

THE HEALING OF THE TWO BLIND MEN AT CAPERNAUM.

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II.

THE story is more than a link in a chain. It has a distinctive character of its own, which comes most clearly into view when we contrast it with the story of Bartimaeus. This distinctive character appears mainly in the attitude which Jesus adopted toward the petitioners. Both at Jericho and at Capernaum Jesus is appealed to as "Son of David," a cry which otherwise we hear only twice in the Gospels, from the Syro-phoenician woman, and from the crowd that escorted Jesus into Jerusalem. There is nothing in the least remarkable in this appeal; "Son of David" was a recognized Messianic title, and may, for aught we know, have been frequently applied to Jesus. The essential difference between the two narratives comes into view when we note how in each case He received the appeal.¹ In Capernaum, *so long as He is in the open street*, He takes no notice, but walks on and goes into His house. When the blind men have followed Him into the house, and the interview is now private, He grants their request, but immediately adds the injunction, "See that no man know it." In Jericho, on the other hand, He responds at once, in public; He stops in His walk, and, in the presence of a large crowd, commands the men to be called, asks them what their desire is—not the same question, be it noted, that He asked at Capernaum—and grants their request at once.²

This surely constitutes a real difference between the two narratives. But the full significance of this change of attitude on Our

¹ Dr. Plummer has noticed this in his commentary.

² Matthew alone records that at Jericho He touched the men's eyes. But I think there can be little doubt that this is correct. One gathers from the Gospel narrative that Jesus usually, but not always, laid His hands on the sufferers—though not on demoniacs—and probably always where there was a sense defective. Such defect, in the case of the blind and deaf, closed up one of the avenues by which our Lord's personality made its appeal to the mind and heart of the sick person, and it was only natural that in such cases He should open another by laying His hand upon the defective organ. Where there was impotence of the limbs, He seems sometimes to have tested the sufferer's faith by simply commanding him to act like a normal man. The case recorded in Luke xiii. appears to have been somewhat peculiar.

Lord's part cannot be grasped without first raising the important question why, in His work of healing, He sometimes avoided publicity and sometimes actually courted it, and why, in particular, He occasionally forbade people to proclaim a miracle which He had just performed. To this latter point we must, in the main, confine our present investigation.

The cases in which such a prohibition is recorded are five in number¹—those of the leper, the blind men of Capernaum, the daughter of Jairus, the deaf man of Decapolis, and the blind man of Bethsaida. The motive of the prohibition is partly suggested to us in Mark i. 45, where we are told that the leper's disobedience to the command compelled the retirement of Jesus to desert places, as the only way of avoiding the crowds. But this is only a partial explanation. Why did He, at this particular juncture, wish to avoid them? Apparently because there was a danger of their coming to regard Him as a mere wonder-worker, and allowing the deeper aspects of His mission to pass unheeded. All through the Lord's Galilean ministry there are signs that He perpetually strove to preserve in the minds of His hearers an accurate balance and proportion between the various aspects of His teaching and work. So far as His immediate followers were concerned, these efforts were eventually successful; with the multitude they failed. Among the latter, indeed, the misapprehension went still deeper. To them Jesus was never really much more than a great earthly and political Messiah, come to restore in more than its ancient splendour the throne of His father David; and when it became finally clear that His aims were irreconcilable with their own, they crucified Him.

Now of all the Messianic titles none was more calculated to foster this erroneous view than the title, "Son of David." It is not difficult, therefore, to understand why the Lord did not choose, at Capernaum, to respond in public to such an address. But why did He act differently at Jericho? This question is not very easily answered. I venture to suggest that the explanation lies, partly at least, in the difference of locality. It seems to me that Our Lord

