

THE EVIDENTIAL VALUE OF MIRACLE.

It is reported of the philosopher Spinoza that he once declared himself willing to profess Christianity if only he could be convinced of the raising of Lazarus. I do not know whether the story be truth or fiction; but in any case it has been often repeated both by believers and unbelievers in the Christian Creed, as if it represented the reasonable utterance of a thoughtful and serious man. The logic has been supposed, on all hands, to be quite rigorous. If the Founder of Christianity were able to work miracles, then He must have been what He represented Himself to be; if, on the other hand, we can never be sure that His miraculous works were really observed while He was on earth, then we must not accept the Son of Mary as the Son of God. Miracles have been proposed as the principal credentials of the Christ; the main body of Christian apologetics has been devoted to their defence; and it has not infrequently been supposed that if men could be persuaded that the evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus was logically complete, they would, with one consent, offer Him their allegiance as their Lord and their God. Some such assumptions as these underlie the English theology of the 18th century. Butler, with hardly less qualification than Paley, takes miracles to be the appropriate proof of revelation. And, although Butler was far too wise to believe that men's conduct is ever entirely regulated by their speculative beliefs on nice points of doctrine, or on complicated questions of historical fact, yet his successors have often expressed themselves as if they thought that our belief in the Fatherhood of God, and our hope of everlasting life had no other foundation than the miraculous works of Jesus Christ.

Within the last ten years it has seemed more than once as if the reaction against these opinions were likely to go

very far indeed. Nothing is more remarkable than the complete repudiation of what is contemptuously described as "eighteenth century theology"; and it is proclaimed with emphasis, if not with authority, that miracles have very little to say to doctrine, that their evidential value is very trifling, and that, in any case, we do not believe in Christ because we believe in miracles, but that we believe in miracles because we believe in Christ.

There is a preliminary question, which it may be necessary to resolve, before we attempt the reconciliation of these two conflicting theories of miracle. It is worth while to ask, What, as a matter of fact, is the function assigned to Christ's miracles in the Gospels? When we have determined that, we shall be the better able to define their proper position in modern apologetics. However miracles may ultimately be explained, and whether or not they can be explained at all, it is plain that they occupy a very large place in the life of Christ as set forth in the New Testament. They are described as Christ's *works*, as His *signs*, as His *powers*; they are, certainly, more than the credentials of the Great Prophet. They are, many of them, symbols of grace, tokens of the love of God, signs of Him who, as the Collect says, "shows His almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity." That ought not to be forgotten; it is not likely to be forgotten. But we ought not entirely to overlook the value which is assigned to them, in an *evidential* point of view, by Christ and His Apostles.

1. First, then, they are not necessarily convincing; they do not compel belief. So it was sternly and gravely said to Dives in the parable, *If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.* There are certain forms of unbelief which, far from being affected by the proof that a miracle was worked in the past, would not be affected by a miracle worked here and now. There is such a thing as a man

hardening his heart against the acceptance of anything which he does not wish to believe. He has eyes, but he sees not, and will not understand. The thing is so common in every-day experience that it hardly needs illustration. A man thinks ill of his neighbour, and *nothing* will convince him that he is wrong in his suspicions. Or another does not wish to abandon his careless habits of life, and he deliberately neglects the repeated testimony of his friends as to their inevitable consequence. You cannot convince a man of anything against his will. There is a kind of moral and spiritual callousness which resists all invitations to pure and godly living as simply irrelevant and inappropriate. So it was in the story with the Five Brethren of Dives. They were in a fair way of going to hell; but not even a miracle would have turned them aside from the path they had chosen. The spiritual world lay so entirely beyond the horizon of their interests, that the true significance of a message—a visitor—from that world would not have been perceived by them at all.

There is a spiritual inertia which no miracle could disturb. And this is illustrated more than once in the history of the Gospels. The miracles of Christ did not always win men's allegiance, or inspire them with belief in His claims. *Though He had done so many signs before them, yet they believed not on Him*, writes St. John.¹ And, again, how instructive and how true to human nature is the account of the raising of Lazarus! *Many therefore . . . which beheld what He did, believed on Him. But some of them went away to the Pharisees, and told them the things which Jesus had done.*² They accepted the fact that a miracle had been worked, but they did not therefore admit the claims of the Christ. And so, when the scoffing priests at the Crucifixion cried out in hate, *Let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him,*³ it is extremely

¹ St. John xii. 37.² St. John xi. 45, 46.³ St. Matt. xxvii. 42.

unlikely that their scorn would have been suddenly converted into worship if they had been taken at their word.

The evidence of a miracle, then, is not irresistible; it will not carry conviction of the truth of the message, or the authority of the prophet, to one who is unwilling to be convinced. It does not force assent. So it was in the first century; so it is in the nineteenth. Paley's "proofs" are absolutely beside the point to one who is not serious in his quest for a Deliverer from sin.

2. None the less it has always been popularly believed that a miracle has a power of conviction which no ordinary preaching can have. *If one go to them from the dead, they will repent*, said Dives. He was wrong, for his brothers were past conviction. But had they been less abandoned in the ways of sin, the warnings of one who had returned from the unseen world to speak to them *might* have roused them from their spiritual torpor.

And the miracles of the gospel are repeatedly said to have arrested the attention and quickened the faith of those who witnessed them. *What manner of man is this*, asked the wondering disciples, *that even the winds and the sea obey Him?*¹ *Depart from me, for I am a sinful man*, said St. Peter in awe and adoration, as he recognised that the unexpected command, *Let down your nets for a draught*, had been prompted by superhuman wisdom.² The result of the first miracle of all is thus described by the Evangelist: *This beginning of His signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed on Him.*³ And not only His chosen companions were impressed by these works of power and pity; the curious and fickle multitude were aroused to admiration by the mastery over man and nature which was one of the signs of the Christ. After the feeding of the Five Thousand they would have

¹ St. Matt. viii. 27.

² St. Luke v. 8.

³ St. John ii. 11.

made Him a king.¹ On another occasion we read that *many believed on His Name, beholding the signs which He did.*² And the raising of the widow of Nain's son was followed by a great outburst of popular favour. *Fear took hold on all, and they glorified God saying, A great prophet is arisen among us; and God hath visited His people.*³ And this report concerning Him went abroad throughout the country.

But all this, it may be said, only shows that ignorant and unthinking people are impressed by miracle, or by what they take to be miracle, because they do not know better. It does not show that the Galilæan peasants rightly interpreted the intention of Jesus in these acts of mercy, or that they derived from His signs the lesson which He desired them to learn. This evidential function of miracle occupies, it is urged, but a very secondary place in the discourses of Christ Himself.

Here is the point of real consequence. Christian theology must, in the last resort, fall back on the words of Christ. And I cannot but think that those who make little of the miraculous in the earthly ministry of Jesus have overlooked the language which He used about His "signs," His tokens of power and of wisdom. *The very works that I do, He declared, bear witness of Me.*⁴ *That ye may know, He said when the palsied man was brought to Him, that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, I say unto thee, Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thy house.*⁵ The healing of the sick was the credential of His claim to be the pardoner of sin. When the tidings reached the disciples that Lazarus was dead, He said that it was well, for the miracle of his recovery would be the greater "sign." *I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe.*⁶ He rebuked the greedy multitude because

¹ St. John vi. 15.

² St. John ii. 23.

³ St. Luke vii. 16.

⁴ St. John v. 36.

⁵ St. Mark ii. 10, 11.

⁶ St. John xi. 15.

they followed Him for what they might get, and not because of the miracles which had shown Him for what He was. *Ye seek Me, not because ye saw signs, but because ye ate of the loaves and were filled.*¹ He upbraided the cities wherein most of His mighty works were done, because they repented not. *Woe unto thee, Chorazin ! woe unto thee, Bethsaida ! for if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon which were done in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.*² The witness of St. Peter was true, and it was in entire agreement with our Lord's own teaching : *Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God unto you by mighty works and wonders and signs.*³ And although St. John specially notes that *many other signs* were done by Jesus which are not recorded, yet *these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God ; and that believing ye may have life in His name.*⁴ This evidential function of miracles was not merely an accidental result, brought about by the credulity of the contemporaries of Christ ; it was, if we are to trust the Gospels, a function which miracles and the record of them were to discharge throughout the Christian centuries.

3. We have seen that miracles do not compel a reluctant assent. We have also seen that when they have taken place, it is no mark of piety or of intelligence to disregard their evidential importance. But it must be remembered, further, that Christ steadily refused to work them to gratify a curiosity which was merely speculative. The leprous, the blind, the deaf were healed ; but again and again they were bidden to keep the secret of their deliverance. *Tell no man,* is His word of dismissal.⁵ He did not desire a discipleship which would be attracted by marvel only. Herod *hoped to see some sign done by Him ;*⁶ but no sign was

¹ St. John vi. 26.

