

The Atonement in the Writings of St. John.

II.

HAVING thus rounded off his conception of the results of the Atonement, St. John now proceeds to emphasize that the Cross is not something towards which our Lord was ruthlessly and inexorably hurried, in spite of Himself, but that it was submitted to by Him as a purely voluntary act.

4. *The Voluntariness of the Atonement.*

The way is prepared in quite a natural manner for the statement of this particular aspect of the matter. At the close of our Lord's discourse to the Jews in the Temple, as described in viii. 12-30, Christ declares that the man who abides in His word (viii. 31), or enters into the knowledge of Himself of which He has been speaking, will know the meaning of freedom in its fullest sense (viii. 32), and will enter upon eternal life (viii. 51). The questionings and cavillings of the Jews in answer to our Lord's statements resulted ultimately in active opposition, with the result that Christ had to hide Himself from their attempts to injure Him (viii. 59). The sign, therefore, which is described in the next chapter seems to be a commentary upon the hostile attitude which the Jews had taken up. One notices a great contrast in the elaborateness of the preparations here—*cf.* the spittle, the clay, the anointing, the journey to the Pool of Siloam—with the spontaneity of the previous signs, and the difference seems to mark the difficulties encountered by Christ towards His life and message. The difficulties, however, were now crystallizing into active opposition on the part of the Jews (ix. 22, 34), and the ostracization of those who believed in Christ was on a par with the attempt at stoning mentioned in ix. 59. It is now, therefore, that our Lord begins to make a certain difference in His teaching and in His method of teaching. Prior to this stage Christ had taught all who would listen, now He teaches only His disciples and those who had a certain degree of faith in Him (*cf.* x. 41, 42). But the point which concerns us with reference to

the Atonement is that our Lord quite clearly emphasizes the voluntariness of His own position. The rising tide of opposition was producing an atmosphere which presaged disaster for Himself, and, therefore, when the note of separation from the general body of Jews comes in chap. x., it is also clearly marked by the voluntariness of Christ's own position. He sees quite clearly that Calvary is already in sight, and hence He declares His freedom in going to it. This is brought out in such verses as x. 10, 11, and 15, and they are all summed up in the words of x. 17, 18: ". . . I lay down My life. . . . No one taketh it away from me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." When blasphemous abuse (x. 20, 21) had developed into attempts at personal violence (x. 31, 39), and the inevitableness of death was now being revealed, it was necessary that our Lord should make it plain that He was moving onward with His eyes quite open to the consequences, and that He was going quite voluntarily into the shadow of death.

The close of the section of the Gospel dealing with the voluntariness of Christ's part in the Atonement is followed by the sign in chap. xi., which has a distinct bearing upon what has preceded as well as upon what follows. The sign itself is a clear proof of Christ's power over death, and therefore witnesses implicitly to the point which has already been examined, whilst the statements of our Lord with reference to Lazarus's death (xi. 4, 15), and His words in xi. 25, 26, show also quite clearly that our Lord's submission to death was purely voluntary. The same facts also prepare the way for the next aspect of the subject dwelt upon by St. John, and that is the necessity of the Atonement.

5. *The Necessity of the Atonement.*

We have already seen that the great sign recorded in chap. xi. shows that our Lord went quite voluntarily to the Cross, but St. John now proceeds to show that there was an actual necessity that Christ should die. This aspect of the subject arises out of the preceding narrative, and it says that Christ's death is necessary first of all for the world.

(a) *For the World.*—The sign of raising Lazarus had, like all the other signs, its positive and negative effect—*i.e.*, in sifting believers in Christ from unbelievers, and in drawing the former closer to Christ and causing further reaction in the case of the latter. This dual effect is seen in xi. 45, 46, where many of the Jews gave in their adhesion to Christ, but where others went to the Pharisees to recount what they had seen and heard. The upshot is seen in the calling of the Jewish Council, and in the dictum laid down by Caiaphas “. . . that it is expedient . . . that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.” The application of this well-known Jewish adage to our Lord by the high priest only carries with it the sinister aspect of necessity, but St. John gives the truer interpretation in his gloss: “ This he said not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation; and not for the nation only, but that He might also gather into one the children of God that are scattered abroad ” (xi. 51, 52). The death of Christ was a necessity, called for by the needs of men, who would be ultimately gathered into one body of believers by the sacrifice on the Cross.

