

not been faithful to thee ever since I was thine? Was I ever wont to disobey thee?" But we can all seek to turn our dumb companions and friends to the best account, by letting them remind us of the reverence we owe to our Master, and of the affection we owe to our Father in heaven.

S. COX.

THE MINISTRY OF ANGELS.

GENESIS xxxii.

THAT part of Christian dogmatics which is concerned with the existence and ministry of angels demands the careful consideration of reverent and thoughtful minds at the present day. For it is in *this* position—a position almost, if not quite, peculiar to itself—that, although founded upon numerous explicit statements of Holy Writ, it has yet fallen to a very great extent out of the real belief of Christian people. If this seem stronger than the fact, I would ask any devout person, holding the common faith, to examine his own religious belief, and to inquire whether the doctrine of angels, as taught by all religious bodies alike, has any *roots* in his own practical faith towards God, in his own conscious relations to the unseen world.

I do not mean to imply for a moment—as will, I hope, appear—that we *disbelieve* either the existence or the ministry of angelic beings: we cannot do so without rejecting and denying point blank the unquestioned and unquestionable dicta of our Lord and of his apostles. There can be no doubt that the doctrine of angels as ordinarily taught throughout all Christendom

is distinctly scriptural.¹ But I do say that our belief in angels is formal only, or at the best merely poetic : it does *not* strike its roots down into our religious consciousness, into that inner and unseen, but most real and often passionate, life of the soul towards God and the powers of the world to come. If I may use the expression, our belief in angels is superficial only, merely of the intellect, or of the imagination, and therefore it is unfruitful : it lies altogether outside the real battle-field whereon the victory of faith is lost and won. And this, I venture to say, is the case with all Christian people of whatever name.

Now if this be so, if it be only partially so, it invites an examination at once reverent and fearless into the causes and meaning of it. It is no use shutting our eyes to the fact that the living faith of Christendom has ebbed away, at least for the time, from what was once a part—a very beautiful part—of its expanse. We still trace the shore-line exactly where we did, but we cannot help seeing that all this tract is now left high and dry, where once the bright waves danced and sparkled in the sun.

Why is it that a practical belief in angels has faded out ? One answer suggests itself at once—That there is now no room for angels in the world. There was a time, a time which we can hardly realize now, when every nook and corner of the outer world was peopled with the creatures of a fancy, sometimes gay, more often gloomy. We all know how long and late the conviction lasted that visible men did not dwell alone

¹ I have seen a large volume of Puritan divinity devoted to the doctrine of angels, as deduced from Holy Scripture, which would sound quite as fantastic in our modern ears as any Romanist treatise. *Inter alia* it enumerated the ways in which angels probably succoured us *before we were born*.

upon the earth, that their ways were crossed in every direction by the unseen paths of other beings, mostly powerful for harm, mostly requiring to be propitiated. We all know how these fantasies became engrafted upon a low form of Christianity, and gave rise to a rank crop of superstitions about witches, "evil eyes," ghosts, and "spirits." It may, however, be broadly stated that modern science has swept the whole world clear of these its ancient denizens. No fairies, elves, or demons, lie hid beside our common path. A few fantastic folk may work themselves up into some belief, more or less real, in "spirits," but the genuine superstitions of the people have vanished like the mists of night before the breath of morning. It would be very natural, therefore, to suppose that angels had practically gone the ways of fairies, elves, gnomes, and all their cognate tribes. Man lives alone now as an intelligent being upon the earth: only his own image meets his eye in stream and mist, in sky and sea. There is hardly room for God Himself now in his own world: how much less for angels!

