

THE GATES OF NEW LIFE

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"Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst Thou—so wilt Thou! . . .
"Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh, that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever: a Hand like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the Christ stand!"

David, in *BROWNING'S Saul*.

Edinburgh: T. & T. CLARK, 38 George Street

been dashed turned to anger. "He will suffer for this! Arrested already, is He? Good! He will die for it." And down the streets to Pilate's palace they poured, to see what was going to happen.

Inside, Pilate and Jesus were face to face. Pilate, too, had heard the rumours about the king. Pilate's sleep had been uneasy for a week because of the rumours about the king. And now there was the Man in front of him; and Pilate, looking at Him, questioning Him, almost began to feel there was something in the rumour after all, half believed it was really true. And yet—how could it be? Oh, if only he could be sure! "Who are you?" he burst out at last. "Speak, man! Tell me! Are you a king?" Then quietly but searchingly it came, the question of Jesus that goes right to the roots of all religion, "Pilate, sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of Me?"

But let us leave Pilate now, for this is Christ's question to every one of us to-day, and we must face it. Take that hymn we have just been singing, "Jesus, Lover of my soul." I think Jesus would want to know about that. "Lover of my soul"—"Sayest thou *this* of thyself, or did Charles Wesley tell it thee of Me?" Are the words about Christ in our hymns and prayers and creeds our own words, beaten out in the fires of our own experience, coming out eager and passionate and really meant, with the zest of a personal discovery behind them; or are we just dully repeating what has been told us by other folk? What, in our religious life, are we founding on—mere hearsay, rumour blown down the centuries from apostolic days, other men's thoughts of Jesus caught and put in cold storage and preserved and handed out to us—is that it? Or are we founding not on that, but on this—a Christ we have spoken to and can speak to daily, face to face and heart to heart; an experience of Jesus thrilling and throbbing

VI

HEARSAY OR EXPERIENCE ?

"Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of Me?"—
JOHN XVIII. 34.

ALL that week rumour had been busy in the capital. Every night excited crowds had been parading the streets, and one word was on every lip—"The king of the Jews!" No one quite knew where or how the rumour had originated. Some talk there was of a procession of pilgrims from Galilee the Sabbath before, who had come into the city shouting "Hosanna." Some said it was they who had started it, but no one seemed to be sure. However it had originated, the rumour was there, flying all round the city. They talked about it in the markets over their bargaining. "Any further news? Where can He be hiding? Has any one seen Him?" The Church courts that were in session debated it, and appointed a committee to look into it. The Roman garrison got wind of it, and doubled the guards, and patrolled the streets at night. Everywhere the rumour was flying—"The King!"

And then it all turned out to be a hoax! "The coming King? Why, have you not heard? Don't you know who He is? It is the wandering preacher from Nazareth who made a scene in the Temple the other day—the poor deluded soul with His hallucinations and His megalomania—a carpenter's apprentice for a King!" And with that the hopes that had

and glorious because we can say of it, "This is my own, my very own"; something that has come to us not on the authority of any Church or creed, not on the authority of our forefathers, not even on the authority of all the millions of believers who have ever lived, but on the authority of God and our own souls? "Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of Me?" Is it first-hand experience or second-hand tradition?

I have seen the light that comes into human eyes with the birth of a real experience. I have seen—and how moving it is, only those who have watched it know—a soul growing simply radiant, full of a new tenderness and peace and attractiveness, through a discovery of the friendship of Jesus. I have heard the grateful confession that everything has been different—home life, Church life, personal relationships, everything—since that day when He drew near. And I thank God that, because the wind of the Spirit bloweth where it listeth, this transforming experience is within reach of all.

But there are some who are quite content with a second-hand religion. And that for two reasons.

For one thing, it is *safer*. You always know where you are with it. It will never sin against good form by breaking out with sudden enthusiasms. But the visionary people who claim to have talked with God and seen Christ with their own eyes—it is they who have always been the real disturbers of this earth. "Why can't they let us alone?" the world asks. Edward Gibbon in his youth had for his tutor that great English mystic, William Law. "Had not Law's vigorous mind," wrote Gibbon years afterwards, "been clouded by enthusiasm, he might be ranked with the most agreeable writers of his time." There speaks the man who had never seen Christ about the man who had. Chesterton pictures the Church "rushing through the ages as the winged

thunderbolt of an everlasting enthusiasm, a thing without rival or resemblance, and still as new as it is old." Ah, but that is not what we want, say some: give us something quieter than that, less dangerous and disturbing and incalculable. So they settle down with their second-hand religion, quite content: It is safer.