¹ It is a mistake, I think, to include Matthew xii. 16 and Mark iii. 12 in the list. The prohibition in Mark may either have been addressed to the demons, to prevent them from proclaiming our Lord's Messiahship, or to the crowds, to prevent them from divulging the place of His retreat. The prohibition in Matthew had almost certainly the latter significance. (V. Zahn, *in loc.*, *Comm. s. Matth.*)

was more reticent about His Messiahship in Galilee and in the North generally than He was in Judaea. It is worthy of note that neither of these two incidents stands alone in the Synoptic narrative. When the Syro-phoenician woman appealed to Jesus as "Son of David," He treated her as He had treated the blind men at Capernaum; He walked on without taking any notice. It is not, I think, an adequate explanation to say that the woman, being a Gentile, was not entitled to appeal to Him as "Son of David"; this would account for His subsequent refusal, or reluctance to grant her request, but surely not for His silence and apparent inattention. What does account for it is the fact—which is quite evident in Matthew's narrative—that the interview took place in the open air.¹

The incident at Jericho has an equally instructive parallel. Almost immediately after it Jesus rode in triumph into Jerusalem amid cries of "Hosanna to the Son of David"; and when the chief priests and scribes, in sore displeasure, called His attention to these words, and asked Him to rebuke His followers, He replied, "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise."

Some will doubtless reply that this difference of attitude on Our Lord's part was a matter not of place but of time. They will urge that the second pair of incidents took place at the very end of Our Lord's ministry, and, in particular, that the Triumphal Entry was the culmination of that ministry, the occasion when He at last threw off all reticence, and made a public and unmistakable claim to be the promised Messiah. That there is some truth in this view can hardly be denied; nor am I concerned to deny it; all that I am attempting to prove is that Our Lord consciously and deliberately adopted on the first two occasions an attitude which He as deliberately abandoned in the last two. By what motives this change was dictated is a separate question.

But there is something to be said for the geographical explanation. Considerations of time will not wholly explain the contrast. Whatever may be said of the Judæan ministry, the ministry in the North was marked, after its first stage, by a gradually increasing reticence and privacy. Very early in that ministry Jesus began to resort to parables, instead of more explicit teaching. More and more He withdrew Himself from the public gaze and sought retirement, either with His disciples or alone. And after the feeding of

¹ "She crieth after us"—"then came she."

the 5,000, this change of method becomes more marked. He forbids His disciples to speak of His transfiguration, or to tell men that He is the Christ. He performs, so far as we are told, only three more miracles, and in two of these He endeavours to avoid publicity, by leading the sufferer aside, and by forbidding him to spread the news of his cures. These prohibitions, moreover, are marked, if I mistake not, by an increasing stringency; in Mark vii. 26 Jesus apparently gives the command over and over again, while at Bethsaida He goes a step further, and forbids the restored man even to enter the town.

So ended the Galileean ministry. But the ministry in Perea, which immediately follows, shows none of these marks of secrecy and reticence. Three miracles of healing are recorded in its course, but none of them are followed by an injunction to keep silence; the two first indeed (Luke xiii. 11 foll., xiv. 1 foll.), seems to have been specially designed to attract attention; they were performed in public on the Sabbath Day, and on the initiative of Jesus Himself.

I do not think that the explanation of these facts is far to seek. It seems fairly clear that the danger against which Our Lord had to take precautions in Galilee was not, in the main, that of open and defiant rejection, but that of a blind and carnal enthusiasm; which, if He had not taken resolute steps to baffle it, would have literally forced Him (*v.* John vi. 15) into the position of an earthly and political Messiah, with the ultimate result of bringing Him into collision with the jurisdiction of Herod and the Romans, and causing Him to be put to death on a false issue. This, of course, would have been fatal to the true spiritual success of His mission. The issue raised before Caiaphas at Jerusalem was the true issue, and though at Pilate's judgment-seat the false one was, for obvious reasons, put forward by the Jews, neither Pilate nor any one else had any doubt about the facts. In Jerusalem and Judaea it would seem that there was from the first no danger of a misunderstanding. This is borne out by what we know from other sources of the two provinces. The Messianic hope burned brightly and often fiercely in Galilee. Professor G. A. Smith remarks that the nature of the people, like that of the district itself, was volcanic. "Josephus describes them as 'ever fond of innovations, and by nature disposed to changes, and delighting in sedition.' . . . From among them came the chief

zealots and wildest fanatics of the Roman wars." ¹ "That the Messianic tempers were stronger in Galilaean than in any other Jewish hearts is most certain." ² The vitality of this hope, its generally carnal nature, and the inability of the Galilaean to understand the spiritual nature of Our Lord's teaching, combined to produce the danger to which I have alluded.

