

V.

NATIONAL FAITH

“I am the true Vine.”—S. JOHN xv. 1.

THESE words close the revelations of Himself and of the Father which our Lord gave to His disciples before His death. He had revealed Himself as the Bread of life, as the Light of the world, as the Door of the sheep, as the Resurrection, as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and now comes a revelation deeper and fuller than any of these, because it embraced in its analogy the whole process of their lives and the life of the world—that life as a whole of which these others are single aspects—the revelation of Himself as the true Vine.

Now, the revelation must not be understood to consist merely in fixing upon the vine as an image of our Lord,—whether being struck by the vineyards on the slopes of Olivet, or by the vine-pruning fires by Kidron, on the way from the upper chamber to Gethsemane—that may be as it may—the vines on their path may no doubt have

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suggested the thought; but it is not the natural vine of which our Lord declares Himself to be the Life, the Root, the Perfection. It is that which to His hearers the vine was understood to signify; that which was signified by the wonderful golden vine on the gates of Herod’s temple; that which being understood as spoken of themselves wrung a “God forbid” from the Pharisees who heard the “Parable of the Vineyard.” “The vineyard of the Lord of hosts,” sings Isaiah, “is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah His pleasant plant;” and so too Hosea, “Israel is a luxuriant vine, he bringeth forth fruit freely;” and the psalmist, “Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt: Thou hast cast out the heathen, and planted it.”

Israel, no doubt, was mistaken in thinking itself the whole vine of God, but this was for a long time an inevitable mistake, and not fatal so long as their own branch brought forth fruit. But a time came to it when it made a mistake that was indeed fatal, when they cut themselves off from the root from which—though they did not know it—all their luxurious foliage, all their wealth of blossom and fruit, had come hitherto; so that no more sap could pass into their branches, and they withered, and the Husbandman cut them from His vine.

“I am the true Vine.” Yes, in these few words we have the Christian philosophy of history.

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“Without Him was not anything made that hath been made.” If we look at these words intelligently and understand them, we are saved from such faithless cries and prayers as that of the great Gregory, that the soul of so good an emperor as Trajan might not toss for ever in the sulphur of hell; saved, too, from such expedients as Dante’s, who brought him back to earth, and let him die again in order that he might believe and be saved;<sup>1</sup> we are preserved, too, from false distinctions between natural goodness which is of man, and supernatural goodness which is of God, because we are taught that every good gift the world has yet received has been from above—that any fruit that has been brought forth has sprung from one root, and that root divine. This is a gospel of which S. John and S. Paul are especially fond. S. John puts it on the front page of his book, when he tells us that the true light was in gradual process of dawning ever since the world was made; and S. Paul lays down as the first principle of religion that in God all men live and move and have their being.

At present I wish to confine our thoughts to one lesson from our Lord's teaching about the true Vine—this, namely, that a *nation* can have no life except it abide in Him.

Nation after nation, as we know, has risen and

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fallen. Branch after branch has been put forth by the great Vine and has withered, and the Husbandman has cut it away. Elam, Babylonia, Assyria, Media, Persia, Greece, Rome, in turn flourished and brought forth fruit and withered. And not stopping to consider the special circumstances in each case, it is true to say that they perished when they became selfish; when they lost the fear of God, and tried to live their own life apart from the root. We shall understand something of the meaning of this if we look at our own case as a nation.

There surely could be no fitter image of a nation than that of a vine. From one root it has many branches, many tendrils and leaves, much blossom, much fruit. In the vine and in the nation there is at the same time a unity and a manifoldness, a unity in the manifoldness, an identity in difference. The vine has life in itself by having life in its branches; for they are itself. We can distinguish the life of each branch, but we cannot separate it from the rest. The branches are many, and yet the vine is one and whole and single, and the life of the one is not distinct from or added to the life of the many, but the one is in the many and the many are in the one. So, too, is it with a nation. It has manifoldness and it has unity.

