

The Vision of God.

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Everybody knew that Christ had to come with good tidings about the kingdom, because everybody was looking for that kingdom. But what kind of a kingdom? In the mind of the Jew of that day what kind of a kingdom was the Kingdom of God about which everybody was speaking? As you know the Roman eagles were set up in Israel; the Roman soldiers were tramping Jewish patriotism under foot, and the Jewish people hated with a bitter hatred, those who had dragged their religion and patriotism in the dust. They were looking for a Messiah who should do the same like Maccabees did when he swept the Roman eagle out, set up the Israelitish kingdom, nay more, grasping the scepter of the Caesars, he wielded it over imperial Rome and ancient Israel. That was the spirit of the kingdom they were looking for. Yet many people have had the same dream since that day. Savonarola had it, and for a time it seemed he had brought it about in Florence; You know how that kingdom flourished. Before very long the apostle thereof had been done to death at the stake in Florence by the people he came to a rise. So it has almost always been with the prophets. Our Puritan fathers had that dream. They could not realize it in England, so some of them came here, and the very name of your church perpetuates the history of that time. It was a magnificent failure, and it is only coming to its triumph now.

The Kingdom of God is a thing that comes slowly. Men have hoped for it through the long centuries. Some day, some day we shall see it when "the earth is filled with knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." The advent of Jesus was prepared for by the apostle in the wilderness. "Is he the one, then, who shall restore the Kingdom of God in Israel?" said Peter and James and John. "Now," said they, "we shall hear about the kingdom." How did Jesus begin to teach them? Observe the slight discrepancy between Matthew and Luke. This gives me a clue to the way the Master taught on the mountain top. You see that Matthew began: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke's version is: "Blessed are ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Which is right? Which is wrong? Both are right; neither wrong; and it is certain that Jesus said both. Each beatitude was a lesson for the day. Perhaps Jesus began this way: "You are expecting to hear about the kingdom. Well, now, Peter, how do you suppose that the kingdom will come?" Peter would say: "We have all got to enlist. We will follow you. Lift up the old banner of Israel and see how many will come to your side."

"What sort of people will I want first, Peter?" "First, you must call in the pharisees. They are the natural leaders of Israel; they are our religious authority; they are the men who pull the first stroke. Let us call them and we shall take our places behind them. Such are the recruits of the kingdom." The Master would say: "Now listen, Peter, blessed are the poor men—yourselves, for yours is the kingdom of God." There would be a dead silence, I will be bound, because, however things are in America, it is a little bit different in the old world. Over our way the poor man does not reckon himself to be of much account when it comes to founding kingdoms. The Master would go on: "You get your living on the sea, you fishermen who draw nets in the night; you one people whom nobody wants or counts when anything big is to be done. Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God, if you only know it." Again there would be silence, and the Master would continue: "There is the chance for the poor man at all. A poor man has to keep quiet in the presence of his betters; he has to take what another man says; he has to give place to the rich man. The spirit natural to a poor man he may keep, or he may not. Some poor men don't, and as the spirit natural to the rich man is not that one, but blessed is that man, whether poor or rich, who can keep the spirit of a poor man."

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Now, look for a moment at the first part: Matthew sat with his pencil and waited for the second. He wrote down: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God." That would do for one day. Another day the Master said: "Peter, John, would you like to see the God to whom we have together prayed? Would you like to see him?" Impossible! would be the reply. "Clouds and darkness are round about Jehovah; there is danger on Mount Sinai; thunder and lightning guard the throne of God. No man hath seen God at any time. To look upon God? Ah, that would be to die! Laid outdone when I have seen the Lord of Hosts." Then the Master would say: "Stay a little. There are more ways than one of seeing a thing. I can give you a vision of God. Blessed are the pure in heart who are seeking the kingdom, for they shall see the King." I venture to say, my friends, that none of those simple men understood more than just a little of what the Master meant. They did not alter their minds nor outlook upon the kingdom in the least. They followed Him for a year and a half, maybe. How much longer I do not know—and still they did not see what he meant by the kingdom and the vision. That was given to the poor in heart. And at last they come to the "upper room," and there they gathered round about Him. They did not know it, but it was to say good-bye before the tragedy of Cal-

