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DAYS OF VISION

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‘Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.’—ACTS xxvi. 19.

THE story of St Paul’s conversion is always fascinating reading because of what he was before and of what he afterwards became. He found delight in telling people what had happened to him on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, for it was the turning-point in his religious experience. Out of a mistaken zeal for the honour of God he had taken a leading part in an anti-Christian agitation in the city of Jerusalem, and at his hands many had suffered much. Those were days not for thought but for action. To consummate his purposes, having decided to launch further attacks upon the defenceless followers of Jesus, he set out for Damascus. The time required for the journey gave the opportunity, probably the first in many days, to reconsider the course he was taking. The firmness and courage of the otherwise simple people whom he was persecuting, and the patience and meekness they had shown in bearing their sufferings, haunted him. Along his way to Damascus the stories which he heard the villagers tell of how Jesus had healed their sick, blessed their young and helped the needy pricked his conscience. The question began to force itself on his mind : Was he after all doing the right thing in opposing this Jesus ? But, as we say in Chinese,

since the bow was drawn, he had to let it go, so he continued his journey to Damascus. Buried in thoughts of doubt and misgiving he suddenly saw a vision from heaven which gave him an entirely new outlook and totally changed his life. There and then he became a determined follower of the One whom he had so violently persecuted. The vision was so convincing that for an honest and uncompromising soul like his there was only one course open ; he must obey it. So, in recounting the incident many years later, his deepest emotions were stirred and he exclaimed with fervour, 'Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.'

I

No great things have been achieved in this world except as a result of men having seen great visions. In the outer city of Peking there stands the famous Altar of Heaven, erected as a place where the rulers of the Chinese nation might worship and offer sacrifice to God on behalf of the people. So impressive is the sight of this marble altar, so simple yet so grand, that visitors from the West are often impelled to acts of reverence before it, as was Dr James Legge, the famous missionary scholar of an earlier generation, who took off his shoes before he went up the marble steps to offer his prayer to God. But no such altar could ever have been erected except for a vision seen by the master builder.

Some forty years ago a youthful Chinese doctor dreamed his dreams of remaking old China, whereby a one-man-rule of an alien monarch was to be replaced by a government of the people, for the people and by the people. To the fulfilment of this vision

Dr Sun Yat-sen devoted his whole life's energies. Through opposition and peril he held straight to his course for many long years until at last he saw the partial realization of his dreams. The whole of China now hears his voice and thousands of people are not disobedient to his vision.

Abraham saw a vision when he heard the call to leave his native land of idolatry for an unknown country, that he might the better serve the true and only God. Obedient to this inner impulse he left his home and started for the land of promise. He walked by faith and not by sight, believing that something far better was before him. Thus it was that he became the founder of a nation which was to play a major part in the history of the world, the nation from which there sprang in the fulness of time our Lord Jesus Christ, for whose sake and in whose name we are gathered here.

Our Lord Himself also had a mastering vision. Rising from the waters of His baptism He saw the heavens opened and heard a voice which to Him was unmistakably clear, saying that the Father in heaven had sent Him. Later, in the solitude of the desert the trustworthiness of this vision was trebly challenged, but only to result in His seeing still more clearly the meaning of the vision and the way by which He must work to fulfil it.

II

It was in the early dawn of His realization of this vision that our Lord, in transmitting the vision to His disciples, gave them the prophetic but daring charge that they become His witnesses, first in Jerusalem, then in the whole of Judæa, then in Samaria and

finally in the uttermost parts of the earth. We have come from the four corners of the earth to-day to discuss the tasks which confront the Christian movement. Before we can profitably do this we must see once more this same vision which the disciples saw nineteen centuries ago. We must try more fully to understand its implications for ourselves, for those who sent us here and for the whole world.

Let us first ask ourselves what conditions are congenial to the seeing of visions, and whether we have them here. Environment is an important factor in the making of visions. Well may we, a group^{of} of two hundred kindred spirits, assembled in this sacred spot from many lands, ask ourselves: Have the conditions for any other such gathering of Christians since the Ascension of our Lord been as favourable as they are for us to gain a mastering vision of Him and of His rightful place in the life of our generation? Every step we take reminds us of our Lord. In this very city He once lived and loved and worked. Just over yonder He died and near the spot where now we meet He said His last word about the future expansion of His kingdom. Nearly two thousand years have passed and we, a band of His followers from widely scattered parts of the world, meet in this same place, where He gave up His life and took it back again, to find the fuller meaning of that life for our age. Surely such conditions are uniquely congenial for a vision that should make of us all new men and new women in Christ Jesus.

