

THE VISION OF ISAIAH.

ISAIAH vi. 1-8.

II. THE VISION.

WE often speak of that "bourne from which no traveller returns," and lament that no one of those who have crossed the stream of death has ever come back to tell us what would have "added praise to praise," by bringing us a report of the land that lies beyond. Ungrateful or thoughtless that we are, when not only has He who could not be holden of death returned to assure us that it is a wealthy land and a good, but a whole order of men have risen into the spiritual and eternal world, the world which lies beyond death and above life, and have come down from it to tell us what they had seen !

Isaiah was one of this rare and elect order of men. As he stood in the temple of Jerusalem, perplexed by fear of change, in the year that King Uzziah died, his spirit was caught up into Paradise, where, if he saw much he could not describe, and heard many words not to be translated into human speech, he also saw much which he has described, and heard many words which it was lawful and possible for him to repeat. Like most of the prophets, he had a vision of the invisible, saw the real through the phenomenal, the ideal through the actual, the eternal through the temporal ; and he has reported, for our instruction, what it was that he saw behind the veil.

What, then, did he see ? He saw a world like that with which he was familiar, and yet unlike it, because unspeak-

ably larger, purer, happier, more splendid and sublime. He still stood within the walls of Jerusalem, but it was the Jerusalem which is above, whose Builder and Ruler is God; he still worshipped in a temple, but it was the house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens; he still looked out on a wide fair earth, but it was an earth filled with the glory of a Divine holiness.

What did he see in that new world? He saw an ideal *Person* as well as an ideal law and worship; he saw a holy and governing Will seated on the throne of the universe; he learned that the true King of men is He who sits high above all change, and not the princes of this world who come and go, who live and die, who change and pass. In the world behind and above this world, the world that *is* and *is to be*, he saw no blind Force merely, no self-passed and self-executing Law, no irresistible but unintelligent Fate, no diffused impersonal Power making for righteousness; but a holy and gracious Lord whose will is one day to be done on earth even as it is already done in heaven.

What else did he see? or, rather, what was the first and deepest impression made on his mind by this vision of a Divine Ruler seated on a throne lifted high above all earthly thrones? The first effect of this vision of Him who is invisible was, he tells us, an overwhelming sense of sin: "Woe is me! I am undone; for I, a man of unclean lips, have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." And yet, even before his call, Isaiah was not a sinner above his fellows. On the contrary, he was one of the best and noblest of his race; a man much given to meditation on the highest themes; a man with a pure lofty ideal before him, which he eagerly pursued; a man who had devoted himself to the study of the ways of God with men and to the obedience of the Divine will. There is other evidence to be had, but we need no other evidence than that of this Vision itself, to prove that he was a just man, walking in the ordinances

and commandments of God with blameless feet. For only the pure in heart can see God. But he who is sufficiently pure in heart to see God is, by that very vision, convicted of an unspeakable impurity. Isaiah was not a bad man, but a good, one of the excellent of the earth in whom God took delight. But no sooner does he lift his eyes to the throne, and to Him that sitteth thereon, than he sees a goodness so much more perfect than his own, a holiness so intense and radiant, a purity so luminous and dazzling, that he becomes aware, not so much of many sins of conduct which unfit him for the Divine presence and inspection, as of a sinful nature, a nature faulty, imperfect, depraved, a nature which needs to be redeemed, renewed, transformed, before it can meet the pure eyes and awful witness of the Divine Judge. The very light that is in him turns to darkness in a glory so ineffable; and he finds a sentence of death in the very life which alone can quicken and renew him.

And it is by this vision of the Divine Holiness that men are commonly convinced of their own unholiness and impurity. So long as we try ourselves by merely human standards, or "measure ourselves by ourselves," we may find little to blame; but no sooner do we gaze stedfastly on the God who reveals Himself within us, or the God who once manifested Himself in the flesh, than we see a goodness so pure, so large, so resplendent, that even what is best in us seems bad, and we feel that we must die to *self* if we are to die to sin, and that we *must* die to sin if we are to see God and live.

