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AT THE SPRING OF THE WATERS.¹

“He went forth unto the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there.”
—2 KINGS ii. 21.

“THE spirit of Elijah,” they said, “does rest on Elisha”—and it was true. Yet who is not struck with the difference, with the contrariety, between them? And who does not trace in this contrast the manifoldness, the flexibility, the appropriateness too, of God’s working, as the Book of God has delineated, as the Church of God has exemplified, it?

At first sight the succession is a deterioration. The glow, the rush, the genius, the inspiration, the awe, the prowess, seems to have died with the Master. The inhabitant of the desert, the man of mystery and apparition, the “enemy” of kings, the slayer of false prophets, the reformer and iconoclast, is gone—the departure of one piece with the life—wind and fire ministering still and bearing away from earth, in confessed yet glorious failure, the man of whom earth had shown itself unworthy. There remains a man—a dweller in cities and houses—living the common life, “eating and drinking with princes and neighbours, presiding over educational homes, the counsellor of his countrymen in peril, their comforter in trouble, their referee in controversy, their powerful mediator, their self-forgetting friend.” Viewed in one aspect, no position can ever have been more level, no work more human, no office less heroic. Yet it is upon this life that “a double portion”

¹ This sermon, which is not included in Dean Vaughan’s published volumes, we owe to the kindness of Mr. G. W. E. Russell, who recovered the copy.
—ED. EXPOSITOR.

of Elijah's spirit rested. The disciples' life, not the Master's, was the "shadow cast before" of a Life above man's. If the Baptist came in the "spirit and power of Elias," it was "Eliseus the prophet" who dimly pre-figured Christ. The very record of Elijah's history should have prepared us for this juster estimate. In the great vision of Horeb—the second proclamation on that spot of the "glory" which is "the name of the Lord"—it was not in the wind, it was not in the fire, it was not in the earthquake,—it was in the "still small voice" that the Real Presence, the very Deity, was manifested to the longing and fainting spirit. It is so everywhere and in all times. Influence ranks essentially above power, and tranquility is evermore a condition of grace. It is one of the high objects of Scripture to correct man's judgments upon insignificance and greatness. When Elisha follows Elijah, the passing generation counts it a descent and a decline—looks back with regret to the stormier scenes amid which, and the grander agencies in which, the prophet of the past exercised his ministry—and returns with disaffection, almost with complaining, to the human, the common, the neighbourly life, which is all that remains to it of a predecessor's magnificence. And yet all the time, just because the second life is human, touches our own at all points, and is exercised not in great matters which are "too high for us," but in a contact and a converse which "refrains and keeps it low"—it is the truer and the more Christlike and the more Godlike of the two. And it is in the discernment of a Divine Hand in those transitions, from a past to which "distance lends enchantment," to a present in which there are no illusions, that a large part of earth's trial, probation and discipline lies for some of the Church's noblest spirits, to whom the old is consecrated by pious association and the new comes harsh and bleak and unlovely for the lack of it. Yet God is in each age as it

comes, and the dweller in the age that is not must miss Him.

The very incident from which the text is taken marks the parallelism to which we have here adverted. The Baptist has his type in Elijah. Elisha typifies Christ. The first and the characteristic miracle of Elisha bears a striking resemblance to the first and representative miracle of the Saviour. The gracious interposition to heal the diseased waters of Jericho, what was it but the faint anticipation and foreshadowing of the scene presented to us in one of this day's select scriptures—the Marriage Feast in Cana? The same sympathy with the discomforts and inconveniences of outward circumstance, the same application of superhuman strength to human need—but far more than this—the same parable in act, of the transforming power of grace—the same control and counteraction of the deep-seated malady of fallen humanity—the bringing back God into God's handiwork—the impregnating and saturating of man's life with an Influence and a Presence lost once and forfeited by sin. There is one point peculiar to this parable, and that is the stress laid upon *the Spring of the Waters*. "The water is naught and the ground barren." Man, then, might have been satisfied to deal with the symptoms, with the stream and with the ground, but God's prophet goes to the spring of the waters and casts the healing salt in there. There must be a "new cruse"—something with which man has not intermeddled—that is one necessity—and then the casting-in must be at the spring—at the source—if God is, as the prophet here reports Him, to say, "I have healed these waters." When the miracle is thus interpreted into parable, as all miracles are interpreted, we see how infinite may be its applications. It is the parable of Thoroughness. It bids go to the spring of our disease and never rest until the antidote is at work there. It would have us look in all our life—the national,

