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A PLEA FOR JUSTICE



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A PLEA FOR JUSTICE

WILL J. ERWOOD

Standing in the center of the Capitol at Madison, viewing the beauty of the great dome which is said to be one of the highest in the world, reading the inscriptions and enjoying the beauty, architectural and artistic, which makes this so great a center of attraction to the tourists traveling through Madison from the four points of the compass, four words stood out above everything else. These were inscribed in the great circle above the rotunda. On one side the word that seemed to blaze forth like a living thing was "Liberty." Next to it in the circle was another word which has been associated with all of the progress and ideals of the human family and that word was "Justice," than which, perhaps, there is no more important word in any language. As the vision wandered, gathering the various impressions which form such a vivid memory of that visit, the next word discerned was that which is the foundation of all civilization, namely, "Legislation," a fitting word to be emblazoned upon the walls of the State Capitol. This trio needed but one more word symbol to complete the circle and suggest the aim and purpose of all of the activities which radiate from that center. The word carved in the solid marble, which forms the basic circle of the great dome, was "Government," that principle which

marks the difference between the enlightened man and the lawless savage.

These four words above form the keystone of the arch of human progress. In some way they seem to suggest the oneness of all of life; in some measure they symbolize the thing that religionists and philosophers from the beginning of time have sought to express, namely, the unity of all life. A great writer said once that "All are needed by each one, that each one of us have need of all of the rest." This applies peculiarly to the four words which form the inscription in the dome of Wisconsin's great Capitol because no one of them can exist without the other and each one embraces all of the elements of the others.

Can one imagine such a thing as liberty, that kind of liberty that every soul craves, without there being mixed in it the element of justice? Justice is the thing which grants to every right-minded man or woman the opportunity to live in accordance with Divine law. Justice it is that must be dispensed to every member of the human race if liberty is to mean all that the word implies. Can it be possible for either liberty or justice to be granted the members of the human family unless there be the kind of legislation that shall voice the needs, the hopes and the aspirations of those who delegate power to the legislators of the land, and is it possible for legislation to be of value unless it embodies the ele-

be under the domination of equally monarchical interests right here in our own country? If it was not right for the brave souls who have come to be known as the founders of the American republic to be slaves to a foreign government which had no other than a pecuniary interest in their welfare, it was not right for the black man, brought here in fear and trembling through deception and misrepresentation, sometimes through force and bloodshed, to be slave of the people of any part of this great country. The interest of the slaveholder is never in the one enslaved; it is always in the personal gain or profit that he may get from his chattel. If it is not right that the black man, the negro, and the people of his and allied races, be enslaved, it cannot be considered in any sense right that the minds of the people should be enslaved by any organization,—political, educational, scientific or religious,—that wishes to perpetuate its own power at the expense of the religious liberty of the rest of its fellowmen. The slaveholder, the dictator, has always surrendered under protest; he has salved his conscience, if so be he had a conscience, by the assumption of authority by Divine right. Great have been his remonstrances when any attempt has been made to recognize the principles of justice as applicable to the life and needs of his underlings.

The history of this nation, as we have said, has been and is replete with the record of the battles be-

tween the old order and the new. Coming here in the early days the pilgrim fathers found a barren coast. Coming here they found a people already the inhabitants of the new world. They read the story of Columbus; they cited the bravery of that intrepid mariner; they told the world that Columbus gave to Castile and Leon a new world; that this world had become the birthplace of freedom and justice, and yet so soon as they had acquired numerical strength sufficient to make it safe, they broke their treaties with the inhabitants of the new world; they abrogated their contracts and the result was murder, rapine and pillage, not only on the part of the savages but oftentimes on the part of the pilgrim fathers as well.

It is strange,—a strange anomaly, that those who have craved for liberty forget its principles when they acquire it in certain measure; that those fleeing from oppression become oppressors as soon as the yoke has been lifted from their necks; strange that such a thing was done to the first inhabitants of America by those who came here seeking a haven that would grant them immunity from the dictatorship and domination of a government that refused religious emancipation; singular that they should so soon turn upon every other people and sect that sought for the same privilege for themselves.