All this is obvious and plausible, but it overlooks an essential part of the question. It is not irreligious minds, or minds of a sceptical turn, only or chiefly; it is at least as much religious and devout minds, minds deeply impressed with a constant sense of the supernatural, minds quite untouched by scientific difficulties, for which angels have become shadowy and unreal. The real difficulty for many of us is not at all the difficulty of believing in beings and powers invisible and imperceptible. We live all our lives, and know we live them, in the presence of such beings and powers; we have to do with them day by day; we converse

with them; we belong to them; they are not less real to us, but more real, than the visible companions of our life. The real difficulty is that there seems no room for angels in our *religion*. We cannot tell where they come in, or can come in. We can understand (quite sufficiently, at least, for entire belief) the presence with us of our Lord, the presence within us of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit in his pure Divinity, the Saviour in his Divine Humanity, are *inward* (so to speak) to our spirit, to our inner man. But the angels are not. As created beings and yet not visible, we cannot possibly conceive how they *can get at us*, what they can do for us. Doubtless it is a common and pious opinion that good angels suggest good thoughts: that is the only spiritual office I have ever heard ascribed to them. But the idea will hardly bear a serious consideration. In the first place, it is not suggested in Holy Scripture.¹ There the ministry of angels is always visible, as far as we can tell: whatever they have to do or say, they assume human form in order to do or say it. In the second place, it is importing into the subject an immense difficulty to affirm that a created yet non-human being *can* communicate with us at all, unless it be placed for the time in possession of human faculties. In the third place, the supposition is superfluous, as well as ungrounded. Does not the Spirit itself bear witness with our spirit? Does not He plead with us, and plead for us, helping our infirmities? What room is there for the whispers of angels when

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the voice of the Spirit is never silent within the soul? Surely, as regards our spiritual life, we are obliged to say humbly, if we are pressed, that we do not want the assistance of angels, because the assistance of God the Son and God the Holy Ghost is all sufficient.

It may however be said, and perhaps truly said, that the angels are the ministers, the intermediaries, the agents of God in carrying on the outward arrangements of Providence for our benefit. This has at least some support from Scripture. "He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways," may be more than a poetic rendering of the Divine care for those that trust therein. "An angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water," may be the distinct assertion of an actual fact, and not a mere statement of the current belief of the day. But granted that angels do play their part in the gracious operations of Divine Providence, still their functions are so totally obscure, so beyond the range, not only of our perception, but also of our imagination, that it is a mere form of words to say that we believe it. Between the mechanical operation of natural laws on the one hand, and the secret overruling of the Divine Will on the other, we cannot have any intelligent belief in angelic ministration. We can recognize and study the working of natural laws; we can recognize and adore the overruling of the Divine Will; but anything *between* these we can neither recognize nor (I think) affirm, even though we dare not deny. And even if we could firmly believe that angels are now *invisibly*, as they certainly were of old *visibly*, the ministers of an outward Providence, still they would only be to us a part of that immense and complex

machinery by which the outward tenour of our lives is shaped from day to day; they would still have no more to do with our religion than the common laws of health or the attractions and counter-attractions of the heavenly bodies.

I venture to believe that almost everybody who has any religious belief at all about angels will find, on really questioning himself, that it is as shadowy as I have described it to be, and more or less distinctly for the reasons I have set down. Only we may very probably have shrunk from admitting the fact to ourselves because the doctrine of angels is strictly and manifestly scriptural, and is chiefly drawn from the Gospels themselves. There is really very little difference between the various Christian bodies on this subject. The division of angels into a hierarchy of nine orders, and the prominence given to the idea of guardian angels, may be traced rather to contemporary Jewish tradition than to the New Testament: but even so, it is very probable that the apostles held these traditions, which are certainly not inconsistent with the Scriptures. Is then, let us honestly ask, this fading of belief in angels a sign of decaying faith, of a secret scepticism and impatience of the supernatural? or is it possible to account for it in a more happy and hopeful, because in a really religious, way? I venture to think that the latter is the case, and I think that in the thirty-second Chapter of Genesis we may read an inspired lesson which will give us just the clue we want.

