

and Spouse; that as speedily as may be, they may attain to join the society of the citizens on high.

The proper of the last Sundays after Pentecost focus on our Lord's Second Coming until we are back again at Advent.



THE LATTER YEARS

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THE latter years of a Catholic who has held the faith from birth, and practised it consistently on an ordinary working level, represent a period when much that supported the soul falls away, when former spiritual helps are shed and life is left with only the necessities for carrying on. As on the natural physical level these years are a stern test of the individual, of his traditions, good sense, the breadth of view experience has brought him, so the soul taking stock of its spiritual resources looks back to the things that have remained and receives its last challenge of final perseverance. Thus the sum total of what life has taught on both levels lies open now in behaviour and reaction to circumstance.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard, the same penny for the man who had worked in the heat of the whole day, sets something of a seal on these latter years in the discipline of its measure and right understanding. That we were given these last years bespeaks their necessity for our co-operation moving with the times. Now or never is complete integration of body and soul essential for fruitful endeavour.

It has been possible in earlier years to carry on a spiritual approach to living whilst still maintaining considerable division between body and soul, for even under circumstances of some hardship and difficulty we are upheld by our natural imagination. The future is still our own as far as we can see and full of possibilities; the wildest hopes might still be realized, given half a chance, despite the day-to-day hum-drum realities. Does not nature herself thus lure on all humanity?—and we should not be her normal children if anything less than time taught us the whole truth.

Of necessity then our religious outlook is caught up with something of the same enervating hopeful power and the soul's constant cry of 'All things are possible with God', whilst emitting a warm glow en route, has not really much value compared with a hard-working faith carried out daily in co-operation with divine assistance, for such prayers lacking in rightful worship and understanding are not of a realistic nature and so defy subsequent translation into deeds. This somewhat childish approach to our religion often remains far on into our spiritual life. We love all the beautiful things of our Faith, we are moved by its external manifestations, being led by its 'letter' rather than its 'spirit' along a road where even the discipline of its rules and regulations bear a strong resemblance to a training, something to be gone through for a reward, rather than an attaining of pliability of body to spirit in growth and status. In short, our devotions with no matter how capital a D, and even the Mass and the Sacraments themselves, are enjoyed or 'gone through' in dry periods—are left safely, or sadly as the case fits psychologically, *in their own sphere* whilst Brother Ass pursues his avocations. Not that we do not try to 'be good' as the children say, like children, we do, but the method does not stand up to an adult life in this world. We are mature in all worldly matters, even sophisticated, but mere dreamers full of youthful spiritual dope in our religious outlook and working.

It can be a long wasteful period carried on through the assistance vouchsafed to us from within the Church by its priests and the truly religious people we come in contact with on account of our obvious good intentions; but there comes a time through many a small storm calmed over by such influences when we shipwreck on to what we deem to be realism—or worse still, we drift. It is hard to knock sense into the soul; no matter how hard life may eventually hit the body into it, if there exists little or no integration between them and the finest religious friends tend to fade in the face of facts we ourselves have to face in our own way just because they are ours and ours alone. There is not much we can really share in life of pain and sorrow and dire decision—only joy is of universal communication. We can endure, it is true; but our creation being in a Christian tradition calls for something of a different order to stoicism. Neither is the answer to be found in the blind acquiescence summed up in the ubiquitous

tragi-comic Irishman's attitude to affliction, 'It's the Will of God'. No, our whole Catholic training is towards an understanding, a seeing, a co-operation in the divine plan.

The knowledge—perhaps a truer word is the information—from continual ordinary experience is the priceless gift of the latter years. In its simplifying, clarifying light, people and events are better focussed, we find an approach to all and sundry, realizing in turn that the greatest knowledge in man only represents one line of thought in an immense human field, that the most superficial mentality has its flashes of insight, that the 'unlettered' guided by the heart reach conclusions which baffle many an educated head, and through a widened understanding of our fellows we ourselves obtain some balance in human and spiritual affairs which leads us beyond ignorant judgments. We can honestly re-act in the full meaning of the dictionary's meaning of the word—produce a reciprocal or responsive effect—in our contacts with our fellows, and through this grace of charity's enlightenment and the well-worn repetitive experiences of our own spiritual road, sense something at last of God's working and move in *with* it, no longer kicking against the goad.

