

THE GROUP OF THE APOSTLES.

I.

THE scriptural accounts of the Apostles are both interesting and important, even if we only regard them as pieces of character-painting by the same artists who have drawn for us the amazing figure of Jesus.

For the character of our Lord is an evidence, now thoroughly recognised and established. It is not only by His spiritual pre-eminence that the student is impressed, but also by the verisimilitude of various and minute details, related by four writers of widely different style, temperament, and tastes. All of them show us the same dexterity in debate, in teaching the same sweetness and love of illustrations, the same resort for these to the homely and everyday side of nature and human life, the same penetrating gaze, the same gentle helpfulness, the same indignation moved by certain respectable vices, and the same astonishing tolerance when sinners against whom society cries out appeal to Him. We feel that such harmony could never have been preserved by a series of deifying myths of a later period, and therefore that the narratives which sceptical criticism admits authenticate the rest. And this portrait, so impressive and sharply cut, exists in defiance of all the laws of dramatic characterization. Shakespeare created no faultless man. The blameless king of Tennyson is but a shadow. Milton and Renan, and hundreds more, with the model before them, have failed to reproduce a "Christ in white marble, . . . without sin . . . simple and pure as the sentiment which creates it."¹ Only four contemporaries ever described a perfect yet lifelike character; and these were an exciseman, a physician, and two fishers, since we must

¹ *Vie de Jésus Pop.* 29th ed., p. v.

recognise the hand of Peter in the second gospel. These only have succeeded in painting a face without shadows; and the natural explanation of their success is that they actually beheld the countenance which is, in the moral heaven, as the sun shineth in his strength.

No belief which men allow themselves to reject offhand because it is "contrary to experience" can be more so than their achievement. It is miraculous, according to the boldest definition of a miracle, unless we are to ignore the existence of laws of literature and of mind. And it continues to be miraculous, even when the sceptic substitutes his own theory of the authorship of the gospels.

Whatever reinforcement this argument needs it may draw from the treatment of the twelve Apostles in the same documents. They too are persons with whom legend and myth might well busy themselves, foundation stones of the celestial city, throned assessors in the final judgment of mankind. How then are they represented by the evangelists? Are they glorious and blameless, betraying the untrustworthy nature of the romances which delight us? Sceptical theories would lead us to expect this, but it is not what we find in the Bible. Let any one compare the Gospels with the *Acta Sanctorum*, and he will know all the difference between history and legend. If there is nothing to be recorded about them which helps the central narrative they are left in perfect obscurity, such as conceals Bartholomew. Whatever is related is homely, substantial, and matter of fact. We see them quarrelling about the mastery, and whispering among themselves when they have no bread, and the words of the Master perplex them. We see the fisherman girding on his coat, the troubled group asleep for sorrow, and again incredulous for joy, the nervous blow that misses the skull and only cuts off the ear, the utterly disheartened love which reckons up the five deadly wounds, and wrongly thinks that belief in the

resurrection will be impossible until it has verified them all. In all this we find the best of evidence that no mythical tendency created the strange and majestic Figure in the midst, so unlike these or any other men; yet no blurred outline, fuller of humanity than the most human, at once the most manlike and the most unearthly.

In studying the Apostles, several lines of thought may be kept in view. What has just been indicated may be observed in detail, the homely verisimilitude of the narratives, quite free from any tendency to apotheosis or even canonization. We may take notice that the part assigned to them in the fourth Gospel is exactly and minutely similar to that which they hold in the other three.

Or we may inquire what it was that recommended these plain men for the supreme rank among mankind. The answer will not be found in the possession of qualities then reckoned admirable, the wisdom or learning or nobility of the Greek world. They were all to come to nought, as a needful step in the development of that regenerate manhood which would find its true nobility only by despising them. Attainments were not rejected, or Saul of Tarsus would not have been a chosen vessel; yet they took a very secondary place among the qualifications for that first and grandest crusade, wherein the heroes who went forth conquering and to conquer were sheep in the midst of wolves, Jews among the Greeks and Galileans among the Jews.

