

Transition A Stage of Transformation

A Thanksgiving Sermon

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Church of Fall River, Mass.

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S E R M O N

There shall be signs in sun and moon and stars : and upon the earth distress of nations, in perplexity for the roaring of the sea and the billows : men fainting for fear, and for expectation of the things which are coming on the world : for the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these things begin to come to pass, look up, and lift up your heads : because your redemption draweth nigh.--Luke 21 : 25-28.

The whole process is long. It began with the convulsions which had the destruction of Jerusalem for their immediate result. It runs on through all ages to the end of earthly history, when the great and final consummation will come. Meanwhile there are many subordinate consummations, and many crises of transition : in all of which the same forces are working on and on, in all of which the course of events has essentially one and the same meaning.

In the preparation of crisis the kingdom comes not with observation. For long periods forces work silently : the results toward which they work are not evident to superficial observation. During such periods there are those who think that little or nothing is accomplished, worth the while : that Christianity is, at least comparatively, a failure. At length, however, the crisis is prepared, and the transition begins to come. It manifests itself in the apparent loosing of all ties for a season : in a general break-up of old forms, both of good and of evil.

The good has outgrown its old form, which had become a fetter. With the good, in the old form elements of evil had been working : and they must be cast out, that a new form may come filled with a better life. But in the very break-up of the old form of good there is often an appearance of the victory of evil. It has long been attempting the overthrow of good : at length the overthrow seems to have come. The partisans of evil raise the shout of victory : the hearts of not a few defenders of good fail them for fear, and for expectation of the things which are coming on the world. On all sides there are pessimists, more or less pronounced—those who have little faith or none at all, and those whose discernment does not penetrate beneath the surface appearance.

Is evil winning a permanent victory ? With the passing away of the old form is the power of good destroyed in the world, or seriously and permanently diminished ? It never has been. Those who believe in God may be very certain that it never will be. In the breakings up of ancient history it was always the corruption of evil which went down. Some power of good lived on, as the germ of a new beginning. In the crises of Christian history evil also has gone down : but in all other respects the outcome has been very different. It has not been some mere germ of good that has survived, as the beginning of a new cycle like the old one. The world has got beyond the cycles in which the same course of events is over and over repeated. The Life has come : more and more it is taking possession of the world and animating it. The crises are crises of progress : not properly of wreck and a new beginning. The transition is transformation. The life takes on higher powers and a wider range of activity. It produces finer and grander results than before : redemption advances, the final glorification is nearer. Such has been the actual course of Christian history, fulfilling the Master's words. They are surer words now than ever before, and we live in times when we need to take heed to them. Notoriously we live in a time of far-reaching transition. Manifestly some are fainting for fear ;

pessimism has more disciples than it has had in Christendom before since the break-up of the Roman empire. There is abundant material for Fast day sermons, for evil is let loose and is very active. Peril is real and is imminent : the love of some waxes cold, and others are beguiled by cheating forms as of an angel of light. There is abundant material for sermons calling for open-eyed vigilance, for a vigor of faithfulness more energetic than ever before. Just as surely there is abundant material for Thanksgiving sermons. Instructed by our Lord we may find the material in the very facts of the crisis, in the very movements of transition.

Consider, therefore, some aspects of the general fact that in our day everything is in transition. New forces are used in industry : they are making revolution in all methods of industry, and in the social combinations of industrial life. Machinery is used instead of unaided human muscle. Even in intellectual pursuits, in all the sciences, not excepting psychology and theology, a multitude of mechanical appliances and instrumentalities have made investigation much more effective and successful. As result of more varied and thorough investigation, we have many new sciences and a great development of the older ones. One result has been a much wider application of science to the uses of life, in a multitude of new or improved arts. Another result has been the discovery of truths unknown before, or of a new sweep and new relations of truths previously known. It is as if, by new conditions of vision, the horizon of thought had been greatly extended : while within the limits of the old horizon the landscape was found to be in many respects very different from what it had seemed, and to contain many more objects than those formerly seen.

Certainly, great principles of truth and life have been known for ages. But the sweep of some of them was not apprehended, and the practical applications of them had been comparatively few and insignificant. They have come out into vivid sunlight : they have a new reality now, a new meaning, a multitude of new and most important applications. Consequently,

