

WHAT DID JESUS TEACH?

BY

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THE language in which Jesus taught, has not been preserved to us. Who recorded his actual words, or if any real record ever existed, is all matter of guess. Who translated the words of Jesus into the Greek no one knows. In the compass of four pamphlets, attributed to four persons, of whose connexion with the Gospels, as we have them, little or nothing whatever can be ascertained, we have what are, by the orthodox, supposed to be the words in which Jesus actually taught. What did he teach? Manly, self-reliant resistance of wrong, and practice of right? No; the key-stone of his whole teaching may be found in the text: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew v, 3) Is poverty of spirit the chief amongst virtues, that Jesus gives it prime place in his teachings? Is it even a virtue at all? Surely not. Manliness of spirit, honesty of spirit, fulness of rightful purpose, these are virtues; poverty of spirit is a crime. When men are poor in spirit, then the proud and haughty in spirit oppress them. When men are true in spirit and determined (as true men should be) to resist, and as far as possible, prevent wrong, then is there greater opportunity for present happiness, and, as even Christians ought to admit, no lesser fitness for the enjoyment of further-happiness, in some may-be heaven. Are you poor in spirit, and are you smitten; in such case what did Jesus teach? — "Unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other." (Luke, vi, 29) Surely better to teach that "he who courts oppression shares the crime;" and, if smitten once to take careful measure to prevent a future smiting. Jesus teaches actual invitation of injury. Shelley breathed higher humanity: —

"Stand ye calm and resolute,
Like a forest close and mute,
With folded arms and looks, which are
Weapons of an unvanquished war."

There is a wide distinction between passive resistance to wrong, and courting further injury at the hands of the wrongdoer.

In the teaching of Jesus, poverty of spirit is enforced to the fullest conceivable extent: "Him that taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee, and of him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again." (Luke vi, 29, 30) Poverty of person, is the only possible sequence to this extraordinary manifestation of poverty of spirit. Poverty of person is attended with many unpleasantnesses; and Jesus, who knew that poverty would result from his teaching, says, as if he wished to keep the poor content through their lives with poverty, "Blessed

be ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” (Luke vi, 20) “But woe unto you that are rich, for ye have received your consolation.” (Luke vi, 24) He pictures one in hell, whose only related vice is that in life he was rich; and another in heaven, whose only related virtue is that in life he was poor. (Luke xvi, 19-31) He affirms it is more difficult for a rich man to get into heaven, than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. (Luke xvii, 25) The only intent of such teaching could be to induce the poor to remain content in this life, with the want and misery of their wretched state in the hope of higher recompense in some future life. Is it good to be content with poverty? Is it not far better to investigate the causes of poverty, with a view to its cure and prevention? The doctrine is most horrid which declares that the poor shall not cease from the face of the earth. Poor in spirit and poor in pocket, with no courage to work for food, or money to purchase it, we might well expect to find the man with empty stomach also who held these doctrines; and what does Jesus teach? “Blessed are ye that hunger now, for ye shall be filled.” (Luke vi, 21) He does not say when the filling shall take place. The date is evidently postponed until men will have no stomachs to replenish? It is not in this life that the hunger is to be sated. “Woe unto you that are full, for ye shall hunger.” (Luke vi, 25) It would but little advantage the hungry man to bless him by filling him, if a curse awaited the completion of his repast. Craven in spirit, with an empty purse and hungry mouth – what next? The man who has not manliness enough to prevent wrong, will probably bemoan his hard fate, and cry bitterly that sore are the misfortunes he endures. And what does Jesus teach? “Blessed are ye that weep now, for ye shall laugh.” (Luke vi, 21) Is this true, and, if true, when shall the laughter come? “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Matthew v, 4) Aye, but when? Not while they mourn and weep. Weeping for the past is vain: a deluge of tears will not wash away its history. Weeping for the present is worse than vain – it obstructs your sight. In each minute of your life the aforesaid future is present born, and you need dry and keen eyes to give it and yourself a safe and happy deliverance. When shall they that mourn be comforted? Are slaves that weep salt tear-drops on their chains comforted in their weeping. Each pearly overflowing as it falls rusts mind, as well as fetter. Ye who are slaves and weep, will never be comforted until you dry your eyes, and nerve your arms, and, in the plenitude of manliness:

“Shake your chains to earth like dew,
Which in sleep hath fallen on you.”