Nor is there a trace of the still poorer wisdom of the modern world, the cleverness by which fortunes are made or competing politicians "dished," what our American friends call *smartness*. They are only worldly wise in so far as they are falling from grace.

But there is a very great deal of what is far more precious (and often wins a more enduring fame even beyond the limits of the Church), the unaffected human nature which

Christ redeemed ; the simple, rich, primitive instincts which do not belong to man as a cultivated nor yet as a fallen being, but as man, the creature whom God made and Christ redeemed. They are persons in whom Shakespeare would have taken a much greater interest than Pope.

Yet another point has to be borne in mind which is too much forgotten. Except by glimpses in the Acts, we see disciples rather than Apostles, recruits in training for the great war, not veterans justifying their commission. We know not how Andrew bore himself in Scythia, nor Thomas in India ; we are not even assured of the places where they really fulfilled their ministry. The criticisms, far too free and slighting, which assail them lose much of their force when we remember that almost all the services they rendered are unrecorded save in the book of life, human fame being nothing accounted of by these followers of the Lamb.

The present paper is an endeavour to collect some of the indications by which we may form a notion of the apostolic group. What is individual, personal, characteristic of the fire of Peter or the gloom of Thomas will be treated hereafter. Meantime it is hoped that a comparison of the scattered notes which concern the Twelve, or "the disciples" (as far as that title obviously includes them, with whom, or even a section of them, it is at times synonymous)¹ may not be without interest.

1. The painters represent our Saviour moving along the country in the centre of a group of comrades who gather about Him as they please. But it is much more probable that they travelled in three ranks, following their Master. At first sight there is little or no agreement in the arrangement of the four lists given to us in the synoptical Gospels and the Acts (Matt. x. 2, Mark iii. 16, Luke vi. 14, Acts i. 13). But we soon discover that the twelve names may be subdivided into three groups of four, and none is ever

¹ Cf. Luke xvii. ver. 1 with ver. 5 ; Matt. xxiv. 3 with Mark xiii. 3.

found in any subdivision except his own, while the names of Peter, Philip, and the second James are always at the head of their group, and the first rank is composed of the mighty brothers, the sons of Jonas and of Zebedee. All this is best accounted for by supposing that the groups were actually thus arranged, and that each had a sort of captain at its head.

On the last journey to Jerusalem, it is explicitly stated that Jesus went before, and as they followed they were afraid (Mark x. 32). Now this, if it stood alone, might only express the holy earnestness with which He then especially came to do the will of God. His rapt devotion is evidently the cause of their awe. But their order in going harmonizes with the call, "Come ye after Me," with the warning, "Whosoever doth not . . . follow Me cannot be My disciple," and with the going of the Good Shepherd before the sheep (Matt. iv. 19, x. 38; John x. 4). So too when Peter pressed upon Him with a too carnal sympathy, Jesus first turned about, and then, seeing His disciples, rebuked him (Mark viii. 33; cf. also Matt. viii. 19, 23, and many other places).

2. Since they were chiefly men of outdoor, hardy avocations, one might fairly expect them to be capable of more physical exertion than their Master, whose lifelong occupation had been more sedentary, and upon whom an unprecedented burden always pressed. Accordingly, we find them permitted to go forward to Sychar for provisions, while their Lord sat beside the well in an attitude which expressed His weariness. And they could row hard across the lake, while Jesus had sunk into deep slumber upon the helmsman's cushion in the stern (John iv. 6, Mark. iv. 38).

3. The manner in which they are helpful to Him is very natural. As Paul was not sent to baptize, so Jesus Himself baptized not, but from the first entrusted to them a duty which made no premature demand upon their spiritual

insight (John iv. 1). And when they were first sent out to preach, their teaching was but rudimentary: the near approach of the kingdom, rather than any statement of its nature; the signs which were evidence of their commission; the goodwill expressed in their greeting; and the confidence which threw itself upon their hearers for supplies, and lacked nothing,—these, and an indignant protest against such as rejected them, served to prepare the villagers for His coming, and to develop their own faith, while not overstraining it (Matt. x. 5). But this is scarcely the gospel which a later age would have entrusted to them.

