

“FORBID THEM NOT.”

BUKOVAC’S PICTURE.

BY MRS. COLLES.

A run up to town for a brief holiday of sight-seeing has its own exceeding refreshment for a dweller in a quiet country town; and if, in addition to this, the holiday-taker be the busy mistress of a household and mother of a large family, I think the refreshment becomes also a first-rate tonic, bringing a new influx of strength and vitality. So, at least, I found it when, leaving my large brood of chickens, I took a short flight last May and found myself in “The Palace of Art”—the new wonder-land of pictures. But, as I remained still a mother in that new world, I found a special attraction in one picture on view in Piccadilly—Bukovac’s striking representation of Christ blessing the little children, entitled “Forbid them not.”

The little faces at home became vividly present to my inward eye as I found myself seated in the quiet curtained room looking at this beautiful and original conception, and the sermon it straightway preached to my maternal conscience seemed more practical and to the point than are a good many heard from the pulpit.

The picture may measure some fifteen feet across, the nearest figures in it being life-size. The groups of figures are depicted outside an Eastern house. Christ stands at the foot of a short flight of steps, while above and beyond Him a woody bank throws a gentle shadow over the foreground, only the topmost trees on it being lit up by the slant rays of the evening sun.

The picture may be viewed as being composed of three groups of persons. First, that of our Lord, with the little ones and their mothers who are already received by Him. Secondly, the approaching crowd of women and children who are being
[p 848]

repelled and forbidden by the disciples. The third is composed of Judas, who leans on the low wall behind his Master, moody and apart, and beyond but close to him one or two persons talking with St. John.

We will take each group in turn, and dwell on the thoughts it suggests.

The Christ stands, clad in a long white robe, His hair falling on His shoulders, the face beautiful in its combination of manly strength with calmness, dignity, and absence of disturbing passion. Must it not be confessed that many of even the great painters have done us a wrong (in spite of much good they have imaged for us) by too often presenting to us our Lord’s face as one stamped with weakness and even insipidity? Have they not robbed us by this means of the thought of “the manliness of Christ,” till many a young heart has owned, or unowning has felt, that it was unable to admire the manhood it was taught to regard as ideal; that the face was unattractive and uninspiring? To a child the face in a picture is “a likeness,” much as a photograph would be. I think we mothers ought to lay this to heart. The pictures of Christ which we show to our children should be such as they can admire.

To return to the group. The Saviour has taken up a babe, and holds it seated on His right arm, with a strong and tender support which the little one evidently finds comfortable. It does not turn wistfully towards its mother, nor even cling timidly to Christ, but sits up fearless and *at home* as if in its rightful place, for “of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

At the feet of the Saviour kneel several women with their children in front of them, the nearest to the spectator being mother to the little one in Christ's arms. She prostrates herself before Him, her forehead on the ground, and her attitude expressive of entreaty amounting to distress. Does the painter intend to suggest the thought of a mother whose little one has indeed been taken by the Saviour, but at the cost of her own bitter woe—that He has taken her at her word; has blessed her child, but only while calling on her to share His sacrifice?

She does not grudge to leave them there,
Where to behold them was her heart's first prayer.
She does not grieve, but she must weep.

Behind this figure is that of a bright young woman holding
[p 849]

up her baby for the Master's blessing, while the child as gladly stretches its arms towards the noble and winning figure before it. Two or three other little ones there are, all waiting as willingly and confidently for His notice, while one thoughtful little creature kneels with joined hands, half realising the reverence due to the Holy Teacher, but not chilled or awed because it does so.

This group expresses simply and forcibly the great truth which we have been slow to learn, but which we of this age are beginning to learn in a degree hardly, perhaps, understood by our fathers—the truth that it is *natural* to childhood to draw near to and be attracted by Christ, when He is allowed to be seen by it in His true character. Let us teach our children to think of Him as of One in whose presence their pure childish mirth, as well as their childish griefs, may freely find expression; in whose presence they may be natural and at ease, not hushed, stiff, and constrained, so that they cannot but rejoice to go to Him to be blessed. A little child once asked me, "Does God laugh?" Evidently the thought was at work, "Is laughter sacred, divine—a thing not apart from God?" Are we not too much afraid of what we nervously stamp as "anthropomorphism," and do we stop to think where we are landing our children by such fears? The bold anthropomorphic language of scripture would seem to rebuke our timidity. I long that all children could share the simple impulse of my own little one, when, on being told the "sweet story of old," she exclaimed eagerly, "If I saw Him, I would put my arms round His neck and kiss Him."

But the picture shows us one exception to these little Christ-lovers, and one which teaches a lesson of warning. One little child, gaily clothed and with carefully dressed hair—a little pampered darling—the child of a wealthy mother, is refusing, with stiffened limbs and rebellious pouts and cries, to receive the Saviour's blessing. Its mother in vain coaxes the undisciplined little one. The lesson is obvious. The children of the poor, taught obedience by the things which they suffer, gladly enter into the kingdom of heaven, while the rich woman's child, nursed in luxury and untaught to obey, refuses the blessing awaiting it. Yes; obedience precedes even the reception of religious truth. The young child must learn practically the foundation of all morality—*i.e.*, obedience to lawful authority—subjection to its parents.

[p 850]

The mother who has failed to lay this foundation has herself undermined the loyalty to Christ which she would fain see developing as part of its character. Self-will and the spirit of lawless independence render the person possessed by them incapable of seeing and

delighting in the law of beauty which ruled His life whose meat and drink it was to do the will of Him who sent Him.

