

## Pastor and People.

### A MOTHER'S PRAYER.

Lord, though his sins were scarlet,  
And he went far astray,  
These long years have I prayed Thee  
Show him the narrow way.

Though with the swine he feasted,  
O! bring him back to Thee;  
My youngest born, O! save him,  
Wherever he may be.

The only prayer now left me  
Is, Lord, that Thou wouldst turn  
His heart to Thee in sorrow,  
Thus, Lord, that he might learn;

Though sin may not come nigh Thee,  
The sinner may find grace;  
If he repents him truly,  
Thou wilt not hide Thy face.

For years, Lord, has he wander'd,  
Let him arise and say,  
"Against Thee have I sinned,  
No longer here I stay;

"I will return unto Thee,  
And at Thy feet will pray,  
That, like the prodigal of old,  
I be not turned away."

It may be, Lord, that never  
He will come home to me;  
I dare not pray for that, Lord,  
While he is far from Thee.

Yet, Lord, all things are possible,  
And mighty is Thy grace;  
It may be the day cometh  
That I shall see his face.

The face of him who left me,  
My youngest born, my pride;  
There came a day I deemed it  
Far better he had died.

But now my prayer is only,  
O Lord, Thy will be done;  
It may be in Thy mercy  
Thou wilt bring home my son.

### THE REV. JOHN McNEILL.

There are, I suppose, certain days of the year when the sun shines on Regent Square, and there are people fortunate enough to have visited it on these. To me it seems one of the dullest spots in London. Fog, rain, or a damp wind blowing autumn leaves about the doors, mingle curiously with all one's memories of it. The houses, "silent and aware," seem to understand that rich tenants will not seek them any longer. To the east lies Gray's-Inn-Road, as cheerless a thoroughfare as London has to show. All round are little streets with untidy gardens and fifth-rate shops and houses. The mother-Church of London Presbyterianism has, therefore, to hold its own amidst depressing outward circumstances. Still, the McCrie-Roxburgh Church is not exactly situated in a paradise, and Mr. McNeill is probably content with his surroundings. For one thing, he is certainly not sorry to be so near King's Cross Station. His occasional visits to the north, for rest or work, brighten all the year for him. Some of us remember the first time he spoke in the Free Assembly Hall after his settlement in London, the long lines of people waiting in the corridors to shake hands with him, and his joy at being once more among his "ain folk." No city in the world understands the art of hero-worship so well as Edinburgh; no audience appreciates fine oratory so keenly. But Edinburgh is small; her churches have room for the decorous congregations assembling for the regular diet of worship, and a few strangers will be courteously admitted by the pew-holders. But when the non-Church-going masses wish to hear a preacher, it becomes a question of building him a tabernacle, or letting London get him. Most people know the outlines of Mr. McNeill's short but eventful career. The story of his early struggles has been told in every Scottish household, and will doubtless form the inspiration of many a future ministry. Even had the road to the pulpit been longer and harder than it is, his gifts must have brought him to the goal at last. It is quite a mistake to suppose that he cares only to address great audiences in halls or circuses. Some of his finest sermons have been preached from village pulpits, or in moorland cottages where two or three had come together to worship. Half his success as a preacher is owing to his gift of sympathy. The young especially he meets face to face. Their troubles, their difficulties, their wanderings through the great wilderness of London, are matters of constant solicitude to him. This gift of sympathy, as valuable to its possessor as Lessing's opal ring, is united in Mr. McNeill's case with an unflinching freshness of style and manner. He carries sunshine about with him. The ring of his voice and the grip of his hand have, on some people, the effect of a breath of mountain wind. He deals in no subtleties, but chooses subjects which all will understand, and makes every point converge upon the present. His best sermons sparkle with epigrams. Quaint paths turn off here and there; glimpses of beauty meet you at unexpected corners. They would need revision, doubtless, before passing into the hands of the *Spectator's* reviewer. But the average hearer, who has a busy week behind and before him, and in whose life clouds have returned all too soon after rain, feels that this preaching meets his need. And with the average hearer, Mr. McNeill will always be popular.

—M.

