

THE GOSPEL OF THE HEART

William Law on: God's unlimited mercy

Christians seem to be set against one another in mutual condemnation. It has been the pattern over the centuries. The wars and rumours of wars predicted by Jesus have infiltrated the ranks of his Church. How then can she be a sign of unity, peace and concord in the midst of a fractured, embattled world?

Mercifully disunity is not the whole story, only the outer husk, and simultaneously a clear indication that there is a battle in progress more deadly and demanding than any of its outward manifestations either in church or society. Scripture makes it clear that our enemies are the principalities and powers of the heavenly places, the powers of darkness. But Scripture also assures us that the victory of good over evil, of light over darkness, is secure, and achieved everlastingly in Christ. Meanwhile all hell is let loose on earth as the devil has his final fling in his death throes (Revelation 12⁷⁻¹²).

Yet the seed and promise of salvation was sown at Creation, just as the possibility, the inevitability we might say, of evil was also there. Since God is absolute goodness, **and** all powerful, evil can have no final sway however. That is our gospel certainty, so we do not despair. But neither do we sit back and do nothing, for the battle is real and still raging. God has done more than his part and like the prodigal son we have to bestir ourselves and journey towards him to receive his mercy, both for ourselves and others. The gospel, which we discover to be true, cannot be hugged to ourselves. It must be proclaimed by our manner of peaceable, compassionate living. Love must be brought to bear again in our day-to-day worldly context and perhaps especially in our local congregational setting and our inter-church relationships. The bickering and uncharitableness will not do.

To make such a radical change we must co-opt once more all the spiritual resources God offers us. We must believe from the heart that redemption is on offer and receive it, work for and with it, until hope is restored. Other ages have known and withstood the ravages of unlove and bitterness between the followers of Christ and we can find support from those who then refused to sit down under things and despair. They looked to the perennial gospel, the good news which cannot be thwarted by human sinfulness. William Law, faced with the uncertainties and divisions in post-reformation Christianity in 18th century England turned to the essentials – the need to find again the living presence of Jesus in the secret places of our own heart and to allow that presence to transform both ourselves and our whole context. Then we might even discover the same Christ, hidden and secretly at work, in people and places where we never dreamed to find him. The bitterness and the bickering then evaporate overnight.

In his treatise, *“The Spirit of Prayer”*, Law says succinctly: *“Christ not in us is the same thing as Christ not ours”*. It is no good professing Christianity if we do not know our Lord deeply and intimately, if his person and his teaching are merely verbal propositions and ammunition for argument. No. In keeping with the spirituality familiar to William Law as part of his inherited tradition, Jesus must be our great exemplar, his life and teaching looked to for imitation, consistently:

“Wherever thou goest, whatever thou dost, at home or abroad, in the field or at church, do all in a desire of union with Christ, in imitation of his tempers and inclinations, and look upon all as nothing but that which exercises and increases the Spirit and life of Christ in thy soul.” (Ibid)

Moreover, this is to be no merely external imitation but is to reach to the innermost centre of our mind, heart and spirit, since that is where we authentically meet with God and he with us. There there can be no pretence, and there the work of redemption, of ourselves and the whole creation, is underway. Without sincerity, repentance and a real change of attitudes any outward modification in behaviour patterns is simply hypocrisy and is doomed to failure.

“From morning to night keep Jesus in thy heart, long for nothing, desire nothing, hope for nothing, but to have all that is within thee changed into the Spirit and temper of the holy Jesus. Let this be thy Christianity, thy church, thy religion . . . This longing desire of thy heart to be one with Christ will soon put a stop to all the vanity of thy life, and nothing will be admitted to enter into thy heart or proceed from it but what comes from God and returns to God.”

(Ibid)

Sadly, though, the reality is far different. Believers are just as ready to reject Jesus as were many of those who first heard him during his time on earth:

O Christendom, look not only at the old Jews, but see thyself in this glass. For at this day [and still] . . . a Christ within us, an inward Saviour raising a birth of his own nature, life and Spirit within us, is rejected as gross enthusiasm. [instead] the propagation of Popery, the propagation of Protestantism, the success of some particular church is the salvation which priests and people are chiefly concerned about.”

(Ibid)

But that is **not** what the Church is really meant to be like. Rather, in essence, she is truly universal, catholic in the real sense of the term, all-embracing and whole. William Law glimpsed this:

“See the beginning and glorious extent of the Catholic Church of Christ; it takes in all the world. It is God’s unlimited mercy to all mankind, and every human creature, as sure as he is born of Adam, has a birth of the ‘Bruiser of the Serpent’ [i.e. Christ, see Genesis 3] within him, and so is infallibly in covenant with God through Jesus Christ. Hence also it is that the holy Jesus is appointed to be judge of all the world; it is because all mankind, all nations and languages have in Him and through Him been put into covenant with God and made capable of resisting the evil of their fallen nature.”

