



SERMON.

The Veiled Teaching of Jesus.

Preached in St. Paul's Congregational Chapel, Hawley-road, London.

"These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs; the hour cometh when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but shall tell you plainly of the Father."—John xvi. 25.

There is no doubt that Jesus Christ's mode of teaching caused surprise and much perplexity to His hearers. It troubled both the Jews and the disciples that they did not seem able to prevail upon Him to speak plainly. "This is a hard saying, who can hear it?" was the exclamation of many who apparently were favorably inclined toward Him. "What is this that He saith?"—we cannot tell what He saith," said His disciples. His words caused a division among the Jews. Many said, "He hath a devil and is mad, why hear ye Him?" Others perplexed enough yet said, "These are not the sayings of one possessed of a devil." At length impatient of this ambiguity, the Jews gathered round Him and said, "How long dost Thou hold us in suspense? If Thou be the Christ, tell us plainly." "Why speakest Thou unto them (the people); they themselves requested to have a parable explained." "Declare unto us this parable." Not unfrequently it is said, "They understood not that saying;" sometimes it is added, "And they were afraid to ask Him wondering, attracted by something in Him which they could hardly define; they followed Him until they came to love Him, still they did not wish that He would speak plainly and speak no more proverbs, hard sayings, or parables. And now, when His ministry is drawing to a close, they think He really has, for the first time, spoken plainly. How eagerly and with what pleasure do they hail His words! What a sense of relief does their exclamation convey! 'Lo, now speakest thou plainly and speakest no proverb' . . . Now know we . . . by this we believe." Their pleasure at this supposed plainness of speech amounts to an unconscious rebuke of His former mode of speaking. Jesus admits His ambiguity. "These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs."

Now, I want to point out to you this morning, in the first place, how almost impossible it is to speak plainly on the greatest subjects, to urge upon you patience with proverbs, hard sayings and parables, to remind you that Jesus deliberately adopted that mode of teaching, which the disciples thought obscure. Language is said to be the garment of thought. A very good definition: only we must remember, that while a garment clothes, it also conceals. Into every word that we use something has crept that we do not suspect, or something has gone out that we believe still remains. They come to us, some of them in sad condition, with their original meanings all torn out of them, charged with other meanings, and if we use them without a knowledge of their life history, as if nothing had happened to them in the course of it, we convey wrong impressions and arrive at false conclusions. Some of them come to us with an accumulation of power gathered during what I may call their life, just as is the case sometimes with a man who being nobody of importance to begin with ends by making his name a trumpet call to duty, a name to conjure with, a name that shall stand for a movement, a nation, an age. They come to us coloured also with all kinds of associations, beautiful or otherwise, which belong to a distant past, and if we use them ignorant of all this, we know not what we may be doing. It is very difficult indeed to know precisely how much or how little there is in the words which we constantly use as fixed or definite and adequate expressions of thought. But now, suppose that we should strip them of all that they have accidentally acquired, or restore to them all that they have lost; suppose that we could see them uncoloured by associations, see them, shall I say, "plainly." What then? Then we should only see them struggling to say what cannot be said. First of all, there is no word which fully covers its meaning; it is only a sign or an image of the thought more or less dim; and secondly, it conveys something false as well as something true—all images do that and we have to allow for it; but if we use words as if they adequately expressed the thought of which they are only the signs or images, and make no allowance for what is false in them, we shall be sure to use them wrongly and harmfully.

Logic and Feeling.

Then, again, we ourselves, in the use of words, put something of our own into them. Feeling makes too little of them and says too much; logic makes too much of them and says too little. Logic is to be distrusted more than feeling; the latter assumes that we shall be on the alert to make allowances, modify, or supplement, until we catch the spirit of what is said; the former tells you that there is nothing that need keep you on the alert, it lulls you to sleep by assuring you that it will be exact, that it will do everything for you, and leave you nothing to do for yourself; and it exercises itself upon subjects which are surrounded by mystery as if they were perfectly plain, definite, measurable; whereas they are infinite beyond what eye hath seen, or ear heard, or the heart of man conceived. No, it is not easy to speak plainly. What is a word, a sentence, a library? What are all libraries? A mere peep into the inexpressible. The best writers know this, and are not surprised if they find their most important things out in between the lines, and the best readers soon learn where to look for them. The best speakers know this, and feel when all is done that they have left their most impressive thoughts unspeakable, because they are unspeakable. However, the best hearers understand perfectly well, perhaps

better than if they had been spoken. The poets know best how to use language. They often express their most inexpressible, or evanescent thoughts by means of repugnant, or somewhat paradoxical epithets; as, for example, Coleridge when he says:

The stillly murmur of the distant sea,  
Tells us of silence.

