SUNDAY MORNING NO. 145

We will go this morning and take our stand by the side of Paul on Mars Hill, as he speaks to the Athenians, in the chapter read this morning (Acts 17), and consider one or two matters suggested by what we shall hear him say. The picture, externally regarded, would be a beautiful one. Athens was and is one of the most picturesquely situated towns in the whole world. It is built on a series of abrupt and detached eminences, which give fine situations for public buildings, of which the architectural skill of the Greeks of old took the fullest advantage with the finest effect. Hither Paul had come on the work which he did in every other place he visited. His business was to present the truth to attention, publicly and privately. He had not come directly for that purpose. He had been conveyed hither by certain guardians who had him in charge, and who principally brought him here in safety from the violence of the Jews at Thessalonica, Berea, and other places. He was here waiting the arrival of certain brethren before making further plans for the future. Pending their arrival, he was more or less passive, yet kept his eyes and ears open, and soon found himself in work (for it is the tendency of things if a man faithfully do what is next to his hand, however small, for things to grow and widen out). He was painfully exercised by what he saw, for *"he saw the city wholly given to idolatry."* His *"spirit was stirred"* by what he saw.

It is a question whether Paul's spirit would be more stirred or less stirred by what he would see in our day. It is a question whether it is more grieving to see people *"wholly given to idolatry"* or not given to worship at all. The latter is greatly the case of the moderns. There is, of course, much religion in a certain way. There are many churches and many chapels, and much movement of one sort or other in connection with these; but the people are to be judged in the matter, not by the external show of things, but by what they are in their individual tastes. Judged in this way the state of things is very different from what one would conclude by the display of religious apparatus. The people are dull and unconcerned in religious directions, and becoming more and more so. There are exceptions, of course: but, as regards the prevalent temper of the people, the present age is not a truly religious age. It is a callous, because an unbelieving, age, and it is unbelieving because of the wrong use of the little natural knowledge to which it has attained. It is questionable whether such an age of unconcern is not more depressing than an age of zeal even for false gods.

However, we must each sustain our own part, and fill the place of wisdom in our own age. Paul, in the midst of the idolatries, gave himself to disputation with the people he found devoutly engaged. He disputed *"with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met him"* (verse 17). He disputed also in the synagogues. This was the only field open to him, and he entered it. He did what he could in the circumstances—a guide for us. We cannot do more than what we can; we may do less. Let us be on our guard here. We are engaged in the same work as Paul, though in a different age and under a less direct commission. We have the same work in hand, though in a different form. Even the form of the work in some particulars is the same: he *"disputed,"* and we have to do the same. In this we are condemned as doing an unchristian thing. Controversy is said to be inconsistent with what is called "the genius of Christianity." Christianity is popularly conceived to consist of a perfectly passive state of mind, in which you let other people alone in profound unconcern as to their opinions, and with a "charitable" horror, above all things, of suggesting, still more affirming, that they are wrong. Well, popular conceptions furnish a very poor guide in the things of God. The *vox populi* is far from embodying the *vox Dei*. We have found popular sentiment wrong on many Scriptural things, and on none more than this.

Acrimonious polemics are doubtless outside the sympathies and the practice of a lover of Christ. The doctrinal pugilist is a monstrosity from whom the new man recoils in disgust:

but, nevertheless, we must needs *"earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints."* (Jude 3.) Here we have the foremost apostle of Christ exemplifying the duty. Here we have him disputing daily in the market with devout persons—not, we may be sure, out of mere pugnacity—not from a love of argument for argument's sake, but from a deep and active sense of the immense consequence of the matters he had to urge, and from a powerful sense of the duty he owed in the case. Such a work, though done in earnestness, can be done in love. Christ's friends are one and all under the command which says—

"Let all your things be done with charity,"

And they are subject to the maxim which says—

"The servant of the Lord must not strive, but must be gentle to all men."