Elsewhere their duties are sufficiently humble. They buy bread at Sychar, they find what provision is among the hungry crowds, they sever the multitudes into less unwieldy groups, they bring the colt and prepare the pass-over (John iv. 8; Mark vi. 38-43; Matt. xxi. 2, xxvi. 17).

It is at the end of His ministry that the Master who has, He reminds them, already called them friends, calls them no longer bondservants (John xv. 15).

4. There is help which might have been expected, but which they fail to render. They neither interpose when He is in danger at Nazareth, nor again when He conveyed Himself away from the Pool of Bethesda, and the Jews sought to kill Him (Luke iv. 30; John v. 13, 18). This absence of heroism, while yet their training is immature, appears also in another way. It is a curious indication of the awe which Jesus inspired, that His opponents, especially in the earlier controversies, impugned His doings, not to His face, but in murmurs among themselves or else to His followers, while they often ventured to question Him about the strange doings of His disciples.

Of Him they ask, "Why do they on the Sabbath day that which is not lawful?" "Why walk not Thy disciples according to the tradition, . . . but eat with unwashed hands?" "Why do Thy disciples fast not?" "Master,

rebuke Thy disciples" (Mark ii. 24, vii. 5; Matt. ix. 14; Luke xix. 39).

It is to them that they say, "Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?" "Doth not your Master pay tribute?" (Matt. ix. 11, xviii. 24.)

Now St. John tells us that this very fear of coming to close quarters with Jesus suggested grave inferences to some shrewd bystanders, who asked, "Is not this He whom they seek to kill?"¹ But, lo, He speaketh openly, and they say nothing unto Him" (John vii. 25, 26). But whether He is questioned or they, it is always He who interposes with a reply: on their part is the same helplessness as when the danger was physical, the same which in the garden contrasted so sharply with His self-possession, when by His surrender He secured their liberty to "go their way."

No sooner do they hear of the murder of the Baptist than their first missionary circuit closes at once, and they hasten back to their Protector (Mark vi. 29, 30).

So true are the words of the great prayer, "While I was with them, I kept them: . . . and I guarded them. . . . But now I come to Thee. . . . I pray . . . that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil one" (John xvii. 12-15).

5. Their subordination is the least part of what we learn from the memorable fact that Jesus never invites them to join with Him in prayer, nor solicits their prayers for Him. The disciples are to pray the Lord of the harvest that He would send forth labourers, but He does not propose to lead them in this prayer; on the contrary, it is at this very time that He continues all night in prayer alone (cf. Matt. ix. 38, x. 1; Luke vi. 12).

Again, when they saw Him praying they seem to have

¹ Observe the further coincidence that the people, gathered from all parts to the feast, said, "Thou hast a devil, who goeth about to kill Thee?" But "some of them of Jerusalem" knew better (vers. 20, 25).

felt their exclusion, and asked to be taught to pray, as John had taught his disciples; and as if to rebuke them for being dissatisfied with the brief prayer He had already given to all, they received it again in a form still terser and more concentrated (Luke xi. 1). Sleep weighed upon them in the mount of transfiguration, while He prayed. In the garden they are bidden to watch with Him, and again to watch and pray, but not to pray with Him (Luke ix. 29-32; Matt. xxvi. 36-41). On the contrary, they must tarry while He goes farther to pray. To St. Paul, the intercessions of his followers were priceless; and they who deny that the synoptical gospels reveal a union between Christ and the Father wholly different from ours have to explain this remarkable divorce between the prayers of Jesus and of the Twelve.

