

STUDIES IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST.

IV.—THE BAPTIST AND THE CHRIST.

NATURE begins and perfects her finest works in secrecy and silence. No eye has yet seen the subtle agents at work which weave for her the rich-coloured sweet-smelling garments of summer, or strip her naked and leave her desolate in the cold and gloom of winter. No ear has heard the footsteps or the swift-moving tools of the mechanics who in her secret yet open workshop build minute crystals or mighty mountains, or those varied and wondrous organisms that make up our living world. Nature is here but the mirror or parable of mind; its growth is a silent process, the swelling till it bursts of the bud under the soft but potent pressure of forces that struggle from without inwards, only that they may the more harmoniously work from within outwards. So in a pre-eminent degree was it with Christ. We can study and describe his historical appearance, can analyze and estimate the educative influences that surrounded his boyhood and youth; but we cannot see the mysterious personal force that at once used and unified these influences and created that appearance. Yet the forces active in the process become manifest in the result, and from it we can infer what kind of architects and builders were needed to plan and rear the substructure of the splendid moral edifice that, as the sinless Man, commands humanity. What was apparent had its source in what was veiled, and revealed it, just as the roots of the glorious flower are bedded deep in the sapful soil; but the thing of beauty and of fragrance into which they

blossom tells of the wondrous alchemy that has in silence and in darkness been changing the juices of earth and the sunbeams of heaven into an object of sweetness and delight.

The growth of Jesus was not hurried and forced, but slow and natural. For more than thirty years He tarried at Nazareth, waiting till his strength had matured and his manhood was complete. Then his hour was struck in tones audible to Himself and his people. The tongue that told it came from the banks of the Jordan and the waste places about the Dead Sea. There a New Prophet had appeared, ancient in manners and spirit, modern in speech and purpose. No sleek scribe, or pompous priest, or courtier clad in soft raiment was he; but a son of the desert, clad in garments of coarse camels' hair, bound round him by a leathern girdle, seeking his food from the rock where the wild bee left its honey, and the locust came—a man full of the stern spirit of solitude and the thoughts God speaks to the soul that can dare to be alone. He called himself a Voice, but he was not like the still small voice the Prophet had heard in his mountain cave; he was rather like the wind and the fire that broke in pieces the rocks, heralds as they were of the low sweet voice that was to come out of the silence they left. People from the banks of the Jordan crowded to hear him. His fame reached Jerusalem, and Sadducees and Pharisees, scribes and priests, publicans and sinners, went forth to listen, and be awed into a passing reverence and faith. West and east, south and north, the tidings spread, reached remote Nazareth, and woke great emotions in the home of the Carpenter there. He who had become, since Joseph

was not, the head and bread-winner of the little family, knew that his hour was come, and went forth, the son of Joseph, to return the Messiah of God.

Now, this New Prophet is full of the deepest and most varied significance for the history of Christ. He not only marks the moment of his emergence from obscurity, but is, as it were, its occasional cause. The only historical authority that does not recognize this relation is Josephus, whose silence as to Jesus is the most eloquent tribute of Jewish antiquity to the transcendent, and to it inexplicable, importance of our Christ. Our other authorities shew us Jesus coming, obscure, undistinguished, to John, mingling with the crowds that throng the banks of the Jordan ; but when the wave of excitement subsides, John has vanished, Jesus alone stands, the end for which the Baptist has lived, the fulfilment of his prophecy and completion of his mission.

The Baptist is one of the greatest of the minor characters in either the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures. His career is short, and his work transitional, but his influence is at once penetrative and permanent. His ministry exercised an immense power—made, while it lasted, Judæa contrite and earnest, Galilee penitent and wistful; remained, when it had long ceased, a memory so moving, as to touch the courtier heart of Josephus with reverence and admiration. Each of our Gospels is a witness to his eminence. Love of him distinguished alike Jesus and the Jews. To Jesus he was the very greatest of the prophets.¹ His name was so potent as to subdue the arrogance, if it did not extort the respect, of the Pharisees; ² so noble as to

¹ Matt. xi. 9-11.

