

ULTIMATE UNITY WITH GOD

When this memorial institution was first appointed, the Lord himself was present to speak living words of comfort and instruction. This was a privilege in which we are far behind the apostles. The Lord is neither here to speak, nor has he appointed anyone to speak as his delegate. Yet we have his words which is a very great matter. Our privilege is greater than it may seem. Although he is not here for our eyes to look upon, and our ears to hear his voice, as the apostles on that occasion heard it, what we do here this morning is done by his authority. The authority has come to us indirectly, still it has come, and not very indirectly either, all things considered. It comes to us through the apostle Paul who wrote to the Corinthians,

"I have received of the Lord that which I also delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and said . . . Do this in remembrance of me."

He praised the Corinthian brethren that they *"kept the ordinances he had delivered unto them"* (1 Cor. 11:2). He would praise us in the same connection if he were now alive. That is, it would be to his mind and meet with approval that we should thus break bread on the first day of the week in remembrance of Christ. To secure Paul's approbation in this matter is to secure Christ's approbation; for Christ has identified himself so closely with the word and work of the apostles as to say—

"He that heareth you (the apostles) heareth me."

Consequently, however deficient we may feel our situation in other respects, we may legitimately indulge in this supreme satisfaction, as we meet Sunday to Sunday in the darkness and silence of his absence, that what we do in this respect is as well pleasing to him as if he were with us, and perhaps more so, for it is no eye-service we render while he is away, as we thus call him to mind in the way of his own appointment.

It would, of course, be a privilege unspeakable to have him here to speak to us as he spoke to the twelve who were present on the occasion of its first observance. That privilege we hope to have on the not now very distant day, of which he spoke at that time when he said,

"This fruit of the vine I shall drink with you new in my Father's Kingdom."

But have we not a higher degree of privilege even now than we at all times make full use of? If our eyes were clearer and our memories stronger and our minds less clogged with the pre-occupations of this evil state, we should almost feel all the time as if we "had been with Jesus" in the personal sense. He is not here to speak to us, but he has contrived to have the words he did speak placed reliably on record and brought safely down to our own time, so that we can read them in our own tongue in our own very midst. What a privilege is this! A portion of those words has been read to us. Let us dwell on them. They are full of light and instruction and encouragement.

"Let not your hearts be troubled," he said.

The apostles were disposed to be much troubled. No wonder, the clouds of adversity were gathering round. The Lord had spoken dark words that perplexed them:

"One of you shall betray me."

"The Son of Man goeth as it is written of him."

"All ye shall be offended because of me this night."

The Lord himself was troubled. He said so:

"My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death."

Yet he says,

"Let not your hearts be troubled."

This is a gleam of light in the darkness. There is something in cheering words even when circumstances may be the opposite of cheery. To be told to cheer up by anyone helps us to cheer up even if there is nothing particularly to cheer up about. How much more when the words are spoken by one who has command of the circumstances. Christ spoke the words not for the sake of the apostles alone, but for all who should afterwards believe on him. All these things that are written were written for the whole family of God. God knew they would be needed in all the days of their trouble and darkness. They are sorely needed yet, for these days are still current. We are often in circumstances of deep trouble. Let us not sink under them. Unto the upright there arises light in the darkness. An earnest of this light will strike into our desolate hearts if we open our ears to this most sweet voice:

“Let not your hearts be troubled.”

Jesus gives a reason for not being troubled—a reason that holds good with all the children of God to the end of the time,

“Ye believe in God.”

There is no greater balm to the mind than this. Only those who really believe know the power of it. It is the feeling expressed in Psalm 16,

“I have set the Lord always before me. Therefore I will not be moved.”

A full sense of the fact that all creation subsists in Him—that it has been contrived by His wisdom and is upheld by His power—and that His very presence fills the whole of it—that He is not far from every one of us—will fortify the mental man in all the fluctuating conditions of our vain life. The fact itself is exhilarating without reference to personal advantage; but the comfort is complete and inexpressible when the mind is opened out to personal hope in the beautiful words which Jesus proceeded to add:

“In my Father’s house are many mansions (or abiding places). If it were not so, I would have told you.”

