

THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE GREATEST BOOK

It is a small book. The ordinary edition would easily fit into one's pocket. My **L**own contains less than two hundred pages; yet that inconspicuous little article is the greatest book in the whole world, so much so that there is none that could be called second to it. This follows from the fact that it is part of the Bible and, let us add, the choicest part of it.

The Bible itself is the word of God - the message of God to the world, and for that reason, which is a unique reason, the book is supremely above every other work. However, the fact of its amazing sublimity of origin need not mean that it would be beautiful or humanly interesting. For instance, some of the great revelations of the Saints are not couched in language of beauty at all. It is to be remembered that when the Holy Spirit speaks He chooses men to speak through. They mark the message with their own qualities and sometimes with their own defects, with the exception of course of error. In a word, the message may be from God but it runs through human channels and it takes its colour from those channels.

A WORK OF INCOMPARABLE CHARM

And so, I say again, it does not necessarily follow that the Bible would be a beautiful work. But the fact is that we have to look with awe on the New Testament. It stands before us as a work of incomparable charm - and that from every possible aspect. In the first place, the language of the book is sheerly lovely. You cannot read the New Testament without being struck all the time by its beauty and dignity. Its style has had a manifest influence in the moulding of the ordinary speech of the people, in which the scriptural words and phrases keep recurring. Likewise you are enthralled by the picturesqueness of the scenes which it places before you, by the atmosphere, by the sweetness, by the brilliance of the portrayal of the characters of the different people who walk on that noble stage. All this is done in a few masterly words. It is almost unbelievable that such an overwhelming effect could be created by so few strokes of the brush, so to speak. The sentences are measured out with such drastic economy, and yet such a colourful, ravishing picture is painted in the end!

The fewness of words may leave us at times with a sense of dissatisfaction. We feel its compression to be too great. We long for a meal and we are given only

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a sip. We ache for more than is granted to us. We read in a few hundred words the immortal stories of Cana, the raising of Lazarus, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, the widow's son of Naim, Mary Magdalen, the Last Supper; or some of those episodes so summarily disposed of in the holy pages by the statement that Jesus healed everyone who was brought to Him.

SENSATIONAL CAMEOS

What a sensation each of those cameos must have represented! How we crave to have those ancient happenings presented to our senses in their reality! We want so much to see and hear those things or even to get some adequate impression of them, but that is denied to us.

Or take that mysterious period which is passed over in the briefest way, i.e., the forty days after Our Lord's Resurrection, when He moved around with the Apostles, conversing freely with them. Before His death, He had spoken of the time when He would talk openly to them, and now that time has come. Try to imagine the startling character of it all. There is the risen Lord, the Messiah Who has accomplished His mission. Around Him, the apostolic band - undoubtedly awe-struck, for they must look on Him differently from before. They are faced with the task of spreading the Church on earth and they need to be prepared for their mission. A campaign is being planned which will take it out into the whole world to teach all nations what He had taught. During those days so shrouded in secrecy, He must have given some instruction in the method and problems of the Mass, the Sacraments, and other main items of the Church's framework. They began with a reasonably definite pattern.

How important - as we might imagine - that we should be able to get that information from the pages of the New Testament for ourselves! If it was there, for instance, how could the Protestants maintain their attitude?

Considering all, we might be tempted to complain that the Holy Ghost has throughout the Gospels been too sparing in His use of words; that He has mortified us with the scantiness of the descriptions of all those entrancing happenings. But we must reflect and realise that there is another aspect. Even with such severe condensation as has taken place, the book is as large as it probably could be in the practical sense. It is little enough read in its present length. What chance would it have if the book were twenty times its present size? But not twenty times, but rather a hundred times larger it would have to be, if it were to give adequate treatment to its stupefying subject - the adventures of Our God upon earth! You will recall St. John's saying that these are so wonderful that the world itself would not be able to contain the books that should be written. Supposing the New Testament were to give that detail which our hearts desire, you will realise that a formidable array of memoirs would be

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the result, a veritable library. Therefore that extreme compression is necessary. There is this much to our advantage, however, that we are stimulated to exert our imagination so as to build up that skeleton account into something which may partially satisfy us.

THE PICTURE OF GOD'S HUMAN LIFE

Having said that much and thus relieved our sense of disappointment, we must admit that the question of detail is secondary. The terrific consideration is that in the pages of the Gospel we have the moving picture of the life of Our Lord, that is the human life of God. In that little volume is the tale of the realisation of all the prophecies and expectations of mankind from the Fall to the advent of the Redeemer. The Incarnation; the coming of the Messiah, looked forward to during all those thousands of years; God Himself made a Baby; the birth of that Baby - Why! Even after the lapse of so great time the yearly celebration by the liturgy of those events is able to thrill us to our depths!

