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“WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?”

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE REV. C. VOYSEY'S SERVICE, AT
ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,
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Summary :—The Question and the Answer. Not the Answer of the Churches. Two objections anticipated. Religious wars and hostile Churches are proofs that the Church has not answered the question correctly. The position further illustrated by two instances in which Christianity apparently breaks down. True Christianity not easy.

Father—If indeed to Thee we owe our longing to raise the veil that hides Thee from our understandings, pardon our imperfect service. We speak of righteousness, striving against sin—help us Father. We speak of truth, struggling in the toils of our ignorance—teach us Father. May that which is untrue perish in the speaking; may that which is true be preserved for the use of Thy children until, perchance, the veil is removed, and this our hour of darkness gives place to Eternal Light.

What is Christianity? A strange question to ask, perhaps, after eighteen centuries of experience. “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me Christendom?” It would almost appear so. For there is no Church that tells us truly and distinctly what is Christianity. If we go by what Churches set forth in their Confessions of Faith, and by what the members of those Churches are most vehement about, we must suppose that Christianity means believing something, having some clear and strong convictions about God and Jesus Christ. If we go by what Churches set forth in their formularies, and by what their members are most particular about, we must suppose that Christianity means observing some religious rite or ceremony,

adhering to some one form of worship rather than another—but this is not Christianity. Believing and worshipping are very secondary aspects of the Christian religion. Christianity is not believing something, but being something; not worshipping in a particular way, but living in a particular way. *Christianity is not a Creed but a Life, the Life of Love.*

And when I say *Life*, of course I do not mean anything so superficial and imperfect as a mere external life. You may tie good fruit and beautiful flowers to a dead tree, but that fruit will soon perish, and those flowers will soon fade. You may be constantly taking the chair at public meetings on behalf of the distressed, you may build schools and endow churches, or, as St Paul puts it, you may give all your goods to feed the poor, and even give your body to be burned, and yet know nothing of the Life of Love. By Life of Love I mean the inner life of heart-kindness from which beneficent acts proceed as a matter of course and necessity, even as from the living tree there grow the leaves and fruit. *That is Christianity.* Christianity in its most essential aspect is a Life of heart-kindness.

This is mere assertion. It requires proof, but I shall not have time to go into the proofs to-day. I must be satisfied with trying to explain in a few simple words what I mean by saying that Christianity is before all things a Life of Love, but that the Churches do not set it forth to us as such.

We must give all their due. Churches would agree in admitting that the Life of Love is an important feature in Christianity; but the Christianity that remains to be tried is not a Christianity of which Love is an important feature, but a Christianity which is Love. You see the difference, I am sure. It is what we are in the habit of calling 'all the difference in the world.' I will try to illustrate it. You have a dear friend to whom your heart is knit, but from whom you have to part for a time. You do not take with you, photographed, the fold of the dress, the hands, or the hair, but you take the face, and why? Because that is herself, she speaks to you in that—and in a like sort of way Love is not an adjunct of Christianity, not an accident of Christianity, not even an important feature of Christianity, Love is the sweet face of Christianity—her own blessed self.

It might occur to you to object that this is no new aspect of Christianity. That numbers of believers in all ages have cherished it and lived in its sunshine. Quite so, and thank God for it. Marvellous would be the presumption and ignorance of any one who supposed that he could reveal a new aspect of a religion which has been before the world so long. God be thanked that thousands of saintly men and women, whose shoe's latchet I should be unworthy to unloose, have known that Christianity is Love, and in the power of that conviction have led lives which we can but contemplate with tears of mingled shame, veneration, and joy. But they drew their knowledge from the words of Jesus, not from the declarations of their Church. Churches have been very silent about the Life of Love, very eloquent about their beliefs, their rites their ceremonies, and the consequence has been that whilst individuals here and there have risen to higher things, the masses have been content to suppose that what the Church took most care of and made most fuss about, was the most important element in their religion, and so zeal has been hot and love has been cold.

Again you might be inclined to say that the love aspect of Christianity has been very well known to the Churches, but that being of one mind with regard to it they have not cared to talk much about it. To some extent this is true. In her earliest years the Church kept love in her proper place, that is the first place, and by that she conquered. But before long, and more because of the infirmity of our nature than for any other reason, love was put in the background, and other things were brought to the front. In any case it is a mistake not to talk much on a point that is vitally important. If we agree not to speak of anything we generally come not to think about it. It is not easy to keep up a strong and perpetual interest in an idea to which we seldom give expression and of which we are seldom visibly reminded. But, however, without going now into the question as to how it came about, the fact encounters us on nearly every page of history, that the Church lost sight to a great extent of the truth that Christianity is love. Religious wars and persecutions are a proof that she did lose sight of it. Religious wars! Curious collocation of incompatible ideas! A war in behalf of the Christian religion is an absurdity. It proves at once that the Christianity in question is not the real

thing. Am I to fight with my brother to make him love me? It is true we are weak and inconsistent creatures, but men would scarcely have been so irrational and obtuse as to engage in religious wars if they had been alive to the truth that Christianity is love.

