

CHAPTER III.

THE SOCIAL VOCATION OF THE CHURCH.

IN the previous chapter, the social aspect of Christ's teaching was indicated. More or less, such an aspect must be impressed on every system of thought which relates to human conduct; certainly, in any consideration of the words of Jesus it is impossible to overlook it. But, to recur to a point already glanced at, it is frequently urged that His ethic contemplates the righteousness of the individual rather than that of a corporate body. The assertion is not without justification. It was no part of His plan to interfere with existing political conditions. His kingdom was in the world, but it was not of the world. Neither did He come directly into collision with any world-realm, nor did He undertake to regulate matters connected with property and administration or with civil issues between man and man. His purpose was

to create a social conscience by first purifying and uplifting the standard of the individual conscience. We interpret His mind when we argue, "Make the members of a community personally righteous, inspire them at least with the feeling that 'Right is right and God is God.' Give them a lofty type of rectitude, and imbue them with a passion for rectitude: in so doing, you lay the axe at the root of all political injustice, and secure the only enduring basis of public morality." But Christ did more than work indirectly, through the regeneration of personal character, towards the improvement of communal life. He had always in His view the formation of a society which should mirror the divine order, the kingdom of God; a society by whose ministries and in whose membership individual souls should be nourished and strengthened in goodness, and which, "fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies,"¹ should propagate its ideal in the civic societies surrounding it. Even in the Sermon on the Mount, representing the earlier stage of His teaching, the unity of His disciples is the objective. Looking on them, He said, "Ye are the salt of the earth."² He pointed to the arena of their action, the earth,

¹ Eph. iv. 16.

² St Mat. v. 13.

and He reminded them that they are one body called to do one thing—to salt this earth, nay, to be themselves in their unity the salt, making human life pure and wholesome through the permeation of it by the divine life which He would infuse into them. And, again, He said, “Ye are” (not merely lights to, but in their unity) “the light of the world. A city set on a hill” (and such a city, a *civitas Dei*, they are) “cannot be hid. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father Who is in heaven.”¹ For, Christ knew man. Man needs more than a philosophy however true. He is swayed by the concrete, not the abstract. Plato idealised a republic. His idealisation excites only a speculative interest. His republic is *in nubibus*. The best object-lesson in righteousness is a society bound to the pursuit and practice of righteousness by its very constitution. This is the character of the society which He organised. Its principle of cohesion is a love which reproduces His love to men. Its vital force is His Spirit dwelling in it as the organism which holds Him the Head. Its purpose is to fill up what is lacking of His sufferings, to articulate His thought, to carry out His will to save

¹ St Mat. v. 14, 16.

men's lives, to be the evidence and the missionary of His kingdom in its two abiding features of Sonship and Brotherhood.

The *Ecclesia*, the Church, is not a mere association of persons having a common cult and resolving to diffuse their faith and worship. It is not made by them, and it is not dissoluble at their pleasure. It encompasses them. It adopts them into it. It presents them with a nurture and training by means of which the conscience is educated in the responsibilities of the Christian profession. It is an election out of mankind, and those who are in it are an elect race.

The term "election" is a stumbling-block to many. But that over which they stumble is not so much the thing which it denotes as the use which is made of it in theories and definitions. The principle of limitations which it implies is one that is apparent in every department of nature, in every sphere of life, in the history of the past, in the facts of the present. It is comprehended in the plan of the all-good Orderer. But whoso is wise and observant of the whole truth may understand His loving-kindness. The elect or higher forms of plant-life are serviceable, as showing the potentialities of the species, and as suggesting ways by which vitality may be more fully developed.

The elect or gifted minds are "lent out" for the benefit of all; the products of their genius or of their labour are the enrichment of their universe. Nations have their distinctive elections. They are limited. They have their special aptitudes, testimonies, characteristics, by which they are circumscribed, but through which they contribute to the sum-total of the forces that act on mankind. Now, it is this law or principle which we recognise in the vocation of the Church. Holy Scripture has enforced it. In the far-away past, it represents the family of Abraham as elected. A secret of the Lord was committed to this family. Why? In order that the secret might be preserved, and that it might have, as thus preserved, an ever-widening area of influence. "Thou shalt be a blessing: . . . and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed."¹ The family increased and became a people. This people, Israel, was elected. It was separated from other nations. It was distinguished above other nations. Unto it were committed the oracles of God. Why? In order that in its history and literature it might be the guardian of a lofty monotheism, of a conception of righteousness which was the germ of truth that had "waked to perish never." "The Law and the Prophets," said Athanasius, "were

