**APOSTOLIC OPTIMISM AND OTHER SERMONS - SERMONS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**06. THE POWER OF THE CROSS by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom s but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God."*

*1 Corinthians 1:22*

"The Jews ask for signs" a request which is not necessarily indicative of a thirst; it may be an asking behind which there is no parched and aching spirit. That is the bane and peril of all externalism. It may gratify a feverish curiosity without awakening the energies of a holy life. The Jews asked for signs. "Now, when Herod saw Jesus he was exceedingly glad," for he hoped to see a sign. It was a restless curiosity, itching for the sensation of some novel entertainment; it was not the pang of a faint and weary heart hungering for bread. "He answered him nothing." "The Jews ask for signs," a request which is frequently indicative of a life of moral alienation.

Externalism abounds in moral opiates, and in externalisms men often discover drugs by which they benumb the painful sense of their own excesses. "A wicked and an adulterous generation seeketh after a sign." Men try to resolve into merely physical sensations and sensationalisms what can only be apprehended by the delicate, tender tendrils of a penitent and aspiring soul.

"And the Greeks seek after wisdom." -- They are the epicures in philosophies, the dainty tasters of intellectual subtleties; they are the experts who relish speculative cleverness, whose mouths water at the airiest abstractions, and who recoil from the severely practical in stern disgust and contempt. "The Jews ask for signs," and their religion degenerates into a despiritualised system of magic. "The Greeks seek after wisdom," and their religion becomes the domain of the disciplinist theorist, the heritage of a cultured and exclusive aristocracy. "But we preach Christ crucified," proclaiming what appears to be His shame, glorying in what appears to be the hour of His collapse, emphasising the season of His appalling darkness, obtruding the bloody, unadorned, and undecked cross on which He suffered His apparent defeat. "We preach Christ crucified" -- we do not whisper it; "we preach Christ crucified" -- we do not whisper it in secret coteries; we do not timidly submit it for subdued discussion in the academic grove; we do not offer it to the hands of exclusive circles -- we preach it, we stand out like the town-crier in the public way, and we proclaim it to the common and indiscriminate crowd. "The Jews ask for signs; we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block." They cannot get over it; it obtrudes itself like a barrier right athwart the common track of their common thought; it throws all their reckonings into confusion; it confronts their hunger for a novel entertainment by an apparent stone. Christ crucified! A sign! It is significant of nothing but shame, failure, utter and dishonourable defeat. "The Greeks seek after wisdom; we preach Christ crucified, unto the Greeks foolishness". It offended their mental pride, it confronted their speculative ingenuity as a piece of unmitigated absurdity, and they repelled it, repelled it because it did not approach and conciliate their interest in the graceful robes of an alluring philosophy. To the Jews a stumbling-block, to the Greeks an absurdity; but "to them that are called" to them who offer it the hospitality of mind and heart, to them who reverently entertain it on the plea of its own august claims, to them who render it the willing homage and obedience of the will, "to them that are called, both Jews and Greeks" irrespective of nationality or race, "Christ, the power of God" a mighty dynamic which is the pledge of all moral, spiritual triumph, "and the wisdom of God" an illumination in which the reverent soul is led into the secret hallowed precincts of the very Light of Life.

"We preach Christ crucified," says Paul, and we are not going to be diverted by the hunger for mere sensation; "we preach Christ crucified," and we are not going to be disengaged from our high calling, and tempted to submit our Gospel as a piece of subtle and mincing controversy. We preach it boldly, definitely -- "Christ, and Him crucified." It was the only message for the apostolic day; it is the only Gospel for our own.

