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BY D.B. KNOX

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Relics an address given in the Town Hall, Sydney, July 12th, 1964.

As we are gathered here this afternoon it is reported in the daily papers that the arm of no less a personage than the Apostle Paul himself is being carried in procession less than a mile away, within St. Mary's Cathedral. There it is right now being exposed and kissed by the worshippers. This action is thought to please God and to bring blessing on those who take part.

We are reminded of an incident in Jerusalem in the 8th century B.C. when King Hezekiah found in the temple the brass snake which Moses had made many centuries before, in the wilderness, and which had brought such blessing to all who looked to that brazen serpent after they had been bitten by the poisonous snakes of the desert. Here was a hallowed relic indeed: authentic, made at the command of God, proved to have been a blessing when it was used as God commanded, and which was later to be chosen by Jesus as a symbol of the salvation which He Himself brought, telling Nicodemus, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life". (John 3).

When King Hezekiah began his reforms he found that the people of Jerusalem were venerating this brass snake and burning incense before it - a very natural way of honouring it, connected as it was with such sacred incidents of the past. However, acting under the Spirit of God the king made short shift with the brazen serpent and in 11 Kings 18:4 we read "He broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan, that is, a piece of brass. He trusted in the Lord the God of Israel so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among all them that were before him, for he clave to the Lord. He departed not from following Him but kept His commandments which the Lord commanded Moses and the Lord was with him whithersoever he went forth he prospered". This one clear

incident is sufficient to establish what God thinks of relics even when authentic and it need hardly be said that there are grave doubts about the authenticity of St. Paul's arm in spite of the two letters which accompany the arm of authenticate it. We need not bother about arguing over the authenticity of the relic, God's word is clear; we are not to serve God by honouring relics however authentic, or however sacred they might have been in their original use, for if there was ever a genuine holy relic it was the piece of brass which Hezekiah smashed up when he found that people were directing their honour to it rather than to the living God. So if we have the arm of the Apostle in our possession we should reverently bury it, for this is the way to honour its owner and God who made it. However, there is every likelihood that this supposititious arm is a fraud. So that the worshippers are doubly deceived. They resemble the heathen whom Isaiah describes in Ch. 44 v. 20, "A deceived heart has turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul nor say is there not a lie in my right hand?" The Roman Catholic religion is full of this superstitious trust in scapulars and other chains worn round the neck, in holy water said to ward off devils, in pilgrimages, in candles, in images of all sorts. It is not lack of faith or sincerity, but it is lack of knowledge which leads to these superstitious activities, which instead of honouring God, dishonour Him.

If we are to worship God in a way acceptable to Him our worship must be based on knowledge, for if we merely follow the thoughts of our own hearts all sorts of erroneous and heathen ideas will find a place. The Reformation was brought about by a rediscovery of the true knowledge of God which He has given to us Himself in Holy Scripture. The rediscovery of the Bible whether by Wycliffe at Oxford or Luther in the Monastery at Wittenburg, or by Bilney and Tyndale at Cambridge is the basic principle of the Reformation and a knowledge of the Bible remains the basic principle of all true worship of God.

God has given us knowledge of Himself in His Word and it is our part to read that Word, not merely give lip service to it, but to read it and to apply it to our own lives and to the lives of all our churches; for it is ignorance of the Word of God which leads directly to all those errors which the Reformation sought to correct and which leads to all the erroneous ideas, religious or secular, current at present in our own society. It is our part to read the Bible for ourselves and meditate on it, and to teach it to our children in our own families; and to see that it is expounded and preached in the pulpits of our churches.

If we ask what is the central theme of the Bible we may sum it up in the phrase "Jesus Christ is Lord". The message of the Bible is that on the cross of Calvary Jesus was victorious over the most intransigent rebellious element in God's creation, namely over sin and evil. Christ over-came sin in two ways: first by living a life in which He repulsed all temptations which came to Him as they come to us, so that He fulfilled God's requirements perfectly in a way that we ought to fulfil them but fail; and secondly He over-came sin by bearing in Himself the penalty and consequences of our sin. As St. Paul said "He became a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13); and thus He annulled and abrogated the accusation that sin brings against us. We have been set free through forgiveness. And so by living the perfect life and by bearing the consequences of our sins Christ has triumphed over Satan and His machinations against humanity, He has vindicated God's sovereignty in the area of the most stubborn rebellion, namely the area of the will. We must not then be surprised that there is no true religion which does not make Christ central. Our whole hope of forgiveness and eternal blessedness rests in Christ. This was the great principle of the Reformation, namely Christ must be all in all; and we for our part must acknowledge Christ as Lord and make Him Lord of our own lives.

The criterion which the Reformers brought against the religions of their day and which we bring against the modern Roman Catholic Church is that Christ has been displaced from the central position which must be His of

right. This so called arm of St. Paul is obtruded as a substitute centre of devotion into the place that Christ should occupy. So too, prayers to the mother of our Lord and to the other saints are objectionable because they ought to be offered to Christ. So too indulgences are objectionable as diverting attention from Christ's death as the only way of forgiveness. Jesus said "No man comes to the Father but by me". We need to remember that Christ must be central in our thoughts about the world and about ourselves. While we criticize others we must be careful that we do not come under the same condemnation of bypassing Jesus Christ. For those who honour not the Son honour not the Father, for as St. Paul said, in Jesus the fulness of the Godhead dwelt bodily.

Now the way to acknowledge Christ as Lord is the way of faith and trust. In Jesus Christ God has revealed Himself as our Heavenly Father who loves us so deeply that He has sent His Son to save us from our sins and to restore us to that fellowship with Him which is perfect happiness. The response He asks from us is the acknowledgement of this through trusting Him; trusting His promise for forgiveness that whosoever believes on Jesus Christ will receive the forgiveness of his sins according to His promise. And He calls on us also to trust Him in our daily life that His Word will be true that if we seek His kingdom He will provide for all our needs.

Trust in God with its consequences of obedience to His will is the way He asks us to worship and honour Him.

We need to ask ourselves whether we have accepted Christ as our Lord and Saviour and whether we are honouring God by putting first in our lives

the things of God and trusting Him to supply  
our needs.

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