But the vision of the Divine Holiness produced one effect on Isaiah which it does not always produce on us, though it always should produce it. While it deepened his consciousness of sin, it also deepened his consciousness of oneness with his fellows. He feels that he must die, not simply because he himself is a man of unclean lips, *i.e.*

of an impure nature ; but also because he “ dwells in the midst of a people of unclean lips,” *i.e.* because he is of a race whose nature is as impure as his own. He does not assume that he was better than they, though he was better ; but he does assume that even if he were better, even if he himself were pure in the eyes of God, he must die because they were impure ; he must bear the sins of his race and be condemned for them. Even in this surprising but most Christian sense, nothing human is alien to him. In the blaze of the Divine Holiness all sense of difference between himself and others, all human degrees of virtue and piety, are utterly lost. He neither can dissociate himself, nor does he wish to dissociate himself, from his fellows. He is ready to, he feels that he must, sink or swim with them. It is no individual safety, or salvation, that he is thinking of ; no such salvation would content him, if “ the rest,” his brethren according to the flesh are to be left unclean, and therefore unsaved. Nay, for the moment, no thought of salvation, whether for himself or for others, is in his mind. In the light which falls upon the world from the throne of the Perfect Holiness the whole race of man, despite its preachers of righteousness and shining examples of virtue, lies in darkness, just as the whole world, when seen against the sun, despite its household lamps and illuminated streets, must be a mere spot of blackness ; and in its darkness he reads its doom. All must die, because that all have sinned and have come short of the glory of God.

And if we believe in God, and also believe that man was made in the image of God, how can we any one of us review the human story and not feel how far humanity as a whole has fallen short of its ideal life and chief end ? Who can contemplate himself, or the world at large, in the light of the Divine Holiness, and not admit that he is impure, that all are impure ; and that before we can stand in the

Divine Presence, before we can see God and live, we must see God and die, must pass through a change as keen and radical as that of death itself?

Thus far, then, Isaiah has gained, and we have gained from him or with him, a vision of human sinfulness through the Divine Holiness. And did the vision end here, it might well breed conclusions of despair in us, as it did in him. But, happily, it does not end here. As Isaiah stedfastly gazed into the ideal and eternal world, in which the purposes of God find their perfect expression—the very purposes which in due time are to be wrought out in this present actual world—he learned that even the sin of man has been foreseen and provided for. There is an altar of sacrifice in the heavenly temple; there are ministering spirits; there is a cleansing and redeeming pain. As he stood, a man of like passions with ourselves, gazing on the holiness which is the glory of God, and finding an omen of doom in that great sign of hope—for if God were unholy, what hope of cleansing could there be for us?—one of the heavenly ministrants flew toward him, bearing a kindled ember (a hot stone) from the altar, laid it on his mouth, and said, “Lo, this hath touched thy lips, and thine iniquity is taken away, thy sin purged.” The young Prophet is saved so as by fire, painfully purged from iniquity by the virtue of a Sacrifice which itself was not made without pain. For this altar in heaven is the altar on which the Lamb of God was slain “before the foundation of the world.” That is to say, it is the heavenly symbol of that eternal sacrifice of the Divine Love of which the Cross of Christ was the expression on earth, in time. It speaks to us of the pain which our sins have caused to the great Maker and Father of us all; but it also speaks to us of “the Love which is more than all our sins,” and which is content to suffer for and by our sins that it may take them away, that it may purge us from our iniquity, redeem us to the

love and service of righteousness, and recreate us in the image of the Divine Holiness.

Now that Isaiah's vision of an altar in the heavenly temple does mean and imply all this, we who accept the New Testament as the Word of God can have no doubt; for it was after quoting from this very vision that St. John wrote: "These things spake Isaiah when he saw his glory (the glory of the Christ), and spake of *Him*." But if we accept this inspired interpretation of Isaiah's vision, think how much it implies,—a truth how far-reaching, a hope how large and sublime. It assures us that the sin of man was no unforeseen accident which the eternal purposes of God did not include, but was part of that Divine education and discipline by which God is training his many sons for honour, glory, and immortality. It assures us that, though our Father in heaven cannot but be pained to the very heart by our sins, yet his love is not alienated from us by them, but has been working from all eternity for our redemption and renewal. It assures us that though, because of our iniquity, we cannot be redeemed without pain, though we must die to live, God will spare us no pain by which we may be purged from our iniquity and formed anew, fitted for his service and made meet to partake his glory.