The belief that it is easy to speak plainly on these great subjects is at the bottom of nearly all the mistakes which divide men in religion, and it may be added, of nearly all the scepticism which has ever existed.

There would not have been so much Unitarianism if men had not spoken of the Trinity as if they knew all about it. "I came forth from the Father," said Jesus Christ. That is enough; it is a worth, a grand explanation of Him; but we cannot get behind it, and those who profess themselves able to get behind Christ's statements, and dogmatise about what they can know so little of, needlessly divide men and mostly, after all, over mere words. Christ's words are like fixed stars shining out all the more brilliantly because of the darkness out of which they shine; we can guide ourselves by them. "The wayfaring man, though a fool, need not err." The Gospel is the "Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," but, as one has well observed, "that face stands out from a background of mystery;" those who think it perfectly easy to penetrate that mystery do more harm than good.

Neither would they have been so much agnosticism, if there had not been too much gnosticism, using the word in its etymological sense. Agnosticism is the reaction caused by the Christian's dogmatism on matters that do not admit of it. It has been elevated to the dignity of a creed, and is able to put on an appearance of modesty, to rebuke Christians, because they have not been modest enough. Jesus Christ's proverbs, hard sayings and parables are infinitely preferable and more profitable than any man's dogmatism.

Truth Found by the Fit.

There were good reasons, we may be sure, why Jesus spoke in proverbs, or parables. One reason seems undoubtedly to have been, that He did not intend any one to have His truth who did not think it worth while taking some trouble to find it. Speaking to men whose hearts were in different moral conditions Jesus found the parable precisely suited to His purpose. There is in the parable a mixture of light and darkness: while it reveals, it also conceals. Fuller aptly compares it with the fiery cloudy pillar which gave light to the children of Israel, but was a cloud of darkness to the Egyptians. Those whose hearts were morally fit to see the light, who cared to see it, saw it. Those who were indolent could make nothing of it. To them it was all dark. What we are, that we see. By the light within us we discern the light without us in whatever form it may be presented. With darkness within, a man discerns nothing. "To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he seemeth to have." Hearts which have "waxed gross," "seeing, perceive not, hearing, understand not." Jesus never gave to those who could not and cared not to receive; therefore He spoke in proverbs, hard sayings and parables, stimulating some to dig for hidden treasure, while that which was meant to stimulate only discouraged others. Another reason was this: a parable best preserves the truth which was needed for after ages. There was a seed of truth in the parable which would go on unfolding, but the blade appearing first caused the confusion in the minds of the disciples before alluded to. The blade, however, preserved the ear. What the sun and the rain and the soil are to the grain, so have been the times and the necessities of men to the parable. Every generation has found something in it to help it, and doubtless we have not exhausted all its meaning; there is yet something hidden in these parables which other times and other needs will develop for other generations. The parable preserved the truth until men were prepared to see it, until they needed it, until they sought for it.

The inadequacy of Language. A third reason was, as I have pointed out, the inadequacy of language. Jesus could not help Himself; for language fails to make "plain" the Father, and He was obliged to content Himself with proverbs, hard sayings, broken hints and parables. Something beside language was needed. Much that He could not express in language He expressed in action; but still it was not "plain." Much that He could not tell us in His life He told us in His passion and His death, but still it was not "plain." "Darkness," it is said, "was over all the earth from the sixth to the ninth hour," and for long enough after the meaning of Calvary was not "plain." To the Jews the cross was a stumbling-block, to the Greeks foolishness, to the disciples themselves for a time it was not "plain;" to them, Jesus was a good but mistaken man who was dead and buried. Deeply disappointed, they said, "We thought it had been He who should have redeemed Israel." It was not "plain." The Resurrection told us a vast deal more; but still the hour had not come when Jesus should tell us "plainly of the Father."

