

#### IV.

#### THE FOOD OF FAITH

“Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.”—S. JOHN iv. 48.

You remember the story. A courtier of King Herod Antipas, hearing that our Lord had returned from Judæa into Galilee, whither the report of His miracles at the feast had preceded Him, comes and entreats Him to heal his son, who is lying at the point of death. But our Lord’s answer is not as we might expect, “I will come and heal him,” but “Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.” The words sound harsh; they seem to make no account of a father’s anguish; and so it has been suggested that this apparent repulse was but a trial of faith, like the answer to the woman of Sidon, “It is not meet to take the children’s bread and cast it to the dogs.” Probably, however, we shall be right in taking the words as a complaint at the disregard of the true purpose of Christ’s mission as the Revealer of God, and the regarding Him instead as a Wonder-worker, who could delay or counteract the ordinary course of nature. So [p 36]

interpreted, their harshness disappears; for they plainly teach us to consider death as a thing not of deep importance. Elisha, who knew nothing of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, might pray earnestly that a life should be given back to him; but our Lord could not do so, for to Him death was no dark close to a life of light, but rather the entrance into light. He knew of a worse death than the death of the body; a death from which there was no resurrection—death eternal—and it was from this that He had come to save men; the other death He would share with them. It is true, indeed, that when the people brought Him their sick folk He had compassion upon them and healed them, as He did in this case, leaving us an example. But it was the sick who sought Him, not He them; the sick whom He sought were the sick in soul, the sinners. “They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” And so the paralytic was healed, “that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins.” Thus interpreted, then, as a declaration that the body’s decay is not a thing to dread, so that a wonder should be wrought to turn it aside, the text loses its harshness, and appears full of immortality.

“Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.” Are the words true of us? And first, in

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regard to the world without. What is it in the world which most helps us to believe in God? When do we most lift our thoughts to Him? When the earth is convulsed with earthquake, smitten with famine and pestilence, or when season follows season in its order, harvest after seed-time, seed-time after harvest, and the fields yield their increase? Which helps us most to believe in God’s almightiness, the sun or the lightning; the sudden death or unexpected recovery of one of us, or the long life and health of the many? Who can deny that it is too often the earthquake ruining cities, the famine desolating continents, the pestilence desolating homes, which causes us to think upon God, rather than the tranquil-breathing earth, and the happy lives of men? Unless we see signs and wonders, we are apt to forget God. And that may be one cause for the need of such “signs and wonders.” But that also is why festivals of harvest are so good for us. By them we do recognize and publicly acknowledge the hand of God, not in

startling and extraordinary signs, in subversions of the natural order of the world, but in the natural order itself. We say over to ourselves, and try to get by heart this lesson of the psalmist, "The day is Thine, and the night is Thine; Thou hast prepared the light and the sun. Thou hast set all the borders of the earth; Thou hast made summer and winter. Thou visitest the earth and blessest it;

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Thou makest it very plenteous. Thou preparest their corn, for so Thou providest for the earth. Thou waterest her furrows, Thou sendest rain into the little valleys thereof; Thou makest it soft with the drops of rain, and blessest the increase of it." *Thou visitest the earth, and blessest it.* The great lesson of this festival<sup>1</sup> to us is to see "the visitation of God," not exclusively in mildew, and blight, and drought, and famine, and pestilence, nor in these especially, but in the constitution and course of nature. And the lesson is not only David's; it is still more emphatically Christ's. The Jews of His day wished to see the hand of God in the destruction of many men at once by the fall of a tower in Siloam; but our Lord bade them look elsewhere. "Behold the fowls of the air," He said; "it is God who feeds them. Consider the lilies of the field; it is God who clothes them." What, then, are we to say of these portents? Are they not signs as well as wonders? It may, indeed, be that nothing happens in this world, sin only excepted, but by God's ordinance; it must be that nothing happens without His allowance—no war, though it is He who maketh wars to cease; no shipwreck, though it is He who stilleth the raging of the sea; no pestilence, though with Him is the well of life. It may be that these things, so terrible that to us they seem only "officers of vengeance," are yet ministers of right-

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eousness and angels of hope; dimly here and there we seem to catch the light of heaven under their dark raiment. But one thing is certain, that we creatures of finite intelligence must not presume to judge of the nature of God by events whose cause and purpose alike are largely hidden; we must use the clue to God's nature which Christ has put into our hands by His life and teaching—for why else are we Christians? We must rejoice, therefore, in the lovingkindness which we can see, in the gifts of light, and daily bread, and home, and goodness, and believe where we cannot prove; above all, we must not be blind to the greatest of God's mercies just because they are ever of old; we must not be unthankful for His visible compassions just because they are new every morning. In these, if we are wise, in these daily miracles of life, and not in the "signs and wonders," the hard writing upon the walls of our world, shall we try more and more to recognize the finger of God.