Our visions grow out of those desires which press most urgently upon us in our conscious hours. Here, again, we find ourselves in a favourable situation. No mere travellers are we, assembled by chance through common curiosity. We have come with

dominant and very similar desires. Out of the stress of social changes which have dazed us with their suddenness and range, out of the strain of trying to adjust ourselves to the demands of a new day, we have come to seek solutions to pressing problems. The presence in our hearts of these dominant desires is in itself an assurance that if we seek earnestly we shall surely here see visions of worth.

A third condition for receiving the kind of vision we need is that we have a true conception of God and a right attitude towards Him. In order to make this point clear let me refer to different conceptions underlying two of the Psalms. One psalmist said : ' By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down ; yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst thereof we hanged up our harps. For there they that led us captive required of us songs, and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land ? ' (Psalm cxxxvii. 1-4). Another psalmist wrote : ' Whither shall I go from Thy spirit ? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence ? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea ; even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, surely the darkness shall overwhelm me, and the light about me shall be night ; even the darkness hideth not from Thee, but the night shineth as the day. The darkness and the light are both alike to Thee ' (Psalm cxxxix. 7-12). One of those writers thinks of God as primarily a God of his own people. When he could not worship his God in the usual place and under fitting circumstances, he became ill at ease. The children of Israel were in exile in a strange land.

He felt it almost impossible to worship his God in such an uncongenial place and under such trying conditions. How can we sing the songs of the Lord, he says, in such a strange land? To him the bottom seemed to be dropping out of his religion, and he was exceedingly unhappy.

¶ In contrast to this narrow view, to the second writer God is seen everywhere, in fact no matter where the psalmist went he could not get away from God. He saw his God in hell as well as in heaven; in darkness as well as in light; in sorrow and adversity as well as in joy and prosperity. His God was with him all the time. His God was not limited by time or space, environment or circumstance. The nearness and presence of God was so real to him that he could never be separated from Him.

We who are gathered here shall see no vision of God unless we remind ourselves that He is near and that He is seeking to hold communion with us. We must be still and listen for His voice.

A fourth condition remains to be fulfilled, if we are to become more than mere dreamers. A visionary becomes a man of vision when he does his utmost to make his dreams come true. Jesus saw visions, but He strove untiringly to realize them. St Paul had his visions, but he was far from being visionary; he translated his visions into action. There is a necessary connexion between vision and action; both are mutually dependent. Action without vision has no future; vision without action is unreal. Both are essential. We have come to this mountain-top to gain a fresh vision of the Unseen, but we are not to ask that tabernacles be erected for us to live here always in self-centred spiritual enjoyment. Our task is down below, among the people. We must

tarry in Jerusalem long enough to make sure that we get the vision, but, if we would keep it, we must hasten back to the uttermost parts of the earth to carry it out.

III

So much for the conditions ; what of the vision itself ? What is the vision that we most need ? I believe it to be twofold : a fresh vision of God, and a new vision of His Kingdom.

There is much unrest in the world to-day, the revolt of youth, the discontent of labour, the conflict between employer and employee, the need for better understanding and relationship between the nations. All are indications of the world's longing and waiting for deliverance. This is the burden of the soul of the prophet of God, the deep concern of God's servants. But we are not to forget that when we hear the loud cry of the world for salvation, there is also a corresponding eagerness, though unheard, on the part of God to deliver and save. We have all of us heard a child in hunger or thirst cry aloud for relief. Then suddenly the cry ceases and all becomes quiet and peaceful. We know at once that the mother has answered the call of the child and met his requirements. We easily notice the eagerness of the child, but we often overlook the eagerness of the mother. There is a world waiting for deliverance, there is also a God waiting to deliver. In the story of the prodigal son it was the father who first saw the wandering son on his way back home. The son was eager to return, but the father was even more eager to see him back. In the midst of influences which tend to make men doubt the existence of God, or to push Him so far away that men can hardly

see Him, we need to find anew the source of life, that we may be full of life and that our work may be spiritually fruitful. We need to see more clearly the will of God and His purpose for the world.

