

ARTICLE IX.

SAVONAROLA AND JESUS:

A COMPARISON AND ITS SUGGESTIONS.

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It would not, I think, be difficult to secure the assent of all who are acquainted with history to the assertion that there have been few men, if any, better fitted to serve as a touchstone by which to test the life of Jesus than the great Florentine preacher and martyr whose character and work have so fascinated the world,—Girolamo Savonarola.¹ “No one in history,” says Emilio Castelar, “personifies and represents with better right that new birth of the religious spirit presented in the gospel of Christ.”² “His absolutely blameless moral character,” says Dean Milman, “his wonderful abilities, his command of all the knowledge of his time, his power of communicating his own holiness to others, even his rigid authority as regards the great doctrines of his church, who will impeach?”³

There is much in the histories of the two to suggest comparison. Both were teachers; both, reformers; both for a time won support and commanded popular approval, but ultimately lost it; both died a violent death at the hands of those whom they were trying to save. The similarity of character and aim is still more marked than that of outward circumstance. There was a certain elevation of

¹ Since writing this article it has come to my notice that Alfred Austin, in the preface to his poem “Savonarola,” has suggested the comparison between Savonarola and Jesus.

² Contemporary Review, Vol. ii. p. 459.

³ Quarterly Review, Vol. xcix. p. 1.

spirit in Savonarola, an intensity and devotedness of aim, a colossal moral force, which has characterized few men in the same degree. He is one of the highest peaks in the mountain ranges of humanity. Around him, during his life, the storms of moral conflict gathered and raged, as they did around Jesus; and upon him, as upon Jesus, fell the clear sunlight of subsequent approbation,—both storm and sunshine proving exaltation of aim and greatness of character.

It will be necessary, for the purpose in view, to assume acquaintance, if not familiarity, on the part of the reader, with the facts of the life of Savonarola. Even thus we can touch, within the compass of this article, only the leading points of resemblance and contrast between the monk of Florence and the man of Nazareth.

PREPARATION.

In both lives there was ample time for preparation before the hour of public committal and action. This time was, however, spent by them in very different employments and amid contrasted surroundings. The home of Savonarola was one of wealth and culture; that of Jesus, one of comparative poverty. In the early years of Jesus there was a contact with toil, with the common tasks and realities of humble life, which Savonarola did not have. During the period in which Jesus was working at the bench and engaged in wholesome household duties, with the Old Testament for his text-book, Savonarola was leisurely studying Aristotle, and observing with a premature, though righteous, cynicism the gay vanity of the life of the Italy of his day. When Savonarola, disgusted with the life of Ferrara, in which, according to his own description, "he is happy who lives by rapine and feeds on the blood of another, who robs widows and his own infant children, and who drives the poor to ruin," left his loving

home and entered the monastery of Bologna, he had an intensely earnest, but not entirely just, conception of humanity. When Jesus came down to the Jordan to be baptized of John, he was presumably in profound sympathy with the courageous and uncompromising denunciations of evil which John was making, but he seems to have had a certain broader and deeper understanding of the reality of human goodness and the possibilities of human renewal. Savonarola, like John the Baptist and Elijah, was less conscious than was Jesus that there were yet knees which had not bowed to Baal. This difference between the boy of Nazareth and the boy of Ferrara can hardly fail to impress one as the two linger before his mind,—a difference which goes below training and surroundings to nature and character. There is a certain halo of faith, holiness, completeness, which encircles the youth Jesus that does not fall upon the young Savonarola.

WORK.

When we compare the work of these two, in the manner in which it was taken up and fulfilled by each, we find a striking similarity.

The reluctance, humility, self-distrust, with which the Dominican monk, now removed to San Marco in Florence, took up the function of preacher, was like the filial obedience, accompanied by a deep inner conflict, which marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Both were led by the Spirit of God. As preachers, there is much in Savonarola to remind one of Jesus. Of the latter it was said, that "he spoke with authority, and not as the scribes." The power of Savonarola lay in the same self-forgetful reliance upon truth as against form. He swept his audience away with him in a torrent of impassioned eloquence. But while his preaching was more intense and energetic than that of Jesus, it was less profound and universal. It was not so

didactic, so full of idealism, so replete with wisdom and suggestion. It did not open illimitable vistas of truth as did that of Jesus. At times, it is true, the great Florentine touched with a master hand some of the deeper chords of the religious life, as in his noble sermon on prayer; but as a rule his discourses consisted of fiery and majestic denunciations of vice and worldliness.

In his understanding of men and his power of dealing with them, Savonarola, for the most part, displayed a strength and self-restraint of the highest quality. His conduct toward Lorenzo di Medici was like that of Jesus toward Herod, in courage and dignity. He loved Florence with the same deep affection which Jesus showed for Jerusalem. The righteous indignation which Jesus expressed toward the corruptions of the Jewish Church Savonarola poured out upon the Church of Rome, and at first, perhaps always, with equal disinterestedness. When Charles of Anjou came down upon terror-stricken Florence like a storm-cloud, the Prior of San Marco took command of the situation, and mediated between king and people in such manner as an Old Testament prophet might have done.

Not until he had won complete sway over the city did Savonarola show any sign of weakness or selfishness. The temptation which Jesus, with a marvelous strength and sagacity, put from him, Savonarola yielded to—the temptation to formulate measures, to dictate details, to define policies; in a word, to exchange the office of a spiritual teacher for that of a temporal ruler. When the eager populace, at the acme of Jesus' success, on the day of the feeding of the multitude, besought him to become their king, he refused, definitely and absolutely, and thus retained his spiritual kingdom. When, at the summons of all Florence and the demand of a need which no one else seemed able to meet, Savonarola turned his pulpit into the throne of a dictator, though in the name of God, he lost forever his spiritual authority.

RESULTS.

Compare the results of these two lives. What was accomplished by Savonarola in his eight-years' ministry? For a short time Florence was lifted to a dizzy height of virtue and spirituality; and then the vision faded, and she sank back to her former low level. What was accomplished by Jesus in his three-years' ministry? A mustard seed was planted which grew into a great tree whose branches now cover the earth. Their methods were radically different. Jesus had the insight to let all prospect of temporal power and immediate success go, and trust the establishment of his kingdom to a few chosen and educated followers,—and succeeded. Savonarola kept his followers in the position of mere devotees, and threw himself into the task of founding a republic of God by means of his own herculean efforts,—and failed. It is true that he achieved a temporary success, and has left also the fine inspiration and example of a noble and consecrated life, through which he, being dead, yet speaketh; but, as respects the accomplishment of any permanent and progressive movement, his life was well-nigh fruitless. His work in Florence seemed to be blotted out at his downfall. His attempt to purge the church of her iniquities was equally unsuccessful. The claim which was at one time made for him, to a place among the precursors of the Reformation has been entirely abandoned. The plan to which he resorted, of calling a General Council to depose the infamous Alexander VI. from the papal seat, while actuated by a purity of purpose, and characterized by a boldness worthy of Luther himself, was not at all a revolt from the church. Moreover, it was a resort to the employment of devices of which the greatest men cannot avail themselves without a compromise of their greatness. Jesus involved himself in no plot to put down the ecclesiastical corruption of his day, but simply spoke the truth.

concerning it with absolute fearlessness, and trusted it to do its work.

This resort to device, reliance upon means, rather than upon truth and right alone, was one of the fundamental defects in the life of Savonarola. It is seen also in his appeal to miracle. Much allowance should be made for him in this regard, it is true, on account of the credulity of the age in which he lived,—a credulity which he too manifestly shared. But when such allowance has been made, it is all too plain that he showed weakness both in the emphasis which he put upon miracle and the character of the miracles to whose authority he appealed. Even Villari admits this: "Indeed, the strangest side of his character and most noteworthy point of his career lies in the fact that the ruler of an entire people, who filled the world with his eloquence, who was one of the most original philosophers of his age, and who had given Florence the best form of republican government it had ever possessed, should almost boast of hearing voices in the air, of seeing the sword of the Almighty, of being the ambassador of Florence to the Virgin. . . . It is undoubtedly a solemn thing to see how inexorably Providence humbles even the greatest men, and reminds us that they were mere mortals, by counterbalancing their highest faculties by utterly human weaknesses."¹ Whatever may be said concerning the relation of miracles to the life and work of Jesus, certain it is that, in the accounts which we have of his use of miracles, there is a sanity and strength which contrasts strongly with the weakness of Savonarola in this respect. It was by the recoil of this appeal to the evidence of miracle that Savonarola at last fell.

The famous "trial by fire" is the riddle of the biographers of the great Florentine preacher. Why did he not accept a challenge that was so like the one which he had

¹Savonarola and his Work (translation, Scribner and Welford), Vol. i. p. 322.

himself offered a short time before? Had his faith in miracles given way? Was he afraid to risk the ordeal? Had he come to feel that God had larger uses for him which he must not hazard by entering the flames? Or did he plan, from the moment that he consented to allow the devoted Fra Bartolomeo to represent the Order, to frustrate the awful proceeding? In any case he fails to command entire approbation at this crisis in his career. The light dims about him; he bears himself less heroically. Perhaps the wisest, most charitable, and discriminating word which has been said of him in this connection is that with which George Eliot closes her penetrating study of his motives: "In the stress and heat of the day, with cheeks burning, with shouts ringing in the ears, who is so blest as to remember the yearnings he had in the cool and silent morning, and know that he has not belied them?"¹ Yet no such hour of weakness or wavering has been pointed out in the life of Jesus.

MARTYRDOM.

The crucial test of a life is, after all, how it bears final defeat. What countenance is one able to show when the lofty objects for which he has striven fall in ruins, bearing him with them in their wreck? The greatness of Savonarola was vindicated in his martyrdom. The agony which he passed through was colossal. He went down into the very depths of anguish, physical and spiritual. The experience of Jesus which uttered itself in the cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" was for him a momentary one; but for Savonarola, apparently, prolonged through many days of physical torture and nights of mental anguish. For a time it seemed as if his faith had left him. Torture elicited from the bruised and suffering man confessions which bore their nature upon their face, and had to be repressed after publication. The testimony of

¹ Romola, chap. 64.

the Signoria to the pope is, on the whole, conclusive as to the brave conduct of Savonarola in these fearful days: "We have had to deal with a man of the most extraordinary patience of body and wisdom of soul, who hardened himself against all torture, involving the truth in all kinds of obscurity with the intention either of establishing for himself by pretended holiness an eternal name among men, or to brave imprisonment and death."¹ Through *his* Gethsemane, *his* trial, *his* ignominy, *his* Calvary, this noble martyr went,—not so calmly as Jesus, but in such a manner as to prove his faith, his integrity, his greatness. And yet, here again we find a gulf of separation between these two. The discipline of affliction, the approach of death, wrought in Savonarola that which is, after all, perhaps the chiefest evidence of human greatness—the spirit of penitence. With that poor maimed right hand that was left him he wrote in his cell a commentary upon the Penitential Psalm. "God placed thee in the midst of the people even as if thou hadst been one of the excellent. In this way thou hast taught others and hast failed to learn thyself. Thou hast cured others; and thou hast been thyself diseased. Thy heart was lifted up at the beauty of thy own deeds, and through this thou hast lost thy wisdom, and art become, and shalt be to all eternity, nothing. . . . After so many benefits with which God has honored thee, thou art fallen into the depths of the sea, and after so many gifts bestowed on thee, thou, by thy pride and vainglory, hast scandalized all the world."² The confessed consciousness of sin, not toward men but toward God, at such a time, by such a man, is a touching token of that humility which belongs only to the very noblest of men. It discloses to us how really great a man Savonarola was. Why was it that no trace of such a consciousness of imperfection appears in the words or conduct of Jesus, as he stood under the shadow

¹ *The Makers of Florence*, p. 341.

² *Romola*, chap. 71.

of the cross? We are driven to this alternative: Either the Nazarene was less sensitive to the nature of holiness, less noble a man than the Florentine; or else he was so much purer and greater than he that the difference will not admit of classing them under the same category. Savonarola went to the flames bravely, submissively, trustfully, but went as a *defeated penitent*. Jesus went to the cross with the same meek heroism, but went as a *victorious Son of God*.

Thus our comparison reveals quite as much of contrast as of similarity. It is inevitable. The result would undoubtedly be the same were we to place any other character beside that of Jesus. We stand in admiration, almost in awe, before Savonarola. The distance between him and ourselves seems very great. But even greater seems the distance between him and Jesus.

