

ART. V.—THE DEATH OF CHRIST.

IT may very well seem a strange thing that in the nineteenth century of the Christian era there should seem to be a necessity for insisting on the transcendent importance of the death of Christ in faith's view of God's gracious revelation to man. Yet it is undeniable that not a few hearts among us are being sore troubled at the setting in of streams of thought, the tendencies of which are more or less directly, more or less obviously, to depreciate (in some sense) this cardinal truth of our most holy faith. The claims of *scientific*, as opposed to the teaching of the so-called *popular*, theology are pressed upon us. And it is assumed that the unique value and the supreme position which has been assigned to the doctrine of the Cross must fall before a philosophical assimilation of Christian dogma, even if not before a more critical examination of the soteriology of the Bible. We are henceforth, it appears, to correct the faith of our forefathers, which looked too exclusively to the blessed effects resulting from this blood-shedding of the Son of God. Modern thought has found difficulties in the belief which regards these blessings as having any such necessary connection with death. It will be less difficult, we are told, and more scientific to direct the Christian faith to regard rather the doctrine of the incarnation as the great central doctrine of the Gospel. Let the death of the Cross hold a secondary place to the incarnation of Christ, and (so we are led to believe) a great gain will result; a great stumbling-block in the approach to Christianity will be taken out of the way of the advanced thinkers of a thoughtful age.

And it is not by looking in one direction only that the current of this tendency is to be observed. Something of very much the same result may be seen coming from quite another quarter, where a mistaken sacramental system is made to subserve erroneous views of the extension of the incarnation, and the Eucharistic renewing (in some sense) of the sacrifice of Christ is made to deduct something, in faith's view, from the full doctrine of the Cross of Christ.

Careful observers can hardly have failed to mark in this matter something which may remind the traveller of what he has seen in the neighbourhood of Geneva—the converging and uniting of streams of different origins, which, though they may keep their own banks, and show still their distinctive colours, are yet flowing in just the same direction, running their course in the same channel, and combining their separate forces to form one full river.

It would be very wrong to make light of the difficulties of earnest inquiring minds being led, or desirous of being led,

towards the truth. It is possible, indeed, that an error is not seldom committed in assuming that these difficulties are always to be credited to the exercise of intellectual vigour, and the determination to be bold and independent in following after only that which is true. But there is undoubtedly a claim upon our sympathies in the intellectual difficulties of those who are really desiring to believe, and to accept the true faith of God's revelation. In listening to that claim, however, there may be a temptation sometimes to make concessions of that which we are bound not to concede. We may very willingly part with, even though it may cost us much, inherited prejudices as regards the teaching of Scripture on matters which properly belong to the sphere of physical science; but we must ever earnestly contend for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints. And assuredly we must beware of listening to the voice which would bid us attempt to save a wreck of Christianity by casting overboard anything of that which gives to the Gospel its offence, but which also makes it to be the power of God unto salvation.

Reserving for future papers some considerations on the doctrinal bearings of the subject, let it suffice for us at present to have our thoughts directed to the prominence which is given to the death of Christ in the whole scheme of revelation as made known to us in the sacred Scriptures.

And here let it be remarked, at the outset, that it is in truth a very unscientific process, by anything like a minute examination of details, to draw away attention from a comprehensive view of the history of God's dealings with the human race as a whole. And it is scarcely less scientific to ignore the power of certain accepted truths so to light up the landscape that facts—the significance of which may have been before hazy or beclouded—may stand out in distinctness and prominence, like mountain peaks against the sky.

A simple-minded, illiterate Christian may thus be really following a far more scientific method in clinging tenaciously to a doctrine which he may have little ability to defend in controversy, than the subtle reasoner or the well-furnished theological disputant, who by learned and critical arguments would seek to despoil him of that which is to him as the pearl of great price, and which he has proved to be the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The principle we are insisting on may very well be illustrated by applying it to the very point in hand. We all accept the truth contained in the words, "The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." It is a truth which scarcely needs to be interpreted by the words of St. Peter: "As of a Lamb without blemish and without spot, who verily was foreordained before

the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last days for us." But certainly this truth, set before us so clearly towards the close of the Bible record, has power to light up the whole horizon of Revelation, and to make teachings, perhaps otherwise obscure, to stand out distinctly and in sharp outline, gilded as with the rays of the rising sun, bearing witness to the glory which is revealed in the death of Christ.

We have here set before us an aspect of the Redeemer as depicted from the beginning in the purpose of the Most High—even in the eternal purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will.

And let it be well observed that it is not one of the sons of men, but a *Lamb*, and a *slain* Lamb, which we here behold by the eyes of faith.

The view even of the true humanity of the incarnate Son of God—important and blessed as that view is—is here, assuredly, made subservient (we might almost say is sacrificed here) to the imagery which represents His atoning death.

Was this, indeed, the archetypal idea of Christ in the Divine economy before the worlds were ?

Then, certainly, the ideas brought out and educated in the minds of men by subsequent sacrificial teachings must have been intended to prepare the human understanding, in a school of Divine instruction, to receive and apprehend this idea, afterwards to be revealed as the true Divine idea, the idea (speaking after the manner of men) in the Divine mind, of the one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

And is it possible then, we ask, to refuse the claim of this truth to illumine the pages which tell of God's dealings with man in patriarchal and Mosaic and post-Mosaic times ? Shall we think it a scientific process, to take the microscope of our critical faculty to examine the details of these records in the dark, out of the light of this Divine and glorious truth ?

With this truth before us, who can doubt that sacrifice and sacrificial death must have had a Divine original ? If we can persuade ourselves that men were led to sacrifice by some impulse *from within*, some desire to acknowledge symbolically the death which was their due, and to seek reconciliation with God by, in any sense, offering death for death, then must not that inward instinct have been, in some sense, implanted by the Divine Spirit of truth ?

But it concerns us much more to observe how this truth sheds a clear light on the sacrificial narratives of early records of our race, and how in that light we can hardly fail to see their witness not only to the future atonement of Christ's death, but also to the *prominence* which that death should have in the faith of those who live in the light of Christ's Gospel.

“The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” Can it be that there is no witness to Him and His death in the firstlings of Abel’s sacrifice; in the sweet savour of Noah’s offering; most of all in the great lesson of the land of Moriah: “The Lord will see to it”—“the Lord will provide”; in the prophetic word of the patriarch, which takes the name “Jehovah Jireh” as its seal: “My son, God will provide a lamb for a burnt offering,” and in the sacrifice which, after taking the knife to slay his son, Abraham, in obedience to God’s voice of mercy, now offers up “in the stead of his son”?

This is a tempting subject to dwell upon in detail, but in these brief papers we must steadfastly adhere to our purpose of directing attention mainly to broad and general views of the subject before us.

For this reason we must not tarry now to enforce the testimony of the Paschal Lamb. We shall have occasion, indeed, to refer to this more particularly in a future paper. But for the present it must suffice to ask, with the inspired words before us, τὸ πάσχα ἡμῶν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἐτύθη Χριστός—Can we possibly suppose that there is here for us no witness to the Lamb of God—the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world—and no teaching of the stupendous importance of His death—the prominence in the Divine view, which should be also our view—of His saving passion, of His atoning blood-shedding?

So also as regards the whole Levitical system of sacrifice—as *a whole*, we must venture to affirm, without touching at all upon details, that in the light which shines upon it from the eternal counsel of God, and in that counsel from the Lamb slain, we must needs see—if we only look at it with enlightened eyes and through the glass of faith—teachings clear and distinct of the high and exalted place which in God’s revelation is assigned to the sacrificial death of Christ. “Almost all things are by the law purged with blood, and without shedding of blood is no remission.” We may be sure it is no truth of secondary value which in these words is set before us by the inspired writer.

But we are not to confine our view to the typology of the Old Testament. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; and prophecy, too, bears its witness to the same truth. We have the combined witness of type and prophecy pointing to the same object. And as our eyes follow their pointing we behold One—a Man of Sorrows, led as a lamb to the slaughter—on whom the Lord Jehovah has made to meet the iniquities of us all. And then looking back to the Lamb slain from the beginning in the everlasting purpose of God, we are sure that we have here a sure witness to the supreme importance for our faith of the death and blood-shedding of the Redeemer of the world.

In all this, it may probably be thought, we have only been

retailing simple and trite and obvious common-places. But our object in these papers is mainly to insist on the value—a value which is now too often depreciated—of truths which are simple, and teachings which are obvious, and which perhaps, just because of their simplicity and their elementary character, are in danger sometimes of being passed over or lightly regarded.

But in thus insisting on that which is trite and obvious, there is a further object in view. The truth of the Lamb slain is to be regarded in relation to another very obvious truth. We must insist upon it that it is in the highest degree unscientific not to take into account the connection between these two truths. And it is this connection which brings into view most clearly the prominence and importance of the death of Christ.

Man's death is a condemned death. Fallen man is a condemned being, condemned to death for sin; and we desire very strongly and earnestly to insist on the truth—we are sure it is a truth—that the death of Christ is to be viewed in the same view with the death of the sinner. And then this death of the sinner is to be viewed as something far more than the physical dying. What we commonly call death now is but the door—the door of passage into the awful realm and dominion of death and of him that hath the power of death—that is, the devil. Death *was* not the door only, but it included all that was beyond the door—all the awfulness of the judgment and condemnation, and the blackness of darkness, the terror of the region where the strong man armed kept his palace—the prison-house of the lost souls of men. Can there be—is there to be any deliverance from this terrible condition? How stupendous the importance of inquiry! Does not *all* for man depend on the answer to the inquiry? How all-important, then, the way of deliverance—if there be deliverance! What prominence must be due to the work by which deliverance comes!

And was there no connection between the death of the sinner man and the teaching of the sacrificial death of the innocent animal—the lamb without blemish, or the bullock without spot—which in a shadow was offered in death to take away the shadow of sin, and to make in a shadow a deliverance from death—an atonement for the sin of the offerer? It will hardly be seriously contended that no such connection existed. And, then, when we turn to the view of “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world,” shall we think it possible that there is no connection between His death—the death of the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world—and the death of the sinners for whom He died? It is in death that the salvation of the second man, the Lord from heaven, meets and lays hold on the ruin of the first man.

And if it be so, that in any sense His death was for deliver-

ance from our death—our death of judgment and condemnation; if the death which He willingly died for us stands so co-related to the death which has passed upon all men for that all have sinned, that the one is the loosing of the other; if it be so that “as it is appointed unto men once to die, and after the judgment, so Christ was once offered ~~to~~ bear the sin of many,” then assuredly we must place the death of Christ in a position of supreme prominence in our view of the Christian faith. Of necessity it must have importance and prominence in proportion as we realize, by the teaching of the Spirit of truth, the real sinfulness of sin, and the awfulness of the condition of fallen man condemned to death for sin—condemned with a real condemnation to all that is in death and beyond what we call death, in proportion as we have a true view of the terrible misery of man appointed once to die, and to die the death which is the death of judgment.

Truly it is from the standpoint of the conviction of sin, the knowledge of our earthly things, the earthly things of our death and condemnation, that we must learn to regard aright the heavenly things of our great salvation. Therefore said the word of our Saviour: “If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?” It is from the deep places of the valley of humiliation—of humiliation for sin—even from the lowlands of the valley of the shadow of death, that we can hope to obtain the clearest and the truest view of the lifting up of the Son of man upon the cross. And from this point of view we shall assuredly see it exalted—exalted in prominence, in the prominence of its true importance, the true importance of its bearing on the salvation of a perishing world.

Thus we are led on to the more direct teaching of the New Testament. We must be very brief. But we must begin by declining altogether to draw scientific distinctions between the teaching on this point of Christ and His Apostles, as well as between the testimony of one Evangelist and another. We are deeply impressed with the wonderful harmony, rather let us say the Divine unity, of the substance—the body of Christian teaching in the Bible, beneath the strange variety of clothing which it has received from the human element in many minds. We are persuaded that the Gospel according to Christ is also the Gospel according to Moses and Isaiah, and the Gospel according to St. Paul is also the Gospel according to Peter and John.

And then, as to the importance and prominence of the death of Christ in the scheme of Divine revelation in the Gospel, we will call St. Paul to bear witness in the name of all his brethren. And let it not be thought that St. Paul could make light of other doctrines of the Christian faith. In St. Paul's view there

was certainly no depreciation of the doctrine of the incarnation, no low view of the glory of the risen and ascended Saviour. In his teaching great was the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh; great, too, in his view, was the importance of the resurrection. "If Christ be not raised," he says, "ye are yet in your sins." And magnificent was his view of the ulterior results of the incarnation—the final triumph of the Redeemer, the glory to be revealed; the manifestation of the sons of God, when we, who have borne the image of the earthly, shall also bear the image of the heavenly; the deliverance of the whole creation from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. What, then, but the importance in faith's view of the death of Christ could have moved him to set it in a position of such prominence in his teaching? What else could have led him to declare, and to act up to his declaration, "I determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified"?

In this connection another consideration should be added of no small importance. It may be very briefly stated thus: That which is set before faith's view in the reception of the two holy Sacraments is not the incarnation, but the death of Christ.

