

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 328.

In some form or other we always have Christ before us in the daily readings as we thus gather round the memorials of his death. He is very likely before us in the third chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, which has been read this morning. Very many profitable and upbuilding things are suggested by that reading. Only a few months before the stirring incident of the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful gate of the Temple, Christ had been crucified; and now here were Peter and John declaring his resurrection, and performing "*a notable miracle*" in his name in attestation of the truth of their testimony.

This brings to mind the fact on which we stand this morning. The bread and wine on the table mean not only Christ crucified, but also Christ risen; without which all would be vanity, as Paul declares. Personal knowledge of the fact, in the sense of eye-witness, we have not; but we are none the less sure. There are thousands of things that we receive unhesitatingly on the personal testimony of respectable eye-witnesses, or of those who have knowledge from such. In the case of Christ's resurrection the witnesses were not only of the most unblamable character, beyond the remotest suspicion of ulterior aims or objects of any kind (for their testimony brought them nothing of advantage—only persecution and death); but added to this, there was power behind them—divine power—for what else could stiffen up a hopeless cripple from birth into a strong, rejoicing man, "*walking and leaping and praising God*"? It was only "*God bearing them witness, both with signs, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will,*" that could produce such results, and secure such attention to the testimony concerning the resurrection of Christ.

But it is in the application of the matter that we are chiefly interested, as we thus remember the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ did not rise simply to heal cripples and make mortals whole. These things were only to arrest attention and justify belief in his name. Even his own miracles in the days of his flesh he so explained. They left those who saw them inexcusable for their rejection of him, and worthy to perish in the indignation of God.

The apostolic unfolding of the matter develops a glorious prospect. After explaining the "power and holiness" by which the miracle had been wrought, Peter, for he was the spokesman, according to Christ's appointment (and he would not be proud of it after his denial and "conversion"), convicted his hearers of crucifying the Holy One of God. Then, after making some allowance for their "ignorance," he exhorted them, saying:

"Repent, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you; whom the heaven must receive until the times of the restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began."

Here was a far-distant future when the name of Jesus, whose great power they had just witnessed, should take effect in larger healing in the blotting-out of sins for ever; and upon themselves also if they repented and turned to him. Here are two pillars, as it were: the departure of Christ, and his coming again from heaven: and under the arch connecting them we stand. The same terms were presently offered to the Gentiles by Peter at the house of Cornelius, and afterward throughout the Roman habitable by Paul. And in the providence of God, the revival of the truth in the latter days has brought us to the acceptance of them.

Consequently we find ourselves looking, as they looked, for that "*restitution of all things which God hath spoken of by the prophets.*" The bulk of the nation of Israel in Christ's day, and in the apostles' day, were ignorant and faithless of the prophets; and it was remarked by Josephus at the destruction of Jerusalem, that the attitude of the nation in this respect was one of madness. It is not surprising, therefore, if, in the last days of "*the times of the Gentiles,*" we find a similar state of mind current in the world. The world is ignorant and faithless of the prophetic word, as was Israel, but so much the worse for the world. "*The day of the Lord upon all the heathen*" will no more tarry for them than did His "*wrath to the uttermost*" on Israel for the disregard of these "*murderers*" of His beloved son.

GOD SPEAKS OF RESTITUTION BY ALL THE PROPHETS. Therefore we listen. And notwithstanding the world's indifference and opposition, we see the light and know that Peter's description is true. The prophetic word is truly "*a light shining in a dark place.*" How necessary to keep the mental chamber illuminated by this in daily reading and meditation. How sad that people as a rule prefer the darkness and blindness of the natural man. "*Restitution*" has its times appointed and its signs of approach. We recognise the times and the signs. We are in a "*time of trouble.*" That is one sign. Wherever we turn the world is in trouble, and it widens and deepens every year. Then Christ speaks of "*the times of the Gentiles*" and of their end. We are in these; but we see symptoms of the end. Israel arises, and the shaking of the dry bones is a manifest token of his political resurrection. And that means Christ in the Earth again. Israel has long been in the dust, and the Gentiles have for many centuries lorded it over him; but we see the end of all that approaching.