6. This task will not be lightened for them by observing that in other respects there exists a homely kind of intimacy, such as prays Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat," and with deeper solicitude inquires, "Lord, the Jews of late sought to stone Thee, and goest Thou thither again?" The remonstrance, "How sayest Thou, Who touched Me?" is akin with that in St. John, "Lord, if he is fallen asleep he will recover." With like freedom they interrupt His prayerful retirement, because "all men seek Thee," and they ask, "Knowest Thou that the Pharisees were offended at this saying?" They desired Him to send away the multitudes because the place was desert and the day far spent; and the woman of Canaan, because her outcry drew attention to them when it was desirable that they should be hid (John iv. 31, xi. 8; Luke viii. 45; John xi. 12; Luke ix. 12; Matt. xv. 23).

There is something homely and interesting in their pointing His attention to the size of the Temple stones, just two days after He had predicted that one stone should not be left upon another. And it marks the difference between the region of His thought and theirs, that the day and

almost the hour should be the same when He called the disciples unto Him to point out a generous widow, and when they came to Him for to show Him the buildings of the Temple. In the same familiar way they remarked to Him the speedy ruin of the fig tree which He had cursed (Mark xii. 43 ; Matt. xxiv. 1, xxi. 20).

The same absence of restraint appears in the questions which they ask of Him, sometimes little more than curious, even when they relate to spiritual concerns. "Are there few that be saved?" "Dost Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" "Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Speakest Thou these things unto us, or unto all?" (Luke xiii. 23 ; Acts i. 6 ; John ix. 2 ; Luke xii. 41.)

A graver note was struck when they asked, "Who then can be saved?" "Why could we not cast it out?" "Why speakest Thou unto them in parables?" "Declare unto us the parable of the tares." "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Thus too they reopened privately the subject of divorce, and inferred that it was not good for a man to marry (Matt. xix. 25, xvii. 19, xiii. 10, 36, xviii. 1 ; Mark x. 10 ; Matt. xix. 10).

7. These questions prove that it was no servile dread of being repulsed, but awe, as in the presence of a Being from another sphere, which so often hushed their perplexities into silence. This silence moreover is most frequent when the rapt self-devotion of their Lord is most apparent. "They marvelled that He spake with a woman," yet none asked for an explanation, and it was among themselves that they inquired, "Hath any man brought Him ought to eat?" At His first cleansing of the Temple, they silently recalled to mind that it was written, "The zeal of Thine house hath even eaten Me." Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask Him, "What is this that He saith, A little while?" (John iv. 27, 33 ; ii. 17 ; xvi. 19.)

All these examples are from the fourth gospel, but they are exactly similar to what we read elsewhere about their perplexity when warned against the leaven of the Pharisees. When He cursed the fig tree, we read that the disciples heard it, evidently in silence. And at three several times, when warned of His approaching passion, they could not understand, yet feared to ask Him (Mark viii. 15 ; xi. 14 ; ix. 10, 32 ; x. 32).

All this coherence in statement, equally between the synoptics and John, and between miraculous events and those which are admitted practically by all sides in the great controversy, is valuable evidence. It carries the same conviction which a jury feels when a witness bears the test of cross-examination well, a test which is all the more valuable when it deals with unstudied and minute events.

We now turn to the concerns of their spiritual life.

8. The effect of Christ's protest against formalism, and His miracles upon the Sabbath, appears most naturally in their plucking the corn in the wheatfield and eating bread with unwashed hands, contrary to the tradition of "all the Jews" (Mark ii. 23, vii. 2). It was not unnatural that they should hold their new freedom with an unsteady hand. Yet it was strangely soon after Jesus had vindicated their liberty, and offended the Pharisees by declaring that man is not defiled by food which enters the mouth, but by evil words which issue thence, that they misunderstood His warning against the leaven of the Pharisees, and suspected some new ceremonialism of His institution. Their previous experience was what entitled Him to ask, "Do ye not yet perceive, neither understand?" and again, "Do ye not yet understand?" (Mark vii. 15, viii. 18, 21.)