### THE CALL TO BATTLE.

The gift of tongues given to the Church at the beginning was a mere marvel. There was no clear understanding, on the part of others, of what was said. But in the gift of prophecy, or of a spiritual interpretation of the Word, there was this clear understanding, enjoyed and appreciated by all. It is in this connection that the apostle says: "And even things without life-giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" The words suggest to us the necessity of our understanding, as clearly as possible, the real issue at stake in the conflict in which as Christians we are engaged. There are several trumpet calls around us. Each of them means the rallying of the forces on a given side. Some of them are quite clear and explicit, but others are not so clear. Some are strangely confused. The apostle recommends clearness and certainty. He believes that there are just two sides to the question. It is not a triangular conflict in which we are called to engage and in which a man may be expected to shoot in two directions; but a conflict in which there are two sides, absolutely opposed to each other. That there is an actual conflict of a spiritual kind going on in the world, and that every one is called to take some part in it, we cannot surely doubt. It is essential to our doing so that we have some clear conception of the nature of the conflict, and the precise issue at stake.

In the depths of the sea the greater fishes prey upon the smaller, and upon the surface of the earth a struggle for existence, both among men and the lower creatures, is going on. The result is said to be the survival of the fittest. The greater nations of the earth are armed to the teeth, in watchful and suspicious observance of each other. But all this outer conflict, formidable as it is, is but the fringe of an inner spiritual warfare that is being waged upon the earth. Two great principles are striving for ascendancy in the world; and it must be obvious to every thoughtful person that we require to understand what those principles are if we are to play the part we ought to play in this great controversy of time; if we are to understand what the particular phase of each movement in the mighty campaign really is, and where we ought to stand amid the shifting and conflicting currents of the whole. So long as men look at the outside of the matter—at the shifting of parties, and the rising and falling of sects—they cannot hope to understand why there should be a battle at all, or what it is all about; but when, with the help of divine revelation, we get some insight into the invisible centre of the whole, we know where we are, and what we ought to do.

In so far as this world is concerned, there are tremendous odds against every man. There is a subtle and powerful foe in the field, with the experience of ages in his possession, a master of strategy in spiritual warfare, and far more than a match for all mere men put together. Then there are hosts of darkness under his control, spirits of evil, whose work it is to seduce and corrupt the souls of men through their imagination, their hearts, their passions. Under the most plausible forms do those spirits of evil work—under the names of liberty and knowledge and happiness and power. Then there are the accumulated wrongs of ages—the error and perversions which have got themselves entrenched in seats of authority and influence in the world; and, worst of all, there is the corrupted nature of the individual himself. It is in view of all this that we say, that, in so far as this present world is concerned, there are tremendous odds against every man, in view of the battle he has to fight for the salvation of his own soul, and for the redemption of his fellow-men from the curse of sin.

It is an easy thing to do nothing, to assume the attitude of indifference, to glide on with the stream, and to shut one's ears to the trumpet call of duty; but this only means relinquishing the whole true task of life. Upon any supposition as to the origin of evil and man, we all see that the mass of men are far below what they ought to be. The vast proportion of human beings have had to labour from youth to age, and from morning till night, for the support of their temporal existence alone, with this result, that their minds remain darkened and degraded, as compared with what they ought to be. What a conflict is there not implied in the emancipation of men from this external misery and bondage; and when we pass from the seen to the unseen, and look at the matter as a spiritual conflict, appreciating to any extent the forces that wage war upon the soul, we cannot but feel that we are called to a warfare of the most arduous character.

What, then, is the point for which we have to contend? It is of vital importance to the Christian soldier that he should see this, and keep it constantly in view. There are many subordinate engagements going on. Evil assumes many forms, and it has to be attacked under each. Specific remedies require to be adopted for specific evils. Still the evil in its ground and essence is one, and the enemy is one. In the last resort it is a conflict with principles diametrically opposed to each other; and if the trumpet is to give a clear sound it will let us know exactly for what we are contending. The battle is for God and for the life of God in the human soul. Look along the whole line of this world-conflict. Survey it under all its forms. Is it not a battle for God in nature, for God in Christ, for God in the Church; in one word, for the supernatural? What have we to contend for as against the atheist and the agnostic? Simply

for belief in the divine existence. Is it a question as to divine personality of Jesus Christ and the reality of atonement, as an incomparable work of grace? then is the question of the supernatural still. Is it a battle for reality of miracles, or the actual intervention of God in work of history? That is but another form of the supernatural. Is it a battle for the existence of a true Church—Church that is one and visible all over the world, really body of Christ, formed by His word and filled with His Spirit? The whole idea of such a body is that of a movement to the supernatural in the midst of the natural. If we contend for the divine authority and inspiration of the Bible as opposed to theories and explanations of the book that would account for it, as you might account for any other book, on purely naturalistic lines? Here again it is a question as to whether the Bible implies for its production, detail or as a whole, an operation of the Spirit of God which altogether transcends that which is implied in the best ordinary book; whether, in one word, the Bible is the history of the supernatural or no.

