

## **EPIPHANY 6 ON TOLERANCE**

**MATTHEW xiii.24-30.**

**“The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the household came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye toot up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest and in the time of harvest: I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.”**

The thoughtful man who wishes well to the Gospel of Christ will hardly hear this parable without a feeling of humiliation. None of our Lord's parables are more clear and simple in their meaning; none have a more direct and practical command appended to them; none have been less regarded during the last two thousand years.

Toleration, solemnly enjoined, has been the exception. Persecution, solemnly forbidden, has been the rule. Men, as usual, have fancied themselves wiser than God; for they have believed themselves wise enough to do what he had told them that they were not wise enough to do, and so have tried to root the tares from among the wheat. Men have, as usual, lacked faith in Christ; they did not believe that he was actually governing the earth which belonged to him; that he was actually cultivating his field, the world: they therefore believed themselves bound to do for him what he neglected, or at least did not see fit, to do for himself; and they tried to root up the tares from among the wheat.

They have tried to repress free thought, and to silence novel opinions, forgetful that Christ must have been right after all, and that in silencing opinions which startled them, they might be quenching the Spirit, and despising prophecies. But they found it more difficult to quench the Spirit than they fancied, when they began the policy of repression.

They have found that the Spirit blew where it listed, and they heard the sound of it, but knew not whence it came, or whither it went; that the

utterances which startled them, the tones of feeling and thought which terrified them, reappeared, though crushed in one place, suddenly in another; that the whole atmosphere was charged with them, as with electricity; and that it was impossible to say where the unseen force might not concentrate itself at any moment, and flash out in a lightning stroke. Then their fear has turned to a rage.

They have thought no more of putting down opinions: but of putting down men. They have found it more difficult than they fancied to separate the man from his opinions; to hate the sin and love the sinner: and so they have begun to persecute; and, finding brute force, or at least their interpretation of law, far more easy than either convincing their opponents or allowing themselves to be convinced by them, they have fined, imprisoned, tortured, exterminated; and, like the Roman conquerors of old, 'made a desert, and called that peace.'

And all the while the words stood written in the Scriptures which they professed to believe: 'Nay: lest while ye root up the tares, ye root up the wheat also.'

They had been told, if ever men were told, that the work was beyond their powers of discernment: that, whatever the tares were, or however they came into God's field the world, they were either too like the wheat, or too intimately entangled with them, for any mortal man to part them. God would part them in his own good time.

If they trusted God, they would let them be; certain that he hated what was false, what was hurtful, infinitely more than they; certain that he would some day cast out of his kingdom all things which offend, and all that work injustice, and whatsoever loveth and maketh a lie; and that, therefore, if he suffered such things to abide awhile, it was for them to submit, and to believe that God loved the world better than they, and knew better how to govern it. But if, on the contrary, they did not believe God, then they would set to work, in their disobedient self-conceit, to do that which he had forbidden them; and the certain result would be that, with the tares, they would root up the wheat likewise.

Note here two things. First, it is not said that there were no tares among the wheat; nor that the servants would fail in rooting some of them up. They

---

would succeed probably in doing some good: but they would succeed certainly in doing more harm. In their short-sighted, blind, erring, hasty zeal, they would destroy the good with the evil. Their knowledge of this complex and miraculous universe was too shallow, their canons of criticism were too narrow, to decide on what ought, or ought not, to grow in the field of him whose ways and thoughts were as much higher than theirs as the heaven is higher than the earth.

Note also, that the Lord does not blame them for their purpose. He merely points out to them its danger; and forbids it because it is dangerous; for their wish to root out the tares was not 'natural.' We shall libel it by calling it that. It was distinctly spiritual, the first impulse of spiritual men, who love right, and hate wrong, and desire to cultivate the one, and exterminate the other. To root out the tares; to put down bad men and wrong thoughts by force, is one of the earliest religious instincts. It is the child's instinct--pardonable though mistaken.

The natural man -- whether the heathen savage at one end of the scale, or the epicurean man of the world at the other -- has no such instinct. He will feel no anger against falsehood, because he has no love for truth; he will be liberal enough, tolerant enough, of all which does not touch his own self-interest; but that once threatened, he too may join the ranks of the bigots, and persecute, not like them, in the name of God and truth, but in those of society and order; and so the chief priests and Pontius Pilate may make common cause.