There have been many noble and beautiful lives in the history of the race, but when one comes to place them beside Jesus, in the effort to rival his perfection, a sense of the incongruity of the attempt (which is not due to superstition) seizes one. Comparison is of value, but it must be comparison that is willing to recognize the possibility of contrast.

Neither pre-Christian nor ante-Christian, martyr, teacher, philanthropist, statesman, has been made to bear out the assumption of equality with Jesus. The only kind of comparison which they serve acceptably is that of interpretation.

The same is true of humble lives, in their relation to Jesus, as of great. Many obscure lives have exhibited a beauty and unselfishness beyond which it seems impossible to go. But obscurity nourishes blossoms which publicity would quickly blast. The ultimate test of character is exposure to the moral perils which go with the fulfilment of a great and difficult mission to the world. It is to such

alone that the severest strain upon character comes. It is only as "interpreters" of Jesus that the pure and noble, be they great or humble, can be justly estimated and understood. And it is among such that the great preacher and martyr of Florence must be ranked.

If a comparison such as we have made results in disclosing more clearly the unrivaled perfection of the character of Jesus, there is another inference, also, which may be drawn from it. It is this: Jesus may be interpreted, though not necessarily contained, in terms of humanity. In fact, it is only as he is interpreted as a man that it is possible to understand his life and character. To that conclusion, I believe, Christendom is more and more gravitating. The habit of approaching him from the supernatural standpoint reveals God, brings redemption to the soul, but it does not reveal Jesus. It is the Jesus of history whom the world is now trying, with an enlightened earnestness, to understand. And it is impossible to understand him except as he is interpreted by human standards. It was thus, be it remembered, that the apostles came to know him. To all of them, save to Paul, he was at first only Rabbi, a man gifted with the power of teaching, or at most and dimly Messiah, and not, as such, in any sense supernatural. It was a long time before they thought of him as divine. It was as a *man* that he won their affection, commanded their loyalty, developed their faith. If he had presented himself to them as a supernatural being, the result would probably have been to make their contact with him distant, strained, ineffectual; but, coming to them as a brother, he won such sway over them by the power of human sympathy and affection and wisdom as bound them to him by ties that neither his death nor his glorification could break.

Yet, after the disciples had companied with Jesus until they had come to recognize his power and perfection,

glimpses of a something in him transcending the human began to flash upon them. Peter divined it as early as Cæsarea Philippi. John, after long years of meditation, found it the only key by which he could interpret the heart of Christ. From the human Jesus the apostles went on to the divine Christ. What was the mental process? Was it an imaginative one, like that deification of the hero with which we are so familiar in ancient mythology? Nothing more than a remote analogy can be found between the two processes. It was not character, but achievement, which led to the elevation of heroes into the ranks of the celestial beings, and the species of deification which they underwent did not bring them into fellowship with Perfect Holiness and Infinite Wisdom, but merely gave them a place in the hierarchy of a wretchedly inferior company of deities. The process by which the divinity of Jesus was established was very different. It was, rather, it seems to me, the growing conviction, on the part of the apostles, of the inherent separateness, not of moral goodness, but of such moral perfection as Jesus exhibited, from humanity, which led them to the conception of his divine nature.

The same approach to Jesus, through his humanity, will ultimately lead to the same conclusion now, as then. One can hardly come to an adequate and sympathetic knowledge of the Christ of history without feeling that with, and because of, his complete humanity, there is something that transcends it. "If our human categories are the conceptions that cover actual human existence, Christ's being fills and transcends them; he is all that they require, and infinitely more. They make room for sin, and moral ignorance, and ethical limitation in every direction, and the general sore embarrassment to which all human beings are subject. They make no room for complete holiness, absolute knowledge of moral obligation, utter ethical integrity, and the freedom of the perfect Son of God."

There is a strong impulsion from the humanity onward to the divinity. The soul that has seen the transfigured Jesus finds it difficult to confine him within the limits of humanity. If one persists in binding his thought of the Son of man to the bed of Procrustes, and insists that He must be human, wholly human, and nothing but human, he simply imprisons his own convictions, and mutilates the expanding conception of Him that enlarges with every fresh consideration of his transcendent character and personality.