

## VII.

### THE EAR OF FAITH

“There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me.”—I COR. xiv. 10, 11.

BEFORE the memory of Christmas has passed into the background of our minds, and the Christmas decorations vanish from the church, it would be well if we should try to translate this great fact of Christmas into terms of our everyday life, so that its presence might be continually with us through the year on which we are just entering. As some sort of help to this, let me remind you how it is in Christmas Day, and only in Christmas Day, that we have a key to the understanding of our fellow-men; and not only this but the only key also to the understanding of the world in which we live.

And first for our fellow-men.

“There are so many voices in the world, and none of them is without signification.” How may we attain to a knowledge of the significance of a

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single human voice? Well, have we not speech; may we not just by the interchange of words gain a knowledge of other men? Certainly speech is a common interpreter, without which life could not go on for a single day. But does speech give us all we want? Can we find out a man’s nature by just talking to him? Or have we never found that words can conceal as well as express? Have we never wrapped ourselves in words, as in a disguise, against people who, as we thought, could never understand us? And even when they are not *unreal*, words, as most of us employ them, are feeble and unequal to their work of interpreting our feelings or experience; the fine relief that the coin once had is worn by passing from hand to hand. To take an example—a child and a grown man and a botanist use the same word “tree;” but what very different things they mean by it! Or, again, two people say to each other, “I love you,” as though the words meant the same thing to both; and each interprets the other’s words according to the depth of meaning they have to himself, and hence arise some of the commonest tragedies of human life. No; ordinary speech by itself takes us but little way in our endeavour to understand human nature. Art, when it is worthy of the name, is a far more perfect interpreter of these human voices than common speech. For, in the first place, its object is to interpret, and so it can have no

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interest in disguises. And then, again, it is a more delicate instrument, and can keep closer touch with our consciousness, and express with far greater exactness differences of feeling. How often, by what seems to us a merely idle transposition of words, has a poet brought to articulate expression feelings which never have been expressed before; but which are then and there at once and for ever interpreted to ourselves and others! But this faculty of adequate expression is only half an artist’s endowment; it must depend upon his gift of insight. And so we may ask at once what power or inspiration must inspire us all, as well as the artist, if we are to gain at first hand any knowledge of human nature. The answer is—The power of love, the

inspiration of love. It was not by an idle choice that the poet of "In Memoriam," wishing to express the greatest human love, fixed on the greatest interpreter of human nature as its possessor—

"I loved thee, Spirit, and love, nor can  
The soul of Shakespeare love thee more."

We may go higher still, and say it was by no mere chance that He who alone of all men born on this earth knew perfectly what was in man, and needed not that any should tell him, was also He whose name was *Love*. Love is the only interpreter. We may know this from experience, if we reflect upon it. Who are they whom we know best?

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Who but our friends whom we love best? Do we not find that, as we love them more, we grow to understand them better? It is no less true that, as our love cools, we lose the sensitiveness of our appreciation. When there is little love between two members of a family, they are less known to each other than each may be to some friend who does not share their blood, and has known them outwardly much less long. At the best, because our human love is not the infinite love, we never quite get to know our friends through and through. Finite love means finite knowledge. We, indeed, say sometimes that we love them "as our own soul," or that they are "the half of our soul;" but such language is rather the expression of a deep desire for communion than of its actual fulfilment. Still, love and friendship are real things, and the knowledge that they beget is real; in the spirit of love we know and are known.

But how few persons, after all, we do love, and how few, therefore, we know! The love we feel for our dearest is less than the love of Christ for every soul of man, and no greater than ours should be for every soul, if we are Christians. "In Christ Jesus," says S. Paul, "there are no longer barbarians;" in His Spirit the voices of all human hearts become intelligible to each other. This is the meaning of that strange gift of tongues on the first Whitsunday; it was a manifestation once for

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all of the reality of the communion of the Saints, by an actual audible communion, heart speaking to heart and being understood. Christmas, then, and Christmas alone, supplies the interpreting power, the power of love, by which we may learn the signification of all human voices; and therefore one Christmas lesson for us is this. Seeing that knowledge of men is so difficult, seeing that for its very existence it requires love in some measure, seeing that for its perfection it requires nothing less than the fulness of the divine love, is it not blameworthy to take but little pains about it, to be careless and hasty in forming our judgments; is it not unintelligent to be guided in them by the very spirit of hate?

