A VOLUNTARY HUMILITY.

"A voluntary humility"—*Col.* ii. 18.

THESE words recall to us vast and cloudy speculations which during the second century threatened to drown and even to quench the glory of the Christian gospel. They have long ceased to be credible. We look back upon them with astonishment. It is difficult for us to understand that men of genius should have given their strength to constructing them. But the intellectual and moral conditions from which they all originated exist among ourselves. Man remains the same, though his speculations about God and the universe change from age to age.

Among the Colossian Christians, as we can see in this Epistle, there were teachers who anticipated in a rudimentary way that great movement of religious and philosophical thought which sixty years later was called Gnosticism. At Colossæ they blended into one perilous and pernicious system two distinct and at first sight incoherent elements. On the one hand, they insisted on the permanent obligation and on the religious value of the outward institutions of Judaism. They maintained that Christian men were bound to keep the Sabbath and the festivals of the Mosaic law, and they went even beyond the demands of the Mosaic law in their precepts concerning abstinence from different kinds of food and drink which, as they supposed, were injurious to the higher life of the soul. On the other hand, they adventured on speculations concerning God and His relations to the world and the human race which were wholly alien from the whole substance of the historic Jewish faith. As I have said, they anticipated in a rudimentary way the elaborate theories of Gnosticism. It is to this side of their teaching that Paul is referring when he warns the Colossian Church against being robbed

of the great prize of their Christian calling—present restoration to God and eternal redemption—by a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels.

There are traces of Gnostic tendencies among the Jews of the first century and the false teachers at Colossæ were Jews who were influenced by these tendencies. Gnosticism asks: How is it possible to conceive of God, the Eternal God, the Holy God, as the Author and Creator of the world as we know it, and of men as we know them? The world is a world of matter, God is a Spirit: the distance between the world and God is infinite. In the world there is pain, sorrow, death; God is infinitely good, and how can the world have come from Him? Men, as we know them, are often selfish, intemperate, sensual, unjust, cruel; even in the best men there is sin: how is it possible to imagine that men were created by God who is glorious in His holiness?

These questions were agitating the Jewish mind before this Epistle was written; and there were Jews who supposed that they had discovered the answer to them in the hints and suggestions contained in the Old Testament about the existence of angels.

I cannot attempt to give an exact outline of their theory, which indeed only gradually assumed definiteness, and which received a great variety of forms; but their fundamental principle may be stated in a very few words. They supposed that the Eternal God gave existence to a glorious being, or to several glorious beings, inferior to Himself, but possessing great and wonderful power; that this being, or these beings, originated others who were also glorious and who also possessed great powers, but who were a degree lower both in glory and power; that these again originated other beings; that, as the movement went on, each new order had less of the life and light of God than the order from which it came, and that at last there came into exist-

ence a being who was so far remote from the transcendent perfection of God, that it was possible for him to handle matter and to give form to a world like this and to a race like our own.

The root of the whole position, you see, is the assumption that God is too holy, too great, too good, to have any direct and immediate relation either to the world or to men. Between Him and us, between Him and the world, there is an infinite distance: a chasm of angelic beings, rank below rank, extends over the immense and awful interval, —thrones, dominations, virtues, powers; and we are in immediate contact with the lowest of these angelic orders. That was the form which the Gnostic theory held among the Jews.

But if God is too great for Him to have any direct relation to us, He must be too great for us to have any direct relation to Him. If He cannot approach us, we cannot approach Him. And so when the Colossian Christians who had received this false teaching looked up to God, they saw rising above them, in ascending greatness and splendour, rank above rank of angelic powers,—spiritual agencies intermediate between God and man, between man and God: the highest of these glorious beings were too high for the thought of common men to reach, for the vision of common men to gaze upon; and God, the eternal God, was infinitely higher still. God they could not reach. They reverenced and worshipped angels. They confessed that they were unequal to the blessedness of standing in the immediate presence of the Supreme. This is what Paul calls "a *voluntary humility*,"—a wilful refusal of the dignity which God has conferred upon us in Christ.

