**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**05. THE HAPPINESS OF THE CHRISTIAN ERA by JAMES DENNEY**

*"Blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them."*

*Matthew 13:16 f*

(This address was preached at the ordination of a missionary.)

Two things are conspicuous in this passage. First, there is the congratulation addressed by Jesus to His disciples: "Blessed are the eyes which see the things which ye see"; and next, there is the compassion with which Jesus looks back on those who had longed for such happiness and been denied it: "Many prophets and kings and righteous men have desired to see the things which ye see and have not seen them". It is of this congratulation and this compassion I wish to speak.

**1.** Most of us have heard panegyrics pronounced upon our own age, as compared with earlier ages in the world's history, though perhaps they are neither so common nor so confident as they were a generation ago. Happy, we have heard it said, are those who live in an age in which science has so far mastered nature and put its forces at man's disposal; happy are those who are born to political freedom, to citizenship in a great nation, with inspiring memories, responsibilities, and hopes; happy are those who have not the rudest of the world's work to do, but inherit conditions in which leisure is possible, and the enjoyment of literature, art, and refined social intercourse; happy, in short, are we, living in Scotland in the twentieth century, the heirs of all the ages. There is no century behind to which we should willingly return.

It is quite right to be appreciative of such blessings, but it is not on things like these that Jesus congratulates His disciples. They had none of our modern improvements; no steam engine, or telegraph or telephone; they had no self-government, no votes, no economic security; they had not even words in their language for science or art; they had never seen any of the things which are spread before our eyes in the great exhibitions in which our age parades the consciousness of its immense superiority to all that have gone before. Yet Jesus says to them: "Blessed are the eyes that see the things which ye see". What was in His mind when He broke into this benediction? What was it the disciples saw on which they were so much to be congratulated?

The answer is plain from the very form of the sentence. Jesus does not say, "Blessed are our eyes for they see," as if the ground of congratulation were something in the circumstances of the time common to Him and His disciples. On the contrary, He says: "Blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears, for they hear"; and it is abundantly clear from the context both in Matthew and Luke that the real ground of His felicitation was that the disciples lived in the age in which He had made His appearance in the world. What their eyes saw, they saw in Him; what their ears heard, they heard from His lips; and it was something so wonderful and priceless that that generation might well have been the envy of all that went before. One of the things that come upon us with a perpetually new astonishment in the Gospels is the way in which Jesus thinks and speaks of Himself. He was meek and lowly of heart, the one perfect pattern of humility, utterly remote from boasting; but again and again He reveals, we might almost say unconsciously or unintentionally, a sense of what He is which fills us with amazement. This is one of the most striking passages in which this is done. Jesus does not assert anything here, nor make any particular claim; He only makes us feel that in His own mind He was one whose coming would have satisfied all the unfulfilled yearnings of the best of men in the past, one whose presence in the world entitled His own generation to congratulate itself above all its predecessors. It is far more wonderful than any title, and far more impressive, to feel - as these words make us feel - that in the mind of Jesus the world's felicity was at heart dependent on Him.

Is it possible for us to put the meaning of this more precisely? If what the eyes of the disciples saw and their ears heard were reduced to a unity, what would it be? Their eyes and ears were the recipients of a revelation: can we put the revelation into a word? If we look at the connexion in which this word of Jesus is given in Luke, I think we are justified in so doing. As the disciples looked on Jesus, and saw all that He did - as they listened to Him, and heard the words of grace and truth, of mercy and judgment, that proceeded out of His mouth - the conviction gradually took form within them that this was the Son of the Father. They felt that nothing ever came between Him and God, and that nothing need ever come between Him and themselves. He was as Divine as the Father, and as human as they. He was the Son who was all the time in the bosom of the Father, and who all the time also trod the earth which they trod, breathed the air which they breathed, shared the poverty which was their lot, went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed by the devil - He was the Son in whom the Father was revealed in a redeeming love and power to which there was no limit. This was what they came to feel and believe about Jesus, and the congratulation or beatitude of this passage shows us that this is how Jesus felt about Himself. He did not say what I have said in so many words: it would not have been of any use. We cannot learn the truth about Him by being told it in set terms: it has to be revealed to us as we look on Him and listen to Him; it has to be discovered by us as the revelation takes possession of our souls. But when it is discovered - when we see and hear in Jesus what the Apostles saw and heard - when the whole manifestation of this wonderful Person is unified and focused in the Son of the Father, the Son in whom the Father Himself is revealed to our faith - then the truth of the beatitude appears. Happy, O thrice and four times happy, are those whose eyes see and whose ears hear the revelation of God in Jesus! This is what the best of earlier days have longed for. This is the one ground of self-congratulation that lies too deep for any trouble to touch. And I say again how wonderful it is, what a solemn awe falls upon our hearts as we think of it, that this is not only how the Apostles thought of Jesus, but is how Jesus thought of Himself.

