

indeed we prefer to believe that their writer was a consummate master of the art of simulating antiquity, and wonderfully fortunate in anticipating discovery; or on the other hand, that he was supernaturally enlightened as to matters not otherwise known to him.

J. WM. DAWSON.

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THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

XXVI.

CLOSING MESSAGES.

“ Salute the brethren that are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church that is in their house. And when this epistle hath been read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye also read the epistle from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it. The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand. Remember my bonds. Grace be with you.”—COL. iv. 15—end (Rev. Ver.).

THERE is a marked love of triplets in these closing messages. There were three of the circumcision who desired to salute the Colossians; and there were three Gentiles whose greetings follow these. Now we have a triple message from the Apostle himself—his greeting to Laodicea, his message as to the interchange of letters with that Church, and his grave, stringent charge to Archippus. Finally, the letter closes with a few hurried words in his own handwriting, which also are threefold, and seem to have been added in extreme haste, and to be compressed to the utmost possible brevity.

I. We shall first look at the threefold greeting and warnings to Laodicea.

In the first part of this triple message we have a glimpse of the Christian life of that city. “ Salute the brethren that are in Laodicea.” These are, of course, the whole body of Christians in the neighbouring town, which was a

much more important place than Colossæ. They are the same persons as "the Church of the Laodiceans." Then comes a special greeting to "Nymphas," who was obviously a brother of some importance and influence in the Laodicean Church, though to us he has sunk to be an empty name. With him Paul salutes "the Church that is in *their* house" (Rev. Ver.). Whose house? Probably that belonging to Nymphas and his family. Perhaps that belonging to Nymphas and the Church that met in it, if these were other than his family. The more difficult expression is adopted by preponderating textual authorities, and "*his* house" is regarded as a correction to make the sense easier. If so, then the expression is one of which in our ignorance we have lost the key, and must be content to leave unexplained.

But what was this "Church in the house"? We read that Prisca and Aquila had such both in their house in Rome (Rom. xvi. 5) and in Ephesus (1 Cor. xvi. 19), and that Philemon had such in his house at Colossæ. It may be that only the household of Nymphas is meant, and that the words import no more than that it was a Christian household; or it may be, and more probably, that in all these cases there was some gathering of a few of the Christians in each place, who were more closely connected with the heads of the household, and met in their houses more or less regularly to worship and to help one another in the Christian life. We have no facts that decide which of these two suppositions is correct. The early Christians had, of course, no buildings especially used for their meetings, and there may often have been difficulty in finding suitable places, particularly in cities where the Church was numerous. It may have been customary, therefore, for brethren who had large and convenient houses, to gather together portions of the whole community in these. In any case, the expression gives us a glimpse of the primitive elasticity of

Church order, and of the early fluidity, so to speak, of ecclesiastical language. The word "Church" has not yet been hardened and fixed to its present technical sense. There was but one Church in Laodicea, and yet within it there was this little Church—an *imperium in imperio*—as if the word had not yet come to mean more than an assembly, and as if all arrangements of order and worship, and all the terminology of later days, were undreamed of yet. The life was there, but the forms which were to grow out of the life, and to protect it sometimes, and to stifle it often, were only beginning to show themselves, and were certainly not yet felt to be forms.

We may note, too, the beautiful glimpse we get here of domestic and social religion.

If the Church in the house of Nymphas consisted of his own family and dependants, it stands for us as a lesson of what every family, which has a Christian man or woman at its head, ought to be. Little knowledge of the ordering of so-called Christian households is needed to be sure that domestic religion is woefully neglected to-day. Family worship and family instruction are disused, one fears, in many homes, the heads of which can remember both in their father's house; and the unspoken aroma and atmosphere of religion does not fill the house with its odour, as it ought to do. If a Christian householder have not "a Church in his house," the family union is tending to become "a synagogue of Satan." One or other it is sure to be. It is a solemn question for all parents and heads of households, What am I doing to make my house a Church, my family a family united by faith in Jesus Christ?

