

THE DIFFICULT WORDS OF CHRIST.

2. HOLY VIOLENCE.

MATT. XI. 12.¹

FEW things in the Gospels are more beautiful than the relations to one another of Jesus and the Baptist. John's trial came when the popularity of Jesus began to eclipse his own. Busybodies were not awanting to kindle in his heart feelings of jealousy by pointing out that the crowds that formerly thronged to him had gone away to Jesus. But he put these suggestions aside and rose nobly above his temptation. He told his unwise friends that a man can receive nothing except it be given him from above. He had had his own day and his own share, and now Jesus had received His; and, if the success of Jesus was greater than his own, he could rejoice in it, as the friend of the bridegroom does on the wedding-day, when the bridegroom carries off the prize of love and beauty: "He must increase, but I must decrease." The trial of Jesus came when John sent from his prison to ask, "Art thou He that should come, or look we for another?" In this question there was a tone of disappointment and depreciation, which was fitted to have a prejudicial influence on the fortunes of Jesus; for, if John doubted, might not all be excused for hesitating? Jesus felt the blow; but, as soon as the messengers of John were departed, He rallied from it; His mind was invaded with an access of sympathy and generous enthusiasm towards John; and He poured out on His fore-runner a high-strung panegyric, in which, having touched on the outstanding features of his character, He declared, "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of

¹ "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force."

women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist."

This verse is a continuation of the eulogy. Having completed the description of John's personal character, Jesus goes on to speak of his work and its results; and He still continues in the same high-strung and poetical strain. Hence the figurative and obscure terms in which His meaning is expressed. But we must hold fast to the thread of connexion—that we are in the middle of a panegyric on the Baptist¹—for it is this which determines the sense.

The mere sound of the words does not at once suggest their true meaning, but rather the reverse. But this is not unusual in the language of poetry; and it was far from unusual with Jesus, in His most exalted moods, to wrap His meaning up in enigmatical terms.

When the kingdom of heaven is spoken of as "suffering violence," the first idea which the words suggest is that a reference is being made to the persecutions to which Christianity has been so frequently subjected. And in this sense the words have sometimes been understood. But a reference to persecution is quite out of place at this point in the eulogy on John; nor, indeed, is it historical that at the date when the words were spoken Christianity had been suffering persecution.

In like manner we must put aside the notion, supported by Weiss and Morison, that the reference is to the attempts made by some of the hearers of Jesus, who united political and Messianic ambitions with their enthusiasm for Him,

¹ It is true that in the preceding verse the strain of panegyric is dropped for a moment in the remarkable words: "Notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." That, however, it is immediately resumed again is indicated by the *δε* at the beginning of our verse, on which Bengel has this note: "Antitheton, hoc sensu: quamquam Johannes minor est minimo in regno cœlorum, tamen jam ab initio dierum Johannis regnum cœlorum vim facit."

to hurry on the realisation of His kingdom by violent means. This seems to receive some justification from the fact that the word rendered "take by force" in this text is the same (*ἀρπάξω*) as that employed when it is said that they attempted to take Him by force and make Him a king. But this coincidence is purely accidental. A reference here to such unholy violence on Christ's behalf is as out of place as a reference to the violence of persecution: it has no connexion with the strain of thought which Jesus is pursuing.

What He has in view is to characterize the results of the Baptist's work, in so far as they were good and gratifying—that is, in so far as they were due to John. The lack of results, from His own work as well as John's, due to the unresponsiveness of their hearers, is enlarged upon later.¹ But here He is dealing with the revival of the spiritual life of the country caused by John's preaching.

Its features were that the kingdom of heaven suffered violence, and the violent took it by force. The kingdom of heaven seems to be conceived of as a city which the besiegers are determined to capture, because their hearts are set upon the treasures which it contains. It "suffereth violence" when they overcome the obstacles which stand in the way of their entrance to it; and then, being in, they take possession of its treasures—they "take it by force."²

There is an alternative rendering of the first clause (adopted by Melancthon, Bengel, Baur, Stier, etc.): *βιάζεται* may be middle, instead of passive,³ and signify "offereth violence," or "entereth with violence." The kingdom of heaven coming or entering with violence, as a consequence of the Baptist's activity, would naturally refer to the vehemence with which John inspired men to preach

¹ Querela incipit versu 16.—BENDEL.

² Meyer quotes from Thucydides, πόλεις τὰς βεβιασμένας.

³ Sæpe LXX. βιάζομαι ponunt, vim adhibeo.—BENDEL.

it, or to the fact that it became a universal theme of talk and testimony. And this agrees well with the form of the verse in St. Luke: ¹ "Since that time the kingdom of God is preached and every man presseth into it": where two results of John's work are emphasized—the earnest preaching of the Gospel and the earnest hearing of it. The two things are really inseparable: they are the two sides of every genuine revival.

There is a holy violence in the preaching of the kingdom of heaven.

There are truths of Christianity which it is impossible to believe earnestly without feeling a certain heat and urgency in setting them forth. Such, for example, were the topics which the Baptist handled. He brought sin to remembrance; he warned men to flee from the wrath to come; he attacked public wrongs and abuses. Anyone who puts his heart into such themes has to assail men; his tone and manner must be rousing and threatening; it is intolerable to have such things spoken of in cold blood. But truths of an entirely opposite character may inspire a similar urgency. The sense of the greatness of salvation and of how much those are missing who neglect it; the philanthropic passion for the good of humanity and the onward march of progress; the warmth of love to Christ and devotion to His purpose of saving men can produce a fire of earnestness not less influential than that kindled by the terror of the Lord.

