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"THE PEOPLE OF GOD."

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE REV. CHARLES VOYSEY'S SERVICES, ST.
GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE, AUGUST 9TH, 1874, BY

MR. HOPE MONCRIEFF.

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On Sunday (August 9), at the St. George's Hall, Langham-place, Mr. Hope Moncrieff officiated in the absence of Mr. Voysey, and took his text from Exodus xxxii., 32., "Yet now if thou wilt forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of the book which thou hast written." Also, Romans ix., 3, "I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren."

He said—A frequent source of error and confusion in religious truth, is looking on the prophets of God as inspired in all their utterances by the same measure of His spirit. We should rather remember that the imperfection of humanity clogs even the strongest souls, and that the brightness of truth dazzles the clearest eyes. There are times when such a one seems to be caught up into the third heaven, and sees things unspeakable, which mortal tongue can scarce utter. Again, the lower nature asserts its claim, and the man for whom the veil of Paradise has been rent is seen to be blinded by the prejudices of time or place. Sometimes he comes among us as from the very presence of the Holiest, with a veil over his face, and a power in his voice to make guilty nations tremble; sometimes his words are but those of the learning of the Egyptians. On one occasion the great teacher sets forth our duty to our neighbour under the wide hearted parable of the good Samaritan; on another, we find him forbidding his messengers to bear the good news of salvation into any cities but those of a chosen race. So the wise disciple must not allow himself to be carried away by superstitious regard for his master's every word, but by the light of his own knowledge in spiritual things must take care to separate the gold from the alloy, the temporal from the eternal. Both are found in every gospel that has yet been given

to man. The one may endure for a time, and serve to feed the rage of that great army of bigots, controversialists, inquisitors, ecclesiastics, and the like, who are in truth but the camp-followers of religion, though so often they pass for its saints and heroes. The other, falling into good ground will spring up and bear fruit a hundredfold, and, so long as the world stands, will increase and multiply as food for the noblest needs of mankind.

Two striking instances of this are to be found in the passages to which I have called your attention. The man who prays:—"Blot me out of the book which thou hast written," has his hands red with the human blood which he imagines that God will accept as a sacrifice for the sins of the people. The man who cries:—"Let me be accursed from Christ for the sake of my brethren," goes on to show that he means only his brethren according to the flesh, those who were Israelites, to whom, as he thought, pertained the adoption and the promises. Yet when we consider what those hopes were, which the two great expounders of the old and the new dispensations were willing to sacrifice in their burning love for others, we must look upon these as among the grandest and most instructive passages in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Moses rises in moral stature above the God who is represented as peevish, capricious, and revengeful. Paul offering soul as well as body to eternal death, seems to beggar that conception which we have called divine, that a man should give his blood for the sins of the world. Let us rejoice that their words remain to put to shame that ignoble teaching which even among ourselves would make religion only a more cautious and far seeing form of selfishness, and teach us that our one work in the world is to save our own miserable souls from whatever fate awaits our fellow-men.

A lofty summit which the great men of old only caught sight of here and there through clouds of superstition, is now coming full in our view, though it may yet be long before we stand upon it and command the glorious prospect beyond. The moral sense of our age finds it impossible to rejoice in visions of a paradise, one of the joys of which shall be to sing endless hallelujahs over the agonies of lost souls. The great doctrine, that which may well be said to mark the dawn of a new dispensation, has taken root, and is lifting its head above the weeds that had almost choked it; and men are

learning that they are brothers indeed. Once let us feel this and we can no longer believe that our common father has a special regard for any chosen race or favoured individual.

Hitherto a narrower conception of God's love has reigned in our minds, and we see the results. When this life was all the clear promise, the enemies of the Lord were to be smitten hip and thigh. To obey was to hew Agag in pieces; it was a holy mission to make Jezebel food for dogs. In time came dim glimpses of a life beyond the grave: and here, too, the ignorant zeal of man was busy to deny his inheritance to the stranger and the Gentile. The Jewish vision of a place of future punishment, took form and colour from the foul fires of the valley of Gehenna; and the fierce temper of Aryan converts made these fires more hot and hideous. Then all through the middle ages, the fear of hell sat like a nightmare upon the hearts of men, a fear so unbearable that it overleapt itself. Such a horrible picture could not be realized; if realized, it was madness and despair. The Catholic Church of that day but obeyed the voice of nature in putting its purgatory before the eternal hell, and giving its votaries hope that such sufferings might have an end. By and bye came the Reformation, and in this reaction against Roman teachings, our orthodox theologians would again have brought hell into the foreground of their religious scenery. But as the light of truth dawns, these avenging flames grow paler and paler, and now, to most intelligent men of all sects, they are little more than an ugly dream.

