

ART. III.—PROPHECY IN OUR LORD'S MINISTRY.

IN a previous article the manner was discussed in which the Evangelists interpreted and applied the prophecies in the Old Testament in relation to our Lord; and the purpose of the present article is to consider the prophetic, or rather the predictive, character of our Lord's own teaching. He is the supreme example of the double aspect of the prophet's office, both in interpreting and enforcing Divine and eternal truths, and also in predicting the future. In the former of these two prophetic capacities, He illuminated, with the Divine light, the depths of the ancient law, bringing home to men's consciences, in the Sermon on the Mount, and in parables, like that of the Pharisee and the Publican, its profound moral and spiritual penetration, and their miserable failure to fulfil it. But we are concerned here with the other aspect of His prophetic office—that of prediction—and it will be found very impressive to observe how large, and even paramount, a place is held in His teaching and His work by this predictive prophecy. His Advent was heralded by prophecy, and His own first word was a prophecy—viz., that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. The preaching of John the Baptist may, indeed, be instructively considered from the same point of view. He, too, was pre-eminently a prophet, in the sense of a preacher and interpreter of righteousness; but he was also, in a most conspicuous and striking degree, a prophet in the sense of foretelling future events of the most momentous nature. His declarations respecting our Lord foretold His character, His office, and His death with inspired prescience; but, apart from this, his mere declaration that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, and that, with it, the judgment of the Jewish nation was approaching, is sufficient testimony to his inspired vision. He based the whole of his preaching on that solemn prediction, warning the people that the axe was now laid to the root of the tree, and that One was coming immediately after him, in whose presence he would become insignificant, whose fan was in His hand, and who would thoroughly purge His floor. His preaching was not a merely general warning of the certainty of the just judgment of God upon national and personal sin; it was a specific prediction that a certain Person was immediately at hand who would Himself enforce those judgments, and who would set up a kingdom which would be that of God Himself—a kingdom, not of earth, but of heaven. There is no clearer, or stronger, instance of definitely predictive prophecy than the fact that, before our Lord had been so much as heard of,

John the Baptist should thus have predicted His immediate coming, and the great spiritual, moral, and national revolution which was to ensue.

Now, our Lord takes up this prediction of the Baptist and makes it His own. When He had heard that John was cast into prison He departed into Galilee, and "from that time He began to preach, and to say, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." His own exhortation to repentance, like that of John, does not rest simply upon general moral and spiritual considerations, but is founded upon the declaration, the prophetic declaration, that a new kingdom is about to be set up; and He calls upon men to change their minds in view of that imminent fact. As the subsequent history has shown, that prophecy corresponded to a great and momentous reality. From the time of our Lord's departure from earth, or from within a few days after His Ascension, a new authority has existed in the world, a new personal authority, that, namely, of our Lord Himself, acknowledged as the Son of God, acting, by various agencies, in the Church or the Churches which are called by His Name. This, it is important to remember, constitutes the grand distinction between the state of the world before Christ and the state of the world after Christ—a distinction conspicuous to outward observation as well as to spiritual insight. Since that time there have always been great societies in the world looking up to Jesus Christ, not merely as their Guide, but as their Lord and Master, regarding themselves as bound, in all things, by His authority as revealing to them the will of God and the laws of heaven; they have asserted that authority against the authorities of this world, and have made the laws of this world's authorities bend to it; they speak of Him in their Creed not only as their Master, but as their Lord, and they believe that everything they do, and everything that is done in the world, is subject to His judgment, and will ultimately receive His sentence. It is, therefore, in a proper sense a kingdom in which men and women recognise that they are subject to Jesus Christ, as to a King whose laws are supreme, in life and in death. According to His own illustration, He has gone into a far country for a while, and men may for a time forget or disregard Him, without being immediately recalled to His allegiance by force; but He, and He alone, is their eternal King and Lord, and they will some day have to answer to Him. Our Lord, as has been said, claims this office of King, because He is the Son of God, to whom the Father has entrusted all rule and all authority and power; and, in this respect, He assumes a position which is not so much as claimed by the founder of any other religion. Such, then, in its ele-

mentary conception, is the great institution which was about to be set up, and which John the Baptist and our Lord predicted. They announced the coming of a new authority, the advent of a new King, the creation of a new Society, the revelation of a Judge and a judgment not hitherto known, and they called on men to accommodate themselves to this supreme and imminent reality.