Nor, much as all this is, is even this all that the vision of Isaiah has to teach us. For if we ask, What is to be the end of this long weary conflict between the mutinous will of man and the stedfast and holy will of God? if we ask,—as how can we help asking,—Is evil to win the day or good, and how far is the conquest to extend? even this question is answered for us as we listen to the song of the Seraphim who stood above the throne. For whatever these heavenly ministers may be or represent, we cannot doubt that they, standing ever in the Divine Presence, know the secret which is hidden from us. And they

disclose this secret in their song. Even as they look down on a world so corrupt, so careless and unconcerned in its sins, that Isaiah himself had well nigh lost hope of it, they sing: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; *the whole earth is full of his glory.*" That is what they see. Where the Prophet can only see an unclean world, a world wholly given up to wickedness, they behold a world purged and redeemed, filled from end to end with the glory of God.

And if we ask, What is that glory of God which is to fill the whole earth? Still we get an answer from their *ter sanctus*, from the song which comes rushing down through the open doors of the eternal temple with a power that causes the posts of the doors to tremble: "*Holy, holy, holy* is the Lord of hosts." God's holiness is his glory. It is his holiness, therefore, with which this unclean world is to be filled, into which it is to be redeemed. For what they see is, of course, the ideal world, the world as it shapes itself in the mind of God, in the everlasting purposes of his love; the world as it is to be when his purpose is accomplished and his saving will has taken effect. So that the end of the long strife between man's evil will and the good will of God is that the whole world, the whole race, is to be penetrated and suffused with a Divine holiness, with a purity as bright, as radiant, as resplendent as his own. Isaiah himself had found that Holiness to be not only a light which revealed his iniquity, but also a fire that burned it out. And we, and all men, are destined in the purpose of God at once to be convicted by it and cleansed. A day is coming in which the ideal will become the actual world; and in that day *we* shall take up the song of the Seraphim, and chant one to another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

This, then, is what I take Isaiah to have seen in the ideal and eternal world, the world which lies beyond the reach of sense but opens to the touch of faith, the world

which as yet and for the more part lies outside the bounds and coasts of time, but is one day to be drawn within its bounds. And his vision of the invisible corresponds, at least in its main outlines and at all the points on which I have touched, with that of all the prophets whether of the Old Testament or of the New. They too saw God, and in God the true King and Governor of men. They too recognized human sinfulness, an iniquity so universal, ingrained, and deep as to prove that man had fallen from the glory for which he was made, and had rendered himself unable to endure the immediate presence of his Maker. But they also saw a Divine Love ever at work to redeem men from their sins, to purge them from their iniquity, to recreate them in the image they had marred, and to reinstate them in the glory from which they had fallen. And they foresaw that the patient self-sacrificing love of God must reach its end at last; that it must save men, even if as by pangs of death, unto life everlasting; and that the whole earth must be filled with the glory of his holiness.

It only remains for us to decide whether we will trust the good report of the world invisible brought to us by these seers of a bygone age, or whether we will listen, rather, to the speculations current in our own time. For we, too, have our seers—of whom I would be understood to speak with profound respect so long as they speak of that which they do know—though it must be confessed that many of them profess to see very little when they raise their eyes to the region of the ideal and the eternal, and that some of them step beyond their proper sphere the very moment they advance beyond the things that are seen and temporal. Still they speak with a certain authority; their speculations have a profound interest for many who care but little for their discoveries; and, as we can see for ourselves, the very Church listens to them with a certain apprehension and dismay.

