

A GOSPEL FOR THE DAY.

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Alfred J. Bray.

I indicated in a previous sermon, when speaking of the Gospel of *laissez faire*, which is so popular in these days, that I should have something to say on the positive side this evening. My criticism was, I suppose, purely destructive, and that is but to utter the thoughts and feelings of men now and for a generation past. They feel, what they do not often say, that theology and the preaching of it are out of date; they have ceased to believe in what is merely vague; they no longer care to spend their mental energies and time in trying to solve the insoluble, and to analyze that which is too subtle for any analysis, and to use that which is too delicate for the rough-and-tumble life they have to live on the earth. Two men in England, both in their way representative men, have lately given utterance to their impressions concerning the ministry of the day. Earl Carnarvon discoursed on the subject of preaching, and expressed the opinion that sermons are almost entirely without result, and that because preachers are below the standard of their work in ability and earnestness, and that while people still like and must have sermons, they regulate their lives upon the assumption that what the preacher says will not come to pass in the matter of rewards and punishments. A greater than the Earl of Carnarvon (John Bright) has also been giving his opinion as to the general utility of the Christian ministry. And Mr. Bright ventured to say, in effect at least, that of no class of men is it so true as of Christian ministers that there are no appreciable results of their labours. He spoke neither in scorn nor in anger—hardly in a way of criticism—but simply gave a general impression received no doubt through many years of close and careful, and I am sure, kindly observation. What he said, a multitude of others think. Men, earnest, practical men, hold the clerical profession in respect just because it is an ancient and venerable institution—one that they believe is needful to society in general, and to their wives and children in particular; useful in fact as a part of that great whole we call society and the nation. But, as I said last Sunday night, they do not find with us any real substance of life—any set of authoritative rules co-extensive with wrong conduct; they do not find a sufficient and saving inspiration in all the wide range of our teachings. In other words, we have a gospel of history, and a gospel of prophecy—theories about things which we declare unknowable—conclusions which have no premises, and premises which have no conclusions—a gospel of cloudland and mystery, but no gospel for life here and now to guide men, and bless them, and give them triumph in the life they live in the hot arenas of the world. We have succeeded in persuading them that they can do nothing but lie low and wait for developments. They accept the preaching that “there is a Providence which shapes our ends rough hew them as we may.”

And all this has been brought about by our abstract way of preaching. I am prepared to accept John Bright's criticisms on the ministry, for I believe it to be fair and just. No class of men work for such small results, speaking of what may be seen, as we. For the most part we care more for creeds and forms than for men's souls. At any rate, the stand we take is that of men set for the defence of certain opinions—we look on men from our place in the creeds, rather than look on creeds from our place among men. No wonder that sermons are poor. It is hard, depressing work to talk in the ears of dull uninterested people who appear to listen as a matter of good breeding. Our sermons attract less attention than the leaders in a daily newspaper, which is reducing it to the lowest modicum of interested intelligence. There is a little of what is practical in newspaper leaders, because they deal with the affairs of to-day, but sermons lack even that merit. Said a lady to me the other day: “I went to hear a sermon on the battle of life—thinking I could hear something about the kind of life we have to live here in society, and the kind of life we might and ought to live, but we were told about the fighting good old Joshua did when Israel was conquering Canaan.” She knew that bit of history and took small interest in it then; she would rather have heard something about matters as they stand between the nations of Europe or the prospects of trade on this continent.

I do not say that this gospel of *laissez aller* is one that is altogether good for men, but I do say that we should take blame to ourselves for having brought about a state of things which naturally resulted in this; and that now we ought to recognize the grim fact and try how best we can meet it. We have dogmatized so much, and declaimed so loudly, and so persistently on the supernatural—we have had such curiously wrought abstract theories, that religion in the mind of many, if not of most, is a mere abstraction or at best a supernaturalism for the fancy to brood upon, and speculate with, and we cull from it strange fantastic forms to please itself. I hope no one will accuse me of a lack of faith in the supernatural, for with every fibre of my mental and moral nature I abhor materialism. I have a profound reverence and passionate faith in spiritual worlds, and forces and persons; but I am certain that in our preaching and teaching we have neglected the practical life of the earth, and thus have broken the living connection between what is called the spirit world and the world of work and care, and pain and pity.

