

THE GOSPEL IN COMMONPLACE ENGLISH

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THE translation of two sections of the Gospel which is given below is an experiment of a sort that seems quite popular nowadays. Its purpose is to make the Gospel strike the English reader with the same kind of impact, the same force and freshness, that it would have had upon the Greek-speakers for whom it was immediately written. It is an attempt to clear the incense-laden air of nineteen centuries, to find the Gospels unembalmed, unritualized; yes, unconsecrated and stripped of the sacred vestments with which every generation has adorned them. Not that this solemnizing process is in any way to be regretted, or that the versions which it has influenced are bad versions. They are signs of a proper reverence for what is holy. But the shock of a fresh encounter with the Gospels, of experiencing their essential holiness in its crude simplicity, naked and unadorned by the adventitious hallowings of Christian piety, may help to give the reading of those more august versions a greater value.

The experiment is governed by three rules: to be as literal as possible; to be as modern as possible; and to avoid the use of words which have become restricted, more or less, to a special religious meaning, and have lost those everyday associations which their Greek originals possessed—words such as 'grace', 'glory', 'heaven', 'blessed', 'baptize', 'persecute', 'gospel', 'edify' (this last is an example of a word that by losing contact with its original meaning has become positively misleading). A further sub-rule has been to retain Hebrew or Aramaic words which were not translated into Greek, such as *amen*, *gehenna*, and which must have given that suggestion of the foreign which writers convey for example by prefacing a Frenchman's remarks with '*Eh bien*', '*C'est vrai*', '*Quel horreur*', and so forth. Rules (1) and (2) go together, because the Greek of the New Testament was a very modern language, indeed a vulgar tongue, with none of the gentle old-world dignity of biblical English, still less any of the pedantry of contemporary efforts to reproduce it.

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST AND THE VISIT OF THE MAGI. (Matt. I, 18-2.)

Now the origin¹ of Jesus Christ was like this. His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, and before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Ghost.² Joseph her husband, though, being a just man and not wanting to make a butt of her, made up his mind to break it off with her privately. But as he was thinking about it all, look a messenger of the³ Lord's appeared to him by dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid of taking your wife Mary to yourself; you see, it's of the Holy Ghost, what is begotten in her. Now she'll bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he it is who shall save his people from their sins.' This of course has happened entirely in order to fulfil what had been told by the Lord through the prophet, who said, 'Look, the maiden shall be with child, and she shall bear a son, and they'll call his name Emmanuel, which means in translation God with us.' On waking up from his sleep, then, Joseph did as the Lord's messenger had ordered him, and he took his wife to himself, and he never knew her until she bore a son, and he called his name Jesus.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judaea in the days of Herod the king, look, some wizards from eastern parts arrived in Jerusalem, who said, 'Where is the new-born king of the Jews? For we saw his star in the East, and we came to worship him.' King Herod, of course, was disturbed when he heard this, and all Jerusalem with him, and he brought together all the chief priests and scholars of the people and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem in Judaea, for that is how it's written through the prophet, "And you Bethlehem land of Juda are not at all the smallest among the leaders of Juda. For out of you one shall come out to lead, who shall be shepherd to my people Israel."' Then Herod called the wizards privately and ascertained from them the exact time of the star's appearing, and he said as he sent them to Bethlehem, 'Go along and investigate exactly about the infant; but bring me word as soon as ever you find him, so that I can come and worship him too.' Along they

1 This word, instead of lacking the everyday associations of the Greek, fails rather to convey its special religious allusion. The Greek word is *genesis*; the first words of the Gospel are 'Book of genesis of Jesus Christ'. Thus by the mere use of this phrase, which he echoes here as he proceeds from the genealogy to the story of our Lord's birth, St Matthew suggests that in Christ a new creation is being made, a new line of descent is being started to replace descent from Adam. The phrase 'book of genesis' occurs at Genesis 2, 4, "This is the book of genesis of heaven and earth", and at Genesis 5, 1, "This is the book of genesis of men, in the day that God made Adam".

2 If I were to be consistent with my rules, I should translate this as Holy Breath, which would sound not unusual merely, but ridiculous. But it's worth noting that the idea of breath supplies the metaphor on which all our most theological concepts of the Holy Ghost are built up.