the ecclesiastical, the educational, as well as the personal—first for the salt and then for the spring; so that, the water being healed at the source, the issue may no longer be death and barrenness. I will venture, with all possible deference to an auditory which no minister—least of all a stranger—ought to approach without reverence, to suggest a few thoughts suitable (God grant it) to this particular congregation; not presuming to dwell upon matters which belong properly to those who are charged with the oversight of this illustrious University, but confining myself to topics with which a prolonged experience in school and parish may be supposed to have made me in some degree familiar. And yet it would be affectation if I spoke to you but for once—probably it will be but for once—as though you had no distinctive corporate life, big with consequences to the State and the Church of England. I cannot but feel, as I stand in this pulpit, that there is a sense in which we are here at the very spring and source of the life-waters of our country. Where, but here and at Cambridge, can you find gathered at one point so vigorous, so vivid a vitality? Oh, if from this fountain-head there should go forth either death or barrenness! Oh, if Oxford should ever, in any smallest degree, forget her mission either to the homes, or to the studies, or to the parishes, or to the mission-fields of this nation! Oh, if a lethargy either of faith or of zeal should benumb and paralyze that spiritual life which ought to be the salt and the light of the world! Forgive the terrible misgiving—it is prevalent, you know it, in the hearts of thousands of Christian people—that there is some decay in our Colleges and in our Universities of that earnest, that devout self-addiction to the service of Christ, in the service of his people, which once quickened into spiritual fire a languid and formal and lifeless Christianity. It is not to foster pride—it is rather the deepest lesson of humility—to count over one with another and in the sight of God the peculiar,

the incommunicable talents with which He has charged an English University. The measure of the gift is the measure of the responsibility. "Give an account of thy stewardship" rings already in the ears of the privileged. It is an error to suppose that the opportunities of a University are all intellectual. It is true that a neglect of these can scarcely co-exist with fidelity to any other. It is true that where Learning is the business of the place, Religion herself must take her flight with it. It is true that idleness of mind and thought is commonly found in closest conjunction, not with frivolity alone, but with sin. It is true also that no diligence in bodily exercise can be accepted as any sufficient apology for indolence in that higher thing which is the profession, and therefore the duty, of an Educational Home. Enough, I think, and too much—in these times so full of anxiety and of peril for the highest interests of classes and nations—enough, and too much, I say, have we heard of those athletic distinctions which lose their justification when they cease to be secondary. We are in danger of inverting once again—as in days when we were schoolboys—the divinely-ordered climax of Body and Soul and Spirit. Think not that, in so speaking, we make Intellect or even Soul everything. We deeply feel the blessings of a University life to those who are neither to be the scholars nor the clergymen of their generation. More intimately still do those blessings enter into the formation of character and into the regulation of Society. If ever the day should arrive when any one profession or any one rank were wholly cut off from connexion with our two Universities, the injury would be deep, if not fatal, on the one side as much as on the other. The mutual influences of the University and the world are indispensable to the true welfare of either.

Yet there are ways in which the importance, and therefore the responsibility, of the University is more definite

and therefore more appreciable. Foremost among them we must place that which affects the future teachers of England, those who are to be, at home and abroad, the Pastors and Evangelists of the Church. If there is an art in these matters, which must be sought elsewhere, at least the science of the ministry must be acquired here. No Theological College, no special influence of an individual theologian, can supply the place of a University training in reference to the acquisition of knowledge, and still more the discipline of thought. Here there is everything to make our clergy, not learned only, but wise, if there be but the faithful use (on both sides) of opportunities absolutely innumerable. Here may theology be studied, apart from cramping and narrowing influences—studied as the crown of all sciences, and the key to all mysteries. The divorce of theology from our Universities would be its condemnation as the reverence of the wise and the influence of the people. No multiplication of avenues to the Pastorate can compare, in true value, with the enlargement of this one avenue in its accessibility to the many. Let Oxford and Cambridge open themselves generously to the poor and to the self-taught; and then let the Bishops more and more make this the one gate and the one vestibule.

Let us not plead, in excuse for indolence or inefficiency in this behalf, any statutory or legislative changes, whether past or possible. No change in the past has in reality robbed the Universities of their religious aim and character. It takes more than legislation to do this. Legislation itself has recognized religion (in general terms at least) as the aim of our academical teaching. Legislation has gagged no man's mouth in the liberty to teach truth—which is to teach Christ—to our students. While it has opened the gate to all comers, it has closed it against none. It has not made it penal for a Professor of Theology to communicate a distinctive theology to his disciples. No man can plead that

he is debarred from any influence that his Christian faith or his Christian learning ever enabled him to exercise over his academical sons or brothers. Surely this is something. Surely no man who reflects deeply and speaks advisedly can account for an imputed degeneracy in religious things by charging Acts of Parliament with his crime.