The men who insisted that there can be no immediate relation between the Eternal and the world, and who constructed gigantic systems of speculation to show how the awful interval between the Eternal and the created uni-

verse was bridged over, claimed to be in possession of the true *Gnosis*—the real knowledge of things. Other Christians were *believers:* they were the men who *knew.* Paul in this Epistle sets the true knowledge—the true *Gnosis*—over against the false. He teaches that all things were created in Christ, in heaven, and on earth,—in Christ, the Eternal Son of God, who shares the eternal life and glory of the Father, and is one with Him, of the same substance, —to use the technical term of a later age; and in Christ *we* were created. By sin we had became alienated from our true life—the life of God in Christ—and had provoked the displeasure and condemnation of the Eternal; but Christ in His death for the sin of the world made peace—and through Him we recover the greatness for which we were created. To refuse immediate access to God in Christ, to despair of the immediate knowledge of God through Christ, is a voluntary, a wilful humility.

And now, dismissing these vanished forms of speculation, let us consider some of the tendencies among ourselves which have the same root.

There are some men who say, The universe is great and wonderful, and human patience and genius have made brilliant discoveries concerning its laws and its history; but by the very constitution of our minds we cannot pass beyond it: of God, from whom it came, we can know nothing. That is what Paul would call a wilful or voluntary humility,—an abdication of your regal greatness.

You find in visible and material things an intelligible order; an order, I mean, which you can understand: it answers to your own thought; you can construct a theory of it by observation and experiment; and your theory you call Science. But when I say that a painting is intelligible to me, I mean that I can discover the thought of the artist. I can see—imperfectly, perhaps, but still I can see what was in his mind and purpose when he painted it. If I say

that a building is intelligible to me, if I can construct a theory of it, I mean that I have learned, more or less completely, the principles on which the architect constructed it; I have grasped his thought concerning the proportions of it, concerning the purposes of its various parts. If I say that a poem is intelligible to me, I mean that there is a real relation between my mind and the mind of the poet; that in reading it I have not my own arbitrary thoughts about it, but his thoughts. In the painting the mind of the artist meets my mind. Unless I shared a common intellectual life with the artist, his painting would be unintelligible to me. And wherever the visible universe is intelligible to me, the mind of the Creator of the universe meets my mind, and unless I shared a common intellectual life with the Creator, His creation would be unintelligible to me.

This is Paul's doctrine. The universe was created in and through Christ. You also were created in and through Christ. The light of your intellectual life is kindled by the glorious fires of His intellectual life; therefore His creation is in part intelligible to you. Your intellectual life might decline, its light be almost extinguished: then the creation would cease to be intelligible to you; you could not find any order in it; the thought of its Creator would be beyond your reach. But while you retain the intellectual life with which you were created in Christ, your thought can reach His thought.

Let us take another example of voluntary, wilful humility. There are some men who say, Duty is clear to us. We see that we ought to be just, truthful, kindly, industrious, temperate. But we can see nothing more. About God we can discover nothing. He is beyond our reach.

Is that so? *Duty* is a very wonderful word. The word *Ought*, as soon as you try to see what it means, will lead you into regions of infinite mystery. What is the experience that you represent, when you say that you "ought" to

be kindly and just, for example, to the people about you? *Ought*! Does it mean simply that they have claims on you which you ought to fulfil by justice and kindness? That your conduct is an affair between you and them, and between you and them only?

They have claims on you. Yes, but why *ought* you to fulfil them? Where is the obligation rooted? By what authority is it enforced? *Claims*—how do you distinguish between those of their demands which you *ought* to meet, and those which you are at liberty to disregard? What constitutes the difference? What is that *ought* which is imperative in the one description of demands and silent in the other?

You say that your conduct is an affair between you and them—between you and them only: is it so? Can they release you from the obligation to be just to them, from the obligation to be kind to them? *They* cannot do it. There is some mysterious authority above you both; and in that august word *Ought* it speaks with regal power: beyond i there is no appeal: that word is final.

Ought: you hear it in your most secret heart; it binds—it forbids secret acts, secret passions, secret thoughts. It is above you. It accepts no bribes. It can be dethroned by no force. You may refuse to listen. It may become silent: but the silence is awful; then your doom begins. It has to be reckoned with. You know that it has to be reckoned with. What—what is this mysterious power?