Jesus teaches that the poor, the hungry, and the wretched shall be blessed? But blessing only comes when they cease to be poor,

hungry, and wretched. Contentment under poverty, hunger, and misery is high treason, not to yourself alone, but to your fellows. Slavery spreads quickly wherever humanity is stagnant and content with wrong.

What did Jesus teach? "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Matthew xix, 19) But how if thy neighbor will not hear thy doctrine when thou preachest the "glad tidings of great joy" to him? Then forgetting all your love, and with the bitter hatred that a theological disputant alone can manifest, you "shall shake off the dust from your feet," and by so doing make it more tolerable in the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah, than for your unfortunate neighbor who has ventured to reject your teaching. (Matthew x, 14, 15) It is mockery to speak as if love could really result from the dehumanising and isolating faith required from the disciple of Jesus. Ignatius Loyola in this, at least, was more consistent than his Protestant brethren. "If any man come unto me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke xiv, 26) "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth. I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's foes they shall be of his own household." (Matthew x, 34-36) "Every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for my sake, shall receive an hundred fold, and shall inherit everlasting life." (Matthew xix, 29) The teaching of Jesus is, in fact, save yourself by yourself. The teaching of humanity should be, to save yourself save your fellow. The human family is a vast chain, each man and woman a link. There is no snapping off one link and preserving for it, isolated from the rest, an entirety of happiness; our joy depends on our brother's also. Jesus teaches that "many are called, but few are chosen;" that the majority will inherit an eternity of misery, while but the minority obtain eternal happiness. And on what is the eternity of bliss to depend? On a truthful course of life? Not so. Jesus puts Father Abraham in Heaven, whose reputation for faith outstrips his character for veracity. The passport through Heaven's portals is faith. "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved, but he that believeth not, shall be damned." (Mark xvi, 16) Are you married? You love your wife? Both die. You from first to last had said, "I believe," much as a well-trained parrot might say it. You had never examined your reasons for your faith; as a true believer should, you distrusted the efficacy of your carnal reason. You said, "I believe in God and Jesus Christ," because you had been taught to say it, and you would have as glibly said, "I believe in Allah, and in Mahomet his prophet," had your birth-place been a few degrees eastward, and

your parents and instructors Turks. You believed in this life, and after death awake in Heaven. Your much-loved wife did not think as you did — she could not. Her organisation, education, and temperament were all different from your own. She disbelieved because she could not believe. She was a good wife, but she disbelieved. A good and affectionate mother, but she disbelieved. A virtuous and kindly woman, but she disbelieved. And you are to be happy for an eternity in Heaven, with the knowledge that she is writhing in agony in Hell. If this be true, Shelley was right in declaring that your Christianity

“Peoples earth with demons, hell with men,
And heaven with slaves.”

It is urged that Jesus is the savior of the world, who brought redemption without let or stint to the whole human race. But what did Jesus teach? “Go not into any way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritan enter ye not,” (Matthew x, 6) were his injunctions to those whom he first sent out to preach. “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” is his hard answer to the poor Syrophenician woman who entreated succor for her child. Christianity, as first taught by Jesus, was for the Jews alone, it was only when rejected by them, that the world at large had the opportunity of salvation afforded it. “He came unto his own and his own received him not.” (John i, 11) Why should the Jews be more God’s own than the Gentiles? Is God the creator of all? did he create the descendant of Abraham with greater right and privilege than all other men? Then, indeed, is grievous injustice. You had no choice whether to be born Jew or Gentile; yet to the accident of such a birth is attached the first offer of a salvation which, if accepted, shuts out all beside.