¹ Gen. xii. 2, 3.

a sacred school of the knowledge of God and of spiritual life for the whole world."¹ The Church marks a still wider circle in the election of God. As we have already seen, it is the inheritor of the promises announced in the ages before the day of Christ. But it holds these as fulfilled in the new covenant which has been "enacted on even better promises."² Why is it thus chosen and endowed? In order that it may impart the knowledge which is life eternal. It must always look not only into but beyond itself. Does Christ pray for the men whom the Father gave Him out of the world? He does this with a view to the fulfilment of the mission, "that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me."³ Solemnly He reminds these men that they had not chosen Him, but that He had chosen them and appointed them, that they should "go and bear fruit."⁴ And the entire world of man is described as the sphere of their movement. The experience of St Paul, formerly "a blasphemer and a persecutor, and injurious," naturally induced him to give a more individualistic complexion to the truth of election; but he also regards the Church in its unity as the "accepted in the Beloved,"⁵ and, as the accepted;

¹ De Incarnatione, 12.

² St John xvii. 21.

⁵ Eph. iv. 6.

² Heb. viii. 6.

⁴ St John xv. 16.

the demonstration of His grace to principalities and powers, and the ordained agent of His grace in its world-wide reference, making "all men see what is the dispensation of the mystery which from all ages has been hid in God."¹ St Peter speaks of the Church as "an elect race"; elect, for a purpose by which all are to be benefited, "That ye should show forth the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light."²

The mistake in the harsher modes of Calvinism is, that election is too much disjoined from this wider reference, and from the supreme obligation which is covered by it. Election is so defined as practically to limit the love of God, as an active force "bringing salvation," to those who have been ordained to everlasting life. It is not regarded as a means to an end—the blessing of mankind. Let us settle it that election does not mean that some are exclusive recipients of the divine favour, but that those who freely receive, receive in order that they may freely give. What they have they hold for the good of others. When a will bequeathing an estate is made, the first part of the instrument is the nomination of trustees, the constitution of a trustee body. That body is elected. The estate

¹ Eph. iii. 9.

² 1 Peter ii. 9.

is confided to it. But is it merely for the benefit of the trustees? Certainly not, but in order that the intentions of the one whose will is declared may be realised. The visible Church of Jesus Christ is the trustee body which He has constituted, not to monopolise His love but to be His executive in carrying out the desire of His love to the uttermost, in the redemption of the world.

The view thus presented has been admirably stated by the late Professor Bruce: "Election is but the method by which Christ uses the few to bless the many. Only when so conceived is it Scriptural or wholesome. When it is thought of as involving a monopoly of divine favour and reprobation of all without, as it was by the Jews in our Lord's day, then the salt loses its savour, and the light is extinguished by being placed under a bushel. The principle, natural law in the spiritual world, is emphatically false here. In nature the few are chosen and the many are ruthlessly cast away; the fit survive and the unfit perish, and the unconscious cosmos sheds no tear. In the kingdom of God it is far otherwise. The chosen few seek the good of the many; the fit strive to preserve the unfit. This is their very vocation, and when they cease to pursue it they themselves become unfit, useless, reprobate."¹

¹ *The Kingdom of God*, pp. 256; 257.

Here, then, is the vocation of the Church constituted and ordained by Christ. Referring to this ordination in His intercessory prayer to the Father, He says, "As Thou didst send Me into the world, even so sent I them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth."¹ This is the consecration of His Church to the end of the times. It is separated to Christ Himself, that it may be the body through which He acts in His revelation to men of the possibilities of their life, and in His longing to heal all manner of withering sickness and crippling disease—working ever towards the sublime moment when God, Who is light and love, shall be all in all.

