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TRINITY SUNDAY.

A SERMON,

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

MAY 31ST, 1874, BY THE

REV. CHARLES VOYSEY

[From the EASTERN POST, June 6th, 1874.]

On Sunday (May 31st) at St. George's Hall, Langham-place, the Rev. C. Voysey took his text from Psalm cxlv., 10., "All Thy works praise Thee O Lord, and Thy saints give thanks unto Thee."

He said—As the world grows older and wiser, men begin to be weary of Theology, and to care more for Religion. On this Trinity Sunday I might, perhaps, be expected to go over the old and tedious ground of a barren controversy, and to shew, for the thousandth time, that Three can never be One, nor One ever be Three, in the same arithmetical sense of the terms. But I am in no mood for so wearisome and thankless a task. In an orthodox pulpit such a renewal of a worn-out discussion might be very useful and appropriate; but surely, in a place like this, it would be a waste of time, if not an affront to your understandings, to go over ground every inch of which must be already painfully familiar.

Moreover, the doctrine of the Trinity, as laid down in the Athanasian Creed, however distinctly set forth in language, however frequently and solemnly repeated, has never yet been believed by a human being. It is as impossible for one to believe two contradictory and intelligible propositions, as it is for one to walk on the water, or to fly without wings. Every professed Trinitarian is mentally conscious of believing in Three Gods, or in only one of them at a time. No one ever achieved the miracle of believing that the Three are not Three but One. Christendom is divided between those who worship Jesus as Supreme God, those who worship his mother as Supreme, and a very small minority who worship the Father. They are all practically Monotheists,

because human nature is incapable of bestowing the adoration affection, and trust of the soul upon more than one God at a time Polytheism, which includes Tritheism, is itself a standing proof of my assertion. For, have as many Gods as you will, one of them must be nearest and dearest as an object of worship. The rest fall back into lower ranks.

As involving moral mischief, the doctrine of the Trinity is, perhaps, the most innocuous of all the dogmas of Christianity. It is so purely metaphysical (or would be so if it had in it a grain of sense) that the heart is neither blessed nor injured by pretending to hold it. It is not, therefore, worthy of our attack; it is practically as dead and dry as an Egyptian mummy and as fruitless for good or evil, only interesting as an antiquity, and a curiosity of mental history.

But the passing thought we have given it suggests another of great interest; and that is, the necessary decline of dogmatic Theology before the march of Human Progress; and by Human Progress, I mean our advance in scientific knowledge, and our advance in philanthropy.

All Theology is the result of man's thought and observation of the world without, and of the soul within. Whatever was true in his reflections upon the world, whatever was correct in his observation of phenomena, and whatever was exact in his self-scrutiny entered into and became an integral part of his Theology. And on the other hand, all his mistakes about the world and himself were developed into Theological errors. His Theology has always been more or less the counterpart of his own mingled knowledge and ignorance of the things within reach of his examination.

The very subject of which Theology treats viz :—God and God's relation to man, has varied from age to age with the varying growth of knowledge in other matters. At one time the conception of a Divine Being must have been very different to what it is now. From the beginning "God" has been made in man's image, and I do not see how it could be otherwise, or how else to account for the varieties in Religious beliefs, or for the growths and changes of any one of them. It cannot however be gainsaid that every addition to man's knowledge of any importance has been followed by a marked corresponding change in his Theological ideas. There

