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ST. PAUL AT ATHENS.

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IT was a wonderful sight that awaited St. Paul when he landed from the boat and made his way from the port of Athens into the upper city. Public buildings, temples and statues met his gaze on every side. In style and character the place was entirely unlike any he had so far visited. It was not military like Philippi, nor commercial like Thessalonica, but at this period a quiet university town, to which Roman gentlemen sent their sons. But alike in learning and history Athens had long ago seen her best days. These, of course, had been really brilliant. We still owe a great debt to her citizens. Her poets, her philosophers and historians form the basis of the best education there is to be had in the world to-day. These, however, had lived and died four centuries or more before St. Paul set foot there, and their place was now taken by jangling sects who "questioned everything and settled nothing," while the ancient quest for truth had sunk into a mere love of what was smart or novel: "all the Athenians," we read, and the visitors and students and holiday-makers doubtless as well, "spent their time on nothing else but saying or hearing some new thing." What wonder that an Apostle of lively intellect like St. Paul should catch the spirit of the place, become for a time a philosopher like themselves, meet them on their own ground (as it were) in accordance with his rule of becoming all things to all men, if only he might save some! But was it a success? We shall see.

It seems fairly clear that St. Paul's visit to this seat of learning was not part of his original plan. The place he was really making for was Corinth, a city vastly more important for his missionary purpose: for it was rich and cosmopolitan, throbbing with life, if lax in morals, the meeting-place of north and south and, what was even more important, of east and west, with a population of perhaps three-quarters of a million. But he stayed at Athens to await the arrival of his two friends and fellow-travellers, and, we read, while he waited for them, his spirit was provoked within him, as he beheld the city "filled with idols"—images, that is to say, of gods and heroes, objects, to many, of the greatest artistic interest and value. But it is obvious that to him Art as such made no great appeal. He was a Jew, you see, at bottom, in spite of his Hellenic culture and Roman citizenship, and Jews had little or no feeling for "the stone that breathes and struggles, the brass that seems to speak." Statuary and sculpture interested them hardly at all. They were specialists in religion, not in Art—indeed, would hardly allow to it that ministerial and helpful function which is accorded to it, in greater or less degree, by religious people among ourselves. We delight in making our churches beautiful: Westminster Abbey is

adorned with statues, though they are not there to be worshipped. In that age and to St. Paul such things meant " idolatry "—hence his distress and indignation of spirit.

But he was not the man to suffer in silence. He discussed the matter both in the Jewish synagogue—we are surprised to hear that there was one—and in the market-place. Here certain " philosophers " fell in with him. Some of these rather degenerate followers of greater men of old gravely maintained that pleasure was the end of life; others were more austere and made virtue the end. But they were none of them complimentary to the new teacher, called him a babbler, a charlatan, a retailer of second-hand opinions, little realizing the power of his master mind or the fire of conviction that burnt in his great soul. Nevertheless, they were so far interested that they took him to the Hill of Mars, a quiet spot where they could give him calm and uninterrupted hearing. There St. Paul stood, in that clear and bright open air, a temple immediately below him, another on his right hand, in front the glorious Parthenon—a great scene and a great occasion (Raphael has painted it): what might not be the issue?

How should he begin? Only in one way, with such sights in view. Objects of worship everywhere! To judge by their profusion, the Athenians were religious almost to a fault! They even carried their " God-fearingness " so far that in the multitude of their divinities they actually paid honour to one whose name they did not know. " As I passed along, I found an altar with the inscription, To an unknown God." It did not mean that the donor had some conception of a Being girt with clouds and darkness but exalted high above other deities: it meant only that he was afraid that he had unwittingly offended some deity or other, and wished to propitiate him. But the altar gave the Apostle a start. Such an inscription showed clearly that, even in their own eyes, this beautiful and artistic paganism, multitudinous as it was, was yet inadequate: their very catalogue of gods was incomplete: and the God, by them confessedly unknown, was, to him, the supreme and only Reality—" What ye unknowingly worship that set I forth unto you."

There follows, you will remember, an argumentative passage of some difficulty. It seems to be an answer to questions which the Apostle's mind must have been continually revolving, but which he does not lay, not at least in so many words, before his academic audience, What do you mean by " God "? How much, to you, does the Name express? Clear up your ideas and think them out. Then, when you have done so, is all your statuary really to the point? Valuable as Art, is it not, as religion, weighed in the balances and found wanting?

