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

**06. LEARNING FROM THE ENEMY by JAMES DENNEY**

*"And David said ... let him curse, for the Lord hath bidden him."*

*2 Samuel 16:11*

It would be hard to imagine a provocation more exasperating than that which David met in this chastened spirit. As the old King of Israel, once the darling of his people, was making his escape from Jerusalem, a man who had some family connexion with Saul came out to gloat over his downfall. "Come out, come out," he cried, "thou man of blood, thou man of Belial; the Lord hath returned upon thee all the blood of the house of Saul in whose stead thou hast reigned." Nothing could have been more malignant and unjust. If David had exterminated the house of Saul when he came to the throne, he would only have done what was common in those times upon a change of dynasty; but in point of fact he had shown for his friend Jonathan's sake a rare and distinguished generosity to the descendants of his predecessor. He was slandered in the very point on which he might well have prided himself, and we cannot wonder that the combined insolence and false hood of Shimei provoked the soldiers in his escort. Abishai would have made short work of the malignant Benjamite if only David had allowed him. But David had other thoughts in his heart, and it was the words of Shimei that had roused them. He was not a man of blood, in general terms, but there was blood on his conscience for all that. He was not a man of Belial, in general terms, a worthless vicious character, but there was a hideous tragedy in which he was the villain. It was not the tragedy of the house of Saul, but of the house of Uriah the Hittite. The words of Shimei brought vividly to his remembrance things which touched him more deeply than any human malice could conceive - so deeply that in presence of them resentment could not live. David knew worse about himself than Shimei's bitter tongue could ever tell. And it is the same with us. The most malignant taunts of our enemies wound us, not by what they are, but by what they remind us of. And in bringing our real sins to remembrance, they not only silence resentment on our part, but call us to reflection, to patience, to humility, to penitence. It is only so that the wistful hope of David may be fulfilled for us: "It may be that the Lord will look on mine affliction, and that the Lord will requite me good for His cursing this day".

I wish to speak of some accusations - in the main false accusations - that have been brought against such people as ourselves, such Churches and such Christians as we are; and of the manner in which we ought to find spiritual profit in them.

Not long ago, in the appeal of a French missionary society for a week of self-denial, I found the following description of Protestantism by a well-known Roman Catholic teacher. "Protestantism is essentially the abolition of sacrifice. To abolish mortification, abstinence, and fasting; to abolish the necessity of good works, effort, struggle, virtue; to shut up sacrifice in Jesus alone, and not to let it pass over upon ourselves; no longer to say with St. Paul, 'I suffer that which remains to be suffered of the sufferings of the Saviour'; but rather to say to the crucified Jesus, 'Suffer alone, O Lord' - there you have Protestantism." Let us put it quite definitely and apply it to ourselves: "There you have your religion, a religion without renunciation, without sacrifice, without that self-crucifixion which is the very essence of the religion of Jesus". This is how it actually appears to some people, and how they actually speak of it; but how are we to take it? It is easy to reply to the injustice it contains, and even to retort upon it. The Roman Catholic Church, we are apt to say, provides careers of renunciation for some of its members which are only too visible - not visible only but ostentatious. The orders of men and women who take vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience - who explicitly give up property of their own, a family life of their own, even a will of their own, in the daily ordering of their life - are conspicuous enough. Their sacrifices are not hidden; whatever they are, everyone can see them. But history has anything but a favourable verdict to pass on this type of renunciation, and we have no disposition to be humble because we do not produce monastic orders. We are more inclined to rake up the scandalous chronicle of monastic history, and to thank God that Christianity in this form is with us a thing of the past. But that will not do us much good. The question remains, how comes it that Protestant Christianity ever made on a Romanist like Pere Gratry the impression which it apparently did make. Granting that the religious orders have all the demerits and drawbacks that history reveals, are they not wrong forms of a right thing? And have we got that right thing in our life, in the place and the power which are its due? In plain English, has the cross its proper place in our religion? Probably the cross of Christ has. We have all been brought up to believe in Jesus Christ and Him crucified: to us as to St. Paul this is the epitome of Christianity. He bore the cross alone, and no one could help Him; He finished there the work of atonement which nothing men can do can ever supplement. This is quite true, but quite irrelevant. Jesus not only spoke of His cross, but of ours. "If any man will come after Me," he said, "let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." Our principal hymns about the cross are in the strain, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling". I do not find fault with that; it is the suffering love of Christ which must always be the inspiration of the Church's praise, and of the Christian's cross-bearing. But what about our own cross, not the one to which we cling, but the one which we bear, and on which we are crucified? Is there really such a thing? I do not ask whether anybody else knows of it - it is nobody else's business- but whether we ourselves know. Is there really such a thing as self-denial in our lives? Have we ever made for Christ's sake renunciations and sacrifices which are painfully felt? Can we go back to some hour in our life, or is there something present in our experience even now, in virtue of which we can say that we know what is meant by the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, or that we have been able to drink of His cup? I believe it is a slander to say that Protestantism means the abolition of sacrifice, but it is a slander that should call to remembrance much self-indulgence, much complacency, much contentment with the average moral standard of the world around us, much forgetfulness of Christ's demand for a denied and crucified self. It is not resentment or retaliation it requires, but the spirit in which David said, "Let him curse, for the Lord hath bidden him".

