

consecrated whose hands have been filled by God can approach the presence; only the sanctified can ascend the holy mountain.



THE MANY-SPLENDURED THING

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IN a gospel passage which is seldom quoted with reference to the spiritual life, our Lord reminds us that no father, asked for a loaf or an egg, will hand his son a stone or a scorpion, and since earthly parents give their children only wholesome food, we may be certain that our heavenly Father will show even greater loving wisdom towards us. Each day we ask him to give us this day our daily bread and, at least in England, usually obtain it. We also ask for patience, charity and such other virtues as we may be in need of; we ask him to increase our devotion and remove our distractions. Very often it seems that our heavenly Father hands us stones instead of virtues; scorpions instead of grace. It seems that the only answers to these prayers take the form of despondency, failure to *be* charitable or patient, or show any other admirable quality; our distractions are worse and our sensible devotion sinks to zero.

This, admittedly, may be a slightly exaggerated picture, but the underlying truth is familiar to anyone who is trying to live the life of the spirit. It is very disheartening. We want so much to please our Lord and he makes it so difficult. Or so we think. We have to realize that our Lord usually gives us the raw materials, not the finished product. Metaphorically we have to bake the dough and cook the egg. He does not answer our prayers by bestowing virtues upon us, ready-made; he sends us opportunities for putting them into practice and the grace to make good use of them. It would be very flattering to our self-esteem (and disastrous to our humility) if we found ourselves suddenly dowered with invincible patience or impregnable recollection. The age of miracles is not yet past, but we have no right to expect them in our own lives.

Half the difficulty lies in thinking that progress in the spiritual life connotes tranquil emotions. We feel discouraged because the petty vexations of every day continue to fret us, because we feel no zest for prayer and see no signs of progress. If we were really going forward, hand in hand with our Lord, things would surely be different. Neighbours would never distort our most innocent words, our veracity would never be questioned—or, if these things happened, we ourselves would surely be too advanced to be troubled by them. Similarly, prayer would be a delight and recollection too deep to permit of the least distraction. Only a few weeks or months or years ago we could see our faults dissolving, our virtues increasing; prayer was a joy and we had comparatively little difficulty in keeping our mind on God. Far from rising on stepping-stones of our dead selves to better things, we seem to be lost in a desert where there is no way and no water and where the mirage of emotional tranquillity mocks us from afar.

That is one way of looking at it. It is not a very cheerful one.

The only truly authentic picture we have of what God means by human perfection is the life and character of our Lord in the gospel. Whatever he said or did or bore with, sets the standard for us. The most cursory reading will assure us that like us he had to bear with misunderstanding and calumny; he was tired and hungry; he had to deal with people who were arrogant, ungrateful, spiteful; he was tempted by the devil; he knew the bitterness of man's inhumanity to man, and he shrank from fulfilling the will of his Father. Yet all this appertained to human perfection. Nevertheless, this is only one side of the picture. The gospel also shows our Lord enjoying the company of friends, the beauties of nature; being cheered by a word of gratitude, a gesture of loyalty. No detail was too small to merit his attention, whether it stood alone or was part of an intricate scene. Above all, he was *interested* in others, never in himself.

Perfection in us is necessarily partial, but it follows the same broad lines. The catechism says God made us to know, love and serve him in this world and to be happy with him for ever in the next. Unfortunately, it omits to say that knowing, loving and serving him spells happiness in this life too. It is only when we fail to realize this fact that spiritual difficulties arise. It is not only the world that is too much with us; it is ourselves. We are too

preoccupied with our spirituality to be attentive to God.

Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces

That miss the many-splendoured thing.

Being immersed in the theory of spirituality instead of living the life of the spirit might be likened to sedulously reading the description of a rainbow instead of looking up and rejoicing in the exquisite beauty of an arc in the sky.