In Jerusalem and Judaea the situation was very different. There, in the heart and centre of official Judaism, the real import of Our Lord's teaching was discerned, in part at least, from the very first, with that clear-sightedness which fear and hatred often breed, and which, in spite of the cross-currents which the Fourth Gospel reveals to us, could not ultimately lead to any result but murder. "It cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem."

The caution and reticence, then, which were necessary in Northern Palestine were not called for in Jerusalem. More than that, they were impossible. It was absolutely necessary that Jesus should make some public and unmistakable declaration of His Messiahship, and that He should make it in the religious capital of Israel. If He could not allow it to be supposed that He was an earthly and political Messiah, neither could He allow His countrymen, and [particularly their religious leaders, any excuse for saying that He had not claimed to be Messiah at all. "Son of David" was, indeed, an inadequate title for "the Lord from Heaven," but He could not, at the climax of His Judaeian ministry, leave any loophole for the suggestion that it was not His by right.

I submit, then, that there is a real difference between the two narratives which Sir John Hawkins and others regard as one, ³ a difference characteristic of the respective spheres, and possibly also of the respective periods of Our Lord's ministry in which they are recorded to have taken place.

Bishop Westcott suggests another point of difference, a point which I do not feel inclined to press, yet cannot entirely pass over. In the first of these two narratives, Jesus says to the blind men, "According to your faith be it unto you"; the blessing is confined

¹ *Hist. Geogr. of the Holy Land*, p. 421.

² G. A. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 424.

³ Sir John frankly admits that the prohibition to publish the miracle at Capernaum, and the use of the word *ἐκείθεν*, suggest an earlier date than the Jericho incident; he also notes the entry into the house as a distinctive point.

to the limits of their spiritual capacity ; it is no smaller, but also no greater. We miss here the phrase which Mark attributes to Jesus in the later story, " Thy faith hath saved thee." Westcott sees a real distinction between the two phrases ; he thinks that the Lord is only represented as using the word " saved " in cases where some blessing additional to and higher than mere physical healing was received. A careful analysis of the cases where the word is used seems to me to bear out this view ; in the case of the Samaritan leper, in particular, the word appears almost pointless without this special significance. And in this connection it is perhaps worth noting that Bartimaeus immediately followed Jesus in the way, while the only subsequently recorded act of the blind men at Capernaum was one of disobedience to His express command.

But there is yet another mark of the historicity of the Capernaum incident, a mark, moreover, which finds a parallel in the three other stories of the healing of the blind—the circumstances under which the sufferers came into touch with the Divine Healer. The variations of circumstance give to each of the four narratives, but particularly to that of Matthew ix., an air of verisimilitude.

1. The blind man at Bethsaïda was brought to Jesus by friends. Jesus was then only paying a visit, probably a brief visit, to the town ; the blind man, who himself was apparently not a resident,¹ would not be likely to find Him by his own efforts, and may not even have known that He was there ; but the Lord was well-known in Bethsaïda as a miracle-worker,² and there would naturally be those in the town who could bring the two together.

2. Bartimaeus, on the other hand, who was a beggar, and seems to have been regarded by the passers-by as beneath the notice of Jesus, would probably never have known that the Great Physician was in the town, if it had not been for the noise of the crowd. He got his opportunity, so to speak, by accident.

3. In the case of the blind man at Jerusalem, the Lord Himself took the initiative. The man was not, indeed, without friends. His parents were living, and might have brought him to be healed. But the remark in verse 32 : " Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind,"

¹ I gather this from the words, " Do not even go into the village." Jesus would hardly have forbidden him to go back to his own home.

