

XI.

FAITH IN MAN

“But now we see not yet all things put under him. But we see Jesus.” —HEB. ii. 8.

OF whom is the apostle speaking? He has been quoting the eighth psalm: “One in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? or the son of man, that Thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; Thou crownedst him with glory and honour, and didst set him over the works of Thy hands: Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet.” It is a psalm of the greatness of man. At first, indeed, as the psalmist looks round on the world that lies stretched about him, his thought is of man’s littleness.

“When I survey the heaven, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, [I say] what is man, that Thou art mindful of him; the son of man, that Thou visitest him?” In comparison with these everlasting glories man appears trivial, of no account, the creature of a day and altogether vanity. But the psalmist knows that it is not so. Certainly “the heavens declare the glory of God,

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and the firmament showeth His handiwork,” witnessing by magnificence and order to God’s power and majesty; but man is not akin to these things—he is akin to their Creator. To a certain extent he shares with them the life of a creature, in a certain degree it is true to speak of him, with one prophet, as the handiwork of a Potter framed out of clay, but only in a certain degree; and David, seizing upon a truth far more important, is very bold, and says, “Thou hast made him but little lower than God, and crownest him with glory and honour.”¹ He looks at the glory of the heavens and he is not dazzled, he looks at the simplicity and weakness of man and he is not ashamed; because man has that in him by which he is not only God’s handiwork, but God’s child.

Now, what is it in man by which he is so much better than heaven with all its stars? It is the gift of speech. In the heaven “there is neither speech nor language,” but out of the mouths even of babes and sucklings God has ordained praise. Take man at his lowest, when he seems nearest to the animal, hardly to be distinguished from it, helpless, pitied, subject to so many chances, with so frail a hold upon life; there is yet something which cuts him off not only from dead matter, but from the young of all other living creatures by a firm and impassable line, namely, the gift of speech,

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which widens into the gift of thought. All the other creatures of God move as they are bidden, impelled by an inherent force. The sun and stars, the wind and seas, move by the law God has appointed for them; the beasts and birds and fishes move by their appointed laws; each by God-given instinct lives its own life, and finds its food, and propagates its kind, and dies. But none of these can understand the life of another; none can understand his own life. Nature works in them and they obey, instinct leads and they follow, in ways so wonderful, indeed, that man in his admiration of them is tempted to disparage his own reason. But not one of them all can reflect upon his life; they are shut up within it as in a prison. Whereas man’s thought can pass the boundaries of his own personal life, and penetrate God’s creation in its depth and height; and the more he studies nature, the more he feels at home in it, the more does the

world seem made for him, so that in all he learns he rejoices, so good is it—just what he himself would like to have created, had the power been his, or the providence, or the skill; and what is this but to say that the same Infinite Reason which we call God works also in its fragmentary degree in man, so that man is God's child?

And the psalmist gives a second reason for ranking man far above all other creatures, viz. that to him has been given not only the power of

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understanding the world, but the power also of subduing it; not thought only, but desire and will. "Thou hast put all things under his feet." Not only can man apprehend what God has worked and is working, but within limits he can determine purposes for himself and shape his own life. He can say, "I will do *this* and *this* and afterwards *that*;" and however hard the things be, if they are only possible, he can keep his purpose before him year after year, and at last accomplish it. Within limits man shares in the prerogative of the Creator, who "calls things that are not as though they were;" "who layeth the beams of His chambers in the waters, who maketh the clouds His chariot, who walketh upon the wings of the wind, who maketh His messengers the winds, His ministers the flaming fire."

In these days, when man's heaven and earth, which the psalmist found so stupendously vast, is shown to be no more than a point in the wilderness of space, and he himself is shown to be more intimately linked with "the beasts that perish" than at his lowliest he had conjectured, it is well for us to hold fast the psalmist's faith, that in his apprehension of the world, in the delight with which he sends forth his spirit to explore the immeasurable abyss of the universe, man shows himself akin to its Creator, "who hath put all things under him."

