

PLOUGH WORK Rev. J. A. JOWETT, M.A., D.D.,

"No man having put his hand to the Plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God."—LUKE ix. 62.

THESE words were spoken to a man whom John Bunyan would have described as "Mr. Facing-both-ways." He had been suddenly stirred to an impulse of discipleship, but he half strangled the impulse at its birth. "Lord, I will follow Thee, but let me first go bid them farewell which are at home at my house." There was swift response, succeeded by a swift recoil. There was an apparent surrender to a great cause, and then the gift turned back upon itself. There was a seeming advance which was hindered immediately by promptings of retreat. The discipleship was not wholehearted. There was a cool element of timidity and calculating prudence which proved that the man's enlistment in the Master's company was not passionate and absolute. It was discipleship checked by a spirit of loitering and regret. And when the Master saw the backward gaze in the midst of an apparently forward act, He said: "No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God."

But I am concerned, not so much with the character of this particular man, whose generous impulses were chilled with compromise almost as soon as they were born. I am rather concerned with the strenuous image which the Master uses to express the nature of Christian service. What is this service like? When Jesus of Nazareth thinks of a man enlisting in the life and labours of His kingdom, He also thinks of a man laying hold of a plough and setting its share to a hard field and turning up the stubborn soil as the preparatory work of a golden harvest. He does not think of a husbandman attending the vines. He does not think of a reaper taking a sickle to gather the ripened corn. He thinks of ploughing which is the hardest and the heaviest work of the farmer's year. The service of the kingdom is first of all plough work, and plough work in sullen and obstructing fields. Christ Jesus sees the soil crowded with old-established roots, running here and there, crossing and re-crossing, weaving a matted hostile net which has almost the consistency of wire. And these obstructions have to be cut and broken by the resolute share. The heavy mass has to be overturned: it has to be vitalized by the cleansing light and air. That is the beginning of things. The disturbed and broken clod is the first condition of the waving grain. And to send the ploughshare through these obstacles is tremendous labour, and yet it is this sort of exacting toil which comes

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to strikes. Labour's tendency is constantly to desert its own government. All the people cannot at any one time be an executive. Government must be by representation. Vested authority reacts upon those who will that authority represents and limits inevitably the political and social freedom of individuals in the interest of the whole community. Organized community life is only possible through voluntary submission to the restraints which constitutional authority must impose. The only alternative is a reversion to barbarism, when every man will be obliged to defend himself and his tribe or family by his own hand.

NO ABSOLUTE FREEDOM ON EARTH.

The absolute liberty which the soul desires cannot be obtained here, at least not so long as the power of sin holds such sway in human affairs. The long-looked-for millenium may usher in that happy day. The day when Christ reigns absolutely in our lives will be the day of full emancipation. We seem to be farther away from it than ever in these times, when "the anarchy of speculative thought is almost a harmony as compared with the chaos of moral ideals." In our talk about freedom, we must never fail to distinguish between that which the soul desires by way of emancipation from external restraints which hamper its highest attainment, and the kind of freedom which is but a false re-echo of that through the channels of our lower nature, and seeks the freedom of license for the purpose of self-indulgence. "As free and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness; but as the servants of God."

to the mind of Jesus whenever He thinks of vital service in the Kingdom of God. He thinks of a man putting his hand to the plough.

Now what has experience to say about this teaching? Does it disprove it, or does it confirm it? How is it in any field in human life to which a man brings a revolutionary ploughshare? Do not history and biography bear unceasing witness that whenever a man lays his hand upon some revolutionary ploughshare in any field of human life, he finds his progress hindered by bigotries, by prejudices, by deep-rooted selfish interests, by wirelike and almost impregnable traditions? Let us glance back upon one or two of these fields in order that we may get the "feel" of the heavy business as we watch a ploughman at work.

Take the medical field. How has it always been with daring men in the medical field? Some alert and venturesome ploughman sets his ploughshare to run through the field of medical theory and practice in a way that goes sharply athwart all accepted doctrine and tradition. Perhaps it is Sir James Simpson and his great discoveries in the domain of anæsthetics! Or perhaps it is Lord Lister with his experimental research in the realm of antiseptics. Was their ploughing a light pastime or was it heavy work? Did the ploughman encounter any obstacles? Were there any roots of prejudice in the soil, any incredulity, any harsh suspicions, any professional jealousy and antagonisms? Read the life stories of either of these men and you will find that the ploughing was tremendous work. The soil was alive with hostilities.

Or what about the field of art? There was a certain ploughman named John Ruskin, and at the age of twenty-four he set his shining share to plough up the broad fields of his common judgment. His work on "Modern Painters" cut right through modes and standards of artistic criticism. Traditional theories were overturned. Was it easy work for the ploughman? Did the ploughman encounter any opposition, or did his share slide along as though it were moving through clean and virgin soil? Read his life, or read the prefaces to the succeeding editions of his great work, and you will find that his share was opposed by the toughest prejudices, and by stubborn ignorance, and by a cynicism which affected a sort of contemptuous indifference. It was heavy work for the ploughman.

