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ABOU BEN ADHEM

P.F. JENSEN

"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

St. John's College  
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Poetry I can take or leave, and I guess most of us are the same. It is too complicated. But some poems get under the skin, and here's one of them.

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)  
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,  
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,  
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,  
An angel writing in a book of gold:-  
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,  
And to the presence in the room he said,  
'What writest thou?' - the vision raised its head,  
And with a look made of all sweet accord,  
Answered, 'The names of those who love the Lord'.  
'And is mine one?' said Abou. 'Nay, not so,'  
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,  
But cheerly still; and said 'I pray thee, then,  
Write me as one that loves his fellow men.'  
The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night  
It came again with a great wakening light,  
And showed the names whom love of God had blest,  
And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

Do you like that poem? It's very popular - it's got rhymes in all the right places; it's not too long; it's simple; it tells a story - and, I guess most important of all, it's very comforting. After all, it tells us that loving the Lord doesn't matter, so long as we love our fellow men. Since we all reckon we do this to a greater or lesser degree, then we are all on good standing with God.

One puzzling feature for me is, who was the angel? You know, - the angel Ben Adhem saw. On first appearance the angel is, of course, one of the regulation variety; golden book, rich presence and so on. A real vision; a real messenger from

the Lord.

But, after all, that can't be right. So it's rather a puzzle. What I mean is that he can't have been a messenger of the Lord, since the message he gave was so flat contrary to what the Lord says. Jesus says without any hesitation at all that the first and great commandment is 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and will all your mind.' So, I can't see how Abou Ben Adhem could get away without doing that. I certainly wouldn't advise anyone to give it a miss.

Take another illustration. Someone once asked Jesus point blank 'What must we do, to be doing the works of God'. Now if that angel was answering, he would simply have indicated 'love your fellow men'. But not Jesus: he said: 'This is the work of God, that you believe in me'. First things first; fix up your relationship with God, through Jesus; then love your fellow men for all you're worth. Mind you, I think the reason we're so fond of this poem is that we haven't the foggiest notion just how hard it is to love fellowmen. To my mind Abou Ben Adhem was having himself on.

But who was the angel? If he wasn't a messenger of the Lord, where did he come from? Well the Bible does mention an angel called 'the angel of light', you know. It tells us that 'Satan disguises himself as an angel of light'. All in all, Abou Ben Adhem would have been well advised to start loving the Lord and to tell that angel to go back to hell.

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