

## CHAPTER II.

## THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF CHRIST'S TEACHING.

"ALL Human Society," writes Dean Church, "is the receptacle, nursery, and dwelling-place of ideas, shaped and limited according to the nature of the society—ideas which live and act on it and in it; which are preserved, passed on, and transmitted from one generation to another; which would be merely abstractions or individual opinions if they were not endowed with the common life which their reception in a society gives them."<sup>1</sup> Now, with reference to the Church, the inquiry which the truth contained in these words suggests is, What are the ideas, principles, aims which have found a home in it, which have received a special determination, and, in accordance with this determination, have been made effective by its corporate action, which have been propagated from generation to generation, aglow with the life

<sup>1</sup> Oxford House Papers, No. xvii.

imparted to them by their assimilation to the thoughts, and their enforcement by the energies, of living men? It is an inquiry whose range is far more extensive than the purpose of this treatise necessitates or warrants. We must exclude from our purview theology and ritual, except in so far as they bear on the subjects to which we are limited—the truths and influences embodied in the Church, through whose operation currents of sympathy have been formed, manners and morals have been moulded, higher types of unity have been constituted, and the conditions both of communal and of individual life have been elevated. The points of such investigation are included in the phrase, the social vocation of the Church; and the three lines along which it is proposed that this investigation shall proceed are, this vocation as interpreted, first, in the teaching or the mind of Christ; second, in the character and obligations of the Church's election; and third, in the conceptions which dominate the Christian consciousness and are the perennial springs of the Christian inspiration. The first of these interpretative topics will be the subject of this chapter.

In the Gospels, Jesus, the "teacher come from God," is set before us with a Jewish environment. A nation or people appropriates its units. To

the units the nation marks an inheritance "of aptitudes, stored materials, a thousand and one traditions of the past." Jesus did not renounce this inheritance. On the contrary, he accepted it. He observed the national customs. He kept the national festivals. He began his ministry by reading from the scroll of Isaiah. He pointed to the ancient Scriptures as the verification of His Messiahship. He wept over Jerusalem, and exclaimed through His tears, "How often would I have gathered thy children together!"<sup>1</sup> All that made the core and inner truth of Israel's corporate existence was recognised in His doctrine. It was only the shell which had guarded the kernel "until the time of the reformation" that was set aside; the kernel itself was conserved, in order that it might be completed and glorified. "Think not," He protests, "that I came to destroy the Law and the Prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfil."<sup>2</sup>

His Church, therefore, is the heir to all that, as distinguished from the merely dispensational, is divinely true in the old Jewish polity. Now the divinely true thing in it was the idea of a social order based on righteousness, on "doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God."<sup>3</sup> The Church and the nation were not regarded as

<sup>1</sup> St Mat. xxiii. 37.

<sup>2</sup> St Mat. v. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Micah vi. 8.

two separate factors in the national life. They were regarded as one. The kingdom was a kingdom of priests. It was bound together by divine laws, and by a worship which consecrated all the aspects of life. Every Jew was called to realise that he was a member of a consecrated nationality—bound to it, to every other member of it, and, with every other member, to Jehovah. Was not Israel Jehovah's "son," His first-born, His peculiar treasure? To be faithful to Him, to keep His laws, and be loyal to the brotherly covenant, was the one imperative obligation of citizenship. The consequence of this mystical humanism was, and to this day—"scattered and peeled" though the Jewish race may be—is, an intense solidarity, and, within the tribal limits, a fervent and vigorous social life. Under the theocracy, there were approximations to democratic equalities. The provisions of the Law did not expressly prohibit, but they softened, the harsher features of class and grade. Underlying them was the sense of an inalienable reverence that was due to the person of man or woman; and in many peculiar enactments, such as those of the jubilee (perhaps never fully observed)—liberations from servile condition were contemplated. It was held that every unit of the sacred nationality was entitled to the care of the State. The poor were

