

1

CLEMENT, A PHILOSOPHER OF ALEXANDRIA A.D. 200

Clement of Alexandria, or Titus Flavius Clemens to give him his full name, was born of heathen parents, probably in Athens, about the year A.D. 150. After studying rhetoric and philosophy at the University, he was converted to Christianity and then there followed a period of travel, during which he visited the southern part of Italy and more particularly the eastern Mediterranean where he attached himself to two teachers, one of them being an Assyrian and the other, whom he met in Palestine, being a Hebrew. After further journeyings he came at last to Alexandria where he met Pantaenus, the first great head of the Catechetical School in which the Christian was instructed in the faith and the pagan inquirer received answers to his questions. Clement after being the pupil of Pantaenus later became his associate in the conduct and oversight of the school, and about A.D. 190, having been ordained a presbyter of the Church, he succeeded his master and held office until the outbreak of the persecution under Septimius Severus in 202. He then withdrew to Cappadocia and was the guest of a former pupil, Alexander, who later became Bishop of Jerusalem. In 211 Clement was the bearer of a letter from Alexander to the Church at Antioch; four years later he was dead.

If little is known of the details of Clement's public life, his personal character is familiar from those of his writings that have been preserved. Apart from some fragments called Selections from the Prophets, a sermon entitled Who is the rich man that shall be saved? and a portion of an address to the newly baptized, there are three extant treatises which form a trilogy. The first, the Exhortation to the Greeks, was intended to convert the reader to Christianity; the second, The Pedagogue or Tutor, to instruct in the Christian way of life; and the third, The Stromata or Miscellanies, to which Clement referred as his "carpet bag" or, as we might say, "scrap book", was a collection of diffuse material describing the ideal of a complete Christian, perfect in all spiritual knowledge. In these works Clement reveals himself as a man of profound learning; calm and peaceful in character; grave yet cheerful, solemn but not without a sense of humour, charitable and frank. With his gaze firmly fixed upon his

Redeemer, with prayer ever on his lips, he sought not so much to impart information to his students as to knit them closer to their Lord. He was no abstract thinker, divorced from life; his ardent desire to convert his hearers is expressed again and again, and his vivid description of their pagan environment, together with his careful regulation of the minutiae of everyday Christian living, recreates the contemporary scene in all its original freshness.

Alexandria, towards the end of the second Christian century, with its three-quarters of a million inhabitants, its pride of place next to the imperial capital itself, its thriving commerce and its famous University, hums with ceaseless activity like Virgil's beehive. At its great docks cargoes of Egyptian linen, glass and papyrus, of Arabian frankincense and leopard-skins, and all of the diverse luxuries carried in the one hundred and twenty-four merchantmen which arrive each year from the Indian seas, are shipped for transit to Italy. From beneath the lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the world, the great fleet, led by the massive three thousand tonner *Isis*, annually sets sail for Puteoli with a third of the Roman corn supply aboard. Along the canals which ring the city other vessels head for the Nile by way of Lake Mareotis, freighted with glassware for the Chinese court and with clothes for the natives of Abyssinia. Manufacturers, sailors, eastern traders throng the broad streets: there is no need for anyone to be idle in Alexandria. If the life of commerce is not to one's liking, then the famous Museum, founded by Ptolemy Soter, provides the means for the study of literature, mathematics, astronomy, natural history and anatomy. Though the majority of the citizens may rave about horse-racing and the theatre and are for ever stirring up riots, never satisfied until they have seen blood flow, there is yet ample opportunity in the city where Philo, the Jewish philosopher, strove to reconcile pagan and Hebrew thought and where Galen, the greatest physician of his age, completed his training, for a scholar to pursue his studies in peace and with advantage both to himself and to those who may come to hear him expound the results of his learning. It is therefore in a setting by no means uncongenial that Titus Flavius Clemens, a Christian philosopher, seeks to bring others along the same path which he has followed in his search for truth.