² V. Matt. xi. 21.

the doubts of the neighbours (verse 9), and the incredulity of "the Jews" (verse 18), suggest that even Jesus was not expected to cure so desperate a case.¹ It is interesting to note that such evidence as we have appears to bear out what the Evangelist implies, that the cure was unprecedented. In fact, there is no other miracle recorded where the defect remedied is said, either by statement or implication, to have been congenital.²

And there is another and more subtle mark of historicity in the narrative. Just as the act of healing was more startling, so was the spiritual result more far-reaching than in any previous recorded instance. The restored man was ready at once to receive religious teaching from the lips of his Healer, ready even, without hesitation, on His bare word, to acknowledge and worship Him as the Son of God. Is not this, though at first sight startling, yet really most profoundly natural? The man had received from Jesus a new sense; he had been ushered into a new world; he was enjoying a fresh and utterly unimagined experience. At such a crisis in his personal history he would be in exactly the right condition to receive a new revelation, especially if it came from the Healer Himself; nay, he would even be prepared to believe that the Healer was Himself the new revelation, not merely the restorer of physical or even of spiritual eyesight, but Himself the Light of the world.

4. Different from all these were the circumstances of the blind men of Capernaum. To them it was a simple matter to find access to the Great Physician. Jesus had walked to the house of Jairus accompanied by a crowd of people; He had gone there with the manifest intention of healing the sick child, and the multitude must have been waiting expectantly without, swelled perhaps by the band of mourners whom He had ejected from the death-chamber, and whose scorn and resentment were no doubt vociferously expressed. Moreover, He had just performed a miracle on the way thither in the presence of that very crowd. Must not the narrow Oriental

¹ That no one should, *on that particular day*, have brought the blind man to Jesus, requires no special explanation. It was the Sabbath.

With reference to the question of his parents being able to bring him to Jesus, one gets the impression from verse 21 that they knew nothing of the Great Healer. But it is possible that their profession of ignorance may have been a pretence.

² In some cases it clearly was not, e.g. the case of the blind man at Bethsaïda. A slight exception may perhaps be alleged in the case of dumbness (though obviously *not* the deafness) in Mark viii. 32.

street have been alive with loud and excited discussions about Him ? And would not the multitude be waiting with tense expectation for the moment of His re-appearance ?

It was then perfectly natural that the blind men should be aware that Jesus had now left the house of Jairus, and was again in the street. Nor could they have had any difficulty in following Him to His own home. He was then residing in Capernaum ; it is quite possible that the blind men already knew the house ; and if they did not, they could easily find some one in the crowd to direct them. The whole incident is natural and lifelike, and has, I think, every appearance of historical reality.

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THE STUDY OF THE BIBLE

“ St. Chrysostom, fifteen centuries ago, speaks in burning words, in one of his expository sermons, on the neglect of the Bible. He affirms that in that neglect lies the most fruitful of all sources of misbelief, misbehaviour, confusion and strife in the Church. His words are as true to-day in England as they were in Constantinople in the fifth century. . . .

“ I am quite sure that the Christian life, for its fullness, stability, strength and health, its adult efficiency as a life for God, normally needs, and vitally needs, all the intercourse it can get with the Bible. On the one hand, as we have just recollected, the Christ Himself turned to the Bible for divine aid and light, as to His Father’s oracle. With its words He met the Tempter in the desert. With its words He stayed His most holy soul in the Garden and on the Cross. He died with the words of a Psalm on His lips. When He rose, coming back from Eternity to converse with men in the body, He set out before His wondering followers, ‘ in all the Scriptures, the things concerning Himself.’ So it is our sure wisdom, if indeed we call Him Lord, to use the Book as He used it. To us as to Him it is to be the oracle of eternal verities, for to-day, and for the life to come.

“ Then also, such is the Bible, the Christian who practises ‘ intercourse with the Book ’ will certainly find that a something great and gracious, large and deep, loving and strong, comes out of it into his inner life, and grows there, a something such as no other reading can bring. Make that Book your friend, and you shall surely catch the contagion of its character, its way of thinking about God, about man, about sin, judgment, mercy, holiness, about virtue here and its glorification hereafter.”

[THE BISHOP OF DURHAM in *The Call of Lent* (S.P.C.K.).]