3 The Greek just says 'of Lord's', not 'of the Lord's'. 'Lord' is in fact being used as a proper name, standing for the ineffable tetragrammaton.

went, then, on hearing this, and look the star which they had seen in the East led them on until it came and stopped above where the infant was. On seeing the star, of course, they were as glad as glad could be. And on coming into the house they saw the infant with his mother Mary, and they fell and worshipped him; and opening up their coffers they offered him presents of gold and gums and spices. And on being warned by dream not to turn back to Herod, they departed to their own country by another road.

Now when they had departed, look a messenger of the Lord's appears by dream to Joseph and says, 'Wake up and take along the infant and its mother, and escape into Egypt, and be there till I tell you; for Herod is going to be looking for the infant to destroy it.' On waking up then he took the infant and its mother along at night, and departed into Egypt, and he was there until Herod's decease, in order to fulfil what had been told by the Lord through the prophet, who said, 'It was out of Egypt I called my son.' Then Herod was very angry indeed when he saw he had been fooled by the wizards, and he sent out and did away with all the boys in Bethlehem and in all its neighbourhood, from two years old and under, according to the exact time he had ascertained from the wizards. Then was fulfilled what had been told through Jeremias the prophet, who said, 'A voice was heard in Rama, crying and much lamentation, Rachel crying for her children, and she would not be comforted because they are not.'

Now on Herod's decease, look a messenger of the Lord's appears by dream to Joseph in Egypt and says, 'Wake up and take along the infant and its mother and go along to the land of Israel; for those who were after the infant's life are dead.' On waking up, then, he took the infant and its mother along, and came into the land of Israel. On hearing, though, that Archilaus was reigning in Judaea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there, but on being warned by dream he departed to the district of Galilee, and he came and settled down in a town called Nazareth; so as to fulfil what had been told through the prophets, that he should be called a Nazaraean.

EXTRACTS FROM THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT. (Matt. 5, 3-20; 6, 19-34; 7, 13-29.)

Happy the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom of the skies;
 Happy those who are sad, because they are the ones who'll be comforted;
 Happy the gentle, because they are the ones who'll inherit the land;
 Happy those who are hungry and thirsty to be just, because they are the ones who'll eat their fill;

Happy the kind-hearted, because they are the ones who'll be kindly dealt with;

Happy the clean in heart, because they are the ones who'll see God;

Happy the peace-makers, because they are the ones who'll be called God's sons;

Happy those who are harried for the sake of justice, because theirs is the kingdom of the skies;

Happy are you whenever they inveigh against you and harry you and tell every lie there is against you for my sake. Be glad and enjoy yourselves, because there's a lot of pay for you in the skies; for you see that is how they harried the prophets who came before you.

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt goes flat, what shall it be salted with? It's good for nothing any more except to be thrown outside and trampled on by men. You are the light of the world; a town cannot be hidden when it's set on top of a mountain; nor do you light a candle and put it under the bread-bin, but on the candlestick, and it shines on all in the house. Let your light shine like that in front of men, so that they may see your fine deeds and may acclaim your Father in the skies.

Don't assume that I came to break up the law or the prophets; I didn't come to break up, but to complete. Amen I tell you, until the sky and the earth pass away, not a single dot or a single squiggle shall pass away from the law, until all things have happened. So whoever breaks a single one of the smallest of these instructions, and teaches men like that, shall be called smallest in the kingdom of the skies; but whoever performs and teaches them, such a man shall be called great in the kingdom of the skies. For I tell you that unless your justice is more plentiful than that of the scholars and Pharisees, you shall certainly not come into the kingdom of the skies. . . .

