

The Christian Message concerning God.

THE Christian is essentially a man with a message, and that message is a declaration concerning God and His purpose for men. When our Lord came into Galilee He said, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." When Simon Peter stood up at Pentecost he said, "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we are witnesses." When the Apostle Paul stood before the blasé crowd on Mars Hill he said, "Whom ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you." In the same way the Christian has a message for this tragic and critical world, the foundation of which is a message concerning God. But what is this message, and how are we to make it sufficiently clear and convincing that men will listen?

I.—THE MESSAGE MUST BE OUR OWN.

In these days of hard mental training and abundant theological literature there is a danger of our approaching this matter from the side of books rather than that of life. One does not wish to belittle the real value of books, nor the necessity of consistent thinking, but in the first place it is not from books that we obtain our knowledge of God, but from our own living experience. It is not because we read about God that we know Him; rather it is because we know something of Him already that we read books in order to extend our knowledge, and to co-ordinate it, and to equip it to meet the needs of a doubting world. The Christian message concerning God must be the Christian's own message, beaten out of his own experience, and in this way it becomes a living message for living people.

A few years ago a suggestion was made to me by a business man who had travelled in India and Brazil and had returned to this country after an absence of ten years. He was explaining that since his return to England he had been attending Churches and Chapels of all sorts and that he noticed that there had been a bad slump in church attendance during his absence. When I asked him if he could suggest anything which would account for this slump he said, "Yes. I hope you will not be offended, but it seems to me that you padres have somehow lost the note of authority. For the most part you speak in the third person, though you sometimes vary it by the use of the first person plural, but you very seldom say 'I' and hardly ever say 'you.'" I

ventured to reply that congregations would not welcome such direct preaching, and realised that in making such a suggestion I was justifying his criticism. God forbid that we should take to preaching ourselves, or that we should present the love of God in an aggressive spirit; but it is worth our consideration that our preaching and our teaching should not be talking about religion in general, but that the message I give is the message I know, and it is a message for you and for no one else.

II.—GOD HAS SPOKEN.

This gives us our starting point. Some years ago it was the habit among theologians to start with a definition of God as omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, etc., and then to work out how such a Being would act and what He would demand from men. But this line of approach proved barren and unconvincing because it produced more problems than it could solve. For which of us can say with certainty what an Omnipotent Being would do under any given set of circumstances? We none of us know anything about omnipotence, and therefore our speculations have no foundation. The same applies to the attributes of omniscience and omnipresence.

Having discarded this method of approach, we have adopted another, equally barren and unconvincing. It is the fashion today to start with the universe as we know it, to study astronomy and physics, biology and psychology, and any other "ology" that science may give to us. Then, having crowded the canvas with all this wealth of detail we expect the result to be a picture of God. The picture which we get from this method may be overwhelming, but it bears no visible likeness to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We do not try to generate a sense of humour by philosophising on wit, or by defining what is funny. What we do is to tell a joke. We do not try to generate a taste for music by lectures on harmony and counterpoint. Rather do we take our friend to a concert and if the music is good it will make its own appeal. So should we seek to generate religion by telling what God has done for us, or by leading our friend into such an atmosphere that God can make His own appeal.

Our message concerning God, therefore, must start from the fact that we know Him because He has first known us, that He has spoken to us, and has spoken to us by name. The ways in which He has spoken may be many and various. When, like Abraham, we have gone out into the unknown, then in the midst of our loneliness He has spoken to us as a friend. We may, like Jacob, have looked out at the hills and seen them as steps

to heaven, or like David, we may have known Him as the power that brought deliverance from the lion and the bear. Perhaps, like Moses, we have known a consuming fire of compassion for our enslaved brethren and we have known that it was God speaking to us and calling us to be His ambassadors to lead them to deliverance. It may be that in some day of national calamity we have stood with Isaiah and seen the Lord in His glory, and have been dismayed at our own sin. Or it may be that, like the Apostles, we have seen the Lord "going about doing good," and have heard within us the call, "Follow Me." These are some of the ways in which God has spoken to us. Indeed, with every true Christian there has been some first-hand experience of God, though it may be hidden from the world by the inadequacy of its expression.

These moments, when God has spoken to us direct, may not come frequently and do not seem to come by our seeking. Nevertheless, they have become for us luminous with insight and power, the light of all our seeing. This light does not supersede or contradict the light of reason, but supplements it so that for us God is a reality, our life has a purpose and the universe has coherence.

For most of us the soul has become sensitive to hear and recognise the voice of God, through the influence of some human agency, a friend, a fellowship, the Bible, or the gospel portrait of Jesus Himself. Miss Helen Keller, the blind and deaf girl, was released from the bondage of her disabilities by the devoted love of her teacher, Miss Sullivan, who introduced her to the world of nature, literature, and science. Yet it was not through these channels that she heard the voice of God, but through the friendships of Mr. Hitz and Dr. Phillips Brooks. The fellowship of believers has often been a real though unconscious help in this direction, and God has used the Church to this end, in spite of her manifest weaknesses. The Bible is still a living book to-day because through the records of those whom God has touched He is able to speak again to the souls of men. A university student was the daughter of an atheist who had particularly warned her not to read the Bible, which he described as false and dangerous. But in the study of anthropology certain parts of the Old Testament were set as source books, and it was in this academic and prejudiced way that she began to read them. But she was fascinated and went on reading, until in the New Testament the story of Jesus unfolded itself. In this way she heard the call of God and surrendered, offering herself for service on the mission field.