"But," continues the apostle, "we see not yet

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all things put under him." Whenever the Bible speaks of God's high purpose in man, of the dignity of his calling, of his lofty mission, there is never far distant the sad reflection that he has piteously failed to walk worthily of them. The contrast is no less familiar in our own experience. When we think not of this or that man of our acquaintance, but of abstract humanity, our hearts are lifted up with pride and wonder. "What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!" But when we go on to think of the average man, our first language seems overstrained; to so much we have to shut our eyes if the eulogy is not to be ironical. Of one we can praise the intelligence, of another the heart, but all with qualifications; and when from these we turn our eyes inward upon ourselves, of whom we know more than of other men, our first rapture seems still more inappropriate. For, with the writer of the Epistle, we are compelled to confess that man is not yet the master of things; we see not yet all things put under him. His power, indeed, over Nature is increasing—that we acknowledge with wonder; he has won many secrets from her; the light is become his minister, he has yoked the winds and the great sea and brought them into bondage, and time and space he is fast

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subduing. But we cannot but see that he himself is still unsubdued. In his veins there still riots fierce blood akin to a tiger's, and lust akin to an ape's.

And, seeing this, men have turned from one of these pictures to the other—the idea of man as he was clearly meant to be, “the image of God,” the fact of man as he is found to be—and have watched with tears or laughter, according to their bent, the tragedy of high souls overwhelmed through their own folly, the comedy of overweening pretension and feeble performance. And our author is not blind to either side of the truth. On the one side he claims for man his proud preeminence as lord of the world, on the other he admits with perfect candour “we see not yet all things put under him;” but he does not leave these two facts simply one against the other. He has something to add that has never yet been said by moralist or poet, some third fact to point to in which these may find a reconciliation—“But we see Jesus.”

To the writer of this Epistle and to the apostles generally, it was no longer a mere hope, a hope like despair, that man should one day shake off all the sin and the weakness which clung about him generation after generation, notwithstanding that they seemed so unnecessary; it was no longer for them a mere faith in God, the Almighty, who, having said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,” would not be wanting to His own

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word; no longer hope, no longer faith: it was sight. “That which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, declare we unto you.” Looking round the world, we had been tempted to doubt if man could ever attain to his birthright—that victory which overcometh the world—but we have seen Jesus. It is a simple argument. Suppose it had been believed from various signs that grubs could turn to butterflies, but it had grown doubtful because no instance had been discovered of such a regeneration: one clearly attested instance would prove the possibility; and it would remain on record, even though no second instance were ever discovered, that this creeping existence was not the true nature of the worm. And it remains on record, and the Church exists to attest it, that one Man was born into the world who, under no more favoured conditions than those which are the common lot, lived a perfect life, a life of communion with God and victory over the world, which justified the highest hopes men had formed of humanity. “All things were put under Him. Moreover in that He put all things in subjection under Him, He left nothing that is not put under Him”—not even death, that last enemy. This is the Easter joy—that after death Jesus appeared to His disciples, crowned with glory and honour, having tasted death for every man.

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But the gospel does not end even there. This Jesus is not set before us by the apostle as a mere isolated instance of the victory over sin and death, but as the “Captain of *our* salvation,” as “the Firstborn of many brethren.” In Him was life, and He poured this new life of His upon men; upon their reason, and upon their will. For that was how man ailed—“the whole head was sick, and the whole heart faint.” And so He spoke to man’s reason, and showed him what God is, and what man should be; and spoke to man’s will, and gave him power to become a son of God. And when He departed from earth and left the Church to minister His Spirit to men’s needs, it was still to man’s reason and to man’s will that His succour was directed in the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments. So it is still. Shall we not endeavour, in the year that lies before us, to yield ourselves more unreservedly to the Spirit of Christ; our reason to His reason to be taught, our will to His will to be purified and strengthened? For as for mankind, ourselves and our fellows, whatever we have learnt in these Christian centuries, and however we have grown in power, it remains true that we see not yet all things put under us. But it

remains also true that we see Jesus. May He shine upon all our hearts more and more, until He is finally manifested, and we see Him as He is, and are satisfied with His likeness!

¹ Revised Version.