

CHRIST AND THE PROPHETS

In our readings this morning, we have had brought before us two speakers—Ezekiel and Jesus. In the days of our ignorance, we should all have had the idea, derived from the unscriptural system of things around us, that there was nothing in common between two such speakers. We should have looked upon Ezekiel and the prophets in general as belonging to an effete age, in which they served their purpose and with which they had passed away, leaving nothing for us to do but to admire their abstract beauty as historic monuments of faithfulness and stern devotion to duty, invigorating, after a fashion, to contemplate, but not involving anything of especial consequence for us to know or consider. Christ we should at the same time have looked at as representing a new age—an entirely new and different style of things—a totally dissimilar system of thought, feeling, and idea. This view of things, in which there is only the smallest element of truth, is common in the professing Christian world. It is fostered by elegant writings which are not according to knowledge, but the mere outgrowth of scholastic theology, which is flimsy, insipid, and unreal; being based upon the thoughts and theories of men, and not upon a reverent acceptance of revealed truth.

A knowledge of the truth has emancipated us from this mistaken idea, and enabled us to realize the fact presented to us by Paul when he says, in Heb.1: 1,

“ God, who at sundry times and divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.”

We have God speaking in both cases, and to the same nation and for the same purpose. In the words of the prophet illustrative of this very point,

“He sent his servants to the husbandmen of the vineyard that they might receive the fruits of it...but last of all he sent unto them his Son” (Matt.21: 33-41).

The mission of the prophets was to bring Israel to obedience of the things commanded them, as we read in Jer.7:

“Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt unto this day, I have even sent unto you all my servants the prophets...This thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you”:

and what was the mission of Christ so far as his personal ministrations were concerned? Was it not the same? He said,

“I am sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,”

and his command to them in all his preaching was, “Repent,” and his teaching was that

“except their righteousness exceeded the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, they should in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven.”

There was doubtless a higher aspect to the work of Christ. “To him,” as the climax of God’s work with man, “gave all the prophets witness.” In him was to be accomplished the mystery hid from ages, how God was to be just and yet the justifier of transgressors of Adam’s race unto life eternal, and the way thus opened in one man for the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile. In him was to be accomplished the resolution of the problem how condemned men were to be saved by obedience and yet the glory of it should alone be to Jehovah. In him was to be historically illustrated the name Emmanuel—God with Israel reconciling them to Himself, and not imputing their trespasses unto them—giving us in one man the glory of the Father, and the headship and brotherhood and obedience of the first-born among many brethren. Nevertheless, it was the same God speaking by him that spoke through

the prophets, and the object of the speaking was the same in both cases: to induce men to turn from their evil ways and be reconciled to God. The form merely was different; the essence of the forms was identical. Israel were summoned by the prophets to turn to God with all their hearts, and to obey the commandments given by the hand of Moses: they were summoned by Jesus to turn to God with all their hearts, and obey the commandments delivered by him. In both cases the object of the summons, as far as Israel was concerned, was the same, "that it might be well with them," with this difference in the case of the summons by Christ, that he made the form and nature of the well-ness, so to speak, more definite and obvious. The resurrection and the kingdom of God were presented by him as the nature and the occasion of the great goodness in store for those who should fear, love, and obey him; while in the case of the prophets, they were permitted to speak only of the then present blessings which God should bestow upon Israel in case of obedience.

We gentiles have been brought into the channel of this blessing through Israel's rejection of it at first. Christ, and afterwards Paul, confined his attention to his kinsmen according to the flesh; but Israel treating the offered goodness with scorn, the same salvation was offered to the Gentiles. Through this circumstance we are assembled here this morning, worshipping God through Christ, in hope of the promises made of God unto the fathers. We, who were once Gentiles in the flesh, without hope, have become fellow-citizens with all the saints of all past times. We have been lopped from the wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, on the good olive tree, and with the obedient natural branches, partaking of the fatness of the good Abrahamic olive tree. This is the position which, fairly realized, is calculated to inspire gladness. We are exhorted to rejoice in it. Frequent is this exhortation throughout the scriptures:

"Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous: shout for gladness of heart."

It is well to give reins to our joy. It is true that joy is not an act of the will; we cannot force ourselves to be glad; still, we can review again and again the reasons we have for gladness, and by this our gladness will take a new life, though our sorrow will not take final flight till the Lord come. We shall at last realize in ourselves the words of Peter, who, speaking concerning the promises, says,

"Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1: 6-7).