Granting, however, that the vocation of the Church to purify the springs and to elevate the conditions of social life is expressed in the teaching of Jesus, and in its constitution and ordination by Him, how far, it may be asked, is this vocation enforced by the truths which all who profess and call themselves Christians accept as pertaining to the essence of their profession? Societies or fraternities, however excellent in their aims, are almost certain to lose their hold when the original impulse which resulted in their found-

¹ St John xvii. 18, 19.

ation is shorn of its freshness, unless they have the permanent support of definite and ever-potent principles of action. Because of the want of this support famous unions had their day—often a brief one—and ceased to be. The philosophical fellowships of antiquity—the Garden, the Academy, the Porch—gradually dwindled away. Religious sanctions have an enduring efficacy: they may sustain systems for centuries; but these systems become embodiments of a tradition rather than forces of life when they lack in a faith which, from the centres both of reason and feeling, works by love. Has the Christian Church such a faith? Is there that in its content which irresistibly, un-restingly, impels to the service of humanity?

The reply is, that in the Christian consciousness there is an apprehension that commands thought, there is an affection that commands devotion, there is an assurance that commands hope. These are the dominating influences of the humanitarianism of the Church.

One of its central verities is the Incarnation. With the exposition of dogma we are not now concerned. But there is an article in a symbol that Christendom East and West holds in honour, which, as bearing on our subject, we cannot overlook—"I believe in Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of the Father, . . . Who for

us men, and for our salvation, became man.”¹ More than this need not be said; when we say more we are in danger of losing ourselves in metaphysical subtleties. There is wisdom as well as pathos in the words of one of the early Fathers; “We are compelled to attempt what is unattainable, to climb where we cannot reach, to speak what we cannot utter; instead of the mere adoration of faith, we are compelled to intrust the deep things of religion to the perils of human expression.”²

The discussion of the many issues that connect with the Incarnation is beyond the limits prescribed for this volume. But a brief glance at two or three lines of objection will tend to place the issue that is within the limits more fully before the mind.

It is asserted by many, as a reason for dismissing all consideration of it, that the conception is one which it is impossible to grasp. To this it is sufficient to reply, in the language which Herbert Spencer connects with the idea of the Absolute, “It is true that we are totally unable to conceive any such higher mode of being. But this is not a reason for questioning its existence; it is rather the reverse.”³

¹ Nicene Creed.

² Hilary, *De Trinitate*, 2. 2, 4.
First Principles, p. 209.

A more serious difficulty is indicated in the argument of others, that the idea of a divine-human Personality is inconsistent with the acknowledged principles of evolution. But may it not be answered, first, that the utmost which can be maintained is, that such a Personality stands outside what we know of the facts of nature? But we know not all. Natural science has not read all the secrets of God and of the universe; and there are other data on which to base our reasoning than those of natural science. And, further, if, even having regard to such evolutionary processes as we are able partially to follow, we can discern variations of type constituted by the selection of highly organised individuals, making new developments and beginning new species, is it not credible that the history and the experience of man should be summed up in One akin to us, but higher than us, in whom the Life which is the light of men should be as fully expressed as is possible under the conditions of humanity? All that is true and healthy is ever struggling upwards to completer realisations; is it unnatural, though it may take us to the supernatural, that, in the fulness of the time, the Perfect man, the God-man, should appear, so uniting the effluence to the Source of life that He could say, "I am in

the Father and the Father in Me"? This is the Christian apprehension of Christ, very God and very man, and our point is, that such an apprehension, when reverent, intelligent, and earnest, has in it a call to social endeavour which is supreme over the soul that hears.

So far this contention may be allowed. But again it is argued, "An idealisation of our earthly life, the cultivation of a high conception of what it may be made," a devotion to humanity in which the faith in Christ has no place, can be as efficacious as—nay, more efficacious for all that concerns material wellbeing than—any argument drawn from the idea of an Incarnation.¹ Now, it is not denied that the motive to much of the humanitarian effort of the day is not a distinctively Christian motive. One of the most striking features of society is, that many men and women realise the characteristic forces of religion, find a religion for themselves, in their idealisations, their art, their science, their work. They are frequently unselfish. They give themselves to their cause, and sometimes for it. They have faith, enthusiasm, hope. But let it be remembered that such persons are few, that they are unconsciously influenced by Christian atmospheres of thought,