It has been said that history repeats itself. Perhaps no greater truism has ever been uttered. It

does. The acquisition of authority, the assumption of Divine right, the acquiring of numerical strength and great wealth has always gone to the head and warped the judgment of any people who have reached such a point. We can see that as we scan the pages of the history of the world. Babylon fell not until wealth, arrogance and the Godlessness of authority gained possession of the people. Rome rose like a brilliant meteor in the sky only to have its light extinguished through the riot of passion, the turmoil of authority and the lust of conquest. Egypt, like a bright star, sent its scintillant rays of intellectual light athwart the horizon of mankind, only to have its brilliancy dimmed by the demon of authoritarianism and so, in logical sequence, the world has seen the downfall of practically all of the great nations of the past. Russia,—despotic Russia, the brilliance of whose court probably was never surpassed by any country, writhed under the lash and finally fell, its land drenched with the life-blood of its people. It is a strange characteristic of despotism that it always becomes the final victim of its own fangs. Spain, once brilliant leader of the world, the bright light, whose glory shed a glow across the heavens, has faded into comparative nothingness. Germany, France, Italy,—all have suffered because of the encroachment upon the rights of the people. Throughout this entire journey from the dawn of light to the present day, in every

phase, there has been the spirit of conquest; there has been the loss of the spirit and the exaltation of the letter of the law, but the poet, Longfellow, tells us in poetic language what the fiat of the Great Ruler of all life has been when he reads to us the story of Robert of Sicily in which he says:

“Robert of Sicily, brother of Pope Urbane
And Valmond, Emperor of Allemaine,
Apparelled in magnificent attire,
With retinue of many a knight and squire,
On St. John’s eve, at vespers, proudly sat
And heard the priests chant the Magnificat.
And as he listened, o’er and o’er again
Repeated, like a burden or refrain,
He caught the words, “*Deposuit potentes
De sede, et exaltavit humiles;*”
And slowly lifting up his kingly head
He to a learned clerk beside him said,
“What mean these words?” The clerk made answer meet,
“He has put down the mighty from their seat,
And had exalted them of low degree.”
Thereat King Robert muttered scornfully,
“’Tis well that such seditious words are sung
Only by priests and in the Latin tongue;
For unto priests and people be it known,
There is no power can push me from my throne!”
And leaning back, he yawned and fell asleep,
Lulled by the chant monotonous and deep.”

King Robert, like every ruler who felt that by Divine decree he was placed in authority over his people, lost sight of the inexorability of the Divine law expressed in that Latin phrase “*Deposuit potentes de sede, et exaltavit humiles,*” for over night,

through the administration of an angel, the Divine Evangel of the Most High, King Robert lost his throne and regained it not until he had learned the lesson of humility and human rights; and so, from these examples we see what has been the portent of all life, of all government, of all legislation; what has meant the prostitution of justice and liberty, always what has come when there has been the desire to make liberty and justice, legislation and government subservient to the wish, the ambition of a certain people.

Today in this 20th century, crowned by the victories of science, illumed by the light of learning, inspired by the hope of progress, lured on by the dreams of conquest and personal aggrandizement, history is repeating itself. Religious persecution looms like a menace, like the menace of a many-fanged dragon, waiting the opportune moment to strike at the vitals of the people and strangle liberty in the cradle of its birth. Everywhere there has been and is evidenced the desire to curtail religious progress and in order to curtail religious progress there has been and is being made an attempt to stifle the advance of science. Always the slogan has been, "*Truth is mighty and must prevail.*" But too frequently those who have voiced that slogan have construed it to mean, "*My truth is mighty and must prevail,*" that is, "*My conception of truth must take precedence over all others.*"

Martin Luther dared to think; dared to dream; his life was in jeopardy. The followers of Jesus of Nazareth had visions of a new dispensation; in the catacombs, in dungeons, in hovels, in isolated places they made worship to the unknown God, fleeing sometimes like frightened birds before the advance of the dread enemy that would strike them down in the midst of their flight. Michael Servitus, the eminent Spanish physician, dreaming of that universal brotherhood expressed by the Master of Nazareth, "I and my brother are one and ye are my brethren," gave his life or rather had his mortal life filched from him at the instigation of a John Calvin. Bruno, whose clear eyes scanned the heavens and saw therein the light of a larger message from Almighty God, paid the price that was paid by Socrates, the price exacted from Jesus and Peter and Stephen and most of those illumined souls who, limning the future, caught a gleam of God's great purpose. Galileo, whose vision reached far into the mysteries of the universe, knew sorrow and suffering because of the fear of those in authority that their theology could not survive the revelations of his truth. The gentle Jeanne D'Arc, timid maid of Orleans, whose soul was attuned to the voice of a Michael and a Gabriel, Blessed Evangels of the Most High, was reviled, ridiculed, burned at the stake. 'Twas ever the history of man that that which we would honor we first violate, that that which we would exalt we first demean