As many as are baptized into Christ are baptized into His death, that they, through His death, may enter by a new birth into His life. Those who come to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper come to show the Lord's death, and to be made partakers, not of the flesh and blood of the life of His humanity in the days of His flesh (so understood, the flesh profiteth nothing), but of His body and blood as sundered in sacrificial death. It is His flesh as given for the life of the world, and His blood as shed for the remission of sins, which is the true *res sacramenti* in the Holy Eucharist. As Eve has her being from the wounded side of the first man in his deep sleep, so the Bride, the Lamb's wife, has her very being from the pierced side of the Second Man, the last Adam, even from the deadly wound of the death He died for her life. You may add to this, if you will, that the only memorial of Himself which Christ has left upon earth is the memorial of His death. He has left us no ordained remembrance of His incarnation, save as His incarnation is included in His passion, save as it is implied in the symbols of His body crucified and His blood outpoured for the sins of the world.

But we must hasten to advert to another consideration of great moment—one which appears to us to bring the greatest weight to bear on the matter before us. On one side and another we are hearing the mediæval question revived—If man had not sinned, would the Son of God have become incarnate? The testimony of Christian antiquity led up to an answer "No." The

voices of scholastic theology answered discordantly "Yes" and "No." The speculations of German mysticism declared the answer must be "Yes." We have no hesitation, however, in saying that, in view of "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world," the only answer to that question should be, "There are no *ifs* in the higher region of the eternal counsels of the Most High." But no doubt those who now ask the question, intending to suggest an affirmative answer, do so with a desire to lead our thoughts to ulterior results of the incarnation—results connected with the high destinies appointed for the Being created to reflect the Divine Image, and to share in the Divine dominion—results, in a word, which have to do with the dignity of man's high calling, rather than with the low estate of his fall. Now, we may very well admit all that is here pleaded for. Nay, more: we may very earnestly contend for the truth which is here set before us. But we must still more earnestly insist on this—that when all this has been admitted, it will only add force to the argument that, wherever the purpose of the incarnation is set before us in Holy Scripture, it is always connected, not with the exalted dignity of man's vocation, but with the ruin which has been brought on man's history by the work of Satan and of sin. Can we have higher evidence of the supreme importance of the death of Christ, of the prominent place it should occupy in the faith of the Christian Church?

There *are* ulterior results of the incarnation. There must have been, we may say, higher purposes, in some sense, in view when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. But when we ask of the Word of God for what purpose the Son of God came into the world, the answer always is one which directs our thoughts to His death, or to His work of undoing the workings of the Evil One. Is not His very name—His appointed name because He should save His people from their sins—a witness to "the faithful saying, worthy of all acceptation that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"? We are taught that His coming was to be the propitiation for our sins; that we might live through Him; to seek and to save that which was lost; to call sinners to repentance; to give His life a ransom for many; to break up the power of the lie in man's heart by bearing witness to the truth (the truth which, above all, is manifested by the Cross); to destroy the works of the devil; to reconcile all things to the Father; through death to destroy (bring to nought) him that had the power of death, that is the devil, and to deliver them who, through fear of death, were all their life-time subject to bondage. Have we here the answer from the oracles of God to the question, "Cur Deus homo?" Then, surely, we are not wrong in affirming that we have here a strange contrast—nay, rather a striking contra-

diction—to any *dictum* of modern scientific theology, which would declare, “Christ did not come into the world to die; He died because He came into the world.”

Why is it, we ask, that in answer to our inquiry, the ulterior purposes of the incarnation are never mentioned in Holy Scripture? Surely the answer must be one which will bear witness to the prominence, the stupendous importance, which in faith's view should attach itself to the redeeming death of Christ.

And is there no witness, we must ask, to the same truth in the prayer of Gethsemane, in the blood-drops of the agony, in the great cry of Calvary? Is there no testimony in the portents of earth and sky, in the darkness and the earthquake? Still more in the opening of the graves and the rending of the veil? Surely these are witnesses, whose voice, before silent, is bidden to tell of effects which result not from the incarnation of Christ, but from the death of the incarnate Son of God.

Here we must close for the present. In this paper we have aimed at nothing more than a sketch. And we are very sensible how imperfect a sketch has been set before the reader. Yet we cannot but regard it as sufficient—more than sufficient to show the subservience (in some sense) of the doctrine of the incarnation to the doctrine of the atonement, to show clearly the prominent position, the position of stupendous importance, which the death of Christ must ever occupy in the true faith of the Christian Church.

Assuredly they who, led by the spirit of truth, have learned the faith of the Apostles, have been taught like them to glory only in the Cross of Christ. And surely they who have learned to glory in nothing save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ will not marvel to behold in the heavenly vision “a Lamb as it had been slain,” and to hear in the new song around the throne the voice of those who say: “Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof; for Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed men to God by Thy blood, out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation, and hast made them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests.”

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