

## RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITY<sup>1</sup>

Sermon preached by Fr Bede Jarrett, O.P., for the ceremony of clothing and first vows. Roehampton, 8 September, 1923.

*Walk whilst you have the light, that the darkness overtake you not.*—John 12, 35.

**I**T might seem as you come out from the great city, from the mighty labyrinth that is spreading across your river, as you pass by the gradually diminishing houses, and face the wide stretch of common, and then turn up the lane, it might seem as though this convent stood symbolically for all convents, as a haven of rest. It might seem as though the waste stretch of land was set there, as though the high walls had been built as a shelter, as though here people might escape from the foes around them, laying aside the noise and bustle, the responsibility and the dreadfulness of human life.

In this haven of rest, young and old come to spend in undisturbed peacefulness the even tenor of their lives. Is this right? It is wrong. To escape the responsibility of the labour and toil of life is not Christian but cowardly; it is the very contrary of the teaching of our Master. Religious life is not to escape, to get away, it is not shirking. You are here today to make your profession; the very word means life; it is not getting away, dodging, shirking; it is a seeking, not an escape.

Responsibility? What responsibility do we escape? In little exterior things, perhaps, but the decision of our own life is still with us, the responsibility of our own soul, our work, our prayer, the real things that weigh people down. It is the things of the spirit that matter. Religious are really never off duty, they are always on the alert. 'From the morning watch even to the night'—and our work is never done; through the night we are still religious, we still work, still

<sup>1</sup> This sermon is reproduced, as it was taken down by a listener at the time, in an attempt to recapture something of the style of Fr Bede Jarrett's preaching. Those who heard him will recognise his voice in this. Those who were not so privileged will have to try to listen to a voice rather than to read the printed word.—EDITOR.

toil; death alone ends it. Responsibilities! We come to court greater responsibilities; ours will be a more severe judgment. Others will be judged on the commandments, but we have deliberately chosen to be judged also by the counsels. We have chosen it because it seems to us a fuller and more splendid life, but at the end we shall be judged more severely than the rest. More terrible our position! Do they speak of dodging, of escaping responsibilities? We have courted greater responsibilities, more toil, severer judgment, temptations even. Does the cloister wall shut out temptations, or does it shut in a little corner in which they can eddy round gathering more force? We escape nothing, we have avoided nothing, we have sought out greater responsibilities, sought the very centre of the battlefield.

‘Walk whilst you have the light, that the darkness overtake you not.’ Before us is life, something real and positive, a positive following of the divine Master, who as he strides ahead—we behind him—calls out, ‘I must needs work whilst it is day; the night cometh when no man can work’.

To that cry our ears are tuned, our lives are set. We take vows not that we may escape trouble, but to work more securely and in freedom. ‘A narrow life’, they tell us. The life must be narrow; yes, it needs must if you would do the work. A specialist rejects this, that, and the other, that he may concentrate on one line; he does not lessen, but adds to his work by rejecting. To take all things—that is dissipation; to take one thing—that is a risk, but it is necessary for work. Take your steam: it was everywhere and it was doing—nothing! One man saw it, as they told us when we were children, he compressed it in a kettle, he made it narrow—that it might do no work? Nay, rather that it might drive great pistons and revolutionise the face of the earth. Take your friend gas: we set a mantle on it, make it incandescent, we make it narrow, but the heat and light are not lessened.

Human life is like that. It must be narrowed to do the work. The butterfly is to us the symbol of a wasted life. It flies from place to place over a wide and unlimited stretch of land. And then it dies. It has accomplished nothing.

By the vows we drop things that we may concentrate; we reject that our life may be narrowed down to work. It seems to me like a great captive balloon straining on the ropes that still hold it to the earth. The man leans out and cuts the last ropes that hold it. Is he shirking the responsibilities of earth? No, it is built for the skies, for the great free heaven of God. It does not seek escape by its straining, it is seeking greater danger, adventuring into the great storms without shelter, seeking a wider sphere. Our vows are so for us, cutting all the things that hold us to earth, that we may go to the things we are made for, to the free sky of God. It is a life, a profession, and it has almost to be done feverishly.

‘Walk whilst you have the light.’ We have just got this little span of life and on that rests the future; from the darkness before our birth, to the darkness after, that little life is rounded by a sleep. There is no possibility of overwork, no chance to do too much. Are we not forgiven if between these rounded ends of life we take vows that we may do more, that we may deliberately set aside the hindrances to our work? Work—we must work else we die, we work according to our capacity; it is the command of God, it is the call of our Master. Not shirking, but seeking, not escaping, but going out to meet, not to avoid, never off duty, working to the end, but always with our hearts at peace. Religious stand betwixt time and eternity, working in the little time between the ends of life, while it is light, knowing that everything must be got in somehow, with a certain rush, haste, feverishness—children of time, but children of eternity seeing through time to a wider territory. . . . The eyes of a child and the heart of God.

‘Work whilst it is light.’ It is the cry of our Master. You begin your religious life today; you have come that you may labour to the end, labour first in your soul. No man who puts his hand to the plough in that labour and then turns back can be worthy of the kingdom of God. First of all the cultivation of your own soul, that in good time you may work on the souls of others. You enter under the spirit of the compassionate heart of our Lord, and though that heart was so sorrowful when entering on his passion, yet it was

radiant, full of desire and at peace. For us the way of the cross is a dolorous way, but not to him; he went radiantly, and in joy. To us the Passion is a story of sorrow, to him of joy. What lover is sorrowful in suffering for his beloved? He seeks out hard things, and does them not grimly but with radiance and with peace.

In sorrow, yet always rejoicing; having nothing, yet possessing all things; working always, yet with heart always at peace. It is the spirit too of the Mother whose birthday we keep today. In her daily toil alone with the child and with the father, her heart pierced with a spear, sevenfold, a heart steeped in loneliness. Alone when she followed her son on the outskirts of the crowd. He was anybody's but hers. Alone when he was gone and she was left on earth, lonely working without him, desolate, yet radiant with joy in her heart, working while there was light.

And it is the same in that great spirit who still breathes over this house, who found in the hunting-field a symbolism that explained to her the difficulties and hardships of the life. Surely it was to her as a great gallop over wide spaces, stern and perilous but full of the joy of peril.

Darkness cometh when no man can work; beware lest it overcome you. The critic and cynic are at the door, they damp the ardour of life, smother the ideals of life. No religious, no true religious can be a critic or a cynic; we must be unrelenting, hastening ready to work before it is dark, living a life of enthusiasm and labour. For the night cometh.

Ah, the night cometh! Watchman, what of the night? Beyond the night is the day, beyond the day shall break the shadows; all these shadows shall flee away.



## AN OUTSIDER LOOKS AT A GREAT DOMINICAN

VINCENT READE, Cong. Orat.

**F**OR many years, and indeed almost till the end of his life, Bede Jarrett was to me a remote though beneficent figure; important and attractive but in the background. I never heard him preach; I had never read even one of his books; I met him personally but once and then had not the