How apparent it is that the one thing for which we have to contend in these days is the spiritual, the supernatural the Divine, as against all merely naturalistic theories of existence. The natural is there, but it is not the whole; and by itself it explains nothing. From nature we must ascend; once to God, if we are to get the standpoint that means truly rational explanation of the universe. From that standpoint we are clearly obliged to look at the original structure of the Bible, at the rise and progress of Christianity and at the whole development of human history. Away from that point we are lost in darkness, and the life of man is but "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." A thousand influences are playing against the spiritual life, and trying to beat it down. The whole world of sense and sight is to many a supreme and a counter attraction. There are many things which, not evil in themselves, but as belonging to this present world, come in to crowd out all thought of another and a higher. There is the expansion of commerce, the cultivation of science, the opening up of the whole world to the enterprise of man. There are the great socialistic and communistic movements of the time—the whole secular development of the world, all of which, as concentrating the thoughts of men upon the present and the palpable alone, have a tendency to make the spiritual and the eternal look unreal and far away, a thing with which we have no immediate or practical concern. Hence the alienation of many from religion altogether, and from the great work of the Church in the world.

But all those great questions with which men are dealing in the general world, and about which they are contending, are but larger forms of the conflict with which the humblest and most private Christian has to do. The conflict in the individual life, wherever we are and however engaged, if there is spiritual life in the soul at all, is a battle for the very existence of that life, as well as for its development. People who do not think have a difficulty in realizing what a spiritual life is. The word is but a synonym for the dreamy and the unreal. Hence the meagreness of interest, even on the part of professing Christians, in purely spiritual things. Hence, too, the popularity of coarse, unspiritual, vulgar ways of promoting religion.

Our true life is not a quiet and easy development of natural forces. There are many who think of it as nothing else. They are comfortably situated; the iron has never entered their souls; they have never been broken upon the wheel of a great sorrow; they are amiable; beautiful it may be, and popular; they are intelligent to a degree; but they are moribund upon the surface of life. The shafts of conviction have never entered their souls; their pride has not been slain or trampled in the dust, and so they float on, wondering what people mean when they talk about sin and Satan, and conflict and spiritual triumph. But when the soul has been awakened to the powers of the world to come, it understands what is meant by the Church being a militant body, and life a warfare. The things that now become unreal are the baubles of the world, and the shadows which the pleasure-seeker pursues.

Let us test everything by the effect it has on the spiritual life. It is not a question in regard to many things, as to where a hard and fast line can be drawn, but as to how far a certain form of business or a certain course of study, or a book, or a place of amusement, or any engagement affects the spiritual life. Does it lower the spiritual temperature? Does it make the spiritual world unreal and far away? Does it put one out of sympathy with prayer? Does it make the Bible an unattractive book, and the services of religion a somewhat wearisome performance? In a word, does it shut God out of His own world? Then it is on the side of the enemy; it is helping forward the anti-Christ; it is opposed to the supernatural. If I mistake not, that is the supreme test. The conflict centres here—a life of mere sense, of worldly occupations and enjoyments alone, or a life of faith, that gains the victory of the world, that rises into the unseen, that apprehends the invisible, that walks with God. We cannot, in this multifarious and distracting age, spread ourselves over everything. The time is short, and the work is great. We must concentrate. Bring all the controversies of the day to this one clear and central test: Is it on the side of a life that is ever rising into the supernatural, bathing itself in the unseen, and cleansing its eyes from the film of the lower life, in the pure atmosphere of eternity; or is it on the side of the natural alone, ever being swept down and dragged along by the stupefying course and current of a blind and frivolous world? It is not a call to separate the natural from the supernatural, as if we had to live an unnatural or a double life; but it is a call to bring the spiritual into the heart of the natural, and thereby redeem it from the vanity and misery of an unbelieving life; not standing to-day on the side of the enemies of God for the sake of some supposed earthly good, and to-morrow on the side of Christ for the sake of some fancied spiritual good; but making a whole of life, and that whole a spiritual whole.—Rev. Fergus Ferguson, D.D., in *Christian Leader*.