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ST. PETER.

An Address to the Liverpool Clerical Society, 6th January, 1930.

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I WAS present a few weeks ago at a meeting of a little clerical Society where, as it chanced, the talk fell upon St. Peter, and, ever since, his character and doings have recurred constantly to my mind. I want to make him for a little while the subject of our meditation, and (it may be) the vehicle of our self-judgment. Yet not these only, but also a message of encouragement. Can we all, with him, rise on stepping-stones of our dead selves, and, in spite of repeated failure and disappointment, start, once again, to feed the flock to which we have been assigned? Such would seem to be the goal and purpose of that Devotional Meeting of your Society which so rightly marks the beginning of a New Year. May it be used of us all to our good!

There were members of the Apostolic band who remain little more than names to us: never mind, they shine like stars for ever in the firmament of God. But St. Peter was no imaginary person, no shadowy "St. John the elder," but is thoroughly well known to us—few men better perhaps in all history. Not that we have the story of his life, full and complete: its earlier days and its closing scenes, save for a legend or two such as *Domine, quo vadis?* are alike missing. But, for all that, we are quite well off: and however much of his history and doings may be lost to us, we feel that we do know the man; and very human we find him. In each Gospel he is just the same man, with his failings and his virtues marked upon him unmistakably—another, shall we say, of Paley's "undesigned coincidences"? The Fourth Gospel was probably given its present form some time after the rest, and it supplies much new and supremely interesting matter about St. Peter; but it is exactly the same St. Peter still. He who says in St. Luke, "At Thy word I will let down the net," or in St. Mark, "Let us make three tabernacles," is clearly the same eager, impetuous disciple who in St. John declares, "Thou shalt never wash my feet," and, a little later on, girds his fisher's coat about him, and leaps into the water, to be the first to reach his Risen Lord.

It is questionable, I think, whether, in Protestant churches at least, St. Peter has ever had real justice done to the greatness of his merits. This has been due, I suppose, in part, to the ecclesiastical pretensions of the Roman See, based upon what seems to us a grossly unwarranted use of St. Peter's name. You remember the "chain of hypotheses" on which those claims depend: may I confess that living as I do in a parish where Romanism is the chief form of Dissent, I feel sometimes that we shall be driven,

however reluctantly, to proclaim them to be *hypotheses*, far more openly and vigorously than any of us have done of late? First there is the assertion that St. Peter, by our Lord's appointment, had a primacy over the other Apostles, a claim based, scripturally, on the "Rock" passage, and "Feed My sheep." The former is, I am aware, suspect with some, as found only in St. Matthew. But let us accept it. Then St. Peter himself may be the Rock—but not, I would urge, divorced too sharply from the faith of which he had just been the spokesman. Even so, our Lord was "foretelling a career" rather than "creating an office."[1] Had they understood Him to have done the latter, how *could* they, a little while after, have been disputing among themselves which should be the greatest? And how came "Acts" and the "Epistles" to be written in complete ignorance of such a claim? Further, was it only and pre-eminently to St. Peter that the command was given, later on, "Feed My sheep"? Then we are told that this primacy was not personal, but derivable to his successors: that he became "bishop" of Rome, and that he continued so till his decease: that the bishops of Rome, by Divine Institution, have a universal supremacy and jurisdiction over the Church: that they have, in fact, continually enjoyed and exercised this power; and that it is indefectible and unchangeable.[2]

Little wonder, in face of all this—and much else—that we freedom-loving Englishmen have turned elsewhere for our great Doctor and Saint, and, half-unconsciously, done some little injustice to the memory of a man who (one cannot but think) would have been shocked to find himself so unduly exalted. And then St. Paul's services were so overwhelming. In spite of the tradition—I suppose I am bound to say, the generally accepted tradition—which associates St. Peter's name with Italy and the Imperial city, it is the atmosphere of the "Syrian Lake" that clings to him: it is St. Paul who is the cosmopolitan, the Christian Imperialist, the Apostle and Teacher of the West.

