

THE TRANSFIGURATION.

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DR. SANDAY, commenting on Schweitzer, speaks of the Transfiguration as "a ratification of the past and a foreshadowing of the future." It will be useful before commenting on these words or on the meaning of the Transfiguration to fix in our minds carefully the exact sequence of the events in that marvellous experience. For this purpose the account given in St. Luke will be found to be more exact in detail than the corresponding narratives in St. Matthew and St. Mark. It is enough to note the fact without attempting here to explain it.

THE ORDER OF EVENTS.

Our Lord took with Him Peter, James, and John, and went up on to the mountain (probably Hermon) to pray. While He was praying His countenance was changed, and His raiment became white as a sheet of lightning. Moses and Elijah in forms of glory were conversing with Him concerning His departure, which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. His disciples, who had been overwhelmed with sleep, woke up and beheld His glory and the two men who were standing with Him. As the men were in the act of withdrawing, Peter said to Jesus, "Sir, it is good for us to be here, let us make three booths, one for Thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah," hardly conscious what he was saying. But as he spoke there was a cloud and it overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered into the cloud. And there was a voice out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My chosen : hear ye Him." And in the utterance of the Voice Jesus was found alone. And they kept silence and told no one in those days what they had seen !

From this account, as given in St. Luke, it is abundantly manifest that the part played by the disciples was that of witnesses attesting the reality of the experience, but, as confirming its reality for Jesus, not as deputed to proclaim it to others. From the other gospels it is certain that their silence was not optional but strictly enjoined by Jesus. Therefore all explanations of the Transfiguration as meant to confirm the faith of the disciples are undoubtedly erroneous. A great part of the occurrence took place while they were overwhelmed with sleep, and the subject of the conversation of Jesus with Moses and Elijah can only have become known to them through their Master, at some later period. Even when they woke it was only just in time to see that the gathering was at an end. Even then they were so startled and confused that they hardly knew what they said. That which called them to full consciousness was to find that they were entering into a cloud. Taught by the Old Testament they were aware that they were passing into the Shechina, sinners passing into the presence of God. This was an

experience quite other than that of the changed countenance, or the lightning splendour of the raiment of Jesus ; quite other than the glory resting on the forms of Moses and Elijah. From these manifestations they were passing into the "exceeding glory" of the Divine Presence. From that glory came the voice proclaiming Jesus to be the chosen Son of God. When the voice ceased Jesus was found alone. He raised them from their prostration and calmed their fears. They looked around. No one was there but Jesus and themselves. Awestricken they willingly observed the silence enjoined on them. What had happened they could not know till Jesus rose from the dead.

THE PURPOSE OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

must be sought then in the experience of Jesus, not in that of the disciples. To say this is at once to imply that there was in the Person of Jesus a real need for the spiritual reassurance which was thus ministered to Him. We enter on holy ground, and we enter with the fullest admission that our powers are insufficient for the task before us. The mere fact that Jesus Christ was perfect God as well as perfect man at once places His mentality beyond all human measurements. On the other hand, we must not so think of Him as to imagine that the temptations with which He was confessedly assailed were unreal, and that His Divinity made them battles fought with blank cartridges, mere parade-ground exercises. There was an element even in His perfect Being to which these temptations were powerfully addressed ; His victories over them were real victories after hard-fought battles, and He, though perfect at each stage of the conflict, was further perfected by the things which He suffered. We are therefore justified in believing that the Transfiguration was no mere display of that hidden glory by which Jesus was always encompassed in virtue of His Divinity, but a sublime answer to intensely fervent prayer, which prayer was prompted by a real sense of need. The battle-ground of the Transfiguration was as desperate as that of the Temptation in the wilderness, and hardly, if at all, less desperate than that of Gethsemane. Jesus encountered on all three the same foe, and though He was God, for our sakes entered into the field of temptation as we are called to enter into it. But whereas in the other two conflicts there is a background of angelic aid, in this we have in the foreground representatives of "the assembly and Church of the first-born, whose names are written in Heaven"—not, of course, as mediators in any sense between Him and the Father, but as part of that cloud of witnesses, whose hope and faith would have been wrecked if Jesus had been defeated. The Transfiguration, let us repeat, was purposeless, if it was not a succour given in answer to the prayers of a really tempted Jesus.

"A RATIFICATION OF THE PAST."

