

THE WITNESS OF THE PAROCHIAL AND PLAIN
SERMONS

CENTENARIES ecclesiastical and secular have of late years crowded so fast upon one another's heels that they have become almost dangerously popular. Cathedrals, abbey ruins, tombs of poets and birthplaces of novelists have beckoned to the devout or the sightseer and in every case the char-a-bancs have made reply, and the newspapers have risen to the occasion. A hundred years ago the staid respectability of the Established Church of England received a shock, and though at the time very few of its members knew with certainty what it was all about, the vast majority were quite sure that it was something very shocking. Rumour had it that while courtly prelates maintained a dignified isolation in their palaces and country squires dozed peacefully in their pews an insidious band of cultured divines with Oxford as their plotting ground, were seeking to change the features of the National Church so completely that even its most intimate friends would experience no little difficulty in recognising it.

Among that select group around which the battle raged, three names stand out prominently, but while Pusey lent his name to denote the adherents of this brave endeavour and Keble blunted the enemy's sword by gentle verse making, John Henry Newman is the man whose name leaps to the tongue and captures thought whenever mention is made of the Oxford Movement.

With painstaking accuracy biographers have portrayed his sharply sundered life and no word painting can add fresh lustre to his name, but one may be allowed to muse upon his vision as in those anxious days he looked out across the flat stretch of Anglicanism, and ask if, had he lived in these days of bewildering turmoil of religious thought and experiment, he would not with even greater alacrity have turned his steps towards the seven hills to seek that Mother whose love is as ample as her rule.

In 1828 when he was appointed Vicar of St. Mary's, Oxford, he began that masterful course of sermons known as *Parochial and Plain*. They were delivered, so we are told, without a gesture and with no attempt at eloquence, but with a thrilling earnestness and a knowledge of human nature seldom equalled and never surpassed. Their chastened style and sharp energy have lost nothing through the passing of time, and if their title were somewhat melancholy it does but accentuate that note of sadness running through them as if they came from the heart of one who through tear-filled eyes bewailed what he saw and yet was powerless to mend. 'Let it not be thought a strange thing to say though I say it, that there is much in the religious belief even of the more serious part of the community at present, to make observant men very anxious where it will end.' Maybe as he spoke those words he was referring to that attitude of mind which he had already condemned so strongly in an Advent sermon on *Reverence and Belief in God's Presence*. There he takes to task those who have no scruple in speaking freely of Almighty God, using His Name with familiarity and with lack of reverence. One class, he says, adopts a set of words to describe Him which removes the idea of His Personality, speaking of Him as Deity or Divine Being, which they as they use them are of all others most calculated to remove from the mind, the thought of a living an intelligent Governor, Saviour and Judge.

This light and careless phraseology, the germ of many a heresy, fired Newman with indignation, and he returns to the subject in his sermon on the *Humiliation of the Eternal Son*. 'They have been accustomed to call Christ, God, but that is all. They have not considered what is meant by applying that title to One who was really a man, and from the vague way in which they use it they would be in no small danger if assailed by a subtle disputant, of being robbed of the sacred truth in its substance even if they kept it in name.' Later on, referring to errors concerning the Incarnation, he says, 'they begin by being Sabellians,

they go on to be Nestorians and then they tend to be Ebionites and deny Christ's Divinity altogether. When the early Christians used the title "Son of God," they meant after the manner of the Apostles when they used it in Scripture, all we mean in the Creed when we confess Him to be God from God, True God from True God. He is that He is, the Son of God. He must be what God is, all holy, all wise, all powerful all good, eternal, infinite: yet since there is only one God, He must be at the same time not separate from God, but ever one with Him and in Him indivisibly, so that it would be idle language to speak of Him as separated from His Father as to say that our reason or intellect was separated from our minds.'

These are not the utterances of a man who could go on year after year in solid content despite the fact that all around him was the clamour of voices in his own communion treating one doctrine after another as open questions and patent of varied and contradictory interpretations. We cannot picture him leaving the pulpit to-day at St. Mary's happy in the thought that if others were at that moment impugning the Divinity of Christ or questioning the Virgin Birth, he at least had done his duty in expounding the Faith and championing the Truth, and as moreover there were at least seven thousand in Israel who were still faithful no undue care need vex his soul. Rather would he cry out with St. Mary Magdalene, they have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid Him.