² Ibid. iii. 7; John i. 19-25.

rouse and retain the devotion of the crowd.¹ So full was he of the inspiration of God, that he not only dared to be a prophet in an age of priestcraft and formalism, but even compelled it to listen to him.² So possessed was he of a lofty humility, that he retired before a greater, proudly confessing that he was, and had lived to be, superseded.³ He evoked from the Old Testament the spirit that inaugurated the New, and so became the meeting-point of both, a symbol of the dawn, which is at once the death of the night and the birth of the day. So the man and his mission must be studied if the Christ is to be understood.

There is no need to discuss here the story of John's birth. Enough to say, he sprang from an old priestly stock, both parents being of Aaronic descent. He was a child of age, and there is in age a simplicity that may make its home more sweetly childlike than the home of youth. His birthplace was a city in the hill country of Judæa, possibly Hebron, the old regal and priestly city of Judah. There a simple and sincere faith would live, utterly unlike the formal and official religion that reigned at Jerusalem. If the father may be interpreted through the son, we can say that Zacharias was no priest of the Sadducean type, apt at clothing secular ambitions in sacerdotal forms; no scribe too well skilled in tradition to be familiar with the spirit and the truth that lived in the ancient Scriptures. His son at least was no child of policy and tradition, but of prophecy and freedom. He was not trained in the schools of his people. One authority⁴ represents him as passing his youth in the desert, and his speech

¹ Mark xi. 30-32.

² Matt. iii. 5.

³ Ibid. iii. 11; John iii. 27-30.

⁴ Luke i. 80.

seems to breathe its atmosphere and reflect its images—the stones that mocked the culture of man, but illustrated the creative power of God; the viper-brood curled and concealed among the rocks; the olive-trees, sending their roots far into the dry and stony soil, without finding moisture enough to become fruitful. His bearing, too, and spirit are of the desert. He was scornful of society, independent of its companionship and comforts;¹ was not clad in soft raiment, or distinguished by supple and courtly grace; was no reed shaken by the wind, but a gnarled oak the wind could neither bend or break.² Yet his solitude was society: it enabled him to escape the Rabbis and find the Prophets. The priest by birth became a prophet by Divine nurture, so steeped in the thought and speech of the ancient seers as to seem, alike to the faith and imagination of his time, the greatest of them resurgent. He so speaks the language of Isaiah as to shew who had been the great companion of his solitude.³ His ideas of repentance, the kingdom, judgment, righteousness, were prophetic, not priestly; and the emphasis with which he declared himself a “Voice,” showed that in him the ancient *Nabi*, the speaker for God, had revived. And this prophetic nurture and character sets him in radical antithesis to the ascetic fraternities of his time. He is no Essene—can be as little relegated to an anchorite as to a Pharisaic order. He was no selfish lover of his own soul, too fearful of pollution to touch society, but a magnanimous reformer, great in his love alike of man and of righteousness. The Essene hated flesh, but John ate without scruple

¹ Luke vii. 33. ² Ibid. vii. 24, 25; Matt. xi. 7.

³ John i. 23. Cf. Matt. iii. 3; Mark i. 2, 3; Luke iii. 4-6.

the locust of the desert. The ascetic communities were great in ablutions, but John had only his baptism, an ablutionary rite but once administered, and without meaning, save as expressive of a moral change and prophetic of the baptism of Him who was to baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire. He did not believe in regeneration by separation, in saving the soul by forsaking the world. That to him was but a deeper loss. He believed in a kingdom of heaven which was a kingdom on earth and of men, a society of God, to be realized in the homes they had formed and the cities they had built. And so he was too much the pupil of Divine freedom and discipline to be the child of any school, the spokesman of any sect. His faith was the fruit of inspiration as opposed to experience. Contact with hard human realities had not dulled his enthusiasm, or changed his belief in the practicability of the old theocratic ideals into a belief in the wisdom and omnipotence of expediency. His education made him a preacher who lived as he believed, possessed of the courage to summon men to a like faith and life.