to be helped, the infirm and aged were to be treated with pity. Even the stranger within the gates had his rights. Nor was the responsibility one-sided. If the community, as a whole, placed itself behind its members, its members were reared and trained in the sense of their duty to the community. The male child in earliest infancy received the seal of membership. Through the family he obtained his place in the nation. By means of the family discipline he was educated in the life of citizenship. The honouring of father and mother was emphasised as the condition of material as well as spiritual prosperity,<sup>1</sup> of fountains playing on a land of corn and wine, and of heavens dropping down dew. Thus a fellowship was established whose first commandment was, "Love Jehovah, thy God, with all thy might," and whose second commandment, like to the first, was, "Love thy neighbour as thyself."

Now, all this was assumed by Christ and passed on by Him to His organised discipleship. There was no need to make a brand-new ideal of society; the ideal was there, requiring only to be separated from racial exclusiveness, from a ceremonial which had outlived its day, and from a dead-weight of traditionalism which had obscured its beauty, and, thus separated, to obtain ampler outlines,

<sup>1</sup> Exod. xx. 12.

freer expression, and a more efficient internal dynamic. This Jesus did, and in Him the ancient social order lives, risen again and fulfilled in the kingdom of God, which it is the mission of His Church to realise on the earth.

The originality of His teaching did not consist in the saying of new things, or the propounding of new truths. "He taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes," and, in respect both of their form and of their content, His utterances expressed what was incomprehensible to men "whose hearts had waxed gross." But that which He taught was old, inasmuch as it was of God, who is from everlasting. "My teaching," He testified, "is not Mine, but His that sent Me."<sup>1</sup> "I do nothing of Myself, but as the Father taught Me, I speak these things."<sup>2</sup> Although, being of God, His doctrine was hidden from "the princes of this world," yet there had been, in all the times and in all the counsels of the truly wise, scintillations of the light which was lustrous in Him—"the Light which lighteth every man coming into the world"<sup>3</sup>—the Light which was especially luminous in the people whose Judge, whose Lawgiver, whose King was Jehovah. Jesus interpreted the truth into which holy prophets since the world

<sup>1</sup> St John vii. 16.

<sup>2</sup> St John viii. 28.

<sup>3</sup> St John i. 9.

began had searched, but which He saw in the Father. He was, He is, the Truth. His words are wonderful flashes, in which God is revealed to man as the Father, and man is revealed to himself as the son, and individual men, sharers in this sonship, as brethren. In the universes of thought which they open, we discern the "altar-stairs sloping through darkness up to God." If, in view of this, we inquire into the secret of the originality, we see that it means the crystallising of scattered rays, the unifying of mind and will by the knowledge which is life eternal; the newness gained by the disclosure of the centre to which all the lines of the eternally good and true converge; the newness of irradiated perception, of vitalised energy, of magnificent vistas; the newness, above all, of the glory beheld in His own personality—the one unique Manhood, full of grace and truth, in whom

"the Word had breath and wrought  
With human hands the Creed of Creeds  
In loveliness of perfect deeds,  
More strong than all poetic thought."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, conserving the spirit of the old order by declaring the reality in which it is completed, by disengaging what is vital in it from the outward forms through which the things given of God

<sup>1</sup> In Memoriam, 36.

were adapted to a rudimentary period in the world's education, Christ has unfolded the principles of all wholesome social evolution. It is true that He connects the seen with the unseen, that he regards human life not so much in its temporal as in its spiritual and eternal aspects. But He connects; He does not put asunder what His Father had joined together. If He reaches to "the spiritual beyond the natural," He holds "firmly to the natural" in order that He may so reach. M. Renan has argued, and many have similarly argued, "The aim of Christianity was in no respect the perfecting of human society or the increase of the sum of individual happiness. One does not think of decorating the hovel in which he is to remain for only a moment."<sup>1</sup> Is not this a travesty of Christ's Christianity? To Him, the earth is never a hovel. In it, He sees His Father's house. Its sights and sounds have an inexpressible charm to His eye. Its duties and demands are enforced alike by His precepts and His example. "The whole temporal show is related" to the spiritual, not in a poor way, but "royally and built up to eterne significance through the open arms of God."<sup>2</sup> The more vividly this royal relation is realised, the more fully, He tells

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Prof. Bruce's 'Kingdom of God,' p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> Aurora Leigh, Book 7.

us, will the significance of all life and of all the facts of life be discerned. It is the vocation of His disciple to aim at perfection, at the perfecting of man's estate in the situation and in the circumstances which are present to him, and thus to "make the heaven he hopes indeed his home."