How often have the words of the psalmist, "My soul hath been long a sojourner with them that are enemies unto peace," been found true of the world's greatest spirits, in whom more of God was revealed than in their neighbours, of whom the world, therefore, was not worthy! The world has listened to them at first with carelessness and indifference, then with hate, and has persecuted them and put them to death. It took no pains to understand them; it hated them without a cause. And we who perhaps hate and persecute our own prophets, while

we build the sepulchres of those our fathers slew, say of the latter with a curious irony that they lived before their time. But it is

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not only the greater men, who are naturally more difficult to understand, that we treat with indifference or contempt. We behave in much the same way to the more commonplace people round about us. It is so much easier to construct an imaginary man for ourselves out of such details as birth, education, income, political party, religious belief, social set, than it is to give a loving, patient study to the particular human voice, not without signification; and so it comes about that there are people who hate Frenchmen, or Jews, or Roman Catholics, or High Churchmen, or Protestants, or Unitarians, simply as such. I remember that one Bank Holiday as I was walking through a very poor part of a northern city, a friend said to me "My chief religious difficulty is to understand what God saw in these people to love." It is a great religious difficulty to understand what God could see in any of us to love. It is only in the spirit of God that we can at all understand it. The love must come first, and that is the difficulty, and that is the divine thing. But the love we feel for any child of God does open our eyes to see something worthy in its object, some soul of goodness still lurking amidst all the evil; and not only to see but to foster it, so that it may turn against the evil and burn it up. While, therefore, keeping in mind all through this year that ninth commandment, which forbids bigotry and backbiting, and

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hastily formed and hastily expressed judgments, quite as much as formal lying in a court of law, let us keep in mind also the new commandment, the commandment to love, and pray that God will incline our hearts to obey them.

Now let me say a few words, not about human voices especially, but about the general voices of the world, and how they too become intelligible in Christmas—a subject not inappropriate at this season, when the year is nearly run out. For although, speaking strictly, the old year is ever going, and the new year ever coming, and old things are always passing away, and all things becoming new, yet because our attention is limited, because we are so pressed upon and distracted by a multitude of voices, and are so soon tired, we find it necessary in human affairs to mark times and seasons, on this day to attend to this, on that day to that, and so to find a hearing, if we may, for every good voice. And, therefore, as this point in our earth's revolution which we fix and call a beginning is brought round and round to us, we try to mark it and recollect ourselves, and listen if we can catch, above all the cries that are so urgent on our regard, just that one voice which the moving sphere has of its own.

We all hear in it at different times different voices. At first, when we are young, its sound is cheerful and merry. It tells of change, but of

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change which is only another name for growth and advance; new leaves, new buds, new flowers; as yet no thought or suspicion of decay, or waste, or final failure. It lures us on with a tale of ever new chances, and strange secrets, and startling surprises day by day, endless pursuit and achievement, and seeking and finding, and loving and being loved. There is something magical and fantastic about it, like the music of a pleasant dream, which knows no hard thwarting obstacles, but is full of pleasant breezy spaces and soft distances; vague, indeed, and shifting, and, when we look back, without a purpose so far as we ourselves were

concerned, but still wonderful and divine, and to be thankful for, and not by any after effort to be recalled.

And then, sometimes anticipated in a kind of sentimentalism, sometimes first heard in terrible reality, comes that other voice, telling not of growth but of decay, not only of achievement but of failure, of a necessity in things which is stronger than our own will; of infinite impossibilities, of the strictest limitation to what is called success.