That the notion of eternal punishment is falling into general contempt, or at least neglect, is evident to any one who cares to read the thoughts of his generation. In such matters we must not be misled by creeds. If we were to look merely at the published dogmas of the religious world, we should come to quite a different opinion. But churches are like barometers which, show not only the present state of the weather, but that at which they were last set; it is a pity we do not set our barometers oftener. One hand marks a time when we believed that Jews, Turks, infidels and heretics were objects of the wrath and vengeance of God. The other has evidently risen a long way, and still is rising, for churches, no more than barometers, can resist the atmospheric pressure. So we see a strange contradiction of belief and dogma. Most ortho-

dox people would perhaps tell you that they believed in hell, but it is quite clear that they would rather not talk about it; many of them frankly and vehemently deny it. The subject is studiously avoided in the majority of pulpits, or, if not, is introduced with an apologetic air, and touched upon in a vague, hasty manner that shows it advocates to be ashamed of it. The doctors and dignitaries of the establishment have for some time been hard at work trying to explain to themselves and to one another, how they may continue to say that beyond doubt certain persons shall perish everlastingly, without meaning anything in particular. The churchman has his cut and dry theory; man is in a state of sin and reprobation, God has constructed a machinery of grace; through this only have we any prospect of escape. But if you press him as to the future state of those who do not or cannot avail themselves of this machinery, he hesitates to answer, and his kindness clearly refuses to let him go with his creed to all its logical lengths; so you leave him with a suspicion that his God would be no more consistent than himself. Liberal clergymen notoriously reject the notion of eternal damnation, though the Athanasian curses are chanted very prettily in some of their churches. The so-called Evangelical school, to do it justice, tries harder to keep by its traditions, but there seems something remarkably suggestive, in the very vehemence with which it endeavours to express its belief on this point. One of the most popular organs of the dissenting world has for some time been feeling its way out of the necessity of doubting God's justice, and has got to this point, that it is open to all orthodox Christians to hold that the wicked and unbelieving are not tortured, but annihilated after death. These are signs of the times; and though the preachers are wholly dumb, there are a thousand voices proclaiming that man's spirit, entering into a richer inheritance of blessing, has beheld wider realms of God's goodness. Our whole literature is saturated with a belief or an unbelief, in which endless miseries for any part of our race, have no more place than the existence of a devil with horns and tail.

This divine thought which now comes fuller in view, this revelation which the old prophets saw afar off, is the greatest glory of our age. Beside such a discovery in moral science, how small things are our steam engines and spectroscopes. To believe this

truth is to be born again. Do not say it is mere cowardice and dislike of the unpleasant conditions of existence—though there is something that might be said on this point—which is working this change, and making us willing to take an easy rose coloured view of God's dealings with man. Life has still sad and stern aspects to try our faith and endurance ; it is only hopeless woe in which we refuse to believe. The hell which we imagined was for others, for the heathen, for the impenitent; for ourselves we always left some loophole of escape. But it is the men who are nearest heaven, who now tell us that there are no flames which its streams of mercy cannot quench. The new faith is the work of quickened sympathy, wider knowledge, real humility. It is when we consider our imperfection, shared by the rest of mankind, the varied surroundings which mould the opinions of ourselves and our neighbours, the unequal measures of capability and opportunity which have been bestowed upon us, it is only, I say, when we rise above ignorance and pride and selfishness, that we feel it would be cruel in an Omnipotent Creator to exact eternal vengeance on any soul of man, and base in us to cringe for the favour of such a being, great only in his resistless strength. We cease to look on it as our duty to put the idolatrous nations to the sword ; we begin to believe that the wicked shall not be cast into a hopeless hell ; we come to see that the people of God are no elect saints, no chosen tribe, but all the nations of the earth. Then we know in truth that to love God whom we have not seen, is to love our brothers who sin and suffer side by side with ourselves.

When we wish to estimate the moral progress of man, we do right to mark his highest point of thought, for a good thought can never die, and its being put into deeds is only a matter of time. But looking forward to our ideal, we must constantly remind ourselves how very far we ever lag behind it. And seeing the lessons we have still to learn, we may well say that we have not yet mastered the alphabet of love. It is easy to abolish a conception of hell, half terrible, half grotesque, and altogether out of keeping with the taste of our age. It is a cheap thing to be generous with spiritual blessings which we proclaim to be as free as the air. But let us ask what we give our brothers from that which is our own, and yet, if we knew it, not our own.

The inquisitors of old were consistent in their belief, who burned men's bodies that souls might be saved from eternal fires. What shall we say, if we leave bodies and minds in such a state that Earth itself seems a hell for the soul? Pain we have always with us; we may call it punishment, trusting our Father that in love He chastens us. It is useless to ask why we suffer; enough, that we suffer *by* sin, and our hope is that these sufferings are not endless, that we are being purified by these trials. God has appointed means of help; do we labour night and day that these means may be placed within the reach of those whose need is sorest? It is with loving pity or proud scorn that we regard our brethren on whom the mysterious curse lies heavier than on ourselves? Is our own salvation our least care, and our greatest that others may taste and see that the grace given us is good? Alas! we strive blindly and fiercely for the light itself, and care not that the crowds below are still dwelling in a gloom where there is no human help or hope—none but the spirit of God which can turn the deepest darkness into day. Vain boasting over our attainments! It is but a reflection of the truth that we see, if its rays do not shine in our lives, only that soul which gives light to other draws nearer to the glory of the sun.