can be little doubt that when astrology passed into astronomy, and alchemy into chemistry, religious ideas were vastly enlarged, conceptions of God must have expanded with the opening magnificence of the scale of His operations in Nature. But it is in our own times that we observe this subtle connexion more clearly. Within the last twenty or thirty years the knowledge of civilized man has grown out of all proportion to its previous rate of progress; and with this more rapid advance have come a most remarkable shaking of old beliefs, and a somewhat ruthless cross-examination of the grounds on which they had been accepted. The more we know of the enormous extent of the universe, of the majestic forces which are at work within it, and of the unbroken and eternal order by which those forces are guided and controlled; the less anthropomorphic are our conceptions of God, the less egotistical are our notions of His relation to man. One by one the dogmas are doubted, re-examined, thrown away. We no longer tolerate definitions of God, still less the absurdity of descriptions of His mode of existence. As we abandon the fables of Biblical cosmogony, we dethrone the triple oligarchy which heretofore had ruled, and so misruled, the world and mankind. A manipulating Creator, a Divine artizan who is fatigued and needs rest, a disappointed artificer whose noblest work is marred by a rival, an impatient and petulant tyrant who drowns a whole world which he is incompetent to govern—all these and such like notions disappear the instant they are confronted by even our slender discoveries in true cosmogony. The certainty and constancy of natural laws banish in a moment the probability, if not the possibility, of miracles, dethroning God the second, and discovering the utter baselessness of his pretensions to power.

Scientific knowledge and scientific methods bring freedom of mind and a sense of manly independence. We no longer accede to any one the right to dictate our thoughts and beliefs. We claim the right to think for ourselves and be our own guides in matters of religion. So the time-spirit expels God the third, the God-spirit whose authority had been claimed for Churches and Books and Priests; and the old three thrones are taken down while the kingdom of darkness is retreating and retreating before the dawn of truth.

In spite of all protests to the contrary, the old Theology rested entirely upon miraculous assumptions, and these it is to which modern science has given a death-blow. The theology even of professedly orthodox teachers can never again be what it once was.

But while science is thus pulling down and clearing away the rubbish of centuries, another hand no less Divine and loyal to truth is building up—we will not arrogantly say a true, but a truer theology—a more reasonable faith. Despite all the mournful and even shameless instances of selfishness and cruelty, this age is undoubtedly blessed with an out-pouring of brotherly love and sympathy, such as the world has never before seen. This love colours everything it touches with a golden light. It manifests itself through every virtue ennobling, justice, truthfulness, honesty, industry, breaking down the barriers of caste and class, not by leveling the higher to the lower, but by endeavouring to lift every lower to the standard of the higher. Love is at work among the rich and among the poor as it never was before. No interest is without its passionate adherents; no oppressed soul without a champion and would-be deliverer. Men of high degree think it now their first point of honour to defend the weak against the strong, and offer as a justification for their championship, *Noblesse oblige*. The rich consider themselves most blessed when they give of their abundance to the helpless and poor. The bounty of the world is beautiful to behold; and it comes not so much from ostentation or the love of fame, as from tender love and sympathy with distress; for what we see and read is not a thousandth part of what is being done in secret through the length and breadth of our land and nearly all over the world.

No sooner is any grand discovery made than a hundred kindly hands are stretched out to render it practically beneficial to the rest of mankind. The wise and learned no longer write their books in dead languages, but in the common tongue of the people among whom they scatter the words of wisdom and truth—very often without money and without price. Illustrations are endless. Never surely was benevolence so active, so enthusiastic as now. And this, I say, is beginning to build up a new faith—new, not so much in words as in deeds—a faith which is no metaphysic, but a soul's trust in the Soul of Goodness. Little by little it is teaching

us the alphabet of scientific Theology. The old astrological or alchemical stage of Theology is passing away—driven out by scientific knowledge. The new stage of Theology as a science is now coming, led by the gentle instincts of that spirit of love which is the genius of our times. Men's eyes are beginning to see that if they care so much for each other, God Himself can care no less, that if they find their supreme happiness in doing good and rendering helpful service to each other, the bliss of the most Blessed God must be the same—only so much the more as it is the bliss of one who knows that His kind purpose cannot fail. All our conceptions of the Divine are confined to spiritual and moral qualities. We have abandoned every theory as to His nature and mode of existence as hopelessly inscrutable to us as we are. But we attribute to Him only such moral beauty as we ourselves in our highest moments adore; and strange to say that the very act of so doing seems to add to our grounds for believing in a God at all. Our highest religious emotions are their own justification.