Let us now turn to the second group in the picture. It is connected with the first by the two figures of St. Peter and of a boy of about twelve whose arm he is grasping somewhat roughly as he pulls him back from the party of mothers and children who are already close to his Master. The boy is half frightened, half angry. Two or three others are also repelled, and cling to their mothers with looks of fear cast on the impetuous and mistakenly zealous disciple. In the background the other apostles are following St. Peter's example in driving back the crowd of women and children, though one of them has just caught the glance and gesture of the Master as He sternly rebukes their action. Peter is the chief actor and spokesman on this occasion—a fact in keeping with those trials of his character so uniformly brought before us in the Gospels—his impetuous offer to walk with Christ on the water, his attempt to defend Him with the sword, and the refusal to allow Him to wash his feet. Specially are we reminded of this last incident by the picture, which represents him counting it beneath the dignity of a sacred Teacher and divine Being to bestow attention on children; thus showing how far he is as yet from comprehending the character of God even as He had revealed Himself to the Jews—One who would “gather the lambs with His arms and carry them in His bosom”—much less that of Him who came “not to be ministered unto but to minister,” and who said of children, “In heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father.”

And here again I found food for musing on the lessons which might be read to teachers, whether parents, clergy, or masters.

How have we acted towards children when, by the simple instinct of healthy child nature, they were coming to Christ? Is it not true that many of us are verily guilty in this matter? Have we not often repelled them by our harsh dogmas, by our horrible views of hell and endless torment, hiding, as far as we could hide, the sunlight of the Father's face? While we would shudder to allow the thought to blacken their minds that we

[p 851]

could prolong any pain to them for one moment after it had produced the desired reform, or inflict it if it could never achieve that end, have we not dared to present to their imagination a God who could torture for ever and ever uselessly? Let us face this horror once and for all. It is high time we should do so, for which of us who has followed thoughtfully the progress of unbelief among the young of the present day, but can trace much of it to the dark and repelling creed held in childhood, turned from in disgust when merging into manhood and womanhood, but so closely linked with the idea of God and of Christ—so wrought into the doctrine of the need for an atonement, that, with the dark shadow clinging to these truths, they too have been flung away, and the agnostic steps forth into life, orphaned indeed, yet able at least to spurn the nightmare of never-ending torture?

In whatever views of this subject we parents have grown old, the time has come when we must ponder these things in the light of the effect they produce on the faith of our children. We must ask ourselves whether it is not possible that we may have been mistaken in our interpretation of scriptural teaching with regard to future punishment. Even where, in their religious teaching, parents have, so far as they were able, kept this gloomy creed in the background, it has only been found to have lain snakelike coiled in sleep, but ready to start up when the mental life of the children begins to stir actively in the sphere of religious life—ready to paralyse the revelation of a Fatherhood, when the relation is understood to include the monstrous notion of a world of banished sons writhing in never-ending torture.

But there are many other ways, effectual if less terrible, for repelling young hearts from coming to the Bestower of every blessing. Think of the long, dull, and tedious services and incomprehensible sermons, of the careful repression of all innocent mirth on “the Sabbath”—of the “Sunday books” of studied dulness—the general sense of having to abstain from what is naturally agreeable to youth—movement and variety—of which the church bell calls up the associations even to those to whom the years have taught the meaning and value of the sacred day of rest. I can remember vividly a walk from church with an elderly Scotch lady-friend who was specially kind to me when I was a child, and who would have given me any

[p 852]

pleasure it was in her power to bestow. But her Sabbatarian creed was stronger than her heart, and when I stooped to gather a daisy from the grass at my feet she rebuked me gravely, “because it was Sunday.”

It is the zealous disciple, Peter, who is making this mistake. Religious *zeal* is *not* enough; it needs much tempering with the knowledge of the “wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea,” and “the kindness in His justice which is more than liberty.” We may well exclaim with Aurora Leigh, “Now God forgive all good men [sic]

But the true disciple is in the way to be taught. Peter, when he sees and hears, will obey, and will yet learn from “the Chief Shepherd” how to feed His lambs. The Church, too, is beginning to see and hear, and her Lord’s displeasure at her errors will not be unheeded. His “Forbid them not” will be listened to and obeyed, and she will ask His guidance in herself leading His lambs into His presence.

But there is yet a third group in the picture which claims our attention. It includes Judas, and behind him St. John talking to the people of the house, outside of which our Lord stands. The beloved disciple’s face is lit up with the growing light of new meaning which he reads in his Master’s act. There is a resemblance between him and the Lord which suggests the special bond of sympathy which binds them to each other. Like a peak towering higher than the rest of some mountain range and catching the rosy light of the rising sun, while its brother hills are still in cold shade, John reflects his Master’s likeness as he enters first into the higher spirit which inspired His treatment of the little ones.

Not so Judas. He leans moodily on the stone parapet, eyeing the whole scene with entire aloofness, participating as little in the disciple’s narrow zeal as in John’s deeper insight. The whole thing is to him pure waste of feeling and utterly meaningless. What has it to do with the claim to a mighty kingship which, to his mind, forms the great object of Christ’s mission? What place have these feeble babes in that kingdom for which he himself has been ready to follow Christ, a kingdom closely linked in his thought with the money bags which he grasps?

Of what element in the society of our day is Judas typical?

Let us hope of a smaller one than in bygone ages. We have learnt more of the value of childhood through these eighteen

[p 853]

hundred years of Christian teaching than was known before. But wherever the love of personal ease, personal vanity and ambition, the pursuit of the pleasures of society by parents and guardians, are bringing about neglect of and indifference to the bringing-up of children in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord”—wherever they are resulting in the “waifs and strays” of our streets, in children who are the victims of bad habits and careless nurses in our luxurious mansions, *there* the spirit of Judas is manifested—the spirit which

cannot understand or sympathise, or have part or lot with Him who stands for ever gathering the lambs in His arms and carrying them in His bosom, and saying to us all, "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these ye did it not to Me."