As the sun comes up over the *regio Judaeorum*, the Jewish quarter of Alexandria, Clement, a light sleeper, is already shaking up his bed. He dresses slowly and methodically, passing his head and right arm through the opening in his toga and throwing the loose end across his chest and over his left shoulder. With his hair clipped so that it does not hang into his eyes, his moustache cut round by a pair of cropping scissors and his beard, which has never been disturbed by a razor, long and flowing, there is little to distinguish him from many of his more seriously-minded fellow citizens; except perhaps the purity of his white clothes, cut a little short to avoid their sweeping the dirt like a broom, and the absence of any footwear. The same simplicity is effected by his wife¹ who, in striking contrast to the brilliantly coloured Indian silk dresses and the gold-plated jewelled sandals in which so many Alexandrian ladies display themselves, puts on a white woollen tunic and untrimmed shoes. She binds her hair simply along the neck with a plain pin, disdaining the tresses and braidings, the dyeings and the wigs, which, as her husband is wont to remark, tend to keep so many of her sex awake at night for fear lest in their sleep they might disarrange the fantastic creations which it has taken them most of the day to put in order. Her toilet is now complete, for believing that a woman ought to be adorned within and not without, she has no chains, collars, rings or bracelets, nor, since she thinks the best decoration for the ears is true instruction, has she her lobes pierced in ugly fashion to allow the passage of ear-rings or ear-drops.

Taking her place by her husband's side, together they look through the open window towards the rising sun, heads and hands lifted to the heavens, and Clement raises his voice in this hymn of praise:

Hail, O light! For in us, buried in darkness, shut up in the shadow of death, light has shone forth from heaven, purer than the sun, sweeter than life here below. That light is eternal life, and whatever partakes of it lives. But night fears the light, and hiding itself in terror, gives place to the day of the Lord. Sleepless light is now over all, and the West has given credence to the East. For this was the end of Thy new creation.

Prayer follows, not demands for the necessities of life, for

¹ It is probable, although not certain, that Clement was married, *vide* R. B. Tollinton, *Clement of Alexandria*, 1914, I, pp. 271 f.

Clement is sure that God who knows all things supplies the good with whatever is for their benefit, even though they do not ask; instead he thanks God for the past, for the present, and for the future as already present through faith; he prays to live the allotted life in the flesh, as free from the flesh; to attend to the best things and flee from the worse; for relief in those things in which he has sinned and conversion to the acknowledgment of them.

Turning to his wife, Clement salutes her with a kiss, an action he carefully avoids in front of the servants, and goes out into the atrium where he finds his son sitting on the edge of the rain-water tank in the centre of the open court. The young Clement is a quiet, rather shy boy, and his father with a twinkle in his eye says chaffingly to his mother:

“This son of mine is always talking!”—the happy flush which this remark brings to the young lad’s face soon gives place to a look of eager attention as he sits on the stone bench at his father’s side for his daily lesson in the Christian faith.

To-day’s subject is prayer and Clement is concerned to teach his son both what it is and how to practise it.

“Prayer,” he says, in his even measured tone, “prayer is simply talking to God, conversing with God. There is however no need to say our prayers aloud, our inward desires are voiceless prayers to God; what we have to do is to concentrate our whole spiritual nature within on expression by the mind, in undistracted turning towards God. When we do this, even though we are praying alone, we do it in the society of angels and we have the choir of saints standing with us.”

Clement pauses and looks at his son with his shrewd eyes to see if he is taking it in, and then continues:

“As you know, some people have definite times for prayer, for example, the third, sixth and ninth hours—but the true Christian prays throughout his whole life, trying by prayer to have fellowship with God. He can do this because, as I said, prayer does not have to be vocal. In every place, therefore, but unobtrusively, we can pray. You have only to form the thought in the secret chamber of your soul and call on the Father, and He is near, at your very side.”

