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Anniversary Sunday, 1874.

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A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM  
PLACE, OCTOBER 11, 1874, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY.

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The text was taken from Psalm cxxiv., 7, "Our help standeth in the Name of the Lord."

He said—With these hopeful words we concluded our *Inaugural Discourse* three years ago. We began, as all good and great works must begin, in the face of many obstacles and discouragements. Beyond the earnestness and zeal of the little band of men and women who had pledged themselves to the work, there was not much ground for the hope of permanence or success. The whole thing was an experiment; the country, as it were, was unexplored, the invaders were unfamiliar with its aspects, their weapons of attack and

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*Rev. C. Voysey's sermons are to be obtained at St. George's Hall, every Sunday morning, or from the Author (by post), Camden House, Dulwich, S.E. Price one penny, postage a halfpenny.*

defence as yet untried. Among the earliest recruits were some who did not quite know their own minds, who hardly recognized in these eccentric efforts the real object in view. Some joined our forces for the mere pleasure of witnessing assaults on orthodox belief, and were disappointed to find that these assaults were only preliminary to the building up of a rational faith. Others helped us in the hope of seeing established a new church, or a new sect, with banners of new dogma around which they might rally, and thus form a society which would replace the social losses they had for their heresy incurred. There were, too, those who came armed to the teeth with their own peculiar prejudices, who had built up an adamant barrier beyond which they would not advance, and who resented our refusal of their shibboleths with quite orthodox indignation.

Custom, also, had its obstacles to throw in our path. Some could not endure a religious worship held in a *quasi*-theatre, nor patiently bear the necessary discomforts of a building not our own. Others objected to the form of prayer which had been adopted; others to the minister continuing to use the raiment to which all his life he had been accustomed; others found fault with the music that it was not congregational, while nearly all were found to be unwilling to repeat responses in an audible voice, thus rendering a choral service an absolute necessity.

Well do I remember the anxiety and misery of those early days in our undertaking, and how much patience and perseverance and kindly feeling were requisite from every member of our congregation in order to tide-over the period of unsettlement.

To-day I have no thoughts but those of satisfaction and

gratitude in the retrospect. It is almost marvellous how these difficulties were one by one cleared away, how members one after another laid aside or smothered their prejudices in order to promote good-will, and to secure the final triumph of our endeavours. Compared with the large number of those who worship here whenever they can, the seceders are comparatively few. Not more than a score do I know of, who having given these services a fair trial have deserted them from dislike or on principle.

I see some before me now, and I know of many more who are only temporarily absent from us to-day, who, at the sacrifice of their own prejudices and tastes, have held on to our society for the sake of those aims which in importance are far above the trifling details of our worship or the idiosyncrasies of the preacher with which they have no sympathy. I honour them, and I thank them publicly with my whole heart, not only for their manly and faithful support of an unpopular cause, but also for setting before us all the beautiful example of self-denial and devotion in not permitting any private sentiments to interfere with their well-chosen duty. Believe me, they will discover that they have lost nothing by their generous concessions, which would beget on my part, were it ever wanting, a desire to adapt both service and discourse to their tastes, so far as can be done consistently with honour and with the common good. There remain with us to this day, some who look upon our prayers and praises as idle words, some who dislike our music, some who prefer a methodistical to an ecclesiastical form and accessories, some who never can feel contented with our present place of worship. More gratifying still is the fact that some are still with us, rendering most valuable aid

with a regularity that passes praise, who object to the discourses, some alleging that not enough is made of Christ and Christianity, others saying that there is too much religious sentiment and not enough of polemic. Many, too, are here with patient constancy, who are far better fitted than I to occupy this part.

Now all this is to us a source of comfort and encouragement beyond that which we find even in closer agreement and sympathy. It leads us to ask once more, what is it that binds us together? What is that noble aim which acts like a spell upon such apparently incongruous and unruly elements?

