

The Heart of a Child.

BY THE REV. F. LEWIS.

St. Matt, xviii, 3.—And Jesus said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

WE read in an early chapter of the Gospel that our Lord's first teaching excited astonishment because "He taught as One having authority." The people who heard Him said, "What is this? A new doctrine!" "Strange teaching," for that is what the word means, new and strange, because that kind of teaching had never been heard before. But wherein did our Lord's authority consist? We must hardly say that it was derived from the fact that He was the Son of God, because it was not till men had realized how truly Jesus was the Son of Man that they gained an inkling of what God was like and acknowledged Him as Son of God and worshipped Him. A man who can speak with authority on any subject is a man who has mastered that subject. He is one who has spent laborious nights and days in the study of it until he has made it his own by forcing from it its every secret. He has become the Master of it and so is qualified to speak of it and is entitled to be listened to with respect.

So our Lord was One who could speak with authority on the subject of the Kingdom of Heaven. It was the subject to which He had given His whole mind. In the long night watches on the solitary mountain top He had held communion with God the Father, and God had hidden nothing from Him. And then He had gone down from the mountain and mingled with men in the valley at the foot, and lived out

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the lessons He had learned. How immeasurably above the great men of God who were before Him was He! Those whose heart was not hardened, nor their eyes blinded with prejudice and self-seeking, nor their ears dull of hearing were compelled to confess "Truly, this is the Son of God."

And yet Jesus Christ preferred to speak of Himself as Son of Man. He was not ashamed to call them brethren of whose nature, of whose flesh and blood, He was a partaker. He had gone through all their experiences. He had suffered being tempted, He had won through temptation because He held fast to God and trusted Him to the uttermost. It was so that He entered into the Kingdom of Heaven. He could teach the mysteries of the kingdom, then, with all the authority of experience. As the Citizen-Lord of that kingdom, He knew what the character of the citizen should be. It must be like His own. And who but He who had gone through the whole experience could say with such authority, Blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers? He alone had known that perfect happiness, and could speak of it. He had first lived what He taught. He Who had lived with God took God with Him wherever He went.

And so the Word had breath, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds,
In loveliness of perfect deeds
More strong than all poetic thought.

But may we not say that our Lord also spoke with the same authority of experience when, in teaching His disciples the lesson of humility, "He called a little child unto Him and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven?" As a little child, we may well believe our Lord Himself entered into the Kingdom of heaven. And how much of the child did our Lord retain to the very end of His life on earth. He shows it in so many ways, in His love for birds and flowers, which yielded up to Him their deep but simple lessons; in His childlike simplicity and guilelessness of character; in His purity of heart; even in His bluntness of speech at

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times, for no one is so frank and outspoken as a child; in His trustfulness, He believes so implicitly in men, and yet can read their inmost thoughts so clearly; a child, so trustful, yet by a kind of instinct knows if a person is to be trusted, in His sympathy with children; in a certain buoyancy of spirit and gaiety of heart. We are accustomed to think and speak of our Lord as "the Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief," but may there not also have been another side to His nature? Few can be so sympathetic as a child in a time of sorrow and distress, but is the ordinary healthy child attracted to one who is always sorrowful and grieving? Yet children were attracted to Jesus Christ. Would He not hide His sorrow in their presence? He could not wish to cast a cloud over their simple joys and childish games. The wide-eyed wondering solemn Jewish children would want to see a smile upon His face, to feel that He was ready to play with them or tell them a story. Religious Teacher though He was, He would not wish to make them stand in a row before Him to say their Catechism, when they wished to play a game or hear a story. They would be attracted to Him because they recognised that He had the heart of a child and understood them. They might well think that He was one of themselves and that they could safely share their childish secrets with Him. We cannot but feel that our Lord had very much of the child in Him to the end. In the great spiritual crisis in the garden of Gethsemane He was carried back to His childish days when the name of His infant prayers, which He had lisped at His mother's knee, came back so naturally to His lips, Abba, Father. Has St. Paul that thought in his mind when twice in speaking of the spirit moving in our hearts he says, "Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts whereby ye cry Abba Father." After all "we are but little children weak." In tones of anguish and distress we cry to God in the language of our infancy, Abba Father. It is only by being converted and becoming as little children that we can enter into the kingdom of heaven. Life, we often feel, is a very complex thing, with the many conflicting demands which it makes upon us; yet life in the kingdom of heaven is really a very simple thing. Only we have not the courage of the child

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who takes things so literally. The hardest sayings of Christ are those which seem the simplest. We are told again and again that the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is unpractical and impracticable. And yet if one only had the courage to live out those simple direct precepts would not the world be the better at once? But only a child would make the attempt, because he has imagination. He sees the vision splendid, the vision of Jesus Christ, his Hero, if nothing higher.