And yet the chief priests, with their sense of duty, of truth, and of right, however blundering, concealed, perverted, may be a whole moral heaven higher than Pilate with no sense of aught beyond present expediency. But nevertheless what have been the consequences to both? That the chief priests have failed as utterly as the Pilates. As God forewarned them, they have rooted up the wheat with the tares; they have made the blood of martyrs the seed of the Church; and more, they have made martyrs of those who never deserved to be martyrs, by wholesale and indiscriminate condemnation.

They have forgotten that the wheat and the tares grow together, not merely in separate men, but in each man's own heart and thoughts; that light and darkness, wisdom and folly, duty and ambition, self-sacrifice and self-

---

conceit, are fighting in every soul of man in whom there is even the germ of spiritual life. Therefore they have made men offenders for a word. They have despised noble aspirations, ignored deep and sound insights, because they came in questionable shapes, mingled with errors or eccentricities. They have cried in their haste, 'Here are tares, and tares alone.'

Again and again have religious men done this, for many a hundred years; and again and again the Nemesis has fallen on them. A generation or two has passed, and the world has revolted from their unjust judgments. It has perceived, among the evil, good which it had overlooked in an indignant haste and passionateness, learnt from those who should have taught it wisdom, patience, and charity. It has made heroes of those who had been branded as heretics; and has cried, 'There was wheat, and wheat alone;' and so religious men have hindered the very cause for which they fancied that they were fighting; and have gained nothing by disobeying God's command, save to weaken their own moral influence, to increase the divisions of the Church, and to put a fresh stumbling-block in the path of the ignorant and the young.

And what have been the consequences to Christ's Church? Have not her enemies -- and her friends too -- for centuries past, cried in vain:-

'For forms of faith let graceless zealots fight,  
His can't he wrong, whose life is in the right.'

Of Christian morals her enemies have not complained: but that these morals have been postponed, neglected, forgotten, in the disputes over abstruse doctrines, over ceremonies, and over no-ceremonies; that men who were all fully agreed in their definition of goodness, and what a good man should be and do, have denounced each other concerning matters which had no influence whatsoever to practical morality, till the ungodly cried, 'See how these Christians hate one another! See how they waste their time in disputing concerning the accidents of the bread of life, forgetful that thousands were perishing round them for want of any bread of life at all!'

My friends, these things are true; and have been true for centuries. Let us not try to forget them by denouncing them as the utterances of the malevolent and the unbelieving. Let us rather imitate the wise man who

---

said, that he was always grateful to his critics, for, however unjust their attacks, they were certain to attack, and therefore to show him, his weakest points. And here is our weakest point; namely, in our unhappy divisions -- which are the fruits of self-will and self-conceit, and of the vain attempt to do that which God incarnate has told us we cannot do -- to part the wheat from the tares.

We cannot part them. Man could never do it, even in the simpler Middle Age. Far less can he do it now in an age full of such strange, such complex influences; at once so progressive and conservative; an age in which the same man is often craving after some new prospect of the future, and craving at the same moment after the seemingly obsolete past; longing for fresh truth, and yet dreading to lose the old; with hope struggling against fear, courage against modesty, scorn of imbecility against reverence for authority in the same man's heart, while the mystery of the new world around him strives with the mystery of the old world which lies behind him; while the belief that man is the same being now as he was five thousand years ago strives with the plain fact that he is assuming round us utterly novel habits, opinions, politics; while the belief that Christ is the same now as he was in Judaea of old -- yea, the same yesterday, to-day, and forever -- strives with the plain fact that his field, the world, is in a state in which it never has been since the making of the world; while it is often most difficult, though (as I believe) certainly possible, to see those divine laws at work with which God governed the nations in old time.

May God forgive us all, both laity and clergy, every cruel word, every uncharitable thought, every hasty judgment. Have we not need, in such a time as this, of that divine humility which is the elder sister of divine charity? Have we not need of some of that God-inspired modesty of St. Paul's: 'I think as a child, I speak as a child. I see through a glass darkly'? Have we not need to listen to his warning: 'he that regardeth the day, to the Lord he regardeth it; and he that regardeth it not, to the Lord he regardeth it not. Who art thou that judgest another? To his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, and he shall stand; for God is able to make him stand'?