They therefore argue without strife—without animosity—yet with warmth, as occasion may call, and sometimes with righteous anger. The Lord himself argued and *"looked round about upon them with anger, very grieved at the hardness of their hearts."* The apostles frequently appear in the same attitude in the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles. Still, this is the exception. Mostly they spoke the truth in manifest love, *"commending the truth to every man's conscience as in the sight of God."* Yet, whichever way—mildly or with emphasis—they indulged largely in the warfare of argument in which their weapons were mighty through God to the pulling down high thoughts and every imagination that exalted itself against the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:4-5.) There is a wrong way of arguing. There are evils connected with controversy, but it is no reasonable or Scriptural remedy to prescribe the abandonment of it altogether. As well might we discard the use of tools, because of injuries, or the use of fire, because the children burnt their fingers, or say we must not go on the water because ships sometimes sink. Let us employ argument in the right way in the fear of God, the love of neighbour and the eye of reason in the ascendant, and we shall find it a useful and a blessed thing in its place.

Paul's doings, as he *"disputed daily in the market with them that met him,"* came to the ears of the members of the Areopagus—the highest philosophic court in Athens—and they cited Paul before them to hear what new doctrine it was that he was preaching (for in the market he had been preaching what was an entirely new doctrine to them. He had been preaching *"Jesus and the resurrection."*) The curiosity of the philosophers was aroused. We are told that *"all the Athenians and the strangers that were there, spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing."* This gives us a casual insight into an important matter not mentioned by the recorder of the narrative. Why was there this itching after novelty on the part of the Athenians, and all who resemble them in all parts and ages of the world ever since? There is a very thorough answer to this question. The philosophies of the Greeks were speculative theories, and all such, wherever entertained and championised, appeal only to two sections of the mind which can never rest lastingly satisfied on anything presented to them, but soon tiring of the latest novelty, must have some new gratification, and, therefore, delights in *"some new thing,"* however absurd that new thing may be. Speculative theories appeal only to the intellect and the pride thereof. The knowing faculties and love of approbation (indispensable in their place) were never made to lead, and they have no capacity in themselves for yielding an established satisfaction. If they are run upon, they give over the victim to mental unrest, and impel him in feverish quest after novelty, which leads to crotchets and vagaries and no satisfaction. Athenian or any other speculative theories make no provision for the demands of the largest part of the human brain. The principal and characteristic cravings of the human mind lie on the top of the brain (assuming a full development exists). Phrenologists have described them under the terms veneration, conscientiousness, hope, faith, and benevolence. These capacities have always belonged to man, though their location and description in this way is only a recent discovery. These powers have existed since there was a man upon earth: and the point to be noticed is this, that

only in connection with their enlightened exercise is perfect satisfaction to be found and that Greek and other controversial jargonings minister nothing to this exercise, and therefore minister no satisfaction but leave their votaries a prey to that itching after new things which was characteristic of the Athenians, and of their class everywhere in all ages and countries. The intellect is but a small part of the brain (in front) and the self-conscious sentiments that lead to pride and vanity are but a small part on the rear crown, whereas the cluster of these mental cravings I have referred to, occupies a large place on the most elevated range of the mental organization.

Now the truth differs from everything in this, that it supplies in the completest manner what these deepest cravings of the heart of man call for.

VENERATION—

Craves for a power above man; a Being he can worship as the Infinite Possessor of wisdom, and power and goodness and truth. The truth gives him this in the God of Israel, the Creator, Sustainer, and Possessor of heaven and earth; and in the worship and the love of Him, there is satisfaction and peace that no other exercise of the mind can give.

CONSCIENTIOUSNESS—

Demands a standard of action—a rule of righteousness that may be trusted—a rock on which we may build the fabric of our life. The truth and nothing else, supplies this in the revealed will of God in statute, precept and law, made plain and binding in the commandment of Christ and his apostles.

FAITH—

Seeks confidence of direction (in matters both present and future) by a power higher than man: the truth alone yields this, in the comforting assurance given by Christ that the Father *"careth for us,"* and by the Spirit of God, that if we commit our way to the lord, he will direct our steps, guiding us at last to the haven of eternal life and peace.

HOPE—

Searches for good to come, and the truth alone gives ground for confidence in this direction: for away from the truth, the horizon of human life is darkness.