But another reason attracts them too. It is not only safer, it is also *easier*. "I used to be concerned about religion," said a foreign professor to Henry Drummond, "but religion is a great subject, and I was busy, and there was little time to settle it for myself: so I became a Catholic, and instead of dabbling any longer in religion myself, just left it to the Church to do everything for me. Once a year I go to Mass." Yes, it is more comfortable dealing with Christ by proxy than facing Him alone by yourself. It is ever so much easier.

But do you remember the cry which again and again in the Gospels was on Jesus' lips when there was a needy soul to be saved? "Bring him hither to Me!" Not, mark you, bring him to My disciples, not bring him to the creed-makers, not even bring him to the Church, but—"Bring him hither to Me!" And I think that Paul, if he could see us taking our religion ready-made and accepting other men's beliefs and phrases as our own, would want to cry again, as once he cried to the Corinthians, "The light of the knowledge of the glory of God is"—where? In your dusty books, your neatly tabulated articles, your controversial documents? No! The light of the knowledge of the glory of God is "on the face of Jesus Christ," which means that the only way to know anything about God is to go and see Jesus for yourself. Walt Whitman was listening one night to an astronomer lecturing on the stars, and the hall was stuffy, and the lecture dull, and the charts and diagrams unilluminating, until, says Whitman, I could bear it no longer, and I rose and wandered

out into the night and looked up at the stars themselves! But there are souls to-day—thousands of them—who have never thought of doing that, but stay inside poring over the charts and diagrams of religion, the mere mechanism of the faith, taking the whole thing second-hand and quite content with that. "Men," cries this New Testament, "come forth, in the name of God, out of those stuffy places, and look up with your own eyes, and see the bright and morning star!"

Again and again this Book drives it home to us that unless our religion is our own it is dead. "I know whom I have believed," cries Paul, and sets that down as an impregnable rock in the midst of the swirling waves of the world's doubt—"I know!" And Peter in his epistle breaks out hotly, "It is no cunningly devised fable we are giving you, for we were eye-witnesses of Christ's majesty." Best of all, there is St. John. "This thing that we are declaring unto you," he writes in the great opening sentence of his letter, "this Word of life—we heard it, saw, and gazed upon it, yes, our own hands handled it!" There, he cries, are our credentials—eyes that have gazed into the eyes of Jesus, ears that have known the music of His blessed voice, hands, why, this hand of mine that you see here has clasped again and again the Hand that was pierced! Always it is a personal, immediate experience of Christ on which these men build their case.

And we want that too, don't we? There are three reasons why no sincere soul can rest satisfied with a second-hand religion.

One is that there is always something *unreal* about a religion like that. You are repeating other men's words, and they don't ring true. You sing a hymn like

"Jesus, Lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,"

and the rapture of it and the emotion make you vaguely uncomfortable. Voltaire was one day walking in Paris with a friend, when a religious procession passed them, carrying a crucifix, and Voltaire lifted his hat. "What?" said his friend, amazed. "Have you, too, found God?" "Ah," said Voltaire sadly and a little bitterly, "we salute, but we do not speak." Is not a good deal of present-day religion of that kind—men saluting the cross but not speaking, acknowledging God's Christ but having no personal relationship with Him? That is one reason why no sincere soul can be satisfied with a second-hand religion—it is unreal.

Another reason is that it is *insecure*. If it is not your own, it is always at the mercy of doubts. It is always liable to go to pieces on the hard facts of life. Tennyson indeed tells us that whenever his faith was assailed

"A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason's colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answer'd 'I have felt.'"