My friends, I believe I shall speak only your own thoughts when I say that the bond of union between us is our common aim—to endeavour to solve what Professor Tyndall has called “that problem of problems, the reasonable satisfaction of the religious emotions.” It is for this we have in various ways and degrees sacrificed earthly comfort and advantage, have stifled our own petty and private crotchets, have been willing to put up with this, that, or the other thing which has been distasteful. You are as sure of my loyalty to this grand aim, as I am of yours; and it is to this loyalty alone that we owe our assembling here to day, keeping our anniversary and inaugurating the fourth year of our history as one of the most remarkable religious movements in this century. This is also why, in distant parts of Great Britain, and in north, south, east, and west of the whole earth, thoughts of joyous sympathy with us are throbbing, hands of generous help are being held out to us, blessings are invoked, and prayers are being uttered for the success of our enterprise.

With all its faults, and not one of them incurable, our

service is as yet as reasonable as any service in existence, if not the most reasonable of all; and whatever be the faults and short-comings of the discourses added to it, the principle on which they are delivered, and on which it is known they are received, is that of perfect reasonableness;—the right on the one hand of the absolutely unfettered speech of honest thought, and the equal right, on the other, of accepting or rejecting what is said, at will.

We have a great deal of faith, but we have no formulated creed; we have very strong opinions, and tenaciously cling to certain doctrines; but we have not a syllable of dogma; not an opinion which may not be challenged, nor a doctrine not open to question. We are tied to no Scripture, ancient or modern; we are beholden to no prophet, old or new, that we should obey his voice as Divine; we lean on no Christ, Galilæan or British, that we must bend our thoughts to his thoughts, or take him for our master or guide.

The best and the worst, the truest and the most false must bring their doctrines to the same test in each of us. The Reason, the Conscience, and the Affections. Whatever harmonizes with these we will accept, because of the harmony, and not for the speaker's renown. Whatever jars upon them, we reject, for its intrinsic falsehood, regardless of the speaker's authority.

And still we leave ourselves open to correction. We are not going to deify, and to worship as infallible, our Reason, our Conscience, or our Affections, We expect our reason to err sometimes; but we listen to it because it is better than the authority of another man's reason. We expect our consciences to be warped or stunted sometimes; but we do better

in walking by our own conscience than by that of the priest. We expect even our affections to err through deficiency sometimes, perhaps even through excess, but it is better to be guided through them to the light of love Divine than to search for it in external nature or metaphysics, and worse still to stifle our affections as unholy.

Moreover, we aim at the proper and harmonious action of all the three, that none may be unduly exalted at the expense of the other two. Were a man all reason, he would only think rightly without right action. Were he to be all conscience, he could not perceive the reasonableness or the beauty of right conduct. Were he all love, he would be foolish and extravagant, though, perhaps, more likely to go right by instinct than in the other two cases.

As religious enquirers, and even as religious believers, the chief field of our enquiry, and the chief ground of our belief is *man*. By the study and cultivation of our best human faculties we are on the road to the discovery of Him to whom our common human instinct points as the Ruler and Friend of the universe.

But in doing this we absolutely forswear that very certainty and infallibility, which at present are the life of all dogmatic churches. We have such unbounded confidence in man, and in Natural Religion, that we will not encumber ourselves with those expedients which have hitherto proved so successful in the machinations of priestcraft. We prefer our uncertainty and consciousness of the possibility of error, to a certainty which has no solid foundation, to the claims of an infallibility, which we can prove to be false. We are quite as much in earnest to be right as the Christians are; but we are not so much afraid to be mistaken. As believers, we

trust God's entire justice to visit upon us no calamity which we do not deserve, to punish us with no penalty for what we could not help, still less to inflict permanent misery and disappointment in return for our most loyal endeavours to gain the truth. We are not afraid to be mistaken, in the old sense of that awful fear of Hell-fire which is the threatened doom of the Churches against any intellectual error. We are afraid of error only so far as we may do mischief to other people, or fail of our own proper improvement; and our worst errors, we believe, will one day be thoroughly corrected, and we shall know all the truth. A dear friend of mine, a convert to Romanism, confessed that he could not possibly understand this perfect calm in a mind wide-awake to the possibility, and even probability, of being in error. My reply was "It is because I believe in a God as good as myself—not to say better; *that* is enough to make me sure that, so long as I honestly desire to go right, I shall be certain to know the truth at last. He will not damn me for rejecting what seems to me unreasonable and even blasphemous.