Is it not sad to see the selfishness of men—a selfishness which only changes its object when it seeks spiritual exclusiveness, and its form, when it extends itself from individuals to communities! Think of the narrow views of duty and interest in which we are so often educated, taught to seek a certain standard of virtue, not because it is the inheritance of the great human heart, but that we may do honour to such a family, such a school, such a college which thus instructs us to make pride rather than humility the motive spring of our religion. See then, how we are divided into classes and cliques, each priding itself on its moral and material superiority to others. If the Beelzebub of old romance could observe the ways of men, would he not laugh to see now these self-righteous, self-deceiving herds flock to worship as God the godlike man, who bade the simplest and the sinfullest seek him first, whose heart was most open to the vilest outcast of earth. Need I speak of our churches and chapels? These, on ultimate analysis, will be found to subsist in separation, chiefly through differences of culture which we think it necessary to maintain as barriers for

our sinful pride. Look abroad, and we find people set against people, continent separated from continent by Atlantics of ignorance and selfishness. Almost every nation in Europe names itself Christian, and how complacently we boast of our Established Churches, and call God to witness that His temples are revered in every land. His blessing is involved on all our public acts ; his law is proclaimed to be the guide of our policy. But brush away these flimsy forms like a cobweb ; read the honest paragraphs of your newspapers, and say if there is a single government in Europe which does not habitually act on the assumption that the policy of its most Christian neighbours is absolute selfishness, and that every nation wants but the power and a mere figment of excuse, to proceed to what in private life would be called murder and robbery. We may see that little but the fear of punishment restrains us from vulgar larceny, when it is with impious hymns to our common Father, and accursed blessing of bloodstained banners in His name that men set about stealing a province, or slaughtering half a million of their fellow creatures. Good God ! how far are thy children yet from home !

Our national life is not altogethe unchristain. We do something to educate grovelling classes, and dependent peoples ; we send out missionaries to those whom we call the heathen ; and from some aspects such attempts are wholly creditable to us. But there are features of our missions, which, as I should wish to explain more fully, did time permit, distinguish them from the zeal of genuine humanity. They are sectarian for the most part, and love of our brother as man, trust in him as the child of God, find no place in the creeds of our sects. The statesmen who believe blood and iron to be the only strength of national prosperity, are but the natural outcomes of religions which grant salvation to particular races, or creeds, or congregations. What we should most earnestly support is a home mission to ourselves, to bring our sympathies from the narrow courts and alleys in which they are confined. The most enlightened of us know best how wide is this field of exertion.

To love our neighbour as ourself, how easy it sounds to the tender heart, but how hard it proves when we have not only to make open war against selfishness, but to temper the very zeal of our better nature ! Love leads to "hate of sin that hinders loving," and in our hot haste we cannot pause to separate the sin and the sinner, and would call down thunder from heaven upon our brothers who make light of its law. It is hard, I grant, not to believe sometimes in a hell for the enemies of the Lord and His people. They are not only degraded savages and hardened outlaws whom we are tempted to look upon as cut off from grace. When we see the cruel selfishness with which respectable church-going

people make their way in the world over the bodies and souls of their poorer brethren, we can enter into the spirit which animates the parable of Dives and Lazarus, and take a fierce joy in thinking that a time of retribution shall come for those who so greedily grasp the good things of this life. But deeper experience brings a calmer mood. Vengeance is not ours, and if the Lord is long suffering why should we be wroth? Faith is ready to ascend into heaven with the prayer: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." We learn of the Spirit, and see that as pity is nobler than indignation, so is fear weaker than love.

And then it is only when we regard the sins of others that we wish there may be a great gulf fixed beyond the grave. As has been beautifully said, the highest mountains of earth are scarcely nearer to the stars than the lowest valleys, and paradoxical as it may sound, true humility gives us wings on which we rise to see what the eyes of heaven see always, how far we all come short of the glory of God. When we consider our own temptations, our wasted opportunities, the vile thoughts and words and deeds that ever rebel against the most kingly spirit, the best of us may well abase himself in the dust, and thank heaven that his fate is one with that of the chief of sinners. Oh! how our fears should vanish if we could but believe that we are the most worthless of God's people. Why need we doubt as to our future state, when we are sure that our destinies are bound up with the final welfare of the whole human race; that what God has done for us, He can do for others, and that what He is doing for others, He will do even for us!

It may seem that I have mixed up too closely the ideas of suffering here and suffering hereafter. But it will be seen on reflection that the root and the remedy of all our misery is the same. We must learn that we are members one of another. And as our spiritual being becomes more refined, more sensitive, so we come to feel that while the meanest member is in pain, the whole body must suffer, and to understand that there can be no heaven for us, while one soul is dwelling in hell. At the voice of love a new light comes into the eyes of hope. Then faith takes courage and prophesies that all flesh shall see the Salvation of our God.

If Paul and Moses were alive now, they would perhaps be more distinguished for their works of practical benevolence, than for their utterances in the pulpit and through the religious literature of the day. But this would be their secret prayer: "Blot me out of the book of hope, so long as the gates of omnipotent mercy are closed to the most hardened sinner. Let me be accursed for my brother man, till the least as well as the greatest shall know Thee and rejoice in Thy everlasting love."