(Ibid)

The divine likeness was indeed lost at the fall and yet the image was not defaced. Human nature always had the option, and enabling, to grow again into the likeness of God since he stepped in to remedy things – instantly:

“From the moment that the God of mercy inspoke into Adam the ‘Bruiser of the Serpent’ [once more the promised Christ foretold in Genesis 3], from that moment all the riches and treasures of the divine nature came again into man, as a seed of salvation sown in the centre of the soul, and only lies hidden there in every man till he desires to rise from his fallen state and to be born again from above.”

(Ibid)

This being so, we need first to be sure that we have each of us looked for and found that seed of Christ in ourselves and fostered its growth:

“Consider the treasure that thou hast within thee . . . the eternal Word of God lies hid in thee, as a spark of the divine nature which is to overcome sin and death and hell within thee.”

(Ibid)

If we are not first looking within ourselves and allowing the work of our redemption to be accomplished how can we hope to be peace-makers in a broken and divided Church? We shall be looking for Jesus in the wrong place, putting the cart before the horse and merely making a mess of things under our own steam:

“Thou seest, hearest, and feelest nothing of God, because thou seekest for him abroad with thy outward eyes, thou seekest for him in books, in controversies, in the church, and outward exercises, but there thou wilt not find him till thou has first found him in thy heart

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Thy natural senses cannot possess God . . . nay thy inward faculties of understanding, will and memory cannot be the place of His habitation in thee. But there is a root or depth in

thee from whence all these faculties come forth . . . this depth is the unity, the eternity . . . of thy soul . . . it is so infinite that nothing can satisfy it or give it any rest but the infinity of God.”

(Ibid)

Under God’s grace, and as people of prayer, faith and perseverance, perhaps we can humbly admit that we are beginning to discover God’s hidden presence and working in this deeply interior place. Please God it may be so. Then, looking out and venturing forth, we happily find traces of this same working in others. William Law found this to be so as he gazed in amazement at “*the glorious extent of the Catholic Church*” in its fullness. Not only, as he perceived, is Christ to be found in Christians of other, even **all** denominations, but he is there too in those who have never even heard tell of him. The same birth of Christ has been brought forth in their souls as well:

“Hence it was that so many eminent spirits, partakers of a divine life, have appeared in so many parts of the heathen world . . . as lights hung out by God in the midst of idolatrous darkness. These were the apostles of a Christ within . . . though they had not the law or gospel to urge upon their hearers, yet having turned to God, they found and preached the Gospel that was written in their hearts.”

(Ibid)

Maybe we are fearful of a loss of identity should we admit Christ’s full working within believers of Christian traditions other than our own. How much more are we apprehensive to allow Christ a place in the other world religions . . . and yet . . . William Law’s vision does not stop half way:

“Love is of no sect or party; it neither makes nor admits of any bounds; you may as easily enclose the light or shut up the air of the world into one place as confine love to a sect or party.”

(Ibid)

And, a little earlier:

“There is but one salvation for all mankind, and that is the life of God in the soul. God has but one design or intent towards all mankind . . . that all may be as so many images, temples and habitations of the Holy Trinity. This is God’s good will to all Christians, Jews and heathens. They are equally the desire of His heart . . . His wisdom crieth, she putteth forth her voice, not here or there but everywhere, in all the streets of all the parts of the world.” (Ibid)

These are the words of a man who has found God and the length, breadth, depth and height of his infinite love. He cannot be gainsaid by the ill-will of opponents or the narrowed vision of conflicting doctrines among the believers of his day. This is the challenge we are confronted with too:

“Now there is but one possible way for man to attain this salvation or life of God in the soul. There is not one for the Jew, another for a Christian, and a third for the heathen. No. God is one, human nature is one, salvation is one, and the way to it is one; and that is: the desire of the soul turned to God . . .” (Ibid)

It sounds simple – we need only desire God for him to respond. But of course, as we have seen, the very desiring requires everything of us in imitation of Christ and his self-sacrificial love. William Law himself only came through to a final, universalist position at the end of his life of prayer and struggle, but come through he did. In a conversation on the eve of his death he reportedly said that there would be a “*chasm in creation*” if even the fallen angels should find themselves excluded from eternal happiness.

No doubt **we** still have many struggles ahead with the demonic forces who would seek to impede God’s saving purposes. But for us who believe, and who know of God’s victorious love, there is a work to be done and the graces and helps are at hand. “*Beloved, let us love*” – without limit, and from the heart, where God is.

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