

## Parochial Vignettes.

### II. PARTY AND PARTY SPIRIT.

WE shall find the atmosphere a little heated, I am afraid, for it is in the neighbourhood of such topics that ferocities glow and glare. Few, it is thought, can be trusted to handle such a bristling subject without thrusting a torch into the gunpowder barrel. All the more need, it seems to me, why it should be taken in hand, if only to get rid of so abundant a confusion which seems to dance attendance upon it. And there is something cooling after all in clear thinking on hot subjects, as I hope we shall find.

We will first try to define a little.

It is quite useless to beg the question by throwing contempt on party, as though it were utterly wrong to take sides of a partisan character. To say of some ardent soul, "Oh, he is a party man," however much intended to throw scorn upon him, misses its mark when we consider that we are all more or less party people, and that we cannot help being so.

What such a despiser of his fellows means to convey is not the fact that he belongs to a certain party in the Church, but that he is an unscrupulous person who takes sides for the mere purpose of controversy, and without knowing much about the question which he decides so absolutely. He may be addle-headed as our friend thinks, he may be hurried along he knows not whither in the crowd, he may be moved by motives not at all nice, and he may be bereft of any real convictions, but then it is possible that he is none of these things, and probably is not. Such a charge is an ungenerous missile which it is far better not to fling. The plain fact is that there always have been and always will be schools of thought in the Church, and what can be more natural than that those who lean in the same direction should coalesce. Your drop of water running down the window pane in a shower will run into another drop of water, and the two will amalgamate into one, but your drop of water will have nothing to do with a stray drop of oil which happens to lie in its way. The two are of a different order, and have no affinity. And, after all, the world is run on the doctrine of affinities. Marriages, friendships, and all society are the fruits of partialities. Those we like or love, those we agree with, those we are comfortable

with. And it is amongst these that unions of more or less rigidity are formed. And as religious bonds are amongst the closest of all, we are not surprised that religious parties should exist and flourish in our Church. It would be unnatural if they were absent.

It is not that they agree on every point of doctrine, but that they agree on the main points, on the things which in their opinion matter. Their colours may not match perfectly, but they match sufficiently well for working purposes, and certainly are near enough in tinge to look alike in the distance. It is enough that they are not discordant. Rough approximations serve for unities, and rallying flags and centres of action. And all sensible parties are content with this amount of juxtaposition.

And that this party connexion is understood is evident when some vote is called for, and it is essential that like should close in with like. Then out of the general movement in the mass emerge the parties clear and definite. And even your non-party man stands disclosed as being as much a sinner as the rest. Of course, everybody knew which way he would go, but it pleased and flattered him to stand aloof and aside, and only the exigencies of the situation had crystallized him and made him cling to his special sugar-candy string.

It is curious how the most secretive of men will reveal themselves almost in spite of themselves. At some unexpected moment the flash and gleam will reveal the scarlet, or the Puritan black will suffuse itself, or the neutral tint will gather emphasis to the attentive eye. You can no more permanently hide it than the tailor can conceal his profession. It works through all disguises, and will be out. In times of stress and storm we all run under some umbrella, and the umbrella we choose will be our own particular and special shape. At the bottom, as a matter of fact, there is abundant common ground where at ordinary times we meet and commune. There is indeed more common ground than particular ground. We agree far more than we differ. But, while we agree in the great facts of our faith, we part company in our application of them.

Thus, we all believe in Redemption by the Lord Jesus Christ, and its universality and freeness, but as to how the sinner is to obtain the benefits of that Redemption we differ. One believes that the way is open straight to Christ, and that by faith the benefits are personally received. Another wants badly to find room for the priest and human absolutions and sacraments. We all accept the

Word of God as really His ; but when we ask in what sense, and how far, and to what extent, we scatter. The Holy Communion is indeed a feast of fat things for the worthy and believing participant, but there is a whole world of difference between the man who makes it a show, and tells us that the Lord of Life lies upon the Table and is a real Sacrifice, and the old-world Christian who feeds upon Christ in his heart by faith and looks for Him nowhere else.

And so it is of no good to try to assure one another that party questions are just tweedledum and tweedledee matters, and that we all mean the same thing, for we do not. Our differences are often deep and vital, and if we agreed to sit down together, and nestle beside one another as if we were in thorough agreement, we should only succeed in playing the fool and making our rents wider. Glacier pinnacles are often wide asunder from each other, and to treat them as if they were close is only to fall into the crevasses between. My vested brother who burns his incense, throws himself into such strange postures, and adores what to another is still a piece of plain bread, lives in a world which to some of us is another world theologically than that in which we dwell.