There is much in ourselves that legitimately clamours for attention. We know ourselves to be worthless servants who should at least become less unprofitable and this, surely, can be achieved only by remitting watch over and correction of faults. This is indisputably true; but 'striving to perfect oft we mar what's well', and maybe we would do better, in many ways, to let well alone and allow God to perfect the cup as planned. As the epistle reminds us, we are like rudderless ships, tossed to and fro by our unstable emotions and desires, we do what we should not do and leave undone those things we should do. We seldom suffer fools gladly and the least breath of criticism ruffles our self-esteem. We deplore these and similar frailties—probably they make up the stock matter of our confessions—but we seem unable to rise above them no matter how zealously we try. It would be incorrect to say our failures are of no importance. But maybe if we saw them in their proper context they would be less discouraging. God, who called each one of us into being, knows exactly what our personal weaknesses are and takes them into account. We are all handicapped in some way by temperament, by the physical make-up we have inherited from our forbears. A temperamentally impatient person will, even under the influence of grace, re-act differently in any given instance from one who is naturally longanimous. God judges each one of us personally, tempering the wind to the shorn lamb; he weighs us not against some arbitrary measure of virtue but strictly in accordance with what he knows we are capable of.

We all have some conscious weakness to contend against; we are censorious or niggardly or self-centred—the list could be extended indefinitely. We are prone to these faults by temperament, not by deliberate choice. We know they are imperfections (if nothing worse) and do most sincerely and persistently try to root them out, yet they continue to plague us with their ineradicability. We beg our Lord to make us more charitable in our

judgments, more open-handed, more interested in and compassionate towards other people, but there seems no answer to our prayers. That is where we are mistaken. What we see as perfection in ourselves, what we are asking God to bestow upon us, is not perfection but the absence of opportunities to attain to perfection. What God sees as perfection in us is the steadfast determination to know, love and serve him in his way, not ours.

We would find it far more encouraging to look on our frailties in this light, realizing they may well be with us for life, but that in God's inscrutable wisdom they may be the very means by which we can best serve him. Particular examinations and confessions do, after all, give us a very jaundiced view of ourselves: it is left to the priest after sacramental absolution to remind God of all the good we may have done and all the evil we may have *suffered*, and as the prayer (which in any case is not obligatory) is said in Latin, this restoration of the balance may pass unnoticed by the penitent.

There is nothing so disastrous in the spiritual life as lack of confidence in our Lord. If we are labouring under the mistaken impression that our prayers remain unanswered, uncertainty and despondency and discouragement set in. We may even persuade ourselves that we have good grounds for our lack of confidence, for did he not say that his yoke was sweet and his burden light and that in following him we would find rest to our souls? He did. If we find it otherwise it is because we do not allow him to adjust the weight so that it will not unduly chafe our shoulders or tax our strength.

Every period of history seems to have had its own particular spiritual difficulties. Few people nowadays suffer from the terror of damnation which afflicted good souls in the seventeenth century, or from the bout of morbid scrupulosity that followed on the heels of Jansenism—though there are still books in circulation that take a very dim view of human nature. And there is only too often an underlying, undefined suspicion that our inability to conquer our weaknesses is a form of punishment for our infidelity to God. Insofar as our failures keep us humble they are more likely to be permitted by the Holy Ghost. There is a cheering story told of St Mechtilde who begged our Lord to cure one of her nuns of a bad temper. Our Lord said, 'No; she tries so hard to get the better of it that she is more pleasing to me as she is

than she would be if she had no temper to conquer'. What we seem to suffer from most in these days is a form of uncertainty. Considering the number of books dealing with the spiritual life that are published—and read—this is surprising. It is laid down as axiomatic that we must mature in spirituality (for God does not want us to be spiritual Peter Pans), and growth entails change. The changes are described at length and usually with lucidity, yet when we ourselves leave the nursery for a more adult mode of spiritual life it is as if we entered uncharted country. Apply our reading to ourselves, we cannot.

It is all admirably summed up by Abbot Chapman: we find we cannot meditate and all our feelings of love have gone; we want to keep close to God, but cannot explain what that means; we feel sure we have no virtues and never practise any and our prayers are nothing but distractions—and yet, in spite of all this, we find ourselves with few deliberate venial sins to confess.

Is it not obvious that if we were indeed drifting away from God (as we are inclined to fear) none of these things would cause us sore-heartedness or worry and that, with the diminution of union—and consequently of grace—our sins would multiply in number and increase in gravity?