because out of the fires which consumed the flesh of the little maid of Orleans has grown the colossal figure of St. Jeanne D'Arc. From the cross, upon which hung the body of the compassionate Nazarene, has arisen a saviour of mankind.

It is not strange that Patrick Henry from the depths of his soul cried, "I know not what course others may pursue but as for me, give me liberty or give me death." With this background it is not strange that in this 20th century where men are making conquest of air and earth and water; it is not strange that in this era of progress the shadow of the monster, which has hung like a menace over the human family, should still shed some of its gloom upon the earth and in the hearts of the human family. Today we face a battle,—the battle between the Divine authority of the ecclesiastical order that would rob progress of its growth; that would stifle the advance of human knowledge unless that knowledge came according to its own specific formula, and that invincible spirit of liberty and religious devotion that has ever been the sponsor of religious innovation and progress.

Liberal religion today is hanging in the balance because of the fact that so few people are ready to understand that "the old order changeth" as a consequence of the Divine law. We as a people, meeting here in this convocation, are fighting for the religious freedom that is the birthright of every

citizen of this great American nation and which must be eventually the possession of the peoples of all the nations of the world. Through more than seventy-five years we have gradually made headway, coming from the first apparently insignificant inception of our movement at Hydesville, N. Y., to the point at which we come here as representatives of a great National organization. Practically every step of the way has been met by opposition; practically every attempt to establish our religious order among those that have taken their place in the religious ranks of the world, has met with interference and opposition of various kinds.

We have been charged by unscrupulous hirelings as being a menace to the well-being of humanity, as being a detriment to the religious thought of the world; we are charged with teaching things that are not conducive of high moral character and yet, while this charge has been made, it is impossible for those hirelings to bring any specific cases before our observation.

What is the crime of which we have been adjudged guilty? What is the demand that we have been making upon the human family? Simply this: we are following in the footsteps of every great religious body the world has ever known and in keeping with the practice of ages we are meeting with the same treatment as was accorded the pioneers in every religious movement in the history of man.

Socrates was charged with perversion of the morals of the youth of Athens; yet nowhere in literature can we find more lofty sentiments, more ripe wisdom than was expressed by the intellectual saviour of Athens. Jesus was charged with corrupting the morals and religious principles of the people of his day; yet out of that charge he has arisen phoenix-like from the ashes of his own body to that point at which he has become probably one of the most colossal and commanding figures in the religious history of the world. We should not feel badly that we have fared somewhat the same as the rest of the religious pioneers.

Again I ask what is the crime of which we have been adjudged guilty? What is the thing that we are trying to do? What are some of the things that we teach? We have striven to bring to man a broader, more magnanimous, and, we believe, a more religious interpretation of the power that reigns supreme throughout the universe. We have sought to make man understand that God, that potent force which manifests in all of life, is not a narrow-minded, vengeful, creedalistically-inclined deity whose anger becomes great because certain peoples have been moved to accept different verbiage as being better fitted to express what they feel concerning the over-soul.

We have tried to take from man the fear of one of the great natural changes in human life. We

have accepted the idea of immortality; we have based our acceptance upon the assurance of continuity of existence; we have based our acceptance of this continuity upon certain well-defined phenomena. If we are guilty of anything, this is the thing of which we are guilty: We believe absolutely that when the wisest masters of old said, "That which hath been is now, that which is to be hath already been, and God requireth all that which is past," it was an expression of the Divine truth revealed to man. We have accepted absolutely the statement of the Man of Galilee that "These signs shall follow them that believe; in my name they shall drive out devils and heal the sick." We have accepted the truth of this statement because there have come to us from time to time evidences, that kind of evidences which cannot be repudiated without stultifying our reason, without refusing to accept that which has come in such a manner as to render them indubitable evidences of the survival of human personality after bodily death.