The next subject before us is the gain of party.

We have been so accustomed to bemoan the differences which our parties make visible that the statement that any good could ever come from such divisions will come as a shock to some. And yet nothing is so certain in this world than that the religious world is a better world for the varying points of view represented by our religious parties. Think of the oft desired substitute for parties : the deadly monotony of agreements with never a ruffle upon their surface, every one echoing his neighbour, and all quite certain that everybody else is right. It would be like some still mere in a dark, dank wood, where the surface is only rippled by frogs and flies, where dead leaves float, and fogs are ever rising. No sunshine ever reaches it, and no breath of real life ever stirs its dull surface. We fly from it, and call it a hateful spot, a place of gloom and desolation. Better to me the storms of the great ocean where we can breathe, although it may be hard to keep our footing.

But let us see where the good features of party views are to be found.

For one thing they keep us from becoming one-sided.

Truth is not one-sided, however much we may try to think so,

and however much we may shut our eyes to the other sides. A diamond has more than one facet, and all the cutter's care is exercised to provide as many facets as possible. There is an obverse to every coin of the realm. There is another side to the hill. And if men try to express some unaccustomed side of truth, who are we that we should quarrel with them for it? We should rather quarrel with ourselves for letting that side sink out of recognition and remembrance, and regret the necessity for another to brush by us in his efforts to rescue what we have left in the lurch and out in the cold. What can be more foolish and false than to insist that our side is the only side, and that if there should be another side it is quite unimportant. Offer a defaced sovereign to the bank, expect the cashier to take your money, although only one side is clear, and see what will happen. We are too ready to deal in half truths, and to challenge the man who would fain replace the missing half.

For another thing party provided a home for neglected truth. There was a time when Athanasius stood against the world, and when one man stands so much alone it is difficult to cherish a truth as it should be. It needs a party to keep it warm and to protect it against the rough world, and the truth is only safe when men have responded to the call for help, and have gathered together to protect and shelter. What is hard for one is easy to many. And just as many hands protect, many lips proclaim it, and so the party grows just to keep a home together for it.

When Athanasius and the few orthodox Christians stood together as one for the great truth of our Lord's divinity, it began to be safe, and when the party grew in numbers and influence the tide of Arianism rolled back defeated. When Wesley rose above the religious horizon, legality and dryness were masters of the field, and it was necessary that he and his should in one great bold party go forth to make known the simple Gospel of Christ. But for party efforts, how much would be left to us to-day of our great spiritual inheritance of truth? It is party which has saved us again and again. They have held aloft the truths which were being trodden down so thoughtlessly, and saved them from destruction. What a small party began the call for Reformation in England, and how necessary was it in the interests of truth that they should hold together and die together to keep alight the torch of truth! And that they did it we ourselves owe what to many of us is a priceless heritage.

Moreover, party provides a barrier against the return of the old evil tides of error. What party, by the grace of God, has wrested from the raging seas, party must be raising her dykes to keep, lest she should have to fight the same battles over again. The watch-dogs must be there ready to give alarm, for old errors have enough vitality in them to trouble again if not kept low. Are we not witnessing the revival of old heresies and abominations to-day? And good it is to have those at hand who have fought through that campaign and are ready to fight again. This is the answer to give to those who say that, inasmuch as the party's work has been done, they should drop their banners and ancient battle cries and cease to be. Let them rather stay and watch, and be ready, for their work will have still to be done again some day.

Now that we have tried to show what can be said for party, let us see some of the dangers which all parties are exposed to. For there are perils, many which wait diligently on all parties in Church matters, and indeed in every other sphere of life.

There is the danger of putting a part for the whole, which perhaps may be the origin of the name. Running one truth for all that it is worth, we are apt to run down other and, quite as important, truths. You give the bread, and deny the cup. And nothing is more sure than that parties are in terrible danger of holding a disproportioned creed and a lop-sided faith. The faith party decries works; the works party forgets the faith-spring without which good works cannot be done. And having this onesidedness inscribed upon their banner as a party, the fear is that all avenues for the return of the banished side may be finally closed up. It is the tragedy of many partisan minds that this closure has become an accomplished fact; they have no room for any more truth.

There is the danger of denying to opponents any interest in the true faith of a Christian. Because they do not believe his truth they do not believe any. They must be quite unconverted and lost men and women. You see, his truth is so vital and central that to miss it is to go quite astray. And so we often find that almost the first thing a controversial antagonist does in the supposed interest of his truth is to deny his brother the possession of any saving faith at all. He is practically to him a heathen man and a publican. And until he is converted to that special truth he is a rank outsider. To the Plymouth Brother his Church is the only Church, and to the

Romanist and the High Anglican not to be in alliance with their Church is to be in a parlous condition. Men with such a party spirit can see nothing worthy outside their own party walls.

