

## THE GREAT PRAYER.

### SHORT CHAPTERS ON JOHN XVII.

BY THE BISHOP OF DURHAM.

#### VI.

**O**UR study passes on from the Lord's intercession for His first chosen ones, His apostles, the favoured group who stood around Him that night and heard His words on their behalf. We come now, as last month we undertook to do, to that far wider circle, so wide that one bright day it shall prove to be a multitude that no man can number, those who should "believe on Him through their word."

For them He goes on (ver. 20) to offer explicit petition. Let us approach what He says with the tender solemnity of the recollection that we, writer and reader, are personally included here. We by the great grace of God have believed on His Son. To us, by the Holy Ghost, who takes of the things of the Son and shews them to men, has been given that spirit-sight of Christ Jesus the Lord which brings with it, in a sequence profoundly natural while supernaturally made possible, that saying faith which means the man's committal of himself to his Redeemer, his welcome to his Lord to enter in and have His own way in the inner world, his new life in a trusted Christ. And this we have received, this simple but infinitely significant act of believing we have been led to do, "through the word" of the first messengers of our Master. Through them has come to us all that we know of the unique Person to whom we have entrusted ourselves. Whatever hand actually wrote each of the four Gospels, they are all most assuredly apostolic, in the sense that none of the four could have found its early and decisive acceptance in the Church without apostolic warrant, even where it had not (as in the case of the second and third Gospels certainly) direct apostolic authorship. Every detail of the narrative of the Incarnate Life, and Death, and immortal Victory, every lineament of the Character, every record of the supreme Prophet's words, comes to us from those who walked with Him here below in the unspeakable privilege of companionship. And when we recount to ourselves the truths that we believe, the grounds of our assurance of blessing in and

through the Christ, the offices and attributes of Him on whom we rely, the blessing to us and within us which each office and attribute brings as we translate it into experience—all this is still “through their word.” The precious Epistles are the treasury out of which we draw, always anew and as if for the first time, our articulate certainties about all that our Christ “is given to us to be,” so far as it is not drawn from the apostolic record of His own utterances (as this utterance, for a supreme example) upon earth. Not our “best thinking,” but their word; not all the accumulated “best thinking” of even the finest human minds other than theirs, but their word; not even the best thinking of the Church of which they were the first ministers, but their word; this is the “vessel” which to us “bore the Name,” and which alone bears it still, in its authentic glory.

It is hardly necessary here, but it may not be useless, to say in passing that such recollections will not be in the least disturbed by the obvious fact that the “word” of the Epistles is, for its largest part, given through Paul, the man who not only was not with the Lord on the betrayal night but was soon to develop into His chief antagonist. Paul was indeed “born out of due time” into faith and into apostleship. But indeed he was born, and indeed he was grouped with the first apostles for ever by the same supreme call; “a chosen vessel to bear my Name.” Not physically, not locally, but in spiritual fact, he was there, on that night of the Great Prayer. His “word” was present to the Lord’s mind there quite as truly that of Peter, or of John.

And it may not waste our time to note just further that the one great Epistle which is, *as to certainty*, anonymous, the Hebrews, claims in highest reason our reliance as a part of “their word.” I do not press here what I, for one, hold to be more than probable, that at the back of it, so to speak, was Paul; that Paul originated its creation, as the pre-eminent “scribe instructed unto the Kingdom,” but for grave reasons committed the writing not only to another pen but to another mind, other, while in contact with his own. Whether this were so or not, I take it as assured that the Christian “prophet” who actually framed and wrote the Epistle worked in fullest fellowship with the apostolic leading, and was recognized by the apostles as scattering “their word,” given to him also by the one Inspirer.

Once more, in brief, we believers of to-day, for all our certainties of faith, come back, directly or indirectly, to "their word" as our rock of refuge, repose, and life; their word, vivified and glorified indeed to us by the Spirit who inspired them, but not the less their word. So we, believing through that word, are explicitly embraced in the Lord's petition here. "I pray for them also."

