THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

*SERMONS*

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*WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR*

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X.

*TO KNOW AFTER THE SPIRIT.*

“Wherefore, henceforth know we no man after the flesh; yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we Him no more.”—2 Cor. v. 16.

I HAVE chosen as the subject of our meditation a saying of St. Paul which perhaps astonishes you as it astonished myself until I had caught its true meaning. I confess that formerly these words affected me painfully; they seemed to me, shall I say? as the expression of a wild spiritualism. What! here is an apostle who will no longer know Christ after the flesh! But is not this forgetting the Saviour’s humanity? Is it not slighting the deep and tender sympathy which the Son of Man inspires? Are we, then, to forget His incarnation, His feeble nature, His sufferings,—all, in a word, that attracts us, all that speaks to our heart, all that comforts us? Are we henceforth to have only a glorified Christ as the object of our contemplation? Are we to seek Him only with the Father, in that perfection, in that celestial splendour which dazzles rather than allures? . . . Such were my sorrowful reflections, and unable as I was to follow the apostle in his lofty flight, I joyfully returned to the Friend of Martha and Mary, to Him who wept upon the grave of Lazarus, to the Man of Sorrows, who, in the days of His flesh, bore our griefs and all the woes of our wretched humanity.

But light has dawned upon this mystery; I have understood that St. Paul’s intention was not to take any­thing from the Saviour’s humanity, and that these words which seemed to me so overpowering are, on the con­trary, full of instruction and consolation. That is what you also will acknowledge as you more fully take in their true significance.

To comprehend them we must refer to the admirable chapter from which they are drawn. Among all St. Paul’s epistles, none so strikingly set forth all the depth and riches of his heart as those he addressed to the Corinthians; and the chapter in question shows us whence flows that love which has produced the most devoted life, the most powerful apostleship which the Church has ever seen. If Paul loves thus, it is because the love of Christ constraineth him; that is why he, a stranger, has come to those Corinthians, that is why he has given them his time, his heart, his life. Paul therefore declares that he loves them, and that there mingles with this affection no carnal or interested motive; consequently, in his relations with the world, he pays no regard to aught that is earthly and transient; little cares he if men be poor or rich, learned or ignorant, Jews or Gentiles; in those to whom he speaks he sees souls to be saved and nothing more. He might boast, as do the false teachers who trouble his ministry, of having known the Christ in Judæa, of being His brother according to the flesh, . . . but to this he attaches but slight importance; he will know Christ only after the Spirit, that is, as his Saviour, and the Saviour of the Corinthians; that, for him, is the essential point, the true manner in which Jesus would be known.

Let us draw from this thought a lesson of primary importance.

Who among us has not envied the Jews the privilege of having had Christ with them in the days of His flesh, or His disciples the happiness of having heard Him, or Mary and Lazarus the prerogative of having received Him under their roof? It seems to us that had we but heard Him our hearts would have been more deeply stirred; that a mere look of His would have pacified our soul; that the very sound of His voice would have produced upon us an ineffaceable impression; that, had we but once been the witnesses of His miracles, we would nevermore have suffered doubt to enter our mind; and that at sight of His Cross our moved and subdued hearts would have been wholly given up to Him.

Alas! who can tell if all this would have been realised? Who can tell if, after having seen Jesus, our faith would have been stronger? Hear our Lord Himself. A woman cries out in His presence, “Blessed is the womb that bare Thee;” He answers, “Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it.” A man, breaking through the crowd, brings Him this message, “Thy mother and Thy brethren stand without desiring to see Thee;” He replies, “My mother and My brethren are those who hear the Word of God and do it.” His apostles in the upper room would retain Him; Jesus utters these words, “It is expedient for you that I go away.” The disciples on the way to Emmaus, having recognised Him, exclaim, “Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent;” Jesus disappears from their sight. Mary Magdalene in the garden would lay hold on Him; Jesus says unto her, “Touch Me not! for I am not yet ascended to My Father.” What do all these words signify, if not that it is above all by the soul, by faith, that Jesus would be known and possessed? Now, if this be the case, are we not immediately led to the consoling conclusion that neither time nor distance can prevent us from knowing Christ and feeling His presence, and that, in the nine­teenth century, we may hear Him, possess Him, rejoice in His light, as really as did those who beheld Him with their bodily eyes, who witnessed His miracles, and heard His voice? And is not all this most strikingly obvious? Is it not certain that the Church, so long as she has had Jesus in her midst, has been feeble, timid, undecided, and fearful, and that not till Christ left her did she receive the baptism from on high, out of which she came forth radiant with youth, faith, and triumphant hope? Men said of St. Paul, “His letters are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak and his speech con­temptible.” May not these words be applied in a certain measure to Jesus Christ? Did His discourses, at the time when He uttered them, produce the incomparable effect which they have had since he returned to the Father? Did Jesus in the days of His flesh ever con­vert the thousandth part of the souls which the preaching of His apostles have brought captive to the foot of His Cross? Is it not certain that Jesus Christ absent, separ­ated from us by eighteen centuries, lives in the world far more than He did when men saw Him with their eyes, touched Him with their hands, or heard Him with their ears? Is it not certain that now He enlightens more minds, subdues more hearts, awakens more consciences in a single day than He did during the whole of His three years’ ministry?