In that chamber in Jerusalem in which, by one accord, the disciples were assembled, by the command of their Lord, to wait for the baptism of the Spirit, the "hour" came. They were all filled with the Holy Ghost. Language fails to speak plainly and mumbles mere proverbs, confesses that that is all it is able to do even in the lips of Him who "spoke as never man spoke." Action fails, and is misunderstood; even the cross fails to speak plainly of the Father. There was something more in the cross of Jesus than it could say, something which the Holy Spirit alone could interpret. "The Spirit of Truth" came, and taking of the "things of Jesus Christ declared them unto us"—took the proverbs, hard sayings and parables, the Life, Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus—bathed them in light, and Jesus is found speaking plainly of the Father. The

disciples at once catch His meaning; the past is illumined with a new and glorious light in which all that Jesus said and did are seen in their true relations and proportions. The gospel message is grasped and preached with extraordinary power and effect by men who, but a little before the "hour" came, were ignorant, perplexed, almost accounting themselves as put to shame by the death of their Master whom they had hoped would have redeemed Israel. The proverbs have become "plain." And ever since that day of Pentecost the Spirit has been leading us, little by little, into the truth, as we have been able to bear it, taking of the things of Jesus and declaring them unto us, speaking plainly, and ever more plainly, of the Father. We have made many mistakes; but the Spirit working in the hearts of men is teaching them that—

There's a wideness in God's mercy,  
Like the wideness of the sea;  
There's a kindness in His justice,  
Which is more than liberty.

But we make His love too narrow  
By false limits of our own;  
And we magnify His strictness  
With a zeal He will not own.

There is no place where earth's sorrows  
Are more felt than up in heaven;  
There is no place where earth's failings  
Have such kindly judgement given.

For the love of God is broader  
Than the measures of man's mind;  
And the heart of the Eternal  
Is most wonderfully kind.

LIFE AT THREESCORE-AND-TEN.

The Review of a Well Spent Life—Some Changes of Time.

In the steeples of every human life hangs a bell, which by-and-by will begin to toll a solemn knell. That bell rings in the years as they come to us from God. As I listen to-day to this bell of time, it keeps striking on and on until it reaches three-score years and ten.

There is nothing frightful in the sound. Nay, rather it is the sweet music of silvery chimes. Listening to these chimes I catch the far-away tones of a dear mother's voice, in a christian home, calling me to her knees in prayer. I hear again the merry laugh of a very happy childhood. I hear the distant echoes of school and college bells that summon me to go to work and the wrestle of after life. Then, in God's good time came the great voice out of heaven to my soul, bidding me, into the gospel ministry. Then by-and-by, followed the melodious notes of a marriage bell, that has made sweet music in my home for almost nine-and-thirty years. Mingled with all these chimes I seem to hear the trumpets that sounded the calls to duty, and the bugle notes of holy joy over many a service wrought for Christ and many a soul led to the Saviour. The voices of my beloved "Lafayette Avenue" clock mingle with the music from the belfry of the past—voices of fervent petition in the prayer-room and of tender conversation in the study; voices of thanksgiving, for precious revivals; voices of tenderest love, spoken at the fireside, in the sick chamber, and beside their silent dead.

All these varied tones, for seventy long years, blend in the harmonious chimes that break upon my ear like a "sevenfold chorus of harping symphonies." Let the chimes ring on! They have in them the jubilant strain of the 103rd Psalm. Truly may I devoutly thank God for threescore-and-ten years of superlative happiness and abundant joy. With all their many faults and failures, and all their many sins and sorrows, I would not today change places with any millionaire amid his treasures, or any monarch on his throne. To the tender mercies of my loving Redeemer, whose atoning blood can cleanse each spot and blot and blemish, I humbly commit the irrevocable record of the past. The worst part of it is all my own; the best of it is due entirely to Him who can use a frail earthen vessel as the channel of His grace.

Reviewing the experiences of this long life, I find some especial mercies to which my gratitude. One of them is unbroken health. Although I have on two or three Sabbaths remained at home by the advice of my physician, yet I have never spent a Sabbath in a bed of sickness! Sound sleep and wholesome diet, and a slowing of the axes when the "journals" were getting too hot, have been the chief hygienic rules and regulations. Prevention is worth all the doctors in the world. I am also thankful for an unbroken faith in God's infallible word. From prying into its incomprehensible mysteries I have been deterred by the salutary caution that "the secret things belong to God, while things that are revealed belong to us and our children." The silences of scripture have been often as suggestive as its utterances. The distracting controversies raised by the "higher critics"—some of whom are at loggerheads with each other—have never disturbed me. I have comforted myself with the thought that such ministers of Jesus Christ as Jonathan Edwards, and Thomas Chalmers, and Archibald Alexander, and Albert Barnes, managed to preach in the demonstration of the spirit, and with mighty power, even though they were in blessed ignorance of many of the brilliant discoveries claimed by modern scientific criticism. The present conflicts of the critics may unsettle some ministers; they will never unsettle the Gibraltar of inspired truth.

