

## MIRACLE AND PROPHECY

We are here this morning to build one another up in the faith that has come by Jesus Christ. There are various ways of doing this. Certainly none is more effectual than the one which is touched in a saying of Christ's read in our hearing this morning. He said to the Jews who opposed him,

*"If ye believe not me, **believe the works.**"*

Here was an appeal to evidence—to facts. He bases his claim to be received as the Messiah on reasons in the shape of facts which could not be explained apart from his possession of that character. He told his disciples that the Jews would be held responsible for their rejection of him on this very ground—that they had evidence placed before them which could not be mistaken. He said,

*"If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father" (John 15:24).*

The works he did were of a nature not to be explained away. They could not be understood on any principle except that God was with the worker of them. This was recognised by the Jews themselves as appears from the words of Nicodemus, one of their leading men, who came to see Jesus by night. He said,

*"Rabbi, WE KNOW that thou art a teacher come from God; for **no man can do these miracles that thou doest except God be with him**" (John 3:2).*

As a matter of fact, it is testified that—

*"Among the chief rulers many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 12:42).*

The works that Jesus did were all of a character to carry with them the conviction of his divinity. They were not like the feats of sorcerers or the performances of wizards and magicians. They were not done secretly. They were not done in the dark. They required no appliances. They were done in the open day, and by means beyond human control, such as when with a word, he cured in an instant a dying child at a long distance off, or quelled a storm with a command, or walked on the sea by his will, or fed thousands with a few loaves. It was to such things he appealed when John the Baptist, languishing in prison, began to wonder at the delay in the effectuation of the Messianic mission, and sent two of his disciples with the question:

*"Art thou he that should come? Or look we for another?"*

We are informed (Luke 7:21) that—

*"In that same hour he cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight. Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached."*

To the Pharisees he said,

*"If I do not the works of my Father, **believe me not.**"*

In these few and simple words, he throws down a challenge to reason which cannot successfully be taken up. They are words that cover the whole ground of revelation. They illustrate the nature of God's whole appeal to man. It is an appeal to facts. God asks no man to believe without giving him a reason for believing. From the time Moses wrought his three signs in the presence of the elders of Israel, in proof

that the message he brought was from God, to the day (1,500 years afterwards) when “*with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus*” (Acts 4:33), God confirming their words with signs following (Mark 16:20)—throughout the whole of that protracted period, human submission was never required except on the strength of facts reasonably demanding it. Our position this morning is of that character. In the faith we exercise and the obedience we render to Christ, we stand on facts to a much greater extent than most people realise. It is by no means purely a matter of faith, in the popular sense of the term. The work of God is already largely accomplished. We are not like Abraham, who merely had a promise of Christ. We have had Christ himself in the accomplishment of a part of his work. True, Abraham had angelic visits, which we have not, and thus our cases are equalised. We live not in the age of the prophets, but more than any previous generation, we live in the age of prophecy fulfilled. We look back on a 3,000 years’ fulfilment, embracing every topic with which prophecy deals, except the culminating glory. Surveying that extensive retrospect, we see Babylon brought to nothing, Persia overthrown by Greece, Egypt reduced to political baseness, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, Syria, and other adjacent countries desolated, Jesus born at Bethlehem, despised and rejected, wounded and slain in the house of his friends; Israel dispersed among the nations and Jerusalem down-trodden of the Gentiles for centuries, and Rome in varied foretold phases in political and ecclesiastical ascendancy over “*peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.*” In our own days, before our own eyes, we see the nations armed, through French influence; Turkey at the verge of dissolution through political evaporation; and Israel’s land and people coming into remembrance after a long night of neglect and forgetfulness.

This mighty record of prophecy fulfilled is a more powerful testimony of the divinity of our foundation, than would be prophecy uttered in our midst; for in that case, we should have to wait to see if it came to pass, whereas here is evidence complete before our eyes of the truth of what Paul says, that God—

*“At sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets.”*

Non-thinking, or unprincipled men, affect to make light of fulfilled prophecy, as if it proved nothing. No man, exercising a competent reason, can think in this manner. It requires but a moment’s reflection to perceive that there is no prophetic power in the earth at the present time. There are two features in English public life that would be sure, under the strain of human avarice, to have brought it to the front, if it had existed anywhere—the Stock Exchange and racecourse. We are all aware that a day’s foreknowledge, in either of these institutions would enable its possessor to make a fortune at a sweep. Yet behold the helplessness of the astutest of men with regard to the events of twenty-four hours ahead! Why is it that, with the highest development of the human intellect, and the profoundest knowledge of nature yet attained in human history, there should be a total absence of prophetic power, while this prophetic power was a common feature of Jewish history up to a certain point? It is evident there was a something operating then that is not operating now. The Jewish race are as numerous now as then, yet the Jews are as barren as the Gentiles of the prophetic gift. The Jews have had no prophets among them for 1,800 years. What is the explanation? It is furnished by a prophecy in Amos (8:11), where, amongst other consequences of Israel’s incorrigible disobedience, this is decreed:

