

## ATHEISM AND THE HOUSE OF COMMONS.

A Sermon preached by R. W. Dale, of Birmingham, England.

Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?—JAMES ii., 19, 20.

In the course of the remarkable discussions in the House of Commons last week a member who spoke from the opposition benches warned the Government to consider how their action would be interpreted out of doors. The Prime Minister replied that these words raised great suspicion in his mind. "I am not willing," he said, "in a matter of personal and civil right to be arrested in my consideration of the case or to be guided in that consideration by being told to look and see how my actions will be interpreted out of doors. Our business is to look straight in the case, and then to trust to the generosity and justice of our countrymen as to the way in which they will regard our action."

Sooner or later this appeal of the Prime Minister to the generosity and justice of the English nation will have to be answered. There are many questions of great public interest for the settlement of which most of us may be willing to rely on the knowledge, the judgment, and the integrity of the leaders of the political party to which we belong. But by religious men the question now at issue can hardly be treated in that way. For us, its proportions are so immense, it is so intimately related to all that is most august and awful in the relations and destiny of mankind, that we are forced to examine it for ourselves, and to form our own judgement upon it.

If the late proceedings in the House involved no other considerations than those of constitutional policy—the rights of the electors of Northampton, the limits of the duty of the House in relation to the imposition of the oath of allegiance, the extent of the relief which was granted by the Statute permitting an affirmation to take the place of an oath,—I should be satisfied with discussing the whole subject elsewhere. It is not my custom to preach on current political controversies. There is a certain heat of passion almost always created by political discussions which I am unwilling to kindle within these walls, when we have met for the worship of God. I have opportunities elsewhere and at other times to illustrate the application of the law of righteousness to national legislation and policy. But the controversy now agitating the country not only involves constitutional principles of the first magnitude, it raises questions which affect the religious life both of individual men and the whole nation. It has an exceptional solemnity and grandeur.

Many philosophers have regarded the existence of God as a metaphysical hypothesis intended to account for the order of the universe. The argument from Design, which does not seem to me to be at all impaired, but, if possible, greatly strengthened by the theory of Evolution, makes large concessions to that conception of Faith. And there can be no doubt that when the existence of God is once recognised, the whole universe becomes a perpetual revelation of His eternal power and Godhead; it contributes to confirm our faith in the divine existence, and to deepen our reverence for the divine greatness. We travel far to see the paintings of famous artists, and the marbles to which great sculptors have given imperishable majesty and beauty. When we see them we are sometimes conscious of a certain awe at being in the presence of the canvas or the stone which was touched and handled by the illustrious dead, and which received the glorious impression and inspiration of their genius. But we are *always* in the presence of God. The sun and the stars, the winds and the clouds, are His: and the air we breathe, and the earth on which we live. We ourselves are the creations of His power—hands and feet, muscles, brain and nerves—our eyes, and the faculty of vision—our ears, and the faculty of hearing—memory, imagination, fancy, judgment—our powers of love and reverence, of trust and gratitude. It is He that hath made us and not we ourselves. The transcendent mystery is always about us: we live and move and have our being in God. And so, when God is known, there is no place which is not consecrated by the manifestations of His power; there is no time in which the eternal voices that speak to us of Him are silent.

But the ultimate root of our faith in God is more closely and vitally related to the moral than to the material universe—to the conscience than to the understanding. The material universe confirms our faith, but seldom, if ever, originates it. There is a great passage in Bishop Butler which I have often quoted before, but which can never be quoted too often. After describing the various passions of human nature he says, "But there is a superior principle of reflection or conscience in every man which distinguishes between the internal principles of his heart, as well as his external actions: which passes judgment upon himself and them; pronounces determinately some actions to be in themselves just, right, and good; others to be in themselves evil, wrong, unjust: which, without being consulted, without being advised with, magisterially exerts itself and approves or condemns him, the doer of them, accordingly; and which, if not forcibly stopped, naturally and always of course goes on to anticipate a higher and more effectual sentence, which shall hereafter second and affirm its own."

