

UNIVERSITY SERMON

Sermon preached in Great St. Mary's Church on Sunday, November 26, by the Very Rev. J. BAILLIE, D.D., D.Litt. (Edin.), Professor of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh.

"Casting down imaginations [*margin*: reasonings], and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."—II Corinthians, x. 5.

This text speaks of the conversion of the mind, and is, therefore, a good test from which to preach to a University audience. The conversion of the mind must indeed be part of every man's conversion. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God," said Jesus, "with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind." The mind is the citadel of the man, and Christ has not really won a man for Himself until He has conquered that citadel. No man is truly Christ's until his thoughts are Christ's. But these words of Christ were spoken, we are told, to a student of law, and there was accordingly special point in reminding him that he must love God with his mind. And this letter of St. Paul was written to Greeks; and the Greeks, as he himself said, "sought after wisdom," so that there was special point in reminding them that they must bring their thoughts into captivity to the obedience of Christ. Hence also these texts are of special importance for us University folk who devote so much time and attention to the things of the mind.

"Every thought," the Apostle says. But there are two very different kinds of thoughts in the minds of us all. There are the little thoughts and there are the big thoughts; the fleeting fancies and the ruling ideas. Each has its own different and very great importance, so that it will be worth while to consider each in turn.

First, then, the little thoughts. Their name is indeed legion. They are more in number than the stars. I will not ask you how many thoughts you entertain in the course of a single day, but only how many sometimes pass through your mind in the course of a single minute—and I think that even these you will find it impossible to recapture. I know, indeed, that if anybody were to ask you what you have been thinking about to-day, only one or two things would at first occur to you. They would be what I should call your officially acknowledged thoughts; they would no doubt concern matters of public or professional or family importance, and though not always very weighty, they would at least be eminently respectable. These are the thoughts that pass what the psychologists call the "Censor." But we know that our minds are also at all times giving hospitality to all sorts of unofficial contents. What was in my mind as I waited for the bus at the street corner? What visions did I see in the clouds of my tobacco smoke, as I leaned back in my chair to enjoy my after-dinner pipe? What were my thoughts as I lay awake in bed last night? What were my dreams when at last I went to sleep? And what my day-dreams during my idlest waking hours?

Now, as you know, there is nothing that recent psychology has so much impressed upon us as the importance of these little thoughts. It is in these thoughts, we are told, that the subtle secrets of personality lie concealed, the formation of character, the causation of nervous disorder, and even the border-line between sanity and madness. Indeed, if you consult a psychiatrist, he will often take little notice of your big official thoughts, but will use every means to ferret out your little and repressed ones. And it is very remarkable how our modern novelists and poets and even our modern painters have come, under the influence of this new psychology, to occupy themselves less and less with the big official thoughts that used to occupy the Victorian writers and artists, and are more and more concerned to reproduce the little thoughts—our dreams and our day-dreams, our flitting fancies, our random reveries and whatever else fills the little-noticed nooks and crannies, and the dim-lit marginal regions, of our waking and sleeping life. Compare the Waverley novels with those of Proust or James Joyce or Virginia Woolf; compare the *Idylls of the King* with *The Waste Land*; compare a picture by Sir John Millais with a picture by Cézanne; and it will be evident how great a change has in this way been brought about.

I am indeed by no means convinced that the change is on the whole an improvement. I know at least that the literature and art it has produced are already beginning to pall on me, and that I am more and more inclined to seek relief from it in the art and letters of an earlier day. No study of our little thoughts

is likely to be either profitable or significant unless it is undertaken in the interest of big thoughts, and the defect of so much of this modern literature is just that, in the absence of ruling ideas of its own, it shares in the very triviality which it makes it its business to expose. Nevertheless, modern psychology serves a most useful purpose in explaining the mechanism by which our little thoughts affect the formation of personality, and in showing up the nature of the havoc they work on our minds when they are not properly controlled. It has explained this as it was never explained before, yet the fact itself is something that wise men have always understood. As, for example, that wise man, Marcus Aurelius, who, in his little book addressed to himself, once jotted down these words: "The soul is dyed the colour of its leisure thoughts."