In seeking a vision of God we need to remember that we can see Him best through Jesus Christ our Lord, and it is only as we make Christ the Way, that we shall succeed in winning others to intimate fellowship with God. The world is waiting for some one like Christ to deliver it from darkness, ignorance, despair and sin, to light, hope, joy and life. When Christ is properly and clearly presented to the world, He will, as of old, draw all men unto Him. We do not yet see all men drawn to Him. Our task is still far from being accomplished. The small measure of success which has been attained after nearly two thousand years of activity and work must be due to one of two causes : either Christ has ceased to have the power to draw, or else we have failed to have Him properly lifted up. Our faith in, and experience of, Jesus Christ forbid us to accept the first alternative as true ; the latter then must be the real cause, namely, we have failed to lift Him up before men. Of course the Church has not been idle all these years. Indeed it has done a great deal of work, and its activities seem to be ever increasing. There has been no lack of activity; but the question is whether or not Christ has been properly lifted up before the world. True, we have been lifting up many things that have more or less to do with Christ, such things as rituals, dogmas, customs, traditions, opinions and organizations. But in spite of all this, or perhaps because of it, the portrait of the winning Christ has often become blurred or even distorted or defaced. We firmly believe that when men can see Him in His beauty

they will be drawn to Him. The God whom Christ revealed, and the Christ of the Christian faith, who is the image of the unseen God, are as acceptable to the people of the East to-day as ever, but men do not always find Him in the Christian Church. The Church therefore needs a new vision of Christ.

There is a world-wide movement afoot among the young people to observe the twentieth centenary of the earthly life of Jesus Christ by spending three years in a re-study of the life and teachings of our Lord. We think this a very significant movement and deserving of the hearty support both of the young and those who are older in the Christian Church. If the assertion we have already made is true, that the world is longing for God as revealed in Christ, surely it is of paramount importance that we as followers of Him should ourselves gain a clear and definite vision of Him. We cannot lead other blind men if we ourselves are also blind. From the point of view of our obligation either to Christ or to the world, we have no right to represent Him if we have no clear conception and understanding of Him.

IV

Not only that we may catch the inspiration of a fresh vision of Christ Jesus our Lord, and, through Him, of our loving Heavenly Father, have we come to this sacred spot. We have also come that we may see anew what the Kingdom of God is, and how the Christian Church may more fully realize its mission in helping this Kingdom to come. Where better than here can we re-study the charter for our task? How inspiring to us that after nearly two thousand years we have come to this very spot, living witnesses

to the partial fulfilment of the vision our Lord shared with His disciples so long ago ! Jesus gave His last commission at a time when His work had apparently failed. The outlook was dark indeed. Yet, seeing far down the future, our Lord envisaged the day when the Kingdom He preached would truly come, and God's will would be done on earth as in heaven. But He also saw the difficulties which would hinder the coming of the Kingdom, not the least of which was the lack of vision of His disciples. So He told them to tarry for this vision. 'Ye shall receive power when the Holy Ghost is come upon you,' He said. This meant power to recover from their immediate perplexity and disappointment, power to see beyond their narrow view of nationalism, power to gain a new conception of the Messianic reign, power to be courageous in the face of overwhelming difficulties, power to live a Christ-like life, power truly to be His witnesses both in Jerusalem and all Judæa and Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles may be regarded as the first chapter of the history of the Christian movement in the world. The enterprise began in the city of Jerusalem, then spread to the whole of Judæa, then by force of circumstances to Samaria, then to Africa, then to Asia and at last to the continent of Europe. During the first thirty years of her life the Christian Church promoted what was to the men of that day a world-wide movement. Ever since that time, whenever the Church has been ready and willing to carry out faithfully the great commission of Jesus Christ, she has grown both in grace and in usefulness. Whenever she has ceased to show the evangelistic and missionary spirit her life has ebbed away.

We have come here to spend enough time to think and pray through some of the most urgent matters which concern the Kingdom of God in the world. We have come together to share each other's experience in dealing with changing conditions, and to profit by one another's convictions.

We need make no secret of the fact that organized Christianity has shown many signs of weakness, has made many mistakes and even committed many sins. Severe and bitter attacks during the past few years in China have been made on religion in general and on Christianity in particular. More has been said against Christianity in the last five years than during all the preceding one hundred and fifteen years since the first Protestant missionary landed on China's soil. Many of the accusations can of course be put on one side, as being nothing more than the expression of a blind prejudice, which we can afford to ignore. Much of the opposition has been the result of misunderstandings, which we are ready to clear up. But some of the criticisms and accusations should make us pause and think. It is a sign of hope that the criticisms do not all come from without; when the Church is able and willing to see her shortcomings and is prepared to mend her ways, she is still growing. There is no organization in the world that can claim perfection, and organized religion is no exception. There would have been no place for most of us in the Church were this not so, for our entering into her fellowship would have spoilt her perfection. But with all her imperfections we still believe in the Church of Christ. She has made many mistakes, and will probably continue to make more, but so long as she can maintain her spirituality, so long as she continues humbly to fulfil her Master's

spirit, she is bound to be a vital force in human society.

