

## Some Thoughts on the Seven Epistles.

### VI.

**H**APPY was the Philadelphian angel in the message from his glorified Master, "the holy, the true," the guardian of "the key of David," "He that openeth—and none shall shut, and that shutteth, and none openeth." That Examiner whose eyes see through all semblances of reality, that supreme Disposer in the household and kingdom of God, that true and infinitely greater Eliakim (Isai. xxii. 22), in whose right it is to open and to shut the "door of the word" to His servants, as He weighs their fidelity and readiness, has for this man nothing but praise and promise.

Taken as a whole this sixth Epistle is the jewel of the seven. The second only, the Smyrnæan, can be placed beside it; and there truly the Master's love burns bright, and His promise is glorious. Yet here the love takes a tone even more intimate, and the promises are still richer and more varied. The angel is assured that his bitterest opponents shall yet do him homage as the beloved of his Lord, so that his victories shall begin to be crowned here below. And hereafter he shall be built into the eternal temple, to go out no more. He shall be with his Lord for ever, and so with Him as to take his place as a personality, so to speak, *structurally significant* in the life of heaven; a pillar, which sustains as well as adorns. And he shall be decorated too with wonderful inscriptions, with the name of the God and Father of his King, with the name of the eternal City, the habitation of the holy ones, and with the "new name" of the Son of the Blessed. That is to say, he shall shine in the life of glory as eminently true to the supreme Nature, which is Light and Love, and to the conditions of heavenly citizenship, where the Blessed in their bliss live always "not unto themselves," and to the inmost secrets of the heart of the Redeemer, secrets which "pass knowledge" here, awaiting the unveiling of the "new name," the final disclosure of what the "altogether Lovely" is, in the world to come.

Let us pause to thank God for such a wealth of divine affection, and such a weight of promised glory, conveyed in this wonderful Letter to a mortal man. Let us do so not less but more as we reflect that we have no hint, however faint, of the identity of the Philadelphian angel. This embodied "spirit sent forth to minister to them that should be heirs of salvation," is absolutely nameless to us. He is more obscure in that respect than Antipas of Pergamum, whose *name* lives imperishable. The angel of Smyrna, possibly at least, if not probably, may be the Polycarp whose glorious martyrdom comes down to us fully recorded by his friends. But the Philadelphian has lain these long eighteen ages, as far as our knowledge goes, in a nameless grave.

It is one specimen, sacred and beautiful, of an innumerable class. "Their going from us hath seemed to be utter destruction," as to human memory. But "their record is on high." It will be brought out into the light indeed when the great Temple is at last completed with all its shining colonnades, and the pillar-saints bear their inscriptions of loving glory for all heaven to read.

Of the earthly home of the angel, Philadelphia, we know that it was no ancient place like Sardis. It was founded not more than two centuries before the date of the Apocalypse. Built in a volcanic district, it was often shaken by earthquakes, and some have guessed that the incessant cost of rebuilding had so straitened the citizens that the "poverty" of the mission-church was only part of the poverty of the place. I cannot think that this was so; far more probably the poverty of the angel and his flock was the poverty of those who were, at Philadelphia, the relatively low and weak; slaves, workpeople, a despised and unfashionable company. However, one fact in the story of Philadelphia is remarkable—that it exists as a town to-day. On the slopes of Tmolus, a mountain-name familiar to the Greek and Latin poets, still stands, after a thousand vicissitudes of time, *Ala Sheher*, "the ruddy city," Philadelphia under another title. It is at least impressive to a Christian student to find that precisely Smyrna and Philadelphia, the two cities of the

seven where the Lord found an angel and a mission-church wholly true to Him, are the sole survivors of the circle now, as living homes of men. The passage is well-known in which Gibbon, half in irony, but surely not wholly, speaks ("Decline and Fall," ch. lxiv.) of this phenomenon in the instance of Philadelphia. A few sentences may be quoted here:

"In the loss of Ephesus the Christians deplored the fall of the first Angel, the extinction of the first candlestick of the Revelations; the desolation is complete; and the temple of Diana<sup>1</sup> or the Church of Mary will equally elude the search of the curious traveller . . . Philadelphia has been saved, by prophecy, or courage. At a distance from the sea, forgotten by the emperors, encompassed on all sides by the Turks, her valiant citizens defended their religion and freedom above fourscore years [against the Mahometans], and at length capitulated with the proudest of the Ottomans. Among the Greek colonies and churches of Asia, Philadelphia is still erect, a column in a scene of ruins; a pleasing example that the paths of honour and safety may sometimes be the same."

