John Bunyan’s Text

By F.W. Boreham

I

There is no doubt about John Bunyan’s text. As a lover carves his lady’s name on trees, signs it in mistake for his own, and mutters it in his sleep, so Bunyan inscribes everywhere the text that wrought his memorable deliverance. It crops up again and again in all his writings. The characters in his allegories, the dream-children of his fertile fancy, repeat it to each other as though it were a password, a talisman, a charm; he himself quotes it whenever the shadow of an opportunity presents itself; if it is not the text, it is at least the burden, of every sermon that he preaches. It sings itself through his autobiography like a repeating chorus, like an echoing refrain. By its radiance he extricates himself from every gloomy valley and from every darksome path. Its joyous companionship beguiles all his long and solitary tramps. It dispels for him the loneliness of his dreary cell. When no other visitor is permitted to approach the gaol, John Bunyan’s text comes rushing to his memory as though on angel’s wings. It sings to him its song of confidence and peace every morning; its music scatters the gloom of every night. It is the friend of his fireside; the companion of his solitude; the comrade of his travels; the light of his darkness. It illumines his path amidst the perplexities of life; it wipes away his tears in the day of bitter sorrow; and it smooths his pillow in the hour of death. When a man habitually wears a diamond pin, you unconsciously associate the thought of his face with the thought of the gem that scintillates beneath it. In the same way, nobody can have become in the slightest degree familiar with John Bunyan without habitually associating the thought of his honest and ragged personality with the thought of the text that he made so peculiarly his own.

II

On the opening pages of Pilgrim’s Progress we come upon the principal character, all clothed in rags, a heavy burden upon his back, greatly distressed in mind, walking in the fields and crying, “What must I do to be saved?”

“Do you see yonder shining lights?” asked Evangelist.

“I think I do,” replied the wretched man.

“Keep that light in your eye and go up directly thereto; so shalt thou see a gate, at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do!”

The man comes in due course to the gate and knocks many times, saying:

May I now enter here? Will he within
Open to sorry me, though I have been
An undeserving rebel? Then shall I
Not fail to sing his lasting praise on high.

“I am willing with all my heart,” replies Good-Will, the keeper of the gate, “we make no objections against any. Notwithstanding all that they have done before they come hither, they are in no wise cast out!”

So Christian enters in at the gate and sets out on pilgrimage. And there, at the very beginning of his new life, stands the first vague but unmistakeable suggestion of John Bunyan’s text.

“In no wise cast out!”
“In no wise cast out!”
“In Him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out!”

There, over the portal of the pilgrim path, stands the text that gave John Bunyan to the world.

III

It stands over the very portal of his pilgrim’s path for the simple reason that it stands at the very beginning of his own religious experience. Let us turn from his allegory to his autobiography.

“In no wise cast out!” he exclaims, “Oh, the comfort that I found in that word!”
“In no wise cast out!”
“In no wise cast out!”

We all know the story of the wretchedness which that great word dispelled. It is one of the most moving records, one of the most pathetic plaints, in the language. Bunyan felt that he was a blot upon the face of the universe. He envied the toads in the grass by the side of the road, and the crows that cawed in the ploughed lands by which he passed. They, he thought, could never know such misery as that which bowed him down. “I walked,” he says, in a passage that Macaulay felt to be specially eloquent and notable, “I walked to a neighbouring town, and sat down upon a settle in the street, and fell into a very deep pause about the most fearful state my sin had brought me to; and, after long musing, I lifted up my head; but methought I saw as if the sun that shineth in the heavens did grudge to give me light; and as if the very stones in the street, and tiles upon the houses, did band themselves against me. Methought that they all combined together to banish me out of the world. I was abhorred of them, and unfit to dwell among them,
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because I had sinned against the Saviour. Oh, how happy now was every creature over me, for they stood fast and kept their station. But I was gone and lost!”

“Gone and lost!”
“Gone and lost!”

It was whilst he was thus lamenting his hopeless condition that the light broke. “This Scripture,” he says, “did most sweetly visit my soul: ‘and him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out.’ O, what did I now see in that blessed sixth of John! O, the comfort that I had from this word!”

“In no wise cast out!”
“In no wise cast out!”
“Him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out!”

What was it that he saw in “that blessed sixth of John”? What was the comfort that he found so lavishly stored there? The matter is worth investigating.

IV

In his pitiless distress, there broke upon the soul of John Bunyan a vision of the infinite approachability of Jesus. That is one of the essentials of the faith. It was for no other purpose that the Saviour of men left the earth and enshrined Himself in invisibility. “Suppose,” says Henry Drummond, “suppose He had not gone away; suppose He were here now. Suppose He were still in the Holy Land, at Jerusalem. Every ship that started for the East would be crowded with Christian pilgrims. Every train flying through Europe would be thronged with people going to see Jesus. Every mail-bag would be full of letters from those in difficulty and trial. Suppose you are in one of those ships. The port, when you arrive after the long voyage, is blocked with vessels of every flag. With much difficulty you land, and join one of the long trains starting for Jerusalem. Far as the eye can reach, the caravans move over the desert in an endless stream. As you approach the Holy City you see a dark, seething mass stretching for leagues and leagues between you and its glittering spires. You have come to see Jesus; but you will never see Him.” You are crowded out. Jesus resolved that this should never be. “It is expedient for you,” he said, “that I go away.” He went away in order to make Himself approachable! John Bunyan saw to his delight that it is possible for the most unworthy to go direct to the fountain of grace.

“Him that cometh to Me!”
“Him that cometh to Me!”
“Him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out!”