Then there are **periods** appointed. We have learned also to recognise these, notwithstanding the inattention of the world, and the sneers of many who ought to know better. Especially is this the case with the Revelation. It is a great light, and the religious world is specially in the dark concerning it. It is one of the guarantees of the truth, and a cause for great thankfulness, that it easily unlocks the mysteries of Revelation, and that God has, in these days, provided human instrumentality well fitted for the work. Even Paul, before the Revelation was given, spoke of the day of the Lord and the great apostasy that should precede it; and then to John in Patmos the Lord communicated the lines and the times of its development in special revelation to "*his servants.*"

The development of human history there projected and since unfolded was contrary to all probability. Taking our stand with Peter at the Beautiful gate, with this great power occurrent, we should have thought the name of Christ would prevail at once and for ever. Not so; the Spirit of God saw what was coming. How dreadful is flesh and blood! What depths of wickedness and base ingratitude! Corruption of the truth would set in. A Man of Sin would arise: a system with power to kill, to make war upon the saints and prevail against them, and even to make men worship a blasphemous human high priest as a God! How extremely unlikely, even in A.D. 96, that the faith and practice of Christ should become so utterly corrupted that a drunken harlot should become the divine symbol of the recognised community professing his name, and that the Scriptures should be denied to the masses, and the friends of Christ tormented and slain in the name of religion in hundreds of thousands! However unlikely all this was from a merely human point of view, it is now all history fulfilled. The word of God has proved true, and we see it.

And now, at the end of this dark and dreadful history, we stand in our times of light and privilege. It must have been a problem to the brethren of old how, in view of the prevailing of the Beast to make war upon the saints and to kill them, a remnant was to survive, of whom Paul had spoken saying:

"We shall not all sleep"—"we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord."

How should it come about? We see the answer now at the end of the times of the Papacy. The power to slay the saints has been taken away; the Bible has been given to the people; and is sold even in Rome under the Pope's nose. And, more than that, the truth of the Bible has been exhumed, and the saints are at liberty to obey the truth without let or hindrance from any man. There was a place for this in God's purpose, that the return of the Lord might at least find an intelligent and responsive remnant in the land of the living.

These are times of great privilege; but still we have our disadvantages, just as our first century brethren had. Those were times of open manifestation of divine power by the Spirit of God. Their work was endorsed by God. It was a great trust, and it was accompanied by a great test. Many were "faithful unto death," and more broke under the test and let go the hope of eternal life to save their skins. Now we have freedom. Death for the truth's sake does not threaten us. Nevertheless it is difficult to live for the truth's sake—often very difficult. Our disadvantages are real and often very pressing. It may be the loss of, or exclusion from, social position or friendships that would be advantageous; it may be the endurance of imputations of narrowness, ignorance, and bigotry, because we believe God's testimony. Whatever it is, we must be prepared to suffer it if necessary for the sake of the truth, and of "*the joy set before us.*"

But what are the disadvantages to the advantages? What is the best mortal society by comparison with the friendship of God, of the Lord Jesus Christ, of the angels, and of the great cloud of witnesses "*of*

whom the world was not worthy”? What is mortal life at its best estate by comparison with the eternal life of the Kingdom of God, with wisdom, wealth, influence, and honour thrown into the scale? What wise man would hesitate in the choice between this and the vain and fleeting present, the “*best estate*” of which is altogether vanity?

But here are dangers, and very real ones. The flesh hates suffering, mental or physical, and does not like to walk by faith. It wants the present good in addition to the future. Hence there is always the temptation to whittle down the truth, adapting it to men’s thoughts to get their favour. This is a slow and insidious business. Human nature is the same now as it has always been. We see in the first century, a slow, insidious corruption of the faith ever working, even under the eyes of the apostles, until at last the full fruit of it was visible, centuries afterwards, in the Papal apostasy. Paul foresaw this, and was very jealous for the truth. He said:

“I would they were even cut off which trouble you.”