Our ideas of what is good for us are often diametrically opposed to those of our Lord and we have to learn that he does, after all, know best. 'It must be good for me somehow or our Lord wouldn't let it happen' may fall far short of the elegant phraseology of devotional books but, coming from the heart with a willingness to co-operate with his designs, it expresses a simple and direct confidence in him more truthful than any high-flown rhetoric. For those inclined to correlate spirituality with suffering, sacrifice and the sterner side of religion in general, it would be advantageous to reflect that all good things come from God; it is the abuse, not the enjoyment of pleasures we must be on our guard against. God wants us to be happy and it is no compliment to him to turn our backs on the delights he offers us—these too must be good for us or he wouldn't allow them to happen. If we really believe that he is our loving Father, incapable of handing us stones for bread or scorpions for eggs, we shall accept trustfully all that he offers us, rough or smooth: it is all the raw material of our sanctification, to be kneaded, baked and boiled in accordance with his will. It is a mistake to think that *we* must conquer

our faults. Even though we are aware that it is impossible to do this without grace, we yet tackle the matter in terms of human determination. We screw up our spiritual muscles and sally forth to fight the good fight with all our might.

There is a simpler way than that. It lies in not worrying over details but having a quiet and steadfast intention of doing what we believe to be right at all times, simply because we know this is pleasing to God. It shifts the centre of gravity from us to him, it makes us instruments in his hands to use and dispose of as he chooses and, because the initiative has passed from us to him, it leaves us free from worry and tension. We can attend to our Lord without preoccupation with self. If, in spite of all our failures and infidelities (and we must remember that according to scripture even the just man falls seven times a day), we have an abiding desire to please him, is it conceivable that God, who is infinite goodness, will set stumbling-blocks in our way?

We all need to set more store by the second theological virtue, hope. In everyday English the word does not express confidence; we hope it will be a fine day, we hope an arrangement will prove satisfactory, but we are by no means sure. In the act of hope we tell God we are confident that he will be faithful to his promises, yet in practice we allow ourselves to be tormented by uncertainty. We must learn that hope in God means having implicit trust in him. One of our Lord's favourite rebukes in the gospel took the form of asking 'Why are you afraid?' and it is one he must whisper to our souls many times a day. All we need is patience, trust and courage: patience in dealing with ourselves, trust in God's loving wisdom and courage to follow his beckoning finger. We need courage because we have an instinctive feeling that following our Lord spells hardship, gloomy self-abnegation and general unpleasantness. Indeed it would almost seem that some people take a masochistic view of this to the extent of thinking that spirituality and happiness are incompatible. Nothing could be further from the truth. Living the life of the spirit means living in union with our Lord, indwelt by the Holy Ghost, and at least eight of his fruits are hall-marks of happiness. Masochism is the very antithesis of charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity, goodness, longaminitiy, and mildness, and it is these which will enlighten our way if we follow where our Lord leads. 'By their fruits you shall know them' was not spoken with reference to the scriptural

list, but it is a safe guide if we would know what true spirituality consists of.

We must learn to look upon our life of union with our Lord as a many-splendoured thing; we must be prepared for times when the mist and the driving rain blot out its radiance and when, bathed in sunshine, it is of unendurable beauty. We must cultivate a cheerful outlook yet not be astonished or dismayed if it sometimes fails us—

*But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry:—and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross.*

*Yea, in the night, my soul, my daughter,
Cry:—clinging Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walketh on the water
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames.*



MR GREENE'S SAD MEN¹

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GRAHAM GREENE'S last two works of prose fiction are very encouraging. No one can deny Greene's competence in the early work, nor his rightness in choosing characteristic themes of the times (violence, *cauchemar*, sex and sin) and treating them in suitable modes (the employment of cinematographic devices, newspaper techniques and popular psychology), but the high estimate of Greene, particularly on the continent (he shares it with Somerset Maugham, it appears), has always raised doubts among his serious English readers. There is the central problem of his obvious commitment to Roman Catholicism which affects the reader; and, it is fair to say, irritates both Catholic and non-Catholic reader. Writing as a Catholic, I should say that the main burden of complaint is the meretricious nature

¹*The Quiet American*: a novel, 1955. *Our Man in Havana*: an entertainment, 1958.