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Messages from the Epistle to the Hebrews.

BY THE BISHOP OF DURHAM.

XI.—HEBREWS XII. 14-28.

THE paragraph before us is largely concerned with the inner life of the believing community, its cohesion member with member, and the call to each member and to all to "walk warily in dangerous days," in the path of evangelical holiness. The writer lays it upon them to "pursue peace with all," such peace as always *tends*, even in bad times, to reward the "sons of peace," while they so behave themselves as never on their own part to contribute a factor to avoidable strife, and as the influence of their meek consistency leavens in some measure the mass around them. With equal and concurrent care they are to "pursue sanctification." It is to be their strong ambition to develop and deepen incessantly that dedication of themselves to the Holy One which will give them at once the standard and the secret of holiness, by bringing them into immediate contact with Him who is at once their law and their life. They are to "live out," in the spirit of a resolute quest after fuller and yet fuller attainment, the fact that He has redeemed them to be "a people of His own possession"; remembering, with a solemn simplicity of conviction, that only "the pure in heart" shall ever be able to "see God." For the spirit which refuses to come into a surrendered harmony with His Spirit may be set in the midst of heaven itself, yet it would be blind, it would be blinded, by that *alien* glory. They are to keep watch and oversight upon one another (ver. 15), mutually observant all round, to see that the life of faith and love is alive indeed. Does anyone find his fellow-believer "falling short of the grace of God," sinking into a life no better than the world's? This must at once disquiet the observer, and call out his loving warnings, or at least his anxious intercessions; for the declining convert inevitably extends an influence of decline around him, and the issue will be, in the end, a declining Church. Is "any root of

bitterness growing up"? Is there (see Deut. xxix. 17) any Christian in the company so fallen, so "embittered" by alienation from his Lord, as to be a cause around him of "defilement," so as to stain ultimately large circles (*οἱ πολλοί*) with the deep pollution of a practical apostasy from holiness? Is there here and there a personal example of spiritual infidelity (*πόρνος*) to the Lord, of that radically "secular" (*βέβηλος*) spirit (ver. 16) of which Esau is the type, to which some "mess of meat," some material advantage, proves overwhelmingly more momentous than the unworldly "birthright" given by the promise of God? Let them all watch as for their life against such symptoms. It is a matter of eternal import. The ancient Esau found too late that he was an outcast, irrevocably, from the great blessing, though then he cried for it with a cry great and bitter. In vain he asked his father to reverse the destiny; there was no "place of repentance" in Isaac's will, for Isaac knew he had but carried out, blind as he was, the will of God.

Then follows (18-24) that sublime antithesis of Sinai and Sion which forms one of the greatest examples of rhythmical, of almost lyrical, eloquence in the whole New Testament. On the one hand looms on the view the Thing,¹ material, tangible (*ψηλαφωμένω*), all on fire, black with tempestuous cloud, its echoes pealing (ver. 19) to a tremendous trumpet-blast and then a yet more awful "voice of words." At its base cowers an awe-struck, horror-struck host of men, shuddering at the warning (ver. 20) not to touch the fatal rocks, crowding for refuge round a leader who himself owns (ver. 21) to heart-shaking fears.² On the other hand, as the eyes of faith are lifted, is seen, and in closest spiritual proximity (for the believing company has actually "come unto it," ver. 22), the hill eternal, the true Mount Sion, where shines the city of the living God, the Jerusalem of heaven. No barren rocks are there, nor do

¹ The word *ὄρει* is certainly absent from the true text. We are left as in presence of a mysterious *somewhat*, a mighty mass, wrapt in terror and without form or name.

² A traditional utterance must be referred to. But the whole narrative in Exodus and in Deuteronomy supports it.

articulate menaces of thunder sound from and around that height. All is light, and all is life. Yes, above all things all is life. Behold the countless thousands (*μυριάσιν*) of radiant denizens, the angelic friends of man; and then, beatified men besides (ver. 23), "festal assembly and church of first-born, enrolled in heaven"; the blessed gone before, the "great cloud," seen now in their other character, as the triumphant throng of a celestial Passover, or of a Tabernacle-feast of palms kept in the better Canaan to commemorate the mercies of the mortal wilderness. And there, centre and sun of the wonderful scene, is the glory of the "Judge of all," Vindicator (so we read the meaning of the word *κριτής* here) of His afflicted ones, treading down their enemies and presiding in majesty over their happy estate. Around Him rest and rejoice the happy "spirits of the just made perfect," the dear and holy who have lately passed through death, "perfected" already, even before their resurrection, in respect of the finished course, the fight fought, the faith kept, the trial for ever over. Lastly (ver. 24), the form is seen of the more than Moses of this better Mount of God. Behold the Mediator, not of the old covenant but of the new, the covenant of the eternal Spirit, the promise of the holy heart, sealed with that sprinkled blood of the Incarnate Lamb which, in Divine antithesis to the call for vengeance on the fratricide sent up from Abel's death, claims for the "brethren" who once slew their Deliverer—not remission only, but holiness and heaven.

