

THE EPISTLES TO
THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA.

V.—SARDIS. (*Revelation* iii. 1-6.)

IF the secular history of an Asiatic city had any legitimate connection with the interpretation of these Epistles, few names would offer a field of wider interest to the Expositor than that ancient capital of the old Lydian monarchy through whose agora flowed the Pactolus with its golden sands; which was famed, in its remote past, at once for its manufactures and its coinage; whose name recalls the old tales, half mythical, half historical, of Gyges and of Cræsus. It preceded Miletus and Thyatira in the fame of its purple dye, and Corinth in that of its bronze, or compound metal known as electrum. Following in the track, however, of the method I have hitherto pursued, I cast but a passing glance at these external facts and seek rather to ascertain, as far as may be, what was its actual state at the time when the Apostle's mind was turned to its perils and its privileges, in his Patmos exile. The one event which then, probably, influenced its condition was the great earthquake that had laid it waste in the reign of Tiberius (A.D. 17), and had been followed by a desolating pestilence. From this, however, the population had sufficiently recovered a few years later to be among the candidates for the honour of erecting a temple to the Emperor, who had then come to their aid; and at the time of the Apocalypse it was probably a fairly flourishing community. Its dominant worship, to judge

by the ruins of the stately temple that still remain, was that of the great mother-goddess, Cybele; and that worship, it will be remembered, with its eunuch priesthood and its orgiastic rites, was one which tended, as much almost as that of Dionysos or Aphrodite, to sins of a foul and dark impurity. In the midst of such a population, rescued from such a cultus, we have to think of the small community of disciples who were addressed, through their Angel, or Bishop, as the Church of Sardis.

Here, as before, we may well assume that the name by which the Lord reveals Himself at the opening of this Message had a special bearing upon the state of the Angel and the Church to whom the Message was to be transmitted. The Spirit was thought of, to use the later terminology of the Church, as the "Giver of Life" (*τὸ ζῶοποιόν*) and of all its seven-fold gifts; the seven Spirits of i. 4 and v. 6 were but forms of that Divine life which He—one, yet manifold—imparted. These He, the Lord of the Churches, possessed and could call his own; for thus it is that He can "quicken whom he will:" thus He can impart the Divine life, in all its marvellous variety, to those who stand in need of it. And He is also, as in the opening vision of the Seer, "he that hath the seven stars" which represent the guides and teachers of the Church; He is able, that is, to bring together the gifts of life and the ministry for which those gifts are needed. If those who minister are without the gifts, it is because they have not asked for them. The union of the two attributes is, therefore, one both of encouragement

and of warning. If each star shines with its peculiar radiancy, it is because it is under the power and influence of the seven-fold Spirit; if it has no life or light, and ceases to shine, there is the danger of its falling away from its place in that glorious band and becoming as one of the "wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever."

And here both the warning and the encouragement were needed. Of the Angel of the Church at Sardis, and, by implication, of the Society which he represented, it was said, "*Thou hast a name that thou livest,*"—hast the shew and the fame of a spiritual life,—and yet thou "art dead." The cause of that loss of vitality and strength is to be found, we may believe, in the absence, in this instance, of the "tribulation" and the "endurance" which were so prominent in the judgment passed on the works of other Churches. The members of the Sardian Church had not been tried in the fire of adversity; life had not been braced and strengthened by the conflict with persecution: men had been content with "works" of a lower and less noble kind, occasional acts of charity, the routine of decent conduct. There had been no open scandals; Sardis was still recognized by the other Churches as a living and true member of the great family of God, was even, it may be, winning their admiration for its seemingly energetic vitality. And yet the chill and the paralysis which were the forerunners of the end were slowly creeping in upon its life; death, not life, was already master of the position, the dominant characteristic

of the Church as a whole, and of its spiritual ruler in particular.

To the Angel and the Church that was gliding into this state of spiritual torpor and death, the command comes, "*Be watchful;*" *become* as one who watches (*γίνου γρηγορῶν*); rouse thyself, and stand as one who seeks to cast off that torpor. The words that follow present a singular diversity of reading,—"*Strengthen the things that remain, which ARE ready to die*" (*ἃ μέλλει ἀποθανεῖν*); or, which *were* at the point to die (*ἃ ἔμελλον*); or, lastly, "*which thou wert at the point to lose*" (*ἃ ἔμελλες ἀποβάλλειν*). The meaning is, in all cases, substantially the same, but the best supported reading seems the second. In any case, the question meets us, What are those "things that are ready to die"? Are they those *members* of the Church in whom there were yet some signs of life, however feeble? or those *elements* of life, Christian graces and activities, which were not yet actually extinct? Both interpretations are, of course, grammatically tenable; but the distinct mention afterwards of persons as such, in the "few names" that are singled out for special praise, inclines the balance in favour of the latter. The Angel of the Church is called to wake up from his slumbers, and then to strengthen in himself the energy, the zeal, the love, the hope, the faith, which were so nearly dying out. In doing this he could not fail to help the persons also in whom this flagging of all spiritual vigour had been most conspicuous, or, in the language of the Epistle to the Hebrews, to "lift up the hands that hang down and the feeble knees" (xii. 12).