But now if this is true, if the soul is really dyed the colour of its leisure thoughts, then it is clear that a man is not really converted until his leisure thoughts are converted. I may have given my full assent to all the doctrines of the Creed and have no doubts concerning any of them, I may have so re-ordered my life in accordance with Christ's commands as to fill my whole day with blameless and charitable deeds; but what Christ wants of me is something much deeper than intellectual assent and moral conformity. He wants me to be born again as a new creature. He wants a radical transformation of the very subsoil of my mind, so that there is no longer any hidden poison at the roots of my overt thoughts and actions ready to work its ravages at the first favourable opportunity. He is, therefore, as interested in my idle moments as in my busy ones, as much in my reveries as in my resolutions, as much in my castles in the air as in the more solid edifice of my public and professional life. No man is really Christ's until his day-dreams are Christ's—aye, and his night-dreams too, if they are anywise subject to his control. "My soul," wrote the Psalmist, "shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; . . . when I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches." Or again, "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still."

When sleep her balm denies,

My silent spirit sighs,

"May Jesus Christ be praised!"

When evil thoughts molest,

With this I shield my breast:

"May Jesus Christ be praised!"

Something like this, then, is what is meant by bringing into captivity every little thought to the obedience of Christ.

But I must now pass to the big thoughts, because in this particular context it is the big thoughts that St. Paul has most in mind. "Casting down reasonings," he writes, "and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God." When a man seeks to submit himself to Christ, there is a danger that not only his very little thoughts but also his very big thoughts may escape the process of submission. The former are so trivial, but the latter are so general, that both may escape our Christian vigilance. And yet no man is really Christ's until his very biggest thoughts are Christ's. This letter of St. Paul, as I have said, was sent to an address in a Greek city, and the ancient Greeks were famous above all peoples who lived before or since for their high structures of reasoning, for their great generalisations, for their love of ultimate principles and ruling ideas. The very word "idea" comes from them, and the word "philosophy" too. The history of philosophy begins with them, as every student knows; and nearly every variety of philosophical theory that exists in the world to-day was first thought of in ancient Greece.

It is obviously these Greek speculations and philosophical systems that St. Paul here has in mind, and what he says is that they, too, must be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. Now I have myself been a student of philosophy all my life, and I well understand the temptation to believe that, if only I surrender to Christ my actions and my passions, I can keep my philosophy for myself, as it were in a separate compartment of my mind. But do you remember how G. K. Chesterton says in his book on *Heretics* that it is more important for a landlady to know what her lodger's philosophy is than to know what his income is? Not that his income is unimportant. The poor widow who puts a card in her window must indeed satisfy herself that the stranger who pulls her bell must be able to pay for his lodging. But, says Mr. Chesterton, to know his philosophy is more important still. And he adds that "for a general about to fight an army, it is important to know the enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy."

So it is with Christ. He is concerned with my daily habit of life and my daily habit of worship, but He is no less concerned with my philosophy. He knows that I am not fully and securely His until my philosophy is His as well. Therefore He wants my philosophy also to be transformed by the power of the Cross, and to be born again, and to repent in dust and ashes. Nor will He be satisfied till this has happened to all my reasonings and to every high thing that exalts itself in my mind.

