

THE HOLY GHOST AS DOVE AND FIRE.

ST. MATTHEW iii. 11, 16.

IN the first of these sentences we are shewn the action of the mystic Divine Breath upon the people, coming to them, as it should come, through Christ ; the aspect it would assume, the way in which it would conduct and exhibit itself, when imparted to them from Him. The second sentence describes the dealing of the same Divine Breath with the Christ Himself—its manner of proceeding and working in his case.

In the people, the presence and operation of the Holy Ghost, which He was destined to communicate, would be a baptism of fire ; in Him it was a dove-like brooding. It touched and entered the sphere of his soul, a gently nourishing, fostering, ripening influence ; but, in passing from Him to them, it would become quite another thing. Once touching and entering them, it would be found a fiercely disturbing and devouring element. They could not have it as He had it ; it could not be with them as it was with Him. *His* "dove" must needs be *their* "fire."

One is reminded of the difference between some new grand idea, or principle, in the mind of the originating thinker, and the same sent out by him among the multitude. It has visited *him* like sweet daybreak, like softly-streaming morning light, for which he had been waiting with upturned face and wistful eyes ; or it has

grown up within him by degrees, quietly, perhaps almost imperceptibly, like a plant under successive dews and nurturing airs, like grain of the field—"first the blade, then the ear, after that, the full corn in the ear." Out of many secret thoughts and questionings, and many patient tarryings, it has unfolded to him. He is suddenly, or gradually, possessed with it. It captures him in peace, without noise or striving. But so soon as it goes forth from him, accosting and arresting men here and there, it begins to be a source of storms: around it gather hot angry controversies, and oppositions of prejudice. It creates conflict and division, "setting a man at variance against his father," and filling hitherto tranquil households with agitations of dispute. All is unrest and tumult; and only through prolonged severe struggle with old notions, and traditions that strenuously resist its progress, and are slow, very slow, to succumb and die—only thus is it at length accepted, and established in the general mind. Not a few are the ideas which, silently begotten, and silently deepening and fructifying for awhile in lonely breasts, have gone out into the crowd, to make much uproar, and inflame exceedingly.

The Spirit that descended on Jesus like a dove was to become, and became, when breathed abroad by Him, a consuming fire.

Strangely different the action of the same thing in contact with different substances or natures! What the sun shall be, in its energy and effect, depends on what the sun shall find. If, in the garden, it open waiting buds or sleeping flowers, and draw forth from them locked-up treasures of loveliness and grateful perfume; smiting the clay-clods, it does but bake them into

stiffer drearier hardness, or, shining on the refuse-heap in hidden corners, exhale a reek of foul and noisome stenches. "What is one man's meat is another man's poison." We take the same article of food; but the individual organisms render its action antecedently uncertain, and produce, in the event, more or less diversity of effect. That which, in one, quietly and pleasantly nourishes, in another, deranges and defiles. We take the same medical drug; but the issue varies according to idiosyncrasy, which physicians in their treatment have always to allow for. The sleeping-draught, so called, has its character and quality determined by the system into which it passes. If in some cases it induces slumber, in others it may serve to fever and excite.

It is thus, too, in spirituals. The same scenes and incidents, the same environments, how dissimilarly they tell! When do any two persons receive precisely the same impression from a presentation of the same facts or ideas? What object, or subject, is there which, set before many minds, will yield a common mental result? What we shall greet in aught that approaches, depends upon whence we have come. The brightness, or dimness, of the candle of the Lord is in our own atmosphere. It is nothing that the heavens are opening above, until we know what eyes are open below. As are the eyes so will be the sheen, the glory and power of the revelation, and so will the seers be moved. When God lays his hand upon us, it is *we* who decide what our experience of it shall be.

But, now, what meant the difference which is portrayed for us in these two Verses, between Christ and the people in their several receptions of the Holy Ghost? Why, in its descent upon *Him*, was it the gentle

brooding of a dove? in its effusion upon *them*, the burning of a fire? In other words, why did it simply rest in Him, embracingly, with tender cherishings and succourings? and, in them, vex and afflict with painful searchings and consumptions?