He would not have encouraged illusions. He would not have countenanced their hopes of inheritance in the Kingdom of God if they had not been well founded. He would plainly have said they were indulging a phantom if it had been so. But it was not so. It was true that the Father’s house to which they were looking had many untenanted places waiting the prepared and the elect of God—places that would be gloriously occupied when the work of preparation should be complete. There are no abiding places now, for saint or sinner. Our days upon the earth are as a shadow.

“Wise men die; likewise the fool and the brutish person perish.”

All life is but a vapour that appeareth for a very little time and then vanisheth away. But in the Father’s house are many abiding places. It is real comfort in the apparent vanity of life. It is the language of parable, to which Jesus was prone, but the meaning is plain. It is the clothing given to the doctrine of the Kingdom which Jesus preached and which all the prophets foreshadowed. To the eye of animal sense, it would seem as if there were no Father’s house anywhere, but this scientific age has taught nothing more decisively than this, that the eye of animal sense is a very short-seeing eye and a very false-seeing eye, and that there are things in heaven and earth which it has no power of knowing. It cannot see into the future. To the eye of animal sense, the earth and human life are a wide desert in which there is no providence or plan beyond that of the prowling wolves, who leave the bones of their hapless prey to bleach in the sun. But God has revealed what man could never have known, that He will set up a kingdom on the earth in which His tabernacle will be with men, and blessedness and glory prevail—banishing all evil—bringing in everlasting joy. He has revealed that He will accomplish this work by His son, laying the foundation in him first of all, in righteousness, the righteousness of obedience, the righteousness of sin-condemnation in his crucifixion, the righteousness of inevitable resurrection for a holy one, and the righteousness of ascension to the Father’s right hand, to make intercession for all that come

unto God by him, *“to purify unto Himself a peculiar people zealous of good works.”* This was the work which the Father had given him to do. It was the work continually before his mind as the explanation of his appearance in Israel’s midst 1,800 years ago *“when the fulness of the time had come.”* The consummation of it in the development of the Father’s house was *“the joy set before him,”* of which Paul speaks in Hebrews 12:2. He looked forward to this Father’s house, which, in the hour of his sorrow, was empty and required preparation. He looked forward to the time when it would be joyfully tenanted in its many abiding places as the result of his work. This was the prospect on which he aimed to fix the eyes of his disciples for comfort:

“I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself.”

Thus the absence of Christ that is so distressing to his real brethren and so stumbling to the mere caviller, is a necessity. It is part of the programme. It is part of the work of preparation. It is something, therefore, to which we can become reconciled in the attitude of intelligent patience. If the preparation work were not done, the abiding places would never be prepared. To everything there is a season and a time. Preparation is a self-evident necessity in this work at every stage. For example, we had to be born before our personal part could begin. But this was not enough: we had to grow up. But this was not enough, we had to be instructed. This was not enough: we had to be hewn into acceptable shape by experience and trouble and chastisement. In all this, Christ has borne his part, for he says,

“I know my sheep . . . other sheep I have which are not of this (Jewish) fold: them also I must bring.”

So with the larger phases of the work, development by stages is the rule. It was not enough that Adam was made, disobedience had to come. It was not enough that Adam was driven out of Eden, there had to be sacrifice and law and promise. It was not enough that Noah was saved from a whole population consigned to watery destruction, Abraham had to be called, and Israel had to be nationally organised, and all other phases had to come in their due succession. The sacrifice and resurrection and ascension of Christ had the supremest place. *“I go to prepare a place for you”* was a pregnant saying—intelligible only to those who know the Truth as a complete Bible system. The work of preparation required Christ to die and to rise and to depart and to remain away for a long time as he now is. When the work is finished he will return in great joy to dispense to his people the results—calling them from the dead, welcoming them to the presence of his glory, and associating them with himself in the unspeakable glory and honour of the work leading all mankind into the honour of God, the joy of wisdom, and the felicity of life everlasting.