This was the central truth of our Lord's teaching. In this great central prediction everything else was included, and to this, as we shall see, everything returned. But He proceeded to delineate the nature and the general history of this kingdom in a number of parables, which, as uttered beforehand, constituted a most remarkable series of predictions, which have received in history an ever-increasing verification. Take, for example, those which are collected in the thirteenth chapter of St. Matthew. It is there described how the chief means for the spread of the kingdom is the Word, which works in men's hearts like a seed which grows in one soil and not in another, but where it takes good root brings forth abundant fruit. We are told that "the kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and when the blade was sprung up, then appeared the tares also," and the householder gives orders that the wheat and the tares shall grow together until the harvest; so that the Society, which is to be known as the Kingdom of God, is, until the end of the world, to include bad men as well as good. Again, the kingdom of heaven was to be "like a grain of mustard-seed, which indeed is the least of all seeds, but, when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof"; that is, its beginning was to be slight, and its growth gradual, but its ultimate extent immense. Again, it was to be like leaven, gradually permeating the whole mass of human life. These and similar similitudes exactly describe what has been the character and the mode of growth of the Church in all ages; and if we were not so familiar with them, we should be the more impressed with the Divine foresight, which, instead of anticipating for the Divine kingdom either rapid progress or perfect results, predicted its slow growth by the humblest of means, and the imperfection with which its ideal would be realized, until the day came for its final and complete realization. The life of that earthly society, which acknowledges Christ as its King, has been, throughout history, exactly what our Lord predicted it would be, and the Church is thus, even in her defects and disappointments, a witness to the truth of her Divine Lord.

But our Lord's preaching contained other predictions of a still more specific and far-reaching character. In the first place, as is acknowledged even by modern critics who do not fully acknowledge His Divine nature and authority, He clearly predicted to His disciples both His death and His resurrection. These predictions were not, indeed, put prominently forward in His general teaching; and it obviates many difficulties to bear in mind that they could not have been so put forward without reducing His work among the Jews to an unreality. He came to His own people, making a real appeal to them to receive Him, and He exerted all His power, wisdom, and grace to win their hearts to Himself. It is evident, from His intimations to His disciples, that He knew it would be all in vain; but if He had said so to the Jews, to whom He appealed, He would have rendered the appeal unmeaning. In the end, when all hope is gone, He does say as much, even to them; but not until every motive and every warning is exhausted, and He is obliged to declare, in bitter grief and tears, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." This is the explanation of the circumstance which, though often much exaggerated, is to a considerable degree true, that the atoning death of our Lord does not receive so much prominence in His teaching as in that of the Apostles. He could not give it that prominence without openly and constantly assuming that the appeals He was making to His people would be in vain, and that they would reject Him and put Him to death. When they had done so, when the dreadful event was accomplished, then it stood out in its awful reality and supreme significance, and the vision of that Blood of Christ, which the Apostles themselves had seen, occupied the centre point of their vision, and was interpreted to them by weighty, though reticent, predictions of their Master. If the prediction of His death had thus to be guarded and, so to say, confidential, the case could not but be the same with His predictions of His resurrection. If, indeed, He predicted His death at all, it would seem essential that He should also have predicted His resurrection. That death, without the resurrection, would have been a message of despair, alike in the prospect and in the retrospect, and to both our Lord's saying eminently applies: "Now I have told you before it come to pass, that when it is come to pass ye might believe." The Apostles could not but believe in One who had thus calmly predicted two events so utterly incredible to them as His murder and His resurrection, and whose predictions, in each case, had been so exactly fulfilled.