Let us look at the lines of thought which the Apostle follows. First, he reminds both them and us that we are face to face with a very wonderful world. " Nothing that happens in the world can ever be so wonderful as the existence of the world itself," said St. Augustine: and the question inevitably present sitself: Whence came it? To St. Paul it implied a Creative Intelligence, who, so

far from being "unknown," had revealed Himself, in a measure, by His handiwork. It is a plea which still has force. I will not say that we can demonstrate the existence, still less the character, of God from Nature—Newman once said that Nature alone would make him an atheist, thus differing from Bacon, who declares that God never wrought miracle to convince atheism, because His ordinary works convince it—but I do say that that belief in Him which we bring with us to our study of Nature from an intuitive source is confirmed by what we find there, and the morning sunshine becomes to us a sacrament of Divine Love. So, we say, "In the beginning GOD." The world—do you ask about? He made it. Life? It is His gift. The beauty of the sunset and our power to see it? They come alike from Him, Who in power and loving artistry is Supreme and Alone. "It is *He* that hath made us." To forget that—and in the midst of their triumphs over Nature, with all the resultant comfort and wealth, men *are* forgetting it—is perilous to worship, and to all true reverence. In view of the world, this majestic, awe-inspiring cosmos, and of our own selves, we, I trust, rather bow the head and give thanks.

But he goes on—I interpret his words somewhat freely—having made the world, God also governs its inhabitants. He reveals Himself thereby in Providence (as we say). Look at history: is there no unseen Hand there, no one "behind the curtain"? The separation of men into nations, each with its own territory and destiny, has meaning. "It leads to wars," you say. Well, it does. Yet there is purpose in it, somewhere, we assert. We may not understand the whole world-process—we certainly do not. The ways of Providence from everlasting to everlasting are assuredly beyond us. But we grasp enough to assure us that history is not all chance—nay, more, enough to make us sober and serious-minded men. We "see enough of the play to get an inkling of the plot," and the plot points to a Ruler that "judgeth the earth."

You notice that in this the Apostle makes no reference at all to the Old Testament, or to Jewish history, and for the obvious reason that before a Greek audience such reference would have been out of place. The Athenians knew nothing of Jewish faith and experience. He starts from what his hearers and he shared in common, namely, the world of Nature, to the glory and mystery of which they were fully alive, and the history of mankind, of which they knew at least something. Both, in a way, reveal God, here the Creator, there the Governor. There was Providence, he might have added, in their own history—we, at any rate, can see it now: had the Persian fleet won at Salamis, the history not only of Greece but of the whole world would have been altered.

But was this all? God above creation—yes: God behind history—yes: then, only dimly discerned, you say, largely unknown. But stay, there is more. "God," he says, "is not far from each one of us." "In Him we live and move and are."

Why do we believe in God? Ultimately because we cannot help

it. Faith works at the centre of our personality: it is part of our "make-up." The instinct of faith may be rudimentary or timid; it may be stifled in course of time by sin, or overlaid with intellectual pride. But it is there. When it speaks it says "Father." Your own poets, he says to the Athenians, bear witness to your heavenly origin: "We are also His offspring." As He is Spirit, so also are we, and we know it. Genesis is right: God "created man in His own image," and our consciousness bears witness to Him.

Now this is a great and valuable argument. It is widely used to-day; for if the world and history seem sometimes to conceal God, man reveals Him. Our best reason, after all, for believing in Him is ourselves. "We are made in His image, to witness Him." But St. Paul does not press the argument in this, its wider application, but turns it with unerring force against the cult of images. Does a statue reveal a man? "There's Pericles, you say," pointing to a masterpiece across the road: "but can the dull cold marble express his spiritual nature, his warmth of feeling, his inner history? If so, how much less can it express God?"

Of course, there is nothing in what the Apostle has said, so far, that is definitely and distinctly Christian. A Jew might urge it, or any believer in God. Probably he took the line he did in order to get a hearing. But he has not finished; his argument is yet to have a Christian conclusion. God, he said, had "overlooked" the times of men's ignorance—note the charity of this judgment on the heathen world—"but now commanded men that they should all repent." Yes, and repentance (we all feel) is the supreme requirement, if God is, and if He be holy.

There is no need to argue the point—we all see it. But his appeal had this further driving-power behind it, that God had "appointed a day on which He would judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He had ordained." It is Jesus Christ. That He would come and execute that function the preacher was convinced: had not God guaranteed it by raising Him from the dead?

Here then, at last, the Apostle reaches distinctively Christian doctrine, and it gave offence. "Jesus and the Resurrection"—no, not that. A Creator they were prepared for. Providence was not unlikely. A shadowy survival in the lower world—they might venture so far.