Then the partisan is disposed to stand severely aside from any approach to unity with his differing brethren. He glories in his isolation. He will not kneel at the same Holy Table with you. And you must not draw near to commune with him. You are a religious pariah, and must be treated as such in the interests of his sacred and sure party, or, as he would call it, his Church. Individually, he might be inclined to make exceptions, but, in a party, rigidity pure and simple is the order of the day. He is sorry for you, but then it is a call to mend your ways and your faulty creed, and to ally yourself with the only true Church in Christendom. Accept his view of baptism, surrender your view of Church order and Church government, see eye to eye with him in the supremacy of sacraments, shake off the dust of your feet from the old and false with which you are at present allied, and then all will be well with you. So great a sum does party demand for its priceless alliance. A party is certainly pretty swollen and big in its own eyes. And then it happens as a natural corollary that, with a party, conversion to its tenets displaces in importance all others. The party is apt to be the goal to which all sinners must come and find shelter. They occupy the salvation-ground, and in their arms the dead shall find life. Believe truth and be happy. And so, without intending it, other truths far more important are dropped out of view and disappear. It is not that they do not hold such doctrines in their creeds, but that with so long pondering their differences they lay pretty nearly all the emphasis on the disputed point, and cannot bring themselves easily to lift the others out of their shell. Thus, to a Roman Catholic, membership with his Church is enough; she will see to the salvation of the soul entrusted to her. The Church's faith will make up for his deficiencies. This is salvation by party with a vengeance.

Of course, party spirit cuts off much healthy growth. How can I expand if I am bound round with so many wrappings of party that I cannot move? My party blinkers prevent me from looking around, the cramps upon my mind prevent my understanding fresh views of truth. I am tethered like a donkey to one bit of pasture, and can only feed in the same contracted bit. Party fences shut me

in, and however much I may wish to wander over the great expanses around, I cannot overpass by my limitations. How all this is bound to check growth is evident. It may keep me faithful to my party, but it is at the expense of all that is expansive. I do not say that because we are of party we need necessarily be partisans in all its bad sense. We love our party best indeed when we hold ourselves free to break loose here and there if more light comes. The danger of the closed mind must be so evident to us that we take good care not to close it to future glimpses of truth, from whatever quarter they may come. A wise man will never let any system, however choice, imprison him and limit his liberty. But we all know how prone we are to run ourselves into moulds, and set there. No man thinks clearly who thinks to order, or thinks in grooves which others have made for him.

Then it is wise to remember how apt strong party spirit is to make us formal, and to chain us to our shibboleths. There are party cries and watchwords which to many stand in the place of vitality and real conviction. The world's wicked wit makes sport at this tendency of the religious world. They wonder whether the good soul who writes D.V. so punctiliously slipped it in from habit and without thinking. They marvel too at the easy way in which the Sacred Name is introduced, and the strangely assured way in which it is assumed that by speaking much on religious matters a good profession is made, instead of too often degrading the good coin by over-much handling when there are no thoughts of buying or selling anything divine with it. Each party has its own peculiar shibboleths, so that it is easy to tell whether the speaker is a Churchman or a Nonconformist, an Evangelical or a High Anglican. Of course, they may mean all that they seem to express, but the fear is that they may mean less and sometimes may mean nothing at all. Naturally, it makes for unreality to use meaningless phrases, and we shall do well to watch our use of them. They are apt to make party spirit stronger, and to brand us deeply for the worse. The beginning of all parties is the best time, for then they are in the midst of their realities; then they mean facts which the heart has grasped dearly; then the sacred fires pass from heart to heart, and truth is glorious. But when age comes, the early days of glory have been forgotten, and a new generation has come in who learn their party truths at second-hand, then phrases take the place of

the old fires, and men utter formulas which are as dry as sticks and as cold. It would be good for the extinct party to die out of hand, for its day is past and over.

My last question is an inevitable one—What shall be done to improve matters in the face of all our parties?

Some would say, Eliminate the parties. But we dare not say that. It would be an evil day for Christendom if we ran all the little pools into one great ocean lake. There was a time when the Roman Church dominated the world, and we know the stagnation and death which ensued. You might as well try to eliminate all nationalities and to hurry all families into one. It is by our differences that we exist healthily as much as by our agreements. Even husband and wife agree better when their unlikenesses are as real as their likenesses. Eliminate parties? It cannot be done.