In fact, at this point our Lord addressed to them the keenest and longest remonstrance they had yet incurred. For so distinct a relapse into formalism from liberty indicated the earliest peril of the Church, and foreshadowed the

movement which evoked, a few years later, the passionate remonstrances addressed by St. Paul to Corinth and Galatia. How many later movements also, wherein the wilful human heart, ever the same amid its inconsistencies, has preferred the letter to the spirit, were due to the very principle which underlay the first heresy of the chosen ones of Christ!

9. The gradual progress of their enlightenment is not only indicated by the mention of things which they cannot bear yet, and of actions which they know not now, but shall know hereafter (John xvi. 12, xiii. 7), but by the process of the narrative.

When the miracle of Cana manifested forth His glory, His disciples believed on Him. Yet, when He presently spake of the Temple of His Body, we read that after He was raised from the dead His disciples remembered that He spake this; and believed the Scripture, and the words that Jesus had said. They had not been hitherto incredulous of either, but now their belief attained its intelligent, perfect form. And at many intervening experiences they adored Him, "saying, Of a truth Thou art the Son of God," and, "Now are we sure; . . . by this we know that Thou camest forth from God" (John ii. 11, 22; Matt. xiv. 33; John xvi. 29, 30).

And this explains how the confession of Nathanael, lightly spoken at the opening of the work, became no less than a decisive revelation from the Father when renewed by Peter, in the days of bitter opposition and desertion. "Thou art the Son of God; Thou art King of Israel," is not otherwise behind the great confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (John i. 49; Matt. xvi. 16). But Nathanael only repeated, amid favourable circumstances, the witness of the Baptist (ver. 34), while Peter testified from a divinely illumined faith what "flesh and blood" had ceased to confess, now thinking Him no more than one of the prophets.

10. This gradual falling away of others was itself a part of their training. Merely to stand firm was to be confirmed, as the tree which has borne the storm has become more deeply rooted. And if there is an evident mixture of self-interest with their devotion, if Peter is the mouthpiece of all when he demands, "What shall we have therefore?" (Luke xviii. 28) he also speaks for all, when Jesus gives them the opportunity of retreat by asking, "Would ye also go away?" and he replies, "Lord, to whom should we go? Thou hast words of eternal life. And we, we have believed and know that Thou art the Holy One of God" (John vi. 67-69). In this fine answer we discover the sacred hunger which shall be filled. To return to the lake and the net is not even considered. They must have a leader now, and there is no leader except One: "Lord, to WHOM should we go?"

Their fidelity amid extreme discouragement (a grace which is not inconsistent with panic in the hour of the foe and the power of darkness) is evidently their greatest merit. "Ye are they which have continued with Me in My temptations." "They have kept My word." "I guarded them, and not one of them perished." "These knew that Thou hast sent Me" (Luke xxii. 28; John xvii. 6, 12, 25). Even the blow which shattered their hopes did not prevent them from being a united band; and if they believe not, it is for joy (Luke xxiv. 33, 41).

11. Their failures are those of weakness, not of ungracious hearts. Perplexity when they have no bread, drowsiness in the mount, and sleep "for sorrow" in the garden, natural dread in the two storms and upon the arrest of Jesus, failure to cast out a devil when both He and the foremost of their company are absent, these represent one aspect of human frailty, and are all exceedingly consistent (Mark viii. 16; Luke ix. 32, xxii. 45; Matt. viii. 25, xiv. 26; Luke ix. 40).

Another aspect of it is betrayed in their frequent contests for mastery, their indignation when the sons of Salome covertly intrigue for the chief places, their forbidding the labours of one who followed not "us" (they say not, Thee), in their inquiry whether words of especial privilege were spoken to themselves alone, in their repeated failure to value children aright,¹ and in that reluctance to wash the feet of the brethren which left that lowly task for their Master to perform for all of them (Luke ix. 46, xxii. 24; Matt. xx. 24; Mark ix. 38; Luke xii. 41; John xiii. 4, 14).