Just such a child was St. Francis of Assisi. Because he was a child he did put into practice

the simple direct precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. And perhaps I may be allowed to supplement what I said from this pulpit two (or three) Sundays ago by a brief sketch of St. Francis' character. My purpose in the former sermon was to show how, by infecting men with his own spirit, St. Francis set on foot a great movement which has had great results.

St. Francis set up his kingdom in the hearts of men by the strength of his personality; his personality was in reality the personality of a child. He had imagination, sympathy and simplicity. He had the childlike love of birds and animals and flowers. They were, in his own language, his brothers and sisters. He claimed real kinship with them. He had power over them through his sympathy with them. We have seen what wonderful power over fierce animals in the Zoological Gardens in London has been exercised by a lady recently. There were many pictures of her in the newspapers petting them through the bars of their cages. Such power could only be exercised by one with great sympathy and, I must believe, with the innocent heart of a little child. St. Hugh of Lincoln showed the same power over a fierce male swan which would allow no one else to approach it. St. Francis had this power. You are familiar, no doubt, with the story and the picture of him preaching to the birds. "When he was about to preach in a wood full of the chatter of birds, he said with a gentle gesture, 'Little sisters, if you have now had your say, it is time that I also should be heard.' And all the birds were silent." To everyone and everything that he came in contact with, St. Francis showed a charming deference. He was the very model of courtesy. In ex-

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tending that courtesy to the birds he displays something of the "molle atque facetum ingenium" of Roman Vergil, a gentle playful humour, which at the same time is touched with the pathos of life. But where St. Francis is so much the child is in the literal way in which he took the teaching of Christ, and the directions which he conceived to have been given to him in visions. When in one vision he was called upon to be the soldier of Christ, "he rushed out to take horse and arms," and left Assisi with the great boast "I shall come back a great prince." He returned humiliated; for the sickness from which he had not sufficiently recovered came back upon him. In a second vision he received the command amid the ruins of a Church to which he was wont to resort for prayer: "Francis, seest thou not that my house is in ruins? Go and restore it for me." Again he took the command literally and set to work to rebuild the ruined church. To raise the money for it he sold his horse and also some bales of cloth belonging to his father. This action was resented by his father who put him under lock and key as a common thief. The quarrel which ensued led to Francis renouncing all connection with his father, stripping himself of all that he owed to his father, except a hair shirt, and taking to the frosty winter woods. The story that he broke forth into song as he did so indicates the gaiety of heart which characterised him. It was the mark too of the Little Brethren whom he gathered round him and sent out on their mission to the outcast and poor. But, in his personal life, St. Francis' aim was to be "The Mirror of Christ." And it is in reading the life of such a man as St. Francis that we can understand so much better what Christ was like. We may sometimes learn more from the saints of Christ than from Christ Himself, perhaps, for this reason. In trying to imitate Christ we feel we are attempting the impossible; we are overwhelmed by the thought of what it means to attempt such a task. And this, in spite of the fact that Jesus is held up to us as our great example; and especially in the epistle to the Hebrews His near kinship to us, as partaking of our own flesh and blood, and in being tempted even as we are tempted, is dwelt upon so

emphatically by the writer for our encouragement. Yet when we see a saint, with his many imperfections, winning the vic-

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tory over himself and growing towards perfection, the task does not seem so utterly impossible. Still the discipline is a stern one. We are to grow up to Christ, but by the strange paradox we are to grow into little children if we wish to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Christ's kingdom is in the hearts of men. Into such a kingdom none can win such resistless way as a little child.

To enter the Kingdom of Heaven is a difficult task because in reality it is so simple and easy. The way into it is the way of humility and obedience; the way our Lord Himself trod. But at the back of humility and obedience lies faith; the glad buoyant trustfulness of childhood, the careless faith of St. Francis, when casting off with his gay clothing all the cares and pleasures and riches of this world, wearing the coarse hair shirt, he passed in a gay rapture of song into the frosty winter woods.