In the greater world also of man's spirit the same lesson has to be learned. Here too we look for God; and here too we are often tempted to trace signs of His presence in what is extraordinary—in sudden conversions and striking catastrophes, instead of in the slow winning of the soul by patience and the comfort of God's Holy Word. The evangelical prophet draws a clear parallel between God's way of working in the world

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without and the world within us. "As the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: so shall My word be that goeth forth out of My mouth." That is to say, God works by His Word upon the souls of men by the same quiet and regular processes as He employs in making the earth fruitful. Just as in the outer world we are

to look for His hand, not so much in earthquake and tempest as in the continual ministries of sun and rain, so in the soul within; it is by the regular pieties and charities of home, by the regular performance of everyday duties, by the regular prayers in the closet, by the regular solemnity of worship in His holy temple, that He nourishes in us the seeds of eternal life. The spirit of man grows like wheat—"first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear." And yet there are people who refuse to recognize God's operation in man's spirit except in some exceptional excitement, to which they give the name of "conversion." I have known simple, God-fearing people bred up in ideas of this sort who have wondered when they were to be "converted;" much as if the food-bearing land were to receive God's regular gifts of sun and rain without recognition, and wonder when He was

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going to send His earthquake to bless it. There are earthquakes in the soul, as in nature; happy they who by such means, if by no other, can be led to acknowledge the majesty of God. But the lesson is as old as the days of Elijah, that God is not so to be sought, not so to be waited for; not in earthquake and fire and strong wind rending the mountain, but in the still small voice. Just as quietly as sun and rain descend upon the earth and make it bring forth and bud, so does the Word proceeding from the Father enter within our hearts and bless us. He blesses us in a mother's love, in a father's wisdom, warning us against evil ways, showing us the brightness of honour, the clear beauty of truth, the strength of purity; so it is that they plough the furrows and cast in the seed, which is still His, and pray for the blessing upon it, and scare off the birds of evil temptation, till the seed has rooted itself; and by His blessing so it is that we may grow in wisdom as in stature. But there is a difference. The earth receives God's blessing and cannot withhold herself, for the blessing is indeed not for her but for us, and we give thanks; but from God's spiritual blessings we can, alas! withhold ourselves. We can disobey our parents; we can neglect our children; we can cheat our conscience. In innumerable ways God may be speaking to us all day long, and we be as the deaf; all day long He may be stretching

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forth His hands to us, and we be as the blind, until our heart becomes a fool's heart, and says, "There is no God."

If it be the case with any of us that God is hidden, and we have to seek Him, our lesson today is, first, this of the Prophet Amos, "Seek Him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night;" in the daily workings of God's providence, seek Him and you shall surely find Him. You do, perhaps, at all your meals acknowledge that your daily bread comes from God, but the thanksgiving, just from its frequency, has ceased to lift the heart with it. You give thanks without feeling thankful; then give thanks for some gift of God the blessing of which you can still appreciate, and which is directly and unmistakably His gift. Give thanks for some beauty you have discovered in nature; a flower of the field, a running brook, the colours of sunset, the first breath of spring. What you need is but a window into heaven, through which God's glory may unmistakably shine. Yet such a window may open for you anywhere. Only, when it does open, recognize that the light you wonder at is indeed heavenly; say with Jacob at Bethel, "Surely God is in this place, and I knew it not." And ere long you will discover that the whole firmament of heaven is transparent as crystal, and that it was

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only “earth-born clouds” that shut out the glory of God.

And seek Him also in the world of everyday relationships—in the love of parent and child, and husband and wife, and friend with friend. Give thanks for these. If we have been blessed by God with these witnesses in our inmost life to the reality of love, if we have been guided, and sustained, and cheered, and held back from sin in our daily journey by familiar hands and faces, shall we ask for a further sign of God’s lovingkindness? What profounder witness than such loving care could be devised to the great Fatherhood, the great Love, the great Friendship of God, from Whom it is indeed that every family in heaven and earth is named? The Jews asked our Lord for a sign that His wisdom and love were from God, and no other sign could be given them than these things themselves, wisdom and love. And no other sign can be given of God’s presence in any world than wisdom and love. Seek Him in these, and you will find Him.

“O Lord my God, great are the wondrous works which Thou hast done, like as be also Thy thoughts which are to us-ward: . . . if I should declare them, and speak of them, they should be more than I am able to express. . . . Let all those that seek Thee be joyful and glad in Thee: and let such as love Thy salvation say always, The Lord be praised.”

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<sup>1</sup> Preached at a Harvest Thanksgiving Service.