“Whither I go ye know, and the way ye know” he remarks, in apparent response to the surprised looks of his disciples. He was speaking of his death, and he seems to assume that the disciples would understand. But they did not understand, as becomes apparent at various junctures, evidently to Christ’s pain:

“How is it that ye do not understand?”

He had spoken to them plainly of his approaching death, resurrection and departure: but their understanding as yet was closed. Thomas now becomes spokesman of the bewilderment with which they listened:

“Lord, we know not whither thou goest, and how can we know the way?”

The answer to this (*“I am the way”*) appears at first sight to be no answer, but a mere trifling with the question. How vastly different is the fact when we understand. It is a complete answer, a precise answer, a profound answer, oh, how much so. Before we can see it, we must have a larger idea than was before the mind of Thomas. He was thinking of Jesus going as a man goes from one place to another. In this sense, the *“way”* would be road or direction

taken. But Jesus was not speaking in this limited sense. He was speaking in a larger sense—a sense in which a man, and not a road was the way—the sense of relation and state.

“No man cometh unto the Father but by me.”

“He that cometh to God must believe that He is,” says Paul.

This is not a mechanical coming. No man can come to God in that sense. We do not require to shift our place in space to go to God, for God dwells in every place in the fulness of His Spirit filling heaven and earth (which does not conflict with that other truth that in a particular and bodily sense, He dwells in heaven. The Father in heaven and His effluent Spirit are one person, as the sun in the sky, and the light that comes from it are one sun). To come to God, we have to be reconciled to Him, and become pleasing to Him, so that our approaches to Him in thanksgiving and worship are acceptable to Him. There are some in whom He can take no pleasure, as He told Israel (Amos 5:21-23; Isa. 1:14), whose very religious exercises are an abomination to Him. An acceptable approach in this way is to be followed by the still closer approach of nature—*“changed in a moment,”* so that our dull mortal bodies will become spiritual bodies, conformed in all respects to the likeness of the Lord’s own glorious body, as we are so plainly assured by the apostles. Thus changed, we shall truly have come to the Father, in having become spiritual and glorious, and powerful and immortal as He is—partakers of the divine nature in fulness and truth.

It was to prepare the way for this emancipation that Jesus was about to be temporarily separated from his disciples. This way to the Father was to be prepared in himself.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.”

The way was to be prepared in the offering up of himself to God in sacrifice, which the Father required at his hands for the condemnation of sin in the flesh, preparatory to resurrection to glorious and immortal life, and to ascension to the mediatorial work to be done for those who should afterwards *“come unto God by him.”* No man can come to God apart from this arrangement of His own wisdom. It is what Christ declared, and it is the declaration of every faithful testimony of the truth in our day—the one declaration which gives more offence than all others—namely, that men are not in the way of hope unless they place themselves in Christ in the way appointed. Well, we must not be deterred from the declaration of the Truth, because it gives offence. We are to speak the Truth in love, but the Truth we are to speak, and this is the truth—that Christ, and Christ alone, is the way of life and hope for sinful man; and that Christ can only be entered by the belief and obedience of the gospel and baptism; and that men can only continue in him by keeping his commandments faithfully to the end.

Jesus proceeded to say other things that apparently had no connection with the subject, and yet which have to do with the very marrow of it.

“If ye had known me, ye would have known my Father also.”

Did not the disciples know Jesus then? Yes, in a manner, but not as yet in a perfect manner. They knew and believed in him as *“the Messiah that should come into the world”* according to all the prophets, but their idea of him as the Messiah was too limited as yet. They knew him as one person knows another. They did not yet know him in his intimate relation to the Father who was working by him and in him. He desired to give them an insight into his higher greatness, and made some startling statements with that view:

“If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also, and henceforth ye know him and have seen Him” (John 14:7).

“Known the Father?” “Have seen the Father?” and yet no man had seen the Father (John 6:46). This was baffling to the as yet unenlightened minds of the disciples. Philip gave utterance to their feelings:

“Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us.”

This is the highest desire of godly men, to be brought into direct touch with the Eternal One. What an answer Jesus returned to Philip:

"Have I been so long time with you and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father: how then sayest thou, Show us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father and the Father in me?"