That Babe grows up; passes through the years of boyhood and becomes a Man. Then, as if by the pulling of a switch, He is thrown into His mission, and the events of those three revolutionary years begin to enact themselves, culminating in Passiontide and its awful conclusion. Then you have the sequel of Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and the Church, all so graphically, so captivatingly, so compellingly set out.

The Acts of the Apostles go on to record the earlier steps of the Church. The Church reproduces in its various detail the life of Our Lord Himself, and necessarily therefore is an inextricable weaving of sorrowful and triumphant things, one mingled with the other, one so depending on the other that you can never get away from its opposite. If you think in terms of joy and triumph, you are automatically plunged into sorrow. When in that sorrow, you are made to rise out of it into joy and victory and salvation and glory. That is typical Christianity. It is imperative that we drink it in at the source. In the Catechism and in the various storyettes that form our youthful fare, we learn a great deal of the Gospel narrative. But when we reach adult age we are better able to appreciate the narrative itself. It has a wealth of dignity that is missing from the Catechism or story. Indeed there is no comparison between the two. Does it strike too modern a note to point to the difference between television and the radio?

The genius of the Gospel is that it can portray so vividly as almost to lend substance in our minds to what it tells us. There is no other document which is able to do that in the same way for us. Therefore if we want to make Our Lord and His time live in us, we must use the means which will best bring that to pass. If we do not, our minds will not possess sufficient material to stoke our spiritual life. In the natural order it is essential that machines be adequately

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supplied with energy. If a furnace is not stoked, it will not produce energy. If we do not feed the body sufficiently, it too will fail. Everything that is starved weakens and then fails to accomplish its due purpose. It is starving the mind, and then the soul, to withhold the fullest knowledge of Our Lord's actions and words.

KNOW THE GOSPELS

For another reason, it is far worse to deprive the mind in that way than to starve the body. But why? Because if the body is not sufficiently fed, nature begins to make a clamour about it. The starving body fights fiercely for food and in the end sees that it gets it. But on the other hand, if we allow the supernatural life to languish, it does not assert itself. It yields to the starvation, and that yielding becomes progressive. In other words, the less spiritual nutriment we get the less we desire. There is the further complication that in the measure that the supernatural flickers low in us, the natural comes in with overwhelming influence and in fact takes complete control. Therefore it is what we might accurately call a life and death matter that the intellect be fully nourished in regard to the life of Our Lord.

Note particularly that the Gospels are full of His very words, actually column after column of His speeches and sayings and conversations. These show him forth in a way which otherwise would not be realisable. No amount of telling us about Our Lord would substitute for that listening to the very words of His lips. Oh, do not deprive your minds of that intellectual treat and your soul of that heavenly food.

MARY - CHIEF WITNESS

Now we come to something of major importance, but not sufficiently adverted to. It is the pre-eminent position of Our Lady in relation to the Gospel. Our Lady lived on after the Ascension in order to mother the infant Mystical Body, just as she had nurtured and brought up the Infant Jesus. Part of that nourishment which she would carefully prepare would be the Gospels. It would not be correct to suppose that the Holy Spirit communicated everything to the Evangelists directly. That is not God's way. It is His method to avail of existing knowledge and only to supplement that by a direct or unusual manifestation to the degree that it is inadequate. He would not make a revelation to an Evangelist when there was a witness of unimpeachable quality at hand.

In fact we see that this is what took place. St. Luke assures us to that effect. He says that they interviewed the eye-witnesses and all others who had any share in the holy drama from the beginning; and that he and his fellow-scribes wrote down what they had gathered. Chief among those witnesses was

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unquestionably Our Blessed Lady, not merely as one who was more than others, but in a place all her own.

Her contribution to the Gospel testimony was almost as unique as her bringing into the world of the Lord Himself. It was without equal, proprietorial. Her instrumentality has been compared by Cardinal Wiseman to the tip on which an inverted pyramid stands. You know what the pyramid is like, the broad base and the even ascent up to the point. That structure is always put before us as *exemplifying the greatest solidity*; nothing can shake a pyramid off its base. On the other hand, imagine that pyramid reversed so that it rests upon its apex; the whole bulk depending on that one point on which it stands and balances! That image illustrates precisely the position of Mary in the Gospel message. She is rightly called the pivot of the Gospel by reason of her consent to the incarnation. She was the sole witness to the Divine Maternity. Gabriel and herself were the only actors at the Annunciation, and it was the basic event of all - the cornerstone of Christian belief. Not merely was she the only one available to tell of it, but she was the only one able to tell how the Son of God became man. The knowledge of how that mystery was accomplished could only have come to the Evangelists, humanly speaking, through Mary.

Likewise, hers was the only testimony to the Visitation, to the wonders of Bethlehem, the Presentation in the Temple, the coming of the Magi, the flight into Egypt, and the finding in the Temple. St. Joseph, who had been the participant with her in those special events which belonged to the ground or essence of the Incarnation, was dead. So too were all of the other principal original figures: Elizabeth, Zachary, Joachim, Anne, holy Simeon, the Prophetess Anna, the Baptist, and so on - all dead; all called home by the time the Evangelists set about their diligent investigation.

