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"THE TRUE LIGHT."

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

MAY 11TH, 1873, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

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On Sunday (May 11), at St. George's Hall, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from John i., 9., "That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."

The religious differences which have made, and are yet making, such fierce discord in the world lie far deeper down than the mere surface of various doctrine. The real root of these differences is to be found in the method of enquiry into religious truth, in the means by which it is believed to be discoverable. So long as men keep on trying to substitute one set of dogmas for another, and to impose, as dogma, any new doctrine because it is less false or more true than its predecessor, so long shall we have the strife of tongues and the endless confusion of conflicting sects. Not until we have perceived the only true basis of unity, shall we cease to fight with one another for the ascendancy of our own particular beliefs. The votaries of all religions in turn claim that in their own creeds lies the only pathway to God, and it stands on the face of it, that when these creeds are opposed to each other, they cannot all be true, though they may be all false. If one be true, who can test its truth? What witness could we have that would be infallible to make the choice for us out of so many claimants? Moreover, if only one be true, and only one lead to God, what a frightful injustice is done to the millions on millions who have no access to it, who by the accidents of birth and education, have been not only shut out from hearing of it, but have had their minds pre-occupied from childhood by false beliefs, and have been prejudiced

against all other beliefs, (and among them, of course, the true belief) by the most solemn sanctions! Then again, supposing that the truest belief were discoverable to day, and enforced upon a growing and advancing posterity in consequence, posterity would be hampered by our decrees, fettered and enslaved by our creeds and articles, kept tied and bound in swaddling clothes instead of having the freedom of men. What to us had served all the purposes of truth, because it was the truest we could discover, would inflict all the hardship and hindrance of falsehood upon our children's children. Look at it how we will, in dogma and creed we find no sure resting place for our anxious souls, no safe road to lead us heavenward, no sure light to bring us to God. But we have not therefore been left in darkness because errors and falsehoods have clouded our sky. God hath not left himself without witness, because we have neither infallible Bible, nor infallible Pope, nor infallible heresy. Still brightly shines over us, still leads us ever onward and upward, the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. For all purposes of a true redemption—or to speak more correctly—of a true progress towards God, men have now as ever the light of life, the steady burning gleam that draws us ever onwards, and guards our wayward and storm-tost souls from wreck and ruin.

But I should be sailing under false colours were I to use the text which I have chosen without disowning the sense in which it is generally understood. I quite agree with the writer in this, that that only is the true light which is universal—"which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." Any light which fails thus to illumine all hearts is not the true light, and cannot safely be trusted. A partial light may serve its purpose for a while, just as we use a lantern in the darkness while the wanton earth turns her face from the sun, but its weak and slender rays can only lighten a narrow circle, and by its flickering may even add to our error and perplexity.

As the rush-light to the sun, so are the various systems of belief to that true light which God has sent to lighten every man that cometh into the world. But some will tell us that the author of this text meant that Christ was that true light; and I do not see how we can deny this to have been his meaning. In the opening

verses of this gospel the author unmistakeably refers to the Alexandrine doctrine of the Logos which some one has aptly termed "Platonism spoilt." He speaks of the true light as "he" and "him;" as "coming into the world," as "being received," and being rejected as having the glory of the Great Father, and yet as being made flesh and dwelling visibly among men. Now we unhesitatingly refuse to accept Christ as the true light, on the simple ground that he does not answer to the definition, he certainly does not lighten every man that cometh into the world. He did not lighten a single soul of the countless generations before him, nor many millions of his fellow-creatures in his own generation. Whatever light they wanted down in Judea that Christ could give (and we do not hesitate in saying that that light was great and glorious) they wanted also in the uttermost parts of the earth and in the Antipodes to Galilee, of the very existence of which Christ had no conception. No one who is not a theologian would attempt the folly of making-believe that Christ was the light that was lighting every man all over the world at the very time that he was wandering over the hills of Capernaum or disputing with Pharisees in the streets of Jerusalem. That the soul of Jesus, and in like manner, the souls of the rest of the world's greatest men shed a glorious light over humanity, wherever their names and histories have travelled, is undeniably true; but it is not at all the same thing as being a universal light, or even an infallible one. For whether Christ could help it or not, there was more than one dark band on his spectrum, and some have been led into darkness, and even despair by sayings attributed to him by his friends. No one human being, no one human life, has ever been bright enough to lighten all mankind, nor sufficiently clear and unclouded never to lead them astray. If there is one thing that God has stamped upon all his works, and especially upon his noblest work—man, it is the stamp of imperfection. Nothing is absolutely perfect—though He may behold everything which He has made and say "It is very good. It is exactly what I intended it then and there to be and so far very good," He can never say "It is perfect," "It is finished," "It is incapable of improvement." This must ever be the difference between the Creator and the created. While He alone is absolutely perfect and incapable of change or progress—