It is a theme dear to Clement’s heart and his words flow on uninterrupted by his thoughtful son, until the sound of some-

one at the front door reminds him that it is nearly time for his first lecture, and so the lesson comes to an end, after he has given his son a portion of Scripture to be learned by heart. Together they stand for prayer:

Lord, for long we have desired to receive Thee; we have lived according to what Thou hast enjoined, transgressing none of Thy commandments. Wherefore also we claim the promises. And we pray for what is beneficial, since it is not requisite to ask of Thee what is most excellent. And we shall take everything for good; even though the exercises that meet us, which Thine arrangement brings to us for the discipline of our steadfastness, appear to be evil.

Clement is head of the famous Alexandrian catechetical school, which has come into existence, not as the result of a deliberate official act by the Church but in answer to a vital need for instructing the believer in the rudiments of his faith and for providing the pagan inquirer with an introduction to this new religion. The curriculum worked out by Clement is not so detailed nor so comprehensive as that which his successor, Origen, is to adopt. Origen will begin his syllabus with a series of introductory lectures on philosophy, following this with courses on logic and dialectic, on the natural sciences, in particular geometry and astrology, finally crowning them all with addresses on ethics and theology. Clement, who is essentially missionary-minded and sees his vocation not so much as an educator in all the important branches of human learning as that of a guide to Christ, opens his lectures with an attack upon paganism leading up to an attempt to convert his hearers to Christianity; this is succeeded by instruction in the Christian way of life, and the whole reaches its completion in a long and careful description of the ideal of a perfect Christian initiated into the deep things of spiritual knowledge. Side by side with this, he prepares candidates for baptism and for the benefit of the faithful expounds the Scriptures, commenting in particular on the writings of the Prophets. Clement's aim therefore is to exhort, then to train, then to teach; in his own words it is "to improve the soul and to train it up to a virtuous, not to an intellectual, life", and so he classifies his lectures as hortatory, preceptive and persuasive.

His audience has by now assembled in the dining-room

(*triclinium*) which he uses as a lecture hall and, notes in hand, Clement goes to his seat on the little raised dais. As he opens his book, his eyes rove over his students, observing their looks, their attitudes, their mannerisms, all those little signs which reveal their inner character and tell him of their capabilities.¹ There is Alexander, a keen and concentrated listener; a man with powers of leadership and authority in his bearing, the kind of person to make a good bishop.² Next to him is Leonidas, passionate and intense, devoted heart and soul to the faith he has newly embraced; the martyr type.³ By his side is his son Origen, only sixteen years old, but already full of promise, an embryonic genius—and perhaps not so much of an embryo. Then there are some Jews, they have started early to arrive in time from the *regio Judaeorum*, an indication of their dissatisfaction with the faith of their fathers. For the rest, they all come from Greek families with many centuries of culture behind them. It is a pity that there are no native Egyptians present, but after all not many of them are intelligent, and “teaching a fool is gluing a potsherd, and sharpening to sense a hopeless blockhead is bringing earth to sensation”. They sit, some on stools, some on the uncarpeted floor; a few have notebooks, wax-coated tablets, fastened together by rings, with a stud in the centre of each leaf to prevent their pressing together and so obliterating the writing which is executed on them with an iron stylus. They wait in quiet expectation for Clement to begin.

This is the second lecture in his introductory course in which he is concerned both to show the inadequacy of Greek philosophy and at the same time to emphasize the partial truths it contains. Clement knows that many of his less cultured brethren have scant sympathy with his approach; with their great North African contemporary, Tertullian, they are ready to say:

“What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from

¹ “He who addresses those who are present before him, both tests them by time, and judges by his judgment, and from the others distinguishes him who can hear; watching the voice, the manners, the habits, the life, the motions, the attitudes, the looks, the words.” (*Strom.* I, i.)

² He later became Bishop of Jerusalem.

³ He was martyred in the Severian persecution.

the 'porch of Solomon', who has himself taught that 'the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart'. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus."