“The angels of God met him,” we are told; met the patriarch returning to his father’s home and the Holy Land. *How* they met him, in what guise, on what road, with what intent, we have not the least idea. We

only know that Jacob recognized them, and was aware of another host beside his own helpless and anxious company, another camp beside that which he had pitched in the lonely wilderness. "The angels of God met him:" that was all. Yet not all. For after them came the uncreated Angel, the Lord of angels, "in fashion as a man," though not yet incarnate, and wrestled with him till the break of day. And as Jacob wrestled on, held in that strong grip, forced to strain to the uttermost a strength which he knew to be all too little, had he time to look back upon the fleeting vision of angels which had gone before? No doubt they had gladdened his eyes and his heart for the moment; but we may be sure that they were nothing to him through that awful night which left him shattered and defeated, yet victorious and transfigured, when the morning came.

Are not we in our day like the patriarch of old? and especially in these days of a more intense spiritual conflict, if, at least, there be any depth of life and experience in us. *One* holds us fast from whom we cannot escape, and would not if we could; One who is human, albeit more than human too; One whom we can understand, and against whom it is possible, as it were, to measure our strength; One who forces us to strive with Him, who draws us on to put out all and more than all our strength, even unto utter weariness and fainting; One who teaches us to overcome even in being overcome. And while we wrestle on for life or death, while we hope against hope, and strive beyond our utmost strength for the blessing of the Son of Man, for the new name and the changed nature, can we think with any serious thought of the angels, who are

neither Divine nor human? of the angels who, in their happy ignorance of sin, cannot know anything really of *our* dreadful strife? of the angels, who only desire to look into the mysteries of grace by which and in which we live?

But it will be said, Then is there no true place for angels in Christianity at all, since there is no room for them in our living faith? Is the doctrine of angels to be regarded as a superfluity, which had better not have been delivered at all? That need not follow. The angels of God did not meet Jacob in vain, because the afterwards-incarnate Son of God followed them.

For surely it is true that while the Faith remains the same, yet faith has changed its character not a little. It can hardly be denied that religious belief is far more subjective, more introspective, more self-conscious, than in the first ages. Man's character has changed; whether for the better or for the worse need not be discussed, but surely it *has* changed. Character was childlike then compared with what it is now, much more largely formed and affected by the outward elements of existence. Ignorant as he was of science, yet was the child of man much more alive then to what went on around him, much less alive to what went on within his mind and soul. In his heathen state he had ever felt himself under the influences—mostly the evil and malicious influences—of unseen agents, dreadful because invisible, capricious, unaccountable. He was not master of himself because the unseen forces which played upon his life could not be reckoned up. Above all, a hard remorseless Fate had its ministers evermore about him, which led him blindfold on a path he did not know. He was a child, and

felt himself like a child, not free, not responsible for himself, but fashioned and moulded, and often made a sport of, by capricious wills outside himself. To this child of man came the doctrine of angels as a part and a very sweet part of the doctrine of Christ. No more divinities, beautiful perhaps, but unloving and vexatious at best, beset his daily path, but angels, who only did and only could do the will of his Father in heaven. Sometimes he saw them, or thought he saw them, in his visions; in the molten gold of the sunset he saw them thronging the celestial gates; in the thoughts which came to him unbidden as he lay awake he heard their whispers of hope and faith.

Let any one try to realize in thought the difference between the local divinities and half-divinities of Greece on the one hand, and the angels of the Kingdom on the other, and he may faintly feel how beautifully and happily came the doctrine of angels to the Gentile world. It has been rightly pointed out that the Gospel of St. Luke especially dwells on angelic appearances and ministrations, because it was pre-eminently addressed to the Gentile converts of St. Paul.

But the child of man has grown older since those days; his consciousness, especially his religious consciousness, is much more complex, more turned upon itself; not, perhaps, more earnest, but much more intense. He has no vague fears of mysterious unkindly powers, which may affect him to his hurt, but he is very much afraid of himself; he is keenly alive to what is dark and terrible and mysteriously sad in humanity. Angels do not comfort him now; he does not care for them; he turns him to the strong Son of God; almost with an agony he clings to Him who is

Himself a man, and will not let Him go, for he knows he cannot do without his sympathy and his blessing.

