

with which he paints the picture of lives devoted to efforts in the service of the race, spent in labouring, each of us in his own sphere, to bring about the grand ideal he fancies for humanity, and drawing strength and reward for long years of toil in the anticipation of what man will be when those noble dreams shall have been realised at last—even though we shall never see what we have wrought so hard to win. It is vain to deny, moreover, that these dreams appear more solid and less wild or vague when we remember how close an analogy we may detect in the labours of thousands around us who spend their whole career on earth in building up, by sacrifice and painful struggles, wealth, station, fame, and character for their children, whose enjoyment of these possessions they will never live to witness, without their passionate zeal in the pursuit being in any way cooled by the discouraging reflection. Does not this oblige us to confess that the posthumous existence Mr. Harrison describes is not altogether an airy fiction? Still, somehow, after a few moments spent in the thin atmosphere into which his brilliant language and unselfish imagination have combined to raise us, we—ninety-nine out of every hundred of us at the least—sink back breathless and wearied after the unaccustomed soaring amid light so dim, and craving as of yore after something more personal, more solid, and more certain.

THE PRODIGAL SON, OR THE STORY OF AN INTELLECTUAL WANDERING.

The third of four Sermons preached in Zion Church, Montreal, by the Rev. Alfred J. Bray.

III.—(Continued.)

Now I want to look at that young prodigal there in the fields, tending the swine and feeding, or trying to feed, on the husks. What sort of a meal does he get. Remember he is not at home, he is in the land of the alien, and the meal is not of his own choosing. Well, see what they give him.* The first course is the atheist's theory of the world of matter. He is asked to believe that the world of matter is eternal, always was and always will be, but with no thought or will; that all things came by chance, that is to say in technical language, "the fortuitous concurrence of matter," which has no thought, no plan. There is order everywhere, regularity and law. The sun moves in its circuit, the stars swing in silent magnificence through space; the earth in spring time puts forth buds, which in summer become blossom and in autumn fruit; the air is nicely adapted to light and warm the earth, wraps it round like a swaddling garment to keep in its specific heat, also as circulating wind it helps to cleanse and purify; promotes the life of animal and plant; bears sound from place to place, drawing music from ocean's heart and bird and tree and stream, but all came by chance; there is no presiding mind; there was no plan or purpose; no Creator and no Providence; there is no hand that paints the lily, or feeds the hungry lions; no eye to mark the sparrow's or the hero's fall; no heart to love the stricken man, to bless the sinner or the saint. That is the first course. Eat, my poor wanderer, eat thy fill of that hard, dry dish.

There is a second—it is the Atheist's theory of individual life. Man knows but little; he is "darkly wise and meanly great," but there is no one with higher knowledge or greater wisdom. Life is a chapter of accidents, and nothing in the world can tell what a day may bring forth. Fortune is blind as love, and quite as irresponsible. Fate has a grip of iron and a heart of steel, and man is as dark as night. The universe is drifting into the void inane, and man is drifting with it, as ignorant of his whence or his whither as the clod of earth he treads upon. To-morrow is empty; life is tending to nothing. Get joy if you can, but it means no more than an hour's laugh. If you get sorrow, all the worse for you—nothing comes of it. You may serve men if you like; sacrifice yourself for another's good; rescue the house of the widow and the orphan's patrimony from the Pharisee's grasp; but all you will get in return is the ingratitude of the widow and orphan, and a shower of stones from the baffled Pharisee. The philanthropist spends his goods, his health, his life, to bless his fellow-men; he dies and is forgotten; there is no recompense; no place or person to give a reward. The patriot fights for his country; in the Senate, or on the battle-field amid fire and smoke and cries of the dying; he gets wounds, and his country provides him with plaster; or he loses a limb, and his country finds him a crutch; that is all, and death is the end. The mother wastes sight, health, life, in watching her feeble child; they die together, but never meet again—there is no place for meeting—there is no meeting, for mother and child have ceased to be. A father lays in the ground one dearest to him, an only daughter it may be; he looked on that life when in the bud, and greatly loved it; it burst into blossom, and he loved it more—it was the better part of his life; but now he sits by a new made grave, with eyes too hot for weeping, and moans out his sorrow, "Ah! a worm has come and eaten up my flower; the life has gone, and with it all the light; hope lies buried there, and the earth will have no spring-time or summer for me again, only a dull, cold winter and a longing for the night of everlasting sleep." It is so with each and all. In spite of your dreams and longing, there is no Providence—there is no universal Father—there is no immortality. Eat and drink, for to-morrow you die—die into dust. Young man, laugh and sing, for the morning will soon be gone. Strong man, work, work and get and spend for bread and pleasure, for the evening will soon be here. Old man, sitting solitary over the fire, rake the few embers together, for they are getting low and the evening is near—*night*, whispering with cold breath—"for ever." Men and women oppressed with toil, stricken with pain and sorrow, look up! see you the brooding cloud? there is no rainbow to hang like radiant scarf upon its shoulders; it is full of thunder, with not a point of light, and *night* is beyond—*night* without a star—*night* that never again shall yield to rosy morning. Look at your dead; they are *dead*, not sleeping; the effacing fingers have put out the light and crushed the life; body and soul are gone to dust, and that is the lot of all.

