

THE SCHOOL OF CHARITY

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MEDITATIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN CREED

BY

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FOREWORD

IT was a great thing for London that we were able to induce one of the best-known writers on the Spiritual Life, to undertake our Lenten book for this year. I have read it carefully through twice, and I shall be surprised if it is not considered one of the deepest and most helpful books of the kind she has written.

The first advice which I should give to the reader of it is that it shall be read through very carefully, first once and then twice, otherwise the deep thought and spiritual experience which underlies it might be missed.

The truths that have gone home most to me (others may find messages in it which more appeal to them) are :

- (1) How few and great are the solid facts which underlie all religion. We discuss and dispute over so many things which lie on the surface, but "*I believe in God*" carries us right down into the heart of Eternal Mystery. "The Christian creed," says the author, "is a hand-list of the soul's essential requirements : the iron ration of truths, the knowledge of mighty realities"
- (2) The second fact which comes out in this book is *how practical mystics are*. I suppose that Miss Evelyn Underhill is best known as a writer on Mysticism, and yet you could not find a more practical book than this is.

“What theology means by the Incarnation is the eternal Charity of God finding utterance within His creation.”

“A Light we can bear to look at, and looking at must adore, comes to us from a Light we cannot bear to look at even whilst we worship it.”

“Christ was trained in a carpenter’s shop ; and we persist in preferring a confectioner’s shop. But the energy of rescue, the outpouring of sacrificial love, which the supernatural life demands, is not to be got from a diet of devotional meringues and éclairs.”

“The spiritual life does not begin in an arrogant attempt at some peculiar kind of other-worldliness, a rejection of ordinary experience. It begins in the humble recognition that human things can be very holy, full of God.”

All these are great sayings and are eminently practical.

(3) That last quotation leads up to another fact very encouraging to us ordinary people, and that is the *capability of all of us to live the spiritual life*.

“After all, the shepherds got there long before the Magi ; and even so, the animals were already in position when the shepherds arrived.”

“The essence of the story of the Magi is that it is no use to be too clever about life. Only in so far as we find God in it, do we find any meaning in it.”

And more than that.

“The child who began by receiving those unexpected pilgrims had a woman of the streets for His most faithful friend, and two thieves for His comrades at the last.”

“The third-rate little town in the hills, with its limited social contacts and monotonous manual work, reproves us when we begin to fuss about our opportunities and our scope.”

(4) But passing over for lack of space the fine chapters on the Cross and the Church—what will stay by me in this book is the description of *the Star-life possible to us here and which will continue in the after life.*

“We have been shown the sky of stars, enchanting and overwhelming us : and now we realize that we are living the star-life too.”

“We recognize God’s ceaseless pressure on and in our spirits, His generous and secret self-giving on which we depend so entirely.”

And this life, which is Eternal Life, cannot, it is clear, be ended by Death.

“I expect the life of the age that is drawing near,” and therefore we end in our Creed on a “note of inexhaustible possibility and hope.”

“God is the Lord, through whom we escape death.”

“It is true that we cannot conceive all that it means and all that it costs to stand in that world of purity and wonder from which the saints speak to us . . . but because we believe in One God, the Eternal Perfect . . . so we believe in that world prepared for all who love Him; where He shall be All, in all.”

May this noble book stimulate us all to a nobler life !

A. F. LONDON.

PREFACE

IN this little book, which is based upon the principal articles of the Nicene Creed, I have tried to suggest to the modern Christian how close the connection is between the great doctrines of his religion and that "inner life" which is too often regarded as a more spiritual alternative to orthodoxy: how rich and splendid is the Christian account of reality, and how much food it has to offer to the contemplative soul. We sometimes forget that, with hardly an exception, the greatest masters of the spiritual life speak to us from within the Church; accept its teachings, and are supported by its practices. They tell us, because of their own vivid sense of God, what full life within that Church really means and can be; they do not invite us to contract out of it. Their chief gift to us, their average brothers and sisters, does not consist in the production of striking spiritual novelties, but rather in the penetrating light which they cast on the familiar truths of religion; showing us that these truths are many-levelled, and will only yield up their unspeakable richness and beauty to those who take the trouble to dig below the surface, and seek for the Treasure which is still hidden in the field. If these chapters encourage others to explore their resources, and do a little quiet home digging for themselves—instead of relying upon foreign imports, doubtfully labelled "Higher Wisdom," "Eastern Mysticism," and the rest—their main purpose will have been achieved.

