

No Borrowed Creed

'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life as manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.'

— 1 JOHN i. 1-3.

ONE OF THE GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS OF ENGLISH MUSIC IN the realm of oratoria is 'The Dream of Gerontius', by the late Sir Edward Elgar. At the end of the original score of the work, which has been presented to the Oratory at Edgbaston, Birmingham, Elgar wrote these words — 'This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, and loved and hated, like another; my life was as the vapour, and is not; *but this I saw and knew*; this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory.' There was the great composer's testimony that the music of that mighty work was given to him by direct inspiration; that it laid hold upon him coercively and creatively and irresistibly, a first-hand, authentic revelation of the eternal beauty and pathos at the heart of things.

'This I saw and knew'. When a man speaks like that, the world is bound to listen. And my purpose today is to ask, Can we speak thus of our religion? Can we, in an age when subtle forces are striving to undermine the bases of conviction, when specious voices are busy whispering and hinting that the faith we so much prize is nine-tenths credulity and bad logic and wishful thinking and muddled reasoning, when ethical axioms

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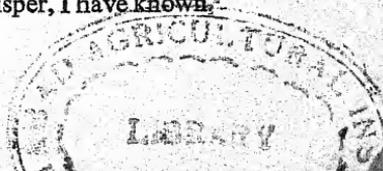
which once held the field unchallenged are widely repudiated, and beliefs which seemed inviolable find themselves fighting for their life, and even religious people grow uncertain in their attitude and vague about their witness and excessively problem-conscious — can we, in such an age, stand up and confront the whole world with the irrefragable assurance of an authentic, first-hand experience, and say of our religion, What Elgar said of his music, "This I have seen! This verily I know"?

It is particularly important that we should face ourselves with this question at the present juncture: and that for two reasons. The one is this. Our religion is going to make absolutely no impact whatever on the world in which we live and move and have our being, is going to leave not the faintest impression on the paganism around, unless it is our own assured possession. There is nothing infectious about a second-hand faith. If you have borrowed a creed, accepted it on hearsay, you will never set another soul on fire with it. 'If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?' If Christ's people are hesitant and doubtful about fundamentals, where is the dynamic for a crusading Christianity to come from? There are some fine words of John Ruskin's in *Modern Painters* which come to mind. "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what he *saw* in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion — all in one." What the world supremely needs today is an army of men and women who, whether they say it with their lips or not, will unmistakably declare it by the light in their eyes and the serenity of their spirits and the decision of their bearing: 'Here stand I! I can no other. For this I have most surely seen! This God revealed by Christ I know.'

But if this matter is urgent from the point of view of the impact of our faith upon the world, it is urgent also because of the trials, frustrations, disappointments, and disasters which our own souls are almost bound to meet on their journey through

this life. And if perchance the thought has crossed your mind that to dwell upon the urgency of religious vision and a first-hand faith is to wander off into abstractions and irrelevancies, I beg you to think again. There is nothing which is more dead on the mark at this moment. The fact is, the hour may come when everything about you — your happiness, your grip and self-control, your resilience and tenacity, your very sanity and reason — will depend on precisely this thing which you are calling irrelevant, the degree to which you have built up, or have failed to build up, an assured and vital faith. When Paul, writing to his Galatian converts, penned the most moving words, 'My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you,' do you think he was just being rhetorical and declamatory and sentimental? No, what made him feel and speak like that was his piercing sense of the inadequacy of a vague and indeterminate faith amid the strains and stresses of this menacing world, his passionate longing to see those people whom he loved secure in the possession of an experience compelling and incontrovertible and deviously their own. It was the thought — 'They must realise God through Christ! Else life will beat them in the end. They will never be able to stand it!' 'How wilt thou do,' cries Jeremiah, 'in the swelling of Jordan?' And since none of us knows how soon, for him, for her, some hours of terrible testing may arrive, nor how desolating the experience may be, how deep the waters to be crossed and how dark the night to be endured, it is the most urgent of all concerns that each of us should reach a point where we can say — 'Here at least is something that will never fail me! This master-fact I have seen. This spiritual reality I have encountered. This God I know. And on a rock He has set my feet!' Where others collapse before the strain of life, that man will stand undaunted in the grimmest days, victorious to the end.

'Ay, tho' Thou then shouldst strike him from his glory
 Blind and tormented, maddened and alone,
 Even on the cross would he maintain his story,
 Yes and in hell would whisper, I have known.'