If this is the virtue and fruit of age's role, several snags are to be met with in working towards its fulfilment, Foremost perhaps the instinctive reticence bred of a long life, but the value of a silent tongue can be over-estimated, even turned vice from apathy; that *laissez faire* attitude of the mind's own coddling, really keeping ourselves out of any possible trouble. We tell ourselves that time will sort the problems out for the other man, that there is no good served by our saying or doing anything, that the years must take their course for us all, etc. In a general way all this may be strictly true. Far better not to meddle is a sane principle and one well learnt. But it is to be regarded with generous good sense; for liberality of mind is something quite as great as that generally understood by generosity of character. Indeed it often entails more labour in its working and far greater surrender. Things have to be so *well* said to achieve their object and opportunities swiftly and bravely caught or wisely long-sought for a mind's successful impression. Sometimes such courageous risk entails a whole friendship where a worldly-wise or even a silent tongue glossing over the situation would save it for *oneself*. To give the easy answer, one that experience has taught

us to be pretty false, can save a lot of trouble, make for smooth going, or be a good bid for popularity which the oncoming years faced with loneliness thinks to cherish. All such mental selfishness deep-rooted in self-preservation can be a terribly insidious growth choking the potentialities of an honest mind's experience.

The second great snag belongs to a character of the other extreme—a natural attitude to a life of 'Martha' busy about many things which tends to force itself upon some of us with time's relentless accumulation of affairs and contacts; it seems to us such an excellent sign of a sustained interest in life, but through it rings our Lord's warning to which we are deaf. All our native capability is so well trained with long practice; we can take on too much so easily, familiarity with the ropes entangles us unwittingly; we make a pace we cannot sustain with either profit or sense and are brought to a standstill exhausted suddenly conscious of the balance of the scales and the years' limitations. In the face of such hard lessons a simple return to the Lord's solution, 'Mary has chosen the better part', is the obvious line of conduct—to sit back and pray. A short Retreat is the ideal, but at any rate a deliberate spiritual breakaway, with no time wasted in vain regrets, allowing ourselves to be acutely conscious that such native capabilities as ours can work *equally for the soul's profit* given its fair chance on a spiritual level; we know ourselves by now—it's a question of re-direction of energy, towards integration in point of simple fact.

All the worth of the latter years is entirely individual in its working. Any comparison with our neighbours' powers are as destructive to its vitality as indulging in useless sorrow over our own intimate past. It is essentially a period where spiritual values must triumph, where, 'casting all our care upon the Lord', we work quietly and sensibly 'while it is day', thinking constantly of God, seeing him in many guises, knowing from all that we have learnt that he really is our *sole* support and finding in this certain knowledge release from anxiety, a simplification in living, genuine integration of body and soul—wholeness. Towards this comprehensive outlook all our energies must be continually directed; we can afford nothing less—'God alone sufficeth'. We shall discover it for ourselves at last, and, like St Teresa, can tell ourselves continually: 'Let nothing disturb thee, Nothing

affright thee, all things are passing, Alone God sufficeth' as a well-beloved hard fact, the only one that can stand up to our ordinary daily life.

According to our particular spiritual road we have probably by now the types of books that suit us, but to read the new approaches to the everlasting values, to be in with the search for truth that will last while man exists on this earth, is part of being here, a real live part. To read always what is familiar rather than seeking anew is an attitude of mind badly rooted in age. It is a stultifying weakness for both body and soul. If it is true that we cannot live to ourselves alone on the physical plane, it is equally true on the spiritual. We need fresh thought for any full life, it is the very air of it here below. And although we may, up to a point, feel that we know what we have learnt, possess a sound foundation and have our own approach to the Faith, we cannot gauge the other man's point of view, or line of procedure, without keeping up with him, be he of our own specific creed or not. His methods, if not his entire line of country, are possibly different. A new jargon about an old matter, it may seem to some of us—quite likely—but we must be able to understand it in order to be equal to it. Nothing static is of any value mentally.