Surely this intensity of craving for sympathy is a great mark of our modern religious temper. It is seen, not only in the immense prominence given to the true humanity of our Lord, but even in those strange and sad departures from the truth of the gospel which are found in Roman Catholic devotions. They who cannot find satisfaction in Christ, do not seek it (as we might have thought) in angels. "Worshipping of angels" is as foreign, practically, to Spanish Christianity as to English. They seek it in the cultus of *human* beings, whose *sympathy* they passionately desire and believe they have. When we see a peasant woman kneeling for hours before a tawdry doll, pouring out all her heart, all her love for her children, all her anxiety for her husband's soul, to *it*, it is a sight to make angels weep; but it is only a perverted outcome of that intense craving for sympathy, personal sympathy, from the object of our worship, which marks *all* true deep religion now. The doll represents to her a woman holy and loving, although exalted to the right hand of power.

Now this sympathy we could not possibly gain from angels. How could they understand us? How could we explain to them our sins, our disgust and dissatisfaction with ourselves, our almost despair of ever being really good, our agony of fear lest we never should be really good? But if the child of man does not need the angels *now*, if he has outgrown that state of mind in which they were very helpful to him, yet it is certain he *did* need them once, and they were very helpful to him in his then state of mind. We may say he was

more childish then, but, thank God! the gospel was given for all ages and for all stages of the spiritual life; and so, doubtless, it has within itself adaptations for changes which are even now taking place in the religious temper of mankind.

And there is another thing. Each one of us was a child; and woe unto us if we despise the faith of a little child—that faith to which stories of angels from Holy Writ are so dear. May it not be, as our Saviour intimates, that angels belong to children in a special sense? — “*their* angels” He says, speaking of the little ones. Ah, yes; they were *our* angels then: the angels of God met us in our early innocence, and smiled upon us, and we loved to see them. They smiled upon us, and passed upon their way, and left us to that sore strife (albeit blessed strife) with their Lord and ours, “until the day break and the shadows flee away.” They were *our* angels then, before we had looked into our own evil hearts, or begun to bear the burden and heat of the day. “When I was a child, I thought as a child,” thought often and lovingly of holy angels that cared for me and guarded me by the will of God. “But when I became a man, I put away childish things;” not because they were untrue or unworthy, for they were not; but simply because they were not meant for me when I became a man; because I was absorbed with other things, to meet the deeper, more imperious wants of my older years. May not this be true of our belief in angels? We cannot think seriously of them just now: we have to do with One who is at once so much greater and so much nearer to ourselves than any angels, that there is no room for them in our living faith, and all the less as that faith is

earnest and intense. But, after all, we do not *dis*believe in them. It may be that in another world *all* the elements of our religious life will reappear in all their balanced fulness, and that *then* the holy angels will be *our* angels once more. And so the poet's words may come true in another sense than that in which he intended them, and we shall find that

with the morn, those angel-faces smile,
Which we have loved long since, and lost awhile.

R. WINTERBOTHAM.

THE KIND MASTER.

ST. LUKE xii. 35-38.

THIS parable of the Kind Master is the complement of that of the Dutiful Servant, recorded in St. Luke xvii. 7-10, of which I gave an exposition last month. The one of these parables without the other is not perfect. We must take the two together if we would get a large and rounded view of the truth common to them both.

It is hardly possible to listen to the latter parable without feeling, at least at first, that it is alien to the usual tone of our Lord, that it is not in accord with the key in which most of his utterances are set. It is not like Him to tell us that our life is an endless series of exhausting duties, for which we are to look for no thanks. It is not like Him to bid us remember that, even when we have done "all the things which are commanded us," we have done no more than it was our duty to do, and must confess that we are but "unprofitable servants."

We need, therefore, to remind ourselves that this hard and severe view of human life falls in with many