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“WOMAN,
THOU ART LOOSED
FROM
THINE INFIRMITY.”



S. Luke xiii. 12.

*A Sermon preached by
The Lord Bishop of Barking.*

Pamphlet

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"Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity."

St. Luke xiii. 12.

A YEAR and a half ago a soldier was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey. The King and the whole nation paid him honour. Thousands have visited the spot where he lies. Hundreds of thousands of pictures of his grave have been sold. *Yet no one knows his name.* He is representative of perhaps a million men, and in honouring him we honour all who gave their lives in the great war.

Yet, though representative, he was none the less an individual man; son of an individual father and mother, husband of an individual wife, father of individual children, one who shared the life of his fellow men, who knew their joys and sorrows, who passed through the tribulation and tasted the death that so many of his fellow-soldiers tasted on the battle field.

And the woman whom our Lord addressed in the words of our text was typical of her sex. She was an individual woman—one who bore the pains and sorrows that millions of other women have known so well. Yet no one knows her name. Like the Unknown Warrior, she is just an Unknown Woman, a type, a representative of womanhood.

St. Paul tells us that "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now." Woman is not outside that description. She is not exempt from the trials and troubles of creation. In fact she has more than her share. Though physically the weaker sex, her burdens are heavier than man's.

In the nature of things this must be so. However easy circumstances may be made for woman, life must be harder for her than for man. Yet in many lands her position is aggravated. She has a spirit of infirmity

and is bowed together and can in no wise lift herself up. In the case of the woman whom our Lord loosed, her condition appears to have been due to outside agencies. Our Lord describes her as a daughter of Abraham "whom Satan hath bound." The powers of evil had attacked her.

The early Church had a vivid conception of the power of the forces of evil. St. Paul speaks of our wrestling against principalities and powers far more formidable than any foes in human form. In the Revelation, St. John holds out the palatable prospect of Satan being bound for a thousand years. What joy the thought brought to those who knew, as we do not, the meaning of spiritual conflict!

Where Satan is not bound, he will bind others. Missionaries tell us that they never realized the power of the devil till they went to heathen lands. Go to West Africa or to the New Hebrides, where there is little to hold Satan in check, and there you see what the power of the devil is.

We are obliged to include man in the indictment. If St. Peter could be addressed as doing the work of the devil—"Get thee behind Me, Satan"—surely men who know not God can become his tools. The inhumanity of man to man was a phrase used originally to describe the inhumanity of man to woman. We can find ample illustration of this in England—more than enough to make us feel unable to cast the first stone at our brothers in various parts of the world where the light of the Gospel had not shone.

The lot of the women and girls of India, of the widows and child-wives, the lot of the women of China, the lot of the women of Africa, all tell the same tale.

It is woman's office to rear the coming generation, to soften, purify and elevate human life, to impress ideals upon the world, yet everywhere she is handicapped with a spirit of infirmity, bowed together, and in nowise able to lift up herself.

To whom can woman look for release from her infirmity?

If she has been bound by Satan; if she has suffered at the hand of man, she needs some very strong force to loose her. *What force is stronger than that of religion?* Lord Bryce, in his last book, "Modern Democracies," tells us that "religion is the strongest of all forces by which governments have been affected." We may apply the description with regard to the bearing of religion upon womanhood. In fact, experience shews that religion is nowhere more powerful than in its bearing on woman. Lord Beaconsfield wrote: "There is nothing to be compared to it (the religious principle) in power except the influence of woman—and they generally go together."

Think what the chief religions of the world have done for woman—specially in lands where our Society works.

What is Islam's view of womanhood? What position does woman hold under its influence? Is the status of woman raised? Is it left untouched? Is it actually debased? Canon Gairdner tells us: "Up to the time of Mohammed the Arabian woman enjoyed a great deal of social freedom." ("The Reproach of Islam," p. 188.) Elsewhere he says: "the thing which above all others affects out judgment of the religion of Islam is the hard fact regarding the position of women . . . And here, the responsibility of Islam for the state of woman, and the degradation of family life, is a matter about which there can be no doubt, for it goes directly back to the Koranic laws of marriage, divorce, polygamy, and concubinage, and the consequent view of womanhood encouraged, nay necessitated thereby."

What is the effect of Hinduism on woman? A *pandit* in Kashmir wrote, "The narrator of the present condition of women in India can a tale unfold which would harrow the soul and freeze the blood of every civilized man . . . that marvellous tragedy of existence which is carried on in an Indian zenana." (Quoted in "Behind the Pardah.") A former missionary of your Society wrote: "The false religions of the land have dragged down woman from the place God intended her to hold." The iniquities of child marriage, the sad lot of the 23 million widows of India are not amelior-

ated by the religions of the country. In fact, the baneful customs which are the curse of the girls and women of India are enjoined by religion and enforced by women—another instance of the union noted by Lord Beaconsfield of the two immense powers of religion and of the influence of woman.

