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The Parable concerning Hospitality.

BY THE REVEREND A. D. MARTIN, DANBURY, ESSEX.

'FRIEND, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine is come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him' (Lk 11⁵⁻⁶). That is the confession of a great embarrassment, for in Syria and in the East generally hospitality commonly has had a high ethical value. If once I have eaten a meal with a man he is my friend; in time of danger his tent is an asylum for me, or, if I am merely passing his way at nightfall, a temporary home. As the Arab phrase runs, there are 'terms of salt' between us. I may come even at midnight and ask for lodging and food. For my friend to open to me and set bread and salt before me is an insistent duty, to deny which would be a shame indeed. To have nothing to set before such a wayfarer is to fail in the service of God.

In the interpretation of this parable our first consideration is, To what situation in the life of the Apostles was it addressed? Jesus had appointed them, we are told, 'that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach, and to have authority to cast out demons' (Mk 3¹⁴⁻¹⁵). Accordingly their recognized connexion with their Lord must have exposed them to many urgent requests from troubled folk, and it is certain that occasionally they failed in their work. We have an instance of this only a few paragraphs back in the Gospel of Luke. 'Master,' said one to Jesus, 'I beseech thee to look upon my son; for he is mine only child: and behold, a spirit taketh him. . . . And I besought thy disciples to cast it out; and they could not' (Lk 9³⁸⁻⁴⁰). Thus it happened at times that an apostle, suddenly appealed to for help in a case of acute need, might have to confess his incompetence and to turn the petitioner away, saying sorrowfully within himself, 'I have nothing to set before him.'

Just so we ourselves, who have to represent Christ to the modern world, might occupy a place far bigger than we do, if we were more successful in dispensing that higher hospitality which is concerned with moral rather than with physical needs. At times every Christian minister does get opportunities of solving personal problems which no one else can solve, cases of trouble which, if in part physical, are at heart moral and susceptible of

spiritual treatment. But too often like others he fails to meet the need. Society, also, periodically turns its head to ask of the Church as a whole, Can you cast out the demons that afflict our social life and industry and politics? And with an immense volubility the Church, in its conferences, for the most part only paraphrases the ancient confession of embarrassment, 'I have nothing to set before him'; the resolutions passed on such occasions resembling the outcome of a famous conference between Anglican bishops and Puritan divines in 1661, when, after months of discussion, it was finally resolved to report to the King that they 'were all agreed on the *ends* for the Churches' welfare, unity and peace, and his Majesty's happiness and contentment, but . . . were disagreed of the means' (F. J. Powicke, *Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter*, p. 202).¹

In this distressing situation it would seem that we must betake ourselves to more prayer. No doubt it is true of all our complex difficulties, as Mr. Oldham in his *Christianity and the Race Problem* so strongly insists with reference to colour questions, that we need to do some 'hard thinking.' This certainly ought we to do but not to leave the other undone. For the value of hard thinking depends largely upon the personality of the thinker, upon the manner of his life, his moral quality and spiritual receptiveness. Hard praying is an in-

¹ An illustration of our modern lamentable failure in the formulation of Christian counsel is provided by the recently issued report of a Congregational Union Commission entitled 'The Christian and War,' edited by Dr. Albert Peel. The Commission, which consisted of about twenty of the ablest ministers and laymen in the English Congregational churches, was directed to ascertain the true Christian attitude to War. They took two years to discuss the subject, and then confessed, elaborating the confession with great clearness and force, 'The members of the Commission, after a number of lengthy conferences, found that they remained fundamentally disagreed upon some of the main issues involved in the enquiry.' They might have said, upon *the* main issue, for whether it is right for Christian men to render military service or not the Commission was unable to decide. It may be questioned whether, in the present state of our spiritual life, any other Church, or group of Churches, would have solved this urgent and terrible problem.

dispensable prerequisite to successful hard thinking. The disciples asked their Lord concerning their failure to heal the epileptic, 'Why could not we cast it out? And he said unto them, This kind can come out by nothing, save by prayer' (Mk 9^{28, 29}).

This, then, surely must be our true way, and our Lord's promises concerning prayer are remarkable. Take these appended to the parable we are to consider: 'I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.' It should be remembered, of course, that these promises must be taken in their context, read, that is to say, in the light of the fact that they *are* appended to this parable. The story our Lord tells conditions them. In effect He declares, 'If your circumstances are like those of this man, ask as he did, and you will receive as he received.' Otherwise, *not* every one that asketh receiveth, as we know by experience only too well. In the outcome we shall see that this does not make the promises less splendid but only more truly weapons of precision in our spiritual warfare.