Here is another illustration. Two years ago our churches, in common with the churches of the Reformation everywhere, were celebrating the quatercentenary of the birth of Calvin. Innumerable speeches were delivered in appreciation of the work and influence of that great man. Among others there was a speech by a French man of letters which contained a notable criticism of the Calvinistic type of Christianity. The speaker made the amplest acknowledgment of what Calvinism had done not only for political liberty, but in particular for enlightenment, for education, and for science generally. But incidentally, he argued, it had intellectualized Christianity. It had laid stress on clear views of truth, and on the building up of such systems of theology as we have in our catechisms and confessions of faith. And in doing so it had made Christianity, perhaps unconsciously, a thing for men only, and even for educated men in whom the logical faculties are properly developed; it had destroyed or impaired its poetry, its power of appeal to children, to the un-educated, to imaginative and emotional natures. Here, again, I have no doubt there are answers to be given. We know that the children in our homes do get into the secret of our religion, and to those who have been brought up on the open Bible and who know all its finest pages by heart it is absurd to speak of the poetry of religion being lost. Nevertheless, we do not profit spiritually by speaking back, but by laying it to heart when even the curse of a Shimei touches our conscience. Is it not true, after all, that the stalwart forms of Protestantism - -those which, as Burke has it, represent the dissidence of dissent, the Protestantism of the Protestant religion - do tend to lose social power? Intelligence is cultivated, and independence, and the sense of individual responsibility - all good things, yet all things capable of degeneration and dis proportion - and the sense of solidarity tends to be lost It is one of the imperfections of our Church, even though it be an unfriendly voice which reminds us of it, that it does not conspicuously provide a spiritual atmosphere which all pious souls can breath alike, whatever their intellectual inequalities or even disagreements may be. There is something wrong here, and I believe it is correctly diagnosed in the charge that we have intellectualized our religion to excess. Religion is no doubt truth, and it is right for all who believe in it to try to find the most precise and adequate expression for the truth, but the value of such intellectual definitions is always secondary. The truth of which the Bible speaks is not only an intellectual truth which can be exhibited in doctrinal propositions; it is a truth, according to the Apostles, which has not only to be believed and known, but to be loved and done. It is something which has a spell in it to command affection and submission; it is something of which we have only an imperfect apprehension till we realize that it is identical with Jesus - "I am the truth"; and who does not feel that the sense of this personal, winning, commanding truth is too easily lost by those who are zealous (as we all should be) for sound doctrine? Perhaps this number is not very large in our time; far more of us care nothing for Christian truth than too much. But it is not improbable that the charge of intellectualizing Christianity may come home to some consciences in another way. It is not that we exalt the logical faculties in religion at the expense of the imaginative or emotional, sacrificing the poetry of the Gospel to our orthodoxy, but that we give doctrinal soundness the primacy over moral. Which would shock you most, to hear that some member of this Church had become a Unitarian or a Roman Catholic, or to hear that he had been seen drunk, or that his books would not balance? I think I understand that state of mind to which the moral seems less heinous than the doctrinal defection, but surely the most malignant voice that can make us conscious of it, and shake us out of it, is the voice of God. How profoundly inconsistent it is with all the great fundamental utterances of the New Testament on the true nature of Christianity. "Not every one that saith unto Me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in Heaven." "If we know that He is righteous, we know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of Him." "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God." Words like these, in which our Lord and the greatest of His Apostles unite, put us at the true point of view for judging what is and is not vital in the Church, and God requites us good for any curse which compels us to lay them to heart.