**1.**

I want to lead your thoughts round about this great text, and to ask you to consider with me why it is that the Gospel of Christ and Him crucified is the only redeeming message for our own day. We preach Christ crucified, because it is the doctrine which incomparably preserves for us the sense of the Holiness of God. Now, is that altogether an irrelevant and particularly inopportune word to apply to our own day? I think that the sense of the holiness of God is an element that is conspicuously lacking in our modern religious life. One misses it in our prayers; it is by no means pronounced in our latest hymns; its presence is not indicated by any pronounced signs in our life. Our ears do not seem to be as open to the cry of the seraphim, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts." I turn to the Old Testament, and I find men lying prostrate in the dust, while they cry in most fruitful wonder, "Holy, holy, holy." I turn to the Apocalypse, to those mystic glimpses of life in the unseen; and wherever I turn, my eyes are smitten with the oft-repeated cry, "Holy, holy, holy." "They have no rest," says John, -- "They have no rest day nor night, saying. Holy, holy, holy." I take up great works of devotion, great manuals and helpmeets of devotion, and I find that every devotional exercise is prefaced by an attempt to realise the awful holiness of God. Take down from your shelves Lancelot Andrewes' great Book of Private Devotion, a book to which I personally and privately owe much more than I can ever tell you -- take down Lancelot Andrewes' Book of Private Devotion. How does each day's exercise begin? In what he calls meditation and adoration. Why, the very words have an old-world flavour about them as though they belonged to a long past and obsolete day. Meditation, adoration! And Lancelot Andrewes leads us in this meditation and adoration right up to the great White Throne, into the awful stillness of the holy place, and instinctively you feel you must take the shoes from off your feet, that you must silence every loud trampling frivolity and flippancy, that the very stillness may steep its message into your awakened and wondering spirit. And then Lancelot Andrewes leads from adoration and meditation to confession, and I do not wonder that such meditations are followed by such confessions, and such contemplations by such agonising cries, such visions by such tears. But, brethren, that is a very silent note in our day. This never-silent emphasis in Scripture, and this essential preface to all great books of devotion, are not to be found in very pronounced emphasis in our modern religious life. I do not think that the cry rings through our ears to-day as it did through the ears of the saints of old -- "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty." The God whom we commonly conceive is lax, loose, kindly, easy-going, and good-natured; a God with whom we dare to trifle, a God with whom we dare to take liberties without being afraid of the consuming flame -- an easy-going God. Why should I fear? God is love. Why should I take the shoes from off my feet? And so, my brethren, there are a number of words that have become almost obsolete; they are quite dropping out of our religious vocabulary -- awe, fear, trembling, and reverence. I do not think we particularly like hymns of this kind to-day:

Lo! God is here, let us adore,

And own how dreadful is this place.

We may not like the words, we may be very happy that they have become obsolete, but the great realities which the words portray will have to be restored to our religious thought. The conception of the holiness of God must not be relegated to primitive times as though it belonged to the merely immature thinkings of the old dispensation: it is an equally cardinal revelation of the new. The idea of Fatherhood does not exclude or obscure the idea of holiness; it includes and intensifies it. Our Master Himself, in a word which I think is far more pregnant than we are inclined to suppose -- our Master Himself took the two words, and sought, for our infinite advantage, to reveal their eternal wedlock when he cried "Holy Father." It is the first of the two words I want to have re-enthroned -- "Holy Father." If I want to gaze upon the holiness of God I know no place like the Cross; nowhere else do I see -- speaking now not as a preacher, speaking now as a disciple -- nowhere else do I see, as I see at the Cross, the wondrous purity of the great White Throne; nowhere do I more find such fruitful stillness as when I am near the Cross; nowhere do I feel so inclined to take the shoes from off my feet. And how do you account for it? I stood in a Roman Catholic chapel a day or two ago, in the Oratory in Birmingham, where Cardinal Newman finished his days; and I stood just under the figure of the crucified Christ. I do not know that it helped me better to realise my Master's love for me, but I noticed that the steps which formed the pediment were worn with the knees of praying folk. I wonder how it is we are so still when we get near the Cross! May it not be because we are instinctively sensitive that we are very near the great White Throne, -- and that there, in the supreme revelation of sacrifice, we have a supreme revelation of the Eternal holiness? My brethren, I plead that we may get that note back into our religious life. We are never going to have grand trees of righteousness until they are rooted in a rich soil of reverence, and we are never, I think, going to get the requisite reverence until we find time to contemplate God's holiness; and I do not know any place that will lead us to such a fruitful contemplation of God's holiness as when we take our place near the Cross. "We preach Christ crucified," because the preaching of the doctrine helps us create and preserve a sense of the Holiness of our God.