You see, when Christianity first came to that old Mediterranean world, it found the great Greek philosophies already in possession. Every educated man followed one or other of the philosophic schools. This man would be a Platonist, this other an Aristotelian, this third a Stoic or a Pyrrhonist. And there is no question that each of these systems is really a towering intellectual structure, a massive and imposing attempt to survey all time and all existence, and to see all things together in a single view. Moreover, there is in them so much precious truth and insight that after two thousand years our minds still feed on them, and must continue so to do. It was therefore natural and inevitable that when an educated Greek in a city like Corinth was converted to Christianity, he should try to understand his new Christian faith and experience in the light of what he had already learned from his Greek masters. He would see whether there was not that in his Platonism or in his Stoicism which would help him to understand what had happened on Calvary and what was now happening in his own heart and life. Thus it fell out that the great intellectual conceptions discovered by the Greeks were pressed one after another into the service of the Cross, providing much of the intellectual framework for Christian theological reflection. Nevertheless, if it was to adapt itself as it ought to this glorious new filling, the framework must itself be radically transformed. The Greek philosophies had their legitimate Christian use, but not until they too had undergone Christian regeneration and conversion. They must first be baptised into Christ and humbly repent beneath the shadow of His Cross. They must be buried with Him in His death, before they could rise with Him into the newness of their Christian life. And if you read St. Augustine's *Confessions*, you will see this process taking place under your very eyes. In other books you may read how Roman power submitted itself to Christ's yoke, but in this one you will read rather of the submission of Greek wisdom. Elsewhere you may read of the conversion of ruling monarchs, but here of the conversion of ruling ideas.

But now the danger of which St. Paul here shows himself to be aware is that this process is not going to work out as it should. He is afraid that these Corinthians will merely try to pour the new wine into the old bottles. He is afraid that some of their ruling ideas will still remain unbaptised, and the pure Gospel of Christ be corrupted or curtailed by being forced into this pre-Christian frame. And he knows that Christ cannot be sure of His triumph in Corinth while there is one high thought that has not been rendered obedient to Him.

Nor, alas, was his fear without foundation. There is no doubt that from the second century onwards the Christian Church suffered from the tendency to build into the structure of its Christian thought this or that untransfigured element of paganism. And, speaking as a student and teacher of theology in these latter days, I should say that we are still haunted by the same danger. Instead of viewing all things in the light of Christ and His Cross, Christian thinkers still tend to view Christ and His Cross in the light of other things. Instead of allowing our Lord to determine the whole of our philosophy, we too often allow our philosophies to determine Him. We try to find room for Him within a world-view that we have constructed without His help, and to understand Him by means of such ruling ideas as were in our minds before He came to us, or before we came to Him. There are men whose deeds are done beneath the shadow of the Cross, but who, when they begin to think, prefer to walk some distance away from it—sometimes a very great distance—in order, as they explain, to get the Cross itself in better perspective. But the experiment is a difficult one. The Cross has always seemed a queer object when seen from afar. It refuses to fit into any distant landscape. It refuses to soften into the background of any picture. Either it is out of perspective itself, or else it puts everything else out. "Unto the Greeks foolishness," wrote St. Paul, in his former letter to this same Greek Church.

For myself, I am increasingly convinced that most of our modern difficulties of belief find their origin in this situation. We are so departmentalised in our outlook. We want to be

Christians, but we are not prepared to let Christ rule in every region of our thought and life. We surrender our Sunday thoughts to His obedience, but on week-days we give our obedience elsewhere. We try to have one set of ruling ideas for our religion, but perhaps another for our citizenship, and still another for our study. In our study of history, for example, we too often divest ourselves of our Christian knowledge before we address ourselves to the understanding of historical events. It is of course true that a proper autonomy must be allowed to all these departmental interests—to our politics and economics, to our science and historical research. But nowadays this autonomy is often allowed to extend itself to the ruling ideas by which each and all of these interests are ultimately governed. Yet a wise man once said that "there are no ultimate principles in politics," and I believe it to be equally true that there are no ultimate ideas in science or historical research. The ultimate ideas which we bring to bear on these interests are always supplied from the central citadel of the mind: and if we are truly Christ's, then in that central citadel it is Christ who must be King.

Let us, therefore, consecrate not only our most trivial fancies to the Lordship of Christ, but also the master thoughts that guide us in our studies. If I may so express it, let us not leave our station on Calvary either when we don our carpet slippers, or when we don our thinking caps. Only thus can we cast down all reasonings, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bring into captivity not only our very smallest, but also our very biggest thoughts to the obedience of Christ.

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