The Galilean ministry of Jesus was drawing to an end. We are apt to imagine that this ministry was foredoomed to failure. But

there is nothing in the Gospels to justify this supposition. On the contrary Jesus entered on a work rich in promise of a great national conversion. Already the preaching of the Baptist had met with a marvellous response. There went out to him in the wilderness "Jerusalem and all Judæa, and all the country round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." The religious and political leaders of the nation, Pharisees and Sadducees were there. Representatives of the Roman dominion, tax-gatherers and soldiers, hung upon his words, seeking to be prepared for the Kingdom of God. There was in all Palestine but one opinion that the Divine forerunner of the new age was heralding the Messiah. Even the horribly licentious court of Herod was aroused to a sense of sin. Into this heritage Jesus entered, attested by the Baptist, as the Lamb of God, as one whose shoe's latchet he was unworthy to unloose, as the Baptizer Whose baptism would be with the Holy Ghost and with fire. Behind all these multitudes, recipients of a wave of profound but possibly transitory religious impression, and behind the Essenes, the first great social reformers, behind also the hotheaded and too often bloodthirsty zealots, there lay "the meek upon earth," the pious homes of such men as Joseph and Zachariah, ripe to receive the message of a Saviour from sin. These "looked for the fulfilment of the Messianic promises at the hands of some great human figure who should work marvels and redeem the Jews and the entire world from slavery and misfortune by his supernatural power" (Clausner's *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 228). We may go further than Clausner and may say that they were prepared for the advent of the redeemer-God, and accepted Jesus as the promised Redeemer.

Who shall say that all these hopes were from the first illusory? True it is that there was a Divine necessity for the Cross, but was there also a Divine necessity that Israel should cry "His blood be on us and on our children," or that the superscription of the Cross should be, "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews"? To assert this is to say, to all appearance, that there was no possibility of the fulfilment of the hopes expressed in the words: "How often would I have gathered thee, as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not." It is, at least, not inconsistent with the gospels to believe that the door was still open for a great national repentance, and for a dissociation of Israel as a nation from the guilt of the Crucifixion. If so, we may regard the Galilean ministry of our Lord as He Himself regarded it, as the culmination of a Divine call to Israel to take its part as a nation in the work of human redemption. Jesus was the beloved Son, Whom the owner of the vineyard sent to gather from the husbandman the fruit of the vineyard. When Jesus began to teach and to preach the door was still open. By the time of the Transfiguration it was practically closed. But of all the multitudes who had heard the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables, who had seen His mighty works, who had fed on the loaves and fishes, how many were left who accepted Him as Messiah? The twelve—and one

of these was the traitor: a few households here and there whose doors were still open to Him. But how few! "The Son of Man hath not where to lay His head." Even the Baptist had sent to ask whether he was the Messiah. With the Pharisees He had finally broken by His words declaring all meats clean. Herod Antipas, the murderer of the Baptist, was thirsting for His blood. The great crowds who would have taken Him by force and made Him a king had all deserted Him. A fugitive almost, now on the borders of Tyre and Sidon, and now in the province of Herod Philip, He saw before Him, not only the Cross, but the Cross to which His own nation nailed Him. Surely, as a Missioner Whose mission had been rejected, as a Patriot Who saw His people finally doomed, Jesus had need of a time of prayer, of uninterrupted prayer, of prayer into which the inner circle of His disciples could not enter. For this prayer, that He might commune with His Father on the refusal by Israel of the Mission that had begun so hopefully, our Lord retreated to the natural sanctuary of Mount Hermon. "It" (that is His journey), says Sir George Adam Smith, "became the occasion of His resolution to return to meet the Jews, and the death which lay ready for Him in their hate. . . . The scenery had already been consecrated by the crisis and turning of a soul, by the hope which another exile had seen break through His drenching sorrow, like as the sun breaks through the mists and saturated woods of the hills around.

" . . . From the land of Jordan
 And the Hermons, from the hill Mizar,
 Deep unto deep is calling at the noise of the waterfalls;
 All day breakers and billows are gone over me.
 With a breaking in my bones my enemies reproach me,
 While they say unto me all the day, Where is thy God?
 Why are thou cast down, O my soul?
 And why art thou disquieted within me?
 Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise Him,
 Health of my countenance and my God!"

Jesus prayed, not because He would turn back from His appointed task, but for reassurance that He was executing it in conformity with the Divine will. At His Baptism was confirmed and approved His long abstinence from any public ministry. In the forty days of solitary communion with God that followed were set aside the temptations (1) to exercise His Divine powers for bodily indulgence; (2) to exercise them for gain of public notoriety; (3) to exercise them in such a way as to make the Kingdoms of the world subservient to the setting up of the Kingdom of God. It was this last resolution that was most costly. Had He yielded to it He could have carried His nation with Him. But He had resisted the attempt to *force* Him to be a king. He had preferred all that this choice involved. He had accepted rejection by Israel, friendship with publicans and sinners, the doom of a death which humiliated Godhead itself with the curse of the Cross—He was staking all that is dear to man, all that makes life worth living. Was all this according to the Father's will? Was there

no other way out? no honourable alternative? Once more He sought in prayer Divine ratification of His choice.