If we are guilty of anything, we are guilty of the desire to make the world understand that the Divine power, that omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient ruler of the universe, does not demand of us long-winded prayers, votive offerings and ritualisms as evidences of our devotion. We seek to make man understand that the best way to serve God is to be of use to mankind. We seek to make man understand

that there has been *too much preaching of Christ and not enough living of the Christ life*. We strive to make the world appreciate the Christ that is universally expressing today rather than a dead Jesus hanging upon the cross. We are guilty of believing in the prayer of kindly deeds, the service of helpfulness, the devotion of kindliness as manifest toward our fellowmen. It is our firm conviction that that power that reigned in ancient Babylon, that power which is said to have breathed these words, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased," still exists and is just as magnanimous, as benignant and considerate today as he was then.

If guilt there be, we are guilty of believing that the gifts of the spirit still exist; that the gifts bestowed upon the men of God in the ancient day are still among the gifts vouchsafed to man in the present century.

We are charged with being an irreligious people; yet one of the cardinal principles in our Declaration is that one which refers to the application of the Golden Rule as voiced by Buddha, as expressed by Confucius, as sanctioned and sealed by Jesus of Nazareth. It is said that the Master of Galilee told us that religion, pure and undefiled, consisted of visiting the orphan and widow, the fatherless. It is said that he made very effective use of this question, "If a man ask Thee for bread, wilt Thou give him a stone?" Our conception of religion is service

rather than services, devotion, homage, reverence revealed by actions.

It is said that we as a people strive to undermine the world's religions, so every effort is made to discredit our phenomena, our teachings. Newspaper writers, in whom there is no semblance of truth, are hired to ridicule and make light of every phase of our movement. Our media come under criticism; our right to seek consolation in that manner which seems to us to give the greatest measure of comfort, is questioned, and this question is raised by people whose religions teem with accounts of psychic phenomena; whose religions teach the Divine authority of the ecclesiast; whose religions attribute to their teachers the authority and ability to sing masses and offer prayers that shall insure the delivery of souls from purgatorial states. This opposition to our movement comes from men and women of all denominations who are supposed to be vicars of Christ, those who are supposed to be the true lineal representatives of the Master of Galilee. They preach to us the Golden Rule; yet in their eagerness to have us adjudged guilty of crime, they hire magicians, tricksters, newspaper writers devoid of principle, to misrepresent the truths and teachings of our religion and to magnify the mistakes of those of us who, like the representatives of all other religious bodies, are just human beings, prone to make mistakes. *If justice is to be done, then the*

representatives of all religious organizations should be adjudged alike and all religious organizations should be held responsible for the misdemeanors of its members:

The preacher who sells stock, while he has over his desk this motto, "*The Bible our guide and Jesus, our leader*" and who, using that religious cloak, has mulcted widows and orphans out of millions of dollars, should be made to suffer and the religious organization of which he is a member should be charged with being a pernicious influence, and laws should be enacted to wipe it out.

When the shyster lawyer through his machinations and misinterpretations of the law is guilty of misdemeanors, as many of them are, the religious organization of which he is a member should be held accountable. When even those on the bench so far forget the thing that they are supposed to manifest as to let personal uninformed prejudice sway their decisions, the church of which those judges are members should be held accountable.

Should we condemn a system because sometimes individuals make mistakes? -If so, what system of religion would stand analysis? What great civic organization could hold up its head? Bankers, lawyers, clergymen, statesmen, educators, citizens—all are human beings; they are prone to error; they let their prejudices sway them; they are unfair, at times immoral and unjust. Shall we hold the princi-

ples of the religion as taught by the Man of Galilee accountable? Should we say it is because of this religion that these things happen, or is it not more compatible with the very essence of justice to say that these things have been done despite the religious instruction to do otherwise, the religious admonition to be honest and clean and wholesome?