There is something akin to this in another criticism of the Church, with which we are all familiar. Nothing is commoner than to hear the church, and especially its office-bearers, denounced as guilty of downright dishonesty with regard to its creed. They profess to believe it, we are told, but they do not and cannot believe it. They sign it on important occasions with solemn declarations of sincerity, and it is notorious that they are not sincere. No person of ordinary intelligence and education could possibly accept in the twentieth century the intellectual statement of religion which suited the sixteenth or seventeenth. The whole thing is revolting in its untruthfulness. Now it is quite easy here also to repel what is most offensive in such charges. They are often made by people who reject Christianity altogether, and who cannot understand that it still has power to win the assent and allegiance even of educated men. They are often made by those who forget that assent by an individual to what is part of the constitution of a society does not mean that the individual is to be annihilated in the interest of the society. A man may be thoroughly loyal in accepting the constitution of his country though he thinks it capable of amendment, and thoroughly loyal in accepting the creed of his Church though he would like to see it cleared or simplified. In point of fact our Church expressly gives those who sign its confession liberty to dissent from it on matters not entering into the sub stance of the Reformed faith: which is as ample a liberty perhaps as can be granted to those who wish to maintain their connexion with Christian history. But when everything has been said in defence of the present situation which can be said, is there not something even in the sneers and slanders of outsiders which should go to our conscience? Why should it be necessary to make any excuses at all? Why should the Christian Church, which is spoken of in Scripture as the pillar and buttress of the truth, of all institutions in the world have to be perpetually defending itself against charges of insincerity, or even of downright falsehood? Why do we ask men still to sign what needs always a certain amount of explaining away? Why do we rack our brains to invent elastic formulae which will seem to bind us to certain doctrinal statements but really leave us a good deal of rope? Why should it be possible for anyone to say that the Church of Scotland declares its acceptance of the Westminster Confession in language the whole recommendation of which is that it is thoroughly equivocal, or that in the United Free Church acceptance of the Confession is eased by a declaratory act which declares with regard to certain main doctrines of the Confession what the Confession itself does not declare? Ought we not to get out of the doubtful situations which give even plausibility to such impeachments of our honesty? Ought we not to find a broad and simple expression for our faith in Christ and loyalty to Him which could be sincerely accepted by all who call Jesus Lord, and trust in Him for salvation? People say this is not a creed-making age. Neither it is. But what if there should never be a creed-making age, in the sense of the seventeenth century, again? Even a good Christian, I think, might be content to believe that the Gospel would perpetuate its power in society and in individual souls without burdening anyone with such a complete intellectual outfit. It creates needless difficulties, and sometimes does tempt to equivocation and insincerity. And when we are denounced for such vices by unsympathetic outsiders, let us remember what David said about Shimei. It may be done in despite and hatred, yet it is God who is calling on us to enter into our conscience, and to make our ways clear and simple before Him. There would not be the possibility of such cursing if we were walking in the light as He is in the light.

