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THE VOICE OF GOD

I

THE forcible article by Dr. Kolfhaus in the August number of the *Evangelical Quarterly* provokes the question, is there not a grave omission in many discussions on Natural Religiousness and the Cognition of God? The discussions revolve round an ellipse of which the foci are God discovered for himself by man, and God revealed by Himself. These two are regarded as mutually contradictory, positive and negative poles. And the one is called Natural Religion and the other Divine Revelation. But is that the proper way to state the case? Is there not a begging of the question there? Is there not a previous question to be considered, namely, has God given man a natural capacity to hear His voice when He speaks and however He speaks? Our Lord says, "He that hath ears to hear let him hear." That is not meant to imply that some have no ears. It is irony. It means that men have the capacity to hear, but too often, alas, they do not use it.

It may, of course, be contended that man has no such natural capacity, or that it has been destroyed by sin. If he has no capacity to hear the Voice of God, then the whole possibility of religion at all is ruled out. There can be no such thing in any man. If it is destroyed by sin, again, how can the voice of God be heard? God is left with nothing in man on which to work. He has no entrance to the soul. He cannot reveal Himself. Do these results not force us back to the position that there is a capacity in man for hearing God's voice and recognizing Him? It may be neglected. It may be distorted. It may be very rudimentary. It may put the most mistaken interpretation on what it hears. It may turn a deaf ear. But the capacity is there, or the very idea of religion would never have arisen in men's minds. What is essential to hearing God's voice is part of human nature, no matter how God speaks, no matter what means He takes to arrest men's attention and reveal Himself to them. There is room for Natural Religion, a capacity

for hearing God's voice, still more for Religion taught by special Divine Revelation.

There is no need then to set up an alternative of God as a discovery of man through nature or conscience, and God as His own Revealer. With the capacity to hear God where He speaks to one of the elements in human nature, it is beside the question to dogmatize as to the way in which God must speak. His voice may come in a variety of ways. It is audible in Nature. It is articulate in Christ. It is emphatic in the Cross. There is a danger in stating the case in this way. It might seem to suggest that it was by gradually moving along this line that men at last arrives at a full-orbed knowledge of God and His Voice. But it is far from that. The order of progress may be the very reverse. The Voice speaking in nature may only be recognized as God's Voice when the heart has heard Him speak through the lips of Christ. Nay, it may only be after a soul has been awakened to its desperate need and has heard the prayer from the Cross, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do, that it realizes that He who hung there was none other than the very Word that was God. To speak of the Voice of God under the three terms I have used is simply a useful means of summarizing ways in which God speaks and reveals Himself to men.

God's voice is audible in Nature. By Nature is meant the world and all that it contains, animate and inanimate and its history through all time. It includes all that is covered by Science and History, be it man or the brutes, the sea or the sky, the record of the ages, the annals of a nation, the story of a single life. In all or any of these in their origin and progress and constitution God can be heard to speak, His voice can be detected.

The quick ear of an innocent child can detect it. Listen to little Paul Dombey:

“What are the wild waves saying, Sister, the whole day long,
That ever amidst our playing I hear but their low, lone song?”

He will be satisfied with no trite commonplace reply. There is more in it than the boom of the waves in ocean caves or the rattle of shingle in the backwash:

“’Tis the voice of the Great Creator that speaks to the heart alone.”

If innocence hears it, so does the awakened conscience. The story of Adam and Eve tells the same tale in tragic terms.

Treat the story how you will, as actual history or as a vivid account of the effect of the stern voice of conscience heard by a soul awakened by its sin to a first sense of accountability, as never before it hears the Voice of God. There is not a child, there is not a man or woman whose memory of childhood does not recall a similar experience. It is the day when conscience began to challenge. Wrong has been done. Nobody knows. It was all right through the day, but at night, in the dark sleep would not come. Every noise startled. Was it God come to judgement. It is Adam and Eve over again. "Adam, where art thou?" They heard the Voice of God as He walked in the garden in the cool of the day. "I heard Thy voice and I was afraid, and I hid myself in the trees of the garden because I was naked." Naked! All things are naked and open in the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