It is a wonderful picture, the Hill of the awful Law confronted by the "Hill whence cometh our help." And we ask ourselves why, just here in the Epistle, it is painted for us and left upon our spirit's eyes for ever. Surely it is that the Hebrew disciple (and we in our turn to-day), may be quickened in watching and in walking alike by an immense encouragement and a warning of corresponding power. The call has just been made, all through the twelfth chapter to this point, to endure, to watch, to warn each other, to pursue to the uttermost the ambition of holiness. Let this be done as by those whose pilgrimage tents

are pitched as it were in a valley between those two mountains of God. Let the true Israelite turn his eyes sometimes upon Sinai, to learn again from its shadows and its thunders the infinite importance of the eternal Will, the awfulness of transgression, the terrors of the law when it is met only by the miserable failures of the sinner. Then, humbled lower than the dust, let him turn towards the eternal Sion, and not only turn towards it but recollect that in the Spirit, and in the Son, he has "*come to it.*" In the Lord Christ, his better Moses, his saving Mediator, he has already arrived beside it and rests upon it. No voice of thunder bids him not to touch it "lest he be thrust through." He is commanded to come as near to it as it is possible to be, because he is to come to "the Lord of the Hill" Himself in the absolute proximity of faith, love, and life. He is welcomed to its recesses, and to its heights. The first-born are his brethren; the just made perfect are his own beloved; every angel of all the host is his friend; the supreme Judge is his omnipotent Protector; Jesus is his Peace, through the blood of His Cross. "Blest inhabitant of Sion, washed in the Redeemer's blood"—shall he not address himself to the path and pursuit of holiness with a heart beating with an inexhaustible hope, and with a life present while eternal?

Then, as the great paragraph approaches its climax, the note of warning sounds again (ver. 25). The convert, fresh from the reminder of the "voice" of the sprinkled blood of the better covenant, is cautioned not to "refuse" it, not to "decline" it (*μὴ παραιτήσηθε*). The primary reference is manifestly to that perpetual danger of the Hebrews, the temptation to turn back from the Gospel, with its spiritual order and its hopes of things not yet seen, to the outworn Dispensation, with its outwardly majestic circumstances of glorious ritual and imposing shows of polity and power. They would need again and again to open the soul's ears and eyes, and steadfastly to recollect (against all appearances) that we "*are come unto the Mount Sion,*" if they were to resist the magnetic forces which drew them back towards Sinai—and towards death. So they were to hear the

sweet voices of heavenly love, and festal life, and blood-bought covenanted peace, sounding from the true Sion, with joy indeed but also with holy dread. They were to *fear* lest they should “decline” them, lest sense should conquer faith, and the soul be lost under the mountain of condemnation after all. “For if they did not escape who on earth declined Him who spoke oraculous warning (*χρηματίζοντα*), much more shall we not escape, turning from Him who warns from heaven.” The contemner of the ban of Sinai fell “stricken through” the body. The “decliner” of the admonition to turn no more to the hill of doom, but boldly to climb the hill of peace, will fall stricken through the soul. That warning voice, which once shook the desert, has now promised (ver. 26),—for a promise, the promise of an eternal redemption, lies deep in that threatening (Hag. ii. 6)—that not earth only, but heaven is to yet feel His shaking, and once for ever when it comes. He “yet once more” shall work one vast “removing”; and then (ver. 27) a stability irremovable shall come in for ever. “The things that have been made,” the terrestrial and material “figures of the real” (ix. 24), are to pass away, never to return, in order that “the things incapable of disturbance” (*τὰ μὴ σαλευόμενα*) “may remain.” And what are these things? Nothing less than the spiritual, final, all-fulfilling truths and glories to which the “things made” served as preparation, type, and foil, but which themselves to all eternity shall know no successors, no “new order” through which God shall otherwise “fulfil Himself.” For what are they, in their inmost essence? They are the truths which spring always from the eternal Son and return always into Him; “the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.”

So let the disciples clasp their sublime privileges, and greatly rejoice—and also greatly fear to “decline” them, to surrender them, to treat them lightly. They “are in receipt (*παραλαμβάνοντες*) of a kingdom unshakeable,” for they have become the willing vassals of the eternal David of the true Israel, in whose kingship they too are kings, reigning over “all the power of the enemy.” But, for the very reason that they hold a royalty, and

such a royalty, let them address themselves to a life of adoration, and reverence, and awe, deep as that of the holy ones who, close to the throne above, veil their faces and their feet evermore with their wings, not in terror, but in a joy full of wonder and of worship. "Let us have grace," let us take and use the grace which in the covenant is ours,¹ and in it let us live this life. For it is to be a life all the while not of alarm and doubting, but of *grace*. Only it is to be lived as before Him who is (ver. 29) "consuming fire, a jealous God" (Deut. iv. 24), "jealous" against all "forsakers of their own mercy" (Jonah ii. 8), rejectors of His Son, even when they seem to fly for refuge to His law.

Thus the great concatenated passage concludes with one of the most formidable of Scripture utterances. But let us boldly gather peace and hope even from this word of fire. For what is the true message of the verses we have traversed, when we look back and sum them up? It is the glory, the fulness, the living richness, the abundant lovingkindness, the supreme and absolute finality, of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is Himself, the supreme and ultimate revelation of the grace and peace of God. And the fiery jealousy of the close, the warning that we shall lose our souls if we "decline" the blessed Son, what does it mean as to His Father's heart? That He so loves the Son, and so loves us, that He adjures us by all His terrors as well as all His mercies never to turn for refuge for one hour away from the ever-blessed Christ.



The Report of the Five Bishops on Vestments.—II.

BY THE REV. CANON NUNN, M.A.

THE purport or tendency—we must not say the "purpose," as all bias is disclaimed—of the Report of the five Bishops is to overthrow the Ridsdale Judgment.

That Judgment condemned the use of the Vestments as

¹ Cf. Rom. v. 1 : ἔχωμεν εἰρήνην—"Let us use the peace which is ours."