Brethren, the salt which is to heal death and barrenness is nothing external—nothing which Council or Legislature can either create or annul. You know well enough what it is which has been the influence upon you. It has been individual. It has been personal. It has been a life. It has been an example. It has been a voice. It has been a soul. These influences come and go—sometimes they seem to be gone, to have perished, for a generation, for an age. But lay not the blame on that which is like the dumb stone, and has no breath in its mouth. Lay the blame on men, not on things. Nay, take the blame, and lay it not! It is for want of something in us—who shall not say, it is for want of something in me?—if the two springs of perennial life bubble forth only death and barrenness. Let the old Faith spring in us into newness of reality, into freshness of meaning, into revival of strength and grace—and, depend upon it, we shall be influences, we shall be powers, towards them that dwell with us and hearken to our words.

Let us remember, not least, that there is a special peril, in these centres of light, of hiding the candle of faith under the bushel of a not ignoble, yet most un-Christlike, dissimulation. Where the hypocrisy of feigning is most hateful, there the hypocrisy of disguising is most attractive. There are men dwelling amongst us in whose souls the Faith is precious above gold and costly pearl. Yet they are so afraid of the charge, or (be it so) the reality, of exaggeration, of inconsistency, of talk without doing, that they habitually dissemble the thing actually felt. There is an hypocrisy of unbelief about them, lest there should be an hypocrisy of

believing. The consequence is, that their influence is lost in behalf of Christ, if it be not intentionally exercised against Him. I speak that which I know, when I urge this audience to a plainer, a more thoughtful, and a more manly dealing. I speak to the covert believer—to the man, and he is one of a multitude amongst us, who does pray, does communicate, does mean, in the general purpose of his heart, to live and to die a Christian—but who never says one word openly, nor can bear the imputation of doing so, to make the light shine upon another, or to glorify by this reflexion his Father in Heaven.

“He went forth unto the spring of the waters.” If there is a sense in which Oxford is this to England, certainly there is a sense in which Oxford life is this to you. What is it which gives its real dignity, its real interest, its real pathos, to a scene like this? Is it not the knowledge that “we stand here by the well” of a thousand lives—that here, and not elsewhere, is the bounding-up of that spring, of which the stream is to be the life of Time, and the ocean the life of Eternity?

There are two aspects of our earthly being, each impressive, each admonitory. The one is that which represents it as a multitude, the other that which represents it as a unit. The one bids us to “number” our days—to make each a little life—to feel how many they are, and how God has made each one both complete, and capacious, and responsible. This is that Scriptural figure of the “walk,” for which the inmate of the home starts each morning, and from which he returns at evening to his rest and to his dwelling. This is that view of life which is good for the Christian man—“walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost”—fearing no evil, because “his time is in God’s hands,” and he is dwelling, every moment of it, in the sweet sunshine of His countenance. To walk before God in holiness and righteousness all the

days till their change come—this is the heritage of God's servants, and it is their sufficient ambition to possess it. But the Word which speaks not in vain, and multiplies not figures in superfluity, has another metaphor for life, which calls it not a "walk" but a "journey." From the birth to the death there is movement—there is progression—some-whence and somewhither. There is no returning at night-fall to the quarters left at the sun-rising. The life is making for a terminus and a destination—it has a plan, conscious or unconscious; it has a scheme and a system known to itself or unknown; it is not a multitude of lives, it is one life; God sees it as a whole—God can write its epitaph—"He did good or he did evil"—not both; and it needs but to inscribe the name, and the father's name, and the length of the course, and the place of the burial.

The life is a unit-life, and this is what gives significance, gives solemnity to its starting. We are here at "the spring of the waters"; and here, therefore, must a more than prophet's hand cast in the salt.

There are countries, I believe, in which the criminal code fixes the definite age of five-and-forty as that which closes the hope of repentance and reformation. After that date no prison-door opens for the man who has sinned away the season of elasticity and of hope. It is a harsh, it is a rigid, it is a human, it is no Divine, estimate of the possibilities of grace. Yet how plaintive an echo sounds from older hearts to the sad, the dreary, the disconsolate testimony! Oh, these lives, protracted already, so many, beyond the forty-five and fifty years, how monotonous are they! how uniform, and of one texture and colour, in reference to God and the soul! How often, when we thought an onward step taken, when we even dreamed of a change and a conversion, have we slipped back again to where we were. Awakened from the dream of eating, the soul still (in Isaiah's figure) is hungry and hath appetite! The life is a unit-life, not

least in things spiritual. Look back into the furthest background of memory—are you not much what you were? Was the childhood very unlike the boyhood, the youth very unlike the full age, in reference to your state before God, in reference to your interest in Christ and His salvation? The continuity is not broken; you are one, not many, alike in mind and heart and soul.