He spoke beforehand of the “*grievous wolves*” who should arise, and exhorted the brethren to watch and remember his service among them, and to give themselves to God and the Word of His grace that was able to build them up and cause them to inherit the kingdom.

Is our time better than that of the apostles? No, we are still in danger; we must watch and pray and strive to maintain the truth in its purity as they did. The truth now, as then, is not a speculative thing, an affair of shifting human philosophy. It is perfectly and finally established. As concerning its modern revival, it has been a fixed and definite and settled thing for fifty years past. But as of old, so in these late days, pertinacious, clever, ambitious men (not disinterested mostly) have arisen to pull down, to corrupt and trim for the sake of advantage. How shall we act in such cases? Adopt new views? give place and latitude for divergence of thought? agree to differ? By no means. We are quite sure of the truth. Then take God’s method. “*Be strong,*” He said to Joshua, “*and I will be with thee.*” God required clear discernment, and then strength and courage in carrying out His work.

God does not do **all** the work; men are made co-workers with Him, which is a pleasure to Him, and also to enlightened humanity recognising thus the divine object in its creation. Paul was a wise master-builder in God’s house, and the brethren builders with him, whom he exhorted to take heed to their work and materials. So we must do our part as Joshua did, and be strong and very courageous, with the word of God always before us for guidance.

“As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”

Let those who will “*halt between two opinions,*” that shall not be our attitude.

A difficult work often? Doubtless. And often made to appear odious enough. Opposition to divine ways always assumes the garb of superior sanctity. Moses and Christ were withstood on this ground, and so were the prophets. “We are holier than thou,” was Israel’s attitude to Jeremiah. But what was the word of the Lord to Jeremiah?

“Say not, I am a child . . . Be not afraid of their faces, for I am with thee.” “I have made thee a defenced city, and an iron pillar and brazen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. And they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee, for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee.”

So Ezekiel was made strong against the rebellious house of Israel:

“I have made thy face strong against their faces, and their forehead against their foreheads. As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead; fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house.” “Speak, whether they will hear or forbear.”

So Christ before the Scribes and Pharisees; and Paul again, agonising with those who had crept in unawares, and were corrupting the faith.

Therefore we need to be very decided and inflexible in defence of God’s ways. There is one qualification, however, that we must by no means overlook—one attitude that must characterise all our earnest contention for the faith; it must be without malice, without hypocrisy, without hatred, without pride. It must all be done in love. Paul enjoins this on Timothy—gentleness plus love, that the errorists may be weaned aright. It is not easy, yet it is not unattainable. It is the ideal character—not the enfeebled milk-and-water pietism of apostate Christianity, nor the stoical harshness and indifference of the merely natural man. The world has wrong ideals. They say it is “*uncharitable*” to agonise for the faith. Not so the Bible, which says: “*Reprove works of darkness,*” and holds up to

execration the “*good words and fair speeches*” by which simple minds are beguiled. Let us be **IMMOVABLE AS THE ROCK, AND KIND AS GOD.**

To be “charitable” is nice—the natural man likes it. But it is not charity to cloak or hide the truth. We must speak the truth in love, we must renounce and denounce error, and know no man after the flesh. There must be harmony between God and His children, and man must obey God: that is the basis of the harmony. So let us have no quarter for error, but do it with kindness and love. It is hard, no doubt, but it cannot be for much longer. All these dark things are nearly past, and the air is full of tokens of the coming of the Lord. We seem to stand still but that is only a delusion. In reality we are moving on all the time, and no man can say what day may be his last.

“Behold, I come quickly,” says Jesus, “and my reward is with me to give to every man according as his works shall be.”

Now is the time in the remembrance of the Lord, and the Father’s love in giving him to the world, to strengthen ourselves from the word that our works may be acceptable before Him.

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