But Resurrection was impossible. The idea of a glorified body, no longer a clog to, but a worthy handmaid of, the soul, was altogether beyond their speculations. So "some mocked." It is quite easy to mock on this subject if you despise the body as mere "matter," as though there were no question behind—And what is matter? or if you feel sure that there are no things in heaven and earth not dreamt of in your philosophy. So these supercilious Athenians had their jest. They did not treat St. Paul as the soldiers had done at Philippi, or the mob at Thessalonica; they claimed to be gentlemen, and "their weapon was not force, but ridicule." This, I do not doubt, was very hard to bear, and to Athens, whether by accident or design, he never returned—"the noblest of ancient

cities and he the noblest man in history, and apparently he never cared to look on it again." [1]

Yet it was not all failure. Some were interested: some even believed. But no great church was planted there. There is no "Epistle to the Athenians." He had tried to meet philosophy with philosophy, and, whether he was right in the opinion or no, he seems to have believed that he had failed, for so most people venture to read between the lines at the beginning of First Corinthians. So it was that he set out for Corinth "determined not to know anything among them but Jesus Christ and Him crucified"—a great and significant resolve.

Wherein lay his mistake, if mistake he made? Was not the argument of his speech sound? Yes, it was. And he must have taken pains, we think, to let St. Luke have an adequate summary of it: how else was it inserted on his pages? And reasonings have their value. "Evidences," as we call them, are often useful, though, as Pascal says, the heart has its own reasons, and the ultimate question is, "Like you this Christianity or not?" The intellect nevertheless has its claims, and we ought always to be able to give a reason concerning the hope that is in us, even though in a world where it is so much easier to ask questions than to answer them we may not be able to explain everything. Such a study may help to clear away difficulties, our own and other people's, as well as to distinguish what is essential from what is not—a process which most men need at some period of their lives or other. But I suppose that at Athens the emphasis was misplaced. All said and done, it made too much of intellect. The Christian message is addressed more strikingly to the needs of the moral and spiritual than of the intellectual nature. It appeals especially to the affections, to the conscience, and to the will. Think—yes: read, study, argue, wrestle with problems—yes, the more the better. But the first Christian "beatitude" is addressed to the "poor in spirit," and the great Christian text is "Repent ye," and a hold upon religion that is merely intellectual may ignore repentance altogether. You may remove men's doubts or correct men's mistakes without touching their real lives; yet it is the lives that matter. By all means show them the folly of graven images as objects of worship: that alone will not convict them of sin. Tell them of judgment to come, its absolute and irrefutable certainty: fear will not produce a permanent change of heart—it is love alone that can do that, and when next the Apostle speaks, it is a message of Divine Love that he will give. He will not feed men's vanity by meeting them on their own "high intellectual ground," but will apply himself to their real wants, to their aching hearts and troubled spirits. He will lead them to the foot of their Saviour's Cross for their sins' forgiveness, to the steps of His throne for their light and peace. It is not, after all, the fact of Creation, or the study of human nature, or the drama of history that is God's great argument with the soul; it is this

[1] Furneaux, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 290. Students of this commentary will notice that I have been indebted to it again and again.

rather—Jesus died, Jesus is risen again, and all for you and for me. "We love Him, for He first loved us."

It is said—I know not with what degree of truth—that as he lay dying the great philosopher-bishop of the English Church, in great spiritual distress declared it to be an awful thing to appear before the moral Governor of the world. "I am afraid," he said, "afraid." In days when, with a flippant light-heartedness which ill becomes responsible beings, too many can toss aside such a conception of God as merely tiresome or irrelevant, we need, we greatly need, some of that high and noble gravity which can contemplate it without flinching, and then, because of it, seek to live in all seriousness a godly, righteous, and sober life. But "the Moral Governor of the world"—is it all? Would this have won men's hearts? Will it minister comfort to us at our last hour?

My lord, saith one,
Hast thou forgotten how Christ came to be
A Saviour? Nay, the bishop made reply,
How know I He's a Saviour unto me?
The chaplain paused, then answered thoughtfully:
Lo, him that cometh unto Me, Christ said,
I will in no wise cast out. Need we more?
The bishop slowly raised his dying head:
I've read a thousand times that Scripture o'er,
Nor felt its truth till now I near the tomb;
It is enough. O Saviour Christ, I come.[1]

[1] Alexander Whyte, *Bishop Butler*, p. 88.

The Sermon on Prayer Book Revision, preached in Norwich Cathedral on February 13, 1927, by the Bishop of Norwich, has been issued by S.P.C.K. (4*d*. net). In this he states the grounds of his objection to many of the proposals of the Bishops in the Composite Book. The Sermon has already reached several editions and has commanded wide attention.

The Church Book Room is issuing a series of Sunday School Lessons on the Collects, illustrated from the Epistles and Gospels in quarterly parts (6*d*. each quarter). The Editors are the Rev. W. H. Flecker, D.C.L., late Headmaster of Dean Close School, Cheltenham, and the Rev. Ll. E. L. Roberts, M.A., Vicar of St. Luke's, Deptford. They are intended to meet the need for lessons which are spiritual, scriptural and evangelical, and at the same time constructed along the lines of modern Sunday School methods. There are also four lessons devoted directly to Missionary instruction. Picture Booklets can be obtained for the lessons illustrating the Sunday Gospels.