If you will consult history, and your own experience, you will find that a

mere passive trust in the supernatural has never been fruitful of great results. Providence has been on the side of the big battalions and great pious Cromwell, who was a Calvinist to the care of his intellect, said to his men “trust in God, and keep your powder dry”—and that is a popular sentiment, our theology to the contrary notwithstanding. Men profess to cast themselves on the Lord, but none the less do they fight against want and calamity as if they alone were the arbiters of their own fate. Those who talk most of the Providence which will take care of the man on the morrow are generally the most eager to make provision for times of storm. Those who profess to live by faith are just those who work hardest or beg hardest. Their lives belie their lips constantly.

And that I think is inevitable—men are compelled to be practical—to carry out the laws of heaven and earth and being in spite of themselves. Nature, which is of God, is mightier than theology, which is of man. Life asserts itself and battles ever against corrupting influences. It is half a heresy perhaps, but as I believe a true statement, to say that Christianity is not based upon the miraculous and that supernaturalism is not its strongest pillar. We have long been contending that it is so. If men demanded proof of our Christian dogmas we at once fell back upon miracles—if they said “We do not understand,” they got for answer, “Of course you do not—how could you?—that is miraculous—you cannot comprehend the supernatural.” If they said “We want more proof that these stupendous assertions are truth,” we pointed again to the record of miracles wrought in the olden time. It is grandly true that we have authenticated statements as to mighty miracles which were done in the name of God. I do not deny miracles either as to possibility or actuality of them—he is unwise and foolhardy who will deny them—but miracles are not religion—they are not Christianity—they are at best only collateral evidences of the power and truth of Him who wrought them. To reverse the expression I would go further and say that religion is not based upon the supernatural, and miracles are not the mightiest things we can use in evidence before men. Jesus Christ never stood forth before the people and said, “there is something in me—something about me which you cannot understand, therefore you must believe in me—or, these are works done by me which you cannot trace to their source, therefore I demand your faith.” It is true that He more than once pointed to those works as evidencing the divinity of his character and mission—but he was dealing with hard-headed, hard-hearted argumentative Pharisees—and then what He said was, “These are they which testify of me.” They were only testimonies. To enquiring John the Baptist He sent word that by Him the blind received sight, the deaf heard, the lame walked, and the dead were raised to life, but He never used such arguments to the multitude as the main facts of the religion he had brought to ennoble and sanctify man's life. He said, “these works that I have done bear witness of me. Not they, but I, am the way, the truth and the life. A man cometh unto the Father not by them, but by me.” Christ never sought to bear down the people's reason and judgment by lofty assumptions of supernaturalism—He never swept their puzzles out of the way by merely dogmatic assertions—He did not appeal to men's sense of mystery at all—He made ordinary life divine—made common-place work sublime and spoke from His mind into the minds of the people; from His heart into their heart—from His experience to theirs, and they understood him, and believed. They understood Him and the appeal was to their eyes, and ears, and reason and affections.

That was vastly different from what they had known before. Judaism had become a mere mysticism, with outward forms of dullest and dearest kind. It was the subject of cloistered contemplation, of hurried debate, of logical disquisitions in the Temple and in the Synagogue, it inspired to the practice of a mere semblance, it produced long and sham prayers in the streets, ostentatious and sham giving, pretentious and sham dress, and, nothing more. A mere abstraction could produce nothing more. Only life can give life, unreality can bring into the world nothing but show. Jesus Christ put Himself into violent antagonism with that. He gave them no new philosophy, a mere reaching-up of the human intellect through Himself to the attainment of a little higher truth and a little more truth than had been mastered before, but He unsealed the treasury of the skies, caused an overflow into time of the Infinite light and grace to illumine and regenerate the world. He stood up before the Church, with its manifold abstract theories, and its fantastic dreams, and its unreality, and dull conventionalism, and said, “Jesus came that they might have LIFE, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

We have fallen into precisely the same condition. Judaism had nothing for the ordinary life of men; it had no power to inspire great thoughts; to harmonise and organise mental and moral forces; it had nothing to say to a youthful science, and a mature art; it had no word for the poor but a curse, and a fast day for the common crowd. The Apostle Paul looked the state of things in the face, examined it, and felt what was needed. The Jews had made of religion a mystery, to be attested and known only by a miracle, the Greeks demanded an appeal, and a satisfaction for the reason. Spurning the popular demand for a sign on the one hand and for wisdom on the other, he said, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ—for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.” The Gospel of Christ? What did he mean? *Evangelists of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, with annotations and*