The Cross is also declared to be necessary for Christ's work.

(b) *For Christ's Work.*—This particular aspect is in contrast with certain incidents which superficially seemed to indicate that Christ's work did not need a *via dolorosa* like Calvary. The first of these was the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (xii. 12-17), with the caustic commentary of the Pharisees that the world is gone after Him (xii. 19). The interview also with the inquiring Greeks seems at first to suggest the same fact. If the Hellenized Jews were being attracted to Christ, surely, then, there was no need for a personal sacrifice on our Lord's part—the mystical truth involved in the fact of the Logos must surely suffice. But the seeming triumph was only used by Christ to emphasize the fact that His death was necessary for His work. “ Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it beareth much fruit ” (xii. 24). In the death of Christ the Son of man would be glorified (xii. 23), and reap the fruit of His life's work. The same truth is brought out in the

address following, in which Christ reveals the questionings of His own soul about the future. If His soul was troubled, and if the natural shrinking from death should prompt Him to claim deliverance from it, yet His Divine consciousness told Him that His presence in the world pointed Him on inexorably to this hour of Calvary (xii. 37). If, therefore, a superficial view should consider that the Cross was a triumph for "the prince of this world," Christ forestalls the view by declaring that the Cross is the overthrowing of the world-prince, and not simply that, but also is the means by which His own work would be completed (xii. 31).

St. John has now brought his narrative down to the period just anterior to the Betrayal itself, and on the eve, as it were, of the great catastrophe he proceeds to enumerate certain ultimate results which would occur from the seeming failure of Christ in the Cross.

Ultimate Issues of the Cross.

The first of these seeming paradoxes is that the Cross would result in glory for Christ Himself.

(a) *For Christ's Glory.*—This aspect of the Cross is presaged in the remarks of St. John after the interview with the inquiring Greeks. The refusal of the Jews to believe in Christ moves St. John to recall the words of Isaiah, who predicted the blindness of the Jews to a suffering Messiah (xii. 37, 40). This, however, did not prevent St. John remembering that Isaiah had seen a glory even for the suffering Messiah (xii. 41), and on the eve of the Cross St. John himself can now see it. Such an insight was no doubt hardly possible except to the eye of faith, nor do the incidents which follow make it easier to realize that the ultimate outcome was to be glory for Christ. For the narrative goes on to depict the Master as a servant doing menial acts (xiii. 1-20).¹ It then

¹ It is well worth noting here the striking association of the Divine consciousness of our Lord along with His voluntary humility. In xiii. 1, St. John emphasizes Christ's knowledge of His approaching departure to the Father; and in xiii. 3 there is the comprehensive statement of the oneness of Christ with God, coupled with the fact that the Father had delegated all things into Christ's hands. But along with this there was the seeming paradox of the menial act of washing the disciples' feet. The whole scene is parabolic in the sense that it sums up the principle underlying the Incarnation and the Cross—*i.e.*, the principle of self-sacrifice.

goes on to relate the Last Supper and the statement of the coming Betrayal (xiii. 21-30), but the incidents are not crowned by any note of personal sadness. Rather, at the end, there is the note of triumph, a pæan of gladness, because in the darkening shadow of the Cross now appearing the Son of man is to find glory (xiii. 31).

Nor is the glory to be confined to Christ, but the Cross is going to issue in glory for the disciples themselves.

(b) *Glory for Christ's Disciples.*—The Upper Room discourse, which commences in chap. xiv., made it quite clear that the death of Christ was at hand, and the statements about "going to prepare a place for them" (xiv. 2) and "going to the Father" (xiv. 28) carried with them the fact that the "going" was by way of the Cross. The point which emerges, however, from our Lord's discourse is that this going by way of the Cross to the Father is to bring joy and glory to the disciples. In the first place, by Christ's own going away the disciples are to do greater works than those accomplished by Christ Himself (xiv. 12). Then, again, Christ emphasizes the same fact in the simile of the vine and branches. The "greater works" are to be paralleled by the "much fruit," and as Christ's own works brought hatred and the result of hatred to Himself (xv. 25), so their works will do the same for them (xv. 20). And if Christ's own works brought the Cross to Himself, and in the Cross He found His own glory, this seems to be implied for the disciples also. There is a joy in store for the disciples, but it is for them, as for Christ, a joy through the path of suffering and sorrow (xvi. 20-24). For the disciples, as for Christ, there is a joy and glory through the way of the Cross.