It is in this anticipation of "a higher and more effectual sentence which shall hereafter second and affirm" the approbation and the censures of the

conscience, that I find the strong support, if not the natural origin, of our faith in the living God.\* The God to whose authority and active vindication of righteousness conscience bears testimony, is infinitely more than a "metaphysical hypothesis" invented for the explanation of the origin of the universe. He is infinitely more than the great First Cause, whose existence and activity are necessary to account for the earliest movements of that immense procession of material, intellectual, and moral phenomena, in whose latest ranks we have somehow found our place. He is the august King whose laws we must obey, and the awful Judge from whose sentence there is no appeal. These attributes of moral supremacy invest Him with a greatness and a glory of which the majesty and splendor of the universe are but inadequate symbols.

"Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well." The faith is simple and elementary, but it involves immeasurable consequences. If the faith is real, it separates you by all the distance between earth and heaven from those who believe not.

From the moment the tremendous discovery is made, duty to God takes precedence of all other duty. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength; this is the first and great commandment." The love which the commandment requires is no faint, evanescent, ineffectual sentiment; it is a sovereign principle, an energetic passion. We must love God with all that fervour of enthusiasm which is inspired by the perfect ideal of righteousness and goodness; for in Him—in His personal life and eternal activity—that ideal is gloriously fulfilled. He is the ally, the inspiration, and the strength of righteousness in all His creatures. With His infinite power and infinite wisdom He is striving to secure the triumph of righteousness in this world and in whatever other worlds righteousness is possible. The noble indignation and vehemence with which we struggle against moral evil in ourselves and in other men should add to the depth and passion of our love for Him, and He is on our side in the struggle—the great Comrade as well as Commander of all who are engaged in that supreme conflict which is the source of the tragedy and the glory of the history of mankind. Our love for Him should be increased by His tenderness for our infirmity and His forbearance with our waywardness. If I add to all the other revelations of the life of God, the revelation of His infinite mercy and self-sacrifice which is made to us in Christ, there are no measures to the gratitude and the wonder, the rapture and the hope which should intensify our devotion to Him.

Compared with these moral reasons for the affection which God should inspire in human hearts, the reasons for loving Him which we find in Creation seem unexciting and are of inferior dignity, and yet even these are, in themselves, great and wonderful. Life itself is His free gift. The world which is our home was made by Him. "He opens His hand and satisfies the wants of every living thing." It was He who in His delight in our happiness and the dignity of our pursuits and pleasures, made us susceptible to beauty, and surrounded us with innumerable forms of loveliness and grandeur; gave us all our intellectual powers and surrounded us with whatever could stimulate these powers into activity and could afford to genius the materials of its splendid triumphs.

You may remind me of the disorders and confusions of the universe, of the pain and anguish suffered by living creatures that are incapable of committing any moral offence, of the great catastrophes—the famines, the wars, the fierce and terrible diseases—which inflict on the just and on the unjust indiscriminating misery; of the appalling moral inheritance to which immense numbers of men are born and from which it seems impossible for them to escape; the vice which is in their blood; the cruelty, the sensuality, the violence which surround them from their very childhood; the foul superstitions, the corrupt ideas of morality by which the whole development of their higher life is impaired and you may ask me whether in presence of these things the divine claim on human love and devotion is not checked. God knows how these vast and portentous mysteries sometimes oppress the faith of those who are most loyal to Him. But we know Him too well for even these tremendous difficulties to destroy our confidence either in His righteousness or in His goodness; and when the difficulties are unable to overwhelm our faith, they augment instead of lessening our love. For our faith in the divine righteousness and goodness remaining, these disorders and evils appear to us to be signs of some appalling disturbance of the divine order, some revolt having its origin in unknown worlds and under unknown conditions, against the divine authority. They seem to us the signs that the divine purposes have been temporarily baffled and thwarted; and while we are secure in our confidence that the ultimate victory will be with God, we think we see Him in a conflict with evil, extending far beyond the limits of the human race; and if I may say it without irreverence there arises in our hearts a passion of sympathy with Him, because of the obstacles which He has to overcome, and this adds a new energy and tenderness to our love.

Yes; believing in God, our duty to Him takes precedence of all other duty; and, further, this Faith adds a new sanction to all morality. I agree with those who regard Atheism as destructive of the strongest guarantees and defences of human virtue; destructive, I say, of the *strongest guarantees and*

\* This argument is admirably illustrated in Mr. Wace's recent Bampton Lecture on *The Foundations of Faith*.