This, my friends, is where we stand; and more unfettered than this, no man, or body of men can be; this is the secret of our firm bond of union, and let me add the secret of our past and future success. All will depend on keeping clear of dogmatism, or the attempt to tie down each other, or the future generation, to special modes of thought which may suit ourselves.

In the *Inaugural Discourse* to which I have referred, I took pains to shew what lines our several efforts ought to take. 1st. That we should do all we could to expose the falseness and absurdity and impiety of the orthodox doctrines.

2nd. That we should let the world know what religious beliefs and hopes we had to put in their place. 3rd. That, at all events, we might hope in this generation to wean the people from their insane dread of damnation for opinion. 4th. That we should help those who had no faith at all towards a reasonable trust in the goodness of God. And 5th. I dwelt upon the necessity, on every ground, of the cultivation of personal beauty of character and conduct, as the only condition in which religious emotions could thrive.

From careful observation, I have come to the conclusion that we are not held together by a common hatred and rejection of orthodox Creeds, so much as by our mutual agreement in the main on the subjects of God and immortality. I mean that there is far more sympathy between us as to what we believe than as to what we deny. This sympathy is not only deeper than the other but more general. It is but a small minority who only enjoy discourses of attack upon prevailing beliefs. With very few exceptions, we all like best those subjects which help to clear our own insight and to add to the foundation of a reasonable faith. To me this fact is more than any other significant of progress and endurance. Had it been the reverse we could not have lasted long. People not only weary in time of polemics, but the function of polemics dies with the perishing superstition at which they are aimed, and then the controversialist has nothing more to do; his mission is soon done and over. But when people are united in the pursuit of that knowledge or belief, which by its very nature cannot be exhausted, the interest in it cannot die, its investigators become more eager and fascinated the longer they search. I am inclined to think not only with Theodore Parker but with Tyndall, that



the interest in religious enquiry is inexhaustible, and of such a nature as to engage and engross the highest faculties of the best of our race. And therefore if, as is the case, we are linked together in sympathy, not merely to uproot hoary and decaying superstitions, but above all things to find out all that is true about the vast mystery of God and man, and to strengthen each other in our faith and hope whenever they rest on reasonable foundations, then indeed my heart leaps up with renewed courage to feel sure that this our work will prosper, that in time it will leaven the whole world, that what is true and sound in our principles will prevail, and that in ages to come we shall have made it an easier task for posterity to correct our errors, than it has been for us to uproot the errors of our forefathers.

Fifteen years ago, Francis William Newman said these words, or words of the same meaning, "For the truly religious in this age, there is no Temple." We cannot yet ask that this most just and severe sentence be withdrawn; but we may ask the venerable professor, and the world of lofty minds and souls like his who sigh for such a temple, to recognize, at all events, our most earnest endeavours to erect such a Temple, to mould such a form of worship. Ours at least has the germs of self-improvement, ours is designed to be severely subject to the dictates of reason and yet open to the embellishments which poetry and the highest æsthetic taste can provide. To be worship at all, it must be emotional, and emotion is a subtle thing very variable and transitory, soon satisfied and soon repelled. The *whole* of the Service cannot then in the nature of things be equally tasteful to every worshipper alike. But we have entire liberty to make it what we please; as the changes in, and additions to, it during the past three

years will shew. We know it to be the envy of many clergymen and others who are tied to old forms; and it has been adopted in whole or in part by some who are free.