Distance makes many things clear. The air of the desert was more favourable to penetrative spiritual vision than the atmosphere of the city. In the desert John came to understand the past of his people as his people did not, and through it their present needs, their present duties, and the possibilities of their future. He looked at the men of his age and their needs through his great beliefs, his exalted ideas, and the contrast of the ideal and the possible with the real and the actual made the student of the desert into the Baptist and Preacher. Had Israel realized the kingdom of heaven? Did the people of God embody

and fulfil his righteousness? Were they a society of brethren, dutiful, merciful, kind? Were they, by their lovely and honourable manhood, making the name of God loved and honoured? Were they making His faith so beautiful and glorious as to be a joy and attraction to the Gentiles? Nay; everywhere and in everything it was the reverse. Israel seemed farther than ever from realizing the visions that had inspired the exalted spirit of the later Isaiah; the sins that had so moved the soul of the earlier still lived, only in prouder and more magnified forms. The "new moons," the "Sabbaths," the "appointed feasts," were still celebrated, the "multitude of sacrifices," the "many prayers," the "incense," were still offered, but less than ever was the command obeyed, "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow."¹ With the decay of prophecy had come the degeneracy of Israel. The priesthood was left free to develop the ritual to the injury of the religion, the scribe to create artificial sins and an artificial conscience, the passion for ceremonial purity which is so fatal to the nobler and more generous virtues. The Sadducee said scornfully, "The Pharisees will soon clean the face of the sun;" and in his scorn he expressed this truth, that there is no surer sign of a decayed ethical and religious sense than the endeavour to cleanse what is naturally pure. The universalism of the prophets had been quenched by the particularism of the priests; the humanity of Hebraism had been buried under the nationality of Judaism. The

¹ Isaiah i. 16, 17.

curse of perverted being was on Israel. The law which bound to the service of man was used to create division and isolation. Even within the nation the spirit of separatism reigned. Caste is but a sacerdotal translated into a social system, and is only possible where the accidents have been turned into the essential qualities or elements of religion. The Pharisee could not touch the publican and be clean; the priest could not help the Samaritan and be holy. To be one of "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" was to be an outcast, and an outcast is worse than a heathen. Hillel might say, "Belong to the disciples of Aaron (the meek); love peace and seek after it; love mankind and bring them to the law;" but the people, with the fanaticism of the letter, without the enthusiasm of the spirit, believed in the divinity of custom, and obeyed it.

Now John emerges from his solitude, no Priest or Rabbi, but a Prophet, with a consciousness of authority so clear and intense as to disdain expression. There is, indeed, in the man a wonderful self-abnegation. He never speaks of his own claims, only delivers his destined message. He is but a "Voice;" the word it utters alone deserves thought and demands faith. When the people—anxiously curious, prepared to believe almost anything as to the new preacher—inquire, "Who is he? the Messiah? Elias? the prophet like to Moses?" he has but one answer, "I am not. What I am matters nothing; what I say is matter enough." But this silence as to himself is eloquent as to his greatness. The man who is, as it were, annihilated by his mission, is most magnified by it; he becomes an organ of Deity, a voice of God, altogether silent as to his own claims, concerned only with God's.

He who is so divinely possessed is insensible to the strength of the resistant forces, does his work by a kind of inspired necessity, and once it is done is content to die, or be forgotten—to decrease, that a greater may increase.

In this New Prophet, so divinely unconscious of himself, so divinely conscious of his mission, there revived the ancient conflict of his order against the ritualism of the Temple and the legalism of the Schools. He was a sort of personified revolt against the law, written and oral. The image and authority of Moses do not seem to exist for him; but the prophets, with their scorn of legal pride and privilege, ceremonial purity and observances, with their faith in the reality of righteousness and retribution, are so real to him, that he appears the very incarnation of their spirit, the embodied voice of their God. Hence his message is moral, not political. His relation to the Roman cannot be directly determined; his relation to the Jew is apparent enough. He does not think that Judaism is the religion of Jehovah, or that Israel needs only freedom to be perfect. He can hardly be named a patriotic Jew; that is, if patriotism be fidelity to what his countrymen passionately revere. To him their national idea is abhorrent, and the attempts at realization but prove its evil. He thinks that people and rulers are alike guilty, that their supreme need is repentance, and the regeneration repentance alone can bring. The priest and the scribe had made the people of God the people of form and privilege; the prophet appears, that he may command the people of form and privilege to become the people of God. National was possible only through individual regeneration. The

