

Common People Faithful to Christ

Written for The Sunday Oregonian by Rev. Newell Dwight Hillis, Pastor of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn

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Text: "And the common people heard him gladly."

DURING his lifetime Christ's name was music to his generation. The common people heard him gladly, and the common people know their friends. The multitude is not always right, but given time, the multitude is seldom ever wrong. Every generation has its hero, but the people who crowded about the carpenter's son knew with swift intuition that here was the leader for whom the people long had looked. And now that the centuries have come and gone all will confess that in this friend of publicans and sinners was held the intellectual life and the political liberties of the last two thousand years. Indeed, the history of social progress is the history of his spirit dwelling in institutions, as man's soul dwells within his body.

The secret of his influence over the multitude is this: He was born of the common people, he walked in the common pathway, he bore the common burdens, he learned from those common teachers—work, events, men, necessity—that is the mother of invention, responsibility—that sows and chastens. Living the universal life, he came to think in the universal language and put the universal and eternal truths in terms of the time. The poet, the philosopher, the teacher, who loves a class lives with that class and with that class doth die. Horace was a typical old Roman gentleman, and said: "I hate the vulgar crowd, and hold them at a distance." And even Thomas Carlyle was seduced away from his confidence in the people to a trust in the aristocratic class alone—seduced by dinner parties and drawing-rooms and friendships with men who dwelt in Kings' palaces.

His Fidelity to His Own

But Jesus never forgot his kind. Born in poverty, he remained poor. To the last he held his confidence in the people, wise and ignorant, in the people, rich and poor, in the good and bad; in the integrity of their intellect and the soundness of their heart, and the certainty of their final response to the divine overtures. The ascetic, the scholar, the leisure classes leave the dusty highway and build bowers of rest on either side of the thronged path along which the multitudes do move; not so Jesus. If other teachers read books he read the heart, with tears blotted with tears and blood. If others nurtured their religious life amid cloistered retreats, he fed his soul in the market place, loved publicans and sinners and came eating and drinking. Once they understood him, the enthusiasm of the people for their hero was beyond all words. The carpenter was and is the most lovable and fascinating figure in all history. In his memoirs Lord Rosebery recalls Napoleon's last days. One morning, climbing the steps of St. Helena, the Emperor met a heavily laden porter at a point where the path was not wide enough for two. Hurrying forward, the aide asked the laborer to give way for Napoleon. "Not so," said the Emperor. "It is for us to step aside. Respect the burden." In that hour the ruler remembered the poverty and toil of his childhood in Corsica, and thought of the fatherhood of God, never forgetting sympathy and the brotherhood of man. When public honors were poured out upon him like a flood, he turned the more sedu-

lously toward the lame, the blind, the publican, the sinner, the heartbroken. Indeed, his miracles are only the outer revelations of his love for the needy. They are benefactions, hints of the deep sympathy with individuals—love tokens, not miracles, not signs, not wonders. For Jesus never forgot the people who had been himself had sounded in the days when he was despised and in poverty and loneliness. He loved the common people and gave himself for them.

Christ and the Poor

Confessingly, Christ was the greatest of social reformers. Plainly, also, the reason is that he has loved the poor and cast his lot in with them. Many reasons have been urged for this. It is said that the poor are in the majority, and that he allied himself with the multitude, 90 per cent of whom are in shops, mines, forests, fields. It is said that the poor are the neediest. Do the rich hunger for wisdom? They can buy books, teachers, travel and leisure. Not the poor. Does the rich man toss upon his favored couch? He can journey to some soft Southern climate or find a way to the seashore, but the poor must die in their garrets. It is said that the poor furnish the leaders for the people. From the shepherd's cote comes David, the sweet singer. From the plow comes Burns, baptizing the field mouse and the daisy with the immortality of song. From the poor comes the father of poetry, the aged and a beggar. The father of philosophy, Socrates, has but one garment, and that worn threadbare. Epictetus, the great moralist, is a slave. And that shall we more say of our indebtedness to the working classes, says that Martin Luther comes from the colliery, and Newton from the home of the weaver, and James Watt from a bare kitchen, and the President from rattle-splitting; while the poets, the merchants, the statesmen and the jurists have not dwelt in that climate named riches, but dwell in the garrets and in the unfriendly zones where poverty rules.

