

65263

SHALL WE NOT GO FORWARD?

---

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN

THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL, BRIDGEWATER.

BY

WILLIAM CHATTERTON COUPLAND, B.A., B.Sc.

LONDON:

TRÜBNER AND CO., 60, PATERNOSTER ROW.

1865.

"BEHOLD, THE FORMER THINGS ARE COME TO PASS, AND NEW THINGS DO  
I DECLARE: BEFORE THEY SPRING FORTH I TELL YOU OF THEM."

## A DISCOURSE.

---

I COUNT it a privilege to live in this age, when temporal and spiritual empires which have done good service in their time, but now cumber the earth, totter towards their grave; when ancient systems of thought which have outlasted the centuries, refusing to adapt their garb to the altered circumstances of the time, are fading peacefully away; when old Jerusalems are melting into the mist of memory; and new temples rising out of the deep. A few years ago many must have thought that all was over with this terrestrial sphere; all the great men were dead and buried, the highest minds were given up to restoring and criticising the works of their predecessors, building "the tombs of the prophets" and garnishing "the sepulchres of the righteous;" for the world had entered on its dotage, but a few hours more and the archangel would sound his trumpet, and Past and Present would cease to be. But the world was mistaken, and that not for the first time in its biography. Amidst all that slum-

berous period a few lamps were burning brightly, and "while their companions slept" some "were toiling upward in the night," sowing new seed and planting fresh trees, which are even now beginning to sprout, and yet shall grow into stout trunks and leafy branches.

The Head-Master of Rugby School declares at Whitehall that the beginning, as the end, of the Bible is poetry, not fact; and the Dean of Westminster, not without a merry twinkle one may fancy, preaches in the venerable Abbey from the text of Ezekiel, "The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley, which was full of bones, and caused me to pass by them round about; and behold, there were very many in the open valley, and lo, they were very dry. And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest." Dean Stanley knows very well that the bones *are* very dry, and is doubtful whether even a divine breath can re-enliven them. But yet, somehow or other, people do like the dry bones; and there is something to be said for them; for is not a bone a relic? and whatever has once been holy surely never can lose its virtue? To hang up a prophet's bone over your mantle-piece, for instance, what an infusion of spiritual vigour would not that afford? Why, your room would be a shrine of divinity,

whither a thirsting and weary people might crowd to inhale inspiration for the loftiest battles of life! So the Catholic Church lives by its bones, and he must be a bold man who denies the Catholic Church to be still living. The Protestant Church yet not less thrives upon its bones, though unfortunately the vessel in which it holds them is so very fragile that it is in constant danger of spilling them.

But Ezekiel was doubtful as Stanley whether the bones could ever live again. It is the essential distinction of the prophet to have no faith in dry bones; for I define a prophet to be *the living voice of a nation*. He is that organ raised up by God to keep alive a spirit of hope in the age. Lose your prophet, or kill him, and you destroy the heart of your nation. That was the function of the Hebrew prophets throughout the long period of the reign of the kings, and the Babylonian exile. From Elijah to Malachi it was the never-sleeping prophet who kept the Hebrew nation breathing; and when Judaism crucified its last prophet, it sounded its own knell. Is not that the word which our great English seer, Thomas Carlyle, has been thundering in our ears, that the great prophetic man, the hero, is the desideratum of every age—a man who shall be shackled by no routine of predecessors, who shall start the world afresh on its journey, and point its eyes to the future,—the man who shall dare to think and do, as if no one had ever thought and

done before; a new creation; no puny dependent child who ever leans on his grandsire's arm? And Thomas Carlyle has not spoken in vain; I fancy all the life which this English generation possesses comes from Carlyle. The burning torch was taken up by Emerson, and from Emerson passed to Parker, and kindled an undying flame on the other side of the Atlantic. So in France, Ernest Rénan has lately revived the theologic dry bones by publishing that glowing life of Jesus which has electrified this time—a work full of errors, doubtless, but which must be measured by its life-breathing spirit. Strauss is far sounder, but Strauss gives no life. The English Unitarians have never been very wakeful, they have nursed their dry bones from the beginning; but the Church of England is now warming a little, and if it were not for its narcotic of a prayer-book, and that sleep-giving ritual, would soon wake up into a living life. Politics are slumberous enough, but when our present leaders die, having served their term, we may expect a regeneration there. I hope great things when Gladstone is prime minister. He will shake the dry bones, or I am much mistaken.

We live, therefore, in a favoured age, but I do not think we make the most of it; nor can we, until we unreservedly place ourselves in the prophetic rank. We must discard all traditions, set no store by precedent, work out anew for ourselves.

