

Some Thoughts on the Seven Epistles.

V.

THE Epistle to the angel of the Church of Sardis is sorrowful reading. The angel himself falls under the solemn and heart-penetrating censure of his Lord. The Mission-Church, mournfully like its leader, contains only "a few names" of which He can speak well, only a few "who have not defiled their garments." "The things that remain are ready to die."

William Cowper contributes to that historic collection, the Olney Hymns, a powerful lyrical version of this fifth Epistle :

Write to Sardis, saith the Lord,
 And write what He declares
 He whose Spirit and whose word
 Upholds the seven stars :
 All thy works and ways I search,
 Find thy zeal and love decay'd ;
 Thou art call'd a living Church,
 But thou art cold and dead.

Watch, remember, seek and strive,
 Exert thy former pains ;
 Let thy timely care revive,
 And strengthen what remains :
 Cleanse thine heart, thy works amend,
 Former times to mind recall,
 Lest My sudden stroke descend,
 And smite thee once for all.

Yet I number now in thee
 A few that are upright ;
 These My Father's face shall see,
 And walk with Me in white ;
 When in judgment I appear
 They for Mine shall be confess'd ;
 Let My faithful servants hear,
 And woe be to the rest.

The simple energy of the verse sounds congenial to the stern emphatic original, in which the irrepressible accent of love and mercy makes itself audible, but only as a kind voice may come from the lips while the face is cloudy with displeasure and distress.

One general reflection is suggested by this Epistle, as by the several other passages in those five of the seven where fault is found with angel and with Church. It is a phenomenon as sad as possible, the appearance so very early in the story of Christendom of such changes and decays. If we had been allowed to witness Pentecost, and then to try to forecast the future of the wonderful movement that was to follow it upon the earth, should we not have imagined the development of a spiritual millennium, without delay and without reverses? We might well have anticipated a Church whose record should be "without spot or wrinkle"; its "people all righteous"; a scene of joy and power in God, harmonious, co-operant, aggressive, by the law of its own heaven-given life, waxing only holier and happier by the momentum of its progress. We might have anticipated its influence in and on the world as graciously resistless. Surely it would go on to surprise, persuade, and conquer by what, through the power of the Holy One, it was; "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, terrible as an army with banners," an army of peace and blessing, terrible only to the powers of darkness. Alas, what do we find to be the facts of history? From the very first appears the presence of untrue members, like Ananias. Then comes in the dolorous experience, as in Galatia, of internal strifes due to divergent conceptions, true and false, of the Christian ideal; then, as at Corinth, and now at Sardis, the cancerous mischief of unholy living, a condonation of sin, sometimes subtle and veiled, sometimes bold and assertive; and then, sad sequel to wandering thinking and impatience of the law of humbleness and loving fear, the dying and the death of many a soul and many a community, sinking into the spiritual grave of formalism and a loveless sloth.

"An enemy hath done this." The sower of the tares, mysteriously permitted to ply his dreadful craft, has interfered. He has found ready allies in the unwatchfulness and indiscipline of Christian hearts. He has diverted them from "looking off unto Jesus," and from finding His "unsearchable riches" at once their necessity and their joy. And then indeed "sin

abounded" in the Church, and it has abounded ever since. As a matter of course, a result according to sure spiritual law, the influence of the Church upon the world has been immeasurably impaired; we see that influence to-day as only a fragment of what it might have been.

It is profoundly sorrowful. Yet the sorrow is not wholly unrelieved. One thought of hope at least it suggests to the believing student, as he considers, not as a critic but as a fellow sinner, the failures of Christendom. It invites him to a wondering vision of the vast patience of the Lord of the Church, who most assuredly is still with His disciples, bearing with them, chastening them, reviving them, leading them into larger light, and, in spite of their incalculable failures, still using them for His work in the world. It has often been remarked, and it is true, that if the Christian Church had not the living presence of the Lord and Founder in the midst, Christendom as a fact in human life must have ceased and determined long ago. The very calamities of the Church, its *real* calamities, its evils generated *from within*—not the persecutions, but the strifes and corruptions—are thus strangely available as testimonies to an unseen and inextinguishable life in the body as a whole. As such, do they not powerfully help, in their obscure but significant way, the believer's hope that such persistent and operative love in the Head will at last have its way and overcome, triumphing in the final issue, with a more than renewal of the Pentecostal glory, in a Church fully and everywhere responsive to His will, and victorious for His purpose in the world?

It may be that this can only be by the fulfilment, in such ways as inscrutable love shall ordain, of that supreme and persistent promise, the unseen Lord's Return. If in any degree the Second Advent shall correspond in its phenomena to the First, we may confidently expect that "the Consummation of the Age" will have its stages, and not be crowded into one sudden and tremendous crisis. Of those stages one may be a Revival vast and universal, under the power of the Parousia.

And I for one hold it possible, in the light of the great chronological promises, that multitudes now living shall not see death till they have thus seen the Lord's Christ in the midst of us.

But I must not follow out this line of reflection further. It has led us somewhat far from Sardis, though the state of angel and Church in the old capital of Cræsus gave us our suggestion. Let me come back now to a brief study of the Epistle.