But what if that "warmth within the breast" can't be counted on? Then the doubts have free course to go smashing their way right through! John Wesley had always thought he was a true Christian, until one day his ship was caught in a storm in the Atlantic and fear got hold of him. The only people on board, he noticed, who were not terror-stricken were a little group of Moravian missionaries. And when the storm abated, "Were you not afraid?" Wesley asked one of them. "Afraid?" said the Moravian. "Why should I be afraid? I know Christ!" And then looking at Wesley with disconcerting frankness, "Do you know Christ?" he asked. And at that Wesley for the first time in his life realized that he did not. When it comes to the day of trouble, a second-hand religion is always insecure.

Here is the third reason why no sincere soul can be satisfied with a religion like that : it is *incomplete*. It always gives you the sense of something lacking. You think of the men who obviously have lived by the power of a vital experience of God in Christ—how different they are, how radiant and sure, how unselfish and self-controlled and kingly ! Why cannot we all learn their secret ? Thomas Hardy one winter evening was walking in the fields, and the world was bleak and grey and shivery and dismal and dead, everything, his own heart included, wrapped in gloom ; when suddenly from a tree above his head a thrush burst into song, a veritable carol of joy—and the poet stood still wondering.

“ I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.”

Is not that how the men who have really seen Christ strike you, that they have discovered something which we perhaps are outside of still :

“ Some blessed Hope, whereof they know
And we are unaware ” ?

Why can't we share it ? When Goethe was in his teens, he stumbled on one of the great hours of life. He discovered Shakespeare, came upon that glory of music and art. “ I was one born blind,” he declared, “ who had suddenly been made to see ! I rushed out into the open air, and felt as though for the first time I had hands and feet.” Would it not be a great thing some day to stumble on Christ like that ? “ All the best part of experience,” wrote that fine spirit, C. E. Montague, “ consists in discovering that perfectly trite pieces of observation are shiningly and exhilaratingly true.” Think of our trite religious beliefs, the things

that seem to us nowadays almost platitudinous, which we can hear and repeat without the faintest ghost of a thrill—true, yes, we accept them as true. But “ shiningly and exhilaratingly true ”—that is what we need ! Why, it would be like the picture that Robert Bridges in *The Testament of Beauty* has given us—a room in a museum and the fossils on the shelves suddenly coming to life, a winter rose-bed in a garden “ bursting into crowded holiday of scent and bloom ” ! It would be like Thomas Chalmers in the manse of Kilmany, quite content to preach for years a cold, dry, formal religion—until one day the south winds of God blew upon his own heart, and from that hour he preached to save. “ Mathematician as I was,” he said, “ I had forgotten two magnitudes—the shortness of time and the vastness of eternity ” ; but Christ gripped him, and the dead gospel came alive—it had hands and feet now, and a heart throbbing like the heart of Jesus. “ I had heard of Thee,” cries Job, “ with the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee.” And there is an old psalmist who breaks out, “ O God, Thon art *my* God ! ” What would we not give for a first-hand religion like that ?

So we come finally to the practical question. How are we to get it ? Jowett of Balliol indeed said we ought not to hope for it. We cannot, he said, “ feel such an attachment to Christ as is prescribed by Thomas à Kempis.” We cannot “ concentrate our thoughts upon a person scarcely known to us, who lived eighteen hundred years ago.” Jowett was never so wide of the mark as then.

But one thing is certain. Every one of us in this matter must stand alone. Even the saints cannot help beyond a certain point. They have tried again and again to pass on their experience to others, to describe just what they have seen and felt in Christ ; but always they come back to this, that the thing (as Paul puts it) is “ unspeakable.” It beats

them, they just can't get it across. Browning in *Rabbi ben Ezra* speaks of

"Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped."

That is the experience of the saints in trying to tell what they have found in Jesus. "We are just young children," said Luther, describing the preachers of the Reformation, "children learning to speak: we can only use half-words and quarter-words." And St. Bernard in his great hymn, after trying to tell us about it, throws down his pen at last in dismay:

"Ah, this,
Nor tongue nor pen can show:
The love of Jesus, what it is
None but His loved ones know."

It is as if you asked a man, "What is a rainbow?" and he replied with a complicated equation about the laws of the refraction of light. That a rainbow! What about the magic and glory of the thing, the ethereal wonder and poetry of it that make it a bridge for the angels? The apostle Paul, in F. W. H. Myers' great poem, after trying to tell men about Christ, breaks out desperately:

"Oh, could I tell ye surely would believe it!
Oh, could I only say what I have seen!
How should I tell or how can ye receive it,
How, till He bringeth you where I have been?"

