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## ‘When ye pray, say, Our Father!’

BY THE REVEREND JOHN A. HUTTON, D.D., WESTMINSTER CHAPEL, LONDON.

To believe that there is a God, and that He is our Father, can never be anything on our part as men but an act of faith. From the side of God, the personal assurance that He is, and that He bears towards us a moral intention so that we do well to call Him our Father, will mean that some Power beyond us has found His way through the barriers of our physical surroundings, making a breach in the inertia of our habits, and has established a contact with us in the depths of our nature. It will always be open to us, on the mere plane of controversy and debate, to declare that this deep contact and illumination of our spirits is something purely subjective—a mirage which rises about our minds from the atmosphere of yearning and protest, and memory and hope, and passion and the miseries of passion, whether we resist it or shamefully succumb. It will always be competent on the purely intellectual plane—if there be such a thing as pure thinking, thinking, that is to say, that is not shot through with sentiment and prejudice—to say that those lights that arise and shine upon us which faith decides are from God and upon them builds its fabric, ‘its house not made with hands eternal in the heavens’—that all this is subjectivism, *aberglaube*, auto-suggestion, make-believe, pathetic fallacy, or whatever other phrase we may prefer to embody the idea that we are deceiving ourselves. But it will always be equally competent, and this theory brings with it when it is heartily embraced such health and vitality to a man and to the human race that it will always stand at the door of the human heart and knock—it will always be equally competent for us to give our personal vote in favour of the view that for us these delicate and momentous contracts are the private pressures and reinforcements by One who knows us so finely, and corresponds to our innermost necessities and dispositions so fittingly, that it is only squeamishness, or pride, or self-consciousness, when it is not something more crude, which stands in the way of our calling Him God and Father.

I think, therefore, that it would be a blessed clearing of the air, and would help to define anew

the relation and contrast between Faith and the secular world, were we to confess quite heartily, and indeed were we to insist, that ‘no man by searching can find out God,’ that there is no coercive proof that the final things we believe are so; that, on the contrary, as that first Christian theological tract ‘the Epistle to the Hebrews’ puts it—‘if we understand that the worlds were made by God, it is solely and purely by faith.’ (I shall try so to order my way as to close *there*, with the idea that, when all is said and in the last resort, a man’s final faith is his lonely, and perhaps in all the circumstances his inevitable, vote.)

This, of course, is not to say that the faith-view which finally means the conviction that we all of us and all the time are in the Hands of One who cares for us, and has His proposals for us, which proposals He will never abandon, wherefore we call Him God and Father—this is not to say that the faith-view has nothing to say for itself, and that it can never be anything else but an intuition or a *pis-aller*. The truth probably is, that the idea of God and of a God in such intimate relations with us that at every stage man might call Him Father—it may be that this is the natural and instinctive and human attitude for us all to take up towards what lies about us and beyond us. It may be that the natural and unreflecting acceptance of life by children is the normal and proper attitude for adult and experienced men. It may be nothing but weakness, and a lapse from intellectual and moral valour, for us at any stage later on to permit the contrary winds of life, the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor’s yoke, the proud man’s contumely, the fardels under which we grunt and sweat, to permit all that, to permit anything or everything, to poison the holy of holies of our life with a fundamental doubt concerning its total meaning and value.

Thus, at least, we may interpret the saying of Jesus concerning little children—that they have an enormous advantage over us for seeing life truly and seeing it whole.

When we say, ‘We believe in God the Father,’

we intend to say at least, *that life means well*. And if, as is indeed the case, we cannot prove that life means well, we shall not be driven from our faith, for nothing can deprive us of the Will to decide that *we shall take it well*. It takes two people to make a quarrel. That we all accept as true. And, indeed, this also is true, that it is not the man who strikes the first blow who establishes the quarrel, but the man who receives the blow and strikes back. If life offends us, we can refuse to take offence. And if you say, 'But that is hard,' you must answer yourself, and say, 'Of course it is hard, but faith is hard—sometimes, according to our Lord, as hard as cutting off one's right hand with one's left.'

I dimly recall an incident of late Victorian days when Lord Dufferin was our Ambassador in Paris. It was a time when things were threatening between Russia and ourselves. My recollection is that at a public reception in Paris, some Russian did something to inconvenience or impede our Ambassador as he was approaching the President of France. But Lord Dufferin refused to take offence, and, appearing to take the blame to himself, muttered, 'How awkward I am!'

