

THE TEACHING CHRIST

IN the eleventh chapter of St. Matthew, Our Lord says (v. 29):

‘Take up my yoke upon you, and learn of me, because I am meek, and humble of heart: And you will find rest for your souls.’

These words are patient of a threefold interpretation:

First, Christ might be pointing to himself as the exemplar, and mean: Learn meekness and humility of me. This is the usual and popular interpretation of the text; though there can be little doubt that so understood it was not intended by Christ and is an accommodated sense. The correct translation of the conjunction, in the Greek original of St. Matthew, is ‘because’ or ‘by reason of.’ Père Lagrange renders the passage: ‘Recevez mes leçons parce que je suis doux et humble de cœur.’ ‘Embrace my teaching, because I am meek and humble of heart.’

Secondly, Our Lord may be making a double comparison and mean: (a) ‘Take up my yoke upon you,—because I am meek; and (b) learn of me—because I am humble of heart.’

Thirdly, and this meaning we shall adopt—Our Lord may intend to show the relation between the trustworthiness of the teacher and the virtues of meekness and humility, and mean—literally—‘Embrace my teaching, because I am meek and humble of heart.’ Let us pursue this interpretation to its legitimate conclusions: and first define what we mean by Meekness.

Meekness is a virtue moderating anger according to right reason. It has nothing whatever to do with mere submissiveness. We all laugh at the Curate in the *Private Secretary* as he fusses with his bottle of milk, bath-bun and goloshes, but we must not confuse such mildness and insipidity with meekness.

Etymologically the root meaning of the word is ‘strength harnessed to service’ and is connected with the idea of the

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yoke which resting lightly on the forehead and neck of the ox helps to control and direct the enormous strength of the animal.

Anger is power which out of control is vicious and destructive, but which controlled is virtuous and serviceable. Meekness is the virtue which controls this power of anger according to right reason.

But what is the relation between the vice of anger or the virtue of meekness and the office or vocation of the teacher?

Let us for a moment get right away from the immediate matter under discussion and try to discover what usually makes men angry.

Is it not true to say that our anger is closely related to our opinions, not always, of course, but frequently. Many of us who quarrel over an opinion will discuss the truth quite dispassionately; for there is in every opinion something subjective and personal.

But truth is inherently certain. For instance, we all know that two and two equal four; but we do not lose our tempers when some lunatic comes along and argues quite seriously that two and two equal five. We all believe that the world is round, or nearly so, and we can talk quite good-humouredly with the gentleman who maintains that it is flat. If any temper is lost it is his; and it is not difficult to see why.

We *adopt* an opinion. It may be defined as the assent of the mind given to one of two opposite statements with a fear that perhaps the other alternative is true. In all opinions there is a personal element; and the less probable they are, the stronger this personal element becomes; and so of all men the crank, the fanatic and the enthusiast are the most irascible.

But we cannot adopt truth in the same way as *our* truth, we assent to it as *the* truth; it might even be said that truth adopts us.

And so an attack on *our* opinion, *our* view, even in religious matters, can become almost a personal affront; and

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the more improbable the position adopted by us, the more readily are we offended when this position is assailed.

Now Jesus Christ made the highest and most improbable of all human claims: he said that he was God. And we would have the reader note that in the passage which we quoted at the beginning of this essay Our Lord himself infers a relation between this assertion or position and his meekness. He says:

'All things are delivered to me by my Father. And no one knoweth the Son but the Father: neither doth anyone know the Father, but the Son, and he to whom it shall please the Son to reveal Him.'

Christ in those words says clearly that he is the Son of God. But immediately afterwards we read:

'Come to me, all you that labour and are burdened, and I will refresh you. Take up my yoke upon you and learn of me *because I am meek and humble of heart*: And you shall find rest for your souls.'

May we not, therefore, safely conclude that the meekness (that is the control of anger) exhibited by Christ in the face of contradiction and ridicule, for example, before Pilate, in the court of Herod, before Annas and Caiphas, the High-priests, amongst the soldiers as they mocked him putting a reed in his hand and a purple garment about his shoulders—proves one thing if it proves anything, that what Jesus said about himself was not an opinion, a pose, an hypocrisy; that it was the truth.