Is it not then somewhat of a reproach to us—or rather to those who are one at heart with us, but who are afraid or unwilling to confess it—is it not a reproach, I ask, that such a service should have as yet no local habitation, should be relegated to a Music Hall, and be performed with all the drawbacks of a small theatre? Is it not a reproach that while Mr. Spurgeon (whom I personally greatly respect) could get a Tabernacle built to hold 6,000 persons on purpose to hear the Gospel of Hell Fire, the Religious Free-thinkers of this Country cannot raise enough money even to buy a bit of land for such a building as our Service and our cause deserve?

While his sermons are circulated by the million, we are thankful to get ours sold by the thousand. While a little book which in all good-nature I call a “wicked book” by a Scotch Minister, entitled *Grace and Truth*, but which ought to be entitled *Disgrace and Falsehood*, has been sold to the amount of 70,000 copies since November last, we have still on hand volumes which have never passed into a second edition.

A Ritualistic Church in the suburbs which can scarcely scrape together £20 for the London Hospitals, can raise £300 at any time for a new set of vestments.

Again, as an instance of hearty earnestness, a handful of Jews agree to build a new synagogue, and they raise amongst themselves the sum of £80,000 for its erection.

For once I must reproach my countrymen, and say that, although considering the agency at work, to have held on for

three years is more than one could have expected ; yet considering the cause in question and its bearing on the interests of humanity all over the world, such neglect is a discredit. And it is a reproach to this wealthy country that we have not in possession, this day, the finest Temple that could be built in all London.

We are quite sure that there are at least 50 persons in this country (probably ten times as many) who are in entire sympathy with our work and who could afford to put down £1,000 each, as easily as we shall contribute our sovereigns to the offertory to-day. We are bound to ask them why they any longer hesitate to give the world such a pledge and token of their honest belief? The moral value of their contribution will be lost, if it be delayed till the cause becomes a fashion. On the other hand, it is *earnestness* which wins men's confidence and does more to make converts than years of talking and preaching.

While, however, this main ultimate object be kept in view, the current expenses must not be forgotten ; nor must it be imagined that the sum of £100 a month can be defrayed out of the ordinary receipts. Our weekly collection, as is well known, is to enable non seat-holders and visitors to contribute what they please towards the expenses ; and we need therefore two or three special offertories in the course of the year to make up deficiencies.

This is the first time in three years that I have made any appeal to yourselves or to our country friends for greater exertion. I am the worst pleader for money that ever spoke, but I can refrain no longer from asking everyone, who at heart wishes us well, to do his or her utmost to carry those kind wishes promptly into effect. Let us endeavour to earn what

Dr. Davies said of us in the *Daily Telegraph*, "These people are terribly in earnest."

Still we must be patient; for we have even greater cause for rejoicing and hope than if we had at command the wealth of the country. The leaven is working more rapidly than we could have expected. On every side, in every church and sect, our denials and our beliefs are spreading with a speed that must strike dismay into the very hearts of the champions of orthodoxy. Truly this is all we want, a fruition more welcome than any amount of worldly success. With the most modest and truthful estimate of our own small powers to work so mightily a change, we yet thankfully recognize that we have had some share in it, and that it is the truth and the reasonableness of what we proclaim, and not the mode of its proclamation, which is working so mightily upon this generation.

To conclude in the key-note with which we began, while doing our best to ensure progress let us remember Him whose truth we are patiently and honestly seeking to discover and to declare; whose Divine call first awakened our souls to this holy service and has all along fortified us to encounter the perils and to conquer the obstacles which opposed our march; whose assurances of final enlightenment and whose words of Heavenly peace have led us on calm and unflinching in our darkest hours; and whose Love, bountifully shed over all his creatures, has set us on the Rock of Faith and Trust, and filled our hearts with songs of Praise.

"Our help standeth in the Name of the Lord."