The reason for this command is then given. "*I have not found thy works perfect*" (literally, *not filled up* to the measure which God requires of thee) "*before God.*" And then, as in the analogous warning to the Angel of the Church of Ephesus (Chap. ii. 5), there came other words: "*Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard.*" Personally it was an admonition to the Bishop of the Sardinian Church to go back mentally to the time when he was yet a catechumen in the Christian Church, to recall the steps by which he then came under the oral teaching of apostles, or bishop-elders, how the traditions thus received in doctrine, ethics, discipline, had formed a complete and consistent whole—how, afterwards (here the change of tense, from the perfect to the aorist, points, it may be, to some definite epoch in his life, as the laying on of the hands of the presbytery when he was consecrated to his ministerial office) he heard, in solemn words, what was the true pattern and standard of the duties of his office.¹ The counsel to "*keep*" all this is identical with that given by St. Paul to Timotheus, to "*keep the good thing which had been committed to his charge*" (2 Tim. i. 14), to "*hold fast the form of sound words which he had heard from his master among many witnesses*" (2 Tim. i. 13; ii. 2). In doing this, and in this alone, there would be the witness that he was indeed "*repenting,*" not mourning with a fruitless

¹ It seems right to mention the deeper meaning which Ewald gives to the words "*thou hast received,*" as implying the reception of the gifts of the Holy Ghost. So taken they would appeal to an inward experience like that to which St. Paul appeals in writing to the Galatians (Gal. iii. 2). I do not accept this as excluding the interpretation given above, but it is, perhaps, implied in the words, "*how* thou hast received," stress being laid on the *manner*, the inward as well as outward accompaniments, of the instructor that had been imparted.

regret over opportunities that had been lost and gifts that had been wasted, but entering on a new life with new impulses and new principles of action.

As in the Message to Pergamos, so here also, the exhortation is followed by a warning: "Except thou watch, therefore, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee." Here, again, we have the language which we commonly associate with the great second Advent boldly transferred to some nearer and more immediate judgment. The very phrase, "as a thief," implies a reference to, and therefore the knowledge of, those "words of the Lord Jesus" in which, in connection with the self-same command to "watch," He had added, "This know, that if the good man of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched, and not have suffered his house to be broken through" (Luke xii. 39), and is, in fact, an echo of what, through those words, and the like teaching of St. Paul delivered to the Thessalonian and other Churches, had become a proverbial form of speech, that "the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night" (1 Thess. v. 2). Dependent as this coming was on the state of the Sardian Church and its ruler, liable to be averted on renewed watchfulness and repentance, it must, of necessity, refer to the discipline, at oncè regulative and reformatory, penal, yet not necessarily inflicting an irremediable penalty, with which, in unlooked-for ways and at an unexpected season, the Lord would come upon the Church. Persecutions, distress, the open shame of being noted as a dead Church, exclusion from fellowship with other Churches, who should no longer

recognize even its "name" to live—these should do their work, teaching all who were yet capable of being taught, warning others by the punishment of the hardened and impenitent.

In other Messages, as we have seen, first the good that exists in the Church is recognized, and then the evil that had mingled with it is marked out for censure. Here, unhappily, the evil was dominant, and the sharp words of rebuke had therefore to be spoken first. But the Judge of all the earth, then as ever, recognized and singled out for praise even the ten righteous men, if such there were, who had kept their integrity in the midst of a general corruption. "*Thou hast a few names*" ("names" for "persons," as in Acts i. 15, but with, perhaps, the underlying thought that He who speaks is one that "knows his own sheep by name," and looks on each in his own distinct personality) "*even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments.*" The meaning of such an image lies of course on the surface. That which is to the spirit what the garments are to the body is the outward form of life which men behold, which in part expresses and symbolizes the character, in part hides from view the nakedness of its personality. Those, then, who had not defiled their garments were those whose outward lives had been free from impurity, who, in the analogous language of St. Jude, had kept that garment from being "spotted by the flesh" (Jude, verse 23). The same thought was, it is clear, symbolized in the practice of the early Church, possibly even a primitive practice, of clothing those who were baptized in white garments,—the "chrism" of old English liturgical usage,—as a witness of

the purity of life to which their baptism pledged them. The parable of the man that "had not on a wedding-garment" must have done something to fix this symbolism in the Apostle's mind, and this implied reference to that parable helps us there also to understand the true meaning of the symbol, and so to eliminate the more fantastic interpretations which see in it either the imputed righteousness of Christ or the outward ordinance of baptism.