the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever—all we his creatures are in the very infancy of our existence, and have an eternity of change and growth before us. So the "brightest and best of the sons of the morning" are each in turn displaced by a brighter and better successor. However vast the interval between their rising over the world's darkness, the glory that has set is eclipsed by the glory that has arisen anew. However, long and glad may have been the zenith of such a star, its turn for fading lustre will surely come, and a more brilliant orb shall take its place.

With the deepest reverence for the excellency of Jesus of Nazareth, and with sincere gratitude for what light he brought into the world, we, nevertheless, deliberately say of him as the Evangelist said of John the Baptist. "He was not that light, but was sent to bear witness of that light." Christ was not the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world, but was only one among the great cloud of witnesses on whom the true light shone, and by whom it was most splendidly reflected. If that light was not Moses, nor Menu, nor Christ, nor Paul, nor Confucius, nor Sâkya Mouni, nor Odin, nor Zoroaster, nor Socrates, nor Mahommed, nor any one, nor all of the great world teachers, because none of them were universal, what is the true light? It is not far to seek if the definition be accepted. If the true light really lightens every man that cometh into the world—ever did, ever does, and ever will give him all the light he can ever get—then it must be found in man, in men universally, and neither outside of them, nor in only a few rare specimens of the race. And this is easy to find; for as in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man. We know humanity by knowing ourselves—know it very imperfectly, but what we do know is truth and fact. And in human nature we find an universal principle, instinct or affection, call it what you will, which is *the love of truth and right*. In spite of all the texts and Confessions and Catechisms, I affirm that the heart of man is not "desperately wicked above all things," but, on the contrary, is almost the only thing about him that is thoroughly sound and good. Man, at heart, is good, because he loves goodness, and true because he loves truth. As soon as ever he discovers that there is such a distinction as good and evil, or

truth and falsehood, his inmost heart turns with desire towards goodness and truth. Of the idiotic and insane I here say nothing because I know nothing; they are not only beyond the reach of adequate tests, but they are so exceptional, and abnormal, as to form no solid objection to the universality of the statement that all men love goodness and truth. Of the great bulk of humanity, from the best to the worst, from the most cultured to the most ignorant, from the holiest saint to the most depraved sinner, it is only the honest truth to say that they all at heart love goodness and truth. They may love them in varying degrees, for the more goodness and truth are known by practice, the more they are loved, the less men know of goodness and truth, the less they care for them. But at heart every sane man has some love for goodness and truth. No man ever yet believed a lie knowing or even suspecting it to be a lie. It is a contradiction in terms. However false may be a man's conviction, it is his conviction only because it seems to him to be true. All he cares to get hold of is truth and fact; and though he should seem to us to hold the most absurd fancies, or cherish, even unto dying for them, beliefs which we cannot but scorn, yet to him they are sacred, because they seem true and because he has not begun to question or suspect their accuracy. From the darkest days of Fetichism, through all the corrupt fables of Polytheism, and down the turbid stream of Christendom to this hour, men have been ever loyal to truth—loyal to such truth as they could discover. They have toiled to find it; and when found, as they think, they would fight for it and die for it, giving up all this world below and risking all that world above for the sake of it. They might have been happy together as one family, but no; they loved the truth better than peace; and they welcomed the fire and sword which laid waste their lands and made their streets run blood rather than sacrifice the sacred treasure which they believed God had entrusted to their keeping. Could they have done this, could they have suffered what was far worse than the crusader's steel, the cruel rupture of their domestic love, for what they thought to be a lie? Impossible? a thousand times No! They bore it all for *truth*, for what they believed to be true. But what of the persecutors? Greater still was the sacrifice for truth which some of these men made. The

persecutors forced themselves to trample on their holiest affections and tenderest instincts before they could put their fellow-men to torture and cruel death. They had to stifle every relenting sigh, to crush their pitying breasts against the stone walls of misguided conscience, and to train themselves to the maddening sport of witnessing horrors of torment without a finching eye or a quivering lip. They had to lay down their manhood for the time, and clothe themselves in the fury—not of beasts, never was wild beast so cruel as man—but in the fury of fiends, and all for truth!