That is the second course; husks, husks, a meal of husks. There is yet another course—the Atheist's theory of the life of mankind. All men came by chance; the family, the society, the nation—all of them came by chance; and the self-made things are self-governed. The strong will rule the weak; the

wise the foolish; the trusting will bow down to the crafty. Justice, wisdom, truth and honesty, are just what man by statute law shall make them; man must fix the standard, and shift it as he will. Tyrants grasp the sceptre and hold it, building up their strong palaces with human bodies and blood, and the cries of the oppressed go throbbing through the weltering wastes of time—but there is no avenger, for there is no God. The earth is full of misery, outrage and wrong, and it must continue, for there is no Almighty wisdom and power to come forth and throne Justice in the earth, and make Love to king the nations. So pride treads the people underfoot; the Pharisee devours widows' houses; and the weak and the foolish suffer and die. The bubble of human life floats on the stream of time—floats awhile, then breaks and passes out of sight, bearing with it into nothingness virtue unrewarded, heroism unrequited, sorrows that were not medicines but fires to eat the life away—bearing all away, life's hopes and life's joys, life's pleasures and pains—all of strong aspiration and swelling great desire, borne away and flung into the insatiable maw of oblivion. That is the meal of husks—how does it look to you? I know that they would denur to my interpretation of their theories, those men of science and philosophy. They would say they have left a God to man, and a religion, and an immortality; but put into ordinary language, stripped of mere verbiage and refinements, that meal of husks I have described is what they give. And can any mortal man feed on that and be content—man with heart and soul in him? Can any man find satisfaction from such fare as that? Oh yes, some do. They hold it and are happy in a way. But how long will they feel content? I will tell you how long—just so long as they can go along in smooth and pleasant ways—just so long as they can feel their strength and lean upon it, and no longer. When the earthquake rends the mountain of their strength, they will tremble and look for a delivering God. I know when some of you will have done with your god "must be," will cease talking of immortality as a mere ideality passing through each age—it will be when some great calamity comes rushing in as a whirlwind—when some awful reverse has beaten you down, when one lies before you dead, whose voice had become the natural music of the world, whose spirit had mingled with yours as jets of water in the fountain's basin, whose love had soothed you in your saddest hour, and made you strong for the manful work of life, dead, cold, gone, then you will need, and cry out for some other God than "must be," and some other life than an ideal life in the life of others; you will wake then, and feel an inward pain, a pain that deepens with anguish, and sharpens to a sense of perishing, which will force open your locked lips and break out in a wild cry for a living God and a heaven. Ah, many a man has mocked at Wisdom's earnest crying, or passed her by unheeding, many a man has spurned her counsel and would have none of her reproof; but the hour of fear came—came as desolation and destruction, came as a whirlwind—then with clasped hands and eager look to heaven, he cried out for a God strong and willing to deliver. Laugh and sing and riot, riot away your goods, riot through the day, but the night will come, and sorrow, and prayer.

Turn to the prodigal again a moment, the whole is true to the life. I see him there in the sultry fields, and casting a long, wistful gaze away, and away toward the home of his youth and his father. He is not satisfied, he cannot be. He has tried the service of the alien, but found no lasting pleasure therein, no escape from the sharp pangs of the famine. He has tried self-reliance, but the ship leaked at every seam, and is lying now water-logged in the trough of the waves. The cistern he had hewn for himself with such labour and care has a fatal flaw in the bottom, and the water has oozed out and got lost in the sand. He thought he could stand by himself; has tried and fallen, and lies there with bruised and aching limbs. He thought he could be self-reliant and pilot himself, and finds now that he cannot. He thought he could do without God, and finds now that his soul thirsteth for God—even for the living God. His heart is hungering for a heart to love, and that will love him in return. His spirit craves for a spirit higher and holier, before which he can bow down in loving worship, upon which he can lean, and by which he can live. The living man begins to feel his deep and desperate need of a living God. Sitting there in the sultry fields he begins to awake, to feel his hunger and long for his home.

And what voices come to him there. The ear is open, the mind inclined to reverent attention, and the fields ring and echo to the many voices that have come to call him home. The birds seem to sing of the Father and his love; the sunbeams write it large in letters of gold; the winds are telling the story day and night; the stars that shine aloft seem messengers of love; and as he sits and muses there, thinks of his wanderings and his shame, of all that he had loved and lost, of the pain he had suffered and the wrong he had done, musing of his father and his home, a voice of wondrous sweetness strikes upon his ear, a voice of invitation and of mercy; a hand is stretched out to lift him up and lead him back. Yes, it is true. A MAN is come, a brother and a friend, come all the weary way into the stranger's land; footsore and travel stained, he has journeyed on to find the lost; walking under the burning sun by day, and resting amid the dews at night, borne up and on by a love divine and quenchless, he has found the wanderer at last, and looking on him with that love which is stronger than want and weariness, aye stronger than death or the grave says, "brother, come home, home to thy father." The prodigal starts to his feet with a new thrill of joy in the heart, and the light of hope smiting on his face, and the cry rings across the fields, and the far away hills echo it back again, "I will arise and go to my father." Grand, sublime decision. Prodigal wanderer, well done. From this moment thou art blessed. "And he arose and came to his father." The action followed quick upon the word, you see. He didn't begin to analyse his emotions; and finger at the roots of his fine feelings; he didn't go to his old companions in riot, or to his last new master, the "man of that country," and consult about it. The famine was upon him; his heart was sinking, dying in him. If he would *live* he must go back home. Hope was over him like a divinely kindled star, travelling with a guiding light toward his father's house. And he said, "I will yield to the want within me, and the light without that beckons on. I will follow this Christ, who through hunger, pain, death, has followed me here with heart to love and hand to help and save. I will follow him in faith and love to purity and peace, and heaven. I will go back and cry, 'father, receive the wanderer, forgive.'" "And he arose and came to his father."

Brothers, there is an example, follow it. You have wandered away from your early faiths. I have not quarrelled with you because of it. I have not spoken scornfully or pitifully of you or your wanderings. I sympathize with you,

(* I think in giving the theories that follow I am just reproducing some thoughts of Theodore Parker's. It is from memory, but I wish to acknowledge my helpers.)