vary, the Central event in the world's history. Jesus spoke about going away, and they felt, for the first time, how much they were going to lose, supposing the Master was not to be the Messiah after all. Supposing Jesus went away. They did not want Him to go. They had learned to love Him, and I am sure you will agree with me when I say, although they were not aware of it, they had never been so near to God before as when they were sitting at the feet of Jesus. They never made any creed about it, but somehow they felt that they had come into contact with the Father as they had never done before. Jesus was going, and at the terrible news their hearts sank. "I shall show you of the Father," "Lord show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied," said one of them. "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not seen the Father? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father," said Jesus. Even then they did not get behind the mystical veil as you and I are getting behind it now as I speak. We do not want in a way to crush all God into the figure of the human Jesus, and say: "There, that is all there is and all there is to be." We do not mean that, and Jesus did not mean that. This is all He meant, and it is true: If God be like Jesus it is well for men. We may have many things to learn concerning the purposes of God after we have looked upon the face of Christ, but we have nothing more to learn about Himself—He will be the same to all eternity. We cannot explain in human language what we mean when we say: Jesus is God; but, believe me, you will never learn any more about the love of God to all eternity than you know when you have really got a grasp of what is meant by the love of Christ. The thought that Jesus is the Father at once is more to me than any metaphysical proposition. He could guarantee God. "In the bosom of the Father he hath declared Him." There is the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. These men felt all this; it had not become a creed, but it was already an experience; and when my second text was spoken they were nearer to what we know as a vision of God than they had ever been before. This is only exordium. I want to apply it.

We are just in the position of these simple men, and are seeking, as they sought, for the vision of God. As Dr. Hillis said, quoting someone else, men are incurably religious. Yes, often when they seem not to be. Sometimes men will not listen to a preacher because they feel that he knows no more than they do about that mysterious something which hides His face behind the clouds. I do not believe there is a man who would not this morning, if he could, have a vision of the Most High; and if he could, without trouble and sorrow and sacrifice, he would be among the great company who stand adoring round the throne of God. I believe there is something in us that protests for God. As Augustine said: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are not at rest until they find rest in Thee." This is the mood in which we find ourselves. How many of us have a vision of God? Have you, have you? No; there is very little in our outward life to remind us of God at all. In the struggle for the dollar we cannot see much of God. In America politics sometimes make you wonder if He has taken His hand off the helm. Then it may take a cataclysm—it may be civil war—to deepen within you all that you should have thought of before. God is, in our most deep and solemn moments we feel it, and we have and can give no companion but Him; and when we seek Him we just as Peter and John did—turn to Christ craving. We feel a need somehow, and if there is a way unto God for us, if the curtain could ever be drawn aside, the way must be Jesus, it will be His hand that draws aside the curtain that veils the sun from the unseem. The best of humanity have felt it—the noblest that England and America have produced have felt it that the Christ has given us God. He is Jesus' God that we worship, and I confess I never say my prayers to the Father without somehow looking into the face of the Son. Jesus gives me all I want of God. If there is a craving not yet satisfied, it will be by and by; we shall see and know more on the other side than we were privileged to see here.

Dr. Hillis and a few friends were talking about Mr. Beecher, and one of them told me this story, which is probably familiar to you, but it struck home to me for the first time. It was given on the authority of Major Pond. Not long before his death Mr. Beecher and Major Pond were together and Beecher, leaning forward, without introduction said, with tears in his eyes: "Pond, think of it, only think of it, soon I shall see Jesus!" That was spoken in the nineteenth century. Let me remind you, of something which was written in the twelfth; Beecher might have said it, but it was not Beecher; it was St. Bernard:

Jesus the very thought of Thee,
With sweetness fills my breast,
But sweeter far Thy face to see
And in Thy presence rest.