In the first of the Corinthian Epistles, St. Paul, after dealing with complaints and controversies that had been submitted to him, brushes them all aside and simply asks, 'Why cannot ye suffer wrong?'

Well, face to face with life, we can all of us do that. Or we can all of us try to do that. And if we still declare that it is hard, we are to believe that if we will take pains and look in the proper quarter, there is something given to us beneath the surface which makes it not impossible even for us average people to keep up this magnanimous and forgiving mood towards life. A good man in the Old Testament once declared that even if God should strike him dead, he would yet trust Him. And he is not the only one who has found himself capable of such a mood; and the fact is God strikes us all dead one day.

If we will try to look without bitterness at life, we shall agree that an immense amount of all that makes the belief in God's Fatherhood difficult, is the result, direct or indirect, of what we call the freedom of the human will. For freedom to choose—and this, whatever limitation we must admit, is a true human faculty—carries with it the liability

to choose wrongly. And these wrong choices in the case of millions upon millions of people through all the ages of human history, must have created a complex of evil, which indeed, were there no redeeming principle at the heart of things eternally active and vigilant, would long since have gone over our souls. Of course, you might conceive of a world in which human beings were not free, or you might conceive of a world without 'conditions,' though this hardly. Indeed, it is as hard to conceive of a world without conditions as it would be for us to conceive of a world or ourselves to live in it—without gravitation and without laws. But even if we could conceive of human life without freedom, and without the liability to err which freedom involves, it would be a condition which would be the end of man. It would be a condition which, had we the power, we should reject: 'For how much better is a man than a sheep?'

And here is another point. As a matter of history, life has rarely been accused or denounced by its really deep sufferers. Like our Lord, all the deep sufferers, the martyr-spirits, have not cursed life but have blessed it. 'Father, I thank thee,' so our Lord prayed at the foot of the Cross, lest later His mind might be confused with the agony of the pain—'Father, I thank thee, that I have known thee'—that is, that He had lived.

No, life has been cursed for the most part by those whose wounds were less deep, certainly not so deep but that they could separate them from themselves and write about them, sometimes even writing quite profitably! For a man is not so deeply hurt by life as he may suppose who is still able to tell you how he is feeling, and able even to revise the proofs of what he had written, touching up the story here and there.

For there is one thing we are compelled to say about life: it is the one game in which the mere spectators see very little, and certainly miss the finer points.

Explain it as you will, the fact is that the great sufferers have been great believers: and they have been most sure of God who were sure of nothing else—in the case of Jesus, not sure of His food, or of a place whereon to lay His head.

You might state the entire truth of the matter and say that life is just what we make it from the

moral point of view. There is a sense in which it is true that we can make anything we like of this life. If we decide to live by inferior or low motives, if we care to make nothing more of this present life,—which, after all, is the great Temple of God with heaven for its dome,—if we care to make nothing more of this Temple than a playground, or a place of merchandise—we may. And as we go on, on the way we have chosen, we shall come upon many things to prove that we have chosen quite rightly. There are circumstances in this world which can be made to support any standpoint, any way of looking at life and of living. Slowly the world becomes what we take it for. ‘According to your faith, be it unto you!’

The question, therefore, of supreme importance, the question which lies at the back of all others, is, what do we think of ourselves? For the fact is—and in our Lord’s saying about the way and the end it is once more announced—we all reap according as we sow; we attain—I mean in the way of character, quality of life, moral destiny—to what we propose; we become what we mean; we see what we believe.

What do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world? That is the question, and all others can wait. What part have you chosen? What are you making for? Because the fact is you shall have your way.

Now, these are questions which we must all deal with in one way or another as seems good to us. Is this God’s world, or is it not? Are the things which are seen—this solid earth, and the things of the world—are these a mere passing show? And are the things which we do not see, the things of the soul, its sense of God and the future—are these the real and abiding things? For what purpose have I been placed here? What am I doing? What am I making of myself?

These are really so many phases of the profound question—Do I believe in God? Do I believe that life is penetrated by a holy endeavour, and that that endeavour is pressing upon *me* to yield to it, and to increase its force in the world?

Put in that way, I can imagine two different answers, two difficulties suggested, which, if we could not meet them, might encourage some to put this question as to the momentousness of

our life away from them, or to postpone their decision about it.

