

Elizabeth Fry *speaks*

The modern movement for the humane treatment of prisoners is due in large part to the efforts of Elizabeth Fry, a sensitive, imaginative and courageous English Quaker of the 18th and 19th century (1780-1845). She ranks alongside Jane Addams, Clara Barton, Elsa Brandstrom, Dorothea Dix and Mathilda Wrede as one of the great humanitarian leaders among the women of all nations and all times.

Elizabeth Fry was brought up at Earlham Hall, the family seat of the wealthy and prominent Gurney family near Norwich, England. As a girl she was a gay participant in society, but at the age of 17 she came under the influence of a travelling American Quaker minister and soon became a "plain Friend." Later she married Joseph Fry of the famous banking family of London and to them were born eleven children.

Despite her large family, she was able to combine her many family duties with an ever increasing concern for social service, and especially for the care of the women prisoners in the then infamous Newgate Prison. As a pioneer in education, sanitation, and work for women prisoners, she flaunted the customs of her day and inaugurated humane prison practices of an astonishingly modern character.

Throughout her life she struggled with very delicate health and an extremely sensitive and shy nature. But she was sustained in her passionate concern for social justice by a deep religious faith. Her influence was felt not only in the Religious Society of Friends but throughout England and in many countries overseas.

ON SERVING GOD . . .

"I can say one thing; since my heart was touched at seventeen years old, I believe I never have awakened from sleep, in sickness or in health, by day or by night, without my first waking thought being, how best might I serve my Lord."

ON TRUSTING IN DIVINE LOVE . . .

"Why need I dread so much? Have I not often known naturally and spiritually way made where I could see no way, and hard things made easy? Oh, that I could trust more . . . more fully committing my body, soul, and spirit, to my faithful Creator."

"Indeed, when covered with divine Love, what cannot we do, for it so fills the heart with love to all, that we become ready and willing to make a sacrifice for the good of any."

"I believe nothing in myself, or my own natural power, will ever do me much good in times of trial, owing to my very nervous, fearful nature; but I may say I have found there is that which can subdue these feelings and overcome them, bringing us into that state where our peace flows as a river. . . . But I cannot do this for myself, I can only seek for and trust in Him who in His own mercy and His own way can do it for me."

"I never have known despondency; whatever may have been my depths of suffering in mind or body, still, the confidence has never left me that all was and would be well, if not in time, in eternity—that the end would be peace."

ON CHRIST WITHIN . . .

"Words of doctrine I do not pretend to understand, or to enter into; one thing I do know, that Christ in me, or that ever blessed power that I have felt, do feel, and I trust ever may feel unto the end of time . . . is my only hope of glory."

ON FOLLOWING CHRIST . . .

"It appears to me that we who desire to be the servants of Christ, must expect to do a part of our Master's work; which no doubt is to bear with the weaknesses and infirmities of human nature; and if we be favored to feel them, and not sink under them, we may be enabled in time to help others to bear their burdens; and it appears to me that all Christian travellers must expect to pass through, in their measure, the temptations and trials their Master did on earth."

ON CHRISTIAN UNITY . . .

"Although I am of the opinion the more our religion is pure, simple, and devoid of outward forms, the better and the safer for us, at the same time I do earnestly desire more full union amongst all Christians, less judging one another, and a general acknowledgment in heart, judgment, and word, of the universality of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"What matters it to what nation or sect we belong, if we love the Lord in sincerity, and our neighbors as ourselves?"

ON THE SIMPLICITY OF TRUTH . . .

"I do not like the habit of that mysterious, ambiguous mode of expression. . . . I like the truth in simplicity; it needs no mysterious garment."

ON SILENCE . . .

"I have often thought the benefits of true silence are far too little sought after, even by those religiously disposed; and this I do not say as a Quaker, but as one who has some little experience of the necessity of having the human nature brought into subjection before God."

"I think a quiet spirit before the Lord and not always looking out for 'concerns', but knowing how to be still, is a very great point in the religious life."

ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS . . .

"However occupied or interested, I desire never to forget anything that may be of service to others."

"From the great fear of hurting others, I feel, though I believe it is not very apparent, a bowing to their opinions, and not openly professing my own, which tries me."

"We ought to make it an object in conversation and in conduct to endeavor to oblige those we are with, and rather to make the pleasure of others our object, than our own. I am clear it is a great virtue to be able constantly to yield in little things; it begets the same spirit in others and renders life happy."

ON REPENTENCE . . .

"Humbled under a sense of being not in a sweet temper, of which I truly repent; but I ever feel it a favor to be clear when I am doing wrong, and to feel repentent for it, for my greatest fear is of imperceptibly falling away and becoming insensible to the error of my ways."

ON IMPROPER SELF-DENIAL . . .

"I think I know what it is when a fearful mind, or looking to the opinions of others, or a judgment of myself, would lead to a sort of self-denial that the best witness in my heart has neither warranted nor led into, though I most fully acknowledge also that too great laxity is my more prevailing temptation, as it respects myself and others—but enough do I know of the true liberty of the gospel . . . to long for all to be brought into it."

ON ETERNAL THINGS . . .

"The world and the things of it occupy us much and they are rapidly passing away; it would be well if we occasionally set apart a time for unitedly attending to the things of Eternity."

ON FAMILY DUTIES . . .