So we go through the routine of all the sects, though we have no affinity with them. We are not a more liberal branch of the Church of England, or the Congregationalists, or the Methodists, but we are a new Church, whose rock is human nature, and whose temple is the personal soul. In affirming this, we by no means cut our connection with the past—that were impossible : as surely as we are the descendants of our parents, are we the offspring of the past ; the organic bond no power in earth or heaven can sever ; but we must not look to our sires to show us the way our feet should tread in the future. All our sires can teach us is what they have experienced, but their experience only correlates their circumstances ; but our circumstances have never pre-existed, therefore our experiences have to be shaped anew by ourselves. Popes and Bibles were indispensable and valuable under the then conditions of society ; but now those conditions are changed, Popes and Bibles rather hinder than help us. It is only the Absolute which endures. And when we say Popes and Bibles have done their work, we by no means intend to affirm there is nothing valuable even for us in Popes and Bibles. The essential truth in the Papal function is, that every organism must have a head ; thus a “minister” is a Pope—but the idea of a Pope is something more than that, viz., that one man has the authority and power to make declarations, which others have only

implicitly to receive, possessing no right to test or question. That the "Bible" is a collection of facts, truths, ethics, and religious sentiment, is indisputable; but that is not what Protestantism means by a "Bible." Protestantism means thereby a document containing a set of divine commands, necessary for all time, and a set of beliefs which it is absolutely incumbent upon us to believe, whether our reasons say "aye" or "no." Protestantism repudiates all homage to a Catholic Pope, and we repudiate all homage to a Protestant Bible; but neither Protestantism surrenders its episcopal establishment, nor do we refuse to work up into our thought and life all the good things we find in Jewish-Christian literature.

It is curious how reliant man yet is. We like to follow our fathers' steps as long as we can, and I verily believe would hold our mothers' dresses to this day if we might. Man is naturally a timid animal. But great deeds were never achieved by fearful men. What enabled Napoleon to accomplish his main victories was that he had no fear. But the many are easily panic-stricken. A sentence of excommunication uttered amidst blue lights and ghostly intonations will scare many hearts; and to fling "infidel" in a man's face is as effective as to stab him in the side. Fear is the real "dweller of the threshold," and we must conquer fear before we can make a step in advance. "Yes, but if we



turn over a new leaf, what will Mr. and Mrs. — say?" Are you afraid of the opinion of Mr. and Mrs. — ? Then you will never leave the Valley of Destruction and set out on the way towards the Eternal City. Thus, I would have our Sunday services utterly remodelled myself, permit a greater elasticity in the arrangement, abolish the stereotyped monotony of hymn, prayer, biblical chapter, hymn, prayer, sermon, etc. time after time. I would have absolute liberty here as in the thought; but do I not know that if I were to advocate such a change I should bring down on my devoted head all the tumultuous shriekings and anathemas of a hundred congregations and the religious newspapers. I suppose there would be a rain-shower of "Iconoclast" and "Atheist," "Desecrator of the Pulpit," and what not!

But this is only applying on a small scale what occurs on the large. The world has to fight against that base tendency in its nature to stand still and be contented. Contentment is false. You ought not to be contented: everything is imperfect, and will be so for many a long day,—I had almost said for ever. And as the infant when it can run alone puts off its long clothes, and the child when it becomes a man exchanges the school-boy jacket for the coat; so, as the world becomes maturer, must it leave on one side the apparel of its youth, and take to itself better-fitting raiment. And if any one

blames this procedure as iconoclastic and revolutionary, he is only blaming the baby for growing to be a boy, and the boy for maturing into a man. "But," say some, "what a harassing time you are making for us! Are we never to have any rest and peace, but always to be reforming?" No, I answer, you are never to have rest and peace in the sense of being permitted to sleep half your time, and turn your tramp-mill the other half, but you are to move on as Time moves, imperceptibly but surely; and as it does not harass you to change your skin through every seven years, and to pass through the stages of birth, marriage, and death; so, if you are liberal at the very core, you will naturally doff the outgrown garments and array yourselves in the bright robes of the Present. One sees therefore I have little sympathy with our Conservative gentlemen. I abhor Conservatism; it is to stop short at animal existence, it being the great characteristic of brute as differentiated from man. But of course there is always the response, "but the time is not ripe." And when, pray, in your wisdom, will the time be ripe? When will the time be ripe to say, "We have no need of Popes," and "a Bible is a hindrance to human life"? Who does not see that each generation puts up the same plea, and will put it up as long as the world lasts; but it is evident that if the plea had never been disregarded, we should have had no Christianity, no Protestantism, and no

and social imperfection. When we have such a "Church" as that, I think the nations will flock thereto as to the prophetic "Hill of the Lord," and malice and uncharitableness will die away. In such a community the spirit of God must be permitted to blow where it listeth; yes, even though it be doubted to be a spirit of *God* at all, and through every story of earth and heaven shall the human mind press, proving and questioning. In such a society, nought shall be secular and nought be sacred, the triumphal march holy as the hymn, and the silent meditation grateful as a prayer. Chiefest of all, shall the thoughts of great men of all time and every clime be spread before a hungry people, and whoever in India or Arabia, England or Syria, have stood closest to the skies shall be esteemed venerable, and be listened to as a heavenly seer.