society is undergoing great changes in intercourse and culture, in spirit and in forms of organization. The methods of business are increasingly different from those of our fathers. The creeds, the organization and the activities of churches are modified. The forms of government have been changing: the spirit of legislation, and the methods of political activity. All things are in a flux. That greatly disturbs many people, including good people. In the world of thought and life they have the feeling of instability that men have when the solid earth quakes under their feet. They do not know what to think. Some of them seem to suppose that truth is becoming uncertain. There are even a few who infer that either nothing is true, or that anything can be made true by accepting it: that if there is a sufficiently confident assertion, white may be made black or black white. Unquestionably there are great perils in times of transition. There is need of calmness, of caution, of discernment, of courage. But God reigns. He will guide every willing mind: if men are faithful, he will ensure to them a blessed outcome. If something better is to come, it must needs be by transition, and the time of transition is the very time for establishing better forms, better institutions, which shall embody a purer spirit. It is above all others the time of great and blessed opportunity, the time of manifest privilege. Both for what we may experience and for what we may accomplish we may be thankful that we live in such a time. "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay," wrote Tennyson truly. For most of us, better one year of wide-awake, vigorous and worthy life to-day than a century in the time of Abraham, or of King Josiah, or of Charlemagne.

Consider now a little more in detail some of the great departments of life in which the old is passing away and a new is coming. I spoke a moment ago of machinery. As compared with our time there was no machinery in use one hundred and fifty years ago. Every year it is increasing and improving. There are new inventions continually, and better adaptations of the old ones. Machinery has revolutionized industry. It is

little to say that, with proper mechanisms, a hundred men can do to-day more than a thousand men could do two hundred years ago. Therefore the introduction of the more important machines has thrown many out of work for a time, and has sometimes occasioned great temporary suffering. But the multiplication of diverse machinery has made ten occupations where there was one before, has immensely increased the quantity and variety of products for human use and comfort, and has greatly cheapened the price of them. By machinery, also, the great forces of nature are harnessed into man's service, so that man is lord of the world as never before. It is his destiny. The consciousness of lordship is exalting to him. It may curse him if his lordship becomes selfish or reckless; it may greatly ennoble him if he is reverent and worthy. One result of this material lordship is great reduction of the hours of labor. The whole of life need not now be spent in grinding toil for mere bread and raiment. Even the poorest has his hours of release. There is possibility of increased dissipation and waste of life on the one hand, but on the other there are opportunity and means for a higher human culture, for a larger and a finer life. There are other and very different results. The wide and varied possibilities of machinery, and the subjugation of nature's forces, have occasioned an absorption of mind in things material. In many minds there is a tendency to think that all human needs may be thus supplied: while practically there are some who regard matter and its forces as the be-all and end-all of the universe. That is a danger to be met and overcome, a mischief to be removed. We may hope it will be temporary mischief, while the lasting result shall be an immense and incalculable gain of power for the uses of civilization and the highest human life.

Notwithstanding the material development, there has been great spiritual activity of a high type and over a wider range of territory than ever before. Christianity is covering the whole world with its enterprises of extension and development, is everywhere furnishing themes of discussion, everywhere

producing movement and transition. In non-Christian lands it has already become evident, or is rapidly becoming so, that no other religion can compare with the Christian in power, in amount and quality of truth, in practical worth for this world and in presumable preparation for another. There is an evident superiority of the Christian nations; not by any means the superiority of all types of life found in Christendom, but only of the better types, which, however, gives great superiority to the nations as such. The unmistakableness of the fact has occasioned inquiry for the cause, and will occasion such inquiry more and more. Some years ago the Japanese ambassadors at several of the European courts were instructed to ask what it was that had given European nations such a development, and had made them so mighty. Queen Victoria replied: The Bible, and the religion founded on it. The Emperor William and Bismarck replied: Christianity. The influence of such a reply is incalculable, especially if further inquiry shows that it is a true reply.

But Christianity is in transition, we are told; in process of disappearance, some have said, affirming that a diminishing per cent. of the population is found in the churches, which exert a diminishing influence in the community. Whatever may be the element of truth or plausibility in such a statement, for the present it may be sufficient to set over against it three facts: (1) Never before in the history of the United States was so large a per cent. of the population in the membership of the churches as during the past twenty-five years. (2) Never before in the history of Christianity were the enterprises of the whole Christian church so vast and effective. (3) Never before did the spirit and principles of Christianity come into such prominence or exert such tremendous practical influence in the world. No doubt the historic Christianity of human opinion and practice is in transition. It needs to be; frequently, if not continually. Errors and evils need to be detected and cast out; defects need to be remedied; progress needs to be made. No doubt the fundamental principles of Christianity are questioned

as never before. Discussion ranges more widely and pursues its investigations more profoundly. So much the better. If Christianity be true, if it be really of God, there can be but one issue of all that. The truth will be brought to light, where many may see it from whom it has been more or less hidden heretofore. The profounder investigations will show that the foundations are immovable. The result will be an intelligent confidence—incomparably better than any traditional faith. The faith of comprehensive intelligence will be strong and manifestly rational.