Yet St. Peter's own labours were surely considerable. Half-breed Samaria and Romanised Cæsarea evidently knew him well, not to mention Jerusalem itself. He was seen at Antioch, known at least by name at Corinth, and must, we think, have worked successfully amongst the sojourners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia—certainly if that beautiful letter, commonly known as his First Epistle, be really and substantially his. It is one of the Church's best literary treasures, and the explanation of its supposed "Pauline" tendency—and therefore non-Petrine authorship—is that however slow St. Peter may have been in adopting new ideas, however wedded he had once been to "carnal" views of Messiah, and, in his all-but-rude, blundering way, ready, alas, to give expression to them, he was nevertheless "Pauline," increasingly, if not always consistently, Pauline, himself—and St. Paul Petrine, if by that we mean a man who would have given his right hand in order that his Jewish

[1] Gore's Commentary [2] Barrow.

brethren might be saved. In my judgment the contrast between the two has been needlessly over-accentuated.

But I have wandered—I hope not too vagrantly—on to ground which yields controversial rather than devotional fruit; and the man, the disciple of the Lord—let us return to him. A nature like his, so warm, so winning, so human, must always have and retain its interest. For he was, above all things, a *man*, and a "man of good will": teachable too, receptive, a fitting subject for the work of grace—such (we note) the stuff the Master chose, out of which to fashion a leader and shepherd. But in this case the interest is heightened, because, unlike some men who go quietly on from strength to strength, his life had its crisis—perhaps lives of his ardent type generally do. A crisis, I say, a change, though one cannot but think that flashes of the old self must have appeared, right on to the end. Yet there was, in his biography, so to say, a page turned permanently down. The prevailing spirit of its earlier half has always seemed to me to be expressed in the question, the dangerous, self-revealing question, *Lord, why cannot I follow Thee now?* There speaks the native, unregenerate ardour of the man. Why? he asks, like the eager, impatient schoolboy. But that is a type of question which is not always answered in word. Give them time, and life, experience, self-knowledge will do it better. And "why not *now*?" When loyalty bids, and affection urges, no time (we say) like the present!—The question was answered, once, twice, first in words of solemn warning, then in a look which Peter never forgot. It was the decisive moment. That look opened his eyes, and pierced his heart. No wonder he wrapped his face in his mantle—is that the meaning of St. Mark's obviously colloquial ἐπιβαλών?—went out, and wept bitterly.

"Why not now?" Yes, the question is very like the man—eager in affection, impetuous in word and deed. And such people are often very lovable, very generous. But, like the rest of us, they have their failings. St. Peter protests his readiness to go with his Master at once both to prison and to death: is it the warm heart that so speaks, or, something very different, a reflective loyalty that has really counted the cost? Worse still, his natural readiness to give a lead, makes him vain and self-confident: "though all shall be offended yet will I never be." He will have gentle, yet wholesome, reminder of these hot words some day. Yet we need not say that it was mere empty boasting. The man was no coward in the ordinary sense of the word, but ready to resist His Master's enemies to the death, *if force were the one thing necessary*. But was it? And, if not, then, what was Peter to do in the impending crisis? To follow Him, quietly, patiently, and refuse to be separated from Him, to wait upon Him, not to assume the initiative himself, but to leave it to Him—yes, that would have been his glory. The *passive* virtues were wanted, and it is in these that the ardent temperament is usually lacking. Fight with the sword—that he would do, even against odds; but to keep awake, and keep still, and pray against temptation—stick

to his post, silently, resolutely—this required a stronger patience and calmer courage. So he failed, and this first failure lowered his self-respect, weakened his moral nerve, and made further failure likely, if not inevitable.

There are dangers, then, to the life of faith (and the work of the ministry) against which the story of the disciple would seem to point a warning, and, obviously, first, that of self-trust, and, the impulsive word and deed to which (in some natures) it is wont to give birth. You remember how (according to the story told us in St. Matthew xiv) in his daring impetuous way he joined the Lord on the water. It was—yes—an act of faith. But self-confidence mingled with it, and spoilt it, and failure followed. The antidote, of course, is self-knowledge. Of this, however, at that stage the disciple had but little. He was not given to introspection—fishermen, out-of-door men, rarely are. Indeed, for us all, the lesson is difficult, and there are probably whole tracts of life where, for us, for this reason, a fall like his is possible.