But though there was thus a certain reserve in our Lord's predictions respecting Himself, He expanded more and more

clearly, and more and more fully, as His ministry proceeded, His prediction that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, particularly in its relation to the Jews. Gradually, as their resistance to Him deepened, He explained to them more distinctly the meaning of His precursor's declaration that "Now the axe is laid unto the root of the trees, therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire." Here, again, it is in His parables that we find some of His most remarkable predictions respecting the fate which was in store for the Jews. Such, for instance, is the parable of the householder, who let his vineyard out to husbandmen, and went into a far country, and sent his servants to receive the fruits of it; and last of all he sent his son, but "they said among themselves, This is the heir, come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance; and they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard and slew him; when the Lord, therefore, of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto Him: He will miserably destroy those wicked men; and He said unto them: . . . Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." We are told that when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard these parables, they "perceived that He spake of them." So, again, in the parable of the king who made a marriage for his son; but the guests refused to come, and the remnant took his servants and entreated them spitefully and slew them; but when the king heard thereof he was wroth, and sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burnt up their city. Even among the parables which, in their more general meaning, are precious to all Christians, as containing the very essence of the Gospel, such as that of the Prodigal Son, several have a clearly predictive character in reference to the Jews and the Gentiles. Even if our Lord had not uttered more direct predictions respecting the fate of the Jews and of Jerusalem, these parables alone would have been a marvellous record of supernatural foresight and prophecy. But I need only remind you briefly of the clear and terrible prediction He uttered, towards the close of His ministry, respecting the doom which was to fall upon the Temple and the Holy City. His disciples came to Him, we read, to show Him the buildings of the Temple, and Jesus said unto them: "See ye all these things. Verily, I say unto you there shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down"; and soon afterwards His disciples came to Him privately, and said unto Him: "Tell us when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of their coming and of the end of the world?" In answer to

this question, He delivered a prophecy which, although in some respects, to be presently noticed, very mysterious, predicted, in the most unmistakable manner, the fearful scenes of the destruction of Jerusalem which ensued about forty years later. "When ye shall see," He said, "Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judæa flee unto the mountains, and let them which are in the midst of it depart out, and let not them that are in the countries enter thereinto. For these be the days of vengeance . . . for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people, and they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led captive into all nations, and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." Attempts to post-date either the Gospels, or these portions of them, so as to reduce these references, as a whole, to vaticinations after the event, have failed, and they stand upon the page of Jewish history like the words of warning written by the finger of God upon the walls of the palace of the King of Babylon.

But they were not uttered as mere displays of our Lord's prophetic power, but with a momentous moral and religious purpose. They were intended to direct the thoughts and hopes of His disciples, and of the Church, to the course and the method in which the kingdom of God, which our Lord had from the first announced, would be developed and manifested. It is a characteristic feature in these predictions that they are wrapped up in a prophecy which looks far beyond them, to the final coming of our Lord in His full power and glory. It is this which constitutes that mystery in the discourse to which I have referred, and no interpretation has fully succeeded in dissipating this mystery. Endeavours have often been made, for instance, to apply the whole discourse to the destruction of Jerusalem, the dispersion of the Jews, and the abolition of the Old Covenant; but although those events were undoubtedly of far more momentous importance in the Divine economy of history than we sometimes realize, it is quite impracticable to explain some of the language as referring to them only. We cannot possibly, for instance, regard as fulfilled in those events such language as this: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven; and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet,

and they shall gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." It is manifest—and the consideration is one of importance in reference to the whole subject of prophecy—that we have here precisely the same phenomenon as in Old Testament prophecy—viz., a combination of the immediate and of the distant future, so entwined with one another that it is difficult to disentangle them. It is the same phenomenon, for instance, which perplexes us in some of the prophecies of Isaiah, where the happy prospect of a return from the exile seems swallowed up in the far larger and grander visions of the final redemption of mankind.

But in the case of this grand prophecy of our Lord's, we may, perhaps, see more clearly both the nature, the reason, and the purpose of His method. It would seem clear that the main and ultimate scope of the prophecy is to direct His disciples and His Church to be living perpetually in a state of watchfulness, and consequent preparation for His return, and for the final realization and coming of His kingdom. He said to them again and again that the time of the final return could not be revealed to them. "Of that day and that hour," He says, "knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but My Father only." He even disclaims any knowledge of it Himself. "Of that day or that hour knoweth no one," as St. Mark records it, "no, not the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." He repeated the same warning after the Resurrection. "It is not for you," He said, "to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power." That is a great mystery; but there could be no stronger assertion of the principle that the time of our Lord's final coming is absolutely shrouded from all but the Father's own knowledge. This being so, it became impossible for our Lord to say that the final manifestation of His kingdom would not occur at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. It was impossible, it was forbidden even to Him, to declare before the event, that that which was immediately imminent was only the destruction of Jerusalem, and that the final revelation of His kingdom was reserved for a subsequent time. For all that was revealed, the two events might have fallen together in the same great catastrophe, and it was therefore impracticable to make a sharp chronological line of distinction between them, when looking forward to both. The destruction of Jerusalem was one great step in the manifestation of the Divine kingdom. It was the final doom of the past; and for all that men, or angels, or even the Son knew, it might have been the final doom of the present. The consequence is that the two momentous events

