

OUR FATHER'S VOICE.

A SERMON BY THE REV. J. OSWALD DYKES, D.D.

"My son, give Me thine heart."—PROVERBS xxiii. 23.

"**Y**E have forgotten the exhortation" (says the New Testament writer to the Hebrews, quoting a quite similar text from this Book of Proverbs) "which speaketh unto you as unto children." Under this kindly form of address, "My son," the Wise Preacher of Israel discoursed to the men—especially to the young men—of his own day, taking his scholars, as it were, to L. kneo, and exhorting them on the practical conduct of life with just such frankness, urgency, and tenderness as any prudent father might use to his boy. In these counsels of the Hebrew sage, however, the New Testament writer hears Heaven's own discourse with us, a deeper than mortal wisdom echoes through the words; the authority is higher, and the tone more weighty, than those of any earthly parent: it is the voice of the Eternal, the Infinite Wisdom, the Father of spirits, which speaks through the grave and gentle lips of this counsellor. God takes all of us, so to say, to His knee, and as foolish, inexperienced children of His own house, He warns, advises, expostulates, instructs, appeals, as in these few pleading, pathetic words, "My son, give Me thine heart."

I feel myself warranted, therefore, to take this sentence as, not by forced accommodation, but in sober fact, a kindly and authoritative call to each of us from Him Who is the wisest and best of fathers. And, because we are not ancient Hebrews, but modern Christians, I shall venture to read it anew under the light of the advent of Christ. Substantially the same in every period has been the call of our pitiful Parent above to His blundering sons below—that patiently repeated call, which our Saviour Himself likened with touchings simplicity to the cluck of a mother-bird to her brood: "How often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathers her chickens;" Substantially, I say, this call from God has meant the same thing to the men of every generation. For men have always been given to throw away their heart upon the same poor objects—to follow the same unworthy guides; and, in one form or other, the voice of celestial wisdom has never ceased to invite such wanderers in the paths which lead to death to that narrow road of fellowship with Heaven, which alone conducts to pleasantness and peace. Perhaps, too, the Father's call falls on as many reluctant ears to-day as it ever did. But certainly it never sounded clearer or more fatherly than it does now:—now, since our relationship to God has become that of reconciled children in Jesus Christ; now, since God has made His fatherhood conspicuous in the gift and sacrifice of His Son; now, since we have been shown by the existence of one obedient Child of God what our common Parent means when He presses on each of us this request: "Give thine heart to Me." When these old, old, words of wisdom are heard coming from the Father of Jesus to us, the brothers of Jesus, they come with a force and pathos, a depth of meaning and a pressure of affection, which they never carried to human hearts before.

For it is evident that the force of such an appeal as this must depend on the person who makes it. Any admonition which begins with this preface, "My son," deserves to be listened to, and everything which exacts the parental authority, or manifests the parental affection of God, goes to strengthen the power of His words.

The choice of human nature as a fitting organ for the Divine Son, a vehicle through which His sonship could adequately realise itself, was itself a testimony to the Divine image in man. The fact that the thoughts, emotions, worship, and service of a human soul could without violence become (as they did in Jesus) those of God's own Son—filial all of them—answering this fatherly call, "Give Me thine heart"—this fact shows how closely kin our human nature itself must originally have been to the Divine; how apt it always has been to play a son's part towards heaven, if only man had chosen. Unless the heart of man had been in some most real sense the offspring of Deity—made in the image of its celestial Author and Parent—how could the only begotten Son have transferred His filial life to human conditions? How could he have become true Man without ceasing to be true Son of the Highest?

Nor is even that all. But this Man who was at the same time a Son to God and gave God His heart, was, by consent even of His enemies, the very flower or bloom of our human

race; not less a man than other men, but more; more true to the human type, more free from inhuman deformities or defects, more worthy than any other to be called the ideal or specimen Man of men. So that His filial attitude to God, His response to the Divine Father's call, "Give Me thine heart," was actually the thing which crowned His humanity with exceptional loveliness and perfectness. It follows, therefore, that men were made to be sons of God, and cannot fulfil the genuine idea of their own humanity, nor reach their nature's proper dignity, without doing what the Son of Man did, that is, yield each man his heart to God as the heart of a son. So that when this voice comes to each one of you from an invisible Father: "My son, give me thine heart, as thy brother Jesus gave Me His; be devoted in filial surrender to Me, thy Parent, even as was Jesus—the voice really means just this. Be out and out true man; realise your human nature in its intended place and office; give free play to its highest and purest capabilities; do not waste, do not misuse, do not spoil, your own selves.

Surely it cannot content our Father above to see anyone whom He made to be His own son throw that position away for husks! Least of all can it content Him now, since He has made such sacrifices for the sake of winning human hearts. It was always, through the weary ancient centuries—the millenniums of error and crime before Christ came, a most pitiful sight for Divine eyes to witness, this loss of Divine children, the flinging away of loves and energies worthy of God upon base things of the earth. This was the loss which drew down the Eternal Begotten from the bosom of the Father. But surely it must be—if one dare speak so humanly—a more pitiful sight still, after that sacrifice has been made for man, and the true dignity of manhood has been displayed, and the way of return to our Father opened through the crucified humanity of His incarnate Beloved, for God in His heaven to see any one of you still repeating the ancient waste, and flinging your heart and soul away on selfish gain or frivolous and voluptuous pursuits! Once the paternal heart has tasted anew the sweetness of being called "Father" by a genuine human child, how it must yearn the more over those who still discard their sacred parentage, and drag their Divine features in the mire. It has happened to the venerable Speaker, whose voice so long has sounded out of Heaven, to get an answer—entire, ungrudging and affectionate—to that plaintive claim: "My son, give Me thine heart!" He got it from Jesus Christ. Think you He is content now? Content while you, a brother of Jesus, one of the same blood with that Son of His, for whose recovery that very Son came, while you (I say) are still withholding a son's trust and loyalty, and giving up the heart He craves to forbidden objects—to stamelled delights—to petty idols? Content, my brother! He cannot be content. He claims you more than ever. His voice is more urgent than before. For Jesus' sake, He pleads with you now. As Jesus' Father, who touches you by that very Brother's hand—palm to your palm: in Jesus' name, who is your own heal, your patron, your surety-friend: by Jesus' blood, who is your kinsman-redeemer, and in whose risen body you have been claimed and brought near again to the yearning bosom of God: He calls to each soul of you out of His heaven this day: "My son, My son, give now thine heart to me."

Still reading this Divine solicitation under New Testament light, I desire now to let that light fall on it from another side. Speaking as the Father of Jesus to us, the brothers of Jesus, God's parental tone is far more intelligible now than it was before—far warmer, too—far more authoritative, because His fatherly relation to us is infinitely better seen than it used to be. Besides this, however, it may also be said that when God asks of us our heart, we are now in a better position to understand what He really wants; for we have seen Jesus. So far, indeed, as the use goes of this primitive and biblical phrase—the "heart"—there is little difficulty in understanding the letter of His demand. Possibly few of us could define off-hand all that is wrapt up in that sin ple current metaphor of Scripture, man's heart; but we know pretty well what it means for all that. It is a very natural conjecture of unscientific people to think that, among the various organs of the body, the heart is the central and the chief. If the blood be the life, then the heart is both its seat—so to say—to which the blood returns, and its source, from which it flows forth again to distribute vital force throughout the body. A very obvious analogy leads us to use the same word for the real centre of power or of impulse in any system or organism whatever. We say of