But while in these ways God has prepared the hearts of men to hear His voice, He has spoken to us supremely in these days

through His Son. The story of Jesus has fascinated writers and thinkers of all kinds and creeds, though the resulting portrait has not always been equally satisfying. Dr. Stanley Jones has mentioned in his various books how strong an appeal the character of Jesus makes in India to-day amongst people of all religions or no religion. The greatest compliment which can be paid to a man anywhere in non-Christian, as well as Christian circles, is that he be called "Christ-like."

It is true that a vague admiration for the character of Jesus Christ is not equivalent to knowing His saving power. Nevertheless, it is a step in the right direction, and the universality of this admiration for Jesus is a further indication of the universality of the scope of the Christian message concerning God.

Seeing then that God has spoken to us and has also spoken to others, then two thoughts seem to be implied. The first is that the Christian message concerning God for any age or for any people cannot be complete if it is confined to the message delivered in the pulpit; for every Church member has some contribution to make out of his own experience. The second is that we do well to assume that God has not left Himself without a witness in any heart or in any age and that the Christian's message concerning God is not thrown out into the void. It is our faith that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, our message is spoken to those who have already a capacity for the message, many of whom have already some vital experience to which we can appeal.

III.—GOD IS RIGHTEOUS.

Nevertheless, people seem difficult to rouse, and for many the fact that God has spoken to us carries no conviction. For them the message must come as a challenge, and this challenge must be felt where they are most sensitive, which is their sense of right and wrong. The first time God spoke to me was at a Baptismal service, and the message I received from Him then, was that God was righteous and I was a sinner. I was convicted of the sins of arrogance and cowardice. I wonder how many people could match that experience with their own. Karl Barth describes a picture of John the Baptist with a pointing finger, pointing to Jesus Christ, and he goes on to say that the message that God is righteous is like that pointing finger, pointing all men to Christ. Rose Macaulay, in one of her novels, remarks on the extent to which English people are addicted to the use of the word "right" in their ordinary conversation. Thus "That's right." "It wouldn't be right." "He's got no right to do it," are phrases frequently on our lips. The fact is that we are

eternally restless over matters of right and wrong, and this makes us sensitive to the challenge of the message that God is righteous.

When Jesus came into Galilee His message concerning God was the challenge to "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." Peter's sermon at Pentecost led up to the same challenging word. Paul's message at Athens did the same. We are unfaithful to our message, therefore, if we repeat the popular idea that man is a good fellow who is capable of achieving his own salvation. Contemporary politics seem to make the suggestion pathetically untrue. Contemporary novelists are shouting at us that it is false. How false it is comes upon us with overwhelming force when we look at Jesus and place our own defeated lives alongside His victorious life. Then do we cry out, "God be merciful to me a sinner," and the cry is wrung out of a painful sincerity. And if it is true that man has fallen short of his own standard of life and conduct, then he will not thank us if we flatter him and perpetuate what he knows to be a lie.

It is in the Gospel story that we see both the sinfulness of man and the righteousness of God. For the average man the word "sin" has a very limited meaning, and according to that meaning he is chary of calling himself a "sinner." But once let us find ourselves face to face with Jesus in His absolute honesty, His absolute purity, His absolute unselfishness and His absolute love, and let us see that it was these very qualities which led Him to the Cross, let us hear His cry of anguish as he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," and His cry of victory when He said, "It is finished," then we shall know what people mean by the sin of man and the righteousness of God.

IV.—GOD IS REDEEMING POWER.

The word of God did not cease on Good Friday, but continued to Easter morning and to Pentecost. The Gospels are not the whole of the New Testament, but there is also the book of the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of Paul. I have seen Church notice-boards in which the advertisement of Good Friday services has remained until well after Whitsuntide, thus conveying to the passer-by an incomplete message concerning God. For it is only as Calvary is seen by the light of the experience of Easter and of Pentecost that we come to enter into its deepest meanings.

We tell people that God is love. They have heard it so often that it has become sentimental in their ears. People so take it for granted that for them God can be safely ignored. That is one of our greatest problems. But when we see Calvary and Easter and Pentecost together, we begin to realise that the love of God is a costly love and a powerful love, powerful by

its very costliness, and that His love confronts us each one with a challenge and a hope. It means that God never accepts the situation as we leave it, but gives Himself to repair the damage, because He loves us. Though in our sin and folly we may snap the chain that binds us to heaven, yet God will repair it again, though it cost Him everything to do it. It means that you and I are so precious to God that He was willing to die for us.

We see foreshadowings of this truth in the Old Testament; in Abraham pleading for the cities of the Plain, in Joseph forgiving his brethren, in Moses asking that his name should be blotted out rather than that of the people of Israel who had sinned, in Hosea with his domestic tragedy. We hear echoes of it in our own experience of human love at its highest and best. We read a story of it in the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel. But in the vision of the Cross of Christ as seen from Pentecost the full glory appears to us. Then can we say with Paul, "I have received from the Lord that which also I would deliver unto you, how that the Lord Jesus, the same night in which He was betrayed, took bread and break it and said, 'This is My body broken for you.'"

V.—VICTORY FOR ALL.

But this message, wonderful as it is, will carry no weight of conviction unless it is translated into terms of daily victorious living. All unconsciously the messenger has become the message, as he speaks of the victory of the love of God he is bound to ask himself whether he actually shares that victory. Is Pentecost just an incident in Jerusalem so long ago, or is it a daily experience of spiritual power from on high? The love of God is not confined to one particular time and place where the Son of God was crucified, but is an eternal experience available for all. So is the Holy Spirit available for all who are "crucified in Christ and risen with Him." When we have claimed this victory for ourselves, with what joy can we tell of it to others. They will listen to our words of humble sincerity, and will be ready to believe us when we say "He can save to the uttermost, for I have known His saving power."

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
 He sets the prisoner free.
 His blood can make the foulest clean;
 His blood availed for me.

ERIC H. DANIELL.