The Kingdom of Heaven is a prominent feature in the teachings of Jesus. Examine the picture drawn by God incarnate of his own special domain. ’Tis likened to a wedding feast, (Matthew xxii, 2) to which the invited guests coming not, servants were sent out into the highways to gather all they can find — both good and bad. The King, examining his motley array of guests, and finding one without a wedding garment inquired why he came in to the feast without one. The man, whose attendance had been compulsorily enforced, was speechless. And who can wonder? he was a guest from necessity, not choice, he neither chose the fashion of his coming, or that of his attiring. Then comes the King’s decree, the command of the all-merciful and loving King of Heaven. “Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Commentators urge that it was the custom to provide wedding garments for all guests, and that this man was punished for his non-acceptance of the cus-

tomary and ready robe. The text does not warrant this explanation, but gives as moral of the parable, that an invitation to the heavenly feast will not ensure partakal of it, for that “many are called, but few are chosen.” What more of the Kingdom of Heaven? “Joy shall be in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance.” (Luke xv, 7) The greater sinner one has been, the better saint he makes, and the more he has sinned, so much the more he loves God. “To whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.” (Luke vii, 47) Thus asserting that a life of vice, with its stains washed away by a death-bed repentance, is better than a life of consistent and virtuous conduct? Why should the fatted calf be killed for the prodigal son? (Luke xv, 27) Why should men be taught to make to themselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness? (Luke xvi, 9) These ambiguities, these assertions of punishment and forgiveness of crime, instead of directions for its prevention and cure, are serious blots on a system alleged to have been inculcated by one for whom his followers claim divinity.

Will you urge the love of Jesus as the redeeming feature of the teaching? Then read the story of the fig tree (Matthew xxi, 18-22; Mark xi, 12-24) withered by the hungry Jesus. The fig tree was, if he were all-powerful God, made by him; he limited its growth and regulated its development; he prevented it from bearing figs, expected fruit where he had rendered fruit impossible, and in his *infinite love* was angry that the tree had not upon it that it could not have. What love is expressed in that remarkable speech which follows one of his parables: — “For, I say unto you, that unto every one which hath shall be given, and from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away from him. *But those, mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring them hither, and slay them before me.*” (Luke xix, 26, 27) What love is expressed by that Jesus who, if he were God, represents himself as saying to the majority of his unfortunate creatures (for it is the few that are chosen): — “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matthew xxv, 41) There is no love in this horrid doctrine of eternal torment. And yet the popular preachers of to-day talk first of the love of God and then of

“Hell, a red gulf of everlasting fire,
Where poisons and undying worms prolong
Eternal misery to those hapless slaves,
Whose life has been a penance for its crimes.”

In the sayings attributed to Jesus there is the passage which influenced so extraordinarily the famous Origen. (Matthew xix, 12) If he understood it aright, its teachings are most terrible. If he understood it wrongly, what of the wisdom of teaching which

expresses itself so vaguely? The general intent of Christ's teaching seems to be an inculcation of neglect of this life, in the search for another. "Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life." (John vi, 27) "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on . . . take no thought saying, what shall we eat? or what shall we drink? or wherewithal shall we be clothed? But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matthew vi, 25-33) These texts, if fully observed, would be most disastrous; they would stay all scientific discoveries, prevent all development of man's energies. In the struggle for existence, men are compelled to become acquainted with the conditions which compel happiness or misery. It is only in the practical application of that knowledge, that the wants of society are ascertained, and disease, poverty, hunger, and wretchedness prevented, or at any rate lessened. Jesus substitutes "I believe," for "I think," and puts "watch and pray" instead of "think, then act." Belief is the prominent doctrine which pervades, and governs all Christianity. It is represented that, at the judgment, the world will be reproved "Of sin, because they believe not." This teaching is most disastrous; man should be incited to active thought: Christian belief would bind him to the teachings of a stagnant past. Fit companion to blind belief is slave-like prayer. Men pray as though God needed most abject entreaty ere he would grant justice. What does Jesus teach on prayer? "After this manner pray ye — Our Father, which art in heaven." Do you think that God is the Father of all, when you pray that he will enable you to defeat some others of his children, with whom your nation is at war? And why "which art in Heaven?" Where is your Heaven? You look upward, and if you were at the Antipodes, would look upward still. But that upward would be downward to us. Do you localize Heaven? Why say "which art in Heaven?" Is God infinite, then he is also in earth. "Hallowed be thy name." "What is God's name? if you know it not how can you hallow it? how can God's name be hallowed even if you know it?" "Thy kingdom come." What is God's kingdom, and will your praying bring it quicker? Is it the Judgment day, and do you who say "Love one another," pray for the more speedy arrival of that day, on which God may say to your fellow "depart ye cursed into everlasting fire?" "Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." How is God's will done in heaven? If the Devil be a fallen angel, there must have been rebellion even there. "Give us this day our daily bread." Will the prayer get it without work? No. Will work get it without prayer? Yes. Why pray, then, for bread to God, who says, "Blessed be ye that hunger . . . woe unto you that are full?" "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." (Matthew vi, 12) What debts have you to God? Sins? Coleridge