"Sorrowful yet always rejoicing," is Paul's description of his own case; and it is a description that will be found applicable to the experience of every true saint of God. There is much on the surface, and, so far as this world is concerned, deep down as well, to cause continual sorrow of heart: but underneath all there is a constant current of joy in God, a satisfaction at the bottom that comes from leaning on Him, and trusting in Him, and hoping in Him, as well as regards the life that now is as that which is to come. Therefore, while avoiding the unseemly ecstasies of unenlightened sectaries, who mistake the electric combustion of the brain for a scriptural joy in God, it is good to remember the reasons we have for being glad, and indulge, in the midst of our many sorrows, in the joy which springs from a present confidence in God and the hope of that morning of brightness which He has promised, and only awaits the right season to reveal.

For another class, this exhortation has to be turned the other way round. There are those who presume upon their standing in the truth, and who forget that they have been called to obedience in many things required of them; and that their continuance in that Gospel is essential to their continuance in the position of favour to which they have been called by the

Gospel. This class have none of the sorrows of the truth, and rejoice after the flesh in their connection with it. They look at others with disdain, and glory in their own enlightenment. They say like Israel,

"The people of the Lord, the people of the Lord, the people of the Lord are we,"

but like them fail to sustain the character and position becoming the people of the Lord; but they were cut off for all that, because while with their mouth they drew near to God, with their heart they were far from Him. So men may speak the truth in a technical sense in claiming to be the brethren of Christ, because they believe and have obeyed the Gospel, and at the same time they may be walking in utter unworthiness of the position, and may be in as great danger of being cut off as the natural branches of the good olive tree. Such have need to remember Paul's exhortation:

"Be not high-minded, but fear: for if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he spare not thee" (Rom. 11: 21).

To such, the exhortation has to be changed into a call to weeping:

"Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord."

For what purpose are men grafted into Christ as branches into the living tree? It is that they may grow and bring forth fruit unto God—fruit that God will have pleasure in. So Christ has plainly told us.

"Every branch in me that beareth not fruit, he (my Father) taketh away.... Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit."

And what is the fruit that is looked for? We have the answer in the expressed wish of Paul's, that the Corinthians might be *"fruitful in every good work."* And what are good works? Those only that God has required in His Word. There is none good but one—that is God; and there is no righteousness but that which has been constituted such by His Word. Hence, to be fruitful branches in the Christ-tree, men must do those things that Christ has commanded for his servants; otherwise, they are unfruitful branches. Of what advantage is it for a man to know the truth and to profess the name of Christ, if at the same time he think and speak and act in accordance with the grovelling instincts of the natural man, which are opposed to what Christ has required? How can a man hope to please Christ, who has conformed in all things to the present evil world, to which Christ did not belong, instead of being transformed in the renewing of his mind after the image of the new man, Christ? To such a man the truth is of no advantage whatever, but contrariwise, a positive calamity, as he will find in the day—near at the door—when Christ will say to all such,

"I know you not, ye workers of iniquity."

It is better not to know the way of truth at all, than, knowing it, to continue in the ways, works and maxims of the flesh. The saintship that is disfigured by a conformity to this God-forgetting, man-fearing, self-seeking, money-making, poor-neglecting, proud, unjust, merciless, impure, drunken, tobacco-stupefied age—is a saintship that will not be recognized by Christ, for Christ will recognize only the saintship of his own pattern, which is abundantly exhibited beforehand in the word of truth. That saintship is a saintship of zeal for God, independence of man, faithfulness to truth, purity (both of body and mind), righteousness, mercy, faith in God, love, meekness, gentleness, unselfishness, submission to evil, and kindness to the unfortunate—even if they are erring, fruitfulness in every good work, always abounding therein with thanksgiving, in the inextinguishable hope of the heavenly calling. This is the portrait drawn by the hand of the Spirit: the *"image"* exhibited for us to try and become conformed to.

We become conformed to it in *"the renewing of our minds,"* which is effected by the word abiding in us, and the word abides by being continually implanted in the reading and

study of it. The mind is made of plastic material, and is being modified every day, for good or evil, according to the influences that play upon it. It is more easily affected for evil than for good, because its natural bent is in the direction of evil. Hence the battle is a hard one, and must be maintained to the last. Let us never surrender. Let us hold on to all the helps God has given us; let us avoid all the hindrances and the weights which so easily impede the journey and sink the steps in the mire of the devil's morass, that spreads far and wide on all sides around us. The day of victory will repay all exertion, for thus saith the Spirit;

"He that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron."

Of one principle, running through the whole of the divine economy, we must never lose sight. It is expressed by Peter thus:

"That God in all things may be glorified."

We may not meet with many who rise to this lesson of wisdom. It is a lesson that has become weakened and dimmed and marred by the hypocrisies and shallowness with which it has become associated in the apostasy of Christendom. The words have come millions of times from heartless lips, on which they almost die for want of sincerity as they are uttered; or they have been shot like sparks of fire from the throats of the tempestuous votaries of superstition, wrought into mesmeric excitement at "revival meetings"; or they have come with a glib hollow sound from mouths that have never truly glorified God. They have come to be hackneyed and cant; but they represent a great reality nevertheless—a reality which is the very heart and glory of the whole system of divine truth. That God may be exalted; that He may be had in highest reverence; that His unsearchable greatness may be recognized; that His great power and goodness, and His underived and absolute prerogative, may be apparent to the sons of men in their deepest affections and profoundest adoration; that His great name may be magnified and extolled, is the great object of all His recorded dealings, including that widest and greatest of them all, His permission of sin to reign unto death. Apart from this, His ways are not to be understood. It is no wonder that men do not understand the Bible; I mean the intellectual talented men of literature. They ignore or do not appreciate its first principle—the honour of God. They look at it through the medium of the conceptions they have formed through the study of Nature, which can give them no information of the true reason of things. They interpret it in the light of mere philanthropy. They tacitly assume that creation exists for man alone, and that all things are to be judged good or bad according as it affects him. This philosophy stands between them and the Bible as a veil; for the Bible exhibits a system of truth at variance with this philosophy in many points. The Bible shows us all things for God, and for man only in so far as man fulfils his part toward God. The chapter read from Ezekiel is an illustration of this kind of teaching. How frequent is this expression in it, in recounting and explaining His dealings with Israel:

"I wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen" (20:14).

His very choice and manipulation of the house of Israel is, through another prophet, declared to have had for their object (Jer. 13:11) that they might be to Him

"for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory";

and by Isaiah, He says,

"This people have I formed for myself; they shall show forth all my praise."

The same object is associated with the work of the Gospel.

"God has visited the Gentiles, to take out a people for his name";

and this people, when taken out

"that they should show forth the praises of him who hath called them out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

This is a very different idea from the idea that is current among “the churches” of Christendom. The idea current in Christendom is, that the great purpose connected with the Gospel is the salvation of men in the humanitarian sense. They are taught that a single soul is of priceless worth and that its rescue from a condition of suffering is the highest of the divine operations. Bible teaching (which is the teaching of eternal truth—and no other teaching is true), is the reverse of all this. It is that all flesh is as grass; that all nations have gone out of the way and are become unprofitable and vain; that they are of no value in the sight of God; that, nevertheless, God, in His wisdom and kindness, will save such of them from death as will turn to Him with all their heart, abase themselves before Him, exalt His name, and do His commandments in reverence and fear.

The Gospel is an invitation to men to come into this attitude that they may live; and such in His sight are precious, in that they---

“offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of their lips giving thanks to his name” (Heb. 13:15).

This is the Scriptural standard of saintship, and none other will avail. Men deceive themselves if they imagine they will be saved, merely because they have come to know that man is mortal and that the kingdom of David will be re-established under Christ at his coming. It is well for them to know the truth; but the truth will only be to their condemnation if they fail to bring forth the fruit which God looks for from the knowledge of it.

Israel, to whom Ezekiel was sent, were acquainted with the truth so far as revealed; and “*certain of the elders,*” we are told, in the first verse of the chapter read (20), even “*came to enquire of the Lord,*” and sat before Ezekiel. What was the answer of the Lord to them?

“As I live, saith the Lord God, I will not be enquired of by you” (verse 3)

There are circumstances in which God will not receive men’s advances, and in which He will even lay stumbling-blocks before them to turn them out of the way (Ezek. 3:20). Both Israel and the Gentiles are illustrations. After long patience, God poured the spirit of slumber upon the mental faculties of the Jews, because they took no delight in His appointments, and honoured not His name; and on the Gentiles also, to whom He sent His messengers in the first century, armed with the gifts of the Spirit, He finally “*sent a strong delusion, because they received not the truth in the love of it.*” These illustrations are of individual service to us. They show us that our knowledge will be no advantage to us unless we carry that knowledge to its legitimate results. If our hearts are not set on things above instead of on things on earth; if the fear of God is not before our eyes all day long; and praise of His name on our lips, and thanksgiving and supplication in our hearts; if our deeds are not framed in accordance with His law, in holy and trembling regard for His Word, and in true and contrite humility before Him, we fail to present the features that will characterize the family that will be gathered together in glorious unity in the day of Christ, to ascribe “*blessing, and glory, and honour, and power unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever.*”

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