"Canst thou by searching find out God?" No. But unto the babes He is revealed. You can be simple sometimes in a time of trouble. It is wonderful how we strip the trappings off and our real self appears when we are bowed down. Sometimes a man discovers himself in the hour of darkness: He never knew what he was until that season came. That is God's chance. Whenever a man is low down, with the cross on top of him, that is the time to feel the pressure of God's hand; and somehow we all turn

wistfully to Jesus where there is any question of a broken heart. He is the Comforter, the Saviour; and best of all, He is a Saviour who can save, and a Comforter who can comfort, for He sits up there on the throne of the Universe, Lord over all. The other day I met with some wonderful testimony concerning this very truth,

I am not attempting to prove it; I am only holding it up. A young man who is at work in London told me this concerning his life in America and England. He is the son of a British general, born to high estates himself and was an officer in the British army. His commission was taken from him for bad conduct and he was exiled at home. He came to this country, went from bad to worse and sank lower and lower, until at last he became a common soldier—shall I say a private soldier?—in your army when it disposed of Spanish pretensions a little south of here. Perhaps I have not stated that properly. He went from bad to worse, but there was a gleam of something better when he enlisted. After the war he left the army and went on his own resources. He said there was scarcely any sin he did not commit—sins of the flesh, I mean. We are harder on those, somehow, than we are on sins of a different kind. If a man makes a pile he can sin with impunity, but if a man has little to spend and gives away his constitution, we dance on him. In a public house brawl he was brought to book. They threatened to kill him and said he was a wild beast not a man. He left that place and went back to the West and got a situation as a gardener—this son of a British general. Then he came to himself in the "far country." It was not an earthly father he was thinking about—he was afraid to go home to him—but of a heavenly one. He didn't know much about God, but this is his account of it: "I was at work one day," he said, "when I seemed to hear a voice within, a voice not my own, protesting and calling me. It seemed as if the spirit of all things was speaking to me. I found myself saying (I do not know why), 'If you will help me, I will.' That was Pauline in its significance. I had never heard anything like it." He went to a minister to see if he could no be put on the right way. The minister could not understand what he was driving at, so he left him; bought a Bible and turned up the chapter, the fourteenth of John. "Up to that time," he said, "I had a thousand times repeated in church, as a child, at the tail end of the collect the phrase 'through Jesus Christ our Lord,' but never knew who Jesus was."

KNOWING HIM.

Now, when I read these words I found out: "Let not your heart be troubled. Ye believe in God, believe also in me," and "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." I said to myself: Now, I know who Jesus is. "He was the voice that spake to me in the garden." It is good theology. Christ has far more to do with you than you have with Him, and what I have been telling you this morning is indelible truth. You could not wipe it out with the worst life that ever was lived. Christ is the spirit of all things, the Master of all. He is the deeper self within the soul of every man, no matter how sunken or low down. The Christ came, the Christ follows, the Christ saves.

Then, to enter into union with such a Christ is possible here and now. There are some here who found that out long ago, who know there is a Christ. If I denied it they would say: "I know whom I have believed." "But you cannot see Him." Yes, you can. Communion of the soul is the only real communion. You can live close up to the Christ, and look up into His Godlike face all the time, and no one can take you from Him, and you, can feel, if you cannot prove, that the Christ cares for you and belongs to you and speaks to you. He looks upon you and you know His face. "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father," and you know that because you are trying to bring something to the Christ—a broken life which He is mending, a faulty character which He is to cure, and Christ takes just what you have to bring and makes it whole.

Mr. Beecher said, some organists never knew what to play when the sermon was over. "But," he said, "John Zundel does. According to what I have said, he speaks on the organ." Suppose one entered the church just after Mr. Beecher had finished speaking and hear John play. He had not heard what had gone before and might cry out: "Play up, not so plaintive; something faster. I am not in the mood for what you are playing." The congregation would soon put him right. They would say: "You would have been in the mood for it if you had heard what had gone before. All was speaking together. Whittier wrote:

For myself alone I doubt
All is well, I know, without.
I alone the beauty mar,
I alone the music jar;
Yet by hands with evil stained,
And an ear my discord pained,
I am groping for the key
Of the heavenly harmony.

We are all groping for the keys of the heavenly harmony. We want to be at one with God, and we are not. Perhaps some day with unbroken harmony around the throne, when we see the "King in His beauty" in the "land that is afar off," we shall understand how much we owe to the invisible Friend, whom "not having seen we love," and yet whom we do see with the heart that craves for a brighter vision still. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God. It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He