That is the heart of it: we shall never know till we have been where Paul has been, and stood where John has stood, and knelt where Mary Magdalene has knelt.

That is why there rings out again and again from these pages a cry, "Come and see!" "Simon," cried Andrew, breaking in on his brother one morning, "I've found the

Christ! I've found Him! I don't ask you to take it on my word—but come! Come and see!" And he took his brother's arm and led him to Jesus. The market-place at Samaria was drowsing one summer afternoon in the sun, and the groups round the stalls were idle, when suddenly an excited, dishevelled creature came running down the road from the well. "Come," she said, "see a man that told me all I ever did—is not this the Christ?" And, wondering greatly and half-doubting, they went. But that night when they were back they said to her, "Now we believe, not because you told us: for we have heard and seen Him ourselves, and know that this is the Saviour of the world!" Yes, somehow we have to get where Andrew was, and Peter, and those Samaritans—as near Christ as that.

But how? I don't know how it is ever to be done except by obeying three simple maxims.

The first is—*keep following*. You say you have never really touched Christ yet, never really looked into His eyes. Ah, but at least you do know the road He is travelling on! Well, keep to that. Surrender your will to His moral ideal: for whatever else may be dark in your religion, this at least is clear, that the purity Jesus stands for, the honour, the manliness, the love, all that is far more worth having than any of the allurements of the world. Get your feet on to that road, for it is down that road somewhere that Jesus is always to be found, and no one who has sought Him there has ever failed to find Him. Therefore, keep following.

The second rule is—*keep praying*. Often men tell you they do not pray because Christ is not real to them: the truth of the matter is, Christ is not real to them because they do not pray. To the man who never prays, God in Christ cannot make Himself real. To the soul which will never subdue its noisy clamour to silence, to listen for the divine voice which guides and blesses and reassures, there is little

hope that a convincing religious experience will ever come. But to the man who prays habitually (not only when he feels like it—that is one of the snares of religion—but also when he does not feel like it, in the dry and barren seasons) to the man who keeps praying then, Christ is sure to make Himself real, sure to become the biggest fact in life, filling the whole horizon. How do I know? It is guaranteed on the word of Christ Himself. For listen. "If any man open the door, I will come in to him." It is prayer that unlocks the door. And, says Jesus, I will come in! I promise it. There are souls to-day who are eager to pass from hearsay to experience, eager to see Christ for themselves. But is that door unlocked? Has prayer swung it wide? What about starting to pull the bolts back now? They may be stiff and rusty through long disuse, but still, if you really mean it, they will move. And then the door will be open—and then—why, then, "even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

Finally, there is this—*keep loving*. For if love is the most Christlike thing in the world, and if you love some one with all your being, does it not follow that Christ cannot be far away? If you have begun to realize that the ultimate meaning of life is love, and if you are allowing a spirit of affection and compassion to banish hardness and censoriousness from your heart, must you not be nearer than you think to Him who was the greatest Lover of all, and to the God who so loved the world that Jesus was His gift?

Perhaps some of us here have been looking for an experience of God in Christ in the wrong place. Perhaps with our intricate doctrines and complicated standards, we have not been nearly simple enough. The greatest simplification of religion ever made was made by Christianity: "Love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." If that does not mean that love is the royal road to a convincing religious experience, I do not know what it means.

How it makes havoc of our narrow dogmatisms and exclusive, man-made orthodoxies! "Every one that loveth is born of God." Will you try to realize that? That every experience of love is already an experience of God? That "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto Christ"? That it is not outside your friendships, but precisely *in* them, that Christ comes close, and may be found? That the love you have seen shining in some one's eyes and on some dear human face is actually God's love in Christ for you? That "he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him," and that therefore Christ is there, an intimate personal possession?

Such is the high road to a first-hand, vital religion. Keep following, praying, loving. And when you call Him Saviour, Lord, and King, you will not be repeating what others have told you. You will be saying it of yourself. And so shall all things be made new.