You smile perchance at this dream, but is it to be ever a dream? and must the world wait another millennial cycle till the thought become a deed? Who knows? I think we should not wait long if some amongst us were more earnest. When the idea does become an act, it needs no very prophetic eye to scan the consequences. Instead of the ghastly hymn which makes our flesh creep, or the lugubrious psalm which compels us to think ourselves in a funeral vault instead of a sun-lit hall; I imagine a melody of inspiration, and a multitude with beaming faces and joyous hearts, shining like

the teachers of righteousness transplanted to the skies, feeling at last one with man, and all the universe.

The tendency of man to seek his paradise in the past is of old standing—a dream more oriental, however, than western; a thought, too, which could only be very vivid where trust in an immortal future was weak. Besides, the problem of evil seemed to necessitate such a conception: there must have been a time when sin was not, when man stood still “erect as a sunbeam,” and as yet no lawless passion had darkened the fair face of nature. Although we may not have advanced much beyond those early theories in solving that great problem, still we have no longer any doubt at which end to place the true Paradise. Seeing by the light of Darwin and Lyell, no naturalist may place his Eden-garden at the dawn of human history. However fair *nature* might then have been, *man* could not have been very lovely. I have never hesitated to avow the conviction that the only conceivable explanation of man’s creation lies in regarding him as the progressive child of the highest Catarhine primates; I cannot conceive for a moment of any other origin, corroborated as it is, too, by his whole physical structure. But, even if that be not conceded, evidence is slowly accumulating of the barbaric beginnings of human history, and our Eden vanishes more and more into the mist. The growth

of man has been upward from the commencement—  
incredibly slow, but ever to a better from a worse.  
After much toil we are come at length to a highly-  
improved link in the chain, but we have by no  
means entered upon Paradise. Our Paradise still  
lies before us, the El Dorado of our hopes lies far  
beyond the furthest mountain-peaks, and probably  
each pilgrim, as he attains a new height, will descry  
yet stretching beyond glorious snow-clad summits.  
The end is far distant, the way is long, but the sky  
is *not* dark. That consolation we have to sustain  
us. The sun is still shining overhead, and will  
shine; the birds will still sing gladdening hymns;  
and though humanity will reel many times back-  
ward and forward with passionate folly and mad-  
ness, beyond the blood-stained battle-field, and the  
fierce strifes of parties, lies the chosen country, the  
milk-and-honey-flowing Land of Promise. This is  
our faith, firm and rooted. But if this be our belief,  
does it not shape our duties? does it not summon  
us away from the tombs to the busy throbs of instant  
life; from laudation of departed saints, to live out our  
lives, and leave our footprints on the temporal sands?  
Does it not tell us how futile it were to grow up  
under the shadow of any by-gone heroic or holy  
soul, there being as great souls now, and greater  
probably to come? The Eden of Adam, naturally  
fair as it is deemed; the Eden of Moses, morally  
fair as it appears; the Eden of Jesus, radiantly

beautiful as it unquestionably was,—are but Edens whose *memory* will never utterly perish, but which by no means exhaust all natural and divine creation. We do not add to our capabilities, we only quench our own powers, by breathing in the atmosphere of a foreign community. I do not stand one inch taller for walking always at the heels of some by-gone chief. A superinduced righteousness is no righteousness worth having; and to put on “the garment of Christ,” I must put off the “garment” of personality. I do not want to walk thus masqueraded. Truly none will be so foolish as to refuse assistance; the entire human race is mutually dependent for much, but we only seek the disciple’s stool to receive suggestions which we must work forward in our own way. A man forfeits his personality when he becomes an echo. And the more intimately we know any great man the less shall we be disposed to call him “master.” We see that he can be no autocrat of *our* soul. And what is true of a man or series of men is true of countries and ages. Palestine is no norm for England, nor St. Paul for Western Republicans. Paul may have fancied he laid down the law for all time, but only impersonal minds will credit him.