A like suggestion may be made if, as is possible, the Church in the house of Nymphas included more than relatives and dependants. It is a miserable thing when social intercourse plays freely round every other subject, and taboos all mention of religion. It is a miserable thing when

Christian people choose and cultivate society for worldly advantages, business connexions, family advancement, and for every reason under heaven—sometimes a long way under—except those of a common faith, and the desire to increase it.

It is not needful to lay down extravagant, impracticable restrictions, by insisting either that we should limit our society to religious men, or our conversation to religious subjects. But it is a bad sign when our chosen associates are chosen for every other reason but their religion, and when our talk is copiously flowing on all other subjects, and becomes a constrained dribble when religion comes to be spoken of. Let us try to carry about with us an influence which shall permeate all our social intercourse, and make it, if not directly religious, yet never antagonistic to religion, and always capable of passing easily and naturally into the highest regions. Our godly forefathers used to carve texts over their house doors. Let us do the same in higher fashion, so that all who cross the threshold may feel that they have come into a Christian household, where cheerful godliness sweetens and brightens the sanctities of home.

We have next a remarkable direction as to the interchange of Paul's letters to Colossæ and Laodicea. The present Epistle is to be sent over to the neighbouring Church of Laodicea—that is quite clear. But what is "the Epistle from Laodicea" which the Colossians are to be sure to get and to read? The connexion forbids us to suppose that a letter written by the Laodicean Church is meant. Both letters are plainly Pauline epistles, and the latter is said to be "from Laodicea," simply because the Colossians were to procure it from that place. The "from" does not imply authorship, but transmission. What then has become of this letter? Is it lost? So say some commentators; but a more probable opinion is that it is no other than the Epistle which we know as that to the Ephesians. This is

not the occasion to enter on a discussion of that view. It will be enough to notice that very weighty textual authorities omit the words "in Ephesus," in the first verse of that Epistle. The conjecture is a very reasonable one, that the letter was intended for a circle of Churches, and had originally no place named in the superscription, just as we might issue circulars "To the Church in —," leaving a blank to be filled in with different names. This conjecture is strengthened by the marked absence of personal references in the letter, which in that respect forms a striking contrast to the Epistle to the Colossians, which it so strongly resembles in other particulars. Probably, therefore, Tychicus had both letters put into his hands for delivery. The circular would go first to Ephesus as the most important Church in Asia, and thence would be carried by him to one community after another, till he reached Laodicea, from which he would come further up the valley to Colossæ, bringing both letters with him. The Colossians are not told to *get* the letter from Laodicea, but to be sure that they *read* it. Tychicus would see that it came to them; their business was to see that they marked, learned, and inwardly digested it.

The urgency of these instructions that Paul's letters should be read, reminds us of a similar but still more stringent injunction in his earliest epistle (1 Thess. v. 27), "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren." Is it possible that these Churches did not much care for Paul's words, and were more willing to admit that they were weighty and powerful, than to study them and lay them to heart? It looks almost like it. Perhaps they got the same treatment then as they often do now, and were more praised than read, even by those who professed to look upon him as their teacher in Christ!

But passing by that, we come to the last part of this threefold message, the solemn warning to a slothful servant.

“ Say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.” A sharp message that—and especially sharp, as being sent through others, and not spoken directly to the man himself. If this Archippus were a member of the Church at Colossæ, it is remarkable that Paul should not have spoken to him directly, as he did to Euodia and Syntyche, the two good women at Philippi, who had fallen out. But it is by no means certain that he was. We find him named again, indeed, at the beginning of the Epistle to Philemon, in such immediate connexion with the latter, and with his wife Apphia, that he has been supposed to be their son. At all events, he was intimately associated with the Church in the house of Philemon, who, as we know, was a Colossian. The conclusion, therefore, seems at first sight most natural that Archippus too belonged to the Colossian Church. But on the other hand the difficulty already referred to seems to point in another direction; and if it be further remembered that this whole section is concerned with the Church at Laodicea, it will be seen to be a likely conclusion from all the facts that Archippus, though perhaps a native of Colossæ, or even a resident there, had his “ ministry ” in connexion with that other neighbouring Church.