Moreover, we have our non-party men, have we not? At least they say that they belong to no known party. But how can they eliminate all party views who have no leaning to either? Some, let us boldly say, hold with no party because they are indifferent in spirit to all definite truth. Many have a backboneless creed which is neither fish, flesh, nor good red herring. They smile contemptuously on men's fierce quarrels because they often have no deep religious feelings on any religious topic, and do not care enough for truth to fight for it. While those who declare themselves to be of no party are as really and truly party men in their votes and sympathies as if they bore the name.

But if we cannot eliminate parties we had better try to get rid of the worst features of the partisan spirit. And how to achieve this we must attempt to show.

We must get to know one another better. This is one of the best of remedies, and the most essential. We shall probably then discover that half our quarrels are about names which we translate differently, or totally misapprehend. We father opinions upon people which they have never held, and never thought of holding.

Then we had better circumnavigate our creeds, and see what is on the other side. Not infrequently we shall be surprised to discover that the obverse of our own creed is our maligned brother's creed. He is actually holding the other end of our own line.

If we can then proceed to lop off extravagances, excrescences

and novelties and meet in the middle, it is likely that we shall find our hands actually touching those of our opponents. For it is the new developments which land us in so many troubles in church matters. Let but these novelties disappear, and the residual essentials will satisfy all sensible and fair-minded men.

Then we can exercise a little more charity, and consider that no man is half so bad as he looks, and that the best of men even of our own party could not bear too much light thrown upon them. Yea, it would be well that we should also remember that we ourselves should look queer to one another under a perfect searchlight. To father our opponent with all the consequences which we think flow naturally from his premisses, but which he knows do not, to give the rein to suspicions which are products of a too lively imagination, to caricature for controversial purposes the other man, is positively unfair. Charity forbids.

And let us beware lest we find ourselves fighting for party rather than for truth. We can easily delude ourselves on this point, and lash ourselves into a bitter mood which is far more for our own side than for God's. We fight best when we fight for the highest causes ; not for the lowest and most personal. And nothing short of truth, God's truth, ought to satisfy an honest man. And if we and they make for truth apart from the claims of our parties, we shall be very likely to land in close proximity to each other before very long, and in friendship, not antagonism.

We shall do well sometimes to take off our party spectacles, and look through a bit of good glass, pure, white, and flawless, and gaze at truth's fair face as God reveals it to us in His Word. It will not be easy. We shall want to have our favourite commentaries by our side, and most favourite doctor to do our interpretations ; but this will be to fall back upon our coloured party spectacles again which we have suggested should be laid aside for a while. Let us then allow for a time a bit of independent thinking, try to see with our own eyes, and, unhampered by rulings from this man or that, this school or that, weigh the thing for ourselves. We shall, probably, come back to our old views, and believe just the same as before, but then we shall be better convinced than before, and have a better foundation by far. We shall then believe, not because we have fallen into line with our party, but because we have fallen into line with God's own revelation. In some such ways as these

we may help to eliminate the evils of party spirit. We shall not be less of our party, but we shall be more free from the limitations and vices of a partisan spirit.

There are not a few signs visible in the theological world that a better spirit is gathering, and we thank God for it. No longer do men refuse to meet or pass each other by with averted eyes. The Evangelical Churchman is seeing the benefits of order and reverence in outward things. The High Churchman is finding that the Gospel of the grace of God must be put more to the front, and is preaching the necessity for a real conversion of spirit. The Sacraments are Christ's even if the interpretations are human and fallible, and the use is not to be arrested because their abuse has been so disastrous.

Forms of prayer can be made as spiritual and devotional as the free and extemporaneous ones. The Church is a real, visible body, and membership in it is not to be despised or made light of. The only, but vital, difference is the breadth of its extension and the nature of its life. Those who make light of its visibility, and those who make light of its invisibility, will have to meet at some common point, inasmuch as both are true. Those who press the outward, and those who insist on the inward, must see the necessity of both. But formal connexions are but a poor substitute for the inner realities, and to adjudge them to be coincident is to misread facts in the light of mere theory.

It is not that men are blind to their differences to-day or that they make light of them, but that they are trying to coalesce at the edges, and to agree where agreement is possible. The unity which comes through surrender of convictions would be fatal. We have no right to merge our individualism in any Church, however venerable or pure. The Church is made up of individuals, and to deny their individual standing as units in the great society is to commit suicide. It is the tyranny of society ecclesiastical and political which is the standing menace of to-day.

Probably, the time will never come when the great Church of Christ upon earth will lose all its differences and defects, at least here, but in the Glory-land all will be different. For then we shall know even as also we are known.

CHARLES COURTENAY.

[The next article in this series, "Strain," will appear in March.]