What, then, is the moral of this argument? That we are to speak our speech, think our thought, do our deeds, as being our own speech, thoughts, and deeds, and without ceaselessly affirm-

ing it is somebody else's thoughts, speech, and deeds that we are to think, speak, and do. They may be Christian, they may be Brahminic, they may be Confucian, they may be Hellenic, or what not; that is not our concern: are they true, right to us? Are they the best realization we can give to the floating ideals of our minds? That is all we have to ask, and all that we need be concerned in the world's knowing. Before the bar of inner consciousness each man must be brought to trial, his own consciousness and not another's.

Drop then the skirts of by-gone prophets, and become yourselves prophets. Be in your generation the kindling fuel which shall keep alive the dull embers of earthly love, hope, and truthfulness. Men walk as in a strange stupor; they know not the joy they might possess were they only content to trust themselves to the swaying waters. Have no Fear; exorcise that phantom, the direst that ever infested the human heart. Why should we fear? The stars will not fall from the skies and crush us; the old destroyer of earnest pilgrims has no longer any teeth to devour, and can only mock. Let her mock; her heaven, her hell, does not invite nor terrify us. The Diabolus of the legends may go about still "like a roaring lion," but his fangs are powerless. The only Devil, and an ugly one sometimes he is, who has any power, is Public Opinion, and he who is not prepared to brave public opinion may as well

at once withdraw from our communion; he has no part with us, nor have we aught to do with him; he has yet to learn the first lesson in the alphabet of Right.

Nor turn your gaze too regretfully towards the fair cities of the plain which duty orders you to quit. Bright they were, I know; beautiful those fretted arches, and venerable those long-used rites. Many a good man knelt upon this pavement, and pious lips kissed that book. Yet, beautiful as it all was, to us it is but a memory; it speaks no longer our faith, it rolls no longer our anthem; our eyes gleam on another world, and the past is a corpse no more to be awakened. "Must I leave thee, Paradise?" Yes, for even "Paradise" does not endure for ever; nay, it will be no Paradise to a new world, who sees with other eyes, and beats with other throbs. The vows which no longer bind we do not snap, and it is a puerile thing to mourn when the destiny is inevitable. Vain is it to put back the dial. Pleasant it was, doubtless, to sail on that shining water, glorious to be the sharer of a martyr's agony; the Olive Mount is ever sacred, and storied Nazareth fair with verdant glades. But well-nigh nineteen hundred years stand between us and that halcyon time; the sun has gone down upon that fairy land, and has arisen upon a world whose aims, thoughts, and aspirations were then undreamed. Awake, O monk! from that childish



trance ; here is thy work-day world, here thy Olive mountain, and Golgotha hath still its counterpart. Nor, had we trod that fairy-land, should we probably have found it so fairy-like as we imagine. Gazed at through the mists of time all scenes look brighter than they actually were ; our minds tinge them with colours which they may never have possessed, mingling with the actual ideal beauties flung from the absolute, and lighting with a glory what then was human, but what we fain would have divine. Fair and best ; yes, if, once for all, the superhuman flood of light suffused the earth, and never reappeared. But it is not so : I can see already a future grander than was ever hoped, which shall dwarf the splendour of any single age, and inaugurate a Paradise on earth. There is a Gospel for us as there was a Gospel for the Jewish-Roman world ; a Gospel, too, born of hours of prophetic vision, and nights of solemn wonder ; a Gospel which also tells of a kingdom of heaven, or, may be, kingdom of earth ; and which, if we have only faith, shall not disappoint us.

“ *Not* where long past ages sleep  
 Seek we Eden’s golden trees ;  
 In the future, folded deep,  
 Are its mystic harmonies.

“ Eden with its angels bold,  
 Trees, and flowers, and cooling sea,  
 No less ancient story told,  
 Than a glowing prophecy,

- “In the spirit’s perfect air,  
 In the passions tame and kind,  
 Innocence from selfish care,  
 The true Eden shall we find.
- “It is coming, it shall come,  
 To the patient and the striving ;  
 To the quiet heart at home,  
 Thinking, wise, and faithful living.
- “When all error is worked out  
 From the heart and from the life,  
 When the sensuous is laid low  
 By the spirit’s holy strife.
- “When the soul to sin hath died,  
 True, and beautiful, and sound ;  
 Then all earth is sanctified,  
 Up springs Paradise around.
- “*Then* shall come the Eden days,  
 Guardian watch from seraph eyes,  
 Angels on the slanting rays,  
 Voices from the opening skies.
- “From that spirit-land afar,  
 All disturbing force shall flee,  
 Stir nor toil, nor hope shall mar  
 Its immortal unity.”