These words it is impossible to understand except in the light of the truth revealed concerning the Father—that He fills all space—that all things are in Him—embraced in His universal presence, and are but the expression and contrivance of His own eternal power. But even this truth does not give us a complete explanation. It is the first step towards an explanation; another truth is needed. If all are in God, wherein did Christ differ from all? The other truth is supplied in the statement that not only was he in the Father, but the Father was in him. This was not affirmable of other men. Jesus was in the Father in being embraced in the universe-filling Spirit, which is the Father, in illimitable immensity, and the Father was in him by this same Spirit dwelling in him and energizing him to the performance of all he did and said. It might be illustrated by a diving bell: the bell is in the water and the water in the bell. All illustrations necessarily fail in resembling the infinite, but still this is an approach to the idea conveyed by the words—

"I am in the Father and the Father is in me."

The idea is that of a man so connected with the Father as to be in complete unity with Him, so that the one is the reflex and instrument of the other, or as Jesus said,

"I and my Father are one."

"Believest thou not," he proceeds, *"that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I speak unto you, I speak not of myself."*

Here is a self separate from the Father, notwithstanding the unity, but a self, nevertheless, employed by the Father in the speaking.

"The Father that dwelleth in me, He doeth the works."

As he said on another occasion,

"Of mine own self I can do nothing."

He appears to read hesitation in the minds of the disciples. He entreats them to receive his declarations:

"Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me," or else (he now appeals to their reason),

"Believe me for the very works sake."

How could they account for the things he did except by the presence of an in-dwelling power that was not with other men? Looking upon his outward person, they might not perceive any difference between him and other men, but looking at his works and listening to his words, he necessarily seemed very different from all other men. Whence the difference? *"My Father;"* this was Christ's explanation and the inevitable conclusion of reason. It is a more glorious idea, that in Christ we touch the Father—that the Father is not a distant being in the background who has to be pacified by a kindly Christ, but that He is enshrined in Christ and comes near to us in him, *"reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them."*

Jesus assured the disciples that whatever difficulty they had at the time in opening their minds to the truth he was presenting to them, in the day of eternal life they would see clearly and rejoice in it fully.

"Because I live, ye shall live also. At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father and ye in me and I in you."

This is the definite and attractive prospect before us in the gospel. This is the finish of the process of which this breaking of bread is but a contributory part. It is the highest goal of rational being—this coming to God in the redemption of bodily nature from death, the

restoration of a broken friendship and the establishment of a perfect fellowship and service, in which there will necessarily be the sweetness of pure and effectual worship, and the joy of a full infusion and unity with the Eternal.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

“Blessed are ye that hunger and thirst after righteousness, ye shall be filled.”

The agonising after holiness; the aspiration after the infinite and the perfect, is not a chimera except apart from Christ. Out of him, it is the chase of phantoms. There is much of this vain yearning in certain circles; and men have invented various methods of attaining their desires—differing with different ages and countries. Oriental mysticism is a form of it. Buddhism finding modern favour is an effort in the same direction. Theosophy is the latest and most fashionable phase of the bootless quest which was even pursued among the Essenes in the days of Paul, *“in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which men had not seen, vainly puffed up by their fleshly minds . . . which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship and humility and neglecting of the body”* (Col. 2:18,23).

It is all a mistake. God cannot be attained by man at all, except by God’s permission, for man is alienated and cast off from Him, however little he may realise it in his pride. And God only permits the approach of sinners in His own way, and that way is Christ crucified and raised—to the Greeks of every kind, foolishness; and to the Jews a stumbling *“but to them who are called Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God, because the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men”* (1 Cor. 1:23-25). Wherein we may have attained to the revealed wisdom of God in this matter, as symbolised by the bread and wine on the Table, let us hold fast to our privilege, in all humble gratitude yet with all the firmness and determination of enlightened boldness, refusing to be led away by the thousand plausibilities of an ingenious, metaphysical but God-neglecting age; and holding with inflexible grip on the immovable rock of God’s revealed wisdom as embodied in the Scriptures of His Truth.

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