*“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord: and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it.”*

By Micah also (chapter 3:6-7) it was foretold that vision should cease, and that there should be no answer from God. By this the disappearance of prophecy is explained; but, at the same time, the divinity of former prophecy fulfilled, and the strangest of all prophecy, a prophecy that prophecy should cease for a time. If prophecy were a natural power, in the sense contended for by the disbelievers of prophecy, here is a curious phenomenon for them to explain—natural power prophesying that natural power should cease;

that is, prophesying an impossibility, according to the naturalist hypothesis, for, by that hypothesis, the ways of nature are immutable—their great argument against miracle. But there is something tougher still for the naturalist to deal with. If prophecy, as a natural gift (!) is so accurate in its forecasts as to be suspended in accordance with its own prediction, what reason can he show for not expecting all its other forecasts to be realised as well? Why not the Jewish restoration? The kingdom of God? The coming of Christ? The resurrection of the dead? —For all these are explicitly foretold by the same “*sure word of prophecy*” that foretold the disappearance of prophecy.

The subject is involved in hopeless embarrassments away from the simple and inevitable explanation that God spoke by the prophets, enabling them, as Daniel expressed it, to show what should come to pass hereafter. This is the only view admissible in view of all the facts: a view that brings with it the glorious guarantee of good things to come, even those covenanted mercies to the fathers which God has sworn by Himself to bring to pass on earth when there shall be no more curse, no more pain, no more death; but when the earth shall be a scene of effective and glorious and joyful life to the glory of Him from whose hand all things have come.

*“If ye believe not me, believe the works.”*

Men may fail in capacity to discern that Christ himself is an all-sufficient reason for believing in him, even apart from the evidence of his “*works*.” Christ allows the possibility of such infirmity. But a man must be far below the ordinary level of reason who can shut his eyes to the significance of his “*works*.” From the place where we stand in the nineteenth century, we must comprise in these works the works of the apostles: for the works of the apostles were the works of Christ. They did them in his name and by his power. It is impossible to separate the apostles from Christ. Some in our day would make a distinction. They say, “Give us the words of Christ: we do not care so much for the apostles.” This is altogether artificial and false. It is in flat contradiction to Christ’s own declaration to his disciples in sending them forth:

*“He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me.”*

By this rule, the man who slights the apostles slights God. It is what John said:

*“We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error”* (1 John 4:6).

A man’s treatment of the apostles is therefore a test of his position before God. To talk of preferring the words of Christ to the words of the apostles is to speak unenlightenedly. Jesus and his disciples were “*all one*,” as he prayed the Father that it might be (John 17:21). In considering the “*works*” of Christ, we must therefore include the apostles, not that when Jesus spoke of them to the Pharisees, he meant to include them, because at that time, the apostolic work was an affair of futurity; but standing where we do, and looking back, we must take the apostolic work into account as part of the “*works*” that bear testimony that Christ is of God.

It may be said we live too late in the day to be witnesses of the apostolic work, seeing the apostles are in their graves and their works a long-past affair. The remark is true, but there is a sense in which they “*being dead yet speak*.” They have left their mark behind them. The evidence of their work is before our eyes. What is the meaning of Christendom? How come whole nations to profess the name of Christ in ever so nominal a way? How come there to be State Church establishments throughout the world? How comes the name of Christ, in the form of “the year of our Lord,” to be in every legal document throughout the civilised world? The consideration of these simple questions will guide us into the presence of the apostles; for no explanation satisfactory to reason can be given of these facts apart from what they did in the first century. What was it they did? Here, again, reason demands that it must have been something extraordinary; for how, without some extraordinary power at work, could a company of poor and illiterate men have succeeded in laying the foundation of Christendom, in persuading thousands, in all parts of the

Roman Empire, to accept a doctrine and practice which brought upon them the disabilities of the law and the persecution of the authorities, the alienation of friends, and the loss of property, reputation, and liberty—yea, even life itself?

Immeasurably powerful becomes this argument when we consider what was their doctrine, and what their argument in support of it. Our knowledge of these comes to us with the apostolic writings. Here again, we stand face to face with facts. The New Testament is a fact. It is not a fact of yesterday. Even if its age were a matter of doubt, its own character is conclusive of its genuineness in every sense, but its age is not in doubt. It comes to us through multitudes in every country, and in different languages, and in multiplied copies. It is no private affair. It has been public property for ages. We have every guarantee possible in such a case that the apostolic writings, as we now have them, were in circulation among Christians of the first century during the lives of the apostles.