Don't hoard treasures for yourselves on the earth where there's moth and rust to spoil things, and where there are thieves to dig through and steal. But hoard treasures for yourselves in the sky where there's neither moth nor rust to spoil things, and where there are no thieves to dig through and steal. Your heart, too, you see, will be there where your treasure is. The eye is the body's torch; so if your eye is simple your whole body will be lit up, but if your eye is evil your whole body will be darkened. So if the light in you is dark, what must the dark be? No one can be a slave to two lords, because either he'll hate one and love the other, or else he'll stand by one and look down on the other; you cannot be slaves to God and to mammon. That's why I tell you, don't worry about your soul what you'll have to eat or what you'll have to drink; or about your body what you'll have to wear. The soul is something more than the food, isn't it, or the body than the

clothing: Take a look at the birds of the sky, how they don't sow and they don't reap and they don't gather into store houses, and your sky Father feeds them; aren't you worth rather more than they? Who is there among you, anyway, who can add a single inch to his stature by worrying? And why worry about clothing? Take note how the wild lilies grow; they don't labour and they don't spin, but I tell you that not even Solomon at the height of his fame was dressed like one of these. Well, then, if that's how God clothes the wild grass which is here today and is thrown in the furnace tomorrow, won't he much rather clothe you, little-faiths? And so don't worry and say, 'What are we to eat or what are we to drink, or what are we to dress with?' Because these are all the things that the nations are dead set on. After all, your sky Father knows that you need all these things. But first of all set your hearts on the kingdom of God and his justice, and you'll have all these things thrown in. So don't worry about tomorrow, then, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Today is quite bad enough to be going on with. . . .

Come in through the narrow gate, because it's a broad gate and a wide roomy road which leads off to destruction, and many there are who go in through it; because it's a narrow gate and a tight squeeze of a road which leads off to life, and few there are who find it. Be careful of false prophets who are coming to you in sheep's clothes, but inside they are ravaging wolves. You'll recognize them from their fruits. You don't pick bunches of grapes off thorns, or figs off thistles, do you? Thus every good tree produces fine fruit, but every rotten tree produces poor fruit. A good tree cannot bear poor fruit, nor a rotten tree bear fine fruit. Every tree which doesn't produce fine fruit is being cut out and is being thrown on the fire. There you are, then, you'll recognize them from their fruits. It isn't everybody who says to me 'Lord, Lord', that will come into the kingdom of the skies, but whoever does the will of my Father in the skies. There will be many saying to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, and throw out devils in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' And then I shall admit to them that 'I never got to know you; depart from me, you who work lawlessness'.

So then everyone who listens to these words of mine and practises them, will turn out like a sensible man who built his house on the rock. And the rain poured down and the rivers came up and the wind blew and they fell upon that house, and it didn't fall down. It was founded, you see, on the rock. And everyone listening to these words of mine and not practising them will turn out like a stupid man who built his house on the sand. And the rain poured down and the rivers

came up and the winds blew and they struck upon that house, and it fell down, and a terrific fall it was.

And it so happened when Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were astounded over his teaching; for there he was, teaching them as if he had authority, and not like their scholars.



THE LITTLE BROTHERS OF THE POOR

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WHEN our Lord Jesus Christ sat down to his last supper, he did so, as he had done during all his earthly ministry, not as a host at a table of his very own, but as a guest in the house of another. He who could, had he wished, have turned stones into bread, was content to share the lot of those who have passed beyond being able to help themselves, and who enrich the lives of others by receiving from them. He did this for our instruction. Giving and receiving is a reciprocal action. In that act of humility whereby he, the master, washed his disciples' feet, he set forth in a final and unmistakable fashion what he had previously been teaching: that his disciples were to love one another as he had loved them, stooping to each other's lowliest needs, cherishing each other with a really personal devotion. In this way they would always find him with them. The saints have continuously experienced the truth of his words, discovering him in the sick and wretched, in the casual stranger at the door. Thus Martin saw Christ wearing the cloak he gave to the beggar; 'for the poor you have always with you'. No Christian is ignorant of this doctrine, yet it is given to some to realize it vividly, pre-eminently. It gives them an irresistible vocation. This is the impulse behind the work of the Little Brothers of the Poor. The founder describes it as a veritable 'passion for the poor'.

It was at Easter 1946 that the first 'little brother' distributed parcels to thirty aged people in a poor quarter of Paris. Working by himself, he carried hot meals twice a week to the homes of those whom the immensely increased cost of living had left scarcely able to keep body and soul together. From the beginning