The first part of the book deals with the ruling fact of religion, the Reality and Nature of God ; the second with the way this Reality and Nature are revealed within human life, and we lay hold of them ; the third, with the kind of life they demand from us, and make possible. These are truths common to all Christians, whatever their "theological colour" may be ; and moreover they are the truths which lie at the root of all valid Christian action, and give its special colour to the Christian outlook on the world. So, if it be thought that these meditations dwell too exclusively on the inner life and have no obvious practical bearing on the social and moral problems which beset us, let us remember that such a retreat to the spiritual is the best of all preparations for dealing rightly with the actual. For our real hope of solving these problems abides in bringing them into relation with the eternal truth of God ; placing them within the radiance of Charity.

E.U.

Feast of St. Mary Magdalen,

1933.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
	FORWORD	vii
	PREFACE	xi

PART I.

I.	I BELIEVE	I
II.	ONE GOD, CREATOR	12
III.	ONE LORD	24

PART II.

IV.	INCARNATE	39
V.	CRUCIFIED	51
VI	GLORIFIED	63

PART III.

VII	SPIRIT	77
VIII.	CHURCH	90
IX.	THE WORLD TO COME	101

CHAPTER I

I BELIEVE

God is love, and he that abideth in love abideth in God and God abideth in him . . . we love because he first loved.—*St. John.*

We shall never learn to know ourselves except by endeavouring to know God, for beholding His greatness, we realize our littleness. His purity shows our foulness, and by meditating on His humility we find how very far we are from being humble.—*St. Teresa.*

EVERYONE who is engaged on a great undertaking, depending on many factors for its success, knows how important it is to have a periodical stocktaking. Whether we are responsible for a business, an institution, a voyage, or an exploration—even for the well-being of a household—it is sometimes essential to call a halt; examine our stores and our equipment, be sure that all necessities are there and in good order, and that we understand the way in which they should be used. It is no good to have tins without tin openers, bottles of which the contents have evaporated, labels written in an unknown language, or mysterious packages of which we do not know the use. Now the living-out of the spiritual life, the inner life of the Christian—the secret correspondence of his soul with God—is from one point of view a great business. It was well called “the business of all businesses” by St. Bernard; for it is no mere addition to Christianity, but its very essence, the source of its vitality and power. From another point of view it is a great journey; a bit-by-bit progress, over roads that are often difficult and in weather that is

sometimes pretty bad, from “this world to that which is to come.” Whichever way we look at it, an intelligent and respectful attitude to our equipment—seeing that it is all there, accessible and in good condition, and making sure that we know the real use of each item—is essential to success. It is only too easy to be deluded by the modern craving for pace and immediate results, and press on without pausing to examine the quality and character of our supplies, or being sure that we know where we are going and possess the necessary maps. But this means all the disabling miseries of the unmarked route and unbalanced diet; and at last, perhaps, complete loss of bearings and consequent starvation of the soul.

Karl Barth has told us, that on becoming a Calvinist minister, he paused to examine his own spiritual stock in trade; and found to his horror that it was useless to him. He seemed to have nothing to feed on, nothing to depend on, nothing to give. It looked imposing; but much of the food was stale and unnourishing, some of the tins seemed empty, and some were so tightly sealed that he could not reach their contents. He was the child and servant of that Infinite God, whose every word nourishes the souls of men. But he was receiving nothing from Him: the real contents of the stores that had been issued to him were inaccessible. In apparent plenty, he was spiritually starved. In lesser ways that dreadful situation can easily become our own, if we merely take our religious equipment for granted; do not make sure that it contains food on which we can feed, tins we can open, and that we know what the labels really mean. For the spiritual life of man cannot be maintained on a diet of suggestive phrases and ideas. Only when we have found within the familiar externals of our religion, those vivid realities which these

externals enclose and keep safe, are we using our equipment properly and getting the food we need. We must open the tins, if we are to discover inside them the mysterious nourishment of the soul. Nor have we any right to ask for fresh enlightenment, or a new issue of provisions, until we have fully explored the resources we already possess.

