

THE SELF-WITNESS OF THE SON OF GOD.

(JOHN VIII. 12-20.)

EVERY reader of the gospels is aware of a very striking change in the style of teaching adopted by our Lord when, leaving the common people of the rural villages, He came to confront the professional classes in the temple. His lessons become less simple and more abstract. He does not get leave to spread His discourse abroad in large masses, because He is perpetually interrupted at the outset, and forced to explain or to defend His words. The discourse becomes a discussion, almost a wrangle, in the end. From whatever point it starts, it soon turns upon Himself, the validity of His claims, or the credit to be attached to His testimony. In short, our Lord had to do at Jerusalem with men who had prejudged Him to be a "deceiver," and who therefore compelled Him to take up an apologetic attitude, a tone of self-justification. The rabbis and other officials of the nation were unquestionably entitled (in a sense) to sit in judgment upon His pretensions. It was their function and their business to investigate such claims as His, and to guide public opinion, so that their less instructed fellow countrymen might be enabled to discriminate betwixt the true prophet and the false, the genuine and the pseudo-Messiah. Before them therefore it was impossible for our Lord to decline the ungrateful task of self-defence. They sat in Moses' seat. They were the authorized "shepherds" of God's people. It lay with them to "judge righteous judgment." But then here was the hopelessness of the situation. Not only did they approach the subject with a prejudice or prejudgment, in their minds, which made them opponents and not judges; worse than that, they were, by their own carnal or unspiritual life, utterly disqualified from appreciating His spiritual teaching. They were like blind men pretending to

judge of colours. Themselves ungodly, out of sympathy with the Divine, and dead to the facts and laws of the unseen life, they lacked the very first qualification for understanding Jesus, or discerning how far His teaching was of God. He and they were like disputants between whom there is nothing in common, who think differently on the fundamentals of the argument; so that they really never meet each other's position, charge past one another (so to say) on different planes of thought, and fail to comprehend so much as one another's language. Two things resulted from this state of matters: the one, that our Lord in these word-tussles was always driven to fall back upon the unsupported testimony of His own consciousness to certain ultimate facts of spiritual experience; the other, that He never closed the debate without revealing the profound spiritual gulf which cleft Him asunder from them, a cleft which went down to the very roots of their nature, they being from beneath and He, as He averred, from above. It was the most remarkable illustration ever seen of the principle St. Paul lays down: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are (to be) spiritually judged. But he that is spiritual (*i.e.* in this case Jesus Himself) judgeth all things; and he himself is judged of no man."

These remarks may afford a key for the comprehension of the passage before us. The question discussed in it is this: Can the testimony of Jesus to His own claims be accepted?—a question which manifestly lies near the centre of all the religious controversies of our own day. It grew out of that magnificent utterance of His dealt with in my last paper;¹ the claim He put forth on the morning after the Festival of Tabernacles had closed to be the moral sunlight of humanity: "I am the light of the

¹ See THE EXPOSITOR, Fourth Series, vol. ii., p. 216.

world : he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." These wonderful words were plainly adapted to form the text, or starting point, for a longer discourse. But possibly the brief and precious fragment preserved to us may have been all that was delivered. For He was interrupted by an objector, and a discussion ensued.

It was, of course, the interest of the adverse party to deaden the effect of His most impressive teaching, whenever they could do so, by some plausible cavil. In the present case, the objection was plausible enough. It raised the whole prior question, how far such an unsupported statement of our Lord could be taken as valid evidence in His own behalf. The Pharisees said to Him : "Thou art bearing witness to Thyself ; Thy witness is not true" : not reliable, not necessarily true and trustworthy. It is, of course, an admitted rule, that a man's testimony in his own interest, on any question of external fact where it is possible to verify it by independent witnesses, should not be received as sufficient. So far as the outward credentials of His Messiahship were concerned, Jesus had already, on a former occasion, admitted this. He had said (v. 31) : "If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true. It is Another that beareth witness of Me." But here the case was different. There are some things to which the man himself is the only competent witness to be had. A soul's spiritual history and spiritual condition cannot be made the subject of any external testimony. Of these facts in his interior life each man is alone cognisant ; and on these therefore his own evidence must be accepted, if you are to come to any conclusion on the matter at all. At first sight, it surprises one to find that our Lord reckons His position in the world as its moral light among such ultimate facts of His own consciousness to which He needs to bear witness. One expects such a fact rather to prove itself. Is

it not true that light of every sort must be its own evidence? It is there if you see it; if you do not, who will convince you of its existence? So it is with the light of the sun as an ultimate fact in physics, that proves itself to the sense of sight. So it is with the moral illumination which Christ affords. He whose soul has been lit up with the glory of God in the face of Jesus needs no other demonstration that He is from God. When we come into the region of such ultimate spiritual truth as Jesus teaches, proof in the sense of testimony or evidence, strictly speaking, fails us. As Chrysostom says: "God Himself is the only trustworthy witness to Himself"; and Christ, who is the image of God, vindicates His divineness no less to the open eye of the soul by simply being what He is. But then, to this self-evidencing power of Divine truth, the Pharisees were blind. They wanted the faculty to discern heaven's light; and the question was, Had Christ's witness to Himself any validity *for them*? Ought the blind to believe the Sun when He testifies of Himself, "I am the light of the world"?