writes, "A sin is an evil which has its ground or origin in the agent, and not in the compulsion of circumstances. Circumstances are compulsory, from the absence of a power to resist or control them: and if the absence likewise be the effect of circumstances . . . the evil derives from the circumstances . . . and such evil is not sin."¹ Do you say that you are independent of all circumstances, that you can control them, that you have a free will? Buckle replies that the assertion of a free will "involves two assumptions, of which the first, though possibly true, has never been proved, and the second is unquestionably false. These assumptions are that there is an independent faculty, called consciousness, and that the dictates of that faculty are infallible."² "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." (Matthew vi, 13) Do you think God may lead you into temptation? if so, you cannot think him all good; if not all-good he is not God. If God, the prayer is blasphemy.

Jesus, according to the general declaration of Christian divines, came to die, and what does he teach by his death? The Rev. F.D. Maurice well said, "That he who kills for a faith must be weak, that he who dies for a faith must be strong." How did Jesus die? Giordano Bruno and Julius Cæsar Vanini were burned, charged with heresy. They died calm, heroic, defiant of wrong. Jesus, who could not die courted death, that he, as God, might accept his own atonement, and might pardon man for a sin which the pardoned man had not committed, and in which he had no share. The death Jesus courted came, and when it came he could not face it, but prayed to himself that he might not die. And at last, when on the cross, if two gospels do him no injustice his last words were a bitter cry of deep despair. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The Rev. Enoch Mellor writing on the Atonement, says, "I seek not to fathom the profound mystery of these words. To understand their full import would require one to experience the agony of desertion they express." Do the words, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" express an "agony" caused by a consciousness of "desertion?" if this be not the meaning conveyed by the despairing death-cry then there is in it no meaning whatever. And if those words do express a "bitter agony of desertion" then they emphatically contradict the teachings of Jesus. "Before Abraham was, I am." "I and my father are one." "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." These were the words of Jesus — words conveying an impression that divinity was claimed by the one who uttered them. If Jesus had indeed been God, the words "My God, my God," would have been a mockery most extreme. God could not have deemed himself forsaken by himself. The dying Jesus, in that despair, confessed himself either the dupe of some other teaching, a self-deluded enthusiast, or an arch-impostor, who in that bitter cry, with the wide-opening of the flood-gates through

which life's stream ran out, confessed aloud that he, at least, was no deity, and deemed himself a God-forsaken man. The garden scene of agony is fitting prelude to this most terrible act. Jesus, who is God, prays to himself: in "agony he prayed most earnestly" (Luke xxii, 44) He refuses to hear his own prayers, and he, the omnipotent, is forearmed against his coming trial by an angel from heaven, who "strengthened" the great Creator. Was Jesus the Son of God? Praying, he said "Father the hour is come, glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee." (John xvii, 2) And was he glorified? His death and resurrection most strongly disbelieved in the very city where they are alleged to have happened. His doctrines rejected by the only people to whom he preached them. His miracles denied by the only nation amongst whom they are alleged to have been performed; and he himself thus on the cross crying out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Nor is it true that the teachings of Jesus are generally received. Jesus taught: "And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover." (Mark xvi, 17, 18) How many of those who profess to believe in Jesus would be content to be tested by these signs? Any person claiming that each sign was to be found manifested in her or his case would be regarded as mad. Illustrations of faith-healing occasionally arise, but are not always reliable, nor are such cures limited to those who profess faith in Jesus. The gift of speaking with new tongues has been the claim of a very small sect. Serpent charming is more practised amongst Hindus than amongst Christians.

Peace and love are alleged to be the special characteristics of Christianity. Yet the whole history of Christian nations has been blurred by war and hate. Now and for the past thirty years the most civilized amongst Christian nations have been devoting enormous sums and huge masses of men to the preparation for war. Torpedoes and explosive shells, one hundred ton guns and melinite, are by Christian rulers accounted better aids than faith in Jesus.

ENDNOTES

¹ "Aids to Reflection," 1843, p. 200.

² "History of Civilisation," Vol. I, p. 14.

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