² St. Matt. xi. 20, 21.

³ Acts ii. 22.

⁴ St. John xx. 31.

⁵ St. Matt. viii. 4, ix. 30 ; St. Mark viii. 26, vii. 36.

⁶ St. Luke xxiii. 8.

wrought. The scribes and Pharisees sought a sign in like manner, and He answered with indignation, *An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of Jonah the prophet.*¹

To demand such signs, as if we had a right to claim them of the Christ, is always indeed a mark of an immature faith; the allegiance which is gained by their display, although it may be true allegiance, is a lesser thing than the faith which is enkindled by a patient following of the great Master. *Believe Me*, He said on the eve of His Passion to those who knew Him best, *Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me; or else believe Me for the very works' sake.*² It is better to accept Him on such grounds than not to accept Him at all; but that is not the highest stage of Christian discipleship. He rewarded the faith of the man who begged Him to hasten to the sick-bed of his dying child, who feared that He would be too late; but He said to Him in sorrow, before He spoke the words of healing and of power, *Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.*³ He did not refuse to give the doubting Thomas the proof for which he asked, but He reminded him that there was a higher, a more spiritual stage of faith which he had failed to reach. *Because thou hast seen Me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed.*⁴

What is the lesson of the miracles of Jesus for ourselves, men of a later age, born into a world whose laws we understand so much better than was possible for the saints or the sinners of the first century? It is probable that we shall hear very much less in the future about the impossibility of miracle than our fathers did. We know something now of the vastness and complexity of nature. We may

¹ St. Matt. xii. 39.

² St. John xiv. 11.

³ St. John iv. 49.

⁴ St. John xx. 29.

be entirely convinced that it is governed by laws and not by caprice ; but we have learnt to be modest in claiming finality for our definitions of those laws. Quite possibly the miracles of the Gospel may be all susceptible of what we call " natural " explanation, for He whose work they were is Himself the Author of nature and the Source of its teeming life. But however we may explain them, we cannot explain them away without relegating the Jesus of the Gospels to a shadowland of myth and legend, which must soon cease to influence our serious thoughts. It is probable that the evidential value of a recorded miracle is not now what it would have been in the first century, or indeed in any century from the first to the eighteenth. This is, perhaps, not altogether a matter for regret. Men have learnt—and it is well that they should have learnt—to look beyond the sign to the thing signified, and to lay stress upon the latter rather than upon the former. So far, well. But to assert that the inference from the " sign " to the superhuman Power and Wisdom of Him who granted it is always an illogical inference, is to adopt canons of logic which are not only at variance with the consent of Catholic antiquity, but with the theology of the Gospels and with the words of our Lord.

No doubt, different minds will remain to the end differently affected by the simple records of these signs of the Christ. They will not convince us of His mission, of His present power to help and to console, if we begin by scrutinizing them and the evidence for them for the sole purpose of gratifying our intellectual curiosity. Nor will they seem very significant to us, if we have not schooled ourselves to obey those voices of truth, of purity, of righteousness, which are ever, through God's mercy, ringing in our ears. *If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.* But to him who is struggling, however falteringly, to follow in the steps of the world's

Master, these long past signs of His power and His pity will seem to be reflected in the grace which He still offers to those who have their faces set towards the heavenly way. They will no longer seem a cruel tax upon faith; they will be recognised as the signs of a Deliverer who can now as of old deliver from all that is base and cowardly and impure. And though we may not see them with our outward eyes, yet we are content that it should be so. The strongest faith seeks no sign, for it has the assurance of personal devotion, of grace given and received. We shall seek no sign, but the sign of the power of the risen Lord, who left that parting legacy of beatitude to His Church, *Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed.*

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THE FUTURE OF THE KINGDOM.

A GREAT deal has been made of the distinction between two conceptions of the Kingdom which some find in the teaching of Jesus. On the one hand, a certain class of writers hold that during the earlier period of His ministry Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God as a present good to be consummated in this world. On the other hand, stress is laid on the eschatological nature of the Kingdom as a blessing to be bestowed in the future. Neither opinion gives a complete or correct interpretation of the gospel narratives. Jesus applies the term Kingdom of God to a condition of life partly present, but ideally complete only in the future, though His most frequent reference in the employment of the term is to the progress of the Gospel in this world. Indeed, except for a few obvious cases of what may be called the transcendental Kingdom, we are safe in interpreting it of the life of the Christian society here on earth.