No religious organisation which admitted a mixture of error for the sake of superficial peace could satisfy the aspirations of a mind so set upon realities and so wedded to the central truths of Christianity. Newman saw with apprehension the threatening danger of a fierce eclecticism which would leave the Church of England little more than a name and its members the pathetic isolation of their own way. 'The doctrine of the Cross of Christ may fitly be called the heart of religion. The sacred doctrine of Christ's atoning sacrifice is the vital principle on which the Christian lives and without which Christianity is not. Without

it no other doctrine is held profitably. To believe in Christ's Divinity or Manhood or the Holy Trinity or Judgment to come or the Resurrection of the dead is an untrue belief unless we receive also the doctrine of Christ's Sacrifice. On the other hand to receive it, presupposes the reception of other high truths of the Gospel besides: it involves the belief in Christ's true Divinity, in His true Incarnation and in man's sinful state by nature, and it prepares the way to belief in the Sacred Eucharistic feast in which He who was once crucified is ever given to our souls and bodies verily and indeed in His Body and Blood.' Thus he spoke in his sermon on *The Cross of Christ, the measure of the world*, gravely stressing the inevitable collapse of a system which accepted or rejected at random the interwoven doctrines of Christianity and the futility of its pretensions to be the visible witness to the mind of Christ. However imposing in its equipment, impressive in its dignity and appealing in its restraint, it could never claim to be anything more than a temporary bulwark against sheer infidelity if once it accepted comprehensiveness as a substitute for orthodoxy. 'Confidence,' he says, in our own power of reasoning not only leads to pride but to foolishness and destructive error. A man who fancies he can find out truths by himself disdains revelation. He who thinks he has found it out is impatient of revelation' (*Sermon 12*).

Clear cut, well defined, swerving neither to the right nor to the left, rigid and insistent, such was the vision of the Church which possessed the soul of Newman. The Catholic instinct already strongly developed shrank from the notion of a Christian body pledged to uphold the sanctity and integrity of Divine Revelation degenerating into a debating society in which the stupendous truths of supernatural religion would be discussed as interesting points capable of divergent opinions. 'The Church speaks for us, but the disputer of this world reverses the procedure: he strips off all our privileges, bids us renounce our dependence on the Mother of Saints, tells us we must each be a church to himself and in himself the elect of God in order

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to prove his right to the privilege of a Christian' (*Sermon 11*).

The basis of the Oxford Movement was the professed abrogation of private judgment. Newman and his friends Keble and Froude never pretended that the desired goal was a national church isolated and aloof. They were avowedly searching for religious authority and those who were associated with the movement and followed the quest to its natural conclusion did what Newman felt obliged to do. The established system was breaking up. 'I do believe,' said Newman, speaking of the Anglican Church, 'it will be ultimately separated from the State'; and where then would be its security? Newman gave as an answer 'in the sacraments,' and thus we are brought in sight of Apostolic Succession with its appeal to Fathers in East and West, to antiquity, to Alexandria, Antioch and Rome, as the undivided communion of primitive Christians.

In untechnical language he advocated in the *Plain Sermons*, addressed to a congregation mainly composed of shopkeepers and their families, a return to the 'Church of the Fathers,' and few there were among his listeners who knew what he meant or if they knew cared for his appeal. In their estimation these champions of old were monks of fierce orthodoxy, addicted to fasting, celibacy and endless superstitions. With stolid indifference they listened to his warnings concerning the sin of schism exemplified by the policy of Jeroboam, though it may be doubted if they were much affected thereby. In clear cut sentences he was at pains to show the Church as the mystical body of Christ into which we are engrafted by Baptism, the only means of entering into that fellowship. 'When He took flesh and appeared on earth He showed us the Godhead in a new manifestation. He invested Himself with a new set of attributes, those of our flesh, taking unto Him a human soul and body in order that thoughts, feelings and affections might be His which could respond to ours and certify to us His tender mercy.'

This revelation of Christ in the Incarnation demanded a response and in his first eight sermons, Newman outlines the attitude of soul to be adopted towards Incarnate God. First there must be obedience based on this Divine revelation, and this subjection must show itself in the strict observance of religious duties as inculcated by the Divine Founder, Holy Communion, fasting and prayer. Religious earnestness must manifest itself in reverence for the Church's saints and the subjection of feelings to supernatural authority in matters of doctrine and discipline. No one can doubt that the *Plain Sermons* secured a lasting success but they did not touch the nation's heart at the time of their publication in 1834, and to-day, admire them as perforce we must for their sincerity and direct speaking, we doubt if their appeal would fall on readier ears if they appeared in our Sunday papers or were heard from an Anglican pulpit.

