

THINGS NEW AND OLD.¹

St. Matt. xi. 29. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

St. Luke, xiv. 27. Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

WE live in an age of questioning and unrest in which some see the break up of established order, the challenging of established beliefs with a boldness and lack of restraint which has in their eyes something almost of profanity: they are disturbed and puzzled and often they are deeply pained. To others it appears as an age of transition in which new conceptions are painfully struggling to the birth, conceptions whose development will mark a new stage in human progress. It may be that for them in their turn there will come a period of disillusionment: 'God is patient because He is eternal,' but it is a hard saying for the young man in a hurry as well as for the old.

And yet an historical student may be pardoned for believing that there is profound wisdom as well as keen observation in that maxim which Lord Acton used to instil at the earliest opportunity into each of his pupils—that 'history is the true demonstration of religion.' No doubt in its implications it goes far beyond one of the latest of modern shibboleths according to which we should assess and differentiate religious beliefs and practices by their 'survival-value': such survival may depend upon characteristics almost wholly independent of intrinsic excellence as estimated by those who adopt a different standard. And there are some who in defence of that different standard have felt themselves led to regard with dismay or even with uncompromising hostility the methods and results of the study of comparative religion, anthropology and folk-lore. We are few of us exempt from the danger of forgetting that God is a God of Truth and of circumscribing Him with our own limitations. The church which was bidden to be
[p 232]

watchful and to stablish the things that remain, which were ready to die, was not one which was filled with the ever new vigorous life of the Spirit, but one of which it was written 'Thou hast a name that thou livest and thou art dead.' And what was true of Sardis may easily be true of us with our own different problems and sometimes as a result [sic] our own indifference. The scribe that hath been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven bringeth forth out of his treasure like the householder things new as well as old; but the source from which the new things come is often forgotten. It was a nobler vision, however imperfectly apprehended, which made some of the greatest minds of the Middle Ages still see in Theology the queen of sciences to which all contributed and which interpreted all; and which set the three crowns of theology, law and medicine around an open book of which the seven clasps were the seven liberal arts and chose as a motto upon its pages 'Dominus illuminatio mea.'

The Lord is still our light, though the clear ray be broken up in prism and spectrum and the medium sometimes esteemed beyond that which it enables us to see. But for rational beings to decry or reject the instruments of knowledge because they have not as yet been perfected or because the use of them leads to surprising results is not to do honour to Revelation but dishonour to Him who is revealed.

The analogy may not be scientifically accurate; but in a sense the same holds good in the sphere of practice. In the ordered season of the Church's year Advent leads on to

Christmas with its enlargement in the season of the Epiphany—the Manifestation of our Lord; this in turn is followed by Lent with its commemoration of the Passion and through the Passion leading to the victory of Easter and the triumph of the Ascension; and then on to the great outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost with its manifold application to the development of the Church's life in the Sundays that follow. The student of history knows that this ordered scheme which we accept as a matter of course is itself the result of a comparatively slow development, the details of which are in some cases of fascinating interest. The student of comparative religion will provide parallels, illustrations, even in some cases he may think explanations, drawn from widely severed areas and from many non-Christian cults, including some which could not in any conceivable way have been first influenced by Christianity. Parallelism does not necessarily prove anything beyond the fact, but that there are correspondences no one can deny. The inferences drawn will often be affected by the temperament of the student and this is perhaps especially true in matters into which religious considerations

[p 233]

enter. One man will draw unwarrantably a particular inference because he wishes to do so: for the same reason another will be deterred equally unwarrantably from doing so in a case where the inference might legitimately be drawn. And if the theologian of judicial mind is rare, it is fair to remember that the same quality is rare also in the students of history and of science. In the world of Learning these defects are corrected and counter-balanced often enough by generous comradeship and frank criticism; but outside that sphere the effect is far different. What a great lawyer once called "the second-rate at second-hand" finds ready acceptance through popular lectures, magazine articles and newspaper paragraphs, and the result is seen in one quarter in eager disputation, frequently based upon insufficient knowledge, in another in the loud challenge of all authority, in yet another in indifference, and in some cases at least in a feeling very nearly akin to despair: the old landmarks have been removed or so it seems, the old standards broken, and they know not where they stand or whither to turn.

In this place at least the statement will not be questioned that the remedy is to be sought in the Advancement of Learning, rather than in the restriction of Knowledge. And progress will be achieved by a new method, new to many in our age but yet a very old one, that which our Lord taught to His disciples when He bade them severally Follow Me. What is called in barbarous phrase the 'historicity of Jesus,' the facts of His Life, Death and Resurrection, the records of His work and the story of the Church which bears His Name—these fall within the province of the historical student: the interpretation of those facts, the correlation with all Life and their significance *sub specie aeternitates*, these belong to the metaphysician and the theologian and, dare we not add, also in his measure to the humblest servant who has tried to follow Him for Love in sincerity and truth. But the path of discipleship began in the Master's plan not with a declaration of belief in His Messiahship but with the self-surrender involved in obedience to His call. If He taught them by what He did, He taught them far more by what He said and what by accompanying with Him they found Him to be. He knew their lack of faith and the consequent hindrance to their work, and He rebuked it, but so that they might learn. Through discipleship they learnt the meaning of love, and through love the meaning of discipline, even the discipline of the Cross and its efficacy and power. That He was declared to be the Son of God with power by resurrection of the dead is the later testimony of historical certainty and triumphant faith; but these early disciples learnt because they were willing to follow when they little dreamed that

[p 234]

Love would reign from the tree. If they knew the austerity of service they knew also its joy, and we shrinking from the one do not learn the other. What have we to answer to him who says that the observance of Lent or of any form of self-discipline is a relic of paganism springing originally from a perverted view of human nature? We know that Christians have often framed their observances as if they held a view of God less lofty than that of many pagans. But shall we not answer that this sense of discipline, self-imposed not as an end but as a means, belongs in its wide extension through many forms to that natural religion which proceeds from an instinct given of God for the moulding and fashioning of instruments for His service.

“Whosoever doth not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” is a hard saying for those who would serve God only upon their own terms; who would gain the crown without having fought the good fight. And the victory is won within as well as without not by those who are seeking first for reward at all but by those who for Love’s sake desire to be more worthy servants of their Lord. How shall we keep Lent? Why just by that self-denial which helps us to be more unselfish, not for our own benefit but to be able to help others better: just by that self discipline [sic] which each of us needs in one way or another in order to serve as good soldiers, trained and fit to endure hardness with the Gospel we profess: just by that self-surrender, self-offering, in sincerity and humbleness of heart, which is the first step to fuller knowledge. Along the path which leads through Prayer and Communion and Service to the presence of our Lord Himself is the way to Theology as I believe for the wise and the simple alike—the way-faring men, yea fools, shall not err therein: it is the way of Holiness and our Lord Himself has taught us that Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. I do not think that the one official creed of the Universal Church will ever sustain material change in expression, though the fashion of philosophical interpretation may and indeed must vary from age to age; and the Church of England in its Catechism has shewn by its summary of the Apostles’ Creed what it would have its members chiefly learn in the Articles of their Belief. It would repel none, as I believe, philosopher or unlearned, whom its Lord would have received who came to seek and to save those who were lost and chose His Disciples not among the rabbis but among ordinary folk. They gained in learning and understanding as they increased in love and faith; and is not that what we ourselves may chiefly ask of our Master as we seek this Lent and all our days to give ourselves to follow more closely in His steps?

¹ A sermon preached before the Honourable Society of Gray’s Inn, by the Rev. Claude Jenkins, F.S.A., Professor of Ecclesiastical History, King’s College, London and Lambeth Librarian.