V

Our vision of God through Christ, our visions of His Kingdom and of the place of the Christian Church in hastening the coming of His Kingdom will be of little avail unless they fully possess our very beings. We must not only see clearly, we must also feel deeply. One simple definition of religion is that it is an enthusiasm for a person or an ideal. After fully recognizing the need in the present day for clarity of thinking in matters of religion, it is our firm conviction that the really serious problem in the Christian Church is not so much the lack of intellectual understanding of Christian doctrines, as the failure on the part of Christians adequately to translate the ideals of Christianity into daily living. Among Christian people there is a lamentable lack of warmth and enthusiasm. We do not act as if our religion really meant everything to us. Our coldness of heart is retarding the progress of Christianity. This seems to me to be the most serious problem we have to face and solve.

Once Jesus was charged by His friends and kinsmen with being mad. They said that He was beside Himself. There must have been real ground for such an accusation. He was so keen about His Father's business ; He was so eager for the welfare of others ; He was so forgetful about His own comfort and safety, that to the men of the world He seemed demented. They did not realize the source of His enthusiasm. They failed to see that He was merely filled with God's Spirit ; that He could not do otherwise than spend Himself with utter abandon.

The Apostle Paul was also intoxicated by his visions. Our heart burns within us each time we read his attempts to express the inexpressible fervour of his heart. His words are mingled with his blood ; they are his very life. Recall a few examples. To the Romans he wrote : ' For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord ' (Rom. viii. 38-39). To the Corinthians he declared : ' I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified ' (1 Cor. ii. 2). To the Galatians he said : ' I have been crucified with Christ ; yet I live ; and yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me ' (Gal. ii. 20). To the Philippians he confided : ' To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain ' (Phil. i. 21), and added : ' Yea, verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord ' (Phil. iii. 8). To the Colossians he has revealed the secret of his endeavours : ' That in all things He (Christ) might have the pre-eminence ' (Col. i. 18). No wonder that Paul has been such a constant inspiration to the children of God in all lands and at all times.

Do not misunderstand me. I do not for a moment mean to suggest that the Christian Church is standing in need of more fanatics. We have too many of them already. Men who cannot harness their emotions and control their unbalanced views have no place in the mission field. They have done more harm than good to the Christian cause. Nor do we plead for more fighters over doctrines or creeds. Men who are always in a fighting mood

against their fellow-Christians are undesirable in this work.

We do long, however, for men and women of God who possess such warmth and enthusiasm as were seen in the life of Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul. Would that each one of us were 'crazy' about the Kingdom of God, as sometimes we are about things of much less importance. When men have caught the spirit of the Master they will have courage to declare, if need be, before judges and rulers that they cannot but speak what they have seen and heard, as did Peter and John. Why did they say 'cannot'? Because the love of Christ constrained them. This sharing of the spirit of Christ is what we often speak of as having 'fellowship with Him.' The word fellowship contains the ideas both of friendship and of partnership. We are His friends in the sense that we share His views, ideals and purposes in life; we are His partners in the sense that we have a part in His task and work. We are shareholders in His great concern. When the work is meeting with success we are happy, when it fails we are in great distress and sorrow. We rejoice with Him; we weep with Him. We are partners with Him in His great undertaking for the salvation of men. In such a fellowship we shall, like Him, make it our meat to do the will of God; we shall be wholly absorbed going about doing good to men. During these days of waiting upon Him, and of considering His business, shall we not pray that we may catch that glow and warmth which will enable us to serve Him and men with greater zeal and determination than we have ever had before? The two disciples on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus, after meeting their living Lord by the wayside and holding intimate

conversation with Him, became different men. Their whole outlook was changed. Instead of bearing a heavy heart and a disappointed look, they became cheerful and eager to share their joy. They moved forward with new vigour and courage. May each one of us during these precious days be able with them to say, 'Did not our hearts glow within us when He was talking with us?' May we be able to see visions which will transform our lives! And when we have seen them, may we let them so fully and permanently possess us that in after years we shall be able conscientiously to say, Wherefore, O Christ my King, I was not disobedient to Thy heavenly vision!