You ask to see Him, you envy the privilege of the disciples, you say: “Blessed is the apostle who leaned his head upon His bosom; blessed is the Samaritan woman who was permitted to give Him drink; blessed is the man of Cyrene who was compelled to bear His cross! I understand you, for the same thoughts have come to me also; but are you sure that if you had beheld Him you would have believed? Are you sure that His humiliation, His poverty, His abasement, would not have caused you to shrink from Him? Are you sure that, seeing the Sadducees, the scribes and the sceptics of that time, rail at His appearance, you would not have felt ashamed at being well-nigh alone to confess Him, and at being obliged to side with Galileans, publicans and sinners? Are you sure that, hearing the Pharisees ex­claim against His blasphemous pretensions, and invoke against Him the traditions of fifteen centuries and the venerated authority of Moses, you would not have been troubled by your scruples? Are you sure that, at sight of Jesus without a place to rest His head, exposed to ignominy and insult, abandoned of God, groaning in the dust of Gethsemane, turning towards heaven a look of bitter anguish and complaining of His Father’s desertion; are you sure, in fine, that at sight of the pallor of death stealing over His features, you would not have doubted? Ah! you are not better than the disciples, you have not more zeal than Peter, more courage than John. What would you have done had you known Christ after the flesh? Who knows but you too would have fled? Who knows but you too would have denied Him, you who, enlightened by eighteen centuries of Christianity, and having seen His victorious Cross triumph over the world and over your own heart, have perhaps denied Him, or, to say the least, have doubted of Him!

Granted, however, that you had remained faithful to Him, would you have understood the work for which He had come? Would you not have been attached to His earthly person rather than to His divine mission? Would you have loved Him after the Spirit, as He wishes to be loved? Would not your love for Him have been that purely human affection which He so strongly rebuked in Peter when this apostle endeavoured to turn Him from the painful path in which the Cross awaited Him; or which He condemned in Martha when it pre­vented her from choosing the good part and listening to His words? No; believe Jesus Christ, who said to His disciples: “It is expedient for you that I go away.” It was expedient that He should go in order that His disciples’ love should become what it was expected to be; in order that, instead of being chained down to earth, it should take wings and recognise the Son of God in the Son of Man. It was expedient that He should go, in order that those carnally-minded disciples should learn to believe in the eternal and invisible realities, in order that they should seek their Master’s reign no longer at Jerusalem, no longer in the earthly glory or in the visible triumphs of a crowned Messiah, but in that royalty of souls which the Cross was to render possible. It was necessary that they should be deprived of His sight, of His looks, of His words, in order that their faith might be strengthened and eventually victorious; thus is the child deprived of its mother’s milk that it may grow in strength and stature.

Now, brethren, we understand what St. Paul means when he declares that he no longer knows Christ after the flesh. It is not that he renounces His humanity, His abasement, His Cross, he who wishes to know nought but Christ crucified; but he means that the very humanity of Jesus must be viewed with the eyes of the Spirit, that it must be contemplated with the eyes of faith; that without this, it is indeed a touching but fruitless spectacle.

How many needful lessons might we not draw from this thought. What might we not say to those who still today are unwilling to know Jesus Christ otherwise than after the flesh? To give way to a purely human emotion at the remembrance of Jesus, to weep over the fate of that victim of human fanaticism, to look at the transitory side of His ministry, to honour His relics and His memory, to allow one’s senses and imagination alone to be stirred in presence of His Cross, is not that know­ing Him after the flesh? Ah! not thus is He honoured when He is known after the Spirit. At the foot of the Cross, it is not upon Him men weep, but upon them­selves. In His death it is not only His material suffer­ings they behold, but, above all, His prodigious abasement, His ineffable sacrifice. In the Son of Man it is the im­molated Son of God they adore; and when they love Him after this manner, they prove it by giving Him their hearts, by consecrating to Him their lives. They do not seek Him eighteen centuries back, on the roll of the historical martyrs; they do not erect a magnificent sepulchre to the dead Christ and then refuse the living Christ a place in their hearts; they call upon Him, they invoke Him as the Saviour who reigneth for ever and ever; they associate in His work, they rejoice at His triumph, they prepare His advent; then, and then only, can they say that they truly know Christ.

