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Old Texts in Modern Translations.

Jeremiah xlv. 4, 5 (McFadyen).

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'When *I* must destroy what I built, and when *I* must uproot what I planted, shalt *thou* seek great things for thyself?' That is a question which life puts to all of us, sooner or later. But there are two other questions which usually lead up to it. The first is, 'What do you want?'—the question which challenges us as we stand on the threshold of responsible life. We choose a career, or drift into one. We enter on a friendship which may shape all our life. We begin to create the world of personal interests in which our chief recreation will be found. It seems as if a really adequate answer would require the knowledge drawn from a full experience of life. How can we tell what anything really is until we have tried it? We stand like travellers at the parting of many untried ways, where to choose one is to reject the others, and to which there can be no retracing of our steps. Really to know what we want of life is no mean portion of life's wisdom. It was a pardonable exaggeration of Carlyle's to say, 'Blessed is he who has found his work; let him ask no other blessing.'

Close on the heels of that first question, 'What do you want?' comes the second, 'What will you pay for it?' Again, it seems an unfair question. How can any of us foresee just how much effort in muscle or brain it will cost him to reach the chosen goal of his journey? Nobody knows what any particular experience will cost him until he has gone through it. We must go on paying for what we wanted, farthing by farthing, day by day. Each man learns the cost to himself—rich man, poor man, beggar-man, thief, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker. If any one of them cries, 'I don't want to be this, I want to be something else,' life is ready with the question in a new form, and retorts, 'Then what *do* you want to be, and how much will you pay to change over?' Most things are possible—even to be a saint—if we want them enough, and are ready to pay the inevitable price for them.

The third question is really that of the text: 'What do you want it *for*?' It usually lags behind the others, and is sometimes sprung upon a man in his middle-age, when he has largely attained his ambition, made his reputation, gathered his money. 'What will you do with it, now that you have got it? What was the secret motive all the time inspiring your energies, which now has the opportunity to display itself?' This is the most difficult of the three questions to answer, because it deals with the subtle pressures, the half-conscious instincts, the dim desires, which we have never dragged into the light for self-judgment. How hard it is to be sure that we have ever done anything with entire unselfishness! How easily a man may go on persuading himself that he is inspired by high and honourable motives, by the desire to serve others, to make a genuine contribution to the world's welfare, to advance knowledge, to obey God—until he reaches a point at which the subtle tinge of selfishness, the corruption of a mean, cowardly, tyrannical or sensual spirit is revealed to others or even to himself! That revelation may come through success, when a man no longer needs to pretend. But it may also come through failure, disillusionment, the embitterment of spirit that at last knows itself for what it is.

The question of the text was addressed to Baruch, the secretary of Jeremiah. He had answered the first two questions successfully. He had encountered one of the world's really great men, the finest of the Old Testament prophets, the large-hearted, tender-souled Jeremiah. Baruch's own heart had gone out in passionate discipleship to him, for here surely was a man to love, and a man to follow. When Baruch met Jeremiah, he knew what he wanted. Not less was he ready for the second question, ready to pay the price of such discipleship in isolation, hatred, peril of life. He does not seem ever to have flinched whilst Jeremiah and he stood alone against a whole people. It was worth while to be the friend and companion of such a man as the prophet, and to feel sure of being on the side of God. But now came the third question, the acid test of the alloy of selfishness. It came through apparent failure. To see no result for all your work, to believe that it will all be thrown away—how hard it is to go on working still, for the work's sake! For Baruch, the sorrow of this personal grief was mingled with sympathy with his country's fate: 'Woe is me now: for Jehovah hath added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.'

To such a man comes the divine message, through the prophet's lips. The point of it lies in the contrast between the unshrinking spirit of God and the shrinking spirit of Baruch, yet beneath the contrast there is God's greatest gift, an offered fellowship. 'When *I* must destroy what I built, and when *I* must uproot what I planted, shalt *thou* seek great things for thyself?' It is the emphasis of the new translation which brings out this point. God has lavished His care on a people whose national existence He is now compelled to destroy. God is about to overthrow the very building His own hands have built through many centuries. God will uproot the very trees His own hands once planted. In Christian terms, the prophet's message gives a glimpse of the Cross of Christ in the heart of God, the eternal passion of self-sacrifice that is God's very nature, 'the authentic sign and seal of Godship.' To this sorrowful human heart, God Himself says, 'Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like mine . . . can you not forget your own demands, your little self, as I show you my heart of sorrow?' That is the greatest of all comfort, for it is the lifting up of a man's thought and vision to something far greater than himself, to a purpose of far-reaching horizon, to an interpretation of the universe in which his private trouble falls into its true place and finds its true comfort. The realization that there is self-sacrifice at the very heart of God gives strength, motive, vision, and, above all, the companionship of Spirit with spirit, in what would else have been a lonely world.

