

THE NATIONAL MISSION.

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It is probable that many of us are perplexed by the prospect of the "Mission." We sincerely desire to lend ourselves to such spiritual influences as may, we hope, be called forth; we want, too, to help the movement forward, and yet we are not clear as to what we had better do. The mission we know is to be one of Repentance and Hope. We need to remind ourselves that in the words of a great preacher (Frederick Denison Maurice):—

"A call to turn to God may be very practical, when the voice of the teacher points to no specific offences, nay, when the conscience itself is awake to none. A dull mechanical temper of mind—obedience to mere custom—impulses communicated from without, not from a Spirit within—a will recognising no higher law than the opinion of men—this is that turning away from God, that implicit denial of His presence, which makes it a most needful thing, that the call should go forth from some human lips, and be echoed by unwonted natural calamities, and be received as coming straight from the mouth of the Lord, 'Repent and be converted.' Repentance is God's choicest and deepest gift: Repentance for our habitual dreariness and coldness, for that shallowness of heart, which overtakes us, where we are surrounded with the tokens of His Presence, where we are partakers of the ordinances of His grace; which those very privileges seem to produce in us; from which troubles, individual and national, cannot of themselves deliver us. Divines may have infinite refinements about the mode, degrees and effect of repentance. That one phrase of Scripture, 'turn to God,' contains, I think, all that we can say of it."

We shall find it easier to think of Repentance as God's choicest, deepest gift, a substantial gift—to use a figure—as real as sunshine, happy homes, good crops, indeed more real than any of these outside things—if we use that tremendous key to the Lord's Prayer, which I have already asked you to consider, the first word, "Our"; let us merge our sins of coldness and deadness in the general flood of transgression, let us humble ourselves for the sins of our people as for our own and pray "forgive us *our* sins" with the certainty that Our Father can and will send the divine Spirit into *all* our hearts to convince us

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of sin, of righteousness and of judgment, to melt us with tender passionate sorrow at the thought of grieving Him through lightness. According to our faith shall it be done unto us, and never, surely, could faith have been more possible to any generation than to this, for have we not seen in our very midst outpourings of the Spirit of loyalty, devotion, self-sacrifice even unto death upon millions of our number who were not long ago men like ourselves, indolent, indifferent, and self-pleasing. Let us realise that every good and perfect gift cometh from above and that the splendid qualities shewn by our men are directly and immediately the gift of God, and then we shall have faith to *demand* as children who have certain rights that even that choicest and deepest gift of Repentance shall be poured out upon us in our thousands, and that we shall all with one accord turn to God who is our Father.

The power to regard the things of the Spirit as real, if not tangible, as more real than if they were tangible, will help us to envisage the second of those choicest and deepest gifts for which we wait upon God by means of the coming Mission. Among the delightful titles of God enumerated in the fifteenth of Romans, not one is more satisfying and sustaining than “the God of Hope.” In our hours of anxiety and distress there is always close at hand, “nearer to us than breathing, closer than hands and feet,” the God of Hope, in readiness for His children’s demands, and no sorrowful soul ever cried for Hope but that the answer was sensible and immediate. It is a great thing to know that in our distresses the alleviation that we really want is Hope: other comforts may come or may not, but when we are filled with hope from the divine treasury we wait with patience for external solaces. Our hearts are going out with very great tenderness and pity towards our “broken” men and bereaved families. We feel that they and we shall be in need of some more lasting and sustaining uplift than the joys of victory and peace, should these be ours, are able to afford. So we call upon Our Father to fill us with the Hope of whatsoever things are pure, honest and of good report: that, if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, we may think on these things. And we who have already seen our KING pour out upon us such amazing spiritual treasures, shall we not also wait upon Him for his gift of Hope that we may with patience wait, and with diligence work, for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