THE FORESHADOWING OF THE FUTURE.

In the process of this communion with God, while His disciples slept, Jesus was drawn out of this world of space and time into the confines of the region of the world of spirits, the realm of the blessed dead. "His face became other." "His raiment shone with the brilliancy of lightning." How could these experiences have become known? We may refer to the glory which shone from the countenance of Moses when he came down from the Mount. It still lingered though it was fading, but lingered sufficiently to need a veil to cover it from the eyes of beholders. Though the disciples did not wake till the manifestation was almost at an end, they were bewildered even by its passing splendour. It is usual to describe the event as miraculous or supernatural, and this is a true description as against those who treat the Transfiguration as a dream. But it is not true if it means that the world known to our senses is the only real, or even the most real world that exists. When Stephen stood before his persecutors, "they saw his face as it had been the face of an angel." There can be no question that this was an actual experience. Not less is it certain that on multitudes of death-beds of saints a glory from the world beyond has shone out. The faces of the departing have "become other," and they have told us how near to them was the world into which they were entering, and how they have seen into "the land of far distances." It is not strange that the glory resting on Moses and Elijah should invest the whole of our Lord's person, and be reflected on His raiment.

These external features of the Transfiguration yield, after all, in importance to the significance of His passing for a while without death into the world of the departed. Here, it is natural that the two, who conversed with Him, should be two of those on whom the hand of death never rested—Moses, "who fell asleep by the kiss of God," and whose body could not be found, and Elijah, who was translated into Heaven. How the disciples recognized them we are not told, nor can conjecture help us. They were present conversing with Jesus on "the departure which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem."

We can—without irreverence—form some impression of the lines which their discourse must have followed. For behind these two were all the great company who died in faith, not having seen the promises, but having embraced them from afar. Martyrs who had laid down their lives in defence of the truth, who had endured imprisonment, torture, and violent deaths, as well as all the rest of the company of the faithful, were at hand—in glory, and yet not perfected. They were not perfected, for things in heaven as well as things on earth were waiting for the reconciliation of the Cross. It is surely by no accident that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews has closely associated all these with Jesus,

“Who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the Cross, despising the shame.” As against all the humiliation of the past and the agony of the Crucifixion there stood out in glory all that the Lord was to win by His death—the defeat of death and sin, the opening of the gates of Heaven to the King of glory, the session of redeemed Humanity in the Person of Christ at the right hand of the Father. Oh! how utterly unequal is our cold, dull imagination to conceive the wonders of that marvellous converse! How little can we know of the glory of the redemption of the world! When we think of these things even the brilliancy that lit up that dark night on Mount Hermon fades into insignificance. No power but the infinite Love of God could achieve it. No nature save the Divine could bear the fulness of that unspeakable joy which the departure in Jerusalem was about to accomplish.

JESUS ONLY.

“Now I saw in my dream,” says John Bunyan, “that these two men went in at the gate: and lo! as they entered they were transfigured: and they had raiment put on that shone like gold. There were also that met them with harps and crowns and gave them to them; the harps to praise withal and crowns in token of honour; then I heard in my dream, that all the bells in the city rang again for joy; and that it was said to them, ‘Enter ye into the joy of your Lord.’ I also heard the men themselves that they sang with a loud voice, saying ‘Blessing, honour, glory and power, be to Him that sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb for ever and ever.’

“Now just as the gates were opened to let in the men, I looked after them; and behold, the city shone like the sun, the streets also were paved with gold, and in them walked men with crowns on their heads, palms in their hands, and golden harps to sing praise withal.

“There were also of them that had wings; and they answered one another without intermission, saying, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord.’ And upon that they shut up the gates, which when I had seen, I wished myself among them.”

So far, our study of the Transfiguration has placed us in the spirit where John Bunyan stood, peering, as it were, into the gates of the golden city. “And upon that they shut up the gates, which when I had seen, I wished myself among them.”

But the Transfiguration does not end there. It carries us far into the very heart of the City, into the presence of the King. “There came to pass a cloud and overshadowed them. And they feared as they entered into the cloud.” It was no dream of future glory that could have sufficed to carry Jesus through the remainder of the journey. Be the vision never so splendid

“At length the Man perceives it die away
And fade into the light of common day.”

The experience vouchsafed to Jesus, not yet glorified, was far beyond any Vision. It was the experience of entry into the

Father's Presence, and the sound of the Father's voice : " This is My Son, My chosen : hear ye Him."