May we not answer with a word, that in Him it encountered no sinful force, no mass of evil passion or unworthy disposition, to contend with; but only beautiful germs to develope, only right sympathies and aspirations to encourage, and direct, and intensify? Yes; it found in Him only that which was accordant and congenial; the Holy Child to be nursed and expanded into the Holy Man: nothing contrary to it, the withstanding of which would have struck out a flame; nothing to burn against, and burn up, in order to his perfecting; no false will or affection to be resisted by, and to resist, until it was conquered. The Spirit from above just lighted and spread its wings, and sat brooding upon the Divine simplicity of the whole-hearted Nazarene. Heaven could gather and glide into his soul without difficulty, without obstruction. He had not to be taken with violence; the angels of God ascended and descended upon Him unopposed and freely. He presented a smooth channel for the sacred stream, which never grew turbulent, or curdled into foam in his breast, against sullen thwartings of opposing rocks. It "came to its own" in coming to Him, and its own received it with open arms. True, it of necessity involved Him in struggle and suffering, by inspiring Him profoundly against the spirit and principles of the age in which He lived. While working in Him ardent longings to fulfil his mission and kingdom by attracting men to Himself, it led Him to see and feel,

more and more vividly, the wrongness of certain maxims and methods that offered themselves to aid Him in accomplishing what He desired, and that seemed to wear promise of aid; and compelled Him to reject them. He was driven of the Spirit into the wilderness, to be "tempted of the devil." Nor only is; it also made the falsehood and evil of the world on which He lived to be his daily burden and grief; wounding Him for our transgressions, laying upon Him the iniquity of us all. The more the heavenly entered into Him, and greatened and waxed within Him, the more, inevitably, the disorder and corruption of the earthly became his cross, until Calvary signified outwardly the culmination of his inward woe.

Yes, He had to endure in Himself a fiery baptism, as the result of the descent upon Him from above. But it was through his contact, thus Spirit-charged, with the bad element surrounding Him, that He suffered what He suffered; not through the contact of the Spirit with any bad element in *Him*. It met with nothing in Him to cause a painful flame; touching which it had to become a purging devouring fire. It abode upon Him like a dove brooding over its nest.

Yet, observe, it *had* to abide upon Him. Not without its inspiration could even the holy child Jesus be perfected. Even upon Him it was essential that the heavens should open with their enlightening quickening influences. Who is there, then, that does not need to be "born from above"? who does not need the action upon him of a greater than himself, to enable him to fulfil himself? The "little one" must be more than mother-nursed, or Nature-fostered, to become the

“strong nation;” angels must receive a charge over him, to bear him up in their hands. God must ever flow in, if we are to flow forth divinely. And He *does* flow in, to make us flow forth divinely. Whether or not we recognize the blessed influx, “the Spirit of God moves on the face of the waters.”

But for *us* to be baptized with the Holy Ghost, is to be baptized with *fire*. The existence within us of false tendency and proclivity makes it a flame. Once let it fall upon us, and, straightway, there is turmoil; straightway some hot work begins. Here is a man wholly at ease and quiet in a pleasant paradise—though it be a fool’s paradise of self-content and free self-gratification; but a breath from on high stirs in him at last, a breath of higher impulse and aspiration; and now a struggle sets in, in which the soul sways to and fro, and burnings of remorse and repentance are suffered, with daily self-refusings and self-crucifixions. The man is no longer at peace with himself, but in a great heat of controversy; no longer a tranquil universe, but a troubled conjunction of antagonisms. His life becomes, as the Scripture represents it, “a battle,” “a warfare.” A fire of discontent is kindled within him; there rages in him the flame of a conflict between the spirit and the flesh.

Hence, perhaps, the often less winsome and pleasing aspect of some God-driven soul in comparison with some godless worldling. The latter, concurring lightly with each impulse as it rises, rarely checking or denying himself, never worn with earnest solemn striving, or stained with tears of bitter mourning and lamentation for defeat, is therefore apt to impress us more agreeably at times than the former does. *He*, through

his frequent self-repressions and self-mortifications, may be wanting in something of a natural grace or charm that belongs to the other, just in consequence of the absence from him of such self-repressions and self-mortifications. A soldier in the midst of heroic fightings oft is not always the most attractive-looking object; yet infinitely more worth embracing, with his powder-blackened face and bespattered regimentals, than the spotless perfumed dandy on parade.

When Christ began of old to baptize with the Holy Ghost, it was a baptism of fire. And even so it is still. The stirring within men of the better self, of the Spirit from above, is invariably more or less with "confused noise and garments rolled in blood." Our God, when He touches us, is a "consuming fire." Not *out* of Christ, as one hears it explained sometimes, but *in* Christ; for from the God in Christ proceeds the Spirit, and where the Spirit breathes in human breasts there is burning.