I will take one example more. The Church is cursed at the present time with great heartiness by many who profess themselves the friends of the poor. There is a socialist criticism which denounces it as essentially a capitalist institution, an inhuman thing. It is always on the side of the rich, or at least of the well- to-do. The working classes are lost to it just because they have gradually come to see that it has no interest in them. It is the abode of the selfish, who may well be content with things as they are, and who care nothing for the disinherited, the hopeless, and the wronged. You will not imagine that I am going to discuss the relations of the Church and socialism, or even to discuss what might be said in reply to such charges. We all know the amount of falsehood and malice which is in them. I preach in a different church almost every Sunday, but I have never preached in a church of capitalists yet. There are churches and individual Christians, we are well aware, that are distinguished for their sympathy with the poor, and for their works of practical beneficence. But instead of resenting or retaliating, let us ask what is the voice of God which becomes audible in our hearts through such slanders or beneath them. What is our real attitude to the poor? Is it the least like the fraternal attitude of Jesus in the Gospel? or do we not rather incline to judge them with a certain hardness of heart? If we are not poor ourselves, we think we have earned it; we have made our position of moderate comfort, or of modest independence; we have been diligent, self- denying, thrifty, independent; and we see no reason why others should not be so, or take the consequences. If people are poor, they have earned that also: let them be poor. It is impossible to alter the laws under which God administers human affairs, and this is one of them. Of course there is such a thing as bad health, and even perhaps as bad luck, and we do not wish to be unsympathetic; but, broadly speaking, people get in the world what they work for, and if we take our own responsibilities we must not be asked to take other people's as well. This is the line on which much of our thinking and feeling spontaneously moves, but simply to follow it is not the way to get the good out of curses. I am sure it would be very difficult to follow it in the presence of Jesus. When we think of it, the economical principles by which men get on in the world are not identical with His teaching in this region. They do not contain everything which it contained. In the staple of our thoughts, in our ordinary temper, there is much inhumanity, much disinclination to think of the burdens and disabilities of others, much reluctance to give practical effect to the idea that society is truly Christianized only in proportion as the things which we value most are shared by all. This is the truth which the cursing of the Church by socialism should teach us, and it is to teach it, doubtless, that God has permitted the cursing. Can anyone deny, for example, that the mind of Christ about money, and the mind of the ordinary Christian about money, are worlds apart? The one thing most of us are afraid of is to be poor; the one thing which He really dreaded for men was to be rich. How hardly, He said, that is, with what difficulty, shall a rich man enter into the kingdom of Heaven ! "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." The socialist criticism of the Church may be malignant or absurd, but do any of us believe that? Is there one of us who, if he had the opportunity to become rich, would decline it because he was risking his soul? Is there one of us who could be sure that to come into the possession of wealth would not intensify his love of wealth, and make him not only less liberal, but less humane, more on his guard against impostors, more rigorous and self-righteous in his judgment of the poor, more exclusive and self-centred, less expansive, sympathetic, and kind? It is bitter to be charged falsely with vices which may be quite alien to our character, but it is rarely that even a false charge does not bring something to our remembrance to humble us in the presence of God. It is of no profit to us to be angered by slander, and to retort upon those who utter it; very likely the one may be as easy as the other. The real profit is when it brings us into contact with something in our life to which in our self-complacency we have been blind - something of which the slanderer knows nothing, but which we feel before God more deeply than any wound He could inflict - and when we give ourselves in God's presence with penitence and humility to set it right with Him. There are such things, such memories, in the lives of all men; and perhaps in surveying the unjust and malignant things said about the Church or about Christians in general we have all been secretly reminded of some of them. It is good to be reminded. It is good to take them to heart. It is good to put resentment away, and with a contrite heart seek forgiveness and amendment from God. It is thus he brings good out of evil, and requites blessing for the curse.