What kind of frailty was that which forsook Him in the garden? Cruel things are spoken by flippant orators (who have perhaps never in all their lives known real danger, and yet have sometimes been afraid) concerning the "cowardice" of the men whom Christ chose out of all the world. But the narrative tells us that Jesus declared the spirit to be willing, though the flesh was weak. Although suddenly aroused from slumber, and apparently weighed upon by the same supernatural pressure against which Christ wrestled, and of which He warned them,² yet they boldly confronted the great multitude of armed men, and "when they saw what would follow" proposed to "smite with the sword" (Matt. xxvi. 41; Luke xxii. 49). In danger they bore themselves gallantly, it was the surrender that appalled them. Now the sternest nerve has often failed in strange and unexpected peril, and the bravest troops have given way to panic. We forfeit the instruction of their overthrow when we speak of them as dastards. It is by remembering all that they afterwards dared, and all that they were even then willing to hazard, as long as

¹ "Take heed that ye despise not"; "The disciples rebuked those that brought them" (Matt. xviii. 10, xix. 13).

² Cf. the injunction when He was at the place to "pray lest ye enter into temptation," and again, later, "Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation," with His mysterious and emphatic words when arrested, "This is . . . the power of darkness," ἡ ἐξουσία τοῦ σκότους (Luke xxii. 40, 46, 53).

danger confronted them in its expected forms, that we measure the warning given us by their example, which is that no arm or heart of flesh is to be trusted in the battles of the soul.

12. With their frailty there was at least a touching consciousness of it.

Though far from wealthy, when the danger of riches was announced they felt the peril within their own hearts, and asked, "Who then can be saved?" Again they appealed to Him, "Lord, increase our faith" (Matt. xix. 25; Luke xvii. 5). The exaggeration of their "cowardice" by pulpit rhetoric is scarcely less flagrant than that of their "self-confidence" at the Last Supper. Yet the conscious superiority with which we read their protests that they never would forsake their Lord should at least be mitigated by the recollection that they had just looked one upon another in fear, had shown an artless and amiable ignorance of the real traitor, and had asked, in words of which the very order betrays their breathless eagerness, "Is it I, Lord?"¹ (Matt. xxvi. 22.) Their contradiction of His warning is presumptuous; but let us at least remember that it is the presumption of hearts reassured after an intolerable dread, and after the bitterly humiliating sense that something treacherous might be detected in them every one; of hearts moreover glowing with loyalty to One who had few friends left, who had just washed their feet, and who was pouring out for them at that wondrous feast a flood of tender, sympathising affection such as never was known before.

Is there any narrative in the world, historical or dramatic, of the same bulk, in which a greater number of minute touches, which concern the minor characters and not the central figure, will bear comparison as well? But these are not collected from one narrative, they are from four

¹ Contrast the cold and formal interrogation wrung at last from Judas, "Rabbi, is it I?" (ver. 25.)

pamphlets; not the production of literary artists, but of Galileans of the first century, working moreover in the harsh material of a language not their own. They have not to do with the idiosyncracies of one individual or another (these have yet to be added to the demonstration), but with the behaviour of a group of peasants, natural, generous, affectionate, willing in spirit yet weak in flesh, dull in their unconsciousness of the wondrous plan which they are helping to develop. The miraculous incidents agree in character with those which scepticism permits us to believe, and the story in the fourth Gospel teems with resemblances to the other three. Above all, there is no trace whatever of the glorifying influence of legend or myth. No sunny haze of sanctified imagination has at once magnified and obscured their figures; no blending of romantic fancy with tender memory has wrapped them in a silvery mist of beauty, effacing the vulgar tints of earth, and revealing only a pearl-white outline, beautiful but dreamlike. It is only by the interposition of such a medium that men would fain explain away the marvellous Jesus, standing luminous in the midst of them. But all around is solid, matter-of-fact, visible in the light of day. What is written about the Apostles authenticates what we read of Christ.

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