Have we not need to hear our Lord's solemn rebuke, when St. John boasted how he saw one casting out devils in Christ's name, and he forbade him, because he followed not them -- 'Forbid him not'? Have we not need to believe St. James, when he tells us that every good gift and

---

every perfect gift cometh from above, from the Father of lights, and not (as we have too often fancied) sometimes from below, from darkness and the pit? Have we not need to keep in mind the canon of the wise Gamaliel? -- 'If this counsel or this work be of man, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, we cannot overthrow it, lest haply we too be found fighting even against God.'

Have we not need to keep in mind that 'every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God;' and 'no man saith that Jesus is the Christ, save by the Spirit of God;' lest haply we, too, be found more fastidious than Almighty God himself? Have we not need to beware lest we, like the Scribes and Pharisees, should be found keeping the key of knowledge, and yet not entering in ourselves, and hindering those who would enter in? Have we not need to beware lest, while we are settling which is the right gate to the kingdom of heaven, the publicans and harlots should press into it before us; and lest, while we are boasting that we are the children of Abraham, God should, without our help, raise up children to Abraham of those stones outside; those hard hearts, dull brains, natures ground down by the drudgery of daily life till they are as the pavement of the streets; those so-called 'heathen masses' of whom we are bid to think this day.

If there be any truth, any reason, in what I have said -- or rather in what Christ and his apostles have said -- let us lay it to heart upon this day, on which all of us have found a common cause for which to plead, whatever may be their minor differences of opinion. Let us wish success to every argument by which this great cause may be enforced, to every scheme of good which may be built up by its funds. Let us remember that, however much the sermons preached this day differ in details, they will all agree, thank God, in the root and ground of their pleading -- duty to Christ, and to those for whom Christ died.

Let us remember that, to whatever outwardly different purposes the money collected may be applied, it will after all be applied to one purpose -- to Christian civilization, Christian teaching, Christian discipline; and that any Christianity, any Christian civilization, any Christian discipline, is infinitely better than none; that, though all man's systems and methods must be imperfect, faulty, yet they are infinitely better than anarchy and heathendom, just as the wheat, however much mixed with weeds, is infinitely better than the weeds alone. But above all, let us wish well to all

---

schemes of education, of whatever kind, certain that any education is better than none. And, therefore, let me entreat you to subscribe bountifully to that scheme for which I specially plead this day.

Let me remind you, very solemnly, that the present dearth of education in these realms is owing mainly to our unhappy religious dissensions; that it is the disputes, not of unbelievers, but of Christians, which have made it impossible for our government to fulfil one of the first rights, one of the first duties, of any government in a civilized country; namely, to command, and to compel, every child in the realm to receive a proper education. Strange and sad that so it should be: yet so it is. We have been letting, we are letting still, year by year, thousands sink and drown in the slough of heathendom and brutality, while we are debating learnedly whether a raft, or a boat, or a rope, or a life-buoy, is the legitimate instrument for saving them; and future historians will record with sorrow and wonder a fact which will be patent to them, though the dust of controversy hides it from our eyes -- even the fact that the hinderers of education in these realms were to be found, not among the so-called sceptics, not among the so-called infidels; but among those who believed that God came down from heaven, and became man, and died on the cross, for every savage child in London streets.

Government controlled education is, by our own choice and determination, impossible. The more solemn is the duty laid on us, on laity and clergy alike, to supply that want by voluntary education. The clergy will do their duty, each in his own way. Let the laity do theirs likewise, in fear and trembling, as men who have voluntarily and deliberately undertaken to educate the lower classes; and who must do it, or bear the shame for ever. For in the last day, when we shall all appear before Him whose ways are not as our ways, or his thoughts as our thoughts -- in that day, the question will not be, whether the compulsory system, or the denominational system, or any other system, satisfied best our sectarian ways and our narrow thoughts: but whether they satisfied the ways of that Father in heaven who willeth not that one little child should perish.

---