

THE GREAT PRAYER :
SHORT CHAPTERS ON JOHN XVII.
BY THE BISHOP OF DURHAM.

I.

THE seventeenth chapter of St. John is one of the special sanctuaries of the Bible. It might almost bear the title of the Holy of Holies of the divine Book. We could not indeed call it so without reserve ; we could not place any Scripture on a higher spiritual plane than the records of the Nativity, of the Passion, of the Resurrection. But among the Scriptures which are utterances rather than records of event, this must take a place of hallowed pre-eminence. It is an utterance of truth, of truths, supremely great, high as the heaven of heaven, deep as the eternal love of God. It is an utterance direct from the lips of the all-blessed Lord Himself and addressed immediately to His Father ; overheard by His disciples ; full of them as to its import ; but spoken only to the heart of paternal Deity. And it was uttered thus by the Lord Jesus on the very verge of His approach to the altar of Calvary, when our High Priest gave Himself for us, our covenant Victim, in the unfathomable suffering which was to be for ever the basis and warrant of His intercessions for us and His blessings showered from the throne of grace upon us. It is thus rightly called, not seldom, the High Priestly Prayer. It was so uttered as to be listened to by sinful men, on purpose, can we doubt it ? to let us know once for all what should be, in essence, the spirit, the aim, the love, of the intercessory work, upon the eternal throne itself, by the side of the Father, of Jesus Christ the righteous and the glorified.

So let us approach the prayer, let us, as it were, enter it, as those who are admitted to the Holiest ; with a reverence beyond words, with a sense most tender of the awe of the Presence. Only let us remember, as believers, that we are here on lawful as well as holy ground. We are not sinning the sin of Uzzah, or of Uzziah. We are children of the New Covenant. Such is our High Priest, so glorious is the virtue of His sacrificial and mediatory work, that He does not, like Aaron, enter for us where we ourselves dare

not go. Wonderful Friend, He has so joined us to Himself that where He is welcome we are welcome too. "We have boldness to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus"; we "draw nigh, with a true heart, in full assurance of faith." Humbled in the dust, but knowing Him whom we have believed and that we are in faith one with Him, we will listen close at hand to our supreme Priest praying, with no more misgiving as to our liberty than John himself had when these words passed through his ears into his soul to abide there for ever.

So listening, we will cherish a thankful assurance that we are indeed dealing with a record absolutely trustworthy. We will take up sentences and paragraphs as the veritable speech of the Lord Jesus Christ, and let them work as such on our faith, hope, and love. They come to us, from the side of chronology, from a long way off, from a moment nearly nineteen hundred years away. And they were written down, as we have them here, long years, perhaps seventy or eighty, after they were uttered. But do not let this come between us and the assurance that they are the veritable words of the Son of Man and that, as such, "they are spirit, they are life." The nineteen hundred years, in such a matter, are of no account. *Littera scripta manet*, above time. It is so with any literature. The verse of Virgil is precisely as much alive in its intellectual and emotional power to-day as it was when it came first from his large, lofty, pensive, tender soul. And as to those seventy or eighty years, which might reasonably be thought to bring a more genuine difficulty, I venture with conviction to say that we need have no misgiving. The question whether the aged John can be thought to have reported his Lord with faultless accuracy, recalling that already remote utterance of the night of the betrayal, has answers full of reassurance, both in the way of nature and in that of grace. In nature, it is a frequent experience of advanced life, not least of very far advanced life, to recollect not only incidents but even chance words and phrases of the earliest days of youth far better than those of yesterday; a phenomenon no doubt not accidental but arising from the human constitution. In grace, in the great and special grace which we call inspiration, when God in His providence commissioned men to be the authentic messengers of His Son to men, we may amply feel sure of His power, even without His leaving for a moment the settled lines (we call

them laws) of His contact with man's inner being, to raise into abnormal action that recollecting faculty. Is it not a highly probable inference from psychological observation that our personal being, speaking briefly, has two regions, the conscious and the subconscious? These, if I understand aright, are regarded as distinct indeed but not isolated; the contents (if I may use the word) of the subconscious are continually working up into the conscious. In particular (so a mass of curious evidence appears to show), the subconscious region receives and, vastly more readily and fixedly than the conscious, retains the impressions made every moment by things around, words included. Under special conditions it can let these work upward into expression in ways transcending all normal memory. The uneducated maidservant, in a well-known case, under delirium in hospital, repeated correctly long passages of the Hebrew Bible; she had heard them recited by her clerical master as he paced a corridor near the kitchen. Some thoughtful inquirers are prepared to say that the underworld of our being retains literally *all* experienced impressions.

Has this nothing to say as to the possibility of exact records of long-past utterances, where such records, in the wisdom of God, were to prove of supreme value for man? If a morbid state of brain could open the way for the untaught maid to the exact repetition of a long chain of verbal sounds unintelligible to her, it is abundantly sure that the will of his holy Maker could open the way for an old apostle, under conditions of perfect sanity of thought, to recall the *ipsissima verba* which, seventy years before, had been dropt into his subconscious treasury by the lips of his blessed Lord.

And if it be said that this is at best only a conjecture, on which it is at least a doubtful thing to build, I venture to reply that the circumstances of the holy history give a reasonableness, a profoundly befitting character, to the conjecture, such as to give it a true sustaining power. To me the whole question of the credibility or not of the supernatural, the miraculous, in the primeval days of the Faith is profoundly affected by the supreme and central fact of the Incarnation. It is historically provable that from the very dawn of the life of the Church the belief was equally sure and calm that Jesus of Nazareth, truly Man, was also truly God, Lord of life and death, Giver of grace, rightful Object of absolute love

and trust. And the majestic sanity of the morals which sprung, adult and perfect, from that faith is spiritual warrant for its truth. Well, if indeed God "took man upon Him to deliver him," if that infinite miracle was indeed as much history as mystery, is it not reason rather than assumption, or presumption, to expect to find the supreme mind and will working wonderfully, abnormally, not against nature but above it, in the surroundings, so to speak, of the transcendent fact? It has pleased God to give us in a Book the record of His preparation for that fact, of the occurrence of that fact, and of the development and exposition of the significance of that fact in the unique first days. And I hold that it is not an idle guess but a deliverance of reverent and sober reason to conclude that in that record alike of actions and of utterances surrounding Incarnation and the Incarnate, we should look for the wholly trustworthy rather than for mistakes of memory, wandering lights of legend, or foreign matter introduced by unauthorized imagination or unauthorized thought.

To me it seems adequate, as I read this chapter of St. John, to recollect that it is manifestly given to me as what asks to be believed; that it professes to come through the venerable Intimate of the Christ; that it is attached by links as tender and as strong as can be to the fact and glory of Incarnate God. And so I read it with the reverent persuasion that the highest will has guided this record of His words into an entire veracity.

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(To be continued.)