mass could be made holy only by the units becoming holy. And the change must be immediate. The God who had borne so long with their evil would bear no longer. The kingdom of heaven was at hand; its dawn stood tip-toe on the mountain top. And the King was a Judge, coming to do his own will, not the will of the Jews. What He needed was a prepared people; what He would find was a brood of vipers. To Him purity of blood was nothing, purity of heart alone was good. He was coming, fan in hand, to divide the chaff from the wheat, to gather the one into his garner, to burn up the other with unquenchable fire.

John's spirit was thus essentially ethical, and his attitude one of essential antagonism to the unethical spirit of Judaism. The people, so far from realizing, had corrupted the theocratic ideal, and had, in depraving it, depraved themselves. Hence his preaching had in its earliest form a twofold character, a minatory and a hortatory, threatened with punishment, and exhorted to repentance. "The axe was laid to the root of the tree, and the tree must either become fruitful, or be hewn down."¹ But his general principles received most particular and direct application. To the Sadducees and Pharisees, the priests and teachers of the people, responsible in the most eminent degree for the worship and faith, manners and laws, of the nation, his speech was plain and severe. They were a "generation of vipers," seeking his baptism in the hope of escaping "the wrath to come." They were foolishly proud of their Abrahamic descent, but were warned not to trust it. God was able, out of the dry

¹ Luke iii. 7-9; Matt. iii. 10.

stones of the desert, "to raise up children unto Abraham."¹ The advice was unsought, and the warning was unheeded. But the people were more tractable than their priests and rabbis. They asked the stern preacher, "What shall we do?"² and the answer so needed by a broken and divided nation was, "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise." To the publicans, who answered exclusion by extortion, he said, "Exact no more than what is due;" to the soldiers, "Do violence to no man; accuse none falsely, and be content with your pay." These were words that became a prophet—echoes of those spoken long before. "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?"³

But John was not satisfied with a preaching that was simply minatory and hortatory: he determined to institute a society of the penitent and reformed. It was but according to Oriental ideas that entrance into the society should be signified by a symbol. Hence the command to repent was supplemented by the command to be baptized. If in his preaching he far transcended Judaism, in his baptism he proved himself a true child of Judæa, a believer in the Divine worth and significance of symbols. The symbol must be interpreted by the circle of ideas in which he moved and

¹ Matt. iii. 7-9.² Luke iii. 10-14.³ Isaiah lviii. 6, 7.

which he variously expressed. Its suggestive cause is as hard to determine as it is unimportant. The rite may have formal affinities with the lustrations of the Essenes or the ablutions of proselytes, but it has a material significance of his own. John placed it in a relation with confession of sin and repentance that made it the symbol of certain spiritual realities—evil recognized and repudiated, good perceived and chosen. In this connection its use may have been suggested by such words as, "Wash you, make you clean;"¹ or, "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness."² But his baptism was the symbol of another and no less significant fact: the baptized were not simply the penitent, but the expectant, men consecrated to a great hope. They formed a community that had renounced with their sins the older Judaism, with its civil kingdom and political Messiah, and stood expectant, waiting the coming of Him who was to baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire. Under this aspect his baptism had affinities with events and customs dear to the Hebrew. When Moses descended from the mount to sanctify the people, he made them "wash their clothes."³ When the Gentile became a Jew he was purified by water. What is to us a sensuous symbol was to him a translucent form of an eternal truth. What he always loved he loved most of all when it had a national significance, expressed some truth as to the relation of the people and their God. And so John was but true to the best genius of his people when he made his baptism represent, not simply an individual change, but a social fact,

¹ Isaiah i. 16.² Zech. xiii. 1.³ Exod. xix. 10-14.