Its manifoldness is too plain to need many words. It is a commonplace that no two men

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are alike in ability or character any more than in feature. It ought to be quite as much a commonplace to insist that these diversities are given us to fit us for our own special duties in life, for the work which each of us has to do, and can do better than another. Do we consider always sufficiently that it is our duty in life to be ourselves?—ourselves not at our worst, of course, not as we happen at any moment to find ourselves, but ourselves at our best; at our best, then, but still ourselves, and not some one else whom we envy and mimic, and spoil ourselves in trying to be like them, and spoil our work in trying to do theirs; ourselves, with few talents or many or one, using them to the best and to the full, but not seeking scope, or exercise, or credit for those we do not possess, so be we may attain to that greatest of all praise, the same to each, called late or early, if this one condition of faithfulness has been fulfilled: "Well done, good and faithful servant." The vine, then, is manifold. We have each one his own proper place and duty.

But the nation has also unity. Our place and station is a place in an organism. We are ourselves, but we are also the same as other people. Take any child. At birth it inherits certain qualities from father and mother, which it will in turn transmit to its children. And what is the child's education but on the one hand a developing

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of these qualities, and on the other the drawing of others from those around him? And this fact, that we are the same as each other, is the only justification of our educating children. A man who tried to educate a child apart from other human beings would be as wise as the Egyptian monarch who kept a new-born baby isolated to see what the primitive language was. No; whatever the child is and knows, he draws not from some single individual fountain of his own, but from those with whom he is cast; he learns what they have learnt, he becomes what they are; he is on all sides saturated with the world in which he lives; his mind is built up from

it; he is shaped by the old nurse custom; he has lain at the breast of the common life. What has he that he has not received? He is himself, but the elements of that self are common. Of course, in the friction of everyday life, the things that impress us most are our differences—our differences from our brothers, our schoolfellows, our fellow-citizens. But so soon as anything happens to touch the depths of our nature—a brother's success, a victory over a rival school or club, a national loss or anxiety, or dishonour or triumph—we know that we feel them as our own, we know that they are our own. Life then widens out in a series of circles, and we are what we are in common with others. And so it becomes clear that there is such a thing as a [p 50]

national soul or spirit, a living soul that penetrates us all, that is in each of us a better self. A visible witness to it is the existence of national institutions, which are the form in which it perpetuates itself from one generation to another—the national Church, the national judicature, the national legislature. By these the common spirit of the nation witnesses with our spirit, and we recognize in it what we ourselves would be, and at our best are: we pray in its words, we bow to its judgments, we obey its laws, but we are conscious all the time of submitting to no alien authority; we are only finding ourselves. There are several considerations which at once follow from this truth.

1. By looking back over history, we notice that the spirit of one age is not the same as the spirit of another. Our fathers did things of which we are proud, but they also did things of which we are ashamed. May we not welcome the teaching of our text, that the true Vine is Christ, the Word by whom the worlds were made; that His Spirit has been working hitherto, and is still working; and so believe that the world's vine is *growing*—growing up in all things through Him and into Him; that every branch that abides in the Vine shall continue to share in that growth, until it reach its final fulness—the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ, who is the true, the perfect Vine? Why God works by growth, by evolution, [p 51]

why He should keep the best wine to the end of the feast, no one can tell us—we walk by faith, not by sight; but we do catch glimpses now and then of an increasing purpose through the ages, and this should encourage us to believe still more firmly in the written Word, that good *is* (against present appearances) the final goal of ill, that Christ *is* both Alpha and Omega, that in Him all things exist, and in His perfection they are to be summed up. And this suggests a very solemn thought—that God's purpose will not fail for any hindrance of ours. He will work through us if we will only let Him, He will use us to bear fruit if we will only cease to be selfish; but if we refuse, then we wither and are cut away,—whole nations wither and are cut away, and the grace of God finds other channels. There have been spring-times in the world's growth, when the sap has risen and swollen like a flood through leaf and tendril, and the vine has been luxurious; there have been times when it seemed almost dead; now and then it has seemed as if some special shoot had a more vital connection with the tree than others, as if it had kept its channels of communication freer and wider, and from it there has passed into the whole branch a richer, fuller life. There have been prophets and saints and philosophers who have, as we say, been before their time, who have outgrown the proportion of their [p 52]