"May my being led out of my own family, by what appear to me duties, never be permitted to hinder my doing my duty fully towards it, or so occupy my attention as to make me in any degree forget or neglect home duties. I believe it matters not where we are, or what we are about, so long as we keep our eyes fixed on doing the great Master's work, and that whatever we do may be done to His glory."

ON ORDER IN THE HOME . . .

"It is very important . . . to have outward things in order. Indeed, I do so far as not to like to sit down in a room even for my time of reading and retirement without having it neat and things in their places. I think some people are not sensible how greatly some of these smaller matters conduce to the healthy state of the mind, and even in degree to the prosperity of the soul."

ON HER ADVICE TO HER CHILDREN . . .

"There is for one young in years much greater safety in preaching to others by example than in crowds, or doing what is done in an upright manly spirit unto the Lord and not unto man. . . . Now this is a subject of the utmost importance—to maintain truth and strict integrity upon all points . . . faithfully maintain not only the upright principle on religious grounds, but also the brightest honor according even to the maxims of the world. . . . My belief is that (this bright honor) cannot be too strictly maintained or too early begun. . . . I may say that I abhor anything like being underhanded or double-dealing but let us go on the right and noble principle of doing unto others as we would have others do to us; therefore in all transactions, small or great, maintain strictly the correct, upright, and most honorable practice."

ON PRISON WORK . . .

"Punishment is not for revenge, but to lessen crime and reform the criminal."

"Let them see the sky! I am certain that separate confinement produces an unhealthy state both of mind and body . . . and I consider light, air and the power of seeing something beyond the mere monotonous walls of a cell, highly important. . . ."

"The good principle in the hearts of many abandoned persons may be compared to the few remaining sparks of a nearly extinguished fire. By means of the utmost care and attention united with the most gentle treatment, these may yet be fanned into a flame, but under the operation of a rough and violent hand they will presently disappear and be lost forever."

"There are times of encouragement and building up, and of discouragement and treading down. I remarkably experienced the latter state yesterday, as it respects the prison cause. . . . It called for patience, candor and firmness. . . . if He, who in remarkable manner has hitherto appeared to bless the work should be pleased for a season to permit a cloud to pass over it, that is nothing to me. I have always considered the work not mine, and have desired that self may have no reputation in it; if trials of this kind come, they may be for our good . . . and an exercise of charity towards those whom we have sought to serve."

ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT . . .

"But is it for man to take the prerogative of the Almighty into his own hands? Is it not his place rather to endeavor to reform such or to restrain them from the commission of further evil? At least to afford poor erring fellow-mortals, whatever may be their offences, an opportunity of proving their repentance by amendment of life."

ON WORK AND REST . . .

"At times I have felt distressingly overdone in body and mind, but in the midst of fatigue and bustle, I have sought the Lord for help and endeavored to wait upon Him, that a quiet spirit might be granted me. . . . Generally speaking, I do not think that I work too hard, for I am deeply sensible that we do not serve a hard Master and that He will never require more of us than we have strength to perform. I think our health, strength, and life are valuable gifts that we have no right to play with but should take all reasonable care to preserve; although I am also of the opinion that active employment for body and mind is preferable and conduces to the health of both."

"I think a place so remarkably void of objects does not suit my active mind, but it is well to be brought where I may rest on my oars for there is a danger of active occupation for comfort and even for a certain degree of diversion."

ON RECREATION . . .

"I should express amongst my blessings how much I am enabled to take pleasure in the various beauties of nature, flowers, shells, etc., and what an entire liberty I feel to enjoy them. I look upon these things as sweet gifts, and the power to enjoy them as a still sweeter. I am often astonished when my mind is so exceedingly occupied and my heart so deeply interested, how I can turn with my little children to these objects and enjoy them with as great a relish as any of them. I mention it as a renewed proof that the allowable pleasures of life, so far from losing their zest by having the time and mind much devoted to higher objects, are only thereby rendered more delightful."

ON SOCIAL JUSTICE . . .

"It is an honor to appear on the side of the afflicted."

"Be just before you are generous."

ON BECOMING AND BEING A QUAKER . . .

"I give myself this advice: Do not fear truth, let it be ever so contrary to inclination, and feeling. Never give up the search after it; and let me take courage, and try from the bottom of my heart to do that which I believe truth dictates, if it lead me to be a Quaker or not."

"I know now what the mountain is I have to climb. I am to be a Quaker . . . a light to the blind, speech to the dumb and feet to the lame."

"I am certainly a thorough Friend, and have inexpressible unity with the principle, but I also see room for real improvement amongst us; may it take place! I want less love of money, less judging others, less tattling, less dependence upon external appearance. I want to see the fruit of the Spirit in all things, more devotion of heart, more spirit of prayer, more real cultivation of mind, more enlargement of heart towards all; more tenderness towards delinquents, and above all more of the rest, peace and liberty of the children of God."

Most of the quotations in this booklet are taken from the "Memoir of Elizabeth Fry with Extracts from her Journal and Letters", a two volume work edited by two of her daughters and published in 1847. The biography of Elizabeth Fry by Janet Whitney, entitled "Elizabeth Fry, Quaker Heroine" (Boston; Little Brown; 1937), is highly recommended to the reader who would like to read further about this outstanding person.

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