

Not Revelation but discovery
Not Forms but the Holy Spirit

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Reading:

Hebrews 3/1-15

Sonnet, The Light Of Faith, by George Santayana

As we move about during these days between the two greet festivals of Thanksgiving and Christmas, our minds inevitably turn to the two familiar attitudes towards life and religion. Thanksgiving is festival of the harvest of the past. Whether we view it simply as the harvest of the soil, the season's crop, or as the harvest of the ages, our tendency to select the best of that past to give thanks for that. If we carry that attitude far enough we arrive at the despairing conclusion that the Golden Age of Excellence is in the past. We become discouraged by the current confusion of the world, the wars, the revolutions, the slipping standards of what we call religion, the animosities of a divided Christendom, the conflicts of religions. How sad, how devastating. We are on the down grade, slipping from bad to worse. We have lost the faith once delivered to the saints. Oh, for the good old days. Revive the past, return to the doctrines and methods of an age that is gone.

But even as we are caught in the meshes of this non-existent past that we have re-created, this dynamic life force pushes on towards the Christmas festival of birth, of a new season, and of the ages to come. Get beneath the forms and persons in which this thing we call life manifests itself, and try to fathom its depth and its power, irresistible in its uncontrolled ferocity, or magnificent and majestic in its disciplined and intelligent best. It dwells in the individual fighting for survival amid the perils of war and the devastations of hunger. It is better to live than to die. It becomes a compelling power of purpose in those who feel not, only its dynamic pressure from the past, but, get a glimmering of direction, if not of purpose, towards which it moves. Age after age appear those who not only feel the power of values in life, of direction and purpose beyond mere

survival and procreation. They feel the unexhausted power within, and the unexhausted and inexhaustable (sic) power of life all about them, power that has expressed itself in millions of years of human history, the and rise and fall of dynasties, of empires, of nations and religions. Some have dared to say that this strange and mysterious power that we feel within is like unto the power that we discover in all nature and all mankind, in all things everywhere, moving on through age after age towards an undiscovered purpose. "Think not that I came to destroy the past, I came not, to destroy but, to fulfill." "I and my Father are one." Here we come upon the history of great souls, and the soul of history. There is a phrase that has had long usage in the Jewish and Christian tradition, The Holy Spirit. Its meaning has become narrowed by too technical use. The word Holy comes from the same root as our commonly used words whole, healthy. Spirit carries the meaning of the breath of life, life in you and in me, life in all about us, expression of all life existent in the nature of things. The Holy Spirit, the whole, healthy life, life with values and standards, life with purpose, life healthy and vigorous with its eye on some better tomorrow, some better age, some better world. The Golden age is not behind, an event or a condition in history, it beckons us in the beacon lights of purpose that allure us on the horizon of an undiscovered future. The whole and healthy life moves on. The Holy Spirit is ever moving in us and about us, unexhausted and dynamic.

A Lesson from the Past: The Epistle to the Hebrews, from which the Scripture reading was taken, is a living document, if one takes the trouble to penetrate the meaning of it in terms of the situation to which it was addressed. It worth recalling. Written sometime between 80 and 90 AD, during the reign of Domitian, by an unknown person to those refugee "Christians" who come together in Rome, this amazing document was an appeal to the wavering and frightened and discouraged folk living amid the terrors of their day, and afraid to stick to their tasks, to cling tenaciously to the compelling vision of new life, a new age to which that Jesus of Nazareth had aroused them. In Rome these refugees from a dying world had gathered. They had been through the terrors of the reign of Nero, they had suffered all sorts of humiliations and indignities. They had survived, some of them, and now, half a century after the death of Jesus, they faced another persecution in the reign of Domitian. The old enthusiasm had weakened. Many, if not all of those who had been

stirred by the early appeals had passed from the conflict. Freedom had not come. Paul's belief in the immediate return Of Christ to redeem his world was to many of them a broken promise. Why cling to such vague and unrewarding beliefs? Why not take their fun where they find it? Why not forsake the lost cause of freedom and faith? After all one has to live in the world as it is. To face another persecution, well, what for?

How like the world of today? Change a few words and phrases, names and localities, dogmas and teachings, and The Epistle To the Hebrews comes alive. It has something to say.