Again the very fact of Christendom breaking up into hostile Churches is a proof that the Church—whatever we mean by that much debated word—had come to forget or to deny that religion is essentially a Life,—Christianity essentially a Love.

National Churches may be a practical necessity, but there is no necessity for their being hostile, hostile even in the extremely mitigated sense that a minister of one may not regard himself as the minister of another; much less hostile in the sense that half the energy of one is spent in trying to neutralise the efforts of another. It surely is a great mistake that there should exist Churches hostile in this sense! It leads to waste of power, and worse than waste, to misuse and abuse of time, energy, money, and all our talents, until the devil's own work, which is strife, is done, as is profanely said, for the Glory of God. If the test of discipleship is love for one another, as was once stated on the highest authority, we don't want many Churches. One would be sufficient. The flocks indeed might be many, but the fold could be one. When the heart of this city is stirred on some great question, and the people hold a meeting in the Park, they may form into separate gatherings, guided by the necessities of the ground, or drawn towards a favourite speaker, but it is still one meeting, having one object, animated by a common purpose. So might it be, so should it be, with all who profess and call themselves Christians.

But suppose those scattered crowds, forgetful of their great object, their common purpose, should take to fighting about matters of secondary importance, and when they had fought themselves tired, should build barriers, and dig trenches to keep themselves away from their neighbours and their neighbours away from themselves—what a melancholy spectacle! *Melancholy at least for the friends of the cause.* This is the spectacle presented by the Christian world.

Yes! I repeat, the fact that Christendom broke up into hostile Churches, the fact that parties hostile to each other, jealous of each other, exist in the same Church, are proofs that we have not

sufficiently taken in the idea that Christianity is love. And what about the cure? Is there a remedy for all this? Is there a solvent before which these hapless barriers will melt away? Can a "Peace, be still!" be uttered to the broken waters of the world? There is! There can! And they will be—the solvent will be applied, the word will be spoken when a Church has the brave simplicity to declare.

Creeds matter little, Forms matter little, we priests and our functions matter little—little, aye nothing!—nothing by the side of that which is the essence, and sweetness, and glory, and treasure of Christianity, the Life of Love.

It is sometimes said that Christianity has failed, and no doubt there are some facts which look like failure, but they need not really frighten us; you cannot truly say of anything that it has failed before it has been tried, and I do not doubt that Christianity will succeed, will establish its place in the hearts of men, will get the better of human weakness and human selfishness when it is fairly tried. But a man cannot reasonably complain of losing a race if he rides the wrong horse. Let us consider two cases in which it would look as if Christianity had failed; it will help us to see still further what the real thing is, and also what comes of not trying it.

One illustration shall be taken from the individual life, the other from social life in one of its broadest manifestations. And bear in mind that I am not now contemplating those departures from the Christian life which result either from indifference to it or from great emptiness. To do so would be beside our present purpose, for they might co-exist with any development of Christianity. The phenomena we are now concerned with are the curious anomalies that arise—not from wilful divergence from Christianity but from the cultivation of a wrong or secondary form of it.

How often this is seen. An earnest, well-intentioned, man is appointed to a parish where the people are fairly intelligent, respectable, and well-affected. He might have it all his own way with them, for a new parson is generally looked at with a sort of kindly interest; we have the prospect of listening to him for some years perhaps, and it is well to think the best of him. In a short time, to use a familiar expression, parson and people are at loggerheads with each other; confusion and strife take the place of order and goodwill, a Samaria is established in the parish, and a new temple is probably built on Gerizim. And why? Because the clergyman is a bad man, or especially silly, or unkind? Not at all—but he has probably introduced something new, something new in his service, or in the arrangement of the Church furniture, or in his own personal get up. The people don't like it and object.

He, instead of saying—"friends, this does not matter, the Christian life is what we are concerned about, loving hearts are the crown of my ministry," he insists upon his crotchet, and excuses himself by calling it a *principle*. And this is just where Church Christianity breaks down, that it permits men to call those things principles which are no principles, and to lose sight of the *principle* of Christianity, which is love. What should we say of a scheme for increasing our sense of the sanctity of human life if it encouraged us to cut off each others heads whenever we objected to the colour of each others hair?

Some will try to excuse themselves on the ground that all this sort of difference and opposition may go on without loss of love. Vain delusion! In human strife he alone may fancy he loves his brother who gets the better of him. If we could be sure of a candid answer, I should not mind bringing the matter to this test. I would say to the controversialists 'do you love your brother when you find he is too much for you?' When there is motion without heat we may have theological strife without ill-will. Did John love Cerinthus when (according to the legend) he would not stay in the same baths with him. Do we love our brother when we will not go under his roof, will not take him by the hand, will not bid him God-speed, and pass him when we meet him, on the other side. If you suspect this to be an exaggerated view turn to "Phases of Faith" and see the treatment experienced by Mr Newman when he began to question the doctrines of the Church. There probably has been no delusion more fatal to Christian life and to the happiness of men than that which has permitted our poor hearts to hide their rottenness from themselves, and to indulge in ill-will, grudging, envy, pride, and all uncharity, under cover of the pretence that it is zeal for the Lord. We may hold it to be a certain truth that the pearl of Christianity, which is Love, will get mislaid when men take to squabbling about the shell.