From these apostolic writings, then, we learn that their doctrine was that Jesus Christ, recently executed in public as a malefactor, had risen from the dead, as the beginning or foundation of a future work of God towards the children of men. Let every one carefully read the Acts of the Apostles, and he will find that this is the kernel of the apostolic proclamation. Their doctrine was a matter of fact—not of speculation. What proof did they offer of the fact? First, their own personal witness. “*We are his witnesses,*” said Peter before the Jewish council (Acts 5:32). The personal testimony of proved honesty is always weighty; but the weight is greatly increased in this case by the fact that not only can no reason be suggested why the witnesses should speak falsely, but every reason why their testimony should be in the other direction. Nothing was to be gained by testifying to the resurrection but shame, confusion, imprisonment, and death. An habitually honest man may, in an extreme case, be betrayed into untruth when his interest is served by it; but when an honest man persists in a statement that tells against his dearest interests, what conclusion is there, but that he speaks what he believes to be the truth? This was the case with the apostles. For three years and a half, they had been the preachers of righteousness with Christ, calling on the people to repent. Christ was arrested and slain. At first overwhelmed by the calamity, these men appeared before the Jewish public, and asserted the resurrection of Christ as a fact, brought within their personal cognition by a forty days’ association with him after resurrection. Their testimony was odious to the Jewish authorities, who enjoined silence on them under the severest penalties. They disregarded the interdict. They proclaimed the fact of Christ’s resurrection more and more widely.

“*We cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard*” (Acts 4:20) was their excuse.

Their perseverance cost imprisonment and every undesirable consequence; but they persevered. It was not one apostle only: it was twelve. It was not twelve apostles only: it was a hundred besides (Acts 1:15; 1 Cor. 15:6). It was not these only, but the very leader of the persecution movement, in the very midst of his most energetic enterprises against the Christians, suddenly became a preacher of the resurrection of Christ, on the ground that Christ had appeared to him in open daylight, in the presence of a band of officers, who were felled to the ground by the glory; and had left his mark upon him in the shape of closed-up eyes for a season. “*This thing,*” as he said to king Agrippa, “*was not done in a corner.*” It was done openly, in the presence of officials, who were not produced to contradict Paul, though the Jews had it in their power to do so, as also to have closed the mouths of the twelve, by producing the body of the Lord Jesus, if the resurrection had been an invented story.

But personal witness was not the only instrumentality employed in producing conviction of Christ’s resurrection. This was weighty enough; but as if allowing the possibility of the people reasonably fearing some mistake, notwithstanding the earnestness and unanimity of the witnesses, God “*confirmed their words with signs following.*” So Mark testifies (16:20). So Paul also testifies:

“*God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit*” (Heb. 2:4).

To this “witness” Jesus referred in his promise to the disciples,

*“When the Comforter is come whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, **he shall testify of me:** and YE ALSO shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning”* (John 15:26).

To this double witness, when it came to be a fact, Peter alluded in the presence of the Jewish Council when he said,

*“We are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Spirit, which God hath given to them that obey him”*

(Acts 5:32).

The form in which the Spirit bore witness is indicated in the prayer of the apostles:

*“Grant unto thy servants that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus”* (Acts 4:29).

This prayer was answered.

*“By the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people . . . insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them. There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them that were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed every one”* (Acts 5:12, 15).

The natural result of this exercise of miraculous power in attestation of the apostolic testimony that Christ had risen, was to induce extensive conviction.

*“Believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women”* (verse 14).

In the case of the Samaritans,

*“The people with one accord gave heed to those things which were spoken by Philip, **hearing and seeing the miracles which he did**”* (Acts 8:6).

In the case of the Asiatics, at the hands of Paul,

*“All they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks. And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: so that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them . . . So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed”* (Acts 19:10, 12, 20).

The mighty hold which Christianity took upon the Roman Empire in the first century in the teeth of the most violent opposition on the part of the authorities, cannot be explained apart from these facts. The perception of this is edifying, or building up: it imparts strength to the confidence in which we stand, gives courage to faith, and resoluteness to our obedience of Christ, around whom all these things centre. Shortly our confidence will be justified and rewarded, by the occurrence of the great event of which they are to us the guarantee—the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ, who, though absent from the earth so long, is only absent for a season, during which he is a watchful spectator of the work to which we stand related, the development of a people by trial, in circumstances of darkness, and weakness, and downtreading, for the mutual glory and joy of Christ and them in the day of his appearing.