Dr. Datta tells us: "Immorality is not rebuked by religion. (In India). . . within the holy precincts of the temples themselves vice often reigns. To many of the great temples, girls are attached as attendants and are dedicated to the god. . . . In the name of religion these hapless girls are condemned to a life of shame." ("The Desire of India.")

Can we speak better things of Buddhism and Confucianism, of Taoism, of Shintoism, or of any other creed? These may, from an ethical standpoint, rise higher than Mohammedanism or Hinduism; but they have failed to loose woman from her infirmity.

Is it possible that we have been thinking too much of the systems mentioned and too little of the personalities whose names they bear? The world is often weary of the systems which have their day. Organisation palls upon men. Life does not disappoint, so shall we summon the founders of these systems to the help of womanhood?

Mahomet comes upon the scene. Can he avail? Are his relations with womanhood suggestive of his being the deliverer of the sex? (Muir, "Mahomet and Islam.")

Next comes Buddha. We hail with more hope his approach. Was his not a winning personality? Was he not the greatest of India's sons? Was he not a noble character? Was he not a seeker after truth? (Datta, "Desire of India.") Yet our hopes are all dispelled when he begins to speak. For though there is much to attract in his ethical standards, he tells us at once that existence is sorrow and that the only hope we have, if hope we may call it, is cessation from existence. No, Buddha disappoints us. He leaves us, he leaves woman, with no prospect of being loosed from her infirmities.

Is there anyone whom we can call on as the Saviour that woman needs? There is only One Who is able to loose woman from her infirmity. For eighteen years the sufferer in the Gospel story lay bowed together, unable to lift herself up. At length Jesus passed that way and called her to Him and said to her "Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity. And He laid His hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God."

Our Lord is the only Saviour, the one Healer of the woes of womanhood, whether she is viewed as an individual or as a sex, whether physical or spiritual infirmity is in mind, whether social or moral ills come into view.

The records of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society contain many infallible proofs of the wonder-working power of Christ, shewing how His Name, through faith in his Name, has made many a sufferer strong.

It is Jesus Christ that the world needs. Can we secure His Presence to-day? Let us offer up the prayer,

"Jesu, stand among us
In Thy risen power."

He can and will come, but He can and will only come in the person of those who love Him. We must be like Him, if He is to work through us. We must not go out to India to *lead*, Dr. Garfield Williams has told us only recently, but to serve. That was our Lord's way—"I am among you as He that serveth." Jesus aimed at shewing men the Father. "Shew us the Father," said Philip, "and it sufficeth us." Jesus replied, "Have I been so long time with you and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip? He that hath seen Me, hath seen the Father." (St. John xiv. 8, 9.) Some days later the Divine Commission was given to the whole Church, women and men alike, not merely to the Apostles, as Bishop Westcott reminds us: "As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you." (St. John xx. 21.) In pursuance of that commission we want to shew Jesus to others. We should like to be able to say "He that hath seen me, hath seen Jesus Christ." It seems almost a daring suggestion to

make, and yet it is one that we must face. How much in our lives there is which needs to be broken before the light of Christ can shine forth. We who have so great a treasure in earthen vessels must be willing for self to be so effaced that others may take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus, and that our bodies are a veritable Temple of the Holy Ghost.

Is there not great hope for us here in days of perplexity and unrest—conditions which affect the Church just as they do the world? What are we to believe? Where do we stand? So many are in uncertainty. What use would it be for them to venture out to the mission field? The question may well be asked, for we need workers with a definite message. It has to be asked too, for the younger women of the present day are just as much affected by the movements of modern thought, by historical and critical investigation, as young men are. In our colleges and outside them young women are thinking, sometimes rather furiously. And they cannot be expected to respond to the great call unless they have a definite mission to impel them forth, and a message to carry to the women of India and China. It may be that once young women were more simple in their belief than young men, less insistent on enquiry and investigation, more ready to accept authority; they are not so to-day.

Yet this can be said: no alternative to Jesus Christ is offered to the world to-day. No one else claims to loose womanhood so effectively from her infirmity. Certainly no one else can sustain so convincingly claims of this nature. To take an instance, the love of a mother for her children is deeper than life itself. Yet Hinduism brings no comfort to the mother who loses her little child. In fact it brings added sorrow, for it impresses upon her the conviction of a hereafter, but with it affirms the dissolution of the relationship of love and friendship.

Yet the missionary can go to that mother with a message; Jesus can come through her. He can lay His hand upon her. He can comfort her as He did the widowed mother

of Nain. "The woman missionary," says Dr. Datta, "gets her opportunity with the women in their households. It may be the plaintive notes of a hymn sung to a familiar melody, or a story which has an underlying meaning, that holds the attention of the assembled women in the courtyard of a friend's house. The lives of many women are so sombre; the death of a favourite child, the waywardness of a husband, or the prospect of being left a widow, with all the terrible accompaniments of that position, cast a deep shadow over the lives of many. A word of sympathy and of comfort has often brought much joy and light into the hearts of these lone creatures, and made them more receptive of the truth of the love of Christ. . . . The woman missionary's opportunity, if she have the gift of sympathy and tact, is boundless."