**2.**

We preach Christ crucified, because it is the doctrine which incomparably creates and preserves the sense of the nature of sin. -- Any doctrine which unveils the holiness of God reveals also the horribleness of sin; any doctrine which obscures God's holiness veneers man's sin. If God were merely the easy-going, good-natured, lax, and kindly Deity of many modern worshippers, sin would remain for ever essentially unrevealed. God the lax, the kindly, good-natured, easy-going, would just bend over His rebellious children and say, "My children, I forgive you." Well, my brethren, that might make us easy; it would never make us good. Forgiveness is counterfeit which decorates the sin it forgives. Such forgiveness only paves the way for a repetition of the offence. All true forgiveness throws a most lurid illumination on the sin that is forgiven. That is true in purely human relations. A father's forgiveness is criminal if it benumbs the consciousness of the crime. If, when I forgive my child, my forgiveness diminishes his sense of sin, then I become a participant in the sin I forgive. That is the thoughtless, easy-going, good-natured goodness of the world to which our Master solemnly refers when He says, "If any man love child more than Me, he cannot be My disciple." If any man love his child in such a way as to make his child more Christless, if he love his child in such a way as to gloss over his young one's sin, then I say his very tenderness and his very forgiveness will appear hateful in the sight of God, for his tenderness and his forgiveness have made sin appear to be less hateful and less revolting, and he can have none of the spirit of the Master and be none of His. In the light of all true forgiveness sin is revealed to be as black as the nether hell. Where, then, shall I see the horrors of sin? Where forgiveness is most truly revealed. Where shall I see sin most keenly? Where forgiveness is supremely revealed. In the place of forgiveness I shall see the unutterable horrors of sin. Well, then, I turn to the Sermon on the Mount. I find no awakening there. I find great principles, lofty ideals, severe standards, great moral maxims. I bask in the soft sunny inspiration of great encouragements; I tremble amid the lightning flashes of appalling warnings; my incompletenesses yawn before me; all my defects are ragged and jagged in the burning noon, but I do not feel ashamed of the pain and the horribleness and the fearfulness of sin. It is not otherwise when I turn even to the story of the Prodigal Son. I may be melted into tears, and yet my tears may not help my vision. Many a man has been made homesick by the story of the Prodigal who has nevertheless not been made sick of his sin. What I want is something that will not merely make me homesick, but something that will reveal to me the hatefulness of sin, the leprous disgustingness of sin, that I may not only turn away home, but recoil from sin in contempt as a healthy man turns from diseased and disgusting food. That is what I want. And I do not see or fear my sin in the Sermon on the Mount. Nor do I fear and find it in the story of the Prodigal Son. But when I stand at the Cross; when I lift my eyes to the crucified Son of God; when I recall the word that He spoke, "God so loved the world that He gave His Son," -- in the love that blazes in that death I can see something of the sin for which He died. I see it, as I see it nowhere else. When I stand at the Cross I am permitted in my measure to see sin through the eyes of my God.

The Cross is the place of great awakening for sinners. And explain it as we may, or leave it unexplained, the experience of the Christian Church has gathered abundant witness to the truth of this statement. It is in the place where forgiveness is most supremely revealed that men have gained the most searching convictions of their sin. It has been always at the preaching of the Cross that men have been pricked -- we have not a better word yet -- that men have been pricked in their heart. Just look at the old apostolic word. They were, says the Acts of the Apostles, "pricked in their heart," pricked, goaded, irritated; first made irritable, and filled with unrest, until it touched the heart and became a pain and an agony. Nowhere else, nohow-else, can you get the pain and the shame and the fear of sin which you find awakened at the Cross. And if we men and women of this latter day wish to gaze into the awfulness of Sin, we shall have to take our stand at the mystic confluence of mid-night and noonday and abide in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. "In Thy light shall we see light," and part of the illumination will be the veritable horror of Sin.

**3.**

We preach Christ crucified, because it is a doctrine in the experience of which we incomparably discern the realities of Grace, -- The Cross is not merely the birthplace of my fears, or the birthplace of my shames, or the birthplace of my disgusts; it is the birthplace of the radiant and immortal hope. I like old John Nelson's words when he was preaching about the influence of John Wesley's preaching and its effect upon him. When he had done, he said, "This man can tell the secrets of my heart, but he hath not left me there, he hath showed me the remedy, even the blood of Christ. Then was my soul filled with consolation, through hope that God, for Christ's sake, would save me." But that has not been merely the experience of John Nelson: it has been the experience wherever Christ, and Him crucified, has been proclaimed. Where has the sanctified comfort of the Christian Church been found? Not far away from the Cross! "And I saw in my dream that just as Christian came up to the Cross his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do until it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more. Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said with a moving heart, 'He has given me rest by His sorrow and life by His death!'" But I will turn away from John Bunyan, who might be thought to be a very partial witness to the power of his Lord, and I will turn to a little frequented path, to Goethe, perhaps to Goethe's masterpiece. Let me give you just a short extract from those wonderful words in the Confessions of a Beautiful Soul: --

"I leaned on a little table beside me and I hid my tear - stained face in my hands, and who could ever express even in the dimmest way the experience that came to me then? A secret influence drew my soul to the Cross where Jesus once expired. It was an inward leaning -- I cannot give it any other name -- an inward leaning like that which draws the heart to its beloved in its absence. As my soul drew near to Him who became mine and died upon the Cross, in that moment I knew what Faith meant, and in that moment my spirit received a wholly new power of uplifting." Worthy perhaps to stand side by side with the testimony of John Bunyan!

