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"THE SPIRIT OF GOD."

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE REV. CHARLES VOYSEY'S SERVICES, ST.
GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE, AUGUST 2ND, 1874, BY

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On Sunday (August 2), at the St. George's Hall, Langham-place, Mr. Hope Moncrieff took his text from Job xxxii., 8., "There is a spirit in man; and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding."

He said—The present is called an age of knowledge, and rightly so-called in comparison with the ages that have preceeded it. But they are our wisest men who remind us that the real lesson of modern science is, how much we may know, how little we do know. We can write volumes on the nature and history of our world, but all our faculties are lost in amazement before the ineffable wisdom that has so marvellously made and fitted it for such myriad gradations of life. We can measure the stars, we can tell their times and distances, but the further we push our conquests into space, the more surely does the boldest mind refuse to set bounds to the universe, even in imagination. We can analyse matter, following it into its most intricate combinations; we may claim to explain its influence in the subtlest manifestations of life; but none can say what life is, or how will and power can be infused into the senseless clod. With less assurance we may dogmatise in the metaphysical parts of human nature; we may endeavour to resolve man's highest attributes into their component parts; we may think that we have traced his virtues and vices more or less closely to custom, hereditary instinct, bodily constitution, in short, we may come nearer to the *modus operandi* of the rarer phenomena of being, but only with more awe to pause before the question—how came this mortal frame by the first breath of spiritual life; who taught man thus to love and hope and trust?

Whence this spirit which now prompts the ignorant child to overcome its selfishness at the call of affection and duty, and now reveals a new moral law to the prophet of all ages ?

In its first survey of the aspects of our existence, knowledge, indeed, helps us only to despair, showing us all the more clearly that in life we share the necessities of the beast, and in death the vileness of the dust. But this very despair arouses us to look further, and our consciousness of the unworthiness of such a fate marks us out as superior to the rest of creation. We gaze steadfastly, and throughout all the dark tangled web of human life, we perceive one gold thread, broadening and brightening as our eyes are fixed upon it, hidden often, but broken never, linking age to age with a divine continuity, having neither beginning nor end, coming from that same eternal light that gave us birth, and going before us into that darkness which awaits our souls. Among the gross promptings of sense, we feel a purer influence that strikes the tunefullest chords of our hearts, calls our noblest instincts to life, and bids us rise in arms against the tyrannous strength of our animal nature. Though imperfection besets us at every step, though difficulties and darkness are around us, though with a'l living creatures we are hurried on in the struggle for existence, our lives present one phenomenon unparalleled in all our knowledge, and inexplicable by all our philosophies. Man will struggle against himself, will help his fellow-man, will look up from earth and seek a treasure that has no other coin but faith, will joyfully resign his fleshly will, and pray that through suffering and labour he may be made perfect, even as he trusts that perfection exists, and shall one day be beheld by him in all its glory.

To this spirit that is in man we are wont to give a name, that may be disputedly some who, in their own lives, feel and show its power. Apart from the clear light of faith, apart from tradition and customary beliefs, the most thoughtful of mankind, looking reverently into the mysteries of existence, seeing how the human soul sets a cloud hidden point, as surely as the needle to the pole, feeling how weak we must indeed be without the aid of such strength and wisdom and provident care as are revealed in the meanest object at our feet—the most thoughtful of men, I venture to say, have been constrained to kneel in adoration and call

upon the name of God, the Maker and Father of all. There are, perhaps, those among us who do not recognise this divine author, let us not say because their hearts are hardened, but because they are dazzled to blindness or awed into silence. Those who can render a reason for calling themselves Atheists, are seen to humble themselves, not indeed before a Person, but before a Thing, which, as they conceive of it, might indeed be called divine by our mortal tongues.

We need not fight with names, and the proofs of God's existence and nature must be sought by every thinking man in his own nature and experience of life. What I wish to dwell on at present is the reality of this faculty by which we apprehend the importance of things not seen. Call it what you will, altruism, the enthusiasm of humanity, an anonymous power that makes for righteousness, the working of that force which we name the spirit of God, is as much a fact as any law of the physical world. Theorize on the cause as we may, we see and feel the effect, and surely we cannot ascribe a mere human source to that influence which has thus enlightened the dim conscience of man. Again and again have its prophets appeared to guide us to ever higher prospects of the moral law. Again and again, deliverers have been sent to free the soul from the bonds of ignorance and selfishness. In all tongues words have been spoken such as man never spoke before, words which to us, perhaps, sound as truisms but were once rightly received as revelations. In all nations unlearned men and woman have been taught by a grace which to them, at least, was thenceforth nothing but divine. In all ages the sons of God, have come clothed in this spirit, and though they have been poor and despised and rejected of the foolish crowd they have never wanted disciples among the more ardent souls, willing to leave all and follow him who had the words of eternal life. And not once only, but wherever the broken, wearied heart, has sought the priceless blessing of communion with this spirit, it has found a strength which no human power could daunt, a peace which nought on earth could give or take away. These witnesses all declare that there is a spirit in man, and with one voice proclaim that by the inspiration of the Almighty they understand the secrets of this troubled life.