What is the thing for which we plead—special privileges? No. The abrogation of laws to prevent misdemeanor? No, far from that. The thing for which we ask is the privilege of worshipping God according to the dictates of our conscience and our understanding. A recent writer, in whose soul there is supposed to be the principle of the Divine mother, has deliberately misrepresented, aye, not only misrepresented but has deliberately lied about some of the teachings and the practices of some of the Spiritualists. This writer went, Judas-like, among our people, called upon them, shook their hands, sat at the table and brake bread with many of them and yet, after having done all of this, deliberately, with malice aforethought, for possibly more than 30 pieces of silver, violated one of the commandments to which she is supposed to subscribe, by bearing false witness. Christian organizations have hired a man of alien faith for the specific purpose of trying to misrepresent and discredit our religion. If I am in error in this statement, no one would be more willing to make public

apology, but the printed word, the published misrepresentation of facts stands for itself. We can't get away from it.

And so we, as representatives of the Spiritualist religion, we in this convocation, convened in this beautiful City of Milwaukee, in this grand old state of Wisconsin, under the shadow of the Capitol a few miles away, wherein are emblazoned the words, "Liberty, Justice, Legislation and Government," make our plea. What are we asking for? Special privileges? Again I say, "No." We are asking for the liberty to enjoy our religion free from interruption from outsiders and particularly from those individuals whose own theology teems with accounts of the manifestations of the so-called dead, the visitations of saints. Ah, I know that they will say to us that these who come as saints are friends of God. Little Jeanne D'Arc was a human being. They burned her at the stake; they reviled her. Today she is a saint. Who are the saints? *Men and women who lived and loved and suffered and died and came back sometimes to minister unto those who were still in this world of material experience.*

What is the thing for which we ask? Justice,—justice for our people, justice for our ministers, the right to express without fear those religious convictions which have been brought to us through sorrow and suffering, through travail, through the search for knowledge, through the effort to under-

stand the Divine. Is it asking too much when we request the same immunity from interference that is given the great Catholic church, the Episcopal church, the Methodist or Baptist or Presbyterian church? Is it asking too much for us to ask that these people show to us a little of the spirit of the Golden Rule? If we have not the truth, if we are mistaken, why don't they show us through their greater justice, their finer spiritual insight, their more magnanimous and kindly treatment, their reason and logic, rather than their vituperation and abuse that they have something finer than we have? Why don't they come to us in the spirit of the Master, whom they assume to serve and say, "*Brother, let us be mutually helpful, let us serve thee as our Master has served us, let us show you God's greater wisdom, let us bring to you the light of a finer, more spiritual understanding*"?

What do we ask? We ask for legislation that shall protect us as it protects the representatives of other organizations devoted to religious instruction. We ask for that legislation which is supposed to be the base of all government, that legislation that is supposed to be representative of the rights, the privileges and the religious hope of all peoples. Our plea is that legislators shall forget that they are Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and Episcopalian when they are passing upon the law that shall give to us the rights that they want for themselves; that

they shall forget denominational bias and prejudice, that they shall fairly, impartially and justly protect us as we desire that they shall be protected. And, finally, what is the thing that we ask?

We ask for the kind of government that shall sustain the principles of justice, that shall give guarantee of legitimate liberty and assurance of protective legislation. We ask all of these because we are citizens; our people are taxpayers; they are business men and women; they are educators. Our boys gave their life blood in the recent struggle for democracy, for liberty; our women stitched their souls into bandages and garments for suffering men and boys on the battlefields; our people subscribed for ambulances, responded to the call that went over the country when it seemed that liberty was jeopardized, and so it was. So long as there is lack of liberty in any part of the world, democracy is never safe in any other part of the world. So long as there is injustice to one organization, no organization is safe from injustice. So long as there is class legislation passed to serve the members of one organization at the expense of another, no religious body is safe, and so we have come to you, not only the citizens of Milwaukee, not only the law-makers of Wisconsin but law-makers, judges, governors, citizens of the entire United States of America, famed cradle of liberty, whose escutcheon has been made bright by such names as those of Washington,

Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, McKinley, Harding, to say nothing of such wonderful individuals as Anna Howard Shaw, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and that great galaxy of great men and women whose names grow forever and ever more illustrious as times goes on.

We have faith in the power that rules the universe; we have faith that justice will be done; we have faith that some time, somehow there shall be accorded to us the same privilege, the same liberty of religious exercise as is accorded to the devotees of other systems; we have faith that some time the spirit of the Golden Rule will dominate and that throughout this broad land each man, each woman, each religious organization shall "do unto others as they would that others should do unto them."