Or what about the ecclesiastical fields? What sort of experience has any venturesome ploughman in that venerable field? As a matter of fact he finds every inch of the field thickly massed with rooted traditions. Let any man set his ploughshare to overturn some accepted ecclesiastical practice. Let him begin, say, with a sort of mild suggestion that we should have interchange of pulpits between the episcopal and non-episcopal Churches, and his bright ploughshare has no sooner begun to move than he discovers that this particular field is the favourite home of almost invincible prejudice and suspicion. He speedily finds that every ecclesiastical ordinance, and every established practice, and every form of rooted bigotry oppose his progress at every inch of the way. It is hard ploughing in the ecclesiastical field! And it demands some very stalwart and determined ploughmen if the field is to be furrowed for richer and more commanding harvests. All these examples may help us to enter more deeply into our Saviour's words and to get the "feel" of the ploughman's work when he seeks to upturn the fields of immemorial usage and tradition.

But now let us think of still more difficult fields. Here is a great ploughman, one of the greatest ploughmen who ever served in the field of the kingdom. His name is Paul. He has had a revolutionary experience in his own soul, and the experience has made him the apostle of revolution. On the way to Damascus he met his Lord, and in meeting his Lord he found a new life, and a new vision, and a new field, and a new commission, and a new ploughshare. And he took his gospel ploughshare to fields whose soil was pre-occupied with every kind of stubborn and unfavourable growth. It was his holy business to overturn the soil and to expose its depths to the glorious light and air of a new day. Think of him taking his share to the field of Jerusalem, the field where the traditions of men were knotted together in the soil of common life like matted

complicated roots which occupied every inch of the ground. And it was his business to cut a furrow. What massed antagonisms he encountered! What wiry bigotry! What stubborn resentments! There never seemed to be a moment when the plough slipped sweetly through the receptive ground. Everywhere the ploughman met obstruction. Indeed, everywhere he went, in Asia Minor, or in Greece, he was ploughing heavy land. But the ploughman stuck to his plough and there was no looking back.

Think of the supreme Ploughman, the one with whom no other ploughman can be compared. Think of the Master Himself. He was always setting His ploughshare to thickly rooted fields. When did His share move smoothly and easily as though the soft, crumbling soil was waiting to be upturned to the light and air of His own new day? Everywhere you feel that His share is caught and hindered by conventional usage and tradition. Everywhere He encountered hidden roots of obstruction. They were like barbed wire in the path of the plough. If I read you a few familiar sentences you will recall the sort of antagonism amid which He toiled: "And they watched Him"; "He eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners"; "He is gone to be guest with a man who is a sinner"; "This man blasphemeth"; "He hath a devil and is mad"; "Then took they up stone to cast at Him"; "They consulted how they might put Him to death"; "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" That was the sort of antagonism which beset this ploughman, whose one purpose in all His ploughing was to change the desert into a garden, and to make the wilderness blossom as a rose. What a field for a ploughman! And what a reception for the ploughman! When He came among us there was "No room for Him in the inn." And thirty-three years later He was crucified at Calvary. But this ploughman, having put His hand to the plough, never looked back! At the end of the hard day He was able to say: "I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do."

Well, this revolutionary ploughshare of the Lord is in our hands to-day. He calls upon us to take it to the stubborn field where there is a congestion of hard obstacles, and we are to overturn it in His sacred name. Our commission is the same as was laid upon Jeremiah, with this mighty difference, that we use the incomparable share of Christ's Gospel, the sharp, shining share of His gracious holy Word. The prophet Jeremiah was called by God "to pluck up, to break down, to destroy, to overthrow, to build, and to plant." And that, too, is our commission, and we are to do it with the radiant splendour of the unsearchable riches of Christ.

We are Christ's ploughmen. What is our labour? What is our field? It is our holy work and privilege to plough up the life fields of nations not our own. Our field is larger than our native land. "The field is the world." "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." "Go ye into all the world." And, therefore, we are to take our ploughshare to fields where life is lived in unfamiliar ways. Some parts of this wider field are comparatively easy. The soil is not crowded with hoary traditions. It yields to the touch of the plough. There are no stiff historic precedents. There is scarcely any history at all. It is almost a virgin soil. That is pre-eminently so in Africa. I am thinking more especially of Western Africa, and the broad belt of the Soudan. In the Cameroons there is just now an extraordinary upturning of the life of the people. The ploughshare just slips through the field. There is no obstruction. Entire communities are turning to the Lord. There are Communion services which are attended by three or four thousand people, and everywhere the coming of the Gospel meets with eager and immediate response. I say the ploughshare glides through the yielding field.

It is infinitely different when the ploughman puts his plough to the field in India, or China, or Japan. There the field is pre-occupied. The roots of ages are in the soil. In the soil there are old faiths, old creeds, and old philosophies. There are reverences, and bigotries, and traditions with the strength of centuries in their veins. And the work of the ploughman is to overturn these crowded fields to the light and glory of Christ. And oh! what ploughmen it needs to do it! Men who, when they have got their hands upon the plough, will not relax their hold until they drop in the furrow which, by God's grace, they have been able to cut! And what heroic ploughmen we have had in these difficult fields! I think of James Gilmour putting his single plough upon the field of Mongolia, and all alone, that one missionary in that vast country, beginning to cut his furrow for the Lord! Year by year he kept his hands upon the plough, but it moved with incredible slowness amid the deadly obstructions

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