When we see how much the spirit of God has done for us, we take hope; it is when we perceive how hardly the heart of man is open to its gracious influences that we may well lose courage. Not only have we to fight our way out of the darkness of utter ignorance, but when we think that we see clearly there is an ever present temptation to limit his greatness by our weak imaginations, to doubt his power beyond our personal experience, to seek to bring Him nearer to us rather than to raise our souls to Him. We trust in the familiar means by which we think His grace has been given; we shut our ears to the promise that it will be given in all ways, at all times, and for all our needs. We believe readily that God has inspired a book, or a place, or an institution, or a person; it is hard for us to believe the plain truth that His spirit is in the human soul, and that we, too, weak and worthless as we are, may partake of this heavenly enlightenment.

To this very doubt we often give the name of faith, and this trust in our weakness we are prone to boast of under the title of humility. Some of us are so humble that they presume to judge the rest of their race, and to offer up thanks that they are not like the publicans and sinners around them, so ignorant that they alone claim to know the whole counsel of God, so weak, that if you credit them, none others stand firm but they. Such are the men who are so ready with the nicknames of heretic and infidel, who turn their backs on the glorious sun and would forbid us to look upon it save through their stained windows, who try to force the scanty grace which they call sufficient upon us who seek for better things. Light they have among them, for the light cannot but fill the world, but see how they labour to obscure it with the darkness of their minds. Look how their temples are foul with dust and cobwebs, and choked up with the lumber of a bygone age. Hear how their words are bitter and empty, often the mere parrot-like repetitions of the phrases of a dead devotion. God is for them not the Eternal Life of the Universe, but a mere magnified Master of ecclesiastical Ceremonies or Examiner of Theological Knowledge, dwelling not in and throughout His works, but in some vaguely conceived locality hard by within reach of the wings of our feeblest aspirations. His spirit is no longer working in every soul of man, but is degraded to be a mere mechanical force, given forth

by engines of which these bigots keep the key. They strive to quench the spirit—to despise all new prophesyings; God has spoken once—to them, and has now retired from the guidance of human affairs, leaving them as his vicars and sole interpreters on earth. Thus religion loses its divine character, and becomes a mere clever contrivance for securing a degree of order and comfort in this world, and a hazy prospect of sufficient prosperity hereafter.

We are all ready to use this language of other sects which deny our doctrines. These Romanizers, say some, are dark-minded and dangerous; their pretences that the spirit is the inheritance of their sole priesthood, may well be called presumptuous; their boasted rites only serve to numb the soul; it were a Christian duty to root out such superstition from the land. But the Protestants soon let us know that we are to be set free from one set of fetters, only to be invited to fit ourselves with another, under pain of theological reprobation and its consequences in this world and the next. And even we who claim the name of Liberal thinkers may constantly catch ourselves planning new prisons for the soul, which would be a little more airy than the old ones, but prisons still, though we call them temples. We are all prone to forget that God is Almighty, and dwells in no temple but the heart of man. Most of us, if we were humble enough, might understand only too well what the weakness is that leads us to put our faith in the forms and shows of spiritual things. How few are wise enough to receive aright the new messages which God ever sends to remind us of the greatness of His glory, and which this false faith ever labours to petrify into new idols to arrest the eyes that would look up to Him!

Is not this the history of every development of religion? The true prophet, the God-kindled soul, the real lord and master of the conscience, appears among us, and leaves behind him a glowing thought to lighten our darkness. Then comes the tribe of lower minds, theologians, critics, scribes, who do their best to stifle and confine his revelation, and would wholly extinguish it, but for the divine strength which again and again bursts the bonds of man's folly. Jesus of Nazareth was scarcely vanished from the scene before his disciples must need set to this work upon his teaching,