So to whom did they go for first-hand information about those key-events which form the basis of our Faith? Of course they went to her who had been the chief actor, the chief witness, the chief bearer of the responsibility, the cooperator with God in the whole drama. They went to her whom Protestants leave out.

LISTENING TO MARY

So when you take up the Gospel of the Infancy, *never forget that in it you are listening to Our Lady talking through printed words* - not all of them her own. Few of them are her own spoken words, but it was all her compilation. So much has that been the case that it has been said that Our Lady's heart was the first two chapters of St. Luke's Gospel, because it was out of that heart that those sublime facts came to light. Twice in the holy chronicle the significant phrase occurs that Mary "kept these thoughts, pondering them in her heart." As the

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commentators of the Church say, she was preserving them in her heart for the day when she would give them up to the Evangelists for noting down.

That is not all. In addition to her being the main informant, right reason tells us that she was part and parcel of the compilation in a wider sense, that is in regard to many of the miracles and events of the three years' mission which she had not actually seen. I think we can surmise that nothing would be regarded as final until it was approved by her. Imagine the Evangelists with the Mother of God beside them rushing off to commit things to paper and publishing them without reading them over to her and saying to her: "Mother, are these circumstances correct? Are they rendered as they should be? Is it a worthy record?"

It forms touching meditation to imagine her thus occupied, but herein, alas, the artists do not help us. No doubt the Evangelists in part wrote from her dictation, and in part from notes which she gave them. Our Lady, you know, was an accomplished pen-woman at a time when ignorance was the order of the day and illiteracy was the possession of every man and especially of every woman. But Our Lady was a well-educated woman, full of the choicest things that a woman of her time would know. She had received what ranked as a superior education for a girl. Perhaps we could liken it to the university education of today, not of course, taking in the same subjects, but equivalent in standard.

Therefore it is intriguing to think of Our Lady, with some sort of writing instrument in her hand, thinking over the past and putting down notes and memoranda to aid the industrious Evangelists. Later, these would study that material of hers and read over to her the things that they had collected elsewhere.

That was long ago. Did her work for the Evangelist finish when she communicated what she knew? No, it was only beginning. When we take up the sacred book, the nourishment which flows from it depends on her; it is the milk which that Mother gives to our soul.

THE CHURCH OUR TUTOR

Another paramount thought is that the Church is our tutor in that reading. That partnership was intended by God. His written word and His spoken word penetrate and fulfil each other. Without the interpreting and explaining Church, the Scriptures would be reduced to confusion. The Scriptures were never intended to be a Catechism or a Manual of Theology, as Protestants are found contending that they are. They believe that the Christian religion is contained in the pages of the Bible, and that the Bible is sufficient. This could be described as the reverse of the fact, because every single text of Scripture deprived of the explanations of the Church can be misleading.

I heard a wise person say recently that it was his deliberate conviction that

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every text of Scripture is capable of fifty different interpretations. Perhaps his desire for emphasis led him too high in number. But his claim is right in essence. One thousand Protestant sects bear witness to that fact. Indeed the individual Protestant bears that same witness, for in some respect each one differs radically from his fellow-Protestant. Their theory has failed. Their idea that they can take up the Scriptures and that the Holy Spirit will render to each reader the full significance of each phrase, has not borne the test of practice. We see the result, and a lamentable result it is.

I have spoken of the many doctrines of importance not sufficiently explained in Scripture, such as the Mass, the Sacraments, the place of Mary, the Incarnation, the Trinity. Even the fact of the divinity of Our Lord, on which absolutely everything depends, is not seen by Protestants who say they accept the plain truth of Scripture. The vast bulk of modern Protestants do not see it, and they deny His divinity.

Why were those vital matters not defined in Scripture? Why did the Holy Spirit not say: "I will preserve those future Protestants from themselves. I will set down everything after the manner of a theological definition - in such precise detail that error will be impossible."

No, the Gospels were never intended to fulfil that role. They were never intended to be a Catechism or a book of instructions about doctrine and practice. They are what St. Luke describes them as: "A narration of the things that had been accomplished" - a history. A history, not a book of doctrine.

Secondly, those things which I have sorrowed over - as not included in the pages of the New Testament for us to read them there - are not at all lost to us. They are in the Church and the Church teaches them. Everything that the Lord spoke to His followers, whether written down or not, is in the Church and the Church, as commanded, is delivering them every day to her children, but only to those who hear her. The person who walks apart from the Catholic Church with the Bible in his hand is not carrying a lantern which will guide him unerringly on his way. In fact, he is carrying what may prove to be a will-o-the-wisp which will lead him off the way and on to his own destruction.