Self-confidence however is doubly perilous when it is found (as it often is) in company with genuine warmth of feeling. It is found, of course, sometimes, where feeling seems to be almost entirely eliminated—in the man, for instance, of cold and critical intellect, and dispassionate grasp of public affairs. But it is a fault to which the man of ardent nature is more peculiarly liable. He feels strongly at the moment: *Now*, he says, "Why not now?" And, so saying, no doubt, he has his uses, for though, often, there is a strength, a wisdom in waiting, it is not always wise to wait. Feeling, however, alone will not make a man wise and virtuous, or keep him so, and probably the more religious he becomes, the less subject he is to its waves and onrush, for usually, in the case of the more aged Christian, will, conviction, understanding are the real masters of his life. Yet, "Rejoice in the Lord alway, and again I say Rejoice." There, feeling must come in, and after all it may be urged that it is "in feeling, and not in thought, that we come nearest to Him whose Name is love." We cannot then abolish it altogether. The emotional appeals of the old Mission preachers accomplished results which our own calmer, saner eloquence—as we think it—seems utterly powerless to produce. For my part I am not ashamed to confess a certain weakness for many quite sentimental children's hymns, or even "Moody and Sankey"—tunes and all. They move me at times as the Latin hymn moved Dr. Johnson, for he never read it, he tells us, without tears.

> Quaerens me sedisti lassus,
> Redemisti, crucem passus,
> Tantus labor non sit cassus!

We may often have to complain that we find too little feeling in others as well as in ourselves. We have most of us met the phlegmatic churchwarden whom no appeal would ever seem to touch, and there are occasions when our own souls are as dry as

boards. If it do little else for us, feeling does, on occasion, reveal to us the possibilities of our nature, makes the hardest sacrifice seem for the moment quite easy, and lifts the whole man to a higher level. All the same, it is like the floodtide, to be made use of at once, and turned into channels of usefulness.

Our love for the Master then—and we cannot truly be His disciples without it, though *faith* ON Him will rather seem to some to be the Apostolic writers' prevailing requirement—is it mere emotion, transient, unprofitable, weak? Or does it nerve the will, animate the life, help us to carry on in spite of apparent failure? Heaven grant it may be the latter.

The peril of feeling, the peril of assurance—together, as I said, they are very dangerous. But the story gives us one more—the peril (shall I call it) of our strong point. We some of us have one. Here is a clergyman who is strong in Christian philosophy, though he will not succeed in his work unless he can supplement it with other means and gifts: *another* is an adept in finance, and neither will he, if that be his all-in-all: a *third* is "good with young men," and he needs to ask himself, again and again, good for what? Such powers need watching, or they may be sources of the most alarming weakness and failure. So with gifts of temperament and character. Here is a man who is a marvel of sympathy—there, another, of meekness—a third, of restraint and self-mastery; and yet each may be betrayed at the exact spot where victory seemed certain. Moses was very meek, yet once at least he spake unadvisedly with his lips: the Apostle had courage—cowardice, the last thing we should have laid to his charge. Yet it was there he fell. How was it? The temptation came upon him, not when he was braced, erect, alert, but when he was comfortable, unguarded—he was "warming himself": *and* it was a sin of surprise.[1]

There are certain forms of temptation which we have all known well, for they were more or less habitual, and came to us at regular times, in the same scenes, under the same circumstances,—and we met them forearmed. But there are others which come upon us quite suddenly. We are taken off our guard, shaken, vanquished, before thoughts of duty, or love, or even of prudence, can come to the aid of the startled self, and in a moment the deed is done.

Now, however it may be with other crises, it is as a surprise that the temptation to deny the Master usually comes. A chance remark in a drawing-room will lead up to it, and then, before our loyalty has time to awake, the word is said—sometimes left unsaid—which we would give our right hands to recall. And our collapse is really so unlike our usual selves. Where were all those old friends of ours—instinct, nature, habit, training, character—that they did not come to the rescue? No, at the critical moment they failed us, and the shame is there. We have come very near to denying Christ before men.

Of such unguarded moments, I would, in all humility, counsel you to take heed and beware. You have a strong point. Use it.

[1] Cf. Temple, *Rugby Sermons.*

Make the most of it. The Church needs it. But do not rely on it overmuch. "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." If we do, well for us if we only "remember" as the disciple did, and seek restoration in that Presence where alone it can be found.

