



The gentleness of Christ

There is scarcely anything more awesome than to watch almighty power at work. It is this that we see at creation. The will of God is here seen at work exerting itself upon nothing and calling worlds into existence from non-existence. The sudden eruption of space, time, galaxies and intelligent beings into being out of nothing is a concept which, however familiar to the devout Bible reader, must never be allowed to lose its wonder and its fascination. From God all beings receive their existence and we, as intelligent beings, should try to live daily in the consciousness that the God whose all-powerful word called us into existence is 'over all and blessed forever'. It is profane to take our Creator's work for granted.

But if almighty power is awesome to us, it is still more awesome to see absolute power acting with absolute gentleness. It is this that we see in the life and behaviour of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was sent into our world with all the power that is inherently his as the eternal Son of God. That is to say, he came to take our nature without in any way laying aside the powers that belonged eternally to his own divine nature and person. And we see in the life of Christ a perfect example of meekness, lowliness and gentleness.

It is possible to talk sentimentally about the gentleness of Christ as though it were something obvious or commonplace. But in fact this gentleness of our Saviour is something which we should look upon as remarkable in the highest degree. A moment's thought will assure us that Christ's lowliness and tenderness is quite as amazing as the most dramatic of all his miracles. Let us examine it for a moment.

The history of our world is very much the history of how power has been abused by men and nations. Dictators and tyrants have risen up on the stage of this world and for a little time they have ruled over men with pitiless terror. Empires have sprung up which have absorbed weaker and poorer nations and often, if not quite always, ruled with oppression and exploitation. If mankind's tyrants have not been entirely successful in crushing our human race absolutely it is not for want of the will to do it. One thing alone has prevented them from dominating the whole world – lack of power. If the Pharaohs and the Caesars, the Napoleons and the Hitlers of this world had only had sufficient power they would never have stopped till the whole human race was groveling at their feet.

But the history of our world shows us one man who *did* have power to do whatever he willed. Jesus of Nazareth came into the world invested with infinite and unlimited power. He entered into history endowed with all the omnipotence of Godhood. This power he was pleased to display before the eyes of men on numerous occasions. We refer to these displays of his power as 'miracles'. The miracles were the exercise of Christ's infinitely powerful will on the material world of his day. So that men would not be in any doubt about the absolutely all-inclusive scope of his almightiness, Christ exerted it in a multitude of ways. He stilled the storm, banished sickness, restored sight, cast out Satan, cleansed leprosy, walked on the sea, raised the dead. The most consummately wonderful miracle of all was his own rising again from the dead. He *conquered* death and overcame it.

The one figure in all mankind's history who *did* have power to crush the world under his heel, had he but wished to do so, is the world's supreme example of meekness and gentleness. Never do we see Christ use his power harshly, cruelly or vindictively. Once and only once perhaps do we have a hint of how Jesus might have used his power against his enemies if he had chosen to do so. It was in the garden of Gethsemane when his betrayer and those with him approached the person of our Lord to lay hands on him. The Apostle John records the event:

'As soon then as he had said unto them, I am he, they went backward, and fell to the ground'.

(John 18:6)

On this one occasion, so far as we know, did the Lord Jesus put forth just so much of his divine power that his enemies fell backward on the ground. We can scarcely think that they fell backwards for any other reason. We are not informed that Jesus let out a supernaturally loud shout or that he menaced them in any way. Such conduct is entirely out of character with all that the Gospels tell us of Christ in any case. The true explanation must be that he exerted at that moment just a little of that omnipotent power which he had used in the creation of the world. It was not intended to do his attackers any harm but it ought to have been enough to tell them that in arresting Christ they were arresting Omnipotence itself.

It is possible to sentimentalise the gentleness of Christ in another way. We must never portray him as if he had any degree of moral weakness or as if he were tolerant of sin. This is done when writers suggest what is false. Christ was *'a friend of publicans and sinners'* (Matthew 11:19) in one sense. He *'received sinners and ate with them'* (Luke 15:2). So much is true, but must not be stated in such a way as to imply something false. Our Saviour's gentle treatment of the erring and the sinning sons of men is never to be portrayed as if he had an easy attitude towards their sins and errors.

This is done by some writers. They give the impression of a Christ who is tolerant of sin. This is not true. He was patient and even tender with sinners but he never condoned their sin. His gentleness is seen in pardoning the penitent, not in excusing their past behaviour.

'Go and sin no more' (John 8:11) he says to one.

'Her sins which are many are forgiven' (Luke 7:47), he says to another.

'Sin no more lest a worse thing befall thee' (John 5:14), he says to a third.

The gentleness of Christ is shown in his readiness to allow sinners to come close to him for his blessing, healing and pardon.

There are limits too to the gentleness of Christ in his dealings with sinners. If we overstate this aspect of his character and ministry we shall distort our picture of him. The evidence shows that on occasion our Lord was angry (Mark 3:5) with sinners. He spoke out bluntly and boldly on many occasions when he saw a carnal wisdom and hypocrisy in religious leaders. He made a whip of small cords and drove out those who were turning the house of God into a den of thieves. This he did both at the beginning and at the end of his ministry (John 2:15; Mark 11:15). Scarcely any more stern or denunciatory language can be found in all the Word of God than that which the Lord Jesus Christ uses in his exposure of the foolish and blind ways in which the Pharisees had corrupted the gospel of the grace of God in his day (Matthew 23).

The character of meekness which we see in the Saviour in the pages of the Four Gospels is one which we ought to study and imitate as his disciples. There should never be anything 'loud' or flashy about a believer or about his religious behaviour. The religion of Jesus is one which breeds circumspection, depth of soul, self-restraint and genuineness. The believer, and especially the Christian minister, needs to walk in Christ's steps in this, as in all other, respects. We are to be compassionate towards the lost sinners of this world. But we are never to make them feel at ease in their sins. The ideal we see in Christ is reflected in the lives of his servants. They are a blend of two excellencies: deep mercy and shining purity.

This quality of gentleness in Christ is an expression of the love which he bears to men's souls. He did not come to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17). While this present world stands he will be most patient with sinners.

'A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory.'

(Matthew 12:20)

He is supremely patient with his own people. He bears with our infirmities and pardons our life-long sinfulness.

The danger is that through presumption it is possible for men, and even for churches, to abuse the patience of Christ. Nothing provokes him to lay aside his gentleness so much as when we presume to disobey his Word on the pretext that he is too loving to be provoked.

It is only the fool who confuses meekness with weakness, or who imagines that because Christ is slow to anger he will *never* be angry. Let us glory in the compassion of Christ; but woe betide us if we take advantage of it! Those who take advantage of Christ's kindness so as to indulge in worldliness, carnality and disobedience will discover that they have turned a Lamb into a Lion.

None are so terrible in anger as those who are slow to anger. So is Christ. He says as much to the seven churches in Asia (Revelation 2-3). He means to be taken seriously when he says:

'I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works'.

(Revelation 2:23)

Gentle as our Saviour is with the penitent, the lowly, the needy and the prayerful, he is nevertheless dreadful when men tamper with his truth, distort his gospel, pollute his church or live with secret sins.

What need we all have of a Saviour who is perfect in patience! What need we have of One who is full of grace! Such is the Son of God who died for us. Out of obedience and respect for him we do well to walk in the light of his Word and keep ourselves unspotted from the world.

M Roberts

© 2013
www.christianstudylibrary.org