It may be worth notice, in passing, that all these messages to Laodicea occurring here, strongly favour the supposition that the epistle from that place cannot have been a letter especially meant for them, as, if it had been, these would have naturally been inserted in it. So far, therefore, they confirm the hypothesis that it was a circular.

Some may say, Well, what in the world does it matter where Archippus worked? Not very much perhaps; and yet one cannot but read this grave exhortation to a man who was evidently getting languid and negligent, without remembering what we hear about Laodicea and the angel of the Church there, when next we meet it in the page of

Scripture. It is not impossible that Archippus was that very "angel," to whom the Lord Himself sent the message through His servant John, more awful than that which Paul had sent through his brethren at Colossæ, "Because thou art neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of My mouth."

Be that as it may, the message is for us all. Each of us has a "ministry," a sphere of service. We may either fill it full, with earnest devotion and patient heroism, as some expanding gas fills out the silken round of its containing vessel, or we may breathe into it only enough to occupy a little portion, while all the rest hangs empty and flaccid. We have to "fulfil our ministry."

A sacred motive enhances the obligation—we have received it "*in the Lord.*" In union with Him it has been laid on us. No human hand has imposed it, nor does it arise merely from earthly relationships, but our fellowship with Jesus Christ, and incorporation into the true Vine, has laid on us responsibilities, and exalted us by service.

There must be diligent watchfulness in order to fulfil our ministry. We must take heed to our service, and we must take heed to ourselves. We have to reflect upon it, its extent, nature, imperativeness, upon the manner of discharging it, and the means of fitness for it. We have to keep our work ever before us. Unless we are absorbed in it, we shall not fulfil it. And we have to take heed to ourselves, ever feeling our weakness and the strong antagonisms in our own natures which hinder our discharge of the plainest, most imperative duties.

And let us remember, too, that if once we begin, like Archippus, to be a little languid and perfunctory in our work, we may end where the Church of Laodicea ended, whether he were its angel or no, with that nauseous lukewarmness which sickens even Christ's longsuffering love, and forces Him to reject it with loathing.

II. And now we come to the end of our task, and have to consider the hasty last words in Paul's own hand.

We can see him taking the reed from the amanuensis and adding the three brief sentences which close the letter. He first writes that which is equivalent to our modern usage of signing the letter—"the salutation of me Paul with mine own hand." This appears to have been his usual practice, or, as he says in 2 Thess. (iii. 17), it was "his token in every epistle"—the evidence that it was the genuine expression of his mind. Probably his weak eyesight, which appears certain, may have had something to do with his employment of a secretary, as we may assume him to have done, even when there is no express mention of his autograph in the closing salutations. We find for example in the Epistle to the Romans no words corresponding to these, but the modest amanuensis steps for a moment into the light near the end: "I Tertius, who write the epistle, salute you in the Lord."

The endorsement with his name is followed by a request singularly pathetic in its abrupt brevity. "Remember my bonds." This is the one personal reference in the letter, unless we add as a second, his request for their prayers that he may speak the mystery of Christ, for which he is in bonds. There is a striking contrast in this respect with the abundant allusions to his circumstances in the Epistle to the Philippians, which also belongs to the period of his captivity. He had been swept far away from thoughts of self by the enthusiasm of his subject. The vision that opened before him of his Lord in His glory, the Lord of Creation, the Head of the Church, the throned helper of every trusting soul, had flooded his chamber with light and swept guards and chains and restrictions out of his consciousness. But now the spell is broken, and common things re-assert their power. He stretches out his hand for the reed to write his last words, and as he does so, the



chain which fastens him to the Prætorian guard at his side pulls and hinders him. He wakes to the consciousness of his prison. The seer, swept along by the storm wind of a Divine inspiration, is gone. The weak man remains. The exhaustion after such an hour of high communion makes him more than usually dependent; and all his subtle profound teachings, all his thunderings and lightnings, end in the simple cry, which goes straight to the heart: "Remember my bonds."