For, let us not forget, after that bitter night the Master and the disciple met again, and alone. "The Lord is risen indeed and hath appeared unto Simon." Alone he had fallen: alone he is to be restored. One is constrained to say, in all reverence, What a gentleman the Master is! How thoughtful of personal feeling, how delicate in His treatment of a difficult case! The disciple is spared that agony of shame which a public forgiveness would have induced in that warm and sensitive nature of his. Of the details of that interview we know nothing—they are hid in sacred silence. Did St. Peter ever, in a burst of brotherly confidence, tell the story to St. John?

He told it not,—or something seal'd
The lips of that Evangelist.

In solitude, then, the disciple is restored to the Master's confidence. But Peter owes a debt of courtesy and humility to his brother disciples. And so, one day, the question comes, *Simon, Son of John, lovest thou Me more than these? Lovest thou Me deeply?*—for so Christ's word means—with a love that carries all true homage and noble obedience—and *more than these?* Thus gently does He touch the old sore—*more than these.* But mark the answer. There is no boasting now. Those who read the Greek will see that the disciple refrains from using his Master's word for "love"—I still think *intentionally*, though nowadays, I understand, it is more usual not to press the contrast. He will not claim to "love deeply": he is not so sure, as once he was, about his homage and obedience. Nay, he will not say of himself that he even loves at all. He appeals from his own inward commotion to the perfect understanding of his Lord: "Thou knowest all things: Thou knowest that I love Thee."

Then follows the threefold charge, corresponding to the three ages of human life—to "*feed* the lambs," the new converts, the children of the Church; to "*tend* the sheep," that is, to guide the strong and vigorous members of the flock; and to "*feed* the sheep"—the sick, the aged, the infirm. We (you and I) have, with what skill we may, to attempt all three, though in a well-organized Church we would gladly see some specialists for each. But, by God's especial grace, the disciple was equal to his task. He was strong now, because he was humble. He had had his experience and learnt his lesson. In the Upper Room promise and disappointment had mingled together—"Thou canst not follow Me now, but thou shalt follow Me afterward." Now it is simply, "Follow thou Me." And he did, he did. He followed the blessed steps, even to prison and to death.

It is in some ways a sad, and yet very human, very inspiriting story, this of the great disciple. It speaks to most of us, assuredly to all who have *failed*, who have been caught unawares, and left humiliated and ashamed. Take it, then, as written for your learning. Be encouraged by it. There is "Gospel in it," as a good layman once said to me, with tears in his eyes. There is forgiveness, restoration. Whatever his past may have been, does not our Lord, through it, still say to every man: At least from this day onward *Follow thou Me?*

Simon, Simon, behold Satan asked to have you—all of you—that he might sift you as wheat: but I have made supplication for thee that thy faith fail not, and do thou, when once thou hast turned again, stablish thy brethren.

You, who are older, pardon me if I say my last word to-day especially to you. You are they to whom the years are bringing (as they pass) the clearer vision, and the surer step, and the more delicate charity. Your grasp of large and fundamental truth, your maturity of conviction is such as no crisis will easily surprise, much less overwhelm. Have a thought, then, a very tender thought, for the young men, the beginners in our ranks. Bear with them; guide them if they will submit to guidance, teach them, if they will let you: give them hints from your experience, lessons of hope from your failures, of diligence in study and endurance in ministry from your crowded hours. For all their superficialities, their present inexperience, their possible ignorance, their all but inevitable frailties, so shall they, even they, go from strength to strength in the difficult times that lie ahead of them, and their labour not be in vain in the Lord.

Marshall Brothers, Limited, have issued *Pioneers of Protestantism*, by James Johnson (6*s*. net). The record contains an account from the earliest times of those who have stood out against the claims and errors of the Papacy. Special attention is paid to the Reformation in England and the rise of civil and religious liberty under the British Constitution. The book makes a strong appeal to all who value freedom to stand shoulder to shoulder in upholding the principles of Protestantism.

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Mr. F. W. Davy, M.A., treats the subject from the "historical and in outlook" point of view. Laymen will find these papers of special interest and full of useful information.