's will was expressed. This, in the final event was refused, and that crime was so insufferable on every ground that God banished man from his open society, and gave him over for a time to evil and death. When Adam walked out of the garden of Eden to take care of himself, evil began. The evil that has prevailed since is not to be looked upon as the consequence of the sin of Adam in the penal sense. That is, Adam's posterity are not punished for what Adam did, but what occurred in Adam's case places his posterity in such a position that the cause that brought death and evil on him continues an operative cause in all their generations. Sin brought exile and death, and sin continues among dying exiles, and the sin that they sin brings punishment of its own, as illustrated in the cases of the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the afflictions of Israel, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the overthrow of their land, and as illustrated everywhere, in the distressful experience of man.

The real and simple explanation, then, of the reign of evil, is that God and man are separated. This is a fact not seen in natural life—a fact not discerned, though felt palpably enough in its consequences. Consequently, most men live in indifference to the fact. We once did so—all of us. We are liable to slip into old indifference and to adopt the foolish policy it inspires. It is here where the breaking of bread helps us. It presents matters in their true light. It recalls the mind to things that are not a human invention. Peter has well said,

"We have not followed cunningly devised fables."

The breaking of bread itself is not an invention of man. It is an appointment of the Lord. Trace its history, and we find ourselves at last in the presence of him who said—

"Do this in remembrance of me."

Attending to it intelligently, we discern its origin in the unquestionable historic work of Christ and the Apostles, and that work connects us with God, for the work was God's work:

God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself."

Hence, at this Table, we are face to face with the most wonderful work that is going on among men, however feeble may be its aspect for the time being—the most wonderful fact among all the myriads of facts that affect our being, however dim in the glare of Gentile day—the fact that Christ gave himself for us, that *"he might purify unto himself a peculiar people."* If men could estimate this fact at its intrinsic consequence, they would observe a very different attitude to it from what is common. That they cannot do so is due to the mental conditions figuratively expressed thus: *"in whom the god of this world hath blinded their eyes."* The present world and all that goes to make it up so fills the orb of their vision that they cannot see beyond it, or through it. They are unable to realise that the *"world passeth away,"* and that in the midst of its shifting scenes, a will of God has been announced, the doing of which will secure for the doer this wonderful effect that he will *"abide for ever."* Their vision is too contracted. They cannot see things in their true light. We were once in the same position. It is for us, while having compassion for them and trying to turn them from darkness to light, to take care that they do not draw us back into the old position. As Paul expresses it—

"We are not of the night nor of the darkness, let us watch and be sober."

Our watchfulness was to be directed to this very point.

“Beware lest there be in any of us an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.”

The world even in its most cultivated and enticing aspects, is alienated from God. The gospel has caused us to be friends of God. It has therefore called us to a position in which there is considerable present inconvenience; for a man cannot be the friend of the world and the friend of God at the same time. Christ has said it, and the nature of things preclude it. A man who truly knows God requires no arguing on this point. A man who truly knows God yields Him a constant loving reverence; and how can this mix with the mind that prevails in the world, the most predominant feature of which is the absence of reverence?

Nothing teaches wisdom in this matter more powerfully or more directly than the Law of Moses, and the history of its communication to Israel. For this very purpose they were written, that those who came after might receive the instruction which they naturally imparted to those who received them in the first instance. We deprive ourselves of great good if we neglect their study. What is the foremost lesson of it all, but this that God Himself announces—

“I will be sanctified in them that approach unto Me.”

“I will be exalted”—exalted on every day and always.

He took hold of a nation for Himself. See what He did with them? First of all, having delivered them with His own naked hand, manifest in direct works of power, in the destruction of Egypt, and their own miraculous rescue from mortal peril, He *“humbled them and proved them.”* He led them in a great and terrible wilderness and taught them. What did He teach them? Science? No. Of what good to show them how He has made things? Political economy? No. The art of legislation, which being interpreted means self-government by count of human wills, whether wise or foolish? No, no, man is not capable of self-government. See what a miserable pass it has brought him to after 6,000 years fair experiment. He requires the government of God. He requires God to tell him what to do, and to compel him to do it by power governmentally applied. What God taught Israel was the art of worshipping God and serving man. This was the essence of the Law of Moses. It was taught in many rites and ceremonies, but this was the thing taught. God was in all things and in every way to be exalted as an object of reverence and fear, and love on the basis of fear. Holiness was the perpetual exhibition.

“I, the Lord thy God am holy.”

“Thou shalt fear before Me.”

It is the lesson of circumcision: of presentation to the Lord; of the purifications presented in the various recurring uncleanness of life; of the sacrifices and offerings in the various relations of experience; of the incessant ablutions connected with approaches to the sanctuary.

The pith of all these things is brought to bear on us in Christ—the Holy One of God. The righteousness of the Law was fulfilled in him, and Paul declares it is fulfilled in us if we walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit. Holiness or consecration to God, is the first principle of righteousness; just as God is the first principle or idea of the Spirit. Here is where the world is utterly destitute of godliness, and becoming more so under the leadership of elegant gabblers infected with Darwinism and the “higher criticism.” God is less and less in all their thoughts. With the children of God it is otherwise; they grow in the knowledge and love of God. What greater contrast could we conceive than that between the attitude of the world towards God and the attitude of the symbolic seraphim:

Each one had six wings: with twain he covered his face: with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly; and they cried one to another, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts.”

This has a practical bearing on us: for though the vision was a symbolic one, it is impossible to mistake its import, the angelic veiling in the presence of the Deity, is not only modesty; it is awe, reverence, fear, and that, too, on the part of the highest beings. As David says,

“Thou art worthy to be had in reverence of all them that approach unto Thee.”

If we are among the chosen at the coming, we shall be incorporated in a community who are symbolised almost in the same way in the Apocalypse, viz, by four living creatures full of eyes, *“who rest not day or night, saying Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty . . . Thou art worthy to receive glory and honour and power, for Thou hast created all things.”*

These are among the things brought to mind by this Table of the Lord and which help us to see our life in its true light. Life upon the earth at present is afflicted because God is not allowed His place in human life. He will yet acquire that place without setting aside the free agency of man. He is slowly creating for Himself a family in whose affections He lives and whose life He controls by His Law, and whom at the appointed time He will glorify with incorruptibility of nature. If the process is a painful one, it is because the result is an everlasting one. God’s claim on human love and obedience is so reasonable, and so beneficent in its operations; and its repudiation is so destructive of every good and noble feature in life that no enforcement of it can be too stringent. But there is a plan of beneficence in all the confusion. Out of the chaos will come shining order and joy. The Gospel of the Kingdom is the announcement of this. But triumph will not come except with the triumph of the principle, overthrown at the beginning—the principle of God’s supremacy. To this principle we have yielded ourselves willing captives. To this principle, let us continue in devoted and unwearying subjection; and ours will at last be the unspeakable joy of beholding its unchallenged and irresistible ascendancy in the great and long-promised day of its earth-filling glory.

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By Bro. Robert Roberts