John Bunyan’s text was a revelation to him of the approachability of Jesus.
In his pitiful distress there broke upon the soul of John Bunyan a vision of the infinite catholicity of Jesus. Therein lay for him the beauty of the text. In the darkest hours of his wretchedness he never had any doubt as to the readiness of the Saviour to welcome to His grace certain fortunate persons. Holy Master Gifford, for example, and the poor women whom he overheard discussing the things of the kingdom of God as they sat in the sun beside their doors, and the members of the little church at Bedford; concerning the salvation of these people Bunyan was as clear as clear could be. But from such felicity he was himself rigidly excluded. “About this time,” he says, “the state of happiness of these poor people at Bedford was thus, in a kind of a vision, presented to me. I saw as if they were on the sunny side of some high mountain, there refreshing themselves with the pleasant beams of the sun, while I was shivering and shrinking in the cold, afflicted with frost, snow, and dark clouds. Methought also, betwixt me and them, I saw a wall that did compass about this mountain. Now through this wall my soul did greatly desire to pass; concluding that, if I could, I would there also comfort myself with the heat of their sun.” But he could find no way through or round or over the wall. Then came the discovery of the text. “This Scripture did most sweetly visit my soul; ‘and him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out.’ Oh! the comfort that I had from his word, in no wise! As who should say, ‘By no means, for nothing whatever he hath done.’ But Satan would greatly labour to pull this promise from me, telling me that Christ did not mean me and such as me, but sinners of another rank, that had not done as I had done. But I would answer him again. ‘Satan, here is in these words no such exception; but him that cometh, him, any him; him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.’”

“Him that cometh!”
“Any him! Any him!”
“Him that cometh I will in no wise cast out!”

Like the gate that swings open on hearing the magic “sesame”; like the walls that fell at Jericho when the blast of the trumpets arose; the wall around Bunyan’s mountin fell with a crash before that great and golden word. “Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out!” The barriers had vanished! The way was open!

“Him that cometh!”
“Any Him! Any him!”
“Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out!” Here was a vision of the catholicity of Jesus.

In his pitiful distress there broke upon the soul of John Bunyan a vision of the infinite reliability of Jesus. It was the deep, strong accent of certainty that ultimately captivated all his heart. Times without number, he had come with a great “perhaps” trembling on his lips. “Often,” he tells us, “when I had been making to the promise, I have seen as if the Lord would refuse my soul for ever, I was often as I had run upon the pikes, and as if the
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Lord had thrust at me to keep me from him, as with a flaming sword. Then would I think of Esther, who went to petition the king contrary to the law. I thought also of Benhadad’s servants, who went with ropes under their heads to their enemies for mercy. The woman of Canaan, that would not be daunted, though called “dog” by Christ; and the man that went to borrow bread at midnight, were also great encouragements to me.” But each was, after all, only the encouragement of a possibility, of a probability, of a “perhaps.”

Perhaps! Perhaps! Perhaps!

In contrast with all this, the text spoke out its message bravely. “Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out!”

“In no wise! In no wise! In no wise!

“Oh! the comfort that I had from this word: ‘in no wise!’…If ever Satan and I did strive for any word of God in all my life, it was for this good word of Christ: he at one end and I at the other. Oh! what work we made! It was for this in John, I say, that we did so tug and strive; he pulled, and I pulled; but God be praised, I over came him; I got sweetness from it!” He passed at a bound from the Mists of the Valley to the Sunlight of the Summit. He had left the shadowland of “perhaps” for the luxurious sunshine of a glowing certainty. “With joy,” he says, “I told my wife: ‘Oh, now I know, I know, I know!’ That was a good night to me; I have had but few better. Christ was a precious Christ to my soul that night; I could scarce lie in my bed for joy and grace and triumph!”

Perhaps! Perhaps! Perhaps!
In no wise! In no wise! In no wise!
I know! I know! I know!

This Bunyan found, in the radiance that streamed from “that blessed sixth of John,” a revelation of the reliability of Jesus!

VII

Those who have studied Butler’s Analogy of Religion will recall the story that, in the introductory pages, Mr. Malleson tells of the illustrious author. When Bishop Butler lay upon his deathbed, Mr. Malleson says, an overwhelming sense of his own sinfulness filled him with a terrible concern. His chaplain bent over him and tired to comfort him.

“You know, sir,” said the chaplain, “that Jesus is a great Saviour!”

“Yes,” replied the terror-stricken bishop. “I know that He died to save. But how shall I know that He died to save me?”

“My Lord,” answered the chaplain, “it is written that him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out!”
“True!” exclaimed the dying man, “I am surprised that, though I have read that Scripture a thousand times over, I never felt its virtue until this moment. Now I die happy!”

And he did.

So, too, pillowing his head upon the selfsame words, did Bunyan. “His end,” says Froude, “was characteristic. It was brought on by exposure when he was engaged in an act of charity. A quarrel had broken out in a family at Reading with which Bunyan had some acquaintance. A father had taken some offence at his son, and threatened to disinherit him. Bunyan undertook a journey on horseback from Bedford to Reading in the hope of reconciling them. He succeeded, but at the cost of his life. Returning by way of London, he was overtaken on the road by a storm of rain, and was drenched before he could find shelter. The chill, falling on a constitution already weakened by illness, brought on fever. In ten days he was dead. His last words were: “Take me, for I come to Thee!”

“I come to Thee! I come to Thee!
“Him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out!”

The words that had lit up the path of his pilgrimage illumined also the valley of the shadow of death! The words that opened to him the realms of grace opened also the gates of glory! The words that had welcomed him at the Wicket Gate welcomed him also to the Celestial City!