¹ J. S. Mill, *Essay on the Utility of Religion.*

and that even they are in danger of having the range of their sympathies contracted by the specialities which engross them. The parts of their nature that are outwith the devotion—possibly the higher and more spiritual parts of the complex human being—are not summoned into activity. A scientific or an artistic interest, when it is wholly materialistic, must lack in a certain purity of idealism, a certain warmth and richness of colouring. Speaking generally, it may be reasserted that a vital belief in the truth of the Incarnate Lord supplies a reason for social endeavour which is both more intense and more quick and certain in its action than a merely vague idealisation of the earthly life can be. There are some words of Pater, in which he contrasts the pagan with the Christian charity, that express a truth as between non-Christian and Christian service of humanity. "What pagan charity," he writes, "was doing tardily, and as it were with the painful calculation of old age, the Church was doing almost without thinking about it, in the plenary masterfulness of youth, because it was her very being thus to do."¹ The spontaneity of labour signified in these sentences is a feature of really Christian labour. A man may, with no

¹ Marius the Epicurean, vol. ii. p. 127.

consciously religious motive, be zealous for the good of his world: one who really believes in Christ must be. If he is not, he is no true believer. It cannot with him be a matter of calculation; when the question as to how little or how much will suffice becomes prominent, he is parting from the vision of his Lord. His doing is not, or should not be, tardy doing. It is, or should be, prompt, easy, natural—the evidence of a love which glows with the sense of the great love of God. For, the Incarnation has revealed God, has penetrated life with the consciousness of God. It has consecrated earth. It has given a new grace to the material world, a new sanctity to man, in body, soul, and spirit. It has shed light on the individual, on the family, on the State. The religion of the Incarnation is the religion of humanity.

For, undoubtedly, in its representation of Christ as the Head of mankind, this religion has given a special form and force to the conception of the solidarity of the race. It has uplifted the sense of the partnership of each individual in the good common to the race, and has quickened proportionally the feeling of obligation to further that good. And in doing so it has emphasised the unspeakable value of the life and the world of man. This,

indeed, is the substance of the last of the objections to the Christian truth of the Incarnation to which allusion is now made. It is maintained that the notion of an intervention by Almighty God on behalf of man, besides being inconsistent with the everlasting continuities and the regularities of law, proceeds on assumptions as to man's place and the importance of his habitation which science has swept away. These assumptions, it is said, belong to ages when the universe in which men dwell was supposed to be the centre of creation, whereas now we know that it is only one, and a small one, in the immensity of universes, and that its tenant is not the final cause of creation. And knowing this—to imagine that the Eternal Supreme could be so interested in their concerns as to give His only-begotten Son to be the Saviour of men, is described as nothing better than the expression of human vanity. Now, to all such reasoning there can be no better answer than that contained in the parables of Christ, which set forth the will to seek and to save that which was lost.¹ Let it suffice, however, to rejoin that, assuming the entrance of sin into the world, it is not at variance with the scientific view of the unity of all worlds to suppose

¹ St Luke xv.

that a dérangement in one sphere may be felt through all spheres (as the effect of an injury to any part of an organism is communicated to the entire organism), that all worlds may be bound together by a subtle and pervasive sympathy, and that, in the interest of all that is created, He who is the Father and Orderer of all may have undertaken to restore the pre-ordained harmony by reconciling that which had gone astray with this harmony and with Himself. But the objection taken only proves the assertion that, in the light of the Incarnation, an unspeakable value necessarily attaches to human life. What can a man give in exchange for a being which God, through a stupendous gift, has redeemed? "The glory of God is the living man; the life of man is the vision of God."¹ In this apprehension of the essential and inalienable worth of life there is the word of command: "Go, endeavour to make the living man to whom you minister the glory of God, to recover the vision of God in the lives that have lapsed. In even the depraved and sunken there is still some potentiality of good, something of the divine. Appeal to it. Remember that Christ saw it when He pierced 'all down the drear abyss of sin.' Search for

¹ Irenæus, quoted in Gore's Bampton Lecture, p. 121.

it. Look at your world with His eyes. Join yourselves to men in their burdens and woes; in His compassion and for His sake, work for the redemption of His kind and yours." Irenæus long ago interpreted a regulative truth of the Church's social mission when he wrote, "Christ was made what we are that He might enable us to be what He Himself is."¹

The influence of a living faith in the Incarnation is strengthened by a twofold appeal which this faith makes.