Now there are two features of our parable which are finger-posts upon the path of prayer. First, this importunate person's request was not a selfish one. In its final object it was not for himself he asked. It was that he might be made equal to his duty towards his guest. This is a very important feature of the story. Without it and judged from the viewpoint of importunity alone, the parable would appear rather unduly extended. One man asks of another for the benefit of somebody else. Importunate prayer could have been more simply illustrated from our many desperate petitions for ourselves, as, indeed, it is illustrated by the story of the widow and the unjust judge (Lk 18¹⁻⁸). But it is the very fact that the request of the friend at midnight was on behalf of another that makes this parable not simply an inculcation of importunity in general, but specifically of importunity in the service of others. Here falls a bright light upon prayer. There are a good many things one would like to ask for, about which assurance is lacking, things which would make a praying man's life more pleasant. But the prayer concerning which we may be confident is the prayer that we may be made equal to the duties of our calling as servants of

Christ, as those who are to dispense for Him the higher hospitality.

The second feature in the story which qualifies the promises based upon it is that the man's request was a reasonable one. Then there were neither telegrams nor telephones, and travel was something of an adventure. Hence the hour of the guest's arrival was not foreseen. Evidently it was a surprise visit and the host could not be blamed for lacking the necessary food. If the need could have been anticipated the appeal might have had a different issue. A sense of annoyance at the man's improvident ways might have strengthened the refusal to help. As in that other parable about midnight borrowing (Mt 25¹⁻¹³) it might have been said, 'Go to those that sell and buy for yourself.' But the need was sudden and unforeseen, and the request was reasonable. So also prayer must never be a lazy man's refuge. Our improvidence is no tribute to the providence of God. The Christian worker must indeed think hard and long in all diligent inquiry and research, concerning the needs of his fellow-men around him and of society at large. But when it happens, as happen it often will, that some definite and complex problem confronts us in the needs of our neighbour, or in the public discussions of our time, and we are brought face to face with precipitate perplexities, surely the fact that we ask both unselfishly and reasonably justifies us in believing that the door will open, and as many loaves as we need be given, namely, all powers and competencies required for the Divine service.

Yes; and yet, just because our assurance seems so modest and rational, we are likely to fail in our prayer. Men are seldom energized by rationality. And because of this our Lord stresses the need for persistence in prayer. He seems to tell us that even when our case is a strong one we may not carry it easily. So we come to this matter of importunity.

Perhaps *importunity* hardly does justice to the homeliness of the language of the Gospel. One often feels that the stateliness of the English versions takes off something of the edge of the sword of the Spirit. Both in classic Greek and in the *κοινή*, *ἀναίδεια* is *shamelessness*, *impudence*, *effrontery*. The revisers of the Apocrypha render it in Sir 25²² 26¹¹ by 'impudence.' So here our parable runs, 'I tell you . . . because of the fellow's impudence, waking all the village with his knocking, the door will at last be opened.'

And in prayer, even when it concerns the higher hospitality and seems so reasonable, there needs to be the boldness of impudence, without, of course, its irreverence. As in the Old Testament we read, 'I will not let thee go, except thou bless me' (Gn 32²⁶), and, 'Give him no rest, till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth' (Is 62⁷), so Jesus cries, 'Be impudent in prayer.'

Now let us clearly understand where lies the need for this insistence. It cannot be that God is really like the friend in bed with his children, or like the unjust judge. Our Lord guards against the supposition in each case by most gracious words: 'If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him? . . . And he is long-suffering over them.' That is not taciturnity. Surely the ground of this teaching concerning ἀναιδέια lies not in Him but in us. We are beings of a strange complexity and an unfathomed depth. There are secret movements of the mind undirected by the will. Our personal life resembles a big business concern of many departments, in which the manager controls operations through a central office, he himself seldom coming into touch with all his employees. In such a business, however, occasionally there arises a crisis—a big contract, perhaps, is at stake—and the manager then will not trust wholly to departmental heads, but personally visits the workshops and seeks to speed up all the workers by an urgent appeal. In like manner is the will related to the various energies of our nature. In normal times much of our mental activity, as always much of our bodily function, is automatic. And there is ever a tendency for more of our life to escape the control of volition. The manager's office becomes too comfortable. Hence we lose the concentration of our powers, and our output is poor. Especially is this the case in prayer. Usually when we pray only a small part of ourself is engaged. It is not 'with all our heart we truly seek him,' but with that divided soul which St. James compares to 'a surge of the sea, driven by the wind and tossed'—a few feet of moved waters above profound stillnesses. But prayer, which is to meet a big occasion and to level up our powers to the high demands of a famished world, needs to be a taking into every mental process of the Spirit of God. Richard Baxter in *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, commending a certain spiritual method, says of its operation in

him who shall employ it, 'Thou hast pleaded thyself from a clod to a flame.' That presents the measure of praying often required of us for the higher hospitality. It is not that God is half-asleep but that I am, not that He needs entreating but that I am casual.

Yet it is not a dervish-like frenzy which will avail us. Feelings are the very last things in the world to be manufactured. They must arise in us naturally from the realization of facts and the convictions of the understanding. Much will be gained in prayer by our conception of the importance of the thing desired. Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure* represents a woman pleading with a judge for her brother's life, and as she falters, one says to her:

Give 't not o'er so: to him again, entreat him;
Kneel down before him, hang upon his gown;
You are too cold; if you should need a pin,
You could not with more tame a tongue desire it.