But one need not go to literature for one's instances to prove that it is just at the Cross men lose their burden and find the truth of the realities of grace. A very dear and intimate friend of mine only this last week related to me a dream which had been blessed by God to the redemption of his own father. The father dreamed that he was a hare, and a hare he was. So real and so graphic was the consciousness of the dream, that he felt he could almost smell the dewy turnip-tops of the fields amongst which he moved. Suddenly he heard the cry of the hounds. He pricked his ears, listened, and bolted full pace across the fields. The hounds drew nearer and nearer, and came at last so close to him that he could feel their hot breath. Then he found that he was leaving the green pastures and was reaching bare and rugged heights; and just when he had reached those bare and rocky heights he became conscious that his pursuers were not hounds. They were his sins, and he was a flying soul! Away up, away up, away up towards the summit he saw a cave, and terrified beyond measure he made for the cave and then turned round. The entrance to the cave was flooded with a most unearthly light, and just in the centre of the opening there shone resplendently a cross, standing between him and the awful things that pursued. He awoke, and behold, it was a dream. But by the power of the dream he was redeemed.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,

Let me hide myself in Thee.

**4.**

We preach Christ crucified because it is the doctrine in whose heart we find ample resources for the attainment of moral and spiritual health, -- It is ' not merely a kindly friend who comes and gives me the gratification of a pleasant and fleeting sentiment. The doctrine of Christ, and Him crucified, is generative of moral and spiritual force. It is the doctrine above all others, so far as my experience in the ministry can tell, which is productive of the ethical energy required for the arduous living of our daily life. It is the power of God unto salvation. I think I can almost feel the thrill of the apostle's heart when he said it -- The Gospel of God is "the power of God unto salvation," right up to it, not merely to regeneration, but to sanctification and perfect health. It is the power of God until God Himself shall put His hand upon me and say, Saved! It is the dynamical power of God, enabling me to meet my daily foes, to front them in confidence, to overcome them, not faintingly, but to be more than a conqueror, to march over them as a man in Christ my God.

So I say that for ethical revivals we must first of all have evangelical revivals. We must first of all have the doctrine of the Cross before we can hope for moral elevation. I wonder how many of my audience have read David Brainerd's Journal of his Life and Doings amongst the North American Indians? If my young brethren in the ministry would take a word from me they would buy that book, and have it by the bedside. Next to John Wesley's Journal it is the book in which I find most devotional help. Get David Brainerd's Life and Journal edited by Jonathan Edwards, and turn to the end of that Journal where you will find an essay by David Brainerd on the doctrine he preached among the Indians, where he makes a statement which is full of heartening to myself in my own ministry. He says, "I never got away from Jesus, and Him crucified, and I found that when my people were gripped by this great evangelical doctrine of Christ, and Him crucified, I had no need to give them instructions about morality. I found that one followed as the sure and inevitable fruit of the other." That is a wonderful word to come from a saintly man like David Brainerd, who hated sin as he feared hell! He said, "I find my Indians begin to put on the garments of holiness, and their common life begins to be sanctified even in a trifle when they are possessed by the doctrine of Christ, and Him crucified." When I look round among my people, and look round in my nation, and long for an ethical revival for the reformation of outward manners and life, I know that the power in which it is to be accomplished is the preaching of Christ, and Him crucified. Christ, and Him crucified, is the doctrine which is to be creative of the moral reformation of our country.

And, lastly, how is a great Gospel like this to be preached? If it is the doctrine in which I best discern the Holiness of God, if it is the doctrine in which I discover the horribleness of Sin, if it is the doctrine which reveals to me the realities of Grace, if it is the doctrine in which I find the resources of Ethical Revival -- How shall I preach it? There is only one way. A Gospel of infinite compassion must be preached in the spirit of compassion in which it was born. My brethren in the ministry, we need to pray, and to pray long and to pray fervently, that we may never become hard. I think if there is one thing we need more than another it is the grace of compassion. We want to have a spirit of compassion until we almost instinctively perceive the poignant need of those to whom we seek to minister. I have gone more than once in my ministry in Newcastle and got as near as I could to the place on which John Wesley stood when he preached his first sermon among the Northumbrians. I daresay you remember that part of his Journal where he says that he thinks he had never noticed such wickedness as he encountered in Newcastle-on-Tyne, such blasphemy, such cursing, such swearing even from the mouths of little children. I always read the Journal there with great and tender interest, because I wondered how John Wesley would think and feel in face of such a horrible state of things. You know he just adds in his Journal "Surely this place is ripe for the Master." I do not think you will be surprised to learn that preaching to those undone and diseased folk of Northumbria he took one of the tenderest texts he could find, and preached on "He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities." And then he tells us in the very next paragraph that when he had done, the people just clung to his clothes and to his hands. He had brought them to the Master and to the Cross. It is the same power to-day. Our God is willing to be powerful, willing to manifest an energy which shall compel men to stand, to wonder, and to pray, not only here but in all lands. It is the power of God unto salvation. If we are to retain, or even to gain, this spirit of compassion, we ourselves must live very near the Cross; and abiding by the Cross, it is possible for us to be bathed in the compassions that fail not; and with the message upon our lips of Christ, and Him crucified, we shall gather many souls unto God.