To this our Lord's reply virtually is: His relation to the dark and sinful world of mankind as its appointed Light-bringer from heaven depends upon two facts: first, He is come from heaven; next, He is going back to heaven. For unless He is a messenger out of the unseen sent forth by God with a celestial mission to enlighten mankind, and a destination to return again to God when His task is done, He is no Saviour, Light-bringer, or Life-producer for our fallen race. Let that point be well considered. Superhuman origin, or the miracle of His birth; superhuman destination, or the miracle of His resurrection and ascension; lying between, a temporary career passed down here among the natural facts of earth, yet closely clasped and girdled in by these supernatural facts, even as this phenomenal world of ours is rounded with the dark un-

known of God: such is Jesus in His own esteem. This He needs to be, or He is nothing to us:—a Visitor out of undiscovered diviner worlds than ours, out of the very Light, returning back again from our eyes into the Light; yet leaving one broad and gladdening trail of glory athwart our dim and perilous road, by following which we need no more walk “in the darkness.”

Now, of these twin facts on which everything comes to hinge, who shall give us reliable assurance? “I do,” saith Jesus. “I know whence I came, and whither I go.” These are among the secrets of personal conscious experience of which no man can be a witness, save the Man Himself. The past fact—“I came forth from God,” as He elsewhere phrased it—was one which dwelt within this Man’s memory as an event experienced, of which He could not doubt. The future fact—“I am to go away back again to God”—stood present to His soul as a purpose, a destiny, to which His will was fastened as the necessary close of His mission. Whence He came, thither He must go: that also He could not doubt. Of these two unique and personal facts, none could be a witness but Himself. What could these Jews know of such things transcending observation? A Man they saw in the midst of them for a little: come from somewhere. By-and-by they saw Him no more: gone somewhither. But whence or whither they could not tell. He knew. “Though I do bear witness to Myself, My witness is valid; because I, alone, know whence I came and whither I go; but ye know not whence I came or whither I go.”

It is quite clear that our Lord means to claim a unique position among us, as a solitary witness at first hand to superhuman and super-earthly facts. He alone of all men does not confess to be bounded as to His knowledge by the limits of the five senses. He alone is conscious of a life antecedent to our human experience, a recollection which

travels back into some previous state of existence and up into another world than this. Of the superhuman, the celestial, the *other-worldly* facts and things, He talks to us, not like one who dreams, speculates, or believes, but as the solitary Witness who knows because He has seen. Is His testimony to be received? That is the question for our time, as it was for His own. Who of us is in a position to criticise, or to reject, His evidence? Is any other man justified in saying to this Man, "I never came, that I know of, out of any world above nature, never was there, never saw God or spiritual things; and therefore I cannot believe that You ever did. My five senses are all the organs which I possess for the acquisition of knowledge, and I recollect no life antecedent to my birth; therefore I cannot accept what *You* tell me of heavenly things, things not to be seen or heard or felt"? Is that reasonable? Is my ignorance a fair criterion for judging of Christ's knowledge? He says He is come into this world to shed light upon it from a higher one; am I entitled to say, "That cannot be, because I have no such light, and know nothing myself of any higher world"? Christ may be speaking truly or not; but at all events it is irrational and unfair to judge of His testimony by the analogy of other men. Till you have found another man as sane and honest as He, and therefore as credible, who will say in sober earnest, "I know whence I came; I came down from above, on a mission from the Father," you have no parallel among men to judge Christ by. The argument from ignorance is a very precarious one.

Yet this is precisely how many in our generation judge of Christ. They judge Him as the Jews did, "after the flesh." That is to say, they judge by what they can see, by the witness of their five senses. Jesus looks to the senses but a common man, the son of the carpenter Joseph, a remarkable specimen of piety and insight in one

of the working classes : and that is all we can see in Him. He professes to know more than other men ; but since it is certain that we have no means of information except scientific observation upon phenomena in nature, therefore it is inferred that He can have none either. His pretence to superhuman light on things Divine can be nothing but the frenzy of a heated brain. "He hath a demon, and is mad ; why hear ye Him ?" It is certainly interesting to find that Jesus encountered in His lifetime this estimate of His position now frequently met with among persons of superior culture, encountered it and answered it. What did He say ? He said : "You do not know whence I came and whither I go. You have no means of rebutting My evidence, therefore, nor any right to sit in judgment on it. You can only judge 'after the flesh,' by the unenlightened understanding of fallen human nature ; and the discoveries of One who has been with God and is come from God can be apprehended only by the spiritual nature after God has quickened it to discern and qualified it to judge."

