

The Peace of Jesus.

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'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.'—
Jn 14²⁷.

THESE words of Jesus steal upon our ears like a strain of heavenly music, ravishing in its beauty, but, we sometimes feel, remote from our present life, ethereal, intangible, unreal. Can He who uttered them have any understanding of the dispeace that tortures our hearts, the fears and doubts that oppress the best of men, the bitter anguish of a world at war, and our brooding uncertainty as to the future? Had He lived in our age, we are tempted to ask, would He still have preached this gospel of peace which passeth understanding? But when we think of it, far distant as the Upper Room may appear from the scenes amid which our lot is cast, the times were strangely like our own. It was the end of the old world. Around that sheltered sanctuary the nations were sinking like hay before the flames. In another generation the smoke of Jerusalem itself was to darken the heavens, and the cry of her intolerable agony to rend the heart of humanity. And blending with the sorrows of His people were Jesus' own sufferings as the Saviour of the world. While He talked with His disciples there loomed before Him the shadow of Gethsemane, the contempt and reviling of His enemies, the shame of the Cross, and the awful loneliness of the hour when even the Father should forsake Him. Yet this was the occasion He chose for the message of peace. Having no earthly legacy to bequeath to His disciples, He left them this most precious of gifts, an inheritance which the world can neither give nor take away. 'Not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.'

I.

This peace of Jesus is first inward and spiritual—the equipoise of a mind brought into harmony with itself and God.

In its ultimate analysis, dispeace is the price of our progress as men and women, its source being the conflict of the finite with the infinite. Through their very acceptance of the finite, the lower animals are free from spiritual anguish. In Whitman's familiar lines

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark, and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God;
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the
mania of owning things,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

Our own early life might be described as just such a Paradise of few possessions, easy ambitions, and simple animal pleasures. But as the infinite value of life opens out before us, there invariably come responsibilities, worries and troubles, pains and sorrows, moral struggles and temptations, with the depressing sense of shortcoming and sin. We will to do the right; but too often the flesh is weak, and we do instead the evil that we would not. This conflict of the spirit has nowhere been probed with so keen an edge as by St. Paul in the seventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. He too could recall with wistful delight the innocence of childhood. 'I was alive'—I lived a simple, radiant, blissful life—'apart from the law once'—when no sense of higher things touched my slumbering conscience; 'but when the commandment came'—when life unfolded its heaven-born ideals before my 'quickened imagination'—'sin sprang into life, and I died'—the inward harmony was broken, and moral life resolved itself into a hopeless struggle of good and evil, the end of which was despair. 'O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?'

In some form or other the conflict has been repeated in every earnest heart, and as many are the ways by which the world has sought to restore the shattered harmony. The Christian scientist bids us dismiss the thought of evil as the great unreality; the sensualist tries to drown his troubles in so-called pleasure; the pessimist would have us quench our desires as the root principle of evil; while Whitman would fain 'turn and live like the animals.' All very well for our speculative hours or holiday moods! But we cannot thus escape the realities of life: we cannot either quench our aspirations, or by airy denials charm away the evil that drags us downward, or dwell for long in the years that are gone, far less descend to the level of the brutes. God has implanted these instincts

in our hearts, as the witness to the Eternity that is ours by nature; and we reach peace, not by surrender, but by victory, not by looking back, but by pressing forward—confronting life's duties as they meet us with a firmer, more unflinching courage, mastering our trials and temptations, so making them pedestals for new achievement. In this way Jesus found peace. Accepting His task as the Father's will, He did always the things that pleased Him, and by His endurance unto death won salvation for the world. Thus, whatever storms might sweep the surface of His life, peace reigned within His heart, peace like that of the ocean at its depths or the oak-tree at the root. And such is the peace He bequeaths to us. Lifting our lives into fellowship with His own, He inspires us with the power that upheld Himself, the power of eternal grace and victory. 'I thank God,' exclaimed the Apostle in his first ecstasy of redemption, 'I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.' Not that the battle was over. There remained for him a warfare that was to end only with his martyrdom. But through all the toils and sufferings it brought him, through tribulation and persecution, nakedness and peril and sword, he dwelt in an atmosphere of holy peace and joy, serene as that of the soldier who fights for his country's honour, and is assured of final victory. In the measure in which this faith sustains us shall we find peace at heart. Whatever our warfare may bring us—perplexity, trial and conflict, even at times the renewed sense of failure and defeat—by faith we shall be 'more than conquerors through Him that loved us.' And the crown of victory is peace.

II.

While Jesus left His disciples this legacy of inward peace, He meant that they also should live at peace with one another. 'I pray for them, and for those that shall believe on me through their word, that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.'

