

## VIII.

### THE ACTIVITY OF FAITH

“Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and sojourners, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul. . . . Be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.”—I PET. ii. 11, 13.

To a Jew—and it is to Jews especially that S. Peter is addressing himself—these words, “strangers and sojourners,” would come with the force of a novel application of words long familiar. They were Abraham’s words when he stood before the children of Heth, and asked leave to purchase a possession among them. “And Abraham rose up from before his dead, and spake unto the children of Heth, saying, I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a burying-place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.”

It is a touching old-world story, its Oriental stateliness making even more pathetic for us its simple and deep emotion. Abraham recognizes that there is a kinship revealed in death, a community of nature behind all differences of race

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which makes it fitting that he should at this time, stranger though he be, have intercourse with the children of Heth. He recognizes that, sojourner as he is, there comes a time when wandering must cease, and no tent will longer serve for a dwelling-place, but the traveller must at last find for himself an enduring habitation. This, then, is how the words first came into the Bible; they are the words of the great patriarch, descriptive of his state in this world—an alien, a wanderer, with no abiding city and no rights of citizenship, in contrast with the dead who are all kin, and whose wanderings are over. Four thousand years have passed, and the cave in the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, still keeps the dust of Sarah, where Abraham buried it; and his dust with hers.

But the words come again into Scripture, no doubt echoed from this place, in the thirty-ninth psalm,<sup>1</sup> familiar to all from its use in the Burial Service. It is a psalm written in sickness, when the thought of the fragility of man’s nature and the shortness of his time is forced upon him, and as a consequence he feels that his desires have played him false. A week, a day ago, there were

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a hundred things worth striving for—wealth, power, place, esteem; to-day they are valueless. He and they are shadows together. “Surely man walketh in a vain show;” that is, surely the world in which he walks is made up only of appearances, like the desert mirage, which fades as we approach it; surely it is in vain that man disquiets himself; surely every man at his best is altogether vanity.

And yet is it altogether so? One proved reality there is among the appearances, one substance behind the shadows: the Creator, who fashioned us and them. We and they pass, He abides; and our times are in His hands. If, then, we would tarry here longer, to Him must the prayer be made. And the psalmist would tarry, and so he goes on to pray: “Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my cry; hold not Thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. O spare me, that I may once more have joy in life, before I go hence, and be no more.”

“A stranger and a sojourner” in the world. The words are Abraham’s, but look how different the sense is. The psalmist calls himself a stranger with God: “I am a stranger *with Thee*, and a sojourner;” that is, a stranger in Thy tent, in Thy caravanserai; the passing guest, who has no claim but that he finds himself here, and yet on that would rest a claim, the claim of a stranger.

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Abraham, on the other hand, speaks of himself as a stranger, not to God, but to those who were strangers to God—those children of Heth; of God he was “the friend.”

What makes the difference? This, that in the mean time a question had been asked, which, when once asked, could allow no peace till it was answered—the question whether there is a life after death. In Abraham’s day the question had not been asked; the new revelation of God’s government of *this* world was all-absorbing; but when the psalmist wrote, men’s hearts were being prepared for a further revelation—prepared, by emptiness and dissatisfaction and longing, for the fulness which God had in store for them. When man had once cried, “Behold, Thou hast made my days as a span long, . . . and now, Lord, what is my hope? truly my hope is even in Thee,” he had entered upon the Lenten preparation which should have its goal in the gladness of Easter; when he had once sighed, “Man is but a breath,” his ears were open to hear the whispered reply, “Man’s spirit is indeed a breath, but the breath of God;” when he felt himself but a stranger with God, and a sojourner, where Abraham had felt himself a friend, it was because God would have him long for an intimacy yet in reserve—that better revelation of Himself as a loving Father which he gave in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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Such, then, is the history of this phrase, “I beseech you as strangers and sojourners,” which S. Peter employs in the text. You are sojourners, he says, in this world, as Abraham was, as all your fathers were. And the psalm speaks the truth: You walk in a vain show; you disquiet yourselves in vain; you heap up riches and cannot tell who shall gather them. Nevertheless, the world of reality, the everlasting world to which you travel, is not the grave, is not the earth from which your bodies were taken—that also shall vanish like smoke—but the heaven of God, who created your spirits immortal as Himself. *To Him*, therefore, you are not strangers; not the guests of a day, who come and go. This world is not His only world; nay, this world is indeed but a tent alike for Him and for you; when you depart hence it is to His country, which is also yours.

That being so, what should be the conduct in this world of those who are but “strangers and sojourners,” because “citizens of a better country”? S. Peter gives two general precepts: “Abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul,” and “Submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.”

1. We may learn something from Abraham’s intercourse with the children of Heth. As long as he could he abstained from all intercourse; when it was unavoidable, he gave them no excuse

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for speaking evil of him. And this attitude of abstinence and jealous care supplies a good model for one side of Christian conduct. “Abstain from all appearance of evil;” “Abstain from fleshly lusts, which are at heart enemies to the soul.” There is much in the world that appeals only to the flesh, from which a Christian will do well to abstain; he is not really concerned with it—it is the custom of a country in which he is not native. His country has laws and customs of its own,

by which he should shape his conduct, and these are of such surpassing excellence, that they will command the approbation and win the allegiance of those who see them put in practice. A true patriot, rather than live carelessly when away from home, will do his best by his example to spread the better principles of his own country; and so S. Peter bids Christians have their behaviour seemly among the Gentiles, "that wherein they speak against you as evil-doers, they may by your good works, which they behold, glorify God in the day of visitation." It should be a comfortable thought to every Christian that, by mere abstinence from any prevalent evil custom, he is permitting the light of God to shine before men, and bringing in a "day of visitation."