In general, it may be said that historic Christianity is in a process of transition, and is in a great crisis of its history, because its principles have generated movements which are affecting the whole structure of modern society, and all the processes of modern life. Of course there is great opposition, and a general ferment. If Christianity succeeds in reconstructing society according to its own principles, and in transforming human life, it must of course thereafter have a place and a power in the world unknown, and in part even undreamed of, hitherto. If it should fail, that would be an unprecedented disaster in its history. We need more carefully to consider what the movements and problems of our time really are, what has caused them, and toward what issue they tend. There is one word that defines the class to which all the more important practical movements and problems belong. In the widest sense of the word they are social. The questions on which everything turns are such as this—What is the proper relation of human beings, or of classes of beings, to each other? In intercourse that is the question of castes and of social classes. In industry it is the question of the proper relation of employer and employed, of capitalist and laborer—in some respects as regards the administration of industry, and always as regards the distribution of its profits. In government it is the question of civil liberty and equality, of the right of all to participate in government on equal terms, and the equal right of all to the protection and benefits of government. In all

departments it is a question of the spirit and the forms of organization by which men are brought together, and of the methods by which organization shall seek its ends. All these are social questions. The word socialism covers some of them, at least in part, but what is properly called socialism has but a comparatively limited sphere. The word sociology is much wider in its meaning. That is the name of a new and most comprehensive science. It includes all that pertains to human life in the relation of human beings to each other; it reaches to all the interests of organic humanity. All the questions I have mentioned, and many more, are questions in sociology.

Now what has brought such questions into prominence, and what are the principles at issue in the problems to be solved? In themselves the questions have always been as important as they are to-day. They have always been practical questions needing to be asked, and to be truly answered. Therefore, to some extent, and in some form, some of them have come up in the past, and have received a partial answer, better or worse. They are the urgent questions of our time; increasingly absorbing attention, and demanding fuller and more satisfactory answer than ever before. Why? Because in the average individual of Christendom a new life is working. He has a new sense of personal worth, of his own capacities and possibilities, a self-consciousness clearer and more sacred than of old, a personality more self-centered and independent, higher aspiration and courage, a more resolute vigor. What has given to the average human individual these characteristics in a degree in which he never before possessed them? So far as I know, there is but one answer which at all meets the demands of the question, and for which any adequate evidence can be given. It is this:—The truths and spirit of Christianity. Such qualities of the average individual are found only in Christendom, and they are just the qualities which the truths and spirit of Christianity generate.

Remember that Christianity teaches a personal relation of the individual soul to the infinite and eternal God, a divine love and care for the individual, a divine redemption for him, the gift of a divine grace to him, divine impartations in the processes of thought and feeling and will; and it teaches that all the work of a right and good life is a form of participation with God. No other religion teaches such doctrines as these, but Christianity presents them as facts. Accepting them, and making experience of the reality of them, it is not possible that one should not come to have a more sacred self-regard, a worthier aspiration, a more resolute and self-centered personality. All these teachings are included in what may be called the Fatherhood of God.

Take now that other and corresponding teaching of the brotherhood of man. It necessarily goes with the common fatherhood of God. In essential rights, then, all men are equal. They may claim a common participation in privilege, an equitable participation in the benefits of all organized activity, whether in culture, in industry or in government. The social problems and conflicts of our time are nothing other than the natural product of such truths as these: for in Christendom we are increasingly persuaded that these are truths. We are increasingly convinced that humanity is one body; that if one member suffers, sooner or later all other members must suffer with it; that if one member receives advantage, in one way or other, sooner or later, all members may participate with it and ought to. Therefore there may not be forms of government which give to one class of persons permanent advantage over other classes. That is the very principle of civil liberty, the principle of revolt in Russia and of Republicanism in America. There may not be laws which give to one class of persons an important and permanent advantage over any other class. If a tariff means such a fostering of new industries, and such a development of national resources as shall promote the prosperity of all the people, and a tariff may be framed so as to mean that—then, so far forth, it has

behind it the support of the principle of human brotherhood. But if it means the advantage of one class to the detriment of others, the promotion of monopolies, the increase of the rich man's profit and the poor man's expense--and a tariff may also be so constructed as to mean that--then, sooner or later, that tariff will find itself at issue with the mightiest movements of history. That is not the whole of the case, however. Humanity is one: all the nations are participating members. If a tariff means help for each where its worth needs a clear field that it may the better contribute to the welfare of all, then international morality will support it. But if it means selfishness and exclusion, the prosperity of one nation or people with loss to others, then, sooner or later, the spirit of universal brotherhood will banish it from history. The question of tariff, or no tariff, high tariff or low, has been considered a purely political and economical question, with which the decalogue and the golden rule have as little to do as with a political campaign--according to the views of some and the practice of many. But it is a question of sociology, and all sociological questions are moral, even though they be also political and financial. And these are some of the moral principles involved in the tariff question, to which many of our politicians have been strangely insensible or culpably indifferent.