Five years later when Newman was considered to be at his zenith as a teacher, he asked himself, 'What gain it is to be applauded, admired, courted, followed—compared with this one aim of not being disobedient to a heavenly vision.' His reading at that time had been of dead heresies, of remote and subtle wranglers such as the Monophysites of A.D. 450, and there had passed before his mind the vision of St. Leo, with outstretched hands, saving Christianity and dictating a creed. The vision passed, the heavens had opened for a moment and closed again, but 'he who has seen a ghost cannot be as if he had never seen it.' Living in his shabby rooms at Oriel, Newman was dwelling in the past and endeavouring to translate it into the present. He had caught the principle of authority by virtue of which the Christian religion should declare itself to the world in the Apostolic formula 'it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us,' but he was battling with forces which would have none of it. Private judgment, Acts of Parliament, and Protestant prejudice were all-powerful. He might expound 'first principles in Scripture,' poverty and self-denial, but he must preach them to those who had no relish for them;

he might cry out on the evil of 'pandering to the enemies of the Church, attaching to men of power, a name,' but the men of power were too firmly entrenched to give way before the Tractarian assault, and as for the presentation of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ with no broken bone nor severed limb, how did it square with that violent smashing at the Reformation, that wrenching from the socket which made the Church of England itself an island and cut it off from the rest of the world?

Newman might preach, lecture, write and talk incessantly, but there confronting him was a national church and those who presided over it in Parliament refused to believe that its prosperity lay elsewhere than in its splendid isolation, nor had they any intention of looking on good-humouredly while a keen band of enthusiasts at Oxford were approaching nearer and nearer to Rome and, as it seemed to them, dragging the Establishment along with them. With the appearance of *Tract 90* Newman's work as an Anglican ended: Protestant England had no further use for a minister who could describe the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion as 'the stammering lips of ambiguous formulas.' The passing vision of years ago came to him again in stern commanding reality. 'New creeds, private opinions, self-devised practices are delusions,' he wrote, and 'the divisions of Churches is the corruption of hearts.' He had staked his all on Authority and authority hid its face at his calling: he had cried out to primitive Christianity and had been answered by a colourless Erastianism, and his insistence on mortification, penance and fasting elicited little more than a polite but firm shake of the head. 'In the Apostles' days,' he wrote, 'the peculiarity of faith was submission to a living authority: this is what made it so distinctive, this is what made it an act of submission at all: this is what destroyed private judgment in matters of religion. If you will not look out for a living authority and will bargain for private judgment then say at once that you have not Apostolic faith, and in fact you have it not: the bulk of the nation has it not. Confess you have it not

and then confess that this is the reason why you are not Catholics.'

In those harrowing years while Sunday after Sunday he preached in St. Mary's the *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, building up stone by stone a structure which was to entrance the eye, gladden the heart and win the soul, might he not have expected the age-past cry in Jerusaiem, 'What shall we do,' in answer to his pleading? Yet no such cry was heard, and when in sorrow he saw his splendid aerial architecture toppling about his ears and with reluctant feet turned away from Oxford and took refuge in Littlemore, those sermons now in print with every sentence superbly balanced, every word chosen with meticulous care, every thought so carefully clothed, were put away on bookshelves, and a new question took the place of the old one, as with raised eyebrows and knowing smile, folk asked of one another 'and now, what will Newman do?' He found the Church of England a time-honoured institution wearing its three hundred years of life heavily but bravely, he recognised it as an heroic endeavour but it was not divine and so he was compelled to leave it. Doubtless it has been, he said, a serviceable breakwater against doctrinal errors more fundamental than its own, but how long this will last in the years now before us it is impossible to say, for the Nation drags down its Church to its own level.

Were Newman to revisit the Established Church to-day, he would find much that was strange, even startling. His eyes would open wide at ornate buildings with pious furnishings. enthusiastic ministers displaying immense zeal and heroism, he would hear the preaching of doctrines which were anathema in his day, but he would still look in vain for what he searched so diligently one hundred years ago—Authority.

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