This process is equally necessary for those who are repelled by the externals of religion, and those who are attracted by them. Both need to recognize the difference between the container and the content. Many people spend the whole of their devotional lives sitting by the wayside admiring the pictures on the tins; more are alienated from religion by mistaking this procedure for faith. Karl Barth went away into solitude to open some of his least promising packages; and found with amazement within them the inexhaustible nourishment of eternal life.

Lent is a good moment for such spiritual stocktaking; a pause, a retreat from life's busy surface to its solemn depths. There we can consider our possessions; and discriminate between the necessary stores which have been issued to us, and must be treasured and kept in good order, and the odds and ends which we have accumulated for ourselves. Most of us are inclined to pay considerable attention to the spiritual odds and ends: the air-cushions, tabloids, and vacuum flasks, and various labour-saving devices which we call by such attractive names as our own peace, our own approach, our own experience, and so forth. But we leave the superb and massive standard equipment which is issued to each baptized Christian to look after itself. There are few who cannot benefit by a bit by bit examination of that equipment, a humble return to first principles; for there we find the map and road-book of that spiritual

world which is our true environment, all the needed information about the laws which control it, and all essentials for feeding that inner life of which we talk so much and understand so very little.

The Christian creed is a hand-list of the soul's essential requirements : the iron ration of truths, the knowledge of mighty realities, which rightly used is sufficient to feed and safeguard our supernatural life throughout its course. When Christians say the Creed, they say in effect, " This is what we believe to be the truth about existence ; about God and the things of God, and so by implication about our own mysterious lives." For the whole of life, visible and invisible, is governed by these statements ; which come to us from beyond our normal radius, entering the human scene in their penetrating truth and majestic beauty, to show us how to live.

The longer we go on with life, the more mysterious, the more baffling it seems to most of us : and the more deeply we feel the need of being taught how to live. We go muddling on, secretly conscious that we are making a mess of it. Guides come forward to tell us this or that, yet always with an avoidance of the full mystery of our situation, seldom with any real sense of the richness of the material of life : and they all fail to be of much use to us when we come to the bad bits. The surface-indications often mislead us. The tangle of new roads, bordered by important-looking factories and unhappy little trees, the arterial highways leading nowhere, the conflicting demands and directions which reach us from every side, only make our confusions worse. And at last we realize that only the Author of human life can teach us how to live human life, because He alone sees it in its eternal significance : and He does this by a disclosure that at first

may seem strange and puzzling, but grows in beauty and meaning as we gaze at it, and which feeds, enlightens and supports us when we dare to take up the life that it reveals.

"Lord," said St. Thomas Aquinas, "set my life in order ; making me to know what I ought to do and do it in the way that I should." The civilized world seems now to have reached the point at which only this prayer can save it ; and the answer is already given us in the Christian creed. We talk much of reconstruction ; but no one has yet dared to take the Christian's profound beliefs about Reality as the basis of a reconditioned world. We treat them as dwellers in the plain treat the mountains. We lift up our eyes to their solemn beauty with respect ; but refuse to acknowledge that plain and mountain are part of the same world. Yet the Creed is no mere academic document, no mere list of "dogmas." It is an account of that which *is* ; and every word it contains has a meaning at once universal, practical, and spiritual within the particular experience of each soul. It irradiates and harmonizes every level of our life, not one alone. All great spiritual literature does this to some extent ; but the Creed, the condensed hand-list of those deep truths from which spiritual literature is built up, does it supremely.

Dante warned the readers of the *Divine Comedy* that everything in it had a fourfold meaning, and would never be understood by those who were satisfied by the surface-sense alone. This, which is indeed true of the *Comedy*, is far more true of the great statements of the Christian religion. They are true at every level ; but only disclose their full splendour and attraction when we dare to reach out, beyond their surface beauty and their moral teaching, to God, their meaning and their end, and

6 THE SCHOOL OF CHARITY

let their fourfold wisdom and tremendous demands penetrate and light up the deepest level of our souls.