1. It appeals to personal affection. In a striking passage in one of his Epistles, St Paul dwells on the *κένωσις* of Jesus, which he thus explains: "Who, being in the form of God, counted it not a prize to be on an equality with God, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross."² Christian thought vainly endeavours to give shape to all that this self-emptying implies. But this every one can discern—it refers to a sacrifice which words are inadequate to represent. God is love. Infinite love is the capacity of infinite sacrifice; and it is in Jesus Christ that the supreme expression

¹ Quoted in 'Lux Mundi,' p. 184.

² Phil. ii. 6-8.

of this sacrifice is realised. What is borne in on us, as we follow Him from the mean cradle to the bitter cross, is that the Creator whose being, which is Love, is a law to Himself, owns, so to say, His responsibility for the world; and, under the spell of this revelation, the mind reasons, "If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."¹ The revelation is an irresistible command to love men, as Christ loved us.

"Christ has taught," observes Professor Seeley, "not merely by the Sermon on the Mount, but also by the agony and the crucifixion."² The teaching of the agony and the crucifixion is the one everlasting illustration of the ethic of Christ. But it is more: it is that which supplies the dynamic for the practical carrying out of the ethic. What we need is, not so much an exposition of righteousness as a power in the soul itself, persuading and enabling to be righteous. We may see the vision of God, as Balaam in the Old Testament narrative did, "with the eyes open," and yet, as in his case, lack the

¹ I John iv. 11.

² *Ecce Homo*, p. 110. "Those who fix their eyes on the Sermon on the Mount, or rather on the naked propositions which it contains, and disregard Christ's life, His cross, and His resurrection, commit the same mistake in studying Christianity that the student of Socratic philosophy would commit if he studied only the dramatic story of his [Socrates'] death."—P. 90.

will-power to be true to it—nay, all the while we may be hankering after “the wages of unrighteousness.” An internal fire which, burning up the wood and hay and stubble of selfishness, effectually “propels generous emanations,” is the desideratum. And it is this that is effected when, by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the crucified Christ is glorified. Very emphatic is the language of the apostle, yet not more emphatic than the experience of a great cloud of witnesses has verified, “The love of Christ constraineth us” (hems us in, shuts us up to the one conclusion), “because we thus judge, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto Him who for their sakes died and rose again.”¹ This is the Christian ideal of the motive and end of the service of humanity; and, that they may receive an ever-fresh anointing, those who “thus judge” are always turning to the place called Calvary, there to be baptised into His death and to be consecrated in the truth of His Church’s mission to the world over which He poured the blood of atonement.

2. Further, the faith in Christ, incarnate, crucified, but risen, to Whom all power in heaven and

¹ 2 Cor. v. 14, 15.

in earth is given, contains an assurance which is the perennial nourishment of all that is strenuous and hopeful. The eye of the Church does not droop over the memory of a dead hero, or of a martyr who speaks only through the effect of His martyrdom. It turns, with a gaze always bright and ardent, to a living Lord, Brother, Friend. The confirmation of all that hope leaps forward to claim is its confidence that He is the true King and Leader of men. Even when wrong seems to triumph, this is the pledge, that whatsoever is right eternally is; that the wrong is only as the black cloud which, drifting athwart the firmament, temporarily obscures the azure beyond. There can be no pessimism where there is the stout heart of the preacher in East London, whom Matthew Arnold has sketched in one of his most beautiful sonnets—

“Ill and o’erworked, how fare you in this scene?”

So the poet asked, and the answer came—

“Bravely, for I of late have been much filled
With thoughts of Christ the living Bread.”

The mind much filled with these thoughts calls sin sin, and sees in it an exceeding sinfulness. It beholds with tears the city in its woes and sorrows. But because its God is the God of

hope, because its Lord is the Christ Who was and is and is to come, because it believes in a kingdom of grace which is active in the midst of social confusions and upheavals, and, even by means of them, is working out larger and fuller measures of good, it can be patient in tribulation, nay, in the dark and cloudy day it cannot be otherwise than sanguine. Men protest that the harvest will not come, if it ever comes at all, until millenniums have passed. The Church, lifting up its eyes to the heaven where its Lord is, replies, "Lo, the fields are white already to harvest," and courageously it works and restfully it waits.