“Passing away, saith the world—passing away  
Chances, beauty, and youth sapped day by day;  
Thy life never continueth in one stay;  
The eye waxen dim, the dark hair changing to grey  
That hath won neither laurel nor bay.”

This is the voice of the world that is caught

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with such wearisome iteration in much pagan poetry; caught also by the Jewish preacher who was king in Jerusalem, and who gave his heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven. “Vanity of vanities,” saith the preacher; “all is vanity!” And this note of vanity—of passing away—far from being an unreal sound, a fancy or imagination, a nightmare to be disregarded, is becoming as the world rolls on ever increasingly audible. What do those who in our own day give their heart to search out all things that are done under heaven tell us about the law of our life here?

They tell us that it is founded upon decay; that it was by the decay of its first life of fire that the world took outline and substance, and parted into valley and hill; that it was by the decay of the hills that the fertile lands were spread; that it was by the wholesale sacrifice of myriads of lower species that the higher animals were produced; that it was by the death of countless martyrs that the fabric of our civilization was reared. They tell us that the sap in the Tree of Life is fed by its own dead leaves fallen about the root.

To these two voices of the world, the voice which tells of life and joy, and the voice which tells of sorrow and death, we cannot be deaf; the world’s song to most of us is mixed of both, although we may attend to the one as much as

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we can, and disregard the other as much as we may.

But is there no third voice in which these two find their harmony? Yes, indeed; there is a voice of the world which for centuries was only a faint whisper, only a dreaming of things to come, but which first became clearly audible on the first Christmas Day. It is the note of *purpose*, the groundtone alike of that song of life and that dirge of death, in which both find their meaning. S. Paul and the Ecclesiast both cast their eyes backward over the ages, both see their slow procession through the same circle of events—war and peace, famine and plenty, birth and death, wisdom and folly, labour and ease; and both give the same verdict, “All is decay and change.” But while the Jewish preacher stops here and only adds a hope, S. Paul sees a mighty power at work in the world, which has subjected the world to vanity for a purpose; he sees under the apparent monotony of existence a growing order, a definite progress towards a divine event, the fashioning of all men into the divine image. “The whole creation groaneth and

travaieth in pain together until now; the creation shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God." To us, then, who hear Christ's voice saying, "I am Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the Ending, which is, and which [p 76]

was, and which is to come, the Almighty," the world should have a meaning. This voice it is, and this voice alone, which can give a meaning to our life, doing away with its vagueness and aimlessness and fragmentariness, and making it whole and decisive. For it proclaims to us God behind and through the world, working hitherto, realizing an end from the beginning by steady advance, working by joy, working by sorrow, working by death and life, to make man at last "in His image," and calling us to submit ourselves to His good will in us, and share in His good will for all the world beside. What that image may be we know; for he that hath seen the Son hath seen the Father, and to inherit that sonship is the purpose of our lives.

So let me ask you, Is there audible for each one of you, besides the two voices of joy and sorrow, of life and death, the voice of this God-revealed purpose in your world, bidding you take the joy with thankfulness and spread it abroad, and take the sorrow without despair, because "whom the Father loveth He chasteneth," bidding you come to Christ, and then follow Christ? Or if the end came to-day, would it come upon you yet undecided for what purpose you have been placed in this unintelligible world? Without sight of a goal, without an intention, without belief in a divine impulse, life must be indeed, what it is

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often called, a wearisome pilgrimage. "Even the youths must faint and be weary, and the young men utterly fall;" but we who have heard to-day the promise of a new heaven and earth, press on towards that mark, for we have faith in it; we have faith that the desire of all nations shall not be unfulfilled—that squalor, and disease, and pain, and crime are not a God-ordained necessity, but that He is bringing them to nought; and we shall pray that in the coming year He will use us still more for His purposes, that He will unstop our deaf ears to hear His call, and give us strength "to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint."