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*THE GOSPEL TO THE GREEKS.*

*John* xii. 20-36.

INTRODUCTION.

EVEN in the history of our Lord Himself there are few incidents more striking and suggestive than the visit of "certain Greeks" to Him during the last week of his earthly ministry. They came to Him at the moment in which the Jews had finally broken with Him, and He had been constrained to denounce wrath and tribulation and anguish on the very people He came to save. The advent, the adhesion, of these Greeks to the Christ whom Israel had rejected, was an omen of vast significance: it was, as Bengel has said, "the prelude to the transition of the kingdom of God from the Jew to the Gentile."

Striking and portentous as the incident was, it has not received the attention it deserves. It lies in the shadow of the Cross. It is eclipsed by the close neighbourhood of the supreme achievement in the history of Christ,—that laying down, that losing, of his own life, by which He saved the life of the world. On the brink of that divine catastrophe we find it hard to pause and consider the events which immediately preceded it, however momentous and significant they may be. And yet *this* event will well repay the consideration it demands. Manifestly it is marked out, as by the finger of God, for special consideration. As at the Baptism, and again at the Transfiguration, so now, while Jesus shews Himself and speaks to the Greeks who came seeking Him, a voice from Heaven is heard, bearing witness to the beloved Son. And this Voice, like that heard on the Mount and by the River, comes to call attention to a critical and far-reaching event, an event too which has a special claim on *us*, since it is nothing less than the throwing open of the gates of the kingdom of heaven to the Gentile world,

Christ's first and sole proclamation of his gospel to the Greeks.

Probably this was the last event of a day crowded with events. Not improbably even, it was "the conclusion of Christ's public ministry,"<sup>1</sup> and so comes to us charged with new significance. But in any case we shall hardly enter into its meaning, or feel its power, unless we glance at the incidents which led our Lord to sum up his gospel in a few pregnant sayings, which embrace all that is essential and distinctive in his teaching, for the instruction of these inquiring Gentiles.

On the third day, then, of the week in which He tasted death for us all, the Lord Jesus stood in the Court of the Women, his favourite resort in the Temple, as it was also that of any Jew who had a word to say to the people, since in this Court, open to both sexes, most of the public assemblies were held. Most of his disciples were with Him; and through a long and weary day He had been speaking to them, and to the Jews who gathered round them, of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. As the evening fell, He was still teaching and preaching in the Temple; but now Philip, absent from the group for a time, seems to have been hurrying through the Court of the Gentiles—which lay next to but below the Court of the Women—on his way to rejoin his Master and his brethren. This lower court was divided from the higher and more sacred enclosures of the Temple by a stone fence, on the posts of which slabs were affixed—one of these slabs, still in a legible condition, has been recently discovered—bearing the inscription: "No alien must pass within this fence. If any one be caught doing so, he must blame himself for the death that will ensue." Philip was not an alien, but a Jew; and therefore he was at liberty to pass the fence and climb the stairs which led up into the Court of the Women.

<sup>1</sup> See Dr. Edersheim's *Life and Times of Jesus*, Vol. ii. p. 389.

But before he reached the steps he was intercepted by certain Greeks—Hellenes, not Hellenists—who were in the habit of coming to Jerusalem in order to worship at the Feast, and who must therefore have been among those foreign converts to the Hebrew faith known as “proselytes of the Gate.” As they could not get to Him, for, being Gentiles, they dare not pass the fence, they begged Philip, if it were possible, to bring Jesus to them.

We are not told who these men were, nor from whence they came. But tradition affirms that more than one effort was made—notably by the King of Edessa—to induce Jesus to leave the hostile and ungrateful Jews, and to take up his residence in some foreign court, where He was assured of an honourable welcome. And it may be that these Greeks—for Greeks were to be found in every Court—were ambassadors from such prince, and came on some such errand as this. Or it may be that they themselves were persons of wealth and distinction who, seeing that Jesus had finally broken with the Jews, and knowing that the Pharisees were compassing his death, sought to save Him from their hands by offering Him an asylum beyond their reach. Or, again, it may be that they had been so impressed by his words and deeds, that they had resolved to attach themselves to Him, and to share his fate, whatever it might be. Only the day before, He had driven from the Temple the money changers who defiled it with their traffic and chicanery, and rebuked them for degrading into a “den of thieves” the Sanctuary which God intended to be “a house of prayer,” not for the Jews only, but “*for all nations.*” These Greeks may have been impressed by his courage, his purity, his liberality. They may have felt that though Himself a Jew, He was the Friend of all men, *their* Friend. They may have wished to confer with Him, and to learn *how* He proposed to convert the Hebrew Temple into an universal Sanctuary.

Whatever their immediate motive and intention, there can be no doubt that there was far more in their advance to Christ than lies on the surface of this narrative. For, first their words, the words rendered, "we would see Jesus," not only imply a very strong desire to see Him; they also mean, "We have *decided* on seeing Jesus," and seem to imply either that there had been some strife and debate in their own minds before they reached that decision, or that they had discussed the matter with Philip before, and had only just determined what they would do.

Nor, again, was it only a *sight* of Jesus which they wished to obtain, such a long lingering gaze as men love to bend and fix on the great and mighty. They could have had that, probably they had had so much as that, as He went in and out of the Temple and passed through the court in which they worshipped. What they asked for was a formal interview with Him, a conference in which they might open their minds to Him and hear what He had to say in reply. Hence it was, I suppose, that Philip was so deeply impressed by their decision. To him it seemed so important that he did not venture to take it straight to Christ. He first goes and consults Andrew, who was on more intimate terms with Him, as one of the first four among the Twelve. And then, as we are told with a ceremonious formality which denotes the importance of the occasion, Philip having come and told Andrew, Andrew and Philip—the only two of the Apostles who bore Greek names, and therefore fitting ambassadors for Greeks—tell Jesus. Nay, Jesus Himself, ordinarily of so calm and serene a spirit, is much more profoundly impressed and moved than his disciples. To Him, the decision of these Greeks is at once as the stroke of doom and the harbinger of victory. He reads in it a sign that the hour is come in which He must glorify God by dying for men, and be glorified by God by being made the Victor over death, and the

Saviour of the world. He finds in it nothing less than the "crisis of the world"—an omen of the utter defeat of the usurping prince of this world, and a promise that all men shall be drawn to Him, the world's true Prince and Lord.

The whole tone and all the details of this brief narrative, therefore, mark this event as one of the deepest and most extraordinary moment; and we are compelled to find in the request of these Greeks far more than meets the ear.

St. John, to whom we owe our only record of this memorable and significant incident, does not tell us in so many words how the Lord Jesus responded to their request. But we can hardly doubt that He who was full of grace acceded to it; that He came down into the Court of the Gentiles, in which they perforce awaited Him, and spoke with them face to face. Indeed all the critics are agreed that in Verses 23-26 we have the substance of what He said to them. In the parable of the grain of wheat, which is fruitful only in death; in the paradox on losing one's life in order to save it; in the promise that as many as serve and follow Him here shall hereafter be with Him where He is; in the prediction that by his death on the Cross He will draw all men to Himself—in all of which we find one dominant and uniting thought, that of gain by loss, life by death, joy by sorrow—He sums up in a few sentences what was most precious and distinctive in the gospel which He had taught at large among the Jews. And, as if to round the whole circle, as if to give these Greeks a veritable and complete gospel all to themselves, however brief it might be, miracle is added to parable and paradox, promise and prediction, and a great voice from heaven—loud as thunder, but sweet as an angel's song—confirms and ratifies all that He had said to them.

He assumes throughout that they offered themselves to his service, that they wished to enroll themselves among his followers and disciples, that they had come to Him for the

eternal life which He professed to bestow. To his disciples He had often repeated the strange paradox, that they could only find their lives by losing them, only rise into eternal life through death. And now He affirms that this strange law of life is the only law of life, whether in the natural or in the spiritual world. It is the law of his own life as well as of theirs ; and it must be the law of all who would follow Him. That is the true life, He says virtually, which can quicken life. But to give life, we must expend life ; we must give it out or give it up. The corn of wheat must die that it may live and multiply. The Son of Man must die that He Himself may truly live, and that He may give life to the world. And all who follow Him must follow Him in this—they must die to live. But if they submit to this law, they shall have life indeed, the true life, the life that cannot die. *They* are as welcome to Him, and to his eternal life, as though they were children of Abraham ; nay, more welcome, for they are the representatives of the whole race of man, and not of a single family alone.

These two seem to have been the leading thoughts or emotions of Christ as He gave these Greeks the interview they had sought. First, the hearty welcome He could now offer, not to the house of Israel only, but to men of every name and race. And, second, deep and devout exultation that his salvation was to be wide as the world, co-extensive with the whole family of man. The first finds utterance in such phrases as these : “ If any man (Jew or Gentile) serve me, him will my Father honour,” and “ I, if I be lifted up, will draw *all* men unto me ” : while the second reveals itself in the exclamation, “ Now is the *crisis* of this world ; now shall the prince of this world be cast out,” and “ the hour is come that the Son of man should be glorified.”

There is a tone of wonder, as well as of joy, in these exclamations, as if the Son of Man Himself were astonished at the greatness of his work, at its scope or

its success ; as if in the advent of these Greeks He beheld the unfolding of a divine purpose of which He had not always been fully conscious, which He had only clearly recognized as He "grew in wisdom and knowledge" by the teaching of labour and experience. And, indeed, we have many indications that that extension of his work and kingdom to the whole Gentile world, in which He here exults, had not always been present to his consciousness, though it had always been embraced in the purpose of God ; that it dawned and grew upon Him as He walked with men, as He met new claims on his grace and felt new impulses of love arise within his heart. "Though he was a Son, he learned . . . by the things which he suffered ;" and, among them, by that conflict between Love and Duty which He shared with us.

Of this growth in wisdom and clearness, this "learning," what the will of God was and how much it embraced until, as here, He saw that it contemplated nothing short of the redemption of the whole world, and could exult in the fact that the Salvation which was "of the Jews," was for the Gentiles also, we have one very familiar and suggestive illustration. Many months before these Greeks decided to see Him, Jesus, wearied by incessant and ill-rewarded toil, had retired from Judea, beyond his beloved Galilee even, to the borderland of Phœnicia, seeking rest, though He found none. For here there came to Him a woman whom St. Mark calls a Greek, *i.e.* a Gentile, a heathen, but who St. Matthew tells us was a Canaanite by birth.<sup>1</sup> Now the Canaanites were not only heathen ; they were the one heathen race on which a curse had rested for ages ; they had been dispossessed of the Promised Land by divine command ; they were disqualified by a rigorous and binding prohibition from ever becoming members of the Holy Congregation. A swarthy mother of this accursed race

<sup>1</sup> Mark vii. 24-30 ; Matthew xv. 21-28.



comes to Christ and begs a boon of Him, beseeching Him to heal her afflicted daughter. By this appeal she brings before Him, in its extreme and most difficult form, the question, whether He is the Saviour of all races or only of one. And there is an apparent rudeness and harshness in his response to her prayer which has already perplexed the Church, so unlike is it to his usual strain. But the reason why He is so unlike Himself is, in all probability, that her appeal has quickened a strife between love and duty in his heart by which for the moment He is bewildered. He was not sent, so at least He felt, save to the House of Israel. How, then, can He take the bread from the children of the House, who sit at the Father's table, even to give it to the household pets<sup>1</sup> who lie and beg under the table? Love prompts Him to respond with bounty to the pitiful appeal; Duty forbids Him so to respond to it.

And this sense of duty, which looks so strange to us—strangest of all in Him—was nevertheless based on a large and wide induction. For nineteen centuries it had been the method of God to confine the special revelations of his mercy to the House of Israel. It had been his method, *i.e.* to provide for the ultimate salvation of the world by saving and blessing one family, one people; by storing up in them an energy by which all the families of the earth should be saved and blessed. From the call of Abraham to the advent of the Messiah, the Hebrew race had been chosen and prepared for this high function. And not without reason. A supernatural revelation could not have been made to every nation and every family without reversing or superseding the natural order: the air would have been darkened with perpetual miracles. In his divine economy,

<sup>1</sup> Our Lord by the use of the diminutive *kunarton* indicates that He is not speaking of the prowling scavenger of the streets, which was held in dislike and contempt by the Jews; but of the trained and familiar companion of the household; and this takes some of the harshness from his tone.

therefore, an economy which characterizes all his works, God selected one nation to be the depository of the heavenly treasure which was ultimately to enrich the whole family of man. Till this revelation was complete, it was reasonable that it should be confined to a single spot, to a single race. Nor would it be complete till Christ had accomplished his mission, finished his work. Till then, therefore, it was but natural He should feel that He was sent only to the House of Israel, that He could not step beyond its limits without departing from the Divine method and violating the Will He came to do. These limits might at times irk and gall his tender compassionate spirit. He might at times long to use his power for the benefit of men and women of other than the chosen race. He *must* have longed to help and comfort this poor Canaanitish mother. But dare He do it? Could He do it without overstepping his commission, without doing violence to the method which his Father had patiently followed through long centuries?

It was only the extraordinary and astonishing faith of the woman, it would seem, which suggested to Him that the Will of God must be even larger, kinder, freer, than He had assumed, and so reconciled for Him the warring claims of love and duty. By a wonderful stroke of wit, which could only have sprung from the pressure of love and anguish, she catches Him in his own net, entangles Him in his own words, meeting his rebuke, "It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs," with the retort, "Yea, Lord; but even the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs." She admits, *i.e.* his method of interpretation, admits that He is sent to Israel first, or even only; but she cannot and will not think so poorly of God as to believe that the Father of all will grudge any kindness that can be shewn to any creature that He has made. And by her faith in the illimitable mercy and

compassion of God, she extorted the admiration of the Son of Man, and taught Him that duty can never be at war with love, that to shew kindness and do good can never be to violate the will of God. Hence He yields to her request, and cries, "O woman, great is thy faith! be it unto thee even as thou wilt."

Women should be proud of the woman who, by her invincible faith in the love that rules the universe, became one of the teachers of the Great Teacher; nor should men, however logical their temper, find any difficulty in believing that He who learned something even from the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, and much more from every child and woman and man He met, learned obedience to a Will even larger than his own from this loving and afflicted mother; for was not her anguish one of "the things which He suffered?"

But, oh, how far had the Man Christ Jesus advanced in his recognition of the loving and redeeming purpose of the will of God, in the months which intervened between his interview with the Syro-Phœnician woman and his conference with these inquiring Greeks in the Temple! There is no trace of agitation, or of hesitation, in his bearing now, no fear lest in admitting *them* to his grace He should be overstepping the bounds of his commission and violating the will of the Father who sent Him. So far from being bewildered between the rival claims of love and duty, He does not even pause to note that these claims can never be opposed. So far from asking whether He had been sent to find and save any but the lost sheep of the House of Israel, He is sure that the true temple must be a house of prayer for all nations. So far from doubting whether He has gifts for the Gentiles also, He sees in the coming of the Greeks a sign that his work is accomplished, his victory won, and exults over the proof they bring Him that the hour has struck in which He is to be glorified. He opens his arms,

and his heart, to the whole world, and rejoices that all men are to be drawn to Him, that all are comprehended in the saving power and love of God.

The fundamental and dominant thought of the Gospel which Christ Himself delivered to the Greeks is this—that death is the inevitable condition of life: and this thought pervades his whole discourse and finds expression in paradox, in parable, in promise, in prediction. The Son of Man must die, He says, both that men may live, and that He Himself may be lifted up into a higher life. His disciples must follow Him in the way of the Cross, *i.e.* they must die with Him, if they would rise with Him into life eternal. Nay, every man, if he would not lose his life must hate his life; *i.e.* he must hold mere living in generous scorn if he would reach the true ends of life. And this law, which pervades the whole round and structure of human life, runs also throughout the physical universe, in which even a grain of wheat cannot breed and multiply unless it fall into the earth and die. Everywhere, death is the condition of life, or of more life and fuller. Everywhere, the lower forms of life fulfil their end and aim in being lost that, from them, higher and more fruitful forms of life may spring.

This was the dominant theme, as of his Gospel to the Jews, so also of his Gospel to the Greeks. And we must now mark how it was varied and wrought out.

### I. THE PARABLE.

*“ Verily, verily (literally, Amen, amen), I say unto you, Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit.”*

The Parable is introduced with that solemn “Verily, verily” which St. John has made familiar to us on the lips of our Lord. On his lips this formula is used to call attention to truths of exceptional moment and depth, truths

which command the "amen," or assent, of his whole nature, truths often which did not lie on the surface, but beneath the surface, of the words He was about to utter; truths which might be very repugnant to the minds, habits, inclinations of those who listened to them, and which needed therefore to be the more earnestly pressed on their attention.

Nor is it at all difficult to see why He laid special and weighty emphasis on the fact—that death, self-surrender, self-renunciation, self-sacrifice, is the condition of all life, or why He called the special and earnest attention of *the Greeks* to it. For not only is the truth itself a fundamental truth of his Gospel and kingdom, lying at the very root both of Christian theology and Christian experience, and finding its supreme expression in the Cross; not only is it repugnant to man's general bent and inclination—for who cares to impose on himself either a yoke or a cross? but it also ran right in the teeth of Greek thought and civilisation. Self-culture and self-enjoyment were the master words with the Greek—the chief good of human life, the supreme aim, the ruling bent of the whole Grecian world, as we may learn from their literature, their art, their political economy, their social and civic institutions; from which we may also learn how miserably, in pursuing this aim, they fell short of the ends for which man was created and made. So that in calling them to substitute self-renunciation for self-culture, and self-sacrifice for self-gratification, the Lord Jesus was virtually asking them to reverse the whole bent of their thought and conduct, and to set before themselves an ideal the very opposite to that which they had hitherto pursued. No wonder, then, that He opened his discourse with this solemn "Verily, verily," forewarning them by his very tone and manner how heavy was the task, how arduous the achievement, how radical the change, to which He summoned them. Not that He

disapproved either of culture or enjoyment; all He demanded was—as we shall see—that the culture should tend to maintain and develop the spiritual life in man, and that the enjoyment should be cheerfully sacrificed, if need were, to the higher claims of duty.

Even this, however, was a grave demand to make on men who had been bred to love culture for its own sake, and enjoyment for its own sake, and to place them above the pursuit of truth, righteousness, and charity. To call on them to use their culture for the welfare of “the common herd,” and to give up any enjoyment which could be secured only at the cost of their own higher life or by injuring their neighbour; to bid them live for others, in short, instead of for themselves, was to make so heavy a demand on them that our Lord felt bound to shew them the reasonableness of such a demand, to place it on the widest and surest foundation. This foundation He finds in a law of nature. He appeals to their own observation and experience. For every man knows that a grain of wheat abides alone, contributes nothing to the general wealth or welfare, until it is cast into the earth, and is dissolved under the pressure of the physical and chemical forces of the sun-warmed earth; or, as we may perhaps add, until it is crushed into flour and worked up into bread. In either case dissolution, the death of the living grain, is the condition of its usefulness, its fruitfulness, *i.e.* its higher life. For nothing exists for itself; nothing truly lives or fulfils its true function save as part of the great whole, and in so far as it ministers to the welfare and advance of the whole. This is the law of universal being, of universal well-being. And though our Lord here gives only a single illustration of the law, his single illustration suffices to remind us that it is a general law, that it runs and holds throughout the physical universe. All things minister to and help each other—even sun, moon, and stars. All things give out life,

or give up life and power, to quicken and cherish life in other forms ; earth, water and heat ministering to the life of the plant, the plant dying that it may minister to the life of bird and beast, bird and beast dying that they may minister to the life of man.

The grain of wheat is but a single type, a single illustration of an universal law. Its death is the condition of its life, since death releases the vital power imprisoned in the husk, and sets it free to manifest itself in higher and more complex forms. For the grain of wheat when cast into the earth does not absolutely die. The principle of life held captive in it, so far from being extinguished by dissolution, is liberated ; it develops new energy and unfolds itself in fairer and more fruitful forms. Death, such death as it undergoes, is not death to it, but the condition of freer, more energetic and useful life. Left to mould or rot in the granary, it absolutely perishes, subserving no useful purpose but rather becoming a source of infection and decay, a savour of death unto death ; while, cast into the fruitful earth, it becomes fruitful, ministers to the life of man, rises into and takes its part in the general harmony of service which pervades the universe.

Death, then, is the condition of life in the natural world. And the law of the natural world is also the law of the human world, as our Lord proceeds to shew in the Paradox which follows his parable ; thus confirming that appeal to the analogy between the course and constitution of Nature and the truths of revealed Religion on which some of our ablest thinkers and divines have insisted, and warranting us in going to the world outside us for a key to the mysteries of the world within.

S. Cox.

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