What now does He ask for us, for all "the blessed company of" the sons of faith through the word, all the long generations of the faithful, even to "the consummation of the age"?

First, and with repetition, He makes request that we may "be one"; "as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee; that they also may be [one]<sup>1</sup> in us." And this He asks with the special aim of providing a host of witnesses who shall arrest and win "the world" "that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me;" "that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and lovedst them even as Thou lovest Me."

We note further, in closest connexion, those other words (ver. 22, 23): "The glory which Thou hast given Me I have given unto them, that they may be one even as We are one; I in them and Thou in Me; that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and lovedst them even as Thou lovedst Me."

What Christian, living by faith in the Son of God, walking with Him in worshipping sympathy of will and aims, has not pondered reverently that great utterance of his Lord upon unity? And who, after such pondering, has not mourned the "divisions of Christendom," the almost innumerable rifts of organization and order, Eastern and Western, Reformed and Unreformed, Episcopal and non-Episcopal? Who has not indulged a dream of what the scene would be; what a calm, what a strength, would fill the life of Christendom; if co-operative unity—no metallic and mechanical uniformity, but federated co-operation, in the large light of truth—could emerge from the chaos? Shall I make a confession which will seem paradoxical from a man whose convictions are not only with the Reformation but largely with its Puritan side? Gazing, some dozen years ago, one bright winter day at Rome, from the Pincian Hill, at the dome-crowned majesty of St. Peter's, the dream

<sup>1</sup> The word "one" (εἷς) in this clause is probably to be omitted. But the context would seem to supply it to the mind.

I have indicated above seemed to rise in and around me. I put aside for the moment all the historical perplexities, to say the least, which attend the claim of Rome to have had Peter for her bishop, and also her vast exaggeration of his "primacy" into a much more than imperial supremacy in the human world. I thought only of the lofty historical importance and significance of that city in the story of civilization, and I imagined to myself a Western, if not a worldwide, Christendom, moving and working in all its manifold national and other developments, in free and constitutional connexion with the Church of that wonderful metropolis—assuming (alas! for the facts on the other side) that Church to have kept unsullied and altogether living the faith (and the law) of the Epistle to the Romans! The dream assumed a noble and beautiful colour, with its vision of liberty and ordered dignity, amidst all my sad certainties that in *that* form a better age of the Church of God was not to be looked for.

The thought is certainly uplifting, hallowing, inspiring—a Christendom actuated all over by the spirit of the Great Prayer and manifesting its inner unity by outward harmony. But then it is evident, as we weigh the words of the Intercessor, that the unity of order, the coherence of amalgamation or federation in the sphere of ministry and government, was certainly not in the foreground of His view. The language could hardly direct us more decisively to the region of the spiritual, to the unity which means a fellowship of souls at once animated and held together by a common life born, in each and all, "of the Spirit," and whose sphere is union of spirit with the Father and the Son. What can be "the glory which Thou gavest Me and which I have given them," but that mysterious and blissful *sonship* which goes immeasurably deeper than the sonship by creation, or the sonship by sacramental rite, and means nothing short of the actual new life of holy and serving love lived in the adored and trusted Son of God Himself? That results in a *family likeness* transcending all ecclesiastical delimitations. And I do not think it too much to say that, in order to make the world savingly aware that the Father has sent the Son for its salvation, the supreme means, infinitely more powerful than any community of order, would be a vast multiplication of those family likenesses in all the provinces, all the fragments, of Christendom to-day.

That spiritual development would most surely work (as nothing

else would) for a harmony great and precious in the externals of Christianity, in its methods of ministering and labour. But it would be the way to such harmony, not the harmony the way to the "oneness." And that sort of oneness, moral and spiritual, is that which would make the world pause, and look, and listen, and believe.

So let us humbly attach our prayers to the Great Prayer of the Intercessor. The grand prerequisite to a regenerated world is a regenerated Church. We will pray that, before the æon ends, the Eternal Spirit may so move in our broken Christendom that Christians, for the world's mercy, may spiritually coalesce in the life of the Family of God.

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*(To be concluded.)*