fellows, who have had some revelation of a new truth, by which the general life has been increased; and by these we still trust that the spirit of the nations, and the spirit of *our* nation,

may grow better and richer and purer from age to age. There will be much purging needed, but if we are in earnest about our fruit-bearing, we shall not complain of this; for the Husbandman is wise, and the fruit-bearing branches He purges that they may bring forth more fruit.

2. It is important to keep in mind that the life of the nation apart from the lives of its members is an abstraction. There is no national life except as lived by the people of the nation, any more than there is a life of the tree apart from the life of the branches. The will of the community as a Church or as a State stands over against our own individual petty wills, and says, "Do this," "Leave that undone;" but unless the members obey and make this universal will their own, that will must itself deteriorate. If even one twig or tendril close itself against the life in the branch, harm is done—most of all perhaps, to the poor individualizing twig, but still harm to all; but if all were to say, "We are individuals, we have nothing in common, we have nothing to do with the branch; let us live our own life in our own way, without let or hindrance; what has the branch to do with us, or we with the branch? what has the State to

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do with us, or we with the State? what has the Church to do with us, or we with the Church? let us go on our own way;"—then it is clear that they and the branch, they being the branch, must all perish together. It is the sign of a nation's decay when there is a decay in public spirit. Whatever a man's function be in the commonwealth—whether he be judge, or parson, or soldier, or legislator, or elector of legislators—he should realize that if he fail in his duty, all his fellow-countrymen must suffer with him, because we are all members one of another, and no man can live to himself. Let us not fall into this snare of carelessness; let us be watchful that the spirit we have inherited from our fathers does not fail in us: rather, by keeping open every avenue by which the life from the Divine root may "flow through all our deeds and make them pure," by self-devotion, by obedience, by eager endeavour, let us, if it may be so, raise and purify and extend it; extend it especially by clearing away obstruction and opening out fresh channels, that there may be from this generation too a fair harvest.

3. If Christ be the true Vine, if our nation be a branch of that Vine, it follows that our Christian life cannot be something apart from our national life; it must be the doing our duty in our station, bearing fruit in our place, wherever that may be. It is a much easier thing to wish to mount up into

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heaven to bring Christ down, or to descend into the deep to bring Christ up, or to go somewhere into the wilderness and be alone, than to will by *His* grace, by *His* power, by *His* sweet influences, to do our daily task-work well. We find ourselves in a world where we are all bound up one with another; we are each members of some family, members of some profession, members of a state; and besides these more general groups, there are other societies which enter into us, and into which we enter. These duties really fill our lives. The main question for us is how we fulfil them; for the success or failure of each man's life is a matter of *how* rather than of *what*. If in these simple duties we could become perfect, we should become perfect men; if the fruit we bore in our everyday stations were only perfect, the vine too would be perfect, and the true vine would be revealed. For the Christian life is not a life apart from the secular life, but that very secular life itself at its best. The good father, the good son, the good brother, the good husband, the good trader, the good citizen, he is the good Christian.

This, then, is the conclusion of the whole matter. Christ is the true Vine, and we are branches, and, whatever our special place, we may, if we only will, draw life from Him. God may thus be connected with every duty; His Spirit may be always our spirit; there is no duty so seemingly insignificant

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that it may not be done, as the phrase is, to His glory. And what that means Christ tells us Himself: "Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit." Apart from Him there can be no fruit. And this is the greatest mystery of all, that the branch should be able to say to the vine, "I am not of thee;" but then we know its fate. "To-day if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts."

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<sup>1</sup> Par. xx. 45, 106.