Many are asking at the present moment whether the revelation which the Apostles enjoyed, and on which Jesus congratulated them, is still accessible to men. Can our eyes see or our ears hear what they saw and heard? Or are we not rather to be condoled with than congratulated because our knowledge of Jesus is necessarily so remote, slight, and uncertain? Can we truly say that we know much or anything at all about Him? I am reluctant to refer in the church to questions that have so much unreality and con fusion in them, but perhaps something should be said. It is quite true that there are many things about Jesus which we do not know and never can know. We do not know exactly when He was born or died; we do not know anything of at least thirty years of His life; we do not know anything of His private relations to other people; we have no materials for writing a biography of Him. But we have the Gospels, and what really concerns us is not whether we can know about Jesus, but whether we can know Him; and that is a question which everyone can and must answer for himself. The greatest scholar in the world is not in a better position to answer it than the simplest and most untutored mind. For my own part, I say with confidence that it is not only possible to know Jesus through the Gospels, but that it is impossible for a sincere human being not to know Him. We not only know Him, we know Him better than anybody that ever lived, better even than we know our fluctuating, inconstant, half-moulded selves. The one thing that strikes a live mind in reading the Gospels, is the simplicity of Jesus. There is never any rift or schism in His being, any want of equivalence between what He says and what He is. The character and the words are one harmonious and in dissoluble whole. Jesus does not stand apart and speak about the truth; He speaks the truth simply, and it is the revelation of Himself. No other person has ever been able to make this kind of impression by His words. The Apostles do not make it. They bear witness to a truth which is independent of them; they know in part; they wrestle, as they speak, with something which is beyond them and greater than they. But with Jesus it is not so. His words do not reveal something from which He stands at a distance, as those may do who hear Him; it is He Himself who is expressed in them. The whole of Jesus is in every word He speaks. Think of the parable of the prodigal son, to take an utterance with which everyone is familiar. Is there any sense in saying that we do not know the person to whom this wonderful story served as self-expression and as self-defence? We do know Him. We know Him as the true Son of the Father - of such a father as he who when he saw the lost son afar off, ran and fell on his neck, and kissed him; we know Him through and through, and there is no limit to which we cannot trust Him. We may have a thousand difficulties about the Gospels, a thousand unanswered questions about what is or is not precisely historical in them; but if we are simple and sincere in our approach to them, I do not see how we can fail to know Jesus. And is not this our happiness? Is it not on this we are really to be congratulated, that through the Apostles' testimony to Jesus, and the testimony of the Spirit to that, our eyes can see and our ears hear the revelation on which Jesus felicitated them? How dark our world would be and dismal if the image of Jesus faded from our minds, if we could not see Him in whom we see the Father, if we had no story of the prodigal son, no good Samaritan, no great Physician, no life given as a ransom, no strong Son of God seeking and saving the lost, receiving sinners, a Captain of salvation to lead all who fight the good fight, one who in every word and deed reveals the Father in whom He lived and moved and had His being! But how bright our life is, how radiant, how full of reasons for congratulation, if Jesus has entered into it! The world into which His presence has come is another world. The people that sit in darkness have seen a great light; to them that sit in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up.

**2.** But turn now to the second aspect of this text - the revelation in it of the compassion of Jesus. It has always been one of the perplexities about the Gospel - one of the arguments alleged against it - that it was so late of appearing. If it is really the way of God's salvation, why was it not revealed from the beginning? Why were men allowed to sit for centuries and millenniums in darkness arid the shadow of death? Why, indeed, are they allowed to sit in such darkness still? How few of all the children of men who live to-day, or who have ever lived, can have this beatitude of Jesus applied to them? These questions have received very different answers.

There have been Calvinistic theologians who answered them coldly. They saw in the actual course of human history the whole expression of the will of God, and raised no question further. If innumerable multitudes of men have never known Jesus and the Gospel, it is by the will of God that this is so; they are not among His elect - that is the obvious fact - but it is idle to seek for any explanation of it. This way of turning time into eternity, and regarding what we see at any given moment as the fixed and eternal will of God, is only apparently philosophical, and is really possible only when we refuse to think and feel in sympathy with Jesus.

St. Paul, who thought about all human history, thought about this question also, but also rather formally. The times before the Gospel are to him "times of ignorance"; God "winked at" them; rather, over looked them, did not press during them the responsibilities of men, as He does now when the Gospel and its call have come. Though He did not leave Himself without a witness, He allowed all the nations in the past generations to walk in their own ways; He was kind, forbearing, had the Gospel in view; but Paul himself does not enter into the situation with much sympathy.