—entrance into a society prepared for the kingdom which was at hand. The “baptism unto repentance” was also a baptism unto hope: as the first, it was the sign of a renounced past, as the second, it was the symbol of a new future.¹

The Baptist’s idea of this new future was embodied in the phrase “the kingdom of heaven.” This kingdom he interpreted in the prophetic sense as the realized reign of the righteous God. It was because his conception of the kingdom was so ethical that his condemnation of unethical Judaism was so vehement and unsparing. He believed that a Divine society could be constituted only by men who were penetrated and possessed by the Divine. So his cry to his evil generation was, “Confess your sins, repent, be baptized; and, so prepared, await the coming of the day whose dawn we see.” But the kingdom implied a king. The prophets when they dreamed of the golden age dreamed of it as instituted by a Divine Prince, a Messiah. In the Messiah the hopes of Hebraism culminated; for Him it had lived, without Him its faith had died. In the days of a wicked tyranny, men could not have believed in the eternal righteousness unless they had at the same time believed in a day of victory and retribution. To the prophet the present might be man’s, but the future was God’s; in it He would see that right reigned and good triumphed. The Messiah personified to the prophetic spirit the Divine judgment against wrong and vindication of right; He was to live to do the will of God, and cause it to be done. The ideas of the king and the kingdom, thus insepar-

¹ In the interpretation of John’s baptism the words of Josephus (*Antiq.* bk. xviii. c. v. § 2) are of great importance.

ably blended in prophecy, appeared as indissolubly connected in the mind of John. He could indifferently say, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand;" and, "After me cometh one mightier than I."¹ He loved, indeed, to contrast his own meanness and the King's greatness. He was not worthy to bear his sandals, to loose his shoe's latchet. He was but the friend of the Bridegroom: the Bridegroom was to come. He only baptized with water, the mighty One who was coming would "baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire." He was but a preacher, only a "Voice." He whose foot was on the threshold was a Divider, wielding a winnowing fan. He himself could but urge men to flee from wrath and seek life; but the King, at once a Saviour and Judge, was able "to gather the wheat into his garner, to burn the chaff with unquenchable fire."² The preaching of John was thus essentially concerned with the coming of a Person: the King made the kingdom. Without Him it could not be: with Him it was a necessity. In his prophetic word ancient prophecy lived again, and waited to welcome Him who was to fulfil its hopes and realize its truths.

The Great Prophet did not prophesy in vain. He moved Israel as Israel had not been moved for centuries. New hopes, new fears, awoke in Judæa. The people became conscious of sin, conscious of their failure to be the people of God. The voice from the banks of the Jordan awed the heart of Jerusalem, and stilled the conflicts of priests and scribes. For one splendid moment the nation awoke to the meaning of its singular and sublime faith, forgot its struggles

¹ Matt. iii. 2; Mark i. 7.

² Matt. iii. 11-12; Luke iii. 16, 17; John i. 27, iii. 29.

against the eagles and images of Cæsar in its consciousness of the reign and righteousness of God. Crowds from the cities and villages, from Judæa and Galilee, Peræa and the land east of the Jordan, Pharisees and Sadducees, priests and Levites, scribes and elders of the people, publicans and proselytes, warriors from the Roman and Herodian armies, came to hear the Prophet, to confess their old sins, and be baptized into his new life. And with a band from distant Nazareth came one who had hitherto been known as Jesus the carpenter, who was henceforth to be known as Jesus the Christ. How He was touched by the multitude, by the preacher, by the sense of sin that had seized the people, by the hope that was expressed in the baptism, we do not know. We only know that here He becomes conscious that his hour had come, that his happy obscurity must end, his mission of sorrow and glory, death and life, begin. What was certain to Himself was no less evident to John. Apparently they had never met before; but to two such spirits, to meet once at such a time and place was enough. Outwardly the two were most unlike. The son of the priest was in all things singular, in home, in dress, in food, in speech, a man of weird aspect, of spirit that disdained the common ways and life of man. The Child of the carpenter was, if not undistinguished, inconspicuous, familiar with society, the city, the home and his duties to it, the weariness and the tameness of common earth and common day. Yet the accidents of their respective aspects could not hide the Prophet and the King from each other. Spirit answered to spirit, and in the answer the revelation came. The hour of recognition might be brief, but it