BENEVOLENCE—

Yearns to benefit fellow creatures; and the truth only, brings a man under the perpetual obligation to do this and shows him how to do it. The mere exercise of the intellect is barren: the mere gratification of self-importance is withering. The gratification of both are but partial and short-lived, and the victim must constantly have new stimulus or he becomes miserable; whereas, let a man have the higher demands supplied by the truth, there is in their combined action, a glow of satisfaction that requires no new fuel. Such a man does not want to tell and to hear some new thing. He will not reject a new thing if it is good: but he has no itching after it. He is independent of it. On the whole, he would rather not have it: for God satisfies him and leaves nothing to desire, so far as mortal satisfactions are concerned. The truth is to him as a mother's milk to the babe: it is a pure and constant and thorough satisfaction, which keeps away the parching fever of those who find pleasure in hearing or telling some new thing.

The Athenian philosophers, desiring to hear of some new thing, sent for Paul: and for once they got hold of something that was not only new, but good. We will look at only two points in the brief but pregnant address he delivered to them. He first introduces God to them:

> *"Whom ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you: God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands, neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he giveth to all, life and breath, and all things."*

In this presentation of the truth, he differed from the style he adopted in addressing the Jews. It was the difference enjoined by good sense. The Jews already knew about God, and about the promises made to the fathers; what they did not know was the mystery of the gospel as fulfilled in the death of Jesus, and, therefore, to this the apostolic argument was most constantly directed. But in the case of the idolatrous Gentiles, there was ignorance of the very foundation of the whole matter. It would, therefore, have been manifestly out of place to speak to them as to the Jews. Paul did not preach a different Gospel to the one from what he preached to the other, but he preached to each that part of the same Gospel which their case in the first instance required. Therefore, to the Athenians he first preached God the Creator.

Dear brethren and sisters, this is the first of all first principles. It is not only a first principle in the sense of being the starting point of other principles, but it is one that runs along with all and through all, and outlasts all others. It is the beginning and the end—the first and the last. It is the most glorious, and the most comforting, and the most purifying of all truths; this truth, that the beginning of things and the foundation of things is an Almighty, Eternal Person, who is the FATHER OF ALL—especially when seen in that phase of this truth which Paul presents, viz., that—

"*He is not far from every one of us.*" (verse 27.)

We ask Paul, how far is he from us? How near is he to every one of us? And we get the answer in the very next sentence which he utters:

"*FOR* ***in Him we live and move and have our being.***"

"*IN HIM;*" how much nearer could we get than this? We need not to ascend to heaven to get to the Father: He has told us He "fills heaven and earth." (Jer. 23:24.) We are as near him on the planet earth as we should be in his burning presence in the heart of the universe; his wide mantling presence in the invisible energy of his power embraces all things in heaven and earth, so that everything is visible and audible to him. Is not this a glorious, strengthening, warming, ennobling truth? Let a man embrace it—let him rest on it in full assurance of faith, and he will be fortified against all the disquietudes of the present evil state. He will find it no vain figure of speech to call God, as David calls him—his refuge, his high tower, his shield, and his defence. He will be able without abatement to say with him—

"*God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.*"

There is one drawback to this consolation at present. God is silent, and does not show His hand. We look in vain to find Him in the widest range of search. We may travel all lands, explore the thickest forests, ascend the highest mountains, or sail far off on the sea to distant zones; we may direct our searching gaze through the widest sweeping telescope among the glittering hosts that people the boundless fields of space, or subject the elements to strictest analysis in the laboratory, or the fabric of being to the minutest scrutiny of the microscope, and we should, after all our search, have to say with Job:

> "*Oh that I knew where I might find him! That I might come even to His seat. . . Behold, I go forward, but He is not; and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; on the left hand, where He doth work, but I cannot behold Him; He hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see Him.*" (Job 23:3, 8-9.)