2. But abstinence and watchfulness are only one side of Christian virtue. There was much in the world, even in the first century, that was not

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of the flesh, but of the Spirit, and of this S. Peter goes on at once to speak. He calls it the "creation" or "ordinance" of men, and justifies it. "Submit," he says, "to every ordinance of man for the sake of the Son of man, whether it be in the State or the Church." Do not call everything on earth vile and worthless, simply because man has made it. It is no reviling to call a thing human. For man is man by the Spirit of God, and by that Spirit he too creates and brings order out of chaos. And in these creations of man, such as the family and the state, with their manifold societies and relationships, a Christian must recognize not carnal but spiritual ordinances. "Honour all men," is a Christian maxim complementary to "Abstain from all fleshly lusts." And out of that temper of reverence to the divine spirit in men, will proceed the various degrees of honour and love due to various estates. "Love the brotherhood;" "Honour the king;" "Servants, be subject to your masters;" "Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your husbands;" "Likewise, ye husbands, give honour unto the wife;" "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren."

Now, this fact, that it is by the operation of a divine instinct that human societies have been produced, and that a divine temper is no less necessary for their maintenance, needs at the

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present day most emphatic assertion. Modern science, which endeavours to trace to their source all human institutions, has proved beyond question that many societies, such as the family, which we had imagined to have always existed, have really come into existence gradually; and, in consequence, a feeling has gained ground among certain classes of people that these societies are less divine than they had supposed. Now, such revulsion of sentiment is natural, but it is thoughtless. Our Bibles would have taught us long ago, if we had had eyes for the lesson, that God's revelation of truth and goodness to the world is, and must be, gradual—"line upon line, precept upon precept; here a little, and there a little;" "in many parts and in many modes;" new institutions coming into being, and being replaced by others better suited to the times; patriarchs yielding to judges, and they to kings; and just as in Bible history this constant change and growth did not strike us as undivine, because we understood that the end in view was the perfect kingdom of God, so neither ought we to be disturbed if the roots of this kingdom can now be traced further still into the past. A tree is to be judged, not by its root, but by its fruit; and societies, not by that from which they spring, but by that into which they spring. And as we do not deny that a tree is a divine creation, because it is produced

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from seed by a natural process and takes time to reach its full stature; so we must not deny that the family and the state are divine creations, because they have grown by the operation of God's Spirit in *man* and in process of time.

But, secondly, we must keep in mind that societies of spiritual origin require spiritual energy for their maintenance. A society lives in its members; and if the temper of all the members of every Christian society were a perfectly Christian temper, the kingdom of God would be at once revealed. But even now every endeavour to live, not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, brings human societies nearer to their divine ideal, and exhibits their true glory. Consider, for example, the marriage state. To those who enter upon it, as the Office says, "unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly," either making provision only for the flesh, to fulfil some one of its many lusts, or else blindly in a trance of passion, the bond which should be one of mutual help and comfort becomes before long hateful and intolerable, till time brings callousness, or divorce disgraceful relief. Whereas if the affection be in whatever degree spiritual, if it attach itself not to the form only, but to the character which the form reveals; if it be mixed with respect and trust, and the charity which seeketh not its own, and is not easily provoked; then the years as they come will bring, not atrophy,

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but new fuel to the living flame, as each sees the other more lovable and more loving.

In the same way, the temper that unites the citizens of a state must be also a spiritual temper. It so happens that the apostles did not number among their disciples any "rulers of this world," and so Christian charity is directly urged only upon the subject: "Render to all their dues, tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour;" but it is plain, from the way in which they address both husbands and wives, both servants and masters, that had opportunity arisen, they would have given the same precept to governors as to the governed. Indeed, they do give indirect precept in their praise. "Rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil; they are ministers of God to thee for good." And we may remember that our Lord had explained very clearly that Christian lordship must ever find its exercise, not in self-profit, but in benefiting the governed. A state, then, will be sound, whatever its form of government, when those in authority exercise their authority in a spirit of watchful consideration for the good of the whole people, and those who are governed obey the laws with a ready will. In England it should be especially easy to obey the laws, because the country is self-governing; we who obey the laws ourselves make them.

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What we have especially to guard against is making laws in the interests of a class, whether rich or poor, or a party, or even a people, which are not the interests of the whole commonwealth. In the apostle's words, what we need is to be all of one mind, having compassion one of another.

The truth that we are "strangers and sojourners" in this world is brought home to us by every funeral bell, but it is important that we should interpret the truth rightly. Let us interpret it first as a call from making provision for the flesh, from amassing or spending money and strength and time for things which are not profitable; and next as a call to increased energy in working the works of the Spirit in all the societies of which we are members, especially the family and the state: whatsoever things are honourable and lovely, in these to abound more

and more, seeing that in the Lord such labour is not in vain, because here as there it is the Everlasting who is Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> The R.V. alters the A.V. of 1 Pet. ii. 11, "strangers and pilgrims," into "sojourners and pilgrims," while retaining in Gen. xxiii. 3 and Ps. xxxix. 12 the A.V. "stranger and sojourner," thus equally obscuring S. Peter's quotations. He employs the words of the Septuagint, which are the same in both cases (πάροικοι καί παρεπίδημοι)