Paul's answer is, You were created in Christ, the Eternal Son of the Eternal God: and in that word *Ought* the will of Christ is asserted concerning your conduct. While your moral life remains you share something of His moral life. Your moral life may be corrupted, as your intellectual life may be impaired: your moral judgments may be false, as your intellectual conclusions may be false. But as long as the moral life is unextinguished, there will be the sense,

dim and faint perhaps, but most real, of an Authority above you, which you are bound to obey. Accept it with joy. This is your glory—that you may fulfil the thought of the Eternal, that the Eternal cares for your fulfilment of His thought. Have the courage to ask Him to make His thought clearer. Trust Him for strength to enable you to fulfil it. An unconscious law—this is hard to obey: recognise through conscience the voice of the Living God, and life will receive new vigour, new hope, new joy.

II.

"A voluntary humility." Let us look at some other examples of it.

There are Churches which encourage the penitent and sorrowful soul, conscious of its sins and of its weakness, to invoke the mediation and intercession of angels and of saints and of the mother of our Lord. It seems a less arduous effort of the soul to appeal to them than to appeal at once to the Supreme.

And in these same Churches a system of mediation of another kind is created between God and man. Men are invited to confess their sins to a priest, and the priest is declared to have authority to absolve from sin. To confess to a priest seems less arduous than to confess to God Himself. The priest is near: he can be seen; his voice can be heard. He himself has known the power of temptation and the trouble of a conscience ill at ease. To find God, there seems an awful distance to travel; and His transcendent holiness is also awful. How can a sinful man draw near to those eternal and glorious fires? Is it not more becoming to shrink from Him in the hour of our weakness—to speak to a man like ourselves instead of to Him? And may we not have fuller comfort in listening to an absolution, when it comes from human lips authorised

to speak for Him, than in waiting in awe and fear to listen to Himself while He assures us of His pardon? How can we hope that *He* will speak to us?

And the grace of God—the life and power that He gives to man—is there not something that transcends human strength in receiving them direct from Himself? If His appointed ministers consecrate the bread and the wine, and so make them the vehicle of spiritual life and power, is there not something in this more suited to our low estate?

Paul would have made short work with all these pleas, and would have said that in every one of them there was a voluntary, a wilful humility, a rejection of the fulness of the mercy and grace which God has made ours in Christ. Angels—saints—Mother of Christ, as intercessors!—You, too, were created in Christ: you are one with Him: in His Sonship you are sons: in His access to God you have access to the Father. You yourselves are to speak to God in Christ's name, because of the union between you and Him; and to decline to do it is a voluntary, a wilful refusal of the redemption and the reconciliation to God which Christ has accomplished for you by His Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection.

Priests to absolve! In Christ's death you died. He bore your sins in His own body upon the tree. You have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins. In Christ, as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed your transgressions from you. Have the courage to accept your redemption—to thank God for it. Christ is not far away: He has descended for you to depths deeper than any into which you have ever sunk, into a darkness which forced from His lips the appalling cry, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" He is near to you still,—nearer than the priest: for you were created in Christ, not in the priest; the very root of your being is

in Him. He, and only He, is the way to the Father. It is a voluntary humility which confesses to another instead of to Him, and which receives absolution from another instead of from Him.

Priests to consecrate sacraments that they may be vehicles of grace! Is Christ absent from a company gathered together in His name unless a priest is there? I repeat, they are created in Christ; they live in His life; they are one with Him, as the branches are one with the vine. When they come together, they realize their union with each other in their common union with Him. As from His hands—from the hands of the invisible Christ—they received the bread: when He has blessed it, it needs no other blessing. As from His hands—the hands of the invisible Christ—they receive the cup: when He has consecrated it, it needs no other consecration.

It is a voluntary, wilful humility, ungracious, ungrateful, unbelieving, which refuses to believe that we may confess our sins to Him who died for them; and that we may receive direct from Him in whom we too have access to God, the life and the power which sustain Christian righteousness and joy.

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