Looking back over the last half-century I discover many changes, some for the better and some for the worse. I fear that with all the boasted improvements in Sunday-school methods, the language of God's book is not committed to memory as thoroughly as it used to be. The children swallow, like young birds in the nest, what the teacher brings to them, but are not compelled to "search the scriptures" for themselves. I also fear that strong doctrinal preaching is less in vogue than it was fifty years ago. "Too dull and dry for these days" is the alleged excuse. The transcendent doctrines of God's word were neither dull nor dry in the hands of John M. Mason, or Dr. Edward Griffin, or Dr. Lyman Beecher, whose discourses were divine logic made red hot by holy emotion. Those great preachers, like the great Greek tragedians, stirred the fountains of rage and tears. The present style of calm, colloquial discourse is in danger of destroying the fervid passion of the pulpit. Paul preached doctrine in a way that made a cynical sinner shake on his throne.

With the rapid growth of wealth and secularising influences comes peril to the spirituality and self-denying zeal of Christians, and also increasing difficulties for Christ's ministers to overcome. But Christianity, if it has more foes to face, is winning in our day some of its most

splendid triumphs. This great wicked world, in all its civil and social and moral revolutions, seems to my mind to be swinging more and more towards God. The "frosts" that are said to gather around threescore and ten have not yet cooled the temperature of my faith, or hope, or abounding joy in the Lord. This is a glorious world to live in, and to serve God in after all, and I am in no haste to exchange it even for the "Better Country." As long as the greatest British statesman is in full force at eighty-two, and America's greatest living poet is full of strength at eighty-four, let no man think of "retiring from business" at three score and ten. Religion is not the art of dying well, but of living well.—Rev. Theo. L. Cuyler.

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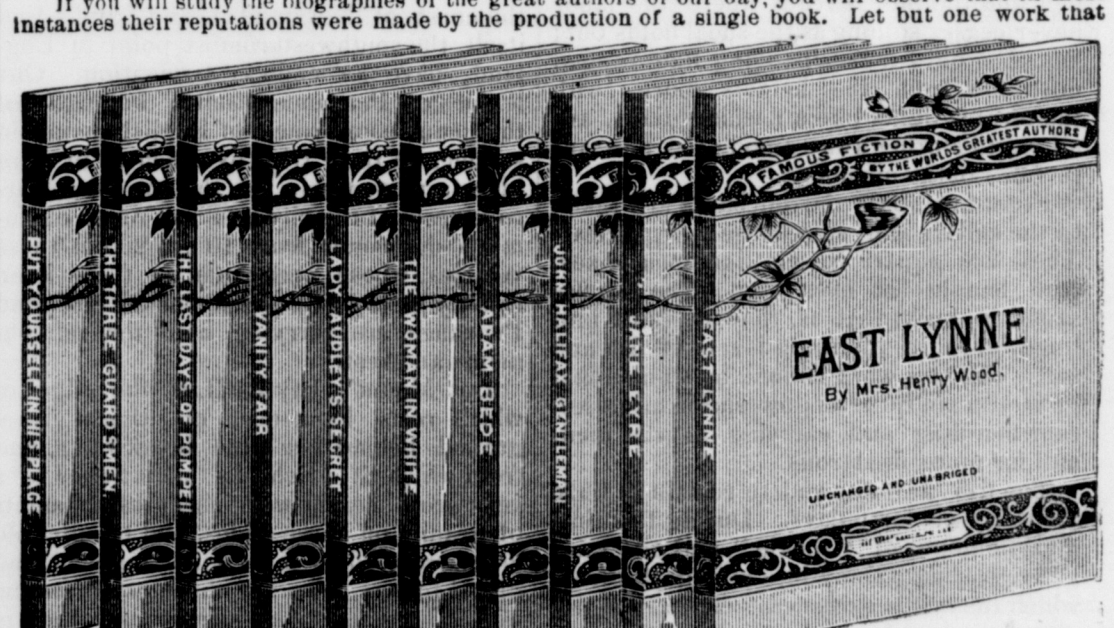
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