It is no uncommon figure of speech to call the thunder God's Voice, and also the instinctive utterance from within of a reponse to the moral law in the voice of conscience. These two are brought vividly together in the great event at Sinai. The two voices are combined, and the roar of the thunder is the deep diapason of heaven's orchestra to the declamation of the ten words. But all through the world of men and things God is seeking to express Himself in language to which men will listen and which they will understand. He would have them hear His Voice, not only in catastrophies of physical nature or tragic events, in the lives of men or nations, but in their orderly progress and accustomed course. God speaks in that mysterious bond that holds together and assunder the whole world of stars, in the flow of rivers, the wash of the tides, the formation of rocks, the basalts and crystals, the sandstone, the clay and the coal, in the orderly succession of the seasons, the growth of the corn and the trees, the lives of ants and elephants. God speaks in the mystic fatalism of the East, the inventiveness and enterprise of the West, the Greek's love of art, the Roman's respect for law, the Hebrew's consciousness of the Eternal and the Holy God speaks in the fate of empires, their growth, their expansion, their transformations, and decay. He speaks in the incidents of daily life—toil, comfort, home delights, sickness, health. All these are words, words of God, in which men can hear His Voice, if they will.

What right has anyone to say so? Is that not the meaning

of the Bible account of the origin of them all? Waiving all other questions, there is an answer there, which you get nowhere else, to one of the most mysterious problems that men ever try to investigate, namely, what is matter, what are things? Stripped of what is accidental, non-essential, mere attributes, what is the reality at the back of them? It is the old question of the Schoolmen, Nominalists and Realists. It has its modern equivalents. What are things? In the light of Genesis isn't the truest answer, they are Words of God. What is light? Something God said. "God said, let there be light and there was light." That is the essence of all reality, the stuff of stuff, as it has been called. Things are God's words. What He says, is.

God's Voice is always a word, never a mere sound. God always talks sense, if only we knew the meaning. And what is the meaning of all God says by the Voice of Science and the Voice of History, by the world of nature and the life of man? It is that the world is not a chaos but a cosmos. It is not a scene of confusion and caprice, but is governed by principles that are rational and moral. Intelligence is supreme there and a Holy Will. If men can be judged by their words, so can God; and our judgement of Him by all He has said in the creation and continuance of His world, in the thoughts and affections and consciences of men, and the experiences of life through which they pass, is that God is wise and God is righteous—that above all. We can see He loves what is beautiful and revels in it. We can see that He delights in strong effects and delicate suggestions. We can see His love of the magnificent and the strong, but equally fragile and the clinging and the tender. He delights in the play of fancy and imagination, the grotesque and the humorous. His voice is sometimes like a shout of laughter, and again it is a whisper of delight. All that is there with sympathy for suffering, a voice as soothing as the hand of nature is kindly in healing the rude rents of titanic force. But above all else this is plain from God's own voice that all His work is orderly, purposeful and intelligent, and all subordinate to the accomplishment of what is holy and good. All that is in Nature. All that is in History. It is what God's Voice is saying there. Men may hear it, if they will.

II

WHAT IS AUDIBLE IN NATURE IS ARTICULATE IN CHRIST.

Christ, as the Revealer of God, is the interpreter of Nature and of man. I pass at once to Christ, without dwelling on what God has said by the lawgivers, historians, psalmists and prophets of the Old Testament through whom God spoke to Israel, and through Israel to all mankind. I do this, not because they are to be held in small esteem, nor to belittle the value of the Old Testament Revelation. But I remember the words of the disciples on the way to Emmaus. "Did not our hearts burn within us as He opened to us the scriptures." The Old Testament derives its interest and significance for Christians from Christ. It is very doubtful if its books would ever have reached the West or have been more than the sacred treasure of a single people, if it had not been for Christ. It is in Christ that the words of Old Testament scripture get that volume, distinctness and significance that lends them more than half their force. It is with them as it is with God's words in nature. They are like nouns. But what makes the sentence? What makes the nouns move? It is the verb. And Christ is the *Verbum Dei*, God's Verb, God's Word that gives life and makes things move and tell their story in terms about which men can make no mistake.