was in its meaning and issues eternal. Months after, John in Machærus, a prisoner, living by the grace of a lustful tyrant, at the mercy of a cruel and vengeful woman, compared his ideal and hope of the King with the gentle and peaceful Teacher who lived so humbly in Galilee; and clinging to his earlier faith as diviner than the Divine reality, fearing that his inspiration had been but illusion, he sent to ask, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?"¹ About the same time the scene on the banks of the Jordan rose before the imagination of Jesus, the curious crowds streaming out to see and hear the prophet, the reeds by the river side bending before the wind, the great prophet unbent, inflexible, speaking the word God gave him; and as He compared the man and his work, He declared him the greatest of prophets,² the one who not only prophesied the coming of the King, but had proclaimed Him come. The contrast is significant. Jesus did not altogether fulfil John's ideal, but the very degree in which our Christ differed from his King makes his recognition the more prophetic, less the fruit of design, more the child of inspiration. What the Baptist in that hour discovered and declared the experience of eighteen centuries has but confirmed.

The recognition over, the baptism ended, Jesus retired to the wilderness, full of the great consciousness that involved his conflict with the devil; but John remained by the Jordan, to fulfil his now almost completed mission. The meeting with Jesus seems to have worked a great change in the mind and speech of the Baptist. His preaching appears to have become less predictive and more declarative—less prophetic of Him

¹ Matt. xi. 2, 3; Luke vii. 19, 20.

² Matt. xi. 7, 14; Luke vii. 24-29.

who was to come, and more indicative of Him who had. So much at least seems to be involved in the deputation from Jerusalem.¹ They do not go, like those mentioned in the older narratives,² to his baptism, but to ask, "Art thou the Christ? Elias? that prophet?" The problem has now changed—is not, What mean his confession, repentance, baptism? but, Who is he? What means his saying about the Christ who is come? Men are eager, not to shew their penitence and share his hope, but to possess his knowledge and discover his Messiah. And within this change there is another, still more significant. His preaching has become sweeter in tone, softer in spirit, materially unlike what it had been. He does not now speak of the unsparing Judge, axe or fan in hand, hewing down the fruitless trees, burning the vacant chaff; but of "the Lamb of God," devoted to meek silence and sacrifice. He does not threaten the multitudes with an avenger of sin, but points to One "who bears the sin of the world." The Synoptists shew the Baptist before he saw Christ and when he first saw Him; but the Fourth Gospel shews him after he had known Christ, changed into a meeker, sweeter, nobler man, softer in speech and in spirit, with a diviner notion of the Messiah, a more hopeful and helpful word for man. And so, when the Christ returned victorious from the conflict, the preacher beside the Jordan hailed Him, not as He of the winnowing fan, but as "the Lamb of God," and turned the eyes of the crowds his voice still held together to One who stood among them, who had come to declare the Father and bear the sin of man. And the new faith mellowed the great preacher, made him feel that his work was

¹ John i. 19-24.

² Matt. iii. 7.

done, that it was a glory to be so superseded and eclipsed, and so enabled him to make his last his most beautiful words: "Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, who standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."¹

A. M. FAIRBAIRN.

*SOME LEADING IDEAS IN THE THEOLOGY OF
ST. PAUL.*

"FAITH in Christ" would be allowed by every one to be the central point in the teaching of St. Paul. But there is reason to fear that these words are often very superficially understood.

The name "Christ" is so familiar to us that we are apt to think of it almost as a proper name, and to forget its weighty significance and the long chain of associations with which it was bound up. When St. Paul used the word, he used it as something much more than a proper name. For him it had the most profound and intense meaning. The moment when he became convinced that the title could be rightly applied to Him whom by the act of applying it he took for his Lord and Master was the turning-point of his life.

Let us try to place ourselves in thought at the time when St. Paul left the gates of Jerusalem with a commission from the high priest to apprehend and bring

¹ John iii. 28-30.