and theirs is a remarkable example of the way in which a grand new lesson is dealt with by our petty conceits. I select an apparently insignificant feature of their earthly mindedness; one of his twelve chosen companions was wanting, and they imagined that their first duty was to fill up the number which in their eyes had a mystic sanctity, little knowing that outside of the sacred band should arise the man who was to play the most important part in shaping the new creed. Later on, it was declared that there must be four gospels among other reasons, because there were four seasons, and four quarters of the earth, and four gospels; there have been ever since to all orthodox Christendom, though in every century God has inspired his evangelists to give new hopes to their fellow men. Need I remind you of that same unhappy weakness which has led men to attempt divisions and definitions of the Almighty according to their conceptions, and would fain sacrifice the grandeur of His unity to such puerile love of accuracy and neatness of form. Alas! such want of spiritual insight was no characteristic of the past; we have but to look around us to see how the earthly soul still loves to feed on the husks of piety. How many men and women are there, whose eyes are blind to the love that falls upon us from heaven in every sun and shower, whose ears are deaf to the varied voices of hope and faith that rise in one grand sweet harmony from the hearts of the whole human race, to whom the true communion of Saints is but an empty name, but who take great satisfaction in thinking that at this moment so many persons in England are going through the same form of prayer, under the ministry of priests dressed in the same fashion, and making the same motions at the same places, in churches built and adorned after somewhat the same pattern. In many of these churches, perhaps, people are praising their God with the obsolete phrases of mediæval superstition, and hugging to their souls theological epithets, which in all probability they do not even understand, with an affectation of as much fervour as if these expressed the great, yet simple truths that are our real consolation and hope. And in how many pulpits, now, are preachers not instructing their docile flocks that God has emptied into a book, into a sacrament, into a priesthood, that inspiration which is the inheritance of all His children! Let us not speak

bitterly against priests and preachers. They are always invited to make Gods for a thoughtless and unbelieving people. It is when we neglect the spirit for the letter, when we are careful to observe customs and ceremonies, and neglect judgement and mercy and true obedience, that our priests are found quarreling about the colour of vestments and the authority of creeds, and dogmatizing upon inspiration to disciples who care not to be inspired. With souls so nourished, priests and people are ready to fall together an easy prey to that real infidelity whose sacrament is worldly gain, whose creed is fleshy lust, and whose gospel—to *morrow ye die*.

Against these pernicious influences there is but one resource. We must remember that the light is eternal at which man has so often rekindled his flickering faith. We look away from our own imperfection to the work of the divine spirit, and see that it is still striving with us. It works like the invisible forces of nature that fill all space and inform all substance, and when our Infallibilities have decreed that it is to use such and such a channel, behold! it bursts forth through unlooked for ways, wherever a human soul is hungering and thirsting after righteousness. It owns no laws but those natural ones of progress and development, which the Almighty in His inscrutable wisdom has appointed, and the unchangeableness of which is but a guarantee that He will never forsake us. Not a grain of sand, not a drop of water can be lost from the earth; what force shall annihilate heavenly truth? The forms in which we enclose it, perish and pass away into new manifestations of our unskilfulness; but the word of God, once spoken to the heart of man, can never die—nay more, it must grow, and though to our sight it be but as the smallest seed, in time it will become a mighty tree. Our mad hands may labour to uproot the tender shoots of grace, but when they are withered in death, the desert will blossom like the rose. Tyrants and traitors take counsel to slay spiritual life, and lo! the cross or the scaffold is but its throne, and high priests and cunning scribes and bigoted crowds come to prostrate themselves before its crown of thorns. Our prophets are stoned, but among the ponderous sepulchres beneath which another age will bury their teachings, the sacred line will not be extinct, and the anointed of the Lord will be

found willing to dare and suffer all things in the service of His spirit. The human soul goes often into captivity, but always it shall return with songs of joy and gladness. For the spirit is ever in man, and from age to age it is the inspiration of the Almighty that gives him understanding.

"God is not dumb that He should speak no more ;
If thou hast wanderings in the wilderness,
And find'st not Sinai, 'tis thy soul is poor.
There towers the mountain of the Voice no less,
Which whoso seeks shall find, but he who bends,
Intent on manna still, and mortal ends,
Sees it not, neither hears its thundered lore.

"Slowly the Bible of the race is writ.
And not on paper leaves or leaves of stone ;
Each age, each kindred adds a verse to it,
Texts of despair or hope, of joy or moan,
While swings the sea, while mists the mountains shroud.
While thunder's surges burst on cliffs of cloud.
Still at the prophets' feet the nations sit."

Why then are we so unbelieving? Why should we thus learn grand national history which we dishonour by our superstitious veneration of its letter, so that its spirit is sealed from us? The Jews ceased to be a great people and teachers of Gentile nation, when they came to look upon their Lord only as a Deliverer in the dim past, or as a Messiah in the far-off future. They preserved their glory and their inspiration so long as they believed that He was among them, and called upon the name of the *living* God. The work of each hero and prophet was then but the warrant of new deliverances, purer revelations. What was the request of the great prophet's greater disciple when his master was taken from him? Not that he might have understanding to store up the lessons of the departed teacher, and to expound his words, but Elisha was bold and cried, *let a double portion of Thy spirit be upon me*. He trusted that his eyes could be opened to see greater things ; nor was his faith in vain.

This should be an example for us. It is no presumption in man to trust in the fountain of the sacred spirit as ever flowing and inexhaustible. We may despise the pure water, but we cannot taint the spring. Grateful for the lessons that have been given us, through history, through nature, through the still small voice of conscience, humble when we consider the perverseness which we oppose to the divine teaching, let us take courage from God's greatness against our infirmities, and praise His name for what we shall yet learn of His ways.

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