This fact is distressing to some minds—needlessly so, yet really so. They are apt to think it strange if God be thus near to every one of us, that the fact should not be apparent to sense in some way or other. They see the evidence of power and wisdom in all the works of nature—in things great and things small: they decide in their inmost hearts that there must be a Cause adequate to the production of these wisdom-marked and power-indicating developments: yet they have a dreadful reservation in distrust of this verdict of reason. They have a feeling that if God is everywhere, He ought to show himself. There is a reason why He does not, which is revealed, and must be true. Philosophy can give us no reason. Philosophy is darkness itself in all things relating to God. The truth supplies the explanation of the distressing fact lamented

even by David, that God should be a stranger to the earth, that He should hide His hand in His bosom and cover His presence with cloud. God is great and holy and dreadful, and to be held in reverence. He is not to be mocked. He cannot look on sin. The inhabitants of the earth are steeped in sin.

> *"They are all gone astray, There is none that doeth good—no, not one."*

From the day that Adam introduced disobedience and death, He has only been approached in sacrifice through faith. The visible indications of the divine presence have been restrained, and as sin has gone on with increasing power and prevalence, the reasons for the divine reserve have acquired increasing strength, until at the present time, if it were not for His purpose, He would abandon the earth altogether, or more probably break forth destructively towards the entire race, as he did in the days of Noah. But He has a purpose which restrains Him—a purpose of wisdom and kindness, and for the sake of this, sin and sinners are tolerated for a season. He purposes finally a total change in the state of things upon the earth. He early announced this purpose in this emphatic form:

> *"As truly as I live, the whole earth shall be filled with my glory."*

This purpose Paul proceeded to apprise the "learned" Athenians of; and this is the second point of his discourse to be briefly glanced at.

He said—

> *"God hath appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom He hath appointed."*

In this is involved all that the heart can desire. It comes as the necessary counterpart of God's existence and greatness. The appointment of *"a day"* in which that existence will be as manifest to sense as it is to reason—and as powerful in the regulation of human affairs as it is in the maintenance of the universe, is a very glorious fact, and in the very nature of it glad-tidings (or gospel). What is the existence or the greatness of God to us if we are to be for ever shut out from all practical relation to it? We sigh and cry with David in these the days of the hiding of His face.

> *"As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God—for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My flesh longeth for thee, in a dry and thirsty land where no water is."*

If such a state of parching desire were to remain, what consolation could flesh and blood derive from the theoretical recognition of a greatness it was not permitted to taste? The appointment of *"a day"* in which this bereft condition of things will end is good news indeed. It is goodness not only announced, but guaranteed. The world has received a pledge of it—a tangible pledge that we can grasp as palpably as anything that belongs to history:

> *"Whereof,"* continues Paul, *"He hath given assurance to all men in that he hath raised up Jesus from the dead."*

The resurrection of Christ is an established fact—an event demonstrated to have taken place—an event of which the perversity of man can in no wise dispose or get rid of. It is the pledge of the glorious purpose that yet lies gloriously embosomed in futurity. Christ's resurrection is a guarantee of Christ's present existence, and Christ's present existence is a guarantee of his coming again to accomplish the glorious purpose which finds finality in the state of things thus proclaimed prophetically in the ears of John in Patmos:

> *"Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain. . . There shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. And they shall see His face, and his*

name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there, and they need no candle, neither light of the sun, for the Lord God giveth them light, and they shall reign for ever and ever."

We are here this morning waiting for the coming of this glorious state of things. We see many signs of its nearness, but still we wait and shall wait. We are in that situation described by the Lord as the position of His waiting servants in the day of His coming: though His coming is due, we know neither the day or hour wherein the Son of Man cometh. Shall we weary at any delay—however prolonged it may appear to our weak faculties? Nay: God helping us, we shall be found at our post to the last if we die there. If he come this year, we shall give praise. If he come next year, we shall rejoice no less for the prolonging, if he come in five years we shall say—

"Lo this is our God, we have waited for Him, let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation."

But if he come not in ten years, we shall still hold in courage. If he come not in twenty years, we shall wait; yea, if he come not in fifty years, we shall not despair. The times and signs forbid such a prospect, still the whole matter stands so strongly established on the pledged and already largely fulfilled purpose of God, that even were our expectations to prove more premature than is possible, reason would calmly abide the appointed working out of things. Time is nothing to God though long to us.

"A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past."

Our attitude cannot better be marked out for us than in Paul's beautiful words,

"Be ye steadfast and immoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

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