It is this experience which makes the eye tearful, and the soul grave even to depression, when we stand at what is still, for other lives, “the spring of the waters.” We know, we have said, that even youth is not the spring. There is a childhood, there is a boyhood beneath it, which is still tingeing and discolouring and embittering the up-leaping waters. But there is this to justify the application—and we pray you, young brothers, to give heed to it; there is a continuity, there is a unity, in each life; but it may be, once at least (it is enough here to say once), sharply, decisively, splendidly broken. We enter into no mysticism, we trench upon no disputed ground between school and school, between party and party, between Church and Church, when we recognize as a fact and as a phenomenon the possibility, proved in thousands of instances, of a new life in the soul. Call it by what name you will, provided that you mean by it this—a change, heart-deep and therefore life-wide, such as brings God into everything, as a Father, a Saviour, and a Sanctifier.

This change may be swift, or it may be gradual, may be due to many influences, some of them far back in the past, some of them undefined, and even unconscious; it has so many varieties as exist in the resources of a God Whose way is in the great waters, and Whose footsteps are not seen. But experience has shown that the point of life at which my younger hearers stand to-day is the point most favourable, most hopeful, in regard to the experience on which we dwell. The piety of childhood is beautiful, but proverbially

evanescent. There must be (if the word "must" have place in things Divine) some knowledge of good and evil, some acquaintance with sorrow and sin, some practical proof of the weakness of resolution, some protracted search of the soul after a still unrealized strength, before the helm of the being is finally set Heavenward—before a man can echo the Samaritan testimony, "Now I believe, not because of Thy saying: for I have heard for myself and know."

In this place, at this hour, we stand at the spring of the waters, and would help you, God helping us, to cast in the healing salt there. Be not satisfied to deal with particulars of conduct or habit. When God says, "I have healed these waters," He has gone to the spring. To purify the stream is impossible, but for this. When once "the water is naught and the ground barren," the remedy must be sought higher up. It is a true parable. "Death and barrenness" are the twin curses of the corrupted life-spring. You find every day—in your moments of reflection you regret it—that your influence, do what you will, is either negative or else injurious, upon those with whom you dwell. You find that you do not elevate, you do not lift the life of your dearest friend. And yet you wish him well; his interests are dear to you; you would not harm him nor see him harmed for the world. You feel it in other things. You would be diligent and purpose-like and exemplary. You would not sin. You have a thousand motives for being a good man. Your fall, your disgrace, your ruin, would break the very heart of your home. Yet unawares, under influence, through mere thoughtlessness, for want of one grain of firmness, you have wasted your time, you have failed in your examination, you have run into debt, you have secrets which you cannot tell, your life is a spoilt life, you talk sometimes as if you wished it gone. "Death," literal death, has sometimes been the stream from this spring. "Barrenness," I need not say, is

its fertility. Must it, must it go on thus, and thus end? Shall twenty years, of which half went without reckoning in the irresponsibility of a home, give its stamp to a life? Is there no way of breaking this dead-level unity, this miserable continuity of a good-for-nothing course?

There is. This is the very Gospel which Christ brought from Heaven, and it has been already the life of a world. The Gospel of a free forgiveness for the sake of a dying, living Lord—the Gospel of a Divine strength given in the Person of an indwelling Spirit—these two, knit into one by the all-embracing revelation of a God, sinned against and trifled with, yet a Father—this is the healing “salt,” this is the life-giving Life, for the sake of which Christ came and suffered and died and rose.

At “the spring of the waters” cast this salt in. Go apart with your God this night, and, in words few and simple, call Him in to your soul. Not all at once may you feel the fulness of the healing; not all at once is sin dethroned and executed in any man. Yet from that act of holy communing and converse with the Invisible, you shall come forth, if you will, an altered man. New powers shall begin to work in you—new hopes, new energies, and new affections. This day shall be to you the beginning of days—it shall be the first day to you of an everlasting year. “He went forth unto the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there” . . . And the Lord said, “I have healed these waters; there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land.”

C. J. VAUGHAN.