Two alternatives offer themselves:

First, that Christ was a mild man, who did not exhibit anger because he had not the power to be angry. This is so patently false to anyone reading the Gospels that it cannot surely be taken seriously. No one can say that the Christ who swept the buyers and sellers from the Temple, who challenged the Scribes and Pharisees and their hypocrisy with such blazing indignation, who stood among his contemporaries, solitary, often unpopular, yet unafraid, who walked towards Jerusalem 'before' his disciples when

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he knew that he was going to death—no one can say that such a man had not power, forthrightness and character.

The second alternative is that Christ was self-deluded; that he was in some way so blinded to the false and exaggerated nature of his claim that he accepted his position, or at least the position which he had taken up, as one might accept a simple and self-evident truth.

This difficulty is something quite different from the charge of extravagant, self-deluding enthusiasm that is sometimes levelled against him. We do not mean that he was carried away on the crest of a religious emotionalism, and had such power of character and personal magnetism that he carried others along with him. Christ could not have been the originator of a so-called psychic epidemic; the idea is too absurd.

We mean here that Our Lord might have been possessed of an idea which had no objective reality, and just as some people think that they are the legitimate successor to the throne, or anti-Christ or Julius Caesar or some other well-known personage; so Christ might have been convinced that he was divine.

Now it is very interesting to note that that is exactly the view that his own friends took of him when he began his public ministry. They had heard of his wonderful works, they saw the people throng around him as he sat in a house, 'so that they could not so much as eat bread.'

'And when his friends heard of it,' says St. Mark (iii, v. 21) 'they went out to lay hold of him. For they said: he is become mad.'

This madness of Christ is an ever-recurring refuge from the fact of Christianity. Many sincere thinkers (and among them is Mr. Bernard Shaw) perceive that the only rational escape from a full belief in the Divinity of Christ is to accuse him of self-deception, or madness. As they cannot deny his sincerity and his essential goodness, they impugn his sanity.

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What is the solution of this difficulty? There have been many religious leaders, apparently sane, who have deceived and led astray normal healthy-minded men and women.

The one entirely satisfactory answer is to see Christ not as an isolated personality, but *in his historical setting*. For he did not spring suddenly upon a startled world; he was the culminating point of an historical progression; and if he were the victim of a delusion and the supreme megalomaniac who thought that he was God, then all history and all life must have conspired in such a delusion. For Jesus Christ did not simply 'happen' and then fade away; he was foretold; he was accepted; and he was, and still is, revered and loved.

But even if we consider him in relationship only with himself everything about his life and teaching is a solid unity of experience and wisdom; nothing is irreconcilable, everything is adjusted and balanced with a startling inevitability—but only on the assumption that what he said about himself was true.

Again, his teaching was not dominated by any school; it was not a philosophy that could exist without its founder; it was an all-embracing system of ethics of which Christ was the centre.

'I am the Vine you the branches: he that abideth in me and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing' (St. John xv).

Christianity as a system of life cannot be detached from Christ. All the principles which he enunciated, he himself fulfilled to the letter; and it is in him that they are fulfilled in others.

'I live,' said St. Paul, 'yet not I but Christ liveth in me.'

Is the System or Personality, whichever you will, that could inspire the great Saul of Tarsus with such heroic devotion, and then after a span of some two thousand years fire with fine courage the soul of Theresa of Lisieux, founded on a fundamental delusion and deception? Surely, if there is any lesson that we all learn from life it is this:

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that everything that is not true to itself must die; that all nature unites to crush the unnatural; that the roots of human life are sane. What shall we say then, of the one challenging exception which not only refuses to die but which has conquered the world? If the Divine Christ Who has so lived is deluded, who then is sane?¹

And finally in answer to this objection we would emphasise that all that Jesus Christ was and all that he taught and claimed to be, had been intimated and foretold in the Old Testament for centuries before he came. In him all these ancient prophecies were fulfilled

The more we study this difficulty the more irresistibly are we driven to the conclusion that Christ must either be accepted or rejected; he can never be explained away. He is not a dead and historical figure who can be studied apart from life; he is the living centre of all life.