Take one of the most recent movements of the times--the tendency to great combinations of industry, or wealth, or power. By possibility that may be, or may be made, a movement in the development of the highest civilization and the largest welfare: may be truly and literally a movement in the development of the kingdom of God. What assignable limit is there to the combinations which may be made in the development of humanity and the promotion of universal welfare? In the ultimate civilization, that will be world-wide, there will certainly be grander and mightier combinations than have ever yet been dreamed of. But the profitableness and the continued existence of them is peculiarly dependent on the moral principles inwrought and controlling. Such combinations are

permanently possible only in the degree in which they shall be founded in righteousness, and administered in accordance with the principles of universal brotherhood. The opportunities for great accumulations and concentrations of power are comparatively few. The numerous relations which they sustain will expose them to a great variety of influences, and will put them into a condition of unstable equilibrium. The hands that can at once hold and wield such power are few. Everything depends on the continuance of life: after power has been attained life is comparatively short, and is always uncertain. If there be any lack of righteousness or love or wisdom in the use of power, practical despotism is the subtle and perpetual liability. Multitudes will be oppressed by it, and they will at length sweep it away. Therefore if such combinations are organized to enable the strong to retain power and to get more, that it may be used for personal, or class, or partisan advantage to the cost of humanity, the longer the combination shall maintain itself, the more utter and widespread the ultimate wreck it will bring, and in which it will be involved. Humanity is greater than any artificial combination which can be made, and humanity is increasingly observant, increasingly discerning, increasingly vigorous. A moral sense has been awakened in humanity which cannot be permanently outraged. More than that, a great deal, there is a moral order of the world which can no more be successfully defied than can the natural order of the seasons or of the planetary motions.

As humanity is one, so also civilization and life are becoming one the world over. There is no movement surer and mightier than that towards ultimate union in one world-life, in which all men shall participate on equal terms. International intercourse represents it and promotes it: so do a world-wide trade and commerce: so do travel and a common literature: so do philanthropy and the missionary propagation of Christianity. Vicious tariffs, if they are enacted, cannot prevent it: nor Chinese exclusion laws--whether enacted in China against the rest of the world, or in the United States against the Chinese.

The only true way of permanently preventing the competition of labor harmfully cheap is that of elevating the type of human life the world over by the power of the gospel and a common development. When manhood means as much in Austria or in China as it does in the best institutions and influences of American life, it will not be possible to get the cheap labor that presupposes or involves human degradation: for the men cannot be found that will labor under such conditions. Meanwhile it is reported that a cotton mill of the Lowell type is in successful operation in China under the superintendence of Lowell-trained skill. If any one supposes that the world will be willing to remain in dependence and privation that we may have a foreign market on our own terms, and chiefly for our own profit, he is needlessly innocent.

The unifying of civilization and life the world over has its possibilities of terrible evil, of fearful peril. It means intimate contacts with all forms of existing corruption and degradation. It means conflict for supremacy of the methods, traditions, political and economical systems, ideals and religions of all the world. We are getting some idea of the nature of it from the conflicts of our social and political life, produced by the mingling of nations and races in the population of the United States. These merely give hint of what is sure to come with world-wide energy. There will be sources of relief, however. The conflict will go on gradually from point to point. For intelligent citizens of the world many principles will be settled beforehand by conflicts that were local. Local governments will remain, many local differences continue, harmonious diversities will increase in number while civilization is becoming essentially one the world over. On the brighter side that means transcendently blessed opportunity and possibility and hope. It means the ultimate contribution of whatsoever God has imparted to every race and people, in the development of a perfect humanity and a perfect social state. There is need of discernment, and wisdom, and courage, and above all, of faithfulness to the right and good: and then there is no doubt

whether good or evil will triumph when the two come in conflict. There is a moral order of the world which the Almighty Creator has established, which the holy Universe-King is maintaining. It cannot be overthrown. The movements and crises of history are the opportunities and the methods of its fuller revelation, of its triumphant on-moving. It is more and more evident that the Christianity of the New Testament is the complement in history of that moral order of the world. The principles of the two are identical. The processes of the two are in harmony. Therefore the proclamation and the development of Christianity have such tremendous result in history, inaugurating the mightiest movements, generating the most radical and far-reaching revolutions.

The ultimate outcome will be a world-life in which Christian principles shall have their final triumph and their complete illustration. That will also be the full revelation of the moral order of the world as an order of righteousness and welfare, of goodness and glory. That will be the kingdom of God among men: which is to come and is coming. We have to-day no occasion for thanksgiving at all comparable with that given by signs of the times, which are the signs of the coming of that kingdom.