But let us come to the details of the Epistle, to gather from them some messages for "him that hath an ear."

We have noted already, but only in passing, the Lord's designation of Himself: "He that is holy, He that is true." He is "true," *ἀληθινός*, that is to say, true in the sense of the genuine, the real; He is the absolute Correspondent to the Ideal; not only the truth-teller, but, in the holy essence of His nature and character, the supreme realization of truth. He who in His life on earth, as all the Gospels witness, condemned no type of sin with such ruthless severity as the sin of unreality in religion, had the right to speak those tremendous censures. He is the eternal antithesis to all false semblances; His holiness is light all through. As such, as the true, who is light, and in that light sees all things as they are, He holds "the key of David," the power to open or close opportunity, and welcome or reject at the gate of the heavenly kingdom. Great and sovereign *Claviger*, Key-bearer, He wields such power alike over Hades (i. 18), over the Church, and over Heaven; what peace is ours in the thought that it is so!

Trench has some memorable words here on this retention

<sup>1</sup> The *site* of the Temple has been ascertained in later days, but it is only a vast hollow heaped with débris.

by the Lord Jesus Christ of the ultimate "power of the keys." I quote some parts of the passage :

"From the highest tribunal on earth there lies an appeal to a tribunal of yet higher instance in heaven . . . and when through ignorance, or worse than ignorance, any wrong has been done to any of His servants here, He will redress it there, disallowing and reversing in heaven the erring or unrighteous decrees of earth. It was in the faith of this that Hus, when the greatest Council which Christendom had seen for a thousand years delivered his soul to Satan, did himself confidently commend it to the Lord Jesus Christ; and many a faithful confessor that, at Rome or Madrid, has walked to the stake, his yellow *san benito* all painted over with devils . . . has never doubted that his lot should be indeed with Him who retains in His own hands 'the key of David.' "

I quote the passage for its intrinsic weight and significance. But I respectfully think that the *main* reference of the "key of David" here is not so much to admission of the faithful now to peace and hereafter to glory (though this is not excluded) as to the opening to the true heart servant of "doors" for effectual service to his Lord.

The next following words (ver. 8) seem to me to indicate this. There it is announced to the angel that already a "door opened" is "set before him," and in connexion with his fidelity in weakness. "Thou hast little power,<sup>1</sup> and [yet] didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name." The angel had been tried and assailed, it would seem by the same bitter hostility of unbelieving Jews which, as the contemporary story tells us, burned so hot against Polycarp at Smyrna. These were "not Jews," save in blood; spiritually they were "Satan's synagogue." And the angel's heavenly Friend would bring some at least from among them to bow at his feet, either in a terrified submission under sudden judgments, or, a happier possibility, in contrite fear and faith, recognizing that the once hated Christian pastor was "the beloved of the Lord," personally dear to the true Messiah in his weakness and his faithfulness.

And the angel's reward, what should it be? Even this same "door opened," an entrance wide and clear to conquests over human hearts for Christ.

<sup>1</sup> I am certain that we should render thus, and not (as A.V. and R.V.) "a little power." The emphasis is laid on weakness, in which the Lord's strength is perfected. "A little" emphasizes the presence of human "power," however little.