I find a second and more general lesson in my text. St. Paul tells us that it is not only Jesus Christ but all men that he wishes henceforth to know after the Spirit, and not after the flesh. This thought is one which I am anxious to impress upon your minds today.

But in order to this, let us once again recall to mind its true significance, for on this point we must prevent a serious and fatal mistake. This saying has sometimes been interpreted in a manner which has called forth the legitimate disapprobation of many. We have seen Christians who, under pretence of an imaginary perfec­tion, have ruthlessly snapped all the ties of flesh and blood, renounced family life, and scorned the natural affections as though they were mere human failings. For instance, we have seen sons and daughters, whose duty it had been to support an aged father or mother, leave them, and after having raised between them the impassable wall of monastic vows, say to them,—“I know you no more!” Spiritual heroism! some exclaim, magnificent triumph of the Spirit over the flesh! Is that what the gospel teaches? Is that what St. Paul wishes to insinuate?[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the days of Jesus Christ similar facts occurred. There were sons and daughters then who, to make them­selves agreeable to God, offered to Him what they should have consecrated to their father and mother. This gift they called *corban,* and St. Mark tells us that none had the right to lay claim to it. What was Christ’s opinion of this? He says of such a line of conduct that it is making void the law of God. And in the same spirit St. Paul declares that the Christian who neglects either father or mother is worse than an infidel. Now, brethren, to neglect them is not merely to deny them bread, but it is especially to deny them one’s heart. That is the teaching of the gospel. If, then, under pretence of renouncing the flesh, men violate or forget the natural laws, they have against them not only the voice of nature, but the voice of God Himself. Let none, therefore, come forward in the name of the gospel to justify these monstrous exaggerations of a chimerical perfection. St. Paul has already condemned them, and it is mere mockery to make them rest on his authority.

Many, doubtless, will here bring forward those nume­rous passages in which Jesus Christ so unsparingly con­demns all who, before they resolve on following Him, consult flesh and blood; they will remind me of these inexorable words: “Let the dead bury their dead,” or of these, which are stranger still: “If any one come to Me, and hate not his father, his mother, his wife, his children, his brothers, his sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” But what is the point in ques­tion in these last precepts? The point in question is to choose between duty and the delights of the heart, between the law of God and the sweet affections of home. Now, for the believer the choice cannot be doubtful; when God speaks he must obey; no affection, were it the closest and most sacred, should come between God and our souls. Here I venture to affirm that our conscience yields a full assent to the teaching of Christ. But how completely at variance is this instruction with the system which condemns the life of the heart and the joys of existence as evil in themselves, and which incites the Christian to a hard and unfeeling spirituality. No, let us say it boldly, the life of the heart, the natural affections, the body itself, all these things have in them nothing impure; all that is human can be sanctified and consecrated to God.

What then are we to understand by these words of the apostle, “Henceforth know we no man after the flesh”? Methinks their meaning is very plain. In every man there are two natures, the outward and the inward: the man according to the flesh is the outward being; the man according to the spirit is the immortal soul. In the eyes of the flesh you are poor or rich, writers or magistrates, merchants, artisans, or servants; in the eyes of the spirit you are children of God. Well, St. Paul declares that henceforth what he would see, what he would know in every man, is the spiritual and immortal being. Do you not see how new, how grand, how sublime is this thought? and do not these words of the apostle fill you with emotion?

To see in every man an immortal soul, that is what Christianity alone could teach us. Before Jesus Christ, what were the poor, the slaves, the publicans? Now, in the eyes of Jesus, the soul of the vilest of harlots weighs as much in the balance as that of a Cæsar. In the eyes of Jesus, earthly grandeur is nothing; not so much as a word does He condescend to give to it; but let Mary pour her box of perfume upon His feet, in token of her repentance, and He declares that this deed will never be forgotten, even to the end of time. In the eyes of Jesus, what are the artificial distinctions of this world? What He sees everywhere is sinners to be saved, to all He speaks the same language, to all He grants the same love, none appears to Him unworthy of His attention; and in many cases, it is upon the humblest and lowliest that He lavishes His most sublime instructions.