As in all the seven so in this fifth message we have first the Lord's designation of Himself. "He that hath the Seven Spirits of God and the seven stars." The Spirits, beyond reasonable doubt, for the student who confesses the unity of Scripture in its testimony to the Godhead, here mean the Eternal Paraclete, in the sevenfold distinction and entirety of His gifts. See ch. i. 4, where, between the Names of the Father and the Christ, appear, *as Source with them of "grace and peace,"* "the Seven Spirits." Wonderfully here does the Son of Man appear as not only co-operant with but "having" "the Spirits," the septiform Power of the Giver of Life. Does not the Spirit "proceed from the Son," if so it is? And consider what must be the divine dignity of the Son, that the Eternal Spirit should thus be His divinely willing Agent. Such is He that the supreme revealed function of the Paraclete is to "glorify Him."

Then further, "He hath the seven stars." We know what that constellation means (i. 20). It is "the angels of the seven churches"; it is the pastorate, the company of men sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation.

Let us clergymen attend to that word, with awe, and with hope. We indeed are not our own. An omnipotent hand "hath" us, in its immediate grasp. What will it do with us in displeasure, if we are unfaithful, if we are unspiritual, unreal, self-seeking, loveless, contentious, making anything short of Christ our strength, our theme, and our end? But then, what will it *not* do in mercy for our weakness, if indeed we "love our Master, and will not go out free"? How will it not employ us, if we are, in some humblest sense, through watching, prayer, and faith, found "meet for the Master's use"?

Then comes the Lord's report upon His servant. Listen to its mercifully relentless terms: "a name that thou livest," a *fame* for what seems life; "but thou art dead." "The things that remain," the relics of profession and of action, "are ready to die." "I have found no works of thine fulfilled before God." What was the outward look of this unhappy pastor's life? Quite reputable, so it would seem. It carried a show with it of religiousness, and perhaps of activities. Its manward side was, in a sense, "fulfilled." All men, or almost all, spoke well of the angel; he had a name, a fame; perhaps as eloquent, perhaps as genial and accessible, perhaps as popular and in favour with "them that were without." But "*before God*" nothing was "fulfilled." That side of the life, the God-ward side, was hollow, it was missing. The man had no real contact with his Lord, no intimacy with Him in secret, no pure joy in His service, no ambition for His dear glorious Name as such, no burning will to be holy as He is holy, no deep life in the Living One.

Alas, such a pastorate is at least as possible in this century as in the first. "Wherefore let us watch, and remember."

It is precisely to "*remember*" that the Sardian angel is exhorted. He is to go back and begin again. "Remember how thou hast received and heard"; recall, not the ideas of your own brain, but the revelation of holy and happy truth, "once delivered"; that first, old, unalterable GOSPEL which is more permanent than heaven and earth; the treasures of a perfect Christ, a Christ for us, in us, with us, over us; our Sacrifice, Life, Lord, All-in-all; the bright mystery which "eye saw not, and ear heard not, and heart conceived not," of man's own wit, but which "God had prepared," and hath revealed. This divine "deposit" let him "keep; and repent," turning heart-whole from the religion of self to this.

It is beautiful to see the generous kindness which, out of the midst of menaces, still speaks love. The angel is not irreclaimable. He *may* go back and begin again. Like Christian in the Progress, after his slumber, he *may* grope his way once more to

the place of loss, and find his vanished treasure, and clasp it to his heart, and watch over it there. How glad will his Lord be if he does! But if not—"I will come as a thief," in an hour unknown, awfully on a sudden, to sentence, and to bid thee go.

Let us listen to the love, and to the warning. We have a Master unspeakably generous and benignant. But because His love is holy it implies an awful intolerance—not of fears, doubts, failures, but of unreality.

Yet He is pleased, He delights, to close "with good words and comfortable words." He turns to the faithful few, each of them perfectly known to Him, affectionately watched and aided by Him; those "few names *in Sardis*," surrounded by its stagnant and malarious air, who yet live *in Christ*, safe and immune; pilgrims along that sin-defiled road who yet had their loins so girt that the white robe of holiness by faith in their Lord was held up untouched above the mire. A bright future is preparing for them. They are to be translated soon to another level, another pathway. "They shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy"—worthy in the sense of spiritual fitness, the result of grace "received not in vain." They shall tread soon where "angelic feet fall on the golden flagging of the street." They shall inhabit the place where, as Leighton somewhere says in his wonderful way (I quote from memory), "we may wear our white garments at full length, for there is nothing which defileth in the beautiful street of the city." And that walk, best of all, will be "with Him." The city itself would be a solitude without the King in His beauty. But He is not only present there; He cares with infinite lovingkindness for the company there of His faithful ones. "There are that have heard Him say and affirm that He will not dwell on the mountains of Zion alone." Such is this mighty One, this Possessor of the Seven Spirits. He is devoted to His poor mortal disciples. He looks forward to their walk and talk with Him for ever. It is part of His own prospect of immeasurable joy.

"He that overcometh," overcometh the death-breathing

surroundings of an expiring Christianity, drawing life amidst the vapours from the Living One—he “shall thus be arrayed in white garments”; “*thus*” (the word is present in the true text)—so as to walk with Christ in them. “And I will in no wise blot his name out from the book of life”; he shall be secure for ever from the decline and death of the soul. “And I will confess his name before My Father and His angels.”

What a grandeur marks the promises of the Seven Epistles! They range all the depths and heights of grace and of glory. And they are all meant not solely for the chiefs and captains of the Christian army. They are to prove true for the lowliest “overcomer,” for the disciple, however nameless in the world and in the Church, who lives by self-surrendering faith within the power of that victory over sin which is the gift of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

HANDLEY DUNELM.