He who is moved to aim loftily, to seek to live on high, above the ordinary level of the world's life, is setting out on what will be a toilsome and a sweltering road.

I saw a vision of a woman, where
 Night and new morning strive for domination;
 Incomparably pale, and almost fair,
 And sad beyond expression.

I stood upon the outer barren ground,
 She stood on inner ground that budded flowers;
 While, circling in their never-slackening round,
 Danced by the mystic hours.

But every flower was lifted on a thorn,
 And every thorn shot upright from its sands
 To gall her feet; hoarse laughter peal'd in scorn,
 With cruel clapping hands.

She bled and wept, yet did not shrink ; her strength
Was strung up until daybreak of delight :
She measured measureless sorrow toward its length,
And breadth, and depth, and height.

I saw a cup sent down and come to her
Brim full of loathing and of bitterness :
She drank with livid lips, that seem'd to stir
The depth, not make it less.

But as she drank, I spied a hand distil
New wine and virgin honey ; making it
First bitter-sweet, then sweet indeed, until
She tasted only sweet.

Then earth and heaven were roll'd up like a scroll :
The day had come that day.

But now, while the Spirit, which in Christ was as a brooding dove, is in common men a painful fire, a fire of purification through conflict and consumption, there is yet a difference in the cases of common men. In some, there is so much less that opposes, so much less of the false and the evil to prevail against than exists in others, that, compared with others, the action of the Spirit in them may be said to be as of a dove descending and lighting upon them, rather than the kindling of a fire. Their unwholesome propensities are less fierce and fewer ; they have less gross animalism to be fought with and overcome. Divinely touched, perhaps, in early life, before the nature had grown too fixed, or habit had acquired strength, their surrender is fluent and gentle, with no sharp pangs of remorse for the past, or tumult of resistance. It is with them a quiet gradual nursing and unfolding, rather than a rude breaking up and recreating. The Lord has only to carry *them* in his bosom, not to tread down and reduce them.

Our experience under the Spirit varies. It is not with some as with others. Let none, therefore, be disappointed or ashamed that they have never inwardly passed through what certain saintly men of their acquaintance report of themselves ; because they cannot speak with them of enlargement slowly gained by prolonged and severe conflict, of days and nights of spiritual agony, of having been

Heated hot with burning fears,
And dipp'd in baths of hissing tears.

There is *something* in the least worldened and the sweetest among us that is contrary to the Spirit of the Lord within us ; that involves, at seasons, some heat of conflict ; that has to be resisted and crucified, and causes us to groan, being burdened. Yet there are many with whom the presence and operation of the Spirit is less a baptism of fire than a dove-like brooding. They have known from the beginning but little of the pain of self-mortification. They can be loyal and true to their higher impulses, and are growing by degrees toward the likeness of the Perfect Man, without much sweat of struggle. It is well, however, for such to remember that with many it is not so ; that there are those whose comparatively little grace is the fruit of great and sore strivings, who have need to be always watching and fighting, that they may express what beauty they do ; that, meagre though that beauty be at the best, and sadly flecked and broken, it is won heroically, "through much tribulation," with secret heart-searchings and wrestlings, and with purgings of secret grief for failure, that men dream not of. It is well for us, whose upward path is smoother and easier, to remember this, if only that we may be ready to appreciate more warmly the

small attainments of some who seem to us far behind in the race, and to judge more leniently, more tenderly, their shortcomings and defects.

But the heavens open, and the Holy Ghost descends upon us all. We are all baptized with the same Spirit. The grand question for us is, How we are surrendering to its influence, and resigning ourselves to be borne on by it, and lifted up; what we have made and are making of those occasional Divine inflows and inspirations with which we are visited. For "who will not acknowledge," as one has asked, "that he has been carried at times whither he would not, and had nobler thoughts, and felt higher aspirations, than the course of his ordinary life seems to allow? These came to him, he could scarcely tell how; sometimes with outward and apparent cause, and sometimes with none, 'the wind blowing where it listed;' but they were the most important moments of his history for good or for evil, the critical points that have made him what he is, either as he used or neglected them." Let us each take heed, then, that we "receive not the grace of God in vain."

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THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH HEARERS.

ST. MATTHEW vii. 24-27; ST. LUKE vi. 47-49.

THE subject suggested by these solemn sentences, which form the conclusion of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, is one in connection with which the value of a synoptical method of studying the Gospels is very apparent. There is reason to fear that it is also one in connection with which that method is too often neglected. We are all accustomed to turn to the First