He wished their remembrance because he needed their *sympathy*. Like the old rags which were put round the ropes by which the prophet was hauled out of his dungeon, the poorest bit of sympathy twisted round a fetter makes it chafe less. The petition helps us to conceive how heavy a trial Paul felt his imprisonment, little as he said about it, and bravely as he bore it. He wished their remembrance too, because his bonds added weight to his words. His sufferings gave him a right to speak. In times of persecution confessors are the highest teachers, and the marks of the Lord Jesus borne in a man's body give more authority than diplomas and learning.

He wished their remembrance because his bonds might encourage them to steadfast endurance if need for it should arise. He points to his own sufferings, and would have them take heart to bear their lighter crosses and to fight their easier battle.

One cannot but recall the words of Paul's Master, so like these in sound, so unlike them in deepest meaning. Can there be a greater contrast than between "Remember my bonds," the plaintive appeal of a weak man seeking sympathy, coming as an appendix, quite apart from the subject of the letter, and "Do this in remembrance of Me," the royal words of the Master? Why is the memory of Christ's death so unlike the memory of Paul's chains? Why is the one merely for the play of sympathy, and the enforcement of

his teaching, and the other the very centre of our religion? For one reason alone. Because Christ's death is the life of the world, and Paul's sufferings, whatever their worth, had nothing in them that bore, except indirectly, on man's redemption. "Was Paul crucified for you?" We remember his chains, and they give him sacredness in our eyes. But we remember the broken body and shed blood of our Lord, and cleave to it in faith as the one sacrifice for the world's sin.

And then comes the last word: "Grace be with you." The Apostolic benediction, with which he closes all his letters, occurs in many different stages of expression. Here it is pared down to the very quick. No shorter form is possible—and yet even in this condition of extreme compression, all good is in it.

All possible blessing is wrapped up in that one word, Grace. Like the sunshine, it carries life and fruitfulness in itself. If the favour and kindness of God, flowing out to men so far beneath Him, who deserve such different treatment, be ours, then in our hearts will be rest and a great peacefulness, whatever may be about us, and in our characters will be all beauties and capacities, in the measure of our possession of that grace.

That all-productive germ of joy and excellence is here parted among the whole body of Colossian Christians. The dew of this benediction falls upon them all—the teachers of error if they still held by Christ, the Judaisers, the slothful Archippus, even as the grace which it invokes will pour itself into imperfect natures and adorn very sinful characters, if beneath the imperfection and the evil there be the true affiancing of the soul on Christ.

That communication of grace to a sinful world is the end of all God's deeds, as it is the end of this letter. That great revelation which began when man began, which has spoken its complete message in the Son, the heir of all

things, as this Epistle tells us, has this for the purpose of all its words—whether they are terrible or gentle, deep or simple—that God’s grace may dwell among men. The mystery of Christ’s being, the agony of Christ’s cross, the hidden glories of Christ’s dominion are all for this end, that of His fulness we may all receive, and grace for grace. The Old Testament, true to its genius, ends with stern onward-looking words which point to a future coming of the Lord and to the possible terrible aspect of that coming—“Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.” It is the last echo of the long drawn blast of the trumpets of Sinai. The New Testament ends, as our Epistle ends, and as we believe the weary history of the world will end, with the benediction: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.”

That grace, the love which pardons and quickens and makes good and fair and wise and strong, is offered to all in Christ. Unless we have accepted it, God’s revelation and Christ’s work have failed as far as we are concerned. “We therefore, as fellow-workers with Him, beseech you that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.”

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

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*DR. SANDAY ON THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY.*

I THINK we must all be grateful to Dr. Sanday for having undertaken the somewhat delicate task of reviewing the progress which has been made in recent years towards a more correct understanding of the constitution of the primitive Church; and if it be true that the greatest difficulty of all Church historians lies in the manner in which we project our own ecclesiastical selves and our environments, with the proper amount of idealization, upon the mists of