are seen in vision as inextricably blended. The grand result of the discourse is that both events would happen, though whether they would happen together or at an interval of time, long or short, no one, not even the Son, could tell. The principle will apply to the prophetic visions of the Old Testament. From the prophets, too, the times and the seasons were hidden, but they were granted a vision of the glory of the ultimate future, and at the same time of nearer events which were steps towards its realization. They saw them both, but they could not tell whether, in point of time, they were closely associated, or separated by a long interval, and they described them as they saw them, in the projection of one plain and prophetic revelation.

But to us, the course of events has now separated the catastrophe of the Jewish nation from the remainder of the predictions in this solemn discourse of our Lord, and it remains to us the great prophecy in which the whole of His message is summed up. He began, as you have been reminded, by proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He concludes in this discourse, uttered at the very foot of His cross, by warning us that that kingdom, which has already come in so remarkable a degree, that realm in which He is acknowledged as the sole King and Lord, and of which we are professed members, will certainly come still nearer to us; and though He cannot tell us the day or the hour, yet the day and the hour will come when He will reveal Himself in His full majesty and power to enforce, fully and finally, the laws of His kingdom; when the Tabernacle of God shall be with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people; . . . but the fearful and the unbelieving and the abominable shall have their part in the second death. He tells us that that great consummation will come with consequences of awful convulsion, physical, moral and political, of which the convulsions which accompanied the overthrow of the Jewish nation were a type; and He calls on us, by virtue at once of the certainty of the result and the uncertainty of the time, to be perpetually on the watch for Him, and to be in a state of preparation for His coming. "Be ye also ready," He says, "for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh. Watch, therefore, for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come."

Such, then, in conclusion, is the nature and office of prophecy, as exemplified in its highest form in our Lord Himself. It is the very basis on which He builds His work, it is the ultimate and supreme motive on which He relies. "Repent," He says at the outset, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." "Watch," He says at the conclusion

of His ministry, "for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." The fact is, that what our Lord has done, in respect of the motives to be brought to bear upon our characters and upon our conduct, may be illustrated by the famous phrase that He "called a new world into existence to redress the balance of the old." He announced a kingdom, present in some degree now, but hereafter to be revealed in infinite glory, in which everyone will be judged according to the moral and spiritual laws He proclaimed; and He warns us that our relation to that kingdom is of such momentous importance as to overshadow every interest and every desire of this world. That prophecy is the fulcrum, with which He would lift the heavy weight with which our souls are bound to this earth; and the experience of human nature tends to show that no other leverage is adequate to lift the burdens which hold us down. In the other great religions of the world also it is the future which is the motive power. Perhaps the chief weakness of the Jewish religion lay in the remarkable fact, that its laws were not enforced by the sanction of a future life. Why that sanction was withheld from them has been the subject of great debate; but perhaps the reason is a more simple one than has been generally supposed. The future life could not be disclosed by the true religion, until the Judge and the Saviour had been revealed, on whose mercy, as well as on whose judgment, that life is mainly dependent. Any attempt to depict that future without placing in the forefront the Saviour, for whose sake forgiveness is bestowed upon us, and by whom, at the same time, our judgment is pronounced, would have been necessarily misleading; it must either have obscured the Divine justice or the Divine mercy. But from the moment when the Saviour's death had made atonement for us, and the Saviour's resurrection and ascension had assured us of His office, as our Lord and Judge in that eternal realm—from that moment the vision of the eternal future, the everlasting kingdom of our Lord, lay open to human eyes, and its prophetic revelation by Him furnished, to all who followed Him, a motive of transcendent power. So, accordingly, St. Peter, who had heard this great discourse, summed up the Gospel in his old age. "Blessed," he exclaimed, "be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which, according to His abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a lively hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away. . . . Wherefore, gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

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