Standing on the utmost verge of what they know, these modern seers project themselves into the vast unknown, and prophesy to us of the things which *are* and which are to be. And, at the very outset, it must be admitted, I think, that their reports of what they have seen when the prophetic soul has been stirred within them are neither so intelligible and harmonious as those of the ancient prophets, nor so bright with hope. For some of them report that, long and steadfastly as they have gazed, they have discovered nothing but an impenetrable darkness, an unbroken silence, an unfathomable abyss in which all thought is drowned, and know nothing save that nothing is to be known. Others find in matter the promise and potency of all that exists and is to exist, and infer that, as there is no "spirit" in man, there can be none above him. Others have discovered nothing beyond an impersonal Power "not ourselves," and to which no self of any kind is to be attributed, which in some blind unaccountable way works for righteousness, that most personal of all qualities. As they look around, above, and before them, many of our most accomplished thinkers find no God in heaven or on earth; while in man they recognize no fall from his original glory, and no promise of a life beyond the grave, but simply an evolution from lower forms of life which must terminate at death. In the teeth of all reason, as it seems to me, and with the very language they use betraying them at every step, they forbid us to believe in any creative Mind, any organizing Intelligence, any ruling Will, in and behind the universe, or any end of grace to which it is pressing on; while, in the very teeth of conscience, with its irrepressible monitions and forebodings, they forbid us to believe in the depravity of man, or in a future life in which his deeds are to be judged and recompensed.

Well, we must choose, each for himself, between these modern seers, who know so much of the visible world but

so little of the world invisible, and the ancient prophets who professed to bring a message from Heaven; and who saw, or thought they saw, when the invisible world was unveiled to them, a God reigning within us as well as over the starry realms of space; who recognized the depravity, the sinfulness, of men, but held that there was a Love at work upon them which was bent on saving them from their sins at the cost of any sacrifice to itself and of any pain to them; and who foresaw and foretold that, in the end, the love of God *must* conquer the enmity of man, the holiness of God triumph over the sinfulness of man, and so utterly and nobly triumph that the whole earth should be filled with his glory.

And in making our choice between ancient prophets and modern sages we shall do well to ask ourselves which of the two seem to be of the more spiritual type of humanity; which of them have done most to cultivate a religious insight and spirit; which of them, therefore, is the more likely to be conversant with the secrets of the spiritual world? We shall have to determine whether, when it is a question of visions and revelations from the Lord, the Hebrew prophet is the more likely to guide us aright or the English man of science or man of literature,—Isaiah, for example, or Professor Tyndall, St. Paul or Herbert Spencer, St. John or Matthew Arnold. If we but use our common sense on such a question as that, there cannot, I think, be much doubt as to the result. When these eminent contemporaries of ours speak of that which they know, we shall listen to them with respect and gratitude; but when they invade provinces not their own, when they begin to guess, and to guess on points which lie outside their proper studies, when they bring minds of an unprophetic type to prophetic themes, we shall surely do well to distrust them, and to turn to more qualified and accomplished guides.

Having determined that question, it will be well to ask another: viz., Do the speculations of modern times or the visions of the ancient prophets present us with the more reasonable and adequate theory of things unseen and eternal? In denying a creative and organizing Mind, a ruling Will, a righteous and loving Heart,—in denying a God, in short, the modern school seems, to me at least, to run counter to the clear dictates of reason, just as in denying the sinfulness of man and his immortality it runs counter to the rebukes and forebodings of conscience. While, on the other hand, the prophets, in affirming God, in recognizing the depravity of man and his immortality, in admitting the struggle between evil and good which we feel within us and see going on around us, and in predicting the final and complete victory of good over evil, seem to furnish us with an adequate and most reasonable account of all the facts with which reason and conscience supply us, and to kindle a hope which may well animate and sustain us in the choice and pursuit of that which is good. No nobler, brighter, and grander vision than that of Isaiah ever broke upon the human mind. If we have once seen it for ourselves, we cannot doubt its truth: it becomes for ever impossible to us to stoop to the speculations which, dethroning God, render it doubtful whether life is worth living and the grave be not our goal. If we have not seen it for ourselves, even then, I think, we ought to hope that it may be true, and that we shall one day see and rejoice in its truth. If the moral worth and tendency of a system of thought be any proof of its origin, we cannot fail to recognize on the vision of Isaiah the very stamp and signature of God.

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