The spirit of the Cross is a *spirit*, and not a formula. 'To become stereotyped,' it has been said, 'is to fail in life.' The social tradition, which hands on to each of us the acquisitions and achievements of the past, easily becomes a tyranny to which we are slaves. So it is that, to the eyes of youth, middle-age often seems to be built on a foundation of prudential compromises and tame expediences—and youth is not always wrong. To live by a spirit is much more difficult and sometimes more dangerous than to conform our lives to a set of maxims, a code of rules. But this tame surrender to circumstance and to public opinion is again and again challenged by the essential Christian emphasis on the spirit of the Cross. The Christian is always in need of the Apostolic warning that life cannot be reduced to a set of petty rules—'Touch not, taste not, handle not.' On the other hand, the spirit of self-denial ranges from the mere courtesies of everyday intercourse up to the great heroisms. Think of Jesus in the Pharisee's house, watching with half-humorous pity the unseemly jostling for the best seats. His little parable of good manners—'when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest place'—is not simply a contribution to a Palestinian book of social 'Don'ts'; it is the application of the spirit of the Cross to the little things of life. There is no finality in such a spirit. We do not exhaust its meaning in some choice of a vocation once for all, like that of the monk or the missionary. Those who make a worthy choice at the outset find that the ideal of it continually expands, and makes ever new demands upon them. There is a fine, though simple enough, example of this in the Labrador experience of Wilfred Grenfell. He tells us how his work as a medical missionary had brought him to a home where the mother lay dead and the father dying. Next day, he had to improvise a double funeral, and then found himself, as he says, with five little mortals sitting on the grave-mound. 'We thought we had done all that could be expected of a doctor, but we now found the difference. *It looked as if God expected more.*' So Grenfell had to establish his Children's Home. That is the essential quality of the spirit of the Cross. God expects more, and both the glory and the rebuke of the Christian ideal spring from that divine expectation. To face that continued demand is one of the most real difficulties of the Christian conscience. Where am I to draw the line between legitimate personal comfort, honourable ambition, a respectable standard of Christian living, on the one side, and on the other, the sternly haunting word, 'Seekest *thou* great things for thyself?' If I do draw such a line, God's finger wipes it out.

The spirit of the Cross, then, is the characteristic spirit of Christianity. Just because it is not a formula or a code of rules but a distinctive attitude to life, it gives to the religion of the Cross its unique character. There is no other religion like this so free from the spirit of a bargain, at least wherever the characteristic spirit of the New Testament religion is maintained. God comes to man in the Cross of Jesus Christ, not in the first place demanding obedience, but offering Himself to us as the self-sacrificing God. There is no other religion which does not insist on certain acts of obedience, ritual or moral, before man can approach God and be sure of welcome. But the spirit of the Cross, so amply illustrated in the words and works of Jesus, means that God does not wait for man to qualify himself for approach to God. God takes the initiative and approaches man. God wins man to a voluntary and far more complete obedience by the

graciousness and grace of His own previous approach to man.

This is the genuine spirit of the Church of Christ. Underneath all the differences of the successive generations and nationalities, all the peculiarities of organization and utterance and even conduct, we could find no more universal and characteristic feature of the genuine tradition of our faith than that of the spirit of the Cross. Whether we think of the message or of the method, of the religion or of the morality, it is this note of self-sacrifice, divine and human, this acceptance of suffering for the sake of the divine purpose, which makes the true Church one. The supreme sacrament of the Church is the sacrament of apparent failure, for in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we proclaim, we 'preach,' the Cross of Christ, the Cross which was failure before it could be success. The history of the Church may often show the lamentable absence even of the ideal, but also shows its continual re-emergence and frequent realization. The spirit of the Cross is not confined to the visible Church, and some of its finest examples lie beyond the borders of any organization. Yet it is the Church which best nurtures that spirit in ordinary men and women. It is the Church as the fellowship of that spirit which preserves and hands on the great tradition of it, and in this sign alone can conquer. The fellowship of the Church is built on what has truly been called that right of the weaker over the stronger which is part of the moral structure of the universe. It is built on the principle enunciated by a notable French writer, 'Nothing is lost when we make an offering of it.'

Such a fellowship of men, by its very nature, proclaims that fellowship with God on which it depends for very existence. All human sympathy, all social consciousness, all generous service, spring from a human nature which God has created in His own image. They belong to man as truly as the self-seeking instincts, with which they are so often in conflict. But, because of this conflict, they need the constant reinforcement of the fellowship of God, in whom there is no such conflict, since it is of His very self to give Himself. Morality always needs, indeed always implies, some sort of religion. Life is ultimately a lonely business, and loneliest as it moves upwards. But that upward path, at every step, brings a clearer vision of Him who so loved that He gave, Him for whom living is giving. Morality at its highest, in the spirit of the Cross, must always mean, like mysticism, an 'alone with the Alone.'

This is not the place to argue in what sense God can be said to suffer. It is enough to say that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Christ we see on the Cross, is One who carries the whole burden of the universe, One who does not stand aloof from it but enters into it, One who is not Himself unmoved by the cry of the whole creation groaning and travailing in pain until now. In some deep sense it must be true that the Cross of Christ is the age-long Cross of God Himself, whilst sinning and suffering man works out his troubled course and attains his destiny. It must be true, for there is no solution to the problem of human suffering, save in the divine. This is the clear teaching of the Bible, in the Old Testament as well as in the New. We have been listening to a prophet comforting his disciple by the thought of a fellowship with God in suffering. This is the essence of the gospel. God's love shrinks from no sacrifice that it may save to the uttermost. The spirit of that divine sacrifice can animate every honourable career, and consecrate every worthy ambition, but it is also the secret of that inner peace for which every human heart seeks, the peace which Jesus offered on His Cross. I shall always remember one night in an Austrian village. I had been tramping all day with a very intimate friend, but before we went to bed we walked out of the village late at night and stood on the little bridge over its stream. The village was asleep; all around us, in the moonlight, were the everlasting hills, crowned with their snows. In that majestic stillness we seemed to have come as close to peace as any mortal could, and one of us said so. Then we happened to glance at the structure of the bridge. There, just above our heads, clear in the moonlight, though unnoticed before, was a crucifix. The face of the Sufferer, looking down upon us, seemed to say, 'O foolish men, to think that solitude is peace. This is my peace, the peace I won on the Cross, and give you from my Cross.'