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I ask you to observe that this is the constant note of the New Testament. They are not dealing in speculations and views and ideas, those men. Every one of them could say what Jesus said to Nicodemus: 'We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen.' They are not weaving an abstract theosophy: they are telling how God got a footing in history. They are not saying, 'Come, and we will explain the speculative processes by which we have reached our idea of the divine nature.' They are saying, 'Come, and we will tell you what God has done for our souls.' Take John in this epistle. He does not start off by saying, 'We think we have found an adequate philosophy of religion', or 'We suppose God must be like this', or 'We have been told that redemption means that', or 'It is rumoured that God has revealed Himself'. His message is totally different. 'That which we have heard with our own ears, seen with our own eyes, handled with our own hands, declare we unto you!'

This is crucially important. It means that Christianity is not just another beautiful speculation on the mysteries of life; not a theory of spiritual values, or a vague mysticism, or a dialectic about our ethical duty. It is historical fact. It is the eternal world of spirit intersecting, at a definite point of time, and in certain decisive events, this actual world in which we live. It is God visibly and dramatically and redemptively in action, on the plane of history and amid the hard and often tragic realities of human existence. 'The life has appeared,' says John. 'The Word was made flesh.'

'And we have seen it.' That is what made those men irresistible. That is what carried their Gospel like fire around the world. It was not mainly what they said. Eloquence and rhetoric were the least of it. Not everyone of them could write an eighth of Romans or a thirteenth of First Corinthians. Even a Paul and a John were bitterly conscious that they were but stammering and stumbling when they tried to deliver the message, dazzled and bewildered by the glory of the facts they had to tell. But what vitally gripped and held the world when the followers of Jesus began to move out from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth was the patent fact that they were

not guessing nor romanticising, but speaking what they had seen and known, yes, and living in a way which revealed, more plainly than any words, that they were men under orders from a higher power, souls under the authority of a direct, first-hand encounter with the living God. That is what arrested the world, and built the Church.

Perhaps some one feels — 'That may be all true, but it does not solve my difficulty. No doubt to those men the Christian faith may have been intensely personal, an immediate apprehension: but how can it ever be that for me? All very well for them to say, "This we have seen, this our hands have handled, this we know". I wish I could say the same! And I do recognise that for the practical facing of this desperately difficult life, with all its possibilities of sudden vicissitude and trouble and disaster, there can be nothing on earth so steady and reinforcing as a proved and tested experience of God which is vivid and alive. But how can I get it? There is no point in what you have been saying, unless you can tell me that.'

I will tell you now. You can get it precisely as those men of the New Testament got it. And how was that? By personal experiment. By the actual process of facing life with Christ. Take any of your religious problems — the existence of God, the reality of providence, the assurance of forgiveness, the power of prayer: in every instance, the experiment of facing life with Christ can transform a vague half-belief into a burning, shining certainty!

Consider, for instance, the fundamental matter — the existence of God. How did those fishermen and artisans, those tradesmen and taxgatherers, become so superbly God-conscious, so magnificently sure that eternal love was on the throne? It was the product of the impact made upon them, day in, day out, by the personality of Jesus. This, they came to realise, as they lived with Him and saw His matchless grace and truth, was what all life was meant to be. This was a disclosure of what must lie at the very heart and centre of the universe. In other words, this was God encountering them. You want to be sure of God? Can

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you not make the same personal experiment still? Believe me, you can. By prayer, by steeping yourself in the Gospels, by facing life with Christ, you can pass beyond the religion of rumour and report and inherited tradition, and meet God face to face. 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee!'

Or take the question of providence. So many of us are confused and hazy and uncertain about that. But here is Paul emphatically affirming 'We know that to them who love God all things work together for good.' We do not hope it, or wish it, or dream about it: we know it. How did he know? Personal experiment again. In all that turbulent, unresting life of toil and controversy and danger, of shipwreck, stoning and imprisonment, of being misrepresented by colleagues, slandered by reputed friends, and vilified by foes, he had tested this thing out. He had walked the troubled roads with Christ; and at the end, 'I know that all things work for good,' he cried, 'I have proved it!' Can you not do the same?

'O make but trial of His love!
Experience will decide
How blest are they, and only they,
Who in His truth confide.'