The story of the Christian Church is a sad commentary on the Master's prayer. Over against that ideal of mutual love and unity, which should convince the world of the reality of Christian faith, we have to set a mournful spectacle of strife and wrangling, schism and discord, accompanied by too much of the bitterness that belongs to the

carnal mind. In the amazing days of the Church's early triumph men said, 'See how these Christians love one another.' Now the words are used in irony rather than admiration. We may deplore the bitterness associated with schism. Nevertheless, in this field also dispeace has been largely the penalty of progress. As the ideal of Christian life expands, there will always be found men in advance of their fellows; and the duller mass will stone them, or drive them out of the Church, to found a freer society of faith, before they will build sepulchres in their honour. The very origin of the Church was the result of schism. Had it not been for the persecution of the rulers, Peter and his fellow-disciples would have remained within the Jewish fold; and even so they temporized until the Apostle of freedom, the real pillar of the Church Catholic, withstood them to the face, as traitors to the freedom with which Christ had made them free. As we survey the many changeful scenes in Christian history, we see how inevitable were the Disruptions that have rent the Church. Heavy has been the mortgage, but at no lower price, so far as we can judge, was progress to be won, and the Church set free from the trammels that fettered her. And now that we aim at reconstruction, we cannot simply reverse the wheels, and surrender the principles purchased by the blood of the martyrs. In all things our watchword must be not compromise—which at best results in the peace which the world giveth—but comprehension in the great things of spirit and truth—a comprehension which includes loyalty to the truth that has come down to us from the past with a juster sense than our fathers had of the many-sidedness of truth, and an earnest desire to learn the truth revealed through others, that we may apprehend more of its boundless 'breadth and length, and depth and height.' And comprehension must ever be based on humble allegiance to Him who is the Head, the directive and inspiring Energy that 'maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.' The Church that would live must be free to follow Him into all the truth, free to express this truth in language adapted to the needs of the age, free to challenge the evil in the world, free to claim the whole world—its commerce, art, and science, no less than its personal, family, and social life—for the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. To freedom were we called, and in freedom alone is peace.

III.

Once more, Jesus wished that His peace should flow out from the Church to bless and gladden the whole earth. Around His birthplace the angels sang, 'Peace on earth,' and now at the Supper-table He prayed for His disciples, not that the Father should take them out of the world, but that He should keep them in the world, as the channels through whom His peace should pass to the nations.

Here too the history of mankind has grievously belied His hope. After these nineteen centuries of Christian teaching, so little has warfare ceased from the earth, that we find the great Christian nations plunged into the deadliest, the most appalling and hellish of all wars, and hear men asking on all sides what Christian civilization has to say for itself.

The question is staggering enough, and cannot yet be answered with any fulness. One thing, however, we may confidently assert: that, while war is anti-Christian, and must one day be blotted out from the book of Christian civilization, there are wars we must wage in the name of Christ. He was for peace, but not for peace at any price. The picture which Tolstoi, for example, draws of Jesus the Quietist is a gross caricature. While He bore His own sufferings with patient dignity, offering His back to the smiter and His cheek to the pluckers of hair, yet at the sight of injustice or hypocrisy, offence or dishonour even to the least of His disciples, He rose up in wrath like that of the Judgment Day, making His enemies shrivel before the fierce light of His countenance. And this same spirit, entering into His disciples, has made them time and again fight, with a holy courage and tenacity unknown to the pagan world, in the cause of honour and justice. Think of the wars in which free nations have fought for freedom, or chivalrous nations for the rights of the oppressed! Were not these all great acts of

Christian devotion, aimed at establishing on earth the peace which Jesus gives? Had such wars not been fought, there could have been no peace among the nations, or if peace, only the peace of stagnation and death, the peace of those who make a solitude and call that peace. By fighting to the death, often with the name of Jesus upon their lips, our fathers won peace, and have handed it down to us, as a sacred heirloom to be guarded by the treasure of our heart and homes. And in our own day the challenge has gone forth, and the two ways of peace confront us. When the thunderbolt burst, we might have had peace 'such as the world giveth,' a peace that would have yielded us rich store of earthly goods and abundant material prosperity; but the price would have been our honour as a nation, and had we thus gained the whole world, we should have lost our soul, and ere long should have been cut down as mere cumberers of the ground.

We needs must fight
To make true peace our own;
We needs must combat might with might,
Or might would rule alone.

It is the truest sign of the essential righteousness on which our Empire is built that men of all classes and creeds should have grasped the issues so unerringly. And out of the smoke and tumult of the conflict one result emerges clear as crystal, that peace can only be regained where Jesus based it, on the triumph of freedom, justice, humanity, and faith, over all that impugns their supremacy. Therefore, having our loins girt about with truth and our hearts ensheathed with the breastplate of righteousness, our good sword bathed in heaven, and our shield anointed with the honour that is from above, let us continue to 'stand fast in the faith, quit us like men, be strong!' And in God's time peace will descend to bless our stricken earth. For 'the work of righteousness is peace, and the fruit of justice eternal security.'