Let us see how this, the social trend of Christ's doctrine, is illustrated in the discourse which is frequently cited as "the ethical manifesto of Jesus." The two questions in connexion with which the substance of the Sermon on the Mount<sup>1</sup> may be summarised are, What is the good to be desired as the chief end of human endeavour? and, What is the conduct by means of which this end is to be attained?

The answer to these questions is explicit.

Christ's *summum bonum* is the Old Testament ideal which the prophets of Israel had expounded, but freed from the limitations under which it was presented "to them of old time," and clothed with a higher force and authority. The commandment, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," gives a law of life which is opposed to aims that begin and end with self, that make a mere selfish earthly gain the dominating purpose and interest. It includes a legitimate self-love. That a man be true to himself,

<sup>1</sup> St Mat. v.-vii.

that he develop his individuality in the aims and preferences which are natural to it, is implied. But the contention is that his real blessedness cannot be found so long as he lives like an isolated individual, that it can be found only by harmonising his existence with a divine order which is law for him and for all men. This order is to be his first and supreme care; the seeking of it in all that marks his opportunity is to be his most strenuous effort. Thus, and thus only, will he prove himself to be the child of that all-loving Father "who maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust." The kingdom of God is the kingdom of the Father, and the righteousness of God, being the righteousness of the Father, can be possessed only in a life filial towards Him and brotherly towards all—the life whose distinguishing features are humility, reverence, sincerity, devotion to human wellbeing, self-renouncing, self-sacrificing love.

Without minutely analysing the elements of the conduct which corresponds to the end thus indicated, three points in the sermon of Christ may be noted. First, there is the inner qualification. The Hebrew morality is distinguished from both the Greek and the Roman by the intensity with which it insists on the exercise of the moral

will, on truth in the inward parts, as the prime condition of rectitude. It has a more searching view than that which was possible when the one word τὸ καλὸν was used to signify both the beautiful and the noble. "The Greek philosophers," as it has been observed, "got into trouble through their failure to distinguish between moral conduct and art. When the moral life was regarded as beautiful, they were tempted to look on it as if it were simply an artistic product."<sup>1</sup> Now Christ, in the first words of this discourse, makes character the foundation of the righteous life. The Beatitudes, in which He sketches the several sides of the happy or blessed man, are not outlines of the merely beautiful; they are outlines of a goodness which involves denials of self and strenuous moral effort. Supplemented by the striking sentences which exhibit His claim to the authority of the divine Lawgiver, they pierce "to the dividing of soul and spirit, and are quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart."<sup>2</sup> Further, the attitude of the soul towards the Father, as the object of supreme worship, and towards the neighbour-man in the exercise of benevolence, is depicted as an attitude entirely removed from the self-consciousness, the posing for effect, which is the fruitful

<sup>1</sup> Mackenzie's *Manual of Ethics*, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. iv. 12.

source of hypocrisy or part-acting—an attitude of joyous surrender to the holy will of God, of a giving and doing in which the eye is single and through which treasures are “laid up in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.” Finally, the principles and references which are to rule all transactions are presented. The life is to be lived frankly in the world, yet the mere lower world-things are not to be the main prospect. Happiness is a natural desire, but to pursue happiness as the end of action is to lose it. The purity and the liberty of the soul are not to be imperilled by the corrosive influence of carking cares and petty strivings. Food and raiment are things needful; in the endeavour after what is worthiest and noblest they will be added. The tendency to judge others is to be cribbed, cabined, and confined: men should judge themselves rather than their neighbours. For all, the golden rule is to do to others as they would have others do to them. A sordid commercialism is unworthy of the son of God. Let him realise, on the one hand, the brave independence which is the result of a constant dependence on God, and on the other, the responsibilities of the brotherly covenant. Let him set his affection, not on what can be won for self, but rather on what self can win