Or take the forgiveness of sins. Have our own eyes seen, our own hands handled, that? Have you ever wanted to shout aloud with the authentic rapture of the forgiven and the free? 'No,' you say, 'I have not. All that is mere dead doctrine to me. I can't get thrilled about it. It leaves me cold.' But here is Peter in the Acts, preaching forgiveness with a passionate, lyrical intensity. Why? Because one morning he had stood on the beach, after an awful night of guilt and shame, and had heard a voice saying 'Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?' And though his first impulse had been to cry 'Is this a dream? It can't be real! It is too good to be true'—he had dared to put it to the test, and had found life suddenly transfigured, and all things made gloriously new! Can you not do that? By the grace of God,

you can. That which our own eyes have seen, declare we unto you!

Or once again, take prayer. What volumes have been written about the problems and perplexities of prayer! How are we to get past all those obsessing and inhibiting doubts and difficulties to a joyous intimate assurance of prayer's essential worth? There is only one way. Personal experiment. We endlessly debate such questions as, Is prayer rational? Does it really work? Can it be effective in a world of rigid law? But long ago there was a psalmist who at one stroke cut through all that to the very root of the matter: 'In the day when I cried Thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul!' The man had tried it, and he knew. And you and I have God's own promise: 'If any man open the door, I will come in.' When the Spirit of the Lord came in like a great flood at Pentecost, it was because men, by prayer and supplication, had been opening wide the door. Have you tried that? 'Now I believe in prayer,' you will be able to say, 'not because others have told me about it, but because I have proved through prayer how God can make the weakest more than conqueror!'

I need not illustrate further. It is abundantly clear that a vivid, self-authenticating experience of the basic facts of the Gospel was no monopoly of the men of the New Testament. What their eyes saw, ours, too, may see. What their ears heard, ours too may hear. What their hands handled, ours too may touch. And we can say, with a conviction no whit less strong or assured than theirs, 'I know whom I have believed! I know I have passed from death to life! I know the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation! This is no borrowed, threadbare faith. It is proved experience, my own, my very own!'

If you and I can reach a faith like that, then let the threatening future bring what it may, one thing is certain — our souls shall not go under! Come the four corners of the world in arms, come night and darkness and crushing blows of sorrow, our spirits shall win through unbroken, and our feet shall stand upon the rock.

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But do remember this: that kind of personal certainty, that vital first-hand experience of God in Christ, comes only through a great personal venture. You cannot prove that those men of the New Testament are right, or share their blessed discovery, unless you are ready to risk giving every atom of your personality, body, soul, and spirit, to Christ's command. I began by quoting Sir Edward Elgar: 'This I saw and knew'. I want to end now by saying that what lay behind that crowning moment of vision and inspiration was Elgar's utter self-abandonment to the relentless demands of his art. And before you and I can say of the deep things of religion, 'This I have seen, and know', one thing must happen — an act of costly, sacrificial self-surrender to the will of God in Jesus.

I put it to you: have we loyalty enough, and intrepidity enough, for that? He is so determined, this Christ, to take all, or nothing. He binds His claims upon us utterly. His love is more implacable than all the force of men. Our human frailty devises half-measures, and cries 'O Christ, inexorable and relentless, haunt me no more, but give me back my peace!' But if we have once seen Him, never in this life will He let us off. That is why Christianity is sometimes such an agony, and sometimes such a glory. I have quoted Elgar: let me finish by quoting another of the greatest artists of all time, who worked with a different medium, Thomas Carlyle. When Carlyle was in the throes of composing his *French Revolution*, he wrote to his friend Emerson. I doubt if the anguish and the thrill of self-surrender to a great task have ever been more forcibly expressed. 'That beggardly Book hampers me every way. To fling it once for all into the fire were perhaps the best; yet I grudge to do that. It is impossible for you to figure what mood I am in. One sole thought. That Book! that weary Book! occupies me continually. For the present, really, it is like a Nessus' shirt, burning you into madness; nay, it is also like a kind of Panoply, rendering you invulnerable, insensible, to all *other* mischiefs.'

There stands the cost — the sweat and agony — of being a dedicated spirit. Are you prepared for that — with Jesus? For He asks nothing less. The strain of such a self-commitment is

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immense, the travail of soul terrific. But it is worth it. For beyond it there is born the faith which sees, and knows, and overcomes the world. Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.