Another point at which Church Christianity has broken down is exposed in the condition of our poor. Individuals here and there are kind-hearted and self-sacrificing, but where is that thought of class for class which could not but be generated in a truly Christian society. The facility with which we bear the distresses of the poor, the reluctance of the powerful to legislate in the interests of the weak, of the rich to legislate in the interests of the poor, I attribute, not so much to the selfishness of our nature as to the fact that the Church does not keep steadily before our faces and close to our eyes the love aspect of Christianity. Look at the dwellings of the poor in our large cities. The desire for a good investment will cover the country with

a network of railways, for which land is taken and money found, but Christianity has not induced our rich and influential classes to insist that the homes of the poor shall be made a State question, to go to Parliament for power to take land and find money, so that our poor may live decently in the presence of their brethren. Call ourselves Christians! Do you think that Jesus would call it a Christian land if he walked about the West-end in the morning and about the East-end in the afternoon. Do you think he would accept the trumpety excuses ^{w_k} make for letting our brothers and sisters starve, and rot, and sin into abysses of degradation, or at the best live lives of monotonous toil, in wretched homes, with scarce a motive to industry their future being without hope? I know the wretched objections which Dives makes to getting up from his table when his servants tell him that Lazarus is really in a bad way. "I cannot help him; Political economy forbids." Christianity says, "So much the worse for political economy." "The poor shall never cease out of the land." "No reason for not doing our best for them, there need not be such poor, and scripture you know can be quoted by the most disreputable people." "They must help themselves." "True in some things, but in some they depend on you." "Charity demoralises." "Not all charity." The fact is, it is easy to see why Dives is slow to go out to Lazarus. The mothers here would tell me. Your child is ill, he has brought it on himself, he will get better if he does what he is told; but you do not like to leave him to himself, you do not neglect him, you take every care of him, and if you scold, you scold him gently, and why? Ah! you know. And Dives, whose name now is Legion, whose habitations in this city are streets of palaces, would Dives leave his brothers and sisters to themselves and their sufferings if he loved them? Yet to love them is Christianity.

If he loved them, how could he bear the luxuries of his home, the ample board, the cheerful fire, the sunshine of the presence he loves, the music of the laughter of his little ones, remembering those outside, cold, and hungry, and ignorant, and degraded, sick, and in misery, and unloved? May God forgive us—we cannot forgive ourselves.

Yet, as I said at starting, those to whom Christianity is dear need not be cast down. The real thing has not failed because it has not been fairly tried. The Church has fought her battle against the world with the scabbard, she has yet to try the sword. We have yet to see what Christianity might do for us in our conflicts with temptation, in all our warfare with evil within and without, if from the dawn of understanding we were taught to feel that Christianity was love. We have yet to see the mighty effects that might be

produced upon society if the religion of love and love only were preached from every pulpit in the land. Then should we see the rich and influential amongst us, those who have time on their hands, and balances at their bankers, forming themselves into societies to consider what they could do for their poor brothers and sisters; then should we see Parliament overwhelmed with petitions from leisured men. Take counsel ye that are wise and prudent, ye Bezaleels and Aholiabs of the State, what can ye do for this congregation? Here we are ready for the work, and here are willing offerings,—our bracelets and earrings, and any amount of income tax, our rings and tablets, and heavy succession duties; only find ye the knowledge and understanding to devise and do for these our brethren. For how can we enjoy the sweetness and light of life, whilst they are in bitterness and gloom? our purple and fine linen are robes of shame to us whilst they are naked and cold, our bread is turned to ashes in our teeth when we think of them that perish for lack of food.

Ah! my friends, when Christianity is tried we shall stand in no fear of Socialism or revolution. We shall indeed have agitation, there may be monster processions in the streets and mass meetings in the parks, but it will not be the agitation of them that toil, bent on wrenching some measure of power, or some crumbs of comfort, from the superfluities of privilege and wealth—it will be the agitation of the powerful and rich, yearning to diminish something from the sadnesses of the poor.

One last thought, Christianity is Love. Does any one feel inclined to say “Is that all?”—It is enough my brother—more than enough for most of us. There is much to learn in that school. In fact, down here, I suspect we may be always learning, and still have to look for the completion of the course in the upper school. For all that it sounds so simple the life is very hard. The spirit I speak of is coy to win, and difficult to keep. If it is to abide with us for ever it must be cherished with no transient courtship, but with the devotion of a life. To seek each others good, to shun each others harm, to wrestle with the temptations that are breaches of love, to keep under and stamp out all the unloving thoughts that are so easily engendered in the friction and turmoil of life, to nurture in the place of them feelings of forbearance, gentleness, and good-will—this is not easy. Yet our religion requires no less. For the creed of Christianity begins with these words, “Whosoever will be saved before all things it is necessary that he live the Life of Love.”