But after all Repentance and Hope are impersonal; they are

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abstractions towards which our hearts do not go out; these things are serviceable to us in the Christian life, but we are made on too large a pattern to put supreme value upon things of the flesh or of the spirit which are merely serviceable. We want more. We want the touch of person with Person, the joy of service, the passion of discipleship. Like our men at the front we “want God”; and because no man hath seen God at any time, we want to see Him in the face of Jesus Christ, who came to reveal the Father to us. It is a little sad that we only of the three great Churches have ceased to name ourselves Christians as the ultimate fact of our religion. No doubt that is only the omission of profession, and is a reaction against over much profession. I have seen “Jesus only” written over an order for the grocer, and the natural man rises in protest against such a way of making use of the name of our Lord and Saviour and all that it implies; that is, that Christ is for our uses; by Him we are saved, provided for, blessed, guided, guarded, prospered; as if the sole concern of the divine King were to look after the small affairs of each one of us who calls himself a Christian. All that is blessedly true no doubt, but it is true only when we receive the converse truth, that we are His; and perhaps the great Hope rising upon us out of the present distress is that an era of passionate Christianity is coming, when we shall hear the shout of a King in our midst and shall all stand at attention waiting his word of command, when we shall hasten to do his bidding, and, like any other courtiers, be aware of the mind of our King upon all the matters of our daily life, small and great, knowing indeed that in his eyes there are no small things and no great. We recollect how Rabbi Ben Ezra discovered in Lazarus, who had been in the light of the King, a new scale of values; important things became of no matter to him, while small things like the gesture of a child, the passing of a mule with gourds, and “he will gaze rapt.” Perhaps by no sign shall we more readily discover the presence of the King in our midst than by that of changed values, the power to discern the things that matter.

We all pray “Thy Kingdom come,” and are ready and willing for the coming of the King in power, but we choose to remain passive, to wait for some thing to happen to us, some strong emotion to change us. It is in fact to religious emotion that we look for a revival, the revival that wise and foolish alike perceive to be immediately necessary. Even this comes to us
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from time to time and opens to us the meaning of Repentance and the fulfilment of Hope. The remembrance of offences committed against God becomes indeed grievous unto us, an intolerable burden, and how glad is the reprieve when “our sins and our iniquities will He remember no more.” We rejoice in the gladness of the forgiven,—

“Not for the sake of gaining Heaven nor of escaping Hell,” but because all that comes between us and the supreme Object of our love is hateful and unendurable. It is possible that we all have such divinely granted seasons of Repentance, but they pass, and we fail to keep hold of the Hope that is set before us because we have trusted to our emotions, not recognising that in their very nature these are evanescent. But there is that which is abiding, permanent, to get which requires deliberate intention and action on our part. Very early in His ministry our Lord declared, “This is eternal life to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” Now to know any art or science two things are necessary, our lessons must be writ for us, and we must apply ourselves with zeal to learn those lessons. The primer, the text-book, of eternal life is in the Gospels and perhaps we cannot do better during the Mission than lay hold upon eternal life through one or other of these.

Consider the Gospel of St. John, for example; almost every verse contains truths so profound that our minds cannot plumb them, and so illuminating that we insensibly get in the reading that scale of new values which gives us new aims and intentions. As we read the first verse it dawns upon us that He, the Saviour of men, is the Word who is in hourly communication with every man, who solicits, counsels, inspires, fills us with the rapturous delight so that we are enabled to say, “My heart is inditing of a good matter, I speak of the things which I have made unto the King.” As we go on with our reading we learn that He is the Life, the sustainer of life, the Bread of life, who openeth his hand and filleth all things living with plenteousness: we learn that the Life is the Light of men, and we see the grey street or the grey fields lit up into beauty, colour and radiance by sudden sunshine; we recognise that all colour, beauty, diversity, form, are revealed or imparted by the light, and, suddenly, we perceive that it is not only the sun that rejoiceth as a bridegroom to run his course, but that the sun in all his splendour is the barest picture or image of that
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Sun of Righteousness who riseth with healing in his wings. Our hearts swell and glow with a new sense of the splendour and beauty, the exceeding warmth and comfort, of that Christianity whose centre is Christ our Saviour.

