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THIS LIBERTY.¹

BY E. H. BLAKENEY, M.A.

NOT, perhaps, for a century or more has there been so resolute an attack on the principles of human freedom as at the present day. If the function of true (as opposed to mere political or party) "liberalism" in the past was to check the power of kings, it is certainly the function of true liberalism to-day to check the power of dictators. The overthrow of thrones and dynasties, following hard upon the Great War, has resulted only in setting up a number of uncrowned despots in the place of hereditary sovereigns. It is ominous, in more ways than one. Curiously enough, it is often forgotten that Scripture itself seems to hint at something of the kind when it speaks, though in guarded terms, of the rise of anti-Christ, by which it signifies not merely a system but an international personage, who draws to himself all the power and prerogatives of monarchs, to employ them ruthlessly to secure unrighteous ends. With the undoubted trend of modern times towards centralisation of authority, this is no uncensored fancy. The gradual extirpation of individual effort, supplanted by officialism and bureaucracy; the extinction of small businesses, which collapse into great trusts and companies; the constantly repeated demand for a single fount of power to exercise lordship in ways unheard of before; the growing desire for international control: all these things appear to be signs of a great collective movement. In Japan—already the dominant power in the East—theorists and practical statesmen have declared, in no uncertain terms, that their ideal is a unified control under an omnipotent ruler. And what Japan thinks to-day may, for aught we know, find its realisation later on. Now the issue of this notable world-idea would, indeed must, were it ever to become translated into fact, mean the end of liberty as we have hitherto understood that word. The dream of Alexander the Great, the vision of Napoleon, have certain implications that we ought not, in present circumstances, contemptuously to dismiss as idle fancies.

It might not be amiss, then, to collect a few—a very few—wise utterances by prophets, and seers, and philosophers, by way of indicating the inherent value of human freedom, in its highest and best sense, as conceived by these men both in the far past and the nearer present. We may begin with a passage from Jeremiah, where he represents Jehovah saying these words: "Ye turned and did that which was right in Mine eyes, by proclaiming liberty every man to his neighbour." Paul lifts the whole conception of freedom to a lofty plain when he writes thus: "Creation itself shall be delivered from its bondage into the glorious liberty of the sons of God." Again: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty"—words which imply that no true liberty is attainable apart from

¹ Notes of a talk given at Winchester College on July 27, 1935.

that divine agency. "Stand fast then in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free"—a saying which indicates that God, respecting human personality, desires freedom for His children everywhere. In the catholic epistle of James we read: "Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty and continueth therein, this man is blest in his deed." Liberty, that is, not to act according to licence, but according to its own proper law, without which it is but a caricature of reality.

We may pass on to secular sayings, all of which teach lessons not dissimilar. Benjamin Franklin finely remarked: "They that can give up liberty to obtain a temporary safety deserve neither safety nor liberty." Curran, the Irish statesman, most truly said: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty"—a fact that we must never forget, if we are not to find ourselves tricked of our jewel. The greatest of Spanish writers, Cervantes, put the matter very simply: "Liberty is the choicest possession God bestows on man." Webster, the American orator, declared once that "Knowledge is the only foundation of the principles of liberty," and, in a sense, he was right; but it must be remembered that such knowledge is of little avail unless it involves the knowledge of God—"cui servire regnare"—"whose service is perfect freedom," as the Prayer Book beautifully renders the Latin words, so monumental in their simplicity and strength. Milton, in a famous sonnet, uttered a warning when he wrote: "Who loves that (viz. liberty) must first be wise and good." Burke, in his own splendid way, asked a question which we do well to ask again: "What is the empire of the world if we lose our liberties? We deprecate this last of evils." And one of the greatest of Nonconformist orators, writing at a momentous epoch (viz. during the Napoleonic wars), roundly asserted: "If liberty, after being extinguished on the Continent, is suffered to expire *here*, whence is it ever to emerge in the midst of that thick night which will invest it?" Most true then; most true now. England, thank God, is still the chosen home of liberty, as Wordsworth knew when he dedicated some of his noblest lines to the spirit of liberty; as we know, the very breath of whose nostrils can be drawn only where thought is unfettered, and human life moves in a free air. Tennyson, in two stately poems, preached no less a gospel. Finally, there are the words of Germany's supreme thinker, Hegel; and what did he say? "History, in its beginning as in its end, is the spectacle of liberty, the protest of humanity against any who should dare lay shackles upon it; the liberty of the spirit, the reign of the soul; and the day when liberty ceased in the world would be that in which history would stop."

All encroachments, then, on the "law of liberty" must be resisted even to death; it is the gift of Heaven. It may, like other such gifts, be abused; but, as Bacon long ago pointed out, *abusus non tollit usum*. The old familiar words may fitly ring in our ears: "O give us the comfort of Thy help, O God, and stablish us with Thy free spirit."