The third of these ultimate issues of the Cross is the fact that it will turn out for the glory of God Himself.

(c) *For God's Glory.*—The glory referred to is of a twofold nature—it is the glory of God in Christ Himself, and also in the disciples. The first aspect is mentioned in the beginning of the high-priestly prayer. Our Lord, in addressing the Father, refers to the fact that "the hour" of the Cross and Passion had now come, but the prayer of Christ asks that the glory of the Father may be realized through the Son in this dread hour (xvii. 1).

Christ had already glorified the Father in the revelation of Him which had been given by Christ's own life on earth (xvii. 4), yet Christ asks specially now, on the eve of Calvary, that the glory of the Father may be realized in the Son, and that the pre-existent glory which Christ had had from all time in the presence of the Father should now be made manifest in this hour of the Cross (xvii. 4).

Furthermore, there is a prayer that the same glory of God may be realized in the disciples. Christ first of all declares that He Himself is glorified in His disciples, and that the glory which He had received from the Father He had given to the disciples (xvii. 10, 22). But if the glory of the Father had already been made manifest to the disciples through Christ, He also prays that the disciples may one day see the glory of God in Christ when the latter has passed into the unveiled presence of God through the Cross (xvii. 24). The whole of the prayer, therefore, seems to ring with the note of glory for Christ, for the Father, and for the disciples through the Cross.

St. John now proceeds with the incidents of the Betrayal and the Crucifixion, but one notices again the emphasis laid by Christ upon His own voluntariness in this dark hour. To the disciples, who propose to put the issue to the test of brute strength, He proclaims His willingness to drink the cup of suffering (xviii. 11); to the representative of the Roman power He defines His own position as a King, but not of this world (xviii. 36), and that the Roman power to put Him to the death of the Cross was only a power delegated from His kingdom above (xix. 11). Christ moves on to the Cross, whatever of dark mystery there was in it for Him, with the perfect assurance of His own freedom in it, and with the knowledge that it was to be for the glory of God and of men.

Had the narrative of St. John stopped at this point, there would have been a certain completeness in his historical record of the Cross. The manner in which he shows its foreshadowings from the very outset of Christ's ministry, and the comprehensive way in which the various aspects of the Cross are considered, would make his narrative complete when the story of the Cross

had been told. But there was a further incident to relate, for the post-Resurrection appearances of Christ in the Upper Room sum up in themselves the whole teaching of the Atonement. On the occasion of the first appearance in the Upper Room, St. John tells us that ". . . Jesus came and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when He had said this, He shewed unto them His hands and His side" (xx. 19, 20). It will not be called a strained exegesis to remark that these words and the action of Christ summarize the message of the Atonement. It was "Peace" for the disciples, and through them for all men; but it was "Peace" through the Cross, the marks of which were on the hands and side He showed to them. There was peace for men with God by the Cross.

The second appearance of our Lord in the Upper Room conveys an equally important truth (xx. 26-28). The incident seems to be concerned mainly with the change of mind wrought in the disciple Thomas, but there is a deeper meaning still. Christ's invitation to the doubting follower to examine the marks of the Cross on His person are followed by the full profession—for the first time in the Gospel—of belief in Christ as the Divine Lord and God. It is the Cross, with the resultant Resurrection, which marks the Divinity of Christ (*cf.* Rom. i. 4), and brings home to men the truth that He is Lord and God. In this great fact, therefore, lies the guarantee that whatever had been presaged of the Cross of Christ carried with it the conviction of truth.

The Gospel of St. John, therefore, has a certain completeness in this record of the fact of the Cross of Christ. It begins with the proclamation that the Cross explains the purpose of Christ's coming into the world; it goes on consistently to show that in every aspect of our Lord's teaching the Cross plays a central part; it finishes with the scenes in the Upper Room, where the two appearances proclaim that in the Cross there is peace with God by Him whose Godhead the Cross itself attests.

T. W. GILBERT.

(To be concluded.)