We go on line by line and word by word pondering these things in our hearts, realising, visualising, taking fast hold of the words of eternal life; we get *knowledge*, that knowledge which is life, and which is to be got chiefly through consistent daily study of those great lesson-books which are set for our use. Here is a definite thing for us to do during the Mission, as at all times; nor need we think it a selfish employment all-dedicate to the bettering of our own minds, for that which we know we shall certainly tell, whether by word or by reflecting the light of our Sun. The first thing is to *know* by definite, daily study, not of the wisest commentaries,

the most eloquent exordiums, but of the very words of our Lord himself. If any ask, how are we really to know that these are the words of Christ?—that temple servitor, sent on a base errand, affords us the final answer,—“He spake as never man spake,” and the faithfulness of the record is proved by the inherent quality of the words which are recorded. Let us endeavor ourselves day by day not only to tell, but in the first place to learn the words and works of our Master. And perhaps in this connection it would be as well to avoid the excellent little manuals of comfort and counsel prepared for *our* uses while we are learning to regard ourselves as existing for *His* uses. It may be that there is no better [sic] way of taking our part in the National Mission than this of definitely studying our Lord from his own words, from the beautiful goings forth of his life among men, until we are consumed by that grand passion which is the destined part of everyone of us, the passion of Christianity,—that new Christianity which recognises that we are for our Lord as entirely as He is for us. Thus will come to us both Repentance and Hope; Repentance, for how shall we bear to sin against Him whom we love; and Hope, the mighty Hope of the gathering of the people and ourselves into the Kingdom of God, where the lion shall lie down with the lamb and righteousness and peace shall prevail and be, like the common air, for all men’s breathing.

I can only in these short notes touch here and there the thoughts upon which we are all called to labour by the National Mission. One other such thought, troublous and perplexing, is [p 774]

the condition attached to the prayer for forgiveness which is our first step towards Repentance. We appear to halt between Scylla and Charybdis; on the one hand we are inclined to bestow a facile, good-natured forgiveness which is no more than a ready condoning of the offences that have been committed against us. “Oh, it’s human nature, what can you expect.” “I daresay I should have done the same in his place.” “He’s bad enough, but who am I to judge another?” With such phrases as these we prepare to meet the great duty that lies before us towards the enemy who has inflicted wrongs, not only upon ourselves, but against the rights of nations. More, are we not secretly envious of the temper which has bred and fostered the criminal action it is our part to forgive? We call this dogged temper “efficiency,” and would willingly do our best to promote it in our schools, manufactories and general administration, as if we might sow the seed without expectation of the fruit.

On the other hand, we may not steer clear of the Scylla of easy tolerance to make for the Charybdis of vindictive hate and retaliation. ‘An eye for an eye’ [sic] is not Christian doctrine; we are not allowed to do to others as they have done to us, but as we would have them do to us. We rejoice in the Christian burial of the crew of the Zeppelin, in the friendly treatment that German prisoners receive at our hands, in every sign which proves that we are living under the divine law and forgiving those who trespass against us. At the same time, forgiveness is costly. Christ Himself is able to forgive us because He died for us. We may not offer a light forgiveness which is only an excuse for following in our own practice those sins which we condone in others. Perhaps we shall arrive at the sincerity of feeling out of which a just forgiveness should come by refusing to take our own selves as our standard, and referring our feeling and our action to the perfect law of God. We may not tolerate that which He condemns. Any action which causes righteous anger in good men is, we may believe, an offence to our God also, and such action we are not allowed to condone. Yet we must forgive all manner of trespass committed against us as we hope to be forgiven, and must forgive cordially

and kindly with no trace of haughty aloofness. We have great need to pray for guidance in this matter; it is easy to say “forgive the sinner but hate the sin,” but for the time being the sinner and the sin are one thing and not two; and it is only through the Spirit of God that we can yield that forgiveness which implies a

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constant and difficult act of discrimination on our part, a free yielding of our love to the offender and yet no, even momentary, making light of the offence. The power of forgiveness, also, is one of the choicest and most precious gifts of God, to be sought for as a gift through the cleansing of our own hearts and by supplication for our offending brother. What if through the war we are being promoted to a higher class in that divine school which is the blessed company of all faithful people, and what if the higher class implies more strenuous tasks? If it is written “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us,” it is implied that our forgiveness shall be like that of our Father in Heaven, a forgiveness which does not condone, but, for the dear sake of the offender, exacts, at any rate, such penalties as shall make him aware that he has sinned and turn him also to Repentance.