In the prologue to John's Gospel, Christ is always spoken of as the Word. What is the reason why that description of Christ ceases so abruptly in that gospel and is so seldom used—if at all in exactly the same way—anywhere else in the New Testament? It seems so suitable that whole theologies have arisen round the *logos* doctrine. Harnack's explanation is probably correct. The Gospel according to John as a whole is an argument to prove that Jesus is the Son of God. It is an argument addressed to thinking minds. In the introduction the author seeks for some common ground with those to whom he writes from which to start. That he found in the prevalent idea of the Word of God. Greek philosophers and Jewish thinkers alike believed in the existence from all eternity of the Divine Word. They would have said what John says in the first verse: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." John says I am at one with you there.

But what I want to add to all that is this: We Christians have found all that incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. He makes perfectly explicit what we have dimly discerned from listening to the music of the spheres and the record of the ages. God is there. It is God's voice we hear, the voice of infinite wisdom and absolute holiness. In him the voice becomes perfectly articulate and we know exactly what God means. Having reached this it is no longer necessary to speak vaguely about the Word. The term can be dropped. The name of Jesus covers it all. Jesus explains the Logos, not the Logos Jesus.

What, then, is His articulate utterance? What does the Voice of God say through the lips and life of Jesus Christ? Just what nature had said, but which, since sin entered, men failed to understand. Before Christ came, and since those whenever they ignore Christ and attend only to nature men constantly fail to understand nature or hear God's Voice there at all. Christ proclaims anew the supremacy of rational and moral principles in the universe. He proclaims the kingdom, the rule of God, and He says that the only things which can live and stand are what is reasonable and what is right. He says that God is supremely anxious about men's well being, and that their only well being is in loyal dependence upon His truthfulness and obedience to His law. It was on the moral side that sin wrought most serious havoc and in consequence nature seemed to speak least distinctly. It was there that men had chiefly grown deaf to the Voice of God. So while for instance all Christ's parables are just a repetition of nature's story of the reign of law and intelligence through all God's world, what He speaks out most clearly and full is the holiness of God. He corrects the distorted judgements of right and wrong, and restores the peremptoriness of the voice of conscience. As the shipmaster, ere he sails, must adjust his compasses so if the soul is to steer a straight course through the sea of life, conscience must be adjusted to the standard of Christ.

In Christ we hear what holiness is. It is not formality. It is not legality. It is an affair of the heart and life finding expression in the forms and laws. It is not so much a question of conduct as of character; only of the body because the body is the instrument of the soul. All this Christ's life and lips said with

a distinctness and a force that had only its feeble echo and parallel in the voice of conscience. It corrects conscience. Conscience, always mindful of its office to call men to the pursuit of the right and to condemn the wrong, had yet in many minds and among many peoples made strange mistakes as to what is right and what is wrong. Christ corrects conscience, makes it speak again with its original accuracy, or Himself takes its place, till it has learnt again aright.

But when God speaks in Christ not only does His mind and will gain for us in distinctness and force. Not only do things that were vague and doubtful become plain. Not only do we cease to doubt if there be a mind behind the universe and a holy will controlling its often unruly movements. But there is a tone imparted into the utterance that brings out a glorious, unnoticed, unsuspected fact. Nay lest there should be any mistake as to the meaning of the tone, it is definitely explained, and its meaning is God is love. That was always hinted at, but men did not take it up. So God said it plainly in the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. That is the point at which the revelation of God in Christ most clearly and definitely transcends utterance by every other mouthpiece by which God has spoken. The Son reveals the Father. He affirms it. He argues for it. He illustrates it. He is Himself the living utterance and proof of it. Why is He here in this world at all but just because "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." So in Christ we reach this: "The Voice that speaks in thunder says, sinner, I am thine."

III

THIS THAT IS ARTICULATE IN CHRIST BECOMES EMPHATIC IN HIS CROSS

Emphasis is, of course, putting stress on a particular word or thought in some way which will fix it on the listener's attention as deserving and requiring chief attention. What makes the difference between a good speaker and a poor one? It is his use of emphasis. The good speaker knows how to use its various forms. He may raise his voice, or sink it to whisper, or having spoken firmly come to a dead pause and give the emphasis of silence.

God is an orator. It is worth while to study the inflections of His Voice. If ever there was emphasis in it, the emphasis of commanding vehemence, followed sharply by the emphasis of dead silence and then stealing through that the impressive whisper, it was effected by the Cross. In that God speaks more strongly than in anything else in the universe. There Christ's revelation rose to a climax of utterance. That was the Selah—the Pause, calling men to stop and think—in the Divine Psalm of Life. It threw all the force that God could give upon the facts which He had constantly declared but which men persistently refused to notice. Ay, against which they had steadily set themselves and shut their ears against, until mother nature nor conscience nor the sweet voice of Christ could make them hear. So here is God's ultimatum, given with startling force.