Listen. "For the word of God is living, and active, and sharper than any two edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart." (Hebrews 4/12). Last spring I planted in my garden some kernels of corn. I watched them come to life, break through the soil, and press forward to the prize of their high calling. I hoed them, kept the weeds down. In due season I gathered from their sturdy stocks, grown to be six feet tall, "Corn on the Cob" just right for eating. It was a reassuring sight, that patch of corn, the source of much food for the table. How I wished that I might stop its living and active growth, so that I could enjoy the Corn on the Cob until it was all eaten. But alas the corn had other purposes. It must fulfill its nature, it must press on to the prize of its high calling of full matured seeds, living and keen for the season yet to come. What the corn wanted was not to maintain its stocks or to provide food, but to make sure that it had seeds for the seasons to come. The sturdy stocks I have pulled and buried, not even a photograph is left. The compost material of the stocks will contribute to crops of another year. Life moves on.

In my yard stands a noble white Ash tree, sometimes called the Tree of Heaven. Two feet in diameter at the base, planted about 1875 by a former minister on the day a child was born in his family. On this Winter day, not a leaf graces its sturdy branches, and the scars of hurricane and storm stand out clearly. Year after year it has produced its crop of leaves. Under its shade we sit on a summer's day. Children climb its drooping branches, and laugh as they swing. Each year it makes a deposit of solid wood beneath its protecting bark. We could count its age if we should cut it down, one ring for each year.

But neither the abundant crop of leaves that come each year, have their day and fall to the ground, nor the sturdy trunk and branches are the prize of the high calling of the noble tree. In fertile years it produces a crop of flowers and seeds. Not far from half a million seeds cling to its branches. Ash trees, years younger, grow about the place. All of this life presses forward to the prize of its high calling in the forests of the world. But the day will come when this noble ash tree will have rounded the years of its living process. The Life Force will no longer flow through branches. It will be cut down, worked up into lumber and wood. If could speak it might, say "I have run my course, I am content. My life still lives on in the forests to come."

Something like that is what the writer to the Christians in Rome was saying. "You are discouraged, not to say frightened, by the conditions under which you are living, and the dangers which you face. You are beginning to long for the good old days. You no longer face the present and the future with faith and confidence. You forget that great as Moses may have been, the Jesus of Nazareth was greater. Important and vital as the Levitical codes have been, however great may have been the achievements of the Great High Priests of the past, they belong to the harvest of yesterday. For you they no longer offer shade in the heat of life. The spirit, the Holy Spirit, that was in them when they lived their days, is now in you. Behold how great a cloud of witnesses surround you, each faithful to the living spirit that moved through them, not to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfill." The word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. The word of God is not with the past, even though it was in the past. It is in the living present. It is active, and with its two-edged sword it cuts away the dead foliage of the past that new and fresh foliage may come on the tree of eternal life.

As of old, so today we are faced with the searching questions that are forever pressing upon us for our answers. The same life force operates in our age as in all ages behind us. We are moved by a profound affection for the great discoveries and achievements of the past and for the human beings through whose fidelity to their age the monuments that we cherish were created. Sometimes we are disposed to imagine that a revival of some dogma, some creed, some practice, some institution that was valid for them might solve the problems of our day. In what

alluring forms that appeal to the past is frequently made? But how insidious! How deceptive. Indeed that attitude of facing the past of turning our back upon the future, of looking for some complete and perfect expression of all-inclusive Life Spirit in any or in all events of history, that is the only real heresy, a betrayal of both the past and the future, and a denial of the Holy Spirit. Age after age we have discovered some bit of insight into the nature of that life stream in which we move from age to age, but its steady flow, its unexhausted power still calls us, not from the past but from the age to come. However great the past may have been, in remote ages or in more immediate centuries, whatever of wisdom may have been gleaned from the experiences of the centuries, the startling truth faces us that we, the living and the generations to come after us, are the vital agents through which that life spirit, call it by whatever name you will, moves out of the past into the age to come. We should face it all not with fear and despair, but in faith and confidence, buoyant in spirit, strong in purpose, keen to contribute to the age to come whatsoever of the Life Spirit dwells with each on. The word of God, this truth is living and active in us, in our homes, in our relations with one another, in our work and play, in our community, in the interplay of all forces, in the age of which we are a part. The Holy Spirit of life moves on.