The easiest way to find one's level with current thought is *via* books. A great many of them will not be to our taste, but they give information which we can assimilate in our own way quietly, soberly appraising their modern note. We shall find that even the Bible—the mainstay and prop of our days—in Monsignor Knox's new translation very strange in places, cutting across many of our own cherished quotations; we may not accept its public usefulness, but it remains one of the most significant steps in the Church towards religious integration, having a naturalness in its approach to the Word of God as something spoken down the ages to succeeding generations. And the Lives of the Saints are brought 'up to date' with this same fundamental idea; even the Mystics have their own pysical and analytical interpreters. St John of the Cross's great Canticle has been rendered into modern verse that all may follow according to their spiritual insight; and religious works at every level abound in styles varying from journalese to scientific wording well matching the latest discoveries in several fields of research. To us older people this is all fast going. We have to pick our

way intelligently; but to find our way is essential as a fitting prelude to all further advanced features such as the Mass in slow motion film-wise, broadcast services (actually so unlike Benediction in our own churches), exhibitions of our religious orders on advertisement lines, vocation booklets which seem much on the same principle, the institution of evening Masses, the relaxation of the fasting regulations, even the possibility of the use of the vernacular emanating from the Dialogue Mass, etc. We have doubtless our private feelings in all the transition as older witnesses, but we cannot deny that it all tends to a 'coming alive' of the divine truths to all and sundry, as well as meeting half-way with many of the needs of the times, particularly, in vocational matters, its psychological difficulties. Indeed, looked on as a whole with a sweeping backward glance, we see that it all amounts to a different method on the same road as that of the popular devotions of yesterday, which when analysed in all their multiplicity were an attempt in their day to convey religious knowledge into daily life. The old methods were an appeal to sentiment—to the heart, if you will, instead of the head. They were in keeping with the trend of that age and the level of its masses. Today with world-wide education, and the ultra-modern accent on it, we must endeavour to interpret the mysteries of the Faith as best we may with our human minds to meet this swift advance. Granted that some of the methods seem pretty bald, that reverence would appear to be at a low ebb, still a naturalness of approach is genuinely sought and some common understanding is the keynote of it all and much must go down before this crying necessity. Yielding nothing of our own position bearing our traditions, wide-eyed in the face of it all, but quite tolerant, learning with the rest, we can play our appointed part linking it sensibly with the past, recreating from our experience and thus contributing to the strength of the chain. The tragedy is that so large a proportion of us—now, alas, greatly in the majority since the two wars—neglect this opportunity through selfish inertia or abuse it with constant destructive criticism so that the future, as we blindly persist in thinking of it instead of facing the fact of its elusive present for most of us, is deprived of a worthy contribution that we were left in the Vineyard to supply.

A chance remark made by an acquaintance recently brought home to me how completely the fundamental workaday structure

of our Faith is seen by some of us. She had just returned from visiting an invalid relation who always grumbled 'at being left here' in that pathetic manner of the self-pitying. 'I told her straight', she reported in her blunt way, 'that is just the point you are always missing: you would not *be* left here if there wasn't still some work for you to do.' 'Oh, that simple faith!', we may murmur in our own intellectual hard-going. To be envied? Possibly. But to each man his own road, the divine Spirit hovering over all—a single movement—that is the universal lesson.

One fact cannot be overstated and should be constantly in our minds balancing judgment—the speed with which the enormous changes have come about in our day. There is no parallel in history. The vast problems of East and West, the coming together of the whole world with air travel, the gigantic discoveries of Science in *every* field, these were all at our door overnight. No wonder human repercussion takes some understanding and handling. Can any defence be great enough for all the superficial reasoning, for the rootlessness of human relationships, for the desperate nervous debility that fills our hospitals, for a younger generation's strange moral sense, or total lack of it, whilst displaying a physical endurance and backbone that calls forth our greatest admiration? We ourselves are part and parcel of these immense human problems. Time has not parted us from them as some of us would like to pretend. That we fit in helpfully among the rank and file is the constant and last prayer that life demands of us.