It is at Christ’s school, therefore, that Paul has learned to know men no longer according to appearance; there he has learned to see in such as Festus or Agrippa nought but lost souls, to whom, unmindful of crown or sceptre, he will preach the truth that saves. There he has learned to evangelise such as Aquila or Lydia with the same love as if the souls of the proconsul Sergius or the governor Publius were at stake; there he has learned that henceforth there is neither Greek nor barbarian, neither bond nor free, but that all are alike before God.

Thus it is we must know men, thus it is we must love them. The world has its distinctions of rank, learning, and fortune, which I, certainly, would not destroy; they are necessary; overthrow them today, and tomorrow they reappear, for they form part of the very conditions upon which modern society rests. Let us respect them, and beware lest, under pretence of Christianity, we im­pose upon superiorities of rank or fortune a level which each of us would unquestionably lower to meet his own individual condition. But pray, let us also learn to know men by their grand and immortal sides, to know them according to the spirit and not according to the flesh. As for me, I know of nothing more wretched than the manner in which a certain class of people judge of humanity. According to their idea, men are mere labels, representing this or that rank, title, or fortune. Between them is established a sort of conven­tional language which never reaches beyond the out­ward and superficial being. Apart from social life, apart from the relations between superior and inferior, master and servant, buyer and seller, they are nothing; all is artificial, substance as well as form, religion as well as morals; all is empty, delusive, and false. It would never enter the thoughts of most world-wise men to discover a soul beneath that social polish; their words will never reach the soul of those they meet, never will they call forth one of those sincere emotions which spring from the depths of the human being. Such is the life of thousands of our fellow-men. Ah! how I love to get out of that factitious and vitiated atmosphere, to breathe the vivify­ing air of the gospel; there what I see in my fellow-creature is, above all, a man; nay, more, a sister-soul. Give me the most ignorant and depraved being, one of those wretches to whom the world would never condescend to grant even one moment’s affection and sympathy; if, as I look upon him, I think of Jesus Christ, I am reminded that he is my brother by what in him is most profound and imperishable, by his soul; and how then could I refuse to respect him?

Oh, how grand would life be if we could see humanity as Jesus Christ saw it, if we could judge of men, not from the outward being, but from the inward! What discoveries would we not often make in natures which seem to us most ungrateful and uncommunicative! That is what Jesus did. He brought out the immortal soul, He discerned it in the depths of the lowest and most depraved life; and the soul responded to His call, for His voice had in it the mysterious attraction of love. What would an ordinary observer, or even a profound philosopher, have seen in that remote corner of Galilee where Jesus exercised His minis­try? An honest and ignorant population, and nothing more. He would have judged only according to the flesh. But Jesus has brought out from its midst some of the finest and grandest characters which the world has ever known, such men and women as St. Peter, Mary, and St. John. And why? Because He discovered these souls and loved them. Let us follow His example; let us say with the apostle, that from this time forth we will know our brethren by their soul, that is by their eternal nature.

You are a mother, for instance. How do you know your children? Alas! you may hitherto have seen in them mere idols, to which you have wholly given up your heart. Know them henceforth after the spirit, see in them souls with which God has entrusted you; you will love them all the more for this, and you will not incur the fearful responsibility of losing them, it may be, for the higher and eternal life.

Let the same thought permeate all your affections, and, as far as possible, all your relations with your fellow-men. You are Christians; oh! love no man without loving his soul; give not your heart to that which cannot be eternal; above the world of appearance see the world of reality, the only world which is acknow­ledged of God. Train your minds to discern in every man what God Himself discovers in him; then you will never be guilty either of cowardly complaisance for those who are above you, or of a contempt which is more cowardly still for those who are your inferiors; then, according to the expression of St. Peter, you will honour all men, because in each of them you will perceive a soul, that is, a sanctuary of the living God, a ruined or restored sanctuary, perhaps, but nevertheless a sanctuary, which it will be impossible to approach without a feeling of respect.

Brethren, all things are passing away and escaping our grasp; all that is but flesh is destined to decay and vanish. Everything warns us of the danger of giving our hearts to that which is mere appearance. Appear­ance, great God! will *that* save us? Ah! what, in the last day, will all the splendours of the flesh avail us? Of what service, I ask, will all the praise, approbation, and incense of men be to us then? God will judge us only according to the spirit. To how many of those who had been surrounded with earthly honours will He say: “Depart from Me, I know you not”? To how many of those who were despised upon earth will He address these blessed words: “Enter into My joy”? Since, therefore, this supreme judgment is to be the end of all, let us Christians henceforward estimate everything by the holy and fearful light of that great and awful day.

1. My intention, in this passage, is not to condemn monastic life in a summary manner and under all its forms. I merely wish to show how fantastical and irreligious is the contempt of natural affections. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)