We reaffirm then—to return to our main argument—that when Christ said: ‘Learn of me because I am meek’ he meant that this virtue of meekness testified to his trustworthiness as a teacher, showing that what he taught was not an opinion, or even a philosophy in which there was any fear of error, but the Truth.

But he is not content, as we have seen, with preaching the primary truths concerning God, and our duties towards God and to one another—*He teaches Himself*. He is the Way by which men ascend unto heaven; the Truth which alone can give us rest and peace; the Bread of Life which cometh down from heaven; the Good Shepherd of the souls of men; he is the Resurrection and the Life. Christ is, in a word, the centre and focus of all his teaching. *He is the revelation.*

He was put to death on account of this estimate of himself. ‘Because he made himself equal to God.’ That is what incensed the Jews: ‘they sought therefore to take him but he escaped from their hands.’ For them such a

¹ For another variant of this argument, cf. Acts, Ch. 5, vv. 34-39.

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saying was just a staggering blasphemy. If a Roman Emperor chose to deify himself no one minded. One god more or less in their Pantheon made little difference. But to the mind of the monotheistic Jew, to claim equality with God would seem to mean the dethronement of the one Almighty and Eternal God and the substitution of one's self.

Now if the meekness of Jesus Christ shows his trustworthiness as a teacher, and if his teaching is mainly the revelation of himself as the Incarnate Son of God, then must we affirm that Christ's estimate of himself in relation to God and his fellow-countrymen is true; *i.e.* that Christ's meekness testifies to his humility.

For what is Humility? It is a moral virtue which prompts in its possessor an appreciation and external expression of his true position in respect to God and his neighbour; or more briefly, the moral virtue which prompts us to *accept* our *true* selves and to *be* our *true* selves.

And so the meekness of Christ, the Revealer and the Revelation, proves his humility.

But did he mean exactly this when he said:

'Learn of me because I am meek and humble of heart'?

Was he considering these virtues as correlated, as we have shown them to be, or separately?

It would seem that he intended to consider them quite apart and that he was contrasting his mode of teaching with that of others and emphasising the characteristic fault of both pagan and religious pedagogues.

Dr. Maria Montessori unwittingly confirms this view in a rather startling way. She once said that whoever wishes to teach must purge himself of those errors which would place him in a false position with regard to those whom he is teaching.

'And by this,' she says, 'we refer to more than one single defect—to a combination of disorders which are allied to one another: pride and anger' (*The Child in the Church*, p. 57). *In other words that the virtues essential to the teacher are humility and meekness.*

Doubtless Our Lord was thinking of the Scribes and

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Pharisees. And his attitude can be better understood if we render his words:

‘ Learn of me because I am meek and unpretentious.’

He did not seek the esteem of men, as did the Pharisees, who wore phylacteries upon their foreheads and sought the first places at table and in the synagogues. He did not seek honours, ‘ when he knew that they would come to take him by force and make him king, Jesus fled into the mountain himself alone ’ (John vi, 15).

‘ What do I stand to gain ’? He would seem to say to them. ‘ I do not want any of the things that other men live for. Materially I am disinterested; I despise riches and love poverty; having all the prizesc of genius within my grasp I choose to die on a Cross.’

In reality this was an appeal to his selflessness. ‘ Learn of me,’ he says—adding: ‘ and *you* shall find rest for your souls.’ He was always seeking to help others. ‘ He emptied himself ’ to quote St. Paul (Phil. ii, 7) ‘ taking the form of a *servant*.’

The test of this humility of heart and unpretentiousness was seen in the ease with which he mixed amongst his fellow-men. He was approachable. He did not stand aloof with his selected band of followers to discuss high philosophy in some chosen grove; he was jostled by the crowd.

On one occasion when he asked who had touched his garment his disciples said to him: ‘ Thou seest the multitude thronging thee, and sayest thou who hath touched me? ’ (Mark v, 25). He was accused of being the friend of publicans and sinners; he gave to the disciples of John the Baptist as a sign of his mission that he preached the Gospel to the poor; he asked that the little children might be allowed to come to him.

All could indeed ‘ embrace his doctrine ’ because he was a meek and unpretentious teacher, who came into the daily lives of men. And they crowded round him not because he wanted to be friendly, but because *he was a Friend*.

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