Still less do we get anything out of the avowedly philosophical people who tell us that you cannot have a world at all unless you have differences in it - -that if it is to have a history at all it must want in one age what it has in another, and that if human beings are to be knit into one society it must be by the mutual supplying of each other's needs, which means (of course) that some must always want what others have. This may be true, but it is one of the formal truths which do not reach the vital facts in which men are interested.

How different from all these is the tone in which Jesus speaks of the past. "I say unto you that many prophets and kings and righteous men have desired to see the things which ye see and have not seen them, and to hear the things which ye hear and have not heard them." For Him the dark immeasurable past is not filled with races and generations, but with men and their spiritual experiences. They are individualized in His mind, and His heart is touched into sympathy with their spiritual yearnings. He embraces in His compassion not only the multitudes around Him, who were like sheep without a shepherd, but those who in distant ages had seen the promise of God, and embraced it, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. This is one of the most consoling and inspiring words in the Gospel - this word which reveals the sympathy of Jesus with souls yearning for the revelation of the Father. Who implanted that yearning in them? Surely it was God Himself, from whom they came. It is His creative mark upon them, and He is a faithful Creator, who will not disappoint the longings He has kindled. We do not know all the wonders of His working, but if we trust the revelation of His love in this sympathetic word of Jesus we can only believe that they and we who live in the light of the Gospel shall be made perfect together.

It is passages like this which show the universality of the Gospel, and furnish the real justification for Christian missions. Jesus Himself was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and He never offered Himself to the wider world beyond. But though He was only sent to Israel, He was sent for the world. And the proof of it lies in a saying like this which shows His yearning sympathy with those who under unfavourable conditions are nevertheless longing for the Father. Here He is only comparing present time with the past - the age in which He revealed the Father to men with the darker and less happy ages that lay behind; but if He were standing in the midst of us to-day - as we who know Him believe He is - would He not look out with the same yearning sympathy on the dim multitudes which lie beyond the borders of Christendom? They are not dim multitudes to Him. They are not inferior or alien races. They are human souls - some of them great souls, prophets and righteous men - who are seeking God if haply they may feel after Him and find Him, and whose restless hearts will not be satisfied till they see Jesus, and believe in God through Him. They are His, though they do not yet know it, and all that longing of their hearts is the Father drawing them to the Son. It is because there are such souls in the world that the work of missions is a Divine and hopeful work. God is preparing the way of His messengers everywhere. The Good Shepherd has sheep that are to be gathered into His fold from the north and the south, from the east and the west. He has the most vivid sympathy with them in all the outgoing of their souls to God. They can be so much to Him, and He can be so much to them. What a joyful hour it is when the supreme revelation breaks upon them through the preaching of the Gospel, and He can say again, "Happy are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear".

We have all heard a good deal lately of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh. By far the strongest impression it made on my mind was that there is no real difference between the work of missions and the work of the Church at home, and that what we need is not a greater interest in missions but a greater interest in the Gospel - that is, in the truth that Christ has come into the world, the revelation of the Father, and that no deep or satisfying happiness can enter human hearts but that which enters with Him. Of course there are differences of men, racial, historical, cultural, but in the long run they do not count. It is not to the Briton or the German the Gospel is preached in Europe, or to the Chinaman or the Hindu in Asia; it is to the soul yearning for God, or perhaps hardened against God; it is with the same inspiration, the same hidden allies, the same antagonists, the same soul travail, the same hope, everywhere. And with this word "hope" I will conclude, returning from the compassionate to the congratulatory side of our Saviour's word. It is only a joyful religion which has a right to be missionary: only one which is conscious of having found the supreme good will be eager to impart it. But surely if we are conscious of having found the supreme good, or rather of being found by Him, it should make us glad and confident. Someone said to me not long ago that he was struck with the number of hopeless ministers. There were so many men who had everything against them, who had an uphill fight, who despaired of making any more of it; they were pithless, apathetic, resigned; they entered beaten into the battle, or did not enter into it at all. I will say nothing unsympathetic of men whom it is not for their brethren to judge, but I will say this to everyone who has accepted this vocation - that when we preach the Gospel it must be in the spirit of the Gospel. It must be with the sympathy of Jesus for all who are yearning after God, and with the certainty of Jesus that in Him there is the revelation of God which will bring happiness to all yearning souls. So preached, it cannot be in vain. In Bengal and in Scotland, in our own race, and in the races most remote from our own, there are souls desiring to see the things that we see, and destined to be blessed with the vision. The evangelist's is no calling for a joyless and dispirited man. "Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound: they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy countenance."