The reward for this purity might seem at first to be the purity itself. They who have not defiled their garments are to "walk" with Christ "in white," for they are worthy. Here, however, it would seem, from the vivid pictures, in Chaps. vi. 11, vii. 9, 13, xix. 8, of the white robes given to the martyred saints, of those who were clothed with white robes which they had made white in the "blood of the Lamb," as if more than this were meant. The "white robes" are such "as no fuller on earth could whiten them," glorious and bright as those which the Apostle had seen on the night of the Transfiguration. In other words, as the reward of the pure in heart is that they shall see God, so that of those who have kept their garments from defilement is like in kind but more glorious in degree,—a purity glorified and transfigured, pure even as He, our Lord, is pure. Of that reward they are "worthy," and no dread of scholastic formulæ of "congruity" or "condignity" need hinder us from accepting the word in its natural meaning. There is a worthiness, a meetness, when the life prepares the way for the reward, and the reward is the completion and consummation of the life, which we need not shrink

from recognizing, as Christ Himself recognized it, and the very essence of which lies, in part, in the absence of any claim or consciousness of merit.

In this Message, and in this alone, the reward of him that overcometh is in part anticipated in what precedes it. If there is any difference, it is perhaps to be found in the use of the word περιβαλεῖται—he shall be clothed, or “shall clothe himself,” as denoting a more solemn investiture than this simple “walking in white.” And looking to the fact of the obvious familiarity of the Evangelist with the prophecy of Zechariah, we can scarcely avoid seeing here a reference to the mysterious vision in which the High Priest Joshua, the son of Jozedek, stood face to face in conflict with Satan, the enemy and accuser, and, having overcome in that trial, had the fair mitre set upon his head, and was clothed in new raiment (Zech. iii. 4, 5).¹

The reward, however, goes beyond this: “*And I will not blot out his name from the book of life.*” The words contain a whole mine of half-latent imagery.

¹ I ought not to pass over, though I cannot altogether accept, Professor Lightfoot's interesting suggestion, in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians (p. 22), that here, and in the parallel passage in the Message to Laodicea, there is a reference to the purple dyes for which both the cities, like Thyatira, were more or less famous. The image seems to me too natural and universal to require the assumption of any such direct reference. When we come to the description of those who had “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. vii. 14), the case is, however, stronger. We can imagine the glance of the Apostle falling on one of the great dyeing vats used in the staple trade of the town, and seeing the linen garments steeped in the crimson fluid that looked like blood, and of his being thus led to think of those whose inmost life, steeped in the spirit of sacrifice of which the blood of Christ is the symbol, should emerge from that process, not “red like crimson,” but, by the strangest of all paradoxes, “white as wool.”

First we note the special appropriateness of the promise as given to those who were exceptions to the statement, too true of the greater part of the Church to which they belonged, that "they had a name that they lived, and yet were dead," whose names therefore would be blotted out of the book of life, which recorded only those of living members. The symbolism was one of the oldest in the Hebrew Scriptures, and occurring, as it does, for the first time in Exod. xxxii. 32 ("Blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written"), probably had its origin in the political life of Egypt. It was a natural expansion of the thought that one who was convicted of treachery or disloyalty to the State of which he was a member, should, as the preliminary to the execution of the sentence of death or banishment, have his name struck out from the register of its citizens.¹ So in the fiery wrath of the 69th Psalm the extremest malediction is, "Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;" and this stands parallel with the clause, "Let them not be written among the righteous" (Psa. lxxix. 28). So in Daniel's vision of the resurrection, those who were delivered out of tribulation, included "every one that should be found written in the book" (Dan. xii. 1). To this image the Seer returns again and again. All should worship the Beast, except those whose names were written in the book of life of the Lamb (xiii. 3; xvii. 8). They only should enter into the holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem (xxi. 27). The

¹ Students of Greek history will remember the scene in which Critias, as the prelude to the condemnation of Theramenes, struck his name out of the list of the Three Thousand who could not be condemned except by a formal sentence of the Council.

words of the Message to the Church of Sardis are valuable as shewing that to have the name so written does not of itself secure, as by a Divine decree, the indefectibility of perseverance. Of not a few it would be true, the very promise implying the warning, that their names, though they had been written in it, would hereafter be blotted out. The close of the Message comes as the natural sequel of this promise: "*I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.*" Here we have in part the distinct echo of words which the Apostle had once heard from his Master's lips while He was yet on earth: "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. x. 32); or, as in Luke xii. 8, "before the angels of God." In the connection between this promise and the names that were written in the book of life we may trace, I believe, a probable reference to the strange Psalm of the Sons of Korah (Psa. lxxxv.), which appears to have been sung at some enrolment of proselytes from Egypt and Babylon, from Philistia and Tyre and Ethiopia, among the citizens of Zion. There also we read that when the Lord writeth up the people, takes, as it were, the census of the holy city, He shall rehearse, or count, uttering as He counts, the names of those who were thus registered in what the Prophet Ezekiel, at a somewhat later date, calls "the writing of the house of Israel" (Ezek. xiii. 9).

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