for others. Let him merge the personal in the social, in the kingdom of the Father. This is the strait gate through which the Christian disciple enters into the amplitude of his inheritance. This is the house-building on the rock, "firm and sure eternally." This is to be perfect even as the Father in heaven is perfect. This is the law of the brotherhood which Christ, with His emphatic "Verily, verily I say unto you," proclaims to His follower.

The Sermon on the Mount epitomises the ethical truth which, in one form or another, is expressed in all Christ's teaching. He individualises, but if He insists on personal repentance, personal faith, personal regeneration, it is because this is essential to the realisation of the blessings of the kingdom of God. The end of His calling of men is citizenship in this kingdom. Its nature, its conditions, its aims, are the subject which pervades His utterance. In His parables, He traces the analogies to it which are "writ large" in the natural world. Baur contended that the kingdom, as held before the Jewish mind by Jesus, was the fulfilment of Israel's theocratic hopes; and this is so far true. But the idea of the Hebrew theocracy is spiritualised and elevated. Employing figures of speech "understood by

the people," Jesus speaks of the "sitting down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"; but He describes those who shall sit down as coming from the east and the west and the north and the south, whilst some who claimed the privileges of the seat as the right of their covenant shall be cast out.<sup>1</sup> Mere nationality, mere external title, He declares, cannot count. There must be the inward fitness as well as the outward seal—the baptism with the Spirit and the baptism with water. And the theocracy itself, in His representation, is not an exclusive Church-State. It is not a State with such distinct political outlines that men shall be able to exclaim, "Lo, it is there." Neither is it a mere hazy cloudland. He conceives of it as having a visibility, as a society with the tokens and characteristics of a society. But it is free from the complications of human governments and ambitions. It is an ethical commonwealth, descending from God out of heaven that it may pervade and sanctify and enrich all nations and peoples in all their life. It is to take shape in His Church, though, in its full and proper glory, it transcends His Church; it is to be ever so far revealed that men shall discern what in its nature and in its purpose it is, and that it

<sup>1</sup> St Luke xiii. 29.

shall draw men towards it, supplying the bonds of an ever-perfecting sympathy, reconciling them to God, and linking them together in the love which is more than mere justice, which is the fulfilling of law. In one of His word-pictures, Jesus compares it to a great supper prepared by a king, to which those who, by covenant position, are bidden will not come—all beginning to make excuse. The invitation which they reject is passed to the waifs of street and lane, of highway and hedge, and by the compulsions of grace they are brought in that the king's house may be filled.<sup>1</sup> In this similitude, the social and catholic character of the kingdom is portrayed. It interprets the supper of humanity—the highest good of life. Poverty is a disintegrating, separatist force. Men, in their poverty, wandering wearily, halt and maimed, in highway and hedge, are called from their isolations into fellowship, into communion with each other, into the common participation of the wealth which is theirs by the gift of God. It was for the establishment of this brotherhood, for the founding of this commonwealth in the house of humanity, that Christ lived, and taught, and suffered, and died. His prospect is that which is sketched in another of His com-

<sup>1</sup> St Luke xiv. 16-24.

parisons—that in which he traces the growth of the grain of mustard-seed, less than all seeds, into the tree greater than herbs, which over-spreads the earth, “so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in its branches.”<sup>1</sup> There is an infinite capacity of expansion to all sorts and conditions of men, to all diversities and developments of life, in the word of Him who is the Word of God and the Son of man. It is not too much to say that “His anthropology contains the germ of all manner of social improvement in the earthly life of man.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> St Mat. xiii, 31, 32.

<sup>2</sup> *The Kingdom of God*, p. 131.