What will not men do for truth? In spite of all counterfeits which claim our regard, in spite of all usurpers of her rightful throne, men are loyally, though blindly, bent on serving truth; on finding it if they can, and on believing it, and living and dying, and becoming devils for it, when found.

And as of truth so of goodness, it is true that men at heart love goodness. It is no answer to point to the enormous crimes that have been done and are still being done; at the vices which infest our fields and markets and towns, our highways and byways alike; it is no answer to take me to the prisons and galleys, and to the dark places of the earth, where evil reigns unchecked by such means of restraint and discipline. I still tell you these men are not lovers of evil for evil's sake, as you suppose, but they are mistaken—utterly mistaken—lovers of goodness. Do you suppose God has made man such a fool as to prefer evil to good if he knows it? Why, even the most fiendish of all human passions—revenge—is a thirst for gratification, for something which seems to him exquisitely desirable in itself, or the man would not seek it. It is at the very root of it an excessive love of justice, an exaggerated and therefore mistaken desire for what is right. I know that men do wrong, knowing it to be wrong, and liking it for the passing pleasure that it may afford; but I never knew one such who loving it called it evil, or hating it called it good. Men hate the evil in themselves, and think that they would be better if they could. Men's ideas of what is good or evil may be as numerous as the stars. Some condemning what others approve; but they are all alike in condemning wrong as wrong, and upholding goodness as goodness. If a man approves what I condemn, the difference is not a moral one, but one of judgment. To him it seems right, and

he can call it by no other name. To me it is evil and I cannot call it good. Every man in one respect is a law unto himself, however deficient he may be in what is called ethical science, however, outwardly indifferent he may be to the well-being of others, he is nevertheless, at heart, convinced that goodness is right and evil is wrong, and up to the dim intelligence of his feeble mind would bear his modicum of testimony on the side of goodness.

Now what have not these instincts for goodness and truth done for man? They are the very foundations of all civilization, the very root of all religion. All the progress of the world, from the first dawn of humanity, is due to the desire after goodness and truth. Only try to realise the changes through which our race has passed and you can come to only one conclusion, that "the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world," is this love of right and truth by which we have ever been led onwards. Have not we been mending since the world of man began? Have not we often and often learnt to change our moral code according as experience or circumstance showed that it was good and right so to do? Do we not condemn what our forefathers deemed innocent, and add to the number or cogency of pre-existing rules? We could only do this, because our aim was goodness, and not mere reverence for past law-givers. Is not the standard of virtue for ever rising, not merely by improving on the models of the past, but by leading us to think with greater reverence of their noblest traits? It is only because we love goodness, and carry with us the true light which sheds light on that which has gone as well as on that which is to come. Religious beliefs have come and gone in like manner, perpetually but imperceptibly being modified by our love of truth. The love of truth ever remains, no matter what the creed with which it is associated. The false is hugged so long as it is thought to be true; but once exposed as falsehood, its day is over. Down, down, it must go; first into lower strata of humanity who catch it and clutch at it as it falls, and then at last to the very lowest ground on which human feet can tread and be trampled into dust. A new or unfamiliar truth dawns on the horizon, and straightway the foremost lovers of truth lift their thirsting eyes to greet its advent, and welcome it with shouts of joy. But some will shut their eyes, and hide themselves in their

inner chambers, lest it should make them dissatisfied with the old truths which they have loved so long ; and so the world becomes divided into foes and factions, each partizan forgetting the tie that really binds them all—their common love of truth. Let them rail at each other's notions as much as they please. We are barbarians still, and know no better mode of pressing on progress, or of keeping it within a safe rate of movement ; but while we do this, let us not forget that we are both alike loyal to the truth which neither of us has really found ; that we, with our more conspicuous sacrifices for the new truth, are not alone in our costly virtue, but they, too, have much to bear and much to lose in the perilous and somewhat ignoble task of fighting for a mummy, and exposing their names to the ridicule of posterity for a mere shadow. Let it be understood on both sides that both alike love truth and goodness, and our contests of opinion will soon lose all their bitterness, and our controversies their sting.

But best of all is the assurance that however wicked and erring men have been and are, God has made them to love goodness and truth. The time will come when that deep seated love of goodness will assert its mastery over the whole man, and present us faultless before the Eternal Throne, just as that radical love of truth will bring every one at last into that glorious region where falsehood and error are unknown.

Then shall be fulfilled that grand old prophecy, "After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law into their inward parts, and write it in their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more, every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord : for they shall all know me from the least of them even unto the greatest."