

'FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES'

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BY this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.' Such was our Lord's last exhortation to his disciples. He insists on mutual charity, love; because when we put that into practice it brings all the rest in its train. Charity is patient, kind, charity envieth not; it calls for forgiveness of trespasses, offences, debts. 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us' gives the Our Father a touch of meaning quite different from our ordinary language. To what do I commit myself when I say this? I acknowledge that I am a sinner: 'All we like sheep have gone astray'; like silly sheep. The gates are open, but do we go through them? No! We are stupid, silly sheep gone astray, just following our own way. In God's eyes we are all like sheep, more stupid than fierce; we are silly, selfish, naughty. The Lord is, however, my Shepherd, so I shall not want; I am always needing forgiveness, and I am getting it, but in the proportion in which I forgive others. How can I ask God to be kind and good to me, not to hold things against me, if I am not this to others?

'If you have love one for another.' This was our Lord's bidding, which was to be the distinguishing mark of his followers. If one does not follow it, or at least try to, one has no title beyond the mere mechanical one to call oneself the follower of Christ, and we know that without Christ we cannot be saved, let alone sanctified; he himself called it the New Commandment, namely, that we love our neighbour as ourself. Christ might have said 'by this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you are bold, intrepid, ready to attack error, living at a high level of prayer', and the rest of it; but he didn't. He said 'if ye have love one for another'. Christ gave a new authority, a new conception, to the law of charity. We judge the world of his day by that which was most representative of it, the Roman civilization; outside that men were lumped together as barbarians

and they did not count. St Paul uses strong language on the unnamable vices of the Romans, and he accuses them of being without affection, without mirth, without loyalty. Roman society was utterly devoid of the idea of human charity: because of the way they regarded human relationships, universal charity was quite impossible in their scheme. So this charity is a purely Christian thing—a new thing. When Christianity is neglected men become less kind, less forgiving to each other.

Well, then, every time I acknowledge I am a sinner before God I say, 'Forgive me, I am an offender, I have piled up a debt, I can only rely on your great mercy and ask you to forgive me, but I don't expect any more mercy from you than I have for other people in their sins against me.' Is not that almost a blasphemous thing to say when I think of this person and that and the other I dislike? I have said unkind things about them, or they are nothing to me, as zero; and then I wipe my lips and trudge off and say, 'Father, forgive me my trespasses as I forgive them'. I think one of the reasons why our prayers are not answered is that unless our prayers are in accord with the Lord's prayer they are not heard. Well, if I say 'Forgive us our trespasses' I have torpedoed it unless I am trying to forgive others.

Our Lord preached the Sermon on the Mount. If only that sermon could be broadcast all day—published in every weekly; instead of which we call it the Sermon on the Mount and leave it there. Well, among other things he talked about prayer and worship generally, and he said, 'You people, when you go to offer your sacrifice, if you remember there is somebody you hate, despise, are contemptuous of, at enmity with, don't offer that sacrifice—I shall forget you are there. Cast out from your heart all those feelings. Cast out hatred, contempt, dislike, hardness to everybody.' That is what our Lord said, and he was not talking to a lot of monks, nuns, or dons, but to the ordinary people. 'Don't pray if there is anything against charity in your heart, because your prayer will not be heard, your petitions will not be granted, your worship will not be accepted.' We are not machines, but human beings with

feelings, so it is not always possible to change the feelings, but at least we can will the good. The effort to try to maintain a high degree of charity to everybody is very pleasing to God.

Again, our Lord was describing the Judgment. He pictured it as a great Assize, and he said to the blessed, 'You are welcome in heaven because you were kind to people, charitable to people'. For when they said, 'When did we do it to you?', he said, 'When you did it to anybody you did it to me'. Then there is his picture of heaven and the lost. The Curé d'Ars used to work himself almost into a state of unconsciousness in horror at the thought of being cursed by God; by God, who is infinite love, who loves me. 'Depart from me, ye cursed'—our Lord used those words. Why? What had they done? It was what they had not done. 'I was hungry and you did not give me to eat; I was naked and you did not give me an old cast-off piece of clothing. If you had heard my word you would have known where to look for me, in my brethren.' Notice the distinction: people were rewarded for doing good works—damned for not doing positive kind things. Our Lord did not accuse them of being positively cruel, or of harshness, but of not doing positively kind things. Could anything be more emphatic? There is no getting round it; those are the words of one who was able to say: 'I and the Father are one'—'Who sees me, sees the Father'.

Charity—the effort to maintain a high standard of kindness in thought, word and deed. Towards whom? Towards everybody; that is the crux. How can I have love for everybody? How can I love the enemies of my country? Does Christ impose such an impossible burden? Yes, that is the ideal—of loving our enemies who oppose us, do harm to us, take violent action against us. We *must* maintain this ideal; and we must be sorry that sometimes it cannot be literally carried out. If you are emptying a Tommy-gun into someone you don't say 'You don't know how I love you!' Is the law of love, then, under certain circumstances, suspended? No; for while I must do everything I can to defeat my enemy, I can *pray* for him. Whatever course of action we have to take against our enemies, however we have to oppose,

defeat, even punish them, there always remains at least this, that we should pray for their good.

St Paul says, 'He that loveth his brother fulfilleth the law'. Our Lord didn't come to give us a doctrine that would make us all nice and happy materially; but he said, 'Seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice and all these things shall be added unto you'—all these things will fall into place. Yes, but the condition is, 'If you will follow me', and we haven't followed him, and we are not following him.

Wherever there is love there is God. The expression of love is the most important thing among us; wherever there is kindness, a giving of ourselves, an affectionate service, there is love, and wherever there is love in us there is God in us and we are showing God. It's my belief that no one can be in hell who, at the moment of his death, whatsoever sort of creature he had been, had in his heart love for somebody, because there is no love outside God.

The name of the devil is 'he in whom there is no love'. To be incapable of love—awful! That is why the devils hate God. They swoop down on us when we don't love one another, for then we are their disciples. There is no love outside God. It may even be a distorted love, but so far as it is *genuine* love it is a divine thing, and that was not recognized until Christ came to reveal it. It was only a disciple of Christ, looking through Christ's eyes, who was able to say, 'God is love'.

Practice of other virtues gives a great deal of trouble; it is very difficult to be humble; so with all the other virtues. But the genuine effort to be charitable has a peculiar attraction and sweetness of its own. Why? Because you are behaving in God's manner. The practice of charity gives us a clear vision, a sort of understanding of divine things.

Nothing facilitates prayer and puts it on the right lines and gives one strength to pursue it all the way, like the deliberate cultivation in our lives of universal charity; the effort to be charitable, to see something lovable in everybody—which there is. We are portrait painters, and we often see other people as we paint them, not as they are. The effort to love people is its own reward.