What may lie beyond for ourselves in the future, or for our posterity, we do not know, nor pretend to foretell; only that the past of mankind leads us to expect with confidence that, as the present is better than the past, so the future will be better than the present. If ever the day comes when God will not be deemed loving and trustworthy, and an "ever present help in time of trouble," it will be when human experience and human growth shall have dwarfed these present virtues which we deem so grand; it will *not* be because our notions of good and evil can ever be reversed. There can be no possible retrogression in morals any more than in science.

Our own integrity, sympathy, and trustworthiness towards each other are, and I believe were intended to be, the only revelation to us of the Divine qualities. As we grow in these, we grow in our conception of Him, and, of course, the more these are practised, the surer is the ground of our hope. For if God will not do what we now deem to be the greatest possible kindness in those who love one another, it must be not because He is wanting in kindness, but because He has an excess of it, and will only deny us *that*, in order to confer some better gift, some larger blessing still.

These are not only different views of God and His relation to man, but they differ in kind from the unscientific theology of the past, as the ground on which they stand differs from the old foundations.

The old Theology said "It is written," or "It is decreed by the Church," always having an assumption which either could not be verified or could be easily disproved.

The new Theology asks "What has God done?" "What is He doing?" and answers by pointing both to the phenomenal world outside of us, and to the mental, moral, and emotional nature within us. These, if there be a God, are the works of God; and though they can only tell us a very very little of Him, inasmuch as this whole globe is only a drop in the stream of existence, and all the history of it we know, but one drop in the ocean of past eternity, still that little must be true so far as it goes, and enough, if we use it aright, to lighten our darkness, and to cheer us in the gloom.

Science, at all events testifies there is *method* in the arrangement and action of the forces. The soul of man denies it not, but says there must be mind and will, or some infinitely higher something to correspond. Science says there is a great deal of rough play and even cruel sport in these forces of nature. The soul of man denies it not, but says there must be love behind these sorrows and tortures, for even to our eyes they are not all unmixed evils, but some are disguised mercies as we have proved; and we know that as we would not inflict wanton injury upon any sensitive creature, so neither would we bring any creature into existence purely to torment it. Science says—I can see no good in it. The soul of man replies—You have not seen it all yet. Wait till the end comes, or for more light. Those who have suffered most have least repined.

The really tortured souls whose pains never leave them till they end in death are for the most part silent and patient, often praise and bless God's Holy Name for all His mercies:—

"And publish with their latest breath,
His love and guardian care."

Certain it is that the soul of man must be the interpreter of nature's awful mysteries. Just as his head can weigh its forces

and tell to a nicety the machinery by which her massacres are perpetrated, so his heart must learn the moral significance of the deeper problem, and interpret the end and purpose for which her catastrophes were permitted.

My friends, we claim it as our special function to pursue religious enquiry on these principles forswearing alike all violence to scientific conclusions, and all neglect of the testimony borne by the human soul to the existence of the Divine. Hitherto, all sects in Christendom have professed to base their belief on a book or person, or some authority external to themselves. The New School of Theology which is represented by Theodore Parker, Professor Newman, Frances Power Cobbe and the Brahmō Somaj of India, and lastly by ourselves, openly disclaim all external authority, and as we do not rest upon it, so neither do we attempt to claim for ourselves any right to impose our faith upon others. We desire only to be nourished out of the wealth of the human soul, and guarded against error by science. We are but a small number by comparison with the Christian world. But our views have already conquered a third, if not more, of the Unitarian Church, are held at this moment by hundreds of the clergy and thousands of the laity of the Church of England and spreading rapidly through every church and sect in Christendom. We make no new sect. It is our honour to be only leaven.

When we give God thanks for "all the truth which may have been spoken" let us gratefully remember that it is from the faithful and earnest students of nature that we first heard those words of truth to which this day we owe not only our freedom and safety, but our emancipation of soul from the grovelling superstitions which darkened the lives of our remote ancestry. Religion will one day repay science for her somewhat stern but faithful correction, by returning to her bosom, pure and unblemished, lovely in form, and having a sound mind.