Our Lord thus disputes the right of physical science to sit in judgment upon His spiritual teaching, or to controvert His personal testimony to spiritual facts. For He claims to have means of information at His command such as are not open to other men. On the strength of this He asks to be believed, even though His evidence were unsupported. But His evidence is not unsupported. It is by a very unexpected and striking turn of the conversation that He guides it to this fresh point. "Ye are judging Me," He had been saying, "after the flesh, misjudging My testimony therefore ; I for My part judge"—*you* (one expects Him to add), not after fleshly standards, but according to God or by the spirit, and therefore truly. Instead of that, He breaks the symmetry of His sentence to interject the unlooked for and stinging words, "I judge no

man." As if He had said: "Whereas you, with your blind, earthly eyes, are for ever presuming to sit in judgment on the claims of One come from above to give you heavenly light, I for My part, who might well expose and judge and condemn you, am come for more merciful ends, not to rebuke, but to illuminate and to save. I am come to show the way to God, and shed the light of love and hope on your dark path, and give you the blessedness of knowing Him whom to know is life eternal. Why meet a revelation so gracious in a spirit of carping and presumptuous criticism?" The rebuke is merited, and may well be laid to heart by the moderns who affect to judge of the Light of the world by the sparks of their own wisdom.

"Yet, if I do judge you," He goes on, "My judgment will not be mistaken like yours, misled by the outward appearances of things, but righteous and true; for I am never alone in it (that is, out of communion with Him who is alone the faithful and true Witness)—never left like you to Myself and the wandering fires of the godless and fallen understanding, but hold a perpetual interior fellowship with God My Father, and enjoy His ceaseless illumination. He lends to all My words infallible truthfulness and absolute validity." There is here a new, additional claim on our Lord's part to be a reliable Witness to Divine truth. Come from God, and about to return to God, He is not, even while on earth, separated from the invisible Father, so that the mists of the earth have power to confuse His insight or obscure His light. Throughout His entire experience and His witness-bearing there runs a mysterious doubleness—His soul abiding in union with the unseen Father whom He came to reveal. It follows that all He says or does is at the same time a saying and a doing of His Father who is in heaven.

Is there not almost a touch of holy sarcasm, a tinge of irony, in this condescension to the requirements of Hebrew

jurisprudence? "You refuse My witness," says He, "because it is unsupported. You would have the witness of two, not one, that you may have legal evidence for Divine facts, seeing that the Law says, 'At the mouth of two witnesses shall every word be established.' Have then what you want. Is not this enough? Are there not Two that bear witness, since I am one, and My Father, whose voice speaks through Me and on My behalf, He is a second, if you will?" It is a singular retort. He stretches Divine mysteries to fit them to our poor human necessities of thought, as far as they will bear stretching: that He may humour, as it were, the captiousness of the legal intellect, and leave His hearers without excuse. Alas! He humours them so far in vain. How is He answered? "Where is this Father of Thine who beareth witness with Thee?" Was it spoken in childish ignorance, as when Philip put the same question on a later day? Or was it an insinuation that it was an idle boast to appeal to such a Witness, who could not be produced in court for cross-examination at their bar? I do not know. But the question laid bare at all events the hidden source of their unbelief; to wit, their spiritual alienation from God, and consequent inability to discern spiritual truth. "Ye know neither Me nor My Father: if ye knew Me, ye would know My Father also."

Did I not say how every controversy betwixt Jesus and His learned critics was sure to run out into this at last—an exposure of their utter and profound inability to apprehend the spiritual or Divine? He lived and moved in one circle of being, they in another circle, outside of His. There is no path to the true knowledge of the Father but through an appreciative, trustful acquaintance with Jesus His Son. But no man can come in trust and love to the Son of God except the Father draw him. We are inclosed in a hopeless circle. Who can break through it? He only whose

grace changes the critic into the penitent. "Except a man be converted, and become as a little child, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Is it not a sublime sight to behold this Son of the Most High, come to shine with saving light from heaven, yet meeting only denial from blind souls—kept at bay and set at naught by men whom, in their superior conceit, no tenderness on His part can soften, nor dignity overawe, yet able to retreat for strength in upon that innermost sacred consciousness of His essential oneness with the Father and His abiding fellowship in the Father's love? Like one who leans his back amidst all odds against some primeval rock, so does He abide in the power of His conscious divinity. From that nothing shakes Him. Believed or denied, His witness to Himself standeth fast. "I know whence I came. I know whither I am going. I know that I am not alone. Here am I, and the Father who sent Me."

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HOSEA.

IN my desire to cover the whole field of inquiry, I may explain that I cannot attend to form and polish and that sort of thing. I propose to strike various notes of thought and feeling that seem to me most interesting in our subject of study. I shall, first of all, make sure that you and I are thinking in the same way about the Hebrew prophets, when we talk about them.

A Hebrew prophet was not a sort of extraordinary magical oracle that was always telling people in a mystically wise kind of way little things that were going to happen, or predicting big things that were going to occur. The supreme end of a Hebrew prophet's action in predicting events was not so much to prove himself correct in having foreseen,