The disciples we are told " entered the cloud with fear," when it had passed they were found prostrate, with their faces to the earth, not daring to rise till Jesus lifted them up and reassured them. Then looking round they saw no one save Jesus only. Erect, undaunted, nay, even elated, He passed into His Father's presence, and received as the seal of approval on the choice that He had made, the enheartening words : " This is My Son, My chosen." Dare we compare things infinitesimally small with things infinitely great? If we dare do so without irreverence, there are those who can call to mind a moment when the training of boyhood and youth being completed, and life's work and vocation entered upon, a father's approval, not easily nor cheaply bestowed, rang in our ears in accents unforgettable, " I am proud of you to-day, my son." At that moment we entered, so it seemed, into an inheritance better than any earthly riches, better than the applause of any by-standing crowd. On that day and in that hour, we *found ourselves*, we saw in a flash the joy of having fulfilled the life-dream of him whom on earth we revered most. He who has found himself has found the best of all treasures.

Could there be anything in the life of Jesus at all corresponding to this experience? Our first impulse is to say decidedly, " No." Having firm and strong faith in the Godhead of our blessed Lord, we shrink from the idea of any growth or development in His Personality. But we find that in so doing we are conceiving a Being Whose manhood was real, and yet was not subject to conditions of time. With what confidence can we defend this assumption? If our Lord was subject, as He undoubtedly was, to conditions of space, was his manhood not, like ours, subject to conditions of time? He grew in stature and in wisdom. He *grew* even in favour with God—not because at any moment aught less than the fullness of the Father's favour rested on Him, but because increasing years increased His capacity to appreciate the length, breadth, depth, and height of that surpassing love. Surely each prayer, each holy meditation, each act of loving service was for Him, so to speak, an entrance further into that Holy of Holies. As he grew in knowledge of His Father, He grew in knowledge of Himself. The purpose of His Mission developed; His holy Name " Jesus " assumed fuller meaning. Those who had borne the name before Him were Saviours of Israel, but He, cost what it might, was called to be the Saviour of the World—yes, even if it cost the humbling of His Divine Sonship to the shame of the Cross. Now, on the eve of the Transfiguration—with Peter's confession, " Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," ringing in His ears—He had at once and plainly foretold His crucifixion. He had determined to lose His life, that He might save it. He had renounced the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of the whole world, but he had found Himself and saved Himself. This was the meaning of the voice heard on the Mount of Transfiguration.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

This study of the Transfiguration is incomplete without reference to the very difficult words: "There are some of those who stand here who shall not taste of death till they see 'the Son of Man coming in His kingdom'" (St. Matthew); "the kingdom of God having come in power" (St. Mark); "the kingdom of God" (St. Luke). It might be satisfactory to interpret this prophecy of the day of Pentecost, or of the spread of the gospel, were it not so nearly connected with the words: "Of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when He cometh in His own glory, and that of the Father, and of the holy angels." The close proximity of these words seems to confine any fair interpretation to the second coming of our Lord. The connecting of the two passages gains for us two points of real importance: (1) The refusal of the critics to believe that our Lord at this time prophesied His resurrection as well as His death is overthrown; for if He was to die, He could not come in glory without rising from the dead. (2) The certainty that the Transfiguration formed part of the gospel narrative during the lifetime of that generation. The words could not have been inserted into, or preserved in the Transfiguration narrative, had the whole of that generation passed away before the Gospels were committed to writing. These are two points of real importance. On the other hand, those who refuse to believe that even as touching His second coming our Lord could have uttered any words that are not to be literally accepted, seem bound to insist that the "coming of our Lord in glory," of one verse bears, and bore in His mind, a different meaning from the "coming of the kingdom of God in power." Some refer it to the Transfiguration, to which it could have been more easily referred, if we had read in any of the gospels, "Till they have seen My Glory." It is a possible, though difficult interpretation, and it seems doubtful whether it would have been accepted, except under the compelling influence of a presupposition.

Others find it compatible with full belief in our Lord's Godhead, and in His absolute truthfulness, to hold that while on earth, He looked forward to a shorter interval than that which has actually occurred between His resurrection and His second coming. The time which, as it passes, seems to us as long, will, in retrospect, be short indeed. Our time-measurements have no place in the world of Eternity. As the rise and fall of ancient Empires, the whole shaping of ancient history prepared the way for the first coming of our Lord, so it seems most certain that the course of this world is now being ordered to find its culmination in the second coming. The first coming took the world by surprise; yet it happened in the fullness of time. In like fullness we expect that second coming, which will overtake the world with like suddenness, and like confirmation of the overruling Providence of God. So we pray, "Thy kingdom come." So will that prayer be answered one day before the lips that framed it have grown cold in death.