How true is that of much of our praying to-day. Founded as it commonly is upon the theology of *Le bon Dieu*, the most feckless of all our creeds, modern prayer achieves little because it has dissolved the sense of the peril of the soul into a haze any gust of worldliness can sweep away. What we generally lack is a realization of the darker elements in our Lord's teaching. Our spectroscope in its analysis of the Light of the World seems to miss the red and the violet hues. And because we have no Christlike sense of the soul's danger we deepen the risk. The cheap optimism of Christian people is one factor in the cheerful sinning of the world. Had we the feeling which prompted those lurid passages in the Gospels that tell of future suffering, we should also have the daring and persistence of great intercessors, we should take hold of God by both hands, we should even wrestle with Him.

Often did He who thus taught men to pray commune with the Father in the perfect peace of sonship. But there came an hour when for Him too the watchword was ἀναιδέια. 'And being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly . . . saying the same words' (Lk 22⁴⁴, Mt 26⁴⁴). He was knocking at the Friend's door, and it did not at once open even to Him, so truly was He 'in all things made like unto his brethren.' But what He sought was not for Himself; it was for us. And also, with all His foresight, the heaviness of the demand was not wholly foreseen; 'he began to be greatly amazed, and sore troubled' (Mk 14³³). Nor in the nature of the case could He, a sinless man, have foreseen

it all. To holy natures there must ever be something incredible and foreign in the nature of sin, until it is actually tasted through the consanguinities of sympathy with the sinful. So was it with Him, until in this amazing experience of need He

had knocked the third time. Then did the door open and loaves were given. He was made equal to the tragedy of a world that was dead in trespasses and sins; He rose up from his 'strong crying and tears' clothed with the majesty of God.

Recent Foreign Theology.

The Acts of the Apostles.

THIS volume¹ is part of the series 'Études Bibliques,' to which the well-known commentaries by Père Lagrange of Jerusalem belong. A massive volume of over a thousand pages, it is the work of a liberal Roman Catholic, who has already rendered good service to New Testament study by his learned and useful volumes on the text, canon, and other subjects of New Testament 'Introduction.' The long introduction is followed by the Greek text on the left-hand page, and a helpful French translation on the right-hand page, the comprehensive commentary being printed continuously below both of these. It would be hard to mention an important topic that is not discussed in the introduction, for it comprises a treatment of the following fourteen subjects: the history of criticism; the author; biography of Luke (author of the Acts of the Apostles); aim of the author; plan of the work; date and place of composition and the readers addressed; the text; the sources; the language and style; literary history; admission into the Canon; doctrinal teaching; historical value; chronology of apostolic times. Nine subsidiary topics are discussed in an appendix: Jewish sects in apostolic times; the Scribes; the Sanhedrin; the Synagogue; the Samaritans; the Jewish Dispersion; the Speaking with Tongues; the Conversion of St. Paul; the Apostolic Decree. The book concludes with admirable indexes.

The author has an extensive knowledge of the bibliography of his subject, though he does not know Dr. Still's suggestive volume, and sometimes employs editions that have been superseded. If any student wants an up-to-date commentary on Acts in which every aspect of the Book is fully

¹ *Les Actes des Apôtres*, par E. Jacquier (Paris: Lecoffre, 1926; pp. ccviii+823; 100 fr.).

discussed, he could not do better than use this work of Jacquier's. A. SOUTER.

Aberdeen.

The Problem of the Word.

The purpose of this volume² is to explore the significance and to enhance the value of the Word—God's personal communication with man—in the Christian religion, and to relate in this way modern Protestantism to the fundamental conviction of the Reformation. The Introduction shows the need for a treatment of the problem. Faith attaches itself to the Word; and as 'theology leads from the life in faith to reflexion about faith,' its decisive principle must be the relation of faith to the Word. The theology that depends on the philosophy of religion ignores that relation; but a reaction is found in Karl Barth (*The Word of God and Theology*) and Emil Brunner (*Mysticism and the Word*). 'Theology is the science of faith, which is life and knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) of the Word, which awakens faith, and assures knowledge (*Wissen*).' In systematic theology one may expect the Word to be treated in the doctrine of revelation, and in regard to the means of grace, and in both respects a fresh treatment is necessary.

A hundred pages are devoted to an historical survey of the treatment of the problem in modern theology—a discussion of great interest and value which cannot be considered in detail here. The constructive part begins with an analysis of the conception of life as emotion, experience, history, and insists that life consists in a continuity in relations. The science of life must be sociological, and must describe life in all its ways and forms of association as economic, ethical, and religious.

² *Das Problem des Wortes*, von Wilhelm Vollrath (Bertelsmann, Gütersloh, 1925).