Meanwhile (ver. 10, 11) not progress only in his work but strong protection for his soul's health should be accorded to this happy servant, who, "when he was weak, then was he strong." An "hour of trial," a fiery test of persecuting wrath, he was to pass over "the whole world," the *οικουμένη*, the imperial realm. But it should not hurt the angel. Perhaps he was to be providentially exempted from the scourge, as no doubt some Christian missions were, even in the great persecutions. Anywise, it should not scathe his true being; he should abide, spiritually, in the safe shadow of the Almighty, the secret of the Presence. And in any case the time of trial should be short before the Master's radiant coming should close it for ever; "I come quickly; hold fast that which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." In some great prelude of His final *Parousia*, the KING would arrive upon the scene. Invisibly, not yet as "every eye shall see Him," yet effectually, He would bid the storm cease over the troubled "world," and lead His angel into peace beyond it. Only strong in that use of grace which is possible to the faith of the utterly "weak" disciple who "looks unto Jesus," he must, through storm and calm, "hold fast that which he had," his life in a trusted Christ. So should "no one take his crown," his "wreath," his laurel of victory. "The enemy should be still as a stone," while the threatened saint, supremely safe in his Redeemer, passed in to bliss.

There he, the overcomer of the terrors of the world and the devil, should indeed thenceforth abide for ever. We have traced already the radiant lines of the promise to the Philadelphian; the pillar in the eternal temple, the names inscribed upon its face, the security of bliss—"he shall go out no more" from the happy place "where no foe cometh and no friend departeth"; "that great city, the heavenly Jerusalem," seated above the clouds of time as to the true *site* of its foundations and its habitations, yet also "coming down" out of eternity, in every manifestation here below of the immortal life of love, and praise, and holy, blissful service, the self-less joy of the surrendered soul.

As our brief study draws to its close I cannot but say a little of what has long seemed to me a noble parallel to the story of the

Philadelphian angel, in the annals of later Christendom. "Thou hast [only] little strength, and [yet] didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name . . . I set before thee a door opened."

These words might make a fitting title to the record of the *Unitas Fratrum*, commonly called the Moravian Church. I cannot here trace in detail the thread of its life, from its origin as a distinct community in the fifteenth century, among the followers of the gently-great patriot saint and martyr of Bohemia, Johann Hus, named already in this paper in my quotation from Archbishop Trench. It must be enough to say that the "Bohemian Brethren," "reformed before the Reformation," persecuted, troubled on every side, in the seventeenth century all but extinguished by the merciless Austrian power, wonderfully clung through every storm to "the word of the Cross." In 1722 they found refuge at last, a remnant, in Saxony, staying unawares their weary feet on the lands of the Saxon nobleman, von Zinzendorf, himself a recent convert to the living faith of Christ, and rejoicing to be their host. There they sprung ere long into a new and glorious spiritual youth and force, visited by a great outpouring of the Holy Ghost with His divine inspiration to testimony and self-sacrificing service. At once the missionary enterprise possessed their souls, and it has been the sacred ambition of this most Christian community ever since. Canon C. H. Robinson ("History of Missions," p. 49) writes thus of them:

"Within twenty years of the commencement of their missionary work the Moravian Brethren had started more missions than Anglicans and [other] Protestants had started during the two preceding centuries. Their marvellous success was largely due to the fact that from the first they recognized that the evangelization of the world was the most pressing of the obligations that rested upon the Christian Church, and that the carrying out of this obligation was the 'common affair' of the community. Up to the present time the Moravians have sent out nearly 3,000 missionaries, the proportion of missionaries to their communicant members being 1 in 12. Amongst English Christians generally the proportion is said to be 1 in 2,000. . . . It would be little exaggeration to say that the continued existence and vitality of the Moravian Church are a result of its missionary activity."

So, "having little strength, they kept His word." And He opened the doors of the world's dark places to them far and wide, He, the faithful wielder of the key of David.

I am one of an Anglican Committee, created on occasion of

the Lambeth Conference of 1908, which has laboured since then for the "alliance" of the Anglican and Moravian Churches. Our hopes were high at times, though the paths of "reunion" are never very easy to traverse amidst our own internal controversies. Now the War has burst upon us, and Saxony and England seem far apart. But I hope I may yet see the day when our Church will be enriched by a living and organic connexion with that small but prolific nursery of missionary pioneers and, as my records of friendship bear witness to my heart, of singularly holy and humble-hearted saints of God.

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