The C.E.Z.M.S. has risen nobly to the occasion. For more than forty years the needs of the women of India and China have been its care. So much blessed have its efforts been that more than 200 missionaries are upon its roll, and during this past year twenty-two new missionaries have been placed upon its list of women on active service.

And the Society is nothing if not up to date. In fact it has anticipated both the world and the Church. It sent forth brave women into the mission field long before women travelled and explored as they do to-day. It has anticipated the Church as well as the world, for while the Church is still discussing tentatively the place which women shall hold in its ministry, the Society has been sending women forth to exercise the functions of ministry even if not clothed with the recognition which the Church is so slow to give!

A petition has been widely signed of late, and strangely enough by many women, behind which lies the assumption that women are incapable of receiving the grace of Holy Orders. It is a most insulting proposition, alike to the sex and to its achievements in the cause of Christ.

Yet we need not be surprised at criticism. When our Lord loosed the woman of the Gospel story from her

infirmity, some of the religious people of His day were quick to criticize. The ruler of the synagogue in which the good deed was done, voiced the protest. For once he was roused to passion. "There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." The way in which the good deed was done was far more important to him than the doing of the good deed itself. That synagogue had become that day a centre of healing influence. The ruler ought to have rejoiced. That Sabbath day was one which brought life and liberty to a long-fettered soul. The better the deed, the better the day. It was left to the people, instead of the Church, to rejoice in the glorious things that were done by Christ.

The Church needs a brighter and longer vision. Can it be that the day has come when God pours out of His Spirit upon His servants and His handmaidens, with the result that our daughters as well as our sons shall prophesy?

The Church has yet to learn that it is not a case of whether it shall admit women to minister, but of whether it can survive if it excludes them from fuller recognition and wider use, if it does not recognize the debt it owes to womanhood for the magnificent service which she has rendered to her Lord.

Is not the heart of the Church touched by the cry of suffering womanhood, a cry in which the plaintive notes of suffering child-life can be discerned making pitiful appeal? The heart of the Saviour is touched. He is moved with compassion. He sees the readiness of many to respond to the revelation of Himself, if only some would present Him to the world. "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few."

Would not the response of the girls of to-day to the call to service be more effective if the Church were more filled with the mind of Christ, if it possessed more imagination and more sympathy, if it could bring home to the women of England the sorrows and sufferings of womanhood in the world at large? The question is widely asked to-day, "What shall we do with our

daughters?" The axe has descended and cut off many opportunities of livelihood, but little mention has been made of the opening that there is for them to carry Christ to the women of the world. Here is scope for the adventure, for the interest, for the romance, for the colour, which the girl of to-day expects to find in her life. This is service which woman is likely to render with double advantage. Not only are the doors thus open to women closed to men, but we are told by so careful an observer as Benjamin Kidd that women will have a far more effective influence than man in impressing ideals upon the world. He also bears witness to the rapidity with which ideals can be impressed upon nations. We may yet see "a nation born in a day." The outcaste movement in India has yielded astonishing results. We are told, moreover, by Christian leaders from several districts in India, that of the outcaste folk who had been baptized, no less than 75 per cent had become witnesses for Christ. "Ye are My witnesses." So let us expect greater and more rapid progress than any we have seen as yet. If anti-British prejudice closes many hearts against Christians, perhaps service and love—exemplified as they have been so long and so fully by Christian women working in the mission field—may yet win the day.

I have hinted at the anti-British prejudice which may check our efforts in India, at least for a time. We are told that Western civilization is hated in India, that Gandhi and his followers have seen its blackness, and that millions of India's people detect and detest it too. We have to remember that Western civilization is ceasing largely to be Christian, if ever it was Christian. There is undoubtedly a decline in religion in our own country. This portends serious danger to our civilization. Certain of its features—its liberty for instance—are due to Christianity. Not least we may say is the position accorded to women the fruit of Christian influence. Now, Christianity preserves a true balance in human life. It provides freedom; it makes it possible. It makes the world safe for democracy. It has given

freedom to womanhood, but it prescribes that standard of life which alone makes such freedom safe for woman. If Christian influence declines, the balance is disturbed and various dangers ensue. Liberty may become licence.

In any case we may be sure that Western civilization will affect the nations of the world. It cannot be kept back. This civilization needs to be permeated with the influence of Christ. The Church alone can secure this end. Every member of the Church must make the influence of Christ more effective at home, and see that the civilization which goes out to India and China carries with it the influence of Christ. Otherwise chaos must ensue.

The Church has often tried repression instead of loosing, compulsion rather than freedom balanced by responsibility. The result of such a policy can never be satisfactory.

Christ must go out into the world through us, in the spirit of the Incarnation; through woman to woman. Through women who go out to the mission field, women who have found in the Jesus of history the Jesus of experience. Jesus Himself will draw near to many a straitened life, to many a woman bowed together by the spirit of infirmity, unable in any wise to lift up herself, to walk straight and to praise God. To many a sister in non-Christian lands Jesus will say the words of life and light, of help and health, "Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity."