

ART. IV.—NOTES AND COMMENTS ON ST. JOHN XXI.

No. 1.

IN a short series of papers I propose to offer some simple expository comments on that brief but rich paragraph of Scripture, the last chapter of St. John's Gospel. Let me explain on the threshold that these comments will not make the smallest pretension to be the product of either critical labour or original inquiry. They will be very much what the theological teacher might give his students on a devotional occasion when the Greek Testament is in the hand, and is used with care, but altogether with a view not to criticism but to edification.

With this brief preface I offer a sort of paraphrase version of the opening lines of the chapter, such as might be given orally on such an occasion as I have supposed, and then proceed to remark on the first few lines :

After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples upon (beside) the sea of Tiberias; and He manifested Himself thus. There were together Simon Peter and Thomas, whose name means Twin, and Nathanael, from Cana, in Galilee, and the two sons of Zebedee, and other two of His disciples. Simon Peter says to them, I am going to fish. They say to him, We are coming with you too. They went out, and embarked in the boat; and that night they took nothing. But when daybreak was now come, Jesus came and stood on the beach (ἔστη εἰς τὸν αἰγιαλόν); the disciples, however, did not know that it is Jesus. So Jesus says to them, Children, have you not any fish? They answered Him, No. Then He said to them, Throw your net towards the right side of the boat, and you will find. So they threw; and now strength failed them (οὐκέτι ἴσχυσαν) to draw, such was the quantity of fish. So that disciple whom Jesus loved says to Peter, It is the Lord. So Simon Peter, hearing that it is the Lord, girded on his outer coat, for he was naked, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples now came with the smaller boat; for they were not far from the land, only about two hundred cubits off, dragging the netful of fish. So when they had disembarked, they see a coal-fire laid, and a dish of fish set at it, and a loaf. Jesus says to them, Bring some of the fish which you have just taken. Simon Peter got up (into the boat), and pulled the net up on the land, quite full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three. And although they were so many, the net had not been torn.

After these things. The interval is not specified. It may

have been now very near the day of the Ascension. But is it not more likely that it was not long after the confession of Thomas—say within the first three weeks of the Forty Days? One consideration speaks strongly for this; I mean, that the full and solemn restoration of Peter to the apostolic pastorate took place on this occasion. Surely this would not be delayed long after the Resurrection.

This appearance, we observe again, is in Galilee. Here is one of the places where St. John incidentally, and as it were covertly, agrees with the other Gospels. They record the command to the Apostles to meet the Lord in Galilee; he does not. But more fully than any of them John records the fact of their doing what was commanded. Now, the removal of the Apostles to Galilee came almost to a certainty soon after the Resurrection, soon after the close of the Passover-time. It is unlikely that anything but Passover obligations would keep them lingering in Jerusalem at all in face of that command and promise.

There then, in Galilee, they found themselves once more. There took place this blessed interview. There, with a company of some five hundred others, they met Jesus at that unnamed mountain (was it Tabor, or was it Hermon?) where He had appointed them. There very probably they saw Him many other times not recorded. And thence, before six weeks were over, they returned again to the City, to the upper room, and to the glorious farewell on the top of Olivet.

A partial veil, a haze of mysterious light, is drawn across this holy and most memorable period, the Forty Days. Notes of time here are scarce; intervals are wide and empty. How different is this from the season just previous, the Passion Week, in particular, where the diary is so full, so crowded! *Ὀπτανόμενος διὰ ἡμερῶν τεσσαράκοντα*, *Seen as by glimpses, at intervals, during forty days*, is St. Luke's account of the Lord Jesus now. Separate appearances are, especially by St. John, recorded with minute care; only the *disappearances*, except at Emmaus and in the Ascension, are never recorded. But the intervals are left without a conjecture, without a hint. There is no legendary unreality about this. Rather, under the alleged conditions, it is deeply truth-like.

At some time then undefined, but perhaps within a fortnight of the Resurrection, we find some at least of the disciples returned to Galilee. Seven are mentioned; but plainly more than seven were near, or it would not be specially noticed that these seven were "together."

There they were, in their old haunts, at their old work. We cannot know for certain under what conditions they were at that work. Had Peter returned to his home, as home? Had

James and John rejoined their father in his fishery? It would seem incredible. They were in Galilee because the risen Lord had bid them go there; and for the express purpose of "seeing Him." And He had already spoken words to them which showed with abundant clearness that their life's work was to be labour for the souls of sinners in His Name, and was soon to begin. With such a prospect they could not possibly go back, in the old way, to boats and nets.

So we may think of them as returned to Galilee and the lake filled with the expectation of Jesus, but meanwhile not therefore forbidding themselves a sojourn, a lodging, under old roofs and amidst old occupations. Their Lord's company and teaching in the past, while it had always tended to disengage them from the bondage of the things of time, had never for a moment tended to break their sympathy with the common life, and work, and affections of men. And they were all, in all probability, in the full vigour of young manhood, contemporaries of their Master. To await Him was blessed; but to await Him in indolence, in inaction, would have been for them unnatural.

How familiar to them, and yet how strangely different too, must the scenes and the life have been. Little more than a quarter of a year had passed since last they were there. But those few weeks were the turning-point of the history of man. A great change had come over even external conditions. There was no more the old eager and excited following about of a wonderful Leader. No longer did ever-growing Galilean multitudes throng to hear and to watch, and clamour to proclaim Him King Messiah. All this had now passed into total silence. For the time, perhaps, in the common thought of Galilee, His name had been already classed with those of Theudas and the Gaulonite Judas, exposed and ruined aspirants to the honours of Messiah. It was silent now on the mount where the Man of Nazareth had taught, and quiet in the sunny streets where He had healed the sick people, and very solitary on that eastern shore of the lake where He had expelled the fallen spirits, and had fed the multitudes arranged in their "parterres" (*πρασιαί*) of hundreds and fifties. Many a Galilean heart which had never seen below the radiant surface of the life of Jesus must yet have felt the profound difference. Air and earth and waters were the same; a glorious scene, glorious even now amidst comparative desertion. But the wonderful presence of the Prophet was gone, and gone (for the popular mind) into such a blank, such a gloom. Faint rumours of the Resurrection may have reached the Galilean villages, apart from anything said by the inner circle of disciples; but even these would be mingled with the Jewish lie which denied it. And we gather that the disciples themselves were not a little reticent about the Resurrection

beyond their own company till Pentecost arrived; so reticent indeed that their witness then broke evidently as a great surprise upon the people. The thoughtful Christian may surely find in this one of the *veri similia* of the Gospel narratives.

But to these disciples themselves meanwhile, in the secret soul, and in the private conversation, the familiar scenery would present another and far different change. Outwardly all was hushed, and as it were motionless; inwardly all was glowing and moving with new and glorious while infinitely solemn life. They had seen the Lord. They knew Him as alive for evermore. As yet doubtless they had taken in but little comparatively of the divine import of the Resurrection; but, at least—they knew the Lord as risen! The mangled Victim of the Roman cross was alive, alive eternally; sure to triumph now in the great issues of His will and work, sure to be glorified, sure to save, lead, rise and glorify *them*. However reticent about it, they must have begun already in their old Galilee to live the life of heaven. They were being already transfigured from the earthly to the heavenly mind. The glories of their native land and air would now be to them fair parables of the resurrection world, of an inheritance reserved in heaven. Above all, their thoughts now would be, as they were to be for ever, filled to overflowing with Jesus and His glory. The sight of Him in His Resurrection must indeed have been soul-possessing; the first deep draught drawn by mortal hearts at the unfathomed fountain of the absolute and finished redemption from guilt, sin, death, which is, and is to come, in Jesus Christ.

Thank God, that fountain is yet springing up unto life eternal, that discovery is ever making. For innumerable hearts to-day (and are not ours among them?) earth, in all its regions and climates, is lighted up from heaven, "because Jesus died and rose again; because the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, and we are in Him, the true."

In this Galilean scenery and sojourn, then, the Lord again manifested Himself to the disciples beside (*ἐπι*) the Tiberias lake.

"And He manifested Himself thus."

"There were together" the aforementioned Seven. Four then of the Eleven were absent. We have no hint of a reason why. But both the mention of the number and the absence of anxious explanation fall perfectly in with this wonderful photograph of details by one who saw.