The spiritual life is a stern choice. It is not a consoling retreat from the difficulties of existence ; but an invitation to enter fully into that difficult existence, and there apply the Charity of God and bear the cost. Till we accept this truth, religion is full of puzzles for us, and its practices often unmeaning : for we do not know what it is all about. So there are few things more bracing and enlightening than a deliberate resort to these superb statements about God, the world and the soul ; testing by them our attitude to those realities, and the quality and vigour of our interior life with God. For every one of them has a direct bearing on that interior life. *Lex credendi, lex orandi*. Our prayer and belief should fit like hand and glove ; they are the inside and outside of one single correspondence with God. Since the life of prayer consists in an ever-deepening communion with a Reality beyond ourselves, which is truly there, and touches, calls, attracts us, what we believe about that Reality will rule our relation to it. We do not approach a friend and a machine in the same way. We make the first and greatest of our mistakes in religion when we begin with ourselves, our petty feelings and needs, ideas and capacities. The Creed sweeps us up past all this to GOD, the objective Fact, and His mysterious self-giving to us. It sets first Eternity and then History before us, as the things that truly matter in religion ; and shows us a humble and adoring delight in God as the first duty of the believing soul. So there can hardly be a better inward discipline than the deliberate testing of our vague, dilute, self-occupied spirituality by this superb vision of Reality.

These great objective truths are not very fashionable

among modern Christians ; yet how greatly we need them, if we are to escape pettiness, individualism and emotional bias. For that mysterious inner life which glows at the heart of Christianity, which we recognize with delight whenever we meet it, and which is the source of Christian power in the world, is fed through two channels. Along one channel a certain limited knowledge of God and the things of God enters the mind ; and asks of us that honest and humble thought about the mysteries of faith which is the raw material of meditation. Along the other channel God Himself comes secretly to the heart, and wakes up that desire and that sense of need which are the cause of prayer. The awestruck vision of faith and the confident movement of love are both needed, if the life of devotion is to be rich, brave and humble ; equally removed from mere feeling and mere thought. Christian prayer to God must harmonize with Christian belief about God : and quickly loses humility and sanity if it gets away from that great law. We pray first because we believe something ; perhaps at that stage a very crude or vague something. And with the deepening of prayer, its patient cultivation, there comes—perhaps slowly, perhaps suddenly—the enrichment and enlargement of belief, as we enter into a first-hand communion with the Reality who is the object of our faith.

For God, not man, is the first term of religion : and our first step in religion is the acknowledgment that HE IS. All else is the unfolding of those truths about His life and our life, which this fact of facts involves. I believe in One God. We begin there ; not with our own needs, desires, feelings, or obligations. Were all these abolished, His independent splendour would remain, as the Truth which gives its meaning to the world. So we begin by

stating with humble delight our belief and trust in the most concrete, most rich of all realities—God. Yet even the power to do this reflects back again to Him, and witnesses to His self-giving to the soul. For Christianity is not a pious reverie, a moral system or a fantasy life; it is a revelation, adapted to our capacity, of the Realities which control life. Those Realities must largely remain unknown to us; limited little creatures that we are. God, as Brother Giles said, is a great mountain of corn from which man, like a sparrow, takes a grain of wheat: yet even that grain of wheat, which is as much as we can carry away, contains all the essentials of our life. We are to carry it carefully and eat it gratefully: remembering with awe the majesty of the mountain from which it comes.

The first thing this vast sense of God does for us, is to deliver us from the imbecilities of religious self-love and self-assurance; and sink our little souls in the great life of the race, in and upon which this One God in His mysterious independence is always working, whether we notice it or not. When that sense of His unique reality gets dim and stodgy, we must go back and begin there once more; saying with the Psalmist, "All my fresh springs are in thee." Man, said Christ, is nourished by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. Not the words we expect, or persuade ourselves that we have heard; but those unexpected words He really utters, sometimes by the mouths of the most unsuitable people, sometimes through apparently unspiritual events, sometimes secretly within the soul. Therefore seeking God, and listening to God, is an important part of the business of human life: and this is the essence of prayer. We do something immense, almost unbelievable, when we enter that world of prayer, for then we deliberately move out