

Francis Thompson's The Kingdom of God: A Brief Analysis

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Francis Thompson (1859-1907) is an English mystic poet of the Nineteenth century. He is essentially a Roman Catholic and known for his profound religious feelings. His failure to be a priest initially and later unsuccessful in study of medicine alienated him from his father. He reached London in 1885 and made vain efforts for his survival. In London he suffered extreme poverty till Wilfrid Meynell a Catholic editor became his friend and supporter.

The Kingdom of God is the last poem of Thompson published after his death in 1908. The poem *The Kingdom of God* also has an alternative title *In No Strange Land*. The poet refers to the invisible spiritual reality as the source of concrete world. He begins the poem by addressing that Spiritual world that sustains and pervades the human world. The idea of the kingdom of God on earth is not a new concept. Jesus Christ speaks about the kingdom of God in his preaching. "And when he was demanded of the Pharisees when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say such a way and say, "Lo, here! or, lo there! for behold, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21). In one sense the kingdom has already come. In his letter Romans, saint Paul refers to the kingdom of God. He says, "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Romans 14:17). The poem begins thus:

O WORLD invisible, we view thee
O world intangible, we touch, thee,
O world unknowable, we know, thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

The first stanza indicates a series of paradoxical assertions – we view the "invisible", we touch the intangible", we comprehend the "unknowable", we hold the "inapprehensible." Human beings have access to the world of the spirit. It is nearby. In fact, we need not go elsewhere to seek God. The opening of the poem indicates that this world includes God

and His angels. Though it is invisible, yet we can see that spiritual world. In general, a majority of human beings cannot see it as it is outside the range of senses and beyond the reasoning mind. It is certainly experienced by the mystics. During the mystical state this invisible world can be experienced and felt.

The poet further explains the same idea in the second stanza. The invisible world surrounds the humans everywhere. Hence it is absurd to set out in search of it. He says the fish do not search for sea nor the birds for air. There is no point in human beings asking the stars whether they know about God.

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air—
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

The answer for rhetorical question in the above stanza is an emphatic 'no'. If people are attentive and sensitive they can experience it everywhere.

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars! —
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

In the above lines the poet refers to the "wheeling systems", that is planets that disappear in darkness. Similarly, the physical body acts as a hindrance to grasp the spiritual world. Angels are everywhere around the human beings. If people pay attention, then only, they can see the heavenly beings.

In the following lines Francis Thompson tries to emphasize his idea that the Angels are found everywhere, he says, even if you slightly shift a stone, you may disturb an angel that flies away. The poet expresses this in a picturesque way. He states the angels are to be found everywhere in the world, though people do not see them, In the past, stories

were narrated of angels visiting men and of men seeing them.

The angels keep their ancient places; —
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

The angels are still moving in the earthly world. The poet wishes to emphasize the presence of an invisible spiritual reality everywhere. To prove his statement about the angels' presence on the earth, he refers to the *Book of Genesis* in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible. "...the traffic of Jacob's ladder". Jacob, son of Issac is sent by his father to Padan-aram to marry a daughter of his uncle Laban who is living there. On the way he comes to a mountainous place. This is believed to be among the mountains of Ephraim, where Abraham rested when entering Canaan. When Jacob was sleeping there, he dreamt that he saw a ladder or rather a stair case linking up the earth to heaven. "While Jacob was sleeping, he had a dream in which a ladder stood on the earth with its top reaching heaven and on it were angels of God going up and coming down." (*Genesis* 28: 12). This is the traffic which Thompson speaks in the above lines and of course the human beings fail to see them.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry;—and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

The poet says that Jacob's dream is symbolic. What Jacob saw in his dream is happening every day and everywhere. Even in London there are ladders connecting Heaven to the earth. The poet also refers to the Charing Cross, a part of London Charing was the name of a village between London and Westminster. In the midway of these two places King Edward, I erected a cross in memory of his queen. This cross was destroyed by the Puritans in 1647. In its place the statute of King Charles I was erected. A copy of the original cross is at the Charring railway station. The poet is referring that even London has a staircase reaching to Heaven, and the angels use it to go up and down.

In the last stanza Francis Thompson says that the spiritually advanced people can see Christ walking even on the waters of Thames in London. The revelation of the spiritual world coming to such a

person is described in terms of an incident in the life of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Saint Matthew relates that, Jesus sent his followers in a boat to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He went up a hill and prayed. Some hours later he saw the boat in the middle of the lake, troubled by waves and contrary winds. He then walked across the water to the boat, and the storm at once was abated. The poet stresses that God and His angels cannot be touched. But they can be felt by anyone who longs for them sincerely and intensely.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry, —clinging Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

The need for Thompson's ardent wish that people should find God everywhere is because people are going away from God. Today people live in a paradoxical situation, a situation captured by Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* suits best.

"It was best of times, it was worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us..." (3).

In John Keats' poem we find the answer for the Thompson's emphasis of God's presence. John Keats very suitably describes the human condition in the poem "On Fame"

"How fever'd is the man, who cannot look
Upon his mortal days with temperate blood,
Who vexes all the leaves of his life's book,
And robs his fair name of its maidenhood;
It is as if the rose should pluck herself,
Or the ripe plum finger its misty bloom,
As if a Naiad, like a medding elf,
Should darken her pure grot with muddy gloom:
But the rose leaves herself upon the briar,
For winds to kiss and grateful bees to feed,
And the ripe plum still wears its dim attire,
The undisturbed lake has crystal space;
Why then should man, teasing the world for grace,
Spoil his salvation for a fierce miscreed?" (112)

In the above sonnet Keats depicts the feverish condition of man who is constantly agitated in his restless pursuit of recognition and reward. Thus, engrossed in the materialistic world.

Undoubtedly Francis Thompson stresses the intimate union between the visible and invisible worlds. The latter is a reality. No doubt, it cannot be seen or touched, but it can be felt and experienced. God is everywhere, accessible to all who call upon him. All that is needed is a passionate desire to feel the presence of this world. In spite of all the suffering Thompson had experienced in his life, his faith was ultimately full of hope. Thompson also focuses the relation of man to God in another poem, *The Hound of Heaven*. The poem presents the mystical experience, that is, the attempts of the individual soul to understand the attributes of the Divine and establish direct personal contact with it. Through his poem, *The Kingdom of God*, the poet tries to emphasize that the kingdom of God is within a human being.

WORKS CITED

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- [3] The Holy Bible, King James Version 1998.
- [4] Thompson, Francis. *The Kingdom of God*. Dustier P.E. Ed. *The Poet's Pen: An Anthology of English Verse Selected and Edited with notes*. OUP 1967. p124