There is a temperament which imparts to preaching this militant and violent character. John undoubtedly had it. St. Paul had it in another form. He was fond of military

¹ In St. Luke it does not occur in the panegyric on the Baptist. The connexion in which it does occur is very difficult (xvi. 16); but there also, as here, what our Lord is characterizing is the hearty and enthusiastic reception of the message of John among the common people and the degraded classes, as contrasted with its rejection by the upper classes.

images in describing his work; and, in a memorable passage, he makes use of the very one here employed—the capture of a city: “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds, casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” It is the temperament of the missionary, the reformer, the evangelist; and names distinguished by it might be mentioned in every era of revival.

This need not be the only mood of the preacher. While Jesus says here that the kingdom of heaven cometh with violence, He says elsewhere that it cometh “without observation”; and, while the preacher is here compared to one breaking into a city, he is compared elsewhere to the shepherd, who carries the lambs in his arms; to the sower, who has long patience, waiting for the appearance of the blade; to the fisher, who must sometimes be content to toil all the night and catch nothing. Such images suggest that there is much work for God whose processes are silent and whose results are distant. Yet, though not the only mood of the preacher, the mood which urges him forth to take men by storm and to fling himself against the strongholds of evil without calculating the consequences is a legitimate state of mind. It is more: it is sometimes obligatory; it ought not to be so rare as it is. The great preachers of the New Testament were accused of being mad. The Baptist was so reproached; so was Jesus Himself; so was St. Paul; at Pentecost St. Peter and his associates were charged with being full of new wine. How long will it be before some preachers are so accused! The wheel of routine goes round, and the old straw is threshed for the thousandth time; all is sober and sensible, but cold and unimpressive; and the strongholds of iniquity in the heart of the individual and in the practices of the

community remain unvanquished and uninvaded. It is one of the marks of a genuine revival to disturb this slumber and make preaching urgent and vehement.

On the other hand, there is a holy violence on the part of the hearers of the kingdom of heaven—"the violent take it by force."

Stier ridicules the idea that there can be any allusion in "the violent" to the fact that many of the subjects of the Baptist's revival belonged to those classes in which violence is chronic. But this is not so certain. The publicans and sinners were the most conspicuous followers of both John and Jesus; and there may be an allusion to this fact in the name by which those who capture the treasure are characterized. The publicans and sinners were children of impulse, who had rushed into evil without calculating the consequences; this exposed them the more to the force of the Baptist's appeals, because they could not hide their sins; and then, when they were pointed to the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world, they followed the good impulse with the same simplicity and directness with which they had followed evil ones. But the Pharisee or Sadducee had so long been accustomed to the practices and the language of religion, that neither the appeals of John nor the invitations of Christ could penetrate his hide-bound consciousness, or excite in him any longing for the treasures of the kingdom.

The word has, however, a universal application. While, on the one hand, the kingdom of God comes with violence to enter into those to whom it is sent, there is requisite on their part a certain violence of desire and resolution to enter into it.

As the experienced Gossner says, "this is not because God is unwilling to give the treasures of His kingdom or requires them to be purchased by sour toil and at heavy

cost. On the contrary, He gives everything for nothing. As far as He is concerned, the kingdom is not a stronghold needing to be captured, but a city with open gates. All things are ready, the table is spread, all are invited to the marriage supper. The King is even angry at those who will not come."

But in man's own heart and in his circumstances there are obstacles which can only be overcome by a certain holy violence. In some cases there are evil associations and companionships from which it is necessary to break away. When a man has lived a lifetime in sin, he "is holden with the cords" of the past; and, unless he is roused by the terror of the future or obtains an overpowering sight of the destiny which he is missing, he will never escape from the coil in which he is enveloped. Even when he has been awakened, he must tear himself away and flee for his life. Almost more dangerous is the state of those who are conscious of no haunting and tormenting memories, but are slumbering in the forms of religion, while their hearts are in the world. If in the pulpit there is need of something to interrupt routine and clothe the preacher with prophetic earnestness, in many a pew there is no less necessary a new and poignant sense that God, sin and eternity are realities, and that the prizes of religion are worth an effort and a sacrifice.

Specially is this necessary at the beginning of the religious life. "Strive to enter in at the strait gate," said our Lord; and the word is as strong as He could make it: literally it is, "Agonize to enter in." The first effort to withdraw the attention from other things and fix it on this supreme concern, the wrench from old associations, the first confession of Christ are peculiarly difficult. At this point, all the enemies of the soul put forth their utmost strength. One must, therefore, be in dead earnest, and see that his all is at stake, if he is to overcome.

Yet effort does not cease here. After the city has been captured, its treasures have still to be appropriated. Too often we are like the children of Israel when they entered Canaan, who left much of the land in the hands of the enemy, though it was all their own. They would have saved themselves from many a harassing attack and humiliating restriction, and would have transmitted to their descendants spacious times of prosperity and peace, if they had acted more fully on the watchword of Joshua, "Be strong and of good courage." We are too easily content with merely being inside the kingdom: its high attainments, its glorious tasks, its joys unspeakable and full of glory we think are not for us. But God wishes us to covet earnestly the best gifts, and to claim all the rights and privileges of our citizenship in His kingdom.¹ It is one of the best signs of a true revival when those who have attained a standing in the kingdom are eagerly reaching forth to lay ampler hold of its unsearchable riches.

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¹ Grotius calls attention to Exodus xix. 24: "Let not the priests and the people break through to come unto the Lord, lest He break forth upon them,"—an instructive contrast between the old dispensation and the new; and the verb in the LXX. is that of this text.