I can imagine, for example, one saying: ‘But is that not a question concerning which one may suspend judgment? Is not that a question concerning which one may delay a personal decision until the evidence is clearer and quite overwhelming? Is it not possible to go on with one’s life, leaving such an ultimate question aside for the time?’ To this we must say: No, it is not possible. It is not possible to observe neutrality here, or to hold our minds in suspense. For, the fact is, we have already taken a standpoint: we are already acting upon a certain theory about ourselves and about the world. In refusing to decide whether we belong to God, and are here to embody His will and to prosecute it in the world—in refusing to decide that question, we have decided it, and decided against Christ and against the testimony of faith. In refusing to decide whether our whole being is due to God, we have decided that meanwhile it is not. We cannot remain neutral in a matter of this kind once it has been raised, any more than we can go on living without having decided upon the excellence of right over wrong, of good over evil.

The other difficulty which may be raised when one is asked to come to terms with himself, when one is asked to make up his mind upon his life, what it means, how he proposes to use it, and how it is likely to end here, and appear elsewhere—is to say, ‘All these matters are very obscure.’ ‘We do not know.’ ‘We see through a glass darkly.’ ‘We know not whither we go, and how can we know the way?’

To which our Lord Jesus replies, ‘Ye know the way: pursue it, and leave the revealing of the end to God.’

‘We see through a glass darkly.’ That is true. Yet what we do see is *there*, and it is real. We know in part: true. Yet what we do know is real, and it abides. For we do see some things. We do know some things. And it will only be as we live in real surrender to what we do know, in real pursuit of what we do see, that more shall be revealed to us.

When we present to ourselves the only possible alternatives—that life means something real, penetrating, expressive of God, suggestive of a

Divine discipline and the overwhelming triumph of the good : that life means that, or that it means nothing, and is a mockery and affront to the faith and the dream of the soul, I say when we present these alternatives to ourselves—and they alone are intellectually possible—we know at once that only one is morally possible. We agree that things can only mean one thing and lead to one end.

If that be so, let us act with thoroughness upon this alternative—that life means for each of us and for all something real, personal, penetrating—and from that moment we become sure that we have chosen rightly ! For does not life *feel* real, does it not seem as if it wished to say something to you ? And when you surrender yourself to faith, how sure you become that you are threading your way through all things to the goal ! It is true that in all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark, or to speak more strictly and with our eye more resolutely upon the process, we take a leap in the light and towards the darkness. But take the leap and next moment your feet are on the solid rock, and on the only way.

I do not think that one who has really accepted Christ's interpretation of all things—of God, of His own nature and duty—and is living under the power of that belief in the world, will come upon many hours of sincere desolation when he will demand a proof such as will satisfy his cold reason, that in making the hazard of faith he has not been deceived.

There are some things which when they are presented to us we know to be true. They so answer and correspond to our own mind and heart, that they approve themselves on the spot. The old Schoolmen gave (in Latin) three signs or marks which proved any proposition to be true.

First, there would be a correspondence or fitness between our mind and the thing (*adequatio intellectus nostri cum re*).

Second, the proposition or thing which claimed to be true had something about it which compelled our decisive assent (*aptitudinem ad extorquendum certum assensum*).

Third, a proposition may be held to be true, and the real and indisputable food of the soul,

when, in addition to these marks, it produces through the whole interior life of him who believes it, a certain quietness and rest (*quietem in cognitione*).

In short, when the real heart of the proposition (*entitas ipsa*) corresponds to the inmost need and cry of the mind, and when having been truly embraced by the soul it brings peace and ends the strife, there you may assure yourself you have the truth. For the final mark of truth is not consistency ; it is power, motive, a state of personal honour.

The message of Christ to the world, the Gospel which He achieved for us and declared, bears all these marks and signs of truth. His Revelation of God, of His knowledge of us : His assurance to us that our human life, our short stay in this world, means something momentous, and may mean something infinitely good for each of us : His promise that beyond this life another opens for the human spirit, for better or for worse :—all these things, I say, and the whole impression and assault which Jesus makes upon our complex nature, upon our heart, upon our conscience, upon our reason, are so commanding and imperial when they are first presented to us ; they bring such quietness to the soul which receives them ; they give birth within us to such power ; they so emancipate and complete our human life, that :

' though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or on earth ; as there are gods many, and lords many ; yet to *us* there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him ; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him,'

in whose light we see light clearly, and in whose service we find Freedom.

I doubt if ever in the history of the world there were more people who are suffering because they will not be obedient to the very deepest instinct of their nature, which is, to believe in life.

The distress which countless people to-day are enduring is the pain of keeping their anchor hanging over the depths of their soul—an anchor which is straining to be let down heartily upon God.