They were together, very probably in Capernaum, in Peter's house, waiting for their absent but promised Lord, waiting it may be for several days. And now some untold passing thing suggests amidst the expectancy their old occupation. The

water is close by, and there lie the *πλοίου* and the *πλοιάριον* of the house, and the sky and the lake promise well. And in the thought of embarkation there would be no discord with thoughts of Jesus. In that boat He had sate; He had taught from its bench; He had slept with His head upon its cushion.

So the men, being together, go out together to their old acts and habits, feeling very possibly, just as young men now might feel, the curious interest of returning for a while to a disused exercise of strength and skill. They part themselves between the two boats; two taking the *πλοίου*, five the *πλοιάριον*. Such at least was the arrangement at the night's end. No doubt one little word of information from St. John, could we get it, would clear up what seems to us an unlikely distribution of numbers. As it stands, it is a detail of fact in the photograph.

Such was the party which embarked: Peter, still leading with the spirit and word of enterprise; Thomas, the self-conscious and self-asserting doubter no more, now indeed "together" with the rest; Nathanael (no born fisherman), the guileless and genuine Israelite, the man of secret prayer; John, the beloved, already finding it habitual to be at Peter's side; James, his brother, first of the company to go to the Lord through death, as John the last; and the other nameless two, whom we may, if we will, suppose to be Andrew and his fellow Bethsaidaan Philip. They were indeed together; in the house, on the water, and at length again on the other shore; and never again in the sense of inner union were they to be apart; working together on the world's tide with the net of souls, and sitting down at last together on the immortal strand around their glorified Lord Jesus.

It is of the essence of the Gospel to unite where it touches. It is obvious that the first disciples must have been scattered, in shame, disgust, suspicion, if the Lord had not risen from the grave. The Gospels show them in the act, as we trace the walk to Emmaus, and the conduct of Thomas. But a Saviour risen again (and HE *is* the Gospel) is indeed a magnetic force to draw around Himself, and to draw to, nay as it were, into one another, the utmost variety of human souls. A personal and recognised interest in His merits, and experience of His presence and His power, as we realize that ours is but one harmonious instance among countless others of the "reception of Christ Jesus the Lord," this does indeed draw hearts together. And we may be very sure that this sense of a blessed community will be intensified, not chilled, by the intensity of the individual's sense of peace and power in Christ.

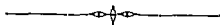
"*I am going to fish.*" So St. John records the simple words with which that memorable night's labour was begun, and then he tells us how they stepped into the boat, and then how the spring

evening and midnight were spent, as it seemed, in vain. "*That night they took nothing,*" "*and daybreak was now come.*" How brief and reserved it all is, till Jesus appears! So it is ever in the evangelical narrative. With Jesus, details come thick and fast—details which manifest Him. Here, the night is recorded in one line. We should like to know all about it; what was the look of the dark water, and the brightness of the stars above, and the stirring of the air, and the sounds on flood and shore. We should like to understand what filled the hearts of those seven men that night; whether they were fairly bent upon their work, and so quite alive to delays and disappointments, or whether expectations of a far higher sort were strong enough to let them "ply their watery task" inattentively. The former alternative is more probable, for the record seems to show them at early morning so unexpectant of the Lord's then coming to them, that it needed the miracle to awaken them to consciousness of Him. They act, as we then see them, just like men fatigued and bewildered by long and real but fruitless effort.

But as to all details, inward and outward alike, we are left without the least certainty. Imagination shows us the two spots upon the dusky waters, under the aerial gloom of the deep midnight. It lets us hear the fishermen as they call to one another, to enquire, encourage, or direct, in the tone and phrase of Galilee. Yet all this is mere reverie, and we do well to remember it.

But it is truth, not imagination, that bids us see in that fruitless night of toil, followed by so blessed a morrow, not only a precious narrative of real events but a living message of strength to the Christian man in the hour of trial, of delay, of seemingly unrequited labour for the Lord; and a living message, too, to the Christian Church, upon the deep dark waters of sin and time, while the eternal morning, and the great ingathering, and the manifested Saviour, yet delay. Let us lay it thankfully to heart.

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ART. V.—OUR LORD'S HUMANITY.

THERE is no subject in all theology which requires to be approached in a spirit of more profound humility and reverent caution than this. Both sacred and profane history are full of warning to all who handle it. In the early ages of the Church the subtle Greek intellect busied itself with it, and a deadly crop of heresies was the result. Nestorius, Eutyches, Apollinaris, and others of minor note, one after