Loved Men as God's Children

But while these are reasons, they are not the reason. Christ loved men as men, and not as rich or poor. He liked men because they were likable. When the likable man was named Lazarus, and poor, he went to his house, he went to his house, he went to his house. When the likable man was rich like Simplicius, he went to his house, not because he was rich, but because he was likable. He peered at all exterior considerations, but he peered at the inner life of the man, the man's soul, and he laid his finger upon the naked soul of manhood. The soul dwells sometimes under rags and sometimes under fine linen, just as pearls are sometimes in a thin shell and sometimes in a thick shell. But if the shell of the pearl happens to be thin as paper we value the pearl, and if the shell happens to be two inches thick we still value the pearl. The French king had ten thousand waistcoats, but no friendly value the soul of that esthetic man because you had to bore through ten inches of cloth, and peel him of his clothes, and then you could see the man. Among the great qualities of Christ we mention his sanity as a social teacher. You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. He taught the truth of social sympathy and service. He said, "Men are in darkness, and you can lighten

them. Men are oppressed, and you can relieve their burdens. Men are wandering from the path, and you can lead them back to the way of peace. Men are at length in the shadow of death, and you can bring them life." God hath placed upon you this unspeakable honor of letting you share with him the world's sins, sorrows and burdens, and in the sharing he will give you his joy and peace.

Enthusiasm for Early Church

After Christ's death, the common people transferred their enthusiasm to the early church and for sufficient reason. In a thousand ways the early Christians made the people debtors. They became veritable agents of deliverance. They saved the lives of babes, exposed by reason of physical defects. They founded homes for orphans. They stood between the slave and his cruel master. They made impossible the gladiatorial games. They founded homes of mercy for the blind, the deaf, the disabled. They stood between the baron and his serfs in later years. The church became a refuge for the weak, the ignorant and the oppressed. In an abundance of love and pity brought their treasures as a thank offering. To the cathedral were assembled all the treasures named marbles, pictures, ivories, lacres, tapestries, and the poor brought gifts of copper, silver and gold. For centuries the church or the cathedral was the very soul of each community, and there they were rescued from all that struck and all that pursued and all that sought to do evil. Men flocked to the church for help, as doves seek out the eaves of the temple, and now once more has come an epoch when the church is to serve, not a class, but all the people, and when the poor and the oppressed are to turn to the church, but ours needs it by way of pre-eminence. In studying the problems of the laboring classes, Carlyle found his only hope in the church. He said: "The most beautiful and touching object one sees on earth. This speaking man—whom have we to compare with him?—of all public functionaries, boarded and lodged on the industry, modern society has there one worthier of the board he has contracted with a man professing to do little but about the particular of men. The speaking function, this of truth coming to us with a living voice, may, in a living shape, have a personal place. Consider that the particular in contact with him what the real state and soul-deavouring, world-devouring devil now is. Original sin and such like are had enough, but this devil, this dark ignorance, stupidity, dark Curia Law, Resolute and Company, what are they? Will he discover our new real Satan whom he has to fight? Feel him at his own throat and ours? That is not intermeddle with the world. Let us not intermeddle with it here." In these striking words Carlyle recognizes the new emergency that is upon society, the new emergency that is upon the church, and since not an earthly Napoleon or Frederick, then God, whose bosom is the seat of law, whose purpose must be the will of the world, Society has called in its last reserve. When society had a king, if the monarch went wrong the aristocracy was called in to correct the monarch. When the aristocracy ruled and served, named the middle classes, representing caution, sobriety and restraint. When society was dissatisfied with the rule of the middle classes it called in the poor with all the people. Reserves to fall back upon now are the common people. The future's civilization is in their children, and we are all familiar with the poor's must be led, and that leader must be the secret of the common people is the secret of the Messiah.

strange, when so many old gardens are blooming through so many old books we know? One reaches the door through an arched door that is old-fashioned or archaic, a door that opens wide or opens half wide, according to the welcome it offers. It is really two doors—an upper and a lower door. It can be open and yet you cannot get into the house unless you vault the lower door. It is a door made on the old-fashioned principle—never open, but always outward courtesy but without inward welcome. The door compromised for us. It is open, and a severe simplicity of manner that might have been as the manner of Sophia or Olivia herself, stood guard on the poet's threshold. We had come from the big city by the sea, from the tallest building in a city of tall buildings; we were mildly disappointed, as New Yorkers always are when disappointed from the crowded streets that crush their littleness. Would the poet see us? She swung the lower half of the door open, smiled a frank and simple welcome, and said with deprecating gesture, in a voice as quiet as the hushed murmur in the trees on the hill, "I don't know how well he will feel when he returns from the city. My father is always adverse to notoriety of any kind. He has always said, whenever he has seen other authors in interview form, 'Well, thank goodness, I hope I can always dodge them.'"

"They say that Goldsmith was rather vain, but doubtless he, too, would have shied the affliction of a literary interview. Still, it more as they did formerly. There is a bank in every town, and checks are used instead of currency. Cattle roping contests and other sports are forbidden under heavy penalties. There are as many 'blue laws' in Texas as in any other state in the Union, if not more. There is a law prohibiting card playing, except in private houses, and even then it must not be habitual or for a stake. It is unlawful for any householder to have a room for that purpose. The law is strictly enforced in 90 per cent of the counties in Texas. Not long ago an entire theatrical company was arrested and the members were fined for playing cards in their private car on the railway tracks, which the court held to be a public place in the eyes of the law. 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