But Clement, with his Athenian education, cannot share this attitude; his own experience has taught him that the way to bring a person to Christ is to speak to him in language that he can understand; those who attend the museum and listen to the lectures on Aristotle, or rather, since he has dropped out of favour and Neoplatonism is now the fashion, to lectures on Plato, would not be affected by an appeal couched in the idiom of the market-place. They are educated men, they need an intelligent approach, they need a bridge across which they may pass into the fold and that bridge is conveniently to hand in Greek philosophy. Moreover Clement, while convinced that the way of truth is one, is large-minded enough to believe and proclaim that "into it, as a perennial river, streams flow from all sides". Clement's opening words command the ready attention of his students:

In our previous lecture we have seen the inadequacy of Greek mythology, its absurdity, its immorality, its utter unworthiness to be a vehicle of divine truth. Its stories are not only unedifying, they are shameful and indecent. A vast crowd of the same description swarms upon me, bringing in their train, like a nightmare, an absurd picture of strange demons, speaking of monstrous shapes in old wives' tales. Far, indeed, are we from allowing grown men to listen to such talk. Even to our own children, when they are crying their heart out, as the saying goes, we are not in the habit of telling fabulous stories to soothe them; for we shrink from fostering in the children the atheism proclaimed by these men, who, though wise in their own conceits, have no more knowledge of the truth than infants. Why, pray, do you infect life with idols, imagining winds, air, fire, earth, stocks, stones, iron, this world itself—to be gods? Why babble in high-flown language about the divinity of the wandering stars to those men who have become real wanderers through this much vaunted—I will not call it astronomy, but—astrology? It is the Lord of the winds, the Lord of the fire, the Maker of the Universe, He who gives light to the sun that I long for. I seek for God Himself, not for the works of God.

Clement pauses and scans his audience to gauge the effect of his words.

I seek for God Himself, not for the works of God, he repeats, who, then, am I to take as my helper in my search? We do not, if you have no objection, wholly disown Plato. How then, Plato, must we trace our God? "It is", to quote a passage from the *Timaeus*, "a hard task to find the Father and Maker of this Universe, and when you have found Him it is impossible to declare Him fully." Why pray, in God's name, why? "Because", as Plato says in his letters, "He can in no way be described". Well done, Plato, you have hit the truth. But do not give up. Join me in the search for the good. For into all men without exception, especially into those who are occupied with intellectual pursuits, a certain divine effluence has been instilled; wherefore they admit, even though reluctantly, that God is one, that He is unbegotten and indestructible, and that somewhere on high in the outermost spaces of heaven, to use a phrase of Menander, in His own private watch-tower, He truly exists for ever.

Tell me what nature must man ascribe to God?
He seeth all; yet ne'er Himself is seen,

says Euripides.

Clement's quiet but audible delivery goes on. Though the substance of what he has to say has required much thought and effort in preparation, he strives to express it simply and directly, avoiding eloquence, content with indicating his meaning, without framing his language with artfulness and care, not composing paltry sentences like gewgaws. Driving home his points with apt quotations from the authors with whom those present are so familiar, he shows that Plato speaks of God as the King of all things, as the measure of all existence; even Antisthenes, the founder of the Cynic philosophical school and the opponent of Plato, bears witness to the one true God. Xenophon, the pupil of Socrates, a one-time army general and later author, is aware that God cannot be represented in human form like the divinities of Olympus; and Cleanthes, the Stoic, who spent his nights drawing water in order to have the wherewithal to devote his days to philosophical pursuits, proclaims the holiness, the justice, the righteousness and the love of the Supreme Being; while even the Pythagoreans believe in the unity of God.

"These sayings", Clement emphasizes, "have been recorded by their authors through God's inspiration, and we have selected them. As a guide to the full knowledge of God they are sufficient for every man who is able, even in small measure, to investigate the truth."