What are the things which the Voice of God says by the Cross and which from it we learn are the most momentous concerns in the universe? First and foremost there is this, the utter hatefulness of sin. Take it how you will, that is in the way fore front. It is the Son of God that is dying there. He is dying a cruel and shameful death at the hands of men, after living amongst them not only blamelessly innocent and inoffensive, but living a life packed full of active benevolence and generosity and courage. If you ask why He met His death, you find it very difficult to understand. It is a triumph of unreason. But it is a revelation of the depth of wickedness in the heart of man; it is the outcome of the fact that He ignored the prejudices, exposed the hypocrisies, crossed the selfish interests, thwarted the schemes of wily, self-seeking men. That was too much for them. They hated Him for His very goodness, and they stuck at nothing to get Him out of their way. That is sin, says the Voice of God. That is the possible issue of every germ of it, "which thing I hate". If men have any doubt of God's hatred of sin, the Cross dispels it. For Son of God though Christ was, yet identified as He was with this criminal race, implicated as their representative in their sin, it could not escape its curse. Even He must die and die He did. As He lay these three days in the grave, no Voice of God was heard, only the terrible emphasis of silence and suspense, seceding the appalling fact of God's hatred of sin deeper and deeper into the consciences of men.

But is that all? Is that the last word? Is there nothing else in the emphasis of the Cross? What do the hearts of men say?

Is that all it says to real lovers of Christ, His followers? Is that all the conscience of an anxious soul discovers there? Is that enough for the startled sinner? When the silence was broken by the Resurrection, here is the Voice men heard coming in deep, full volume from the Cross, "God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." As emphatic as the condemnation of sin is the proclamation of pardon by the Cross. It tells as strongly that there is forgiveness with God. He made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. The Cross tells of God's way of mercy and salvation. It brings out in the strongest possible way that God willeth not the death of the sinner, but rather that he should turn unto Him and live. It declares in deeds that are stronger than words, in deeds that are so strong just because they have that inherent reality which belongs to words of God, that there is nothing that God will not do, no sacrifice He will spare in order to reclaim and rescue men, and deliver them from the curse of their own folly and sin. Sin and salvation from sin: these are God's two most solemn utterances. These are the two words which He forces on the ears of an unwilling, listless, inattentive world by the terrible emphasis of the death of His Son on the tree. And He speaks them not only that men may know, but that they may learn them and turn what He has said to account.

If the laws of God to Israel recorded in the Pentateuch are carefully read, they are found to have a constantly recurring condition attached to them. If the blessings God offers are to be enjoyed it depends on this—"if ye will diligently hearken unto the voice of the Lord and obey." The one hope of welfare for time and for eternity is to keep the ears open for God's voice and obey Him implicitly, carry out His commands to the letter. That is faith in God—believing what He says and that He means what He says. It means being well assured that the world of men and things is in God's hands; that He is supreme—"the Lord reigneth"; that He loves righteousness and hates iniquity, that He is anxious and able to pardon the penitent; that He is willing to save to the uttermost all that come unto Him by Christ; but there is no other name whereby we can be saved save that of His only beloved son, Jesus Christ. That is God's ultimatum, His final condition of peace. It is for men humbly to stake their lives on that.

Here is the overpowering reason for that. We have heard God's voice in Nature, in Christ, in the Cross, and its message is constantly ringing in our ears. We must hear His Voice again at the day of Judgement. What it will say then depends on what attention has been given to it here. It will demand a reckoning. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden men must give an account. Hedging will be useless. Just as little as in Eden will the densest thickets hide from God's eyes, rocks and mountains falling will not cover from His glance. It will be no use to try to shift blame to wife or husband, neglectful parents or seducing friends, no use to attempt to escape among the crowd. Only one plea will prevail, the voice of the Great Intercessor, if by faith he has been secured. Then the Voice will not be a voice of doom, but of welcome home. So while yet there is time the wise man will listen to God's gracious voice, saying, "Hear, and your souls shall live."

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