

DIVORCE AND CHILDHOOD.

A READING OF ST. MATT. XIX. 3-15.

OUR Lord's doctrine of divorce in St. Matthew xix. is immediately followed by His benediction on childhood. These two incidents are given in St. Mark x. in the same close order, though St. Luke has disjoined them. The object of this paper is to trace the thread of their connection, and to show how their sequence explains the attitude of the disciples to the children, and makes the whole scene instinct with reality.

It is well known that what Milton called "the doctrine and discipline of divorce" was a disputed question among Jewish teachers. Their standard precept on the subject in Deuteronomy xxiv. 1-4 was quite vague enough to invite controversy; it does not attempt to define the "unseemly thing" which is to justify a husband in putting away his wife. Here was work for commentators, and we are prepared to find that Hillel and Shammai were in direct conflict on this, as on nearly every other moot point of Jewish law. Shammai restricted divorce rigidly to the case of adultery. Hillel and his followers allowed far greater freedom. A man may divorce his wife, they said, if he hates her; if she cooks badly; if she goes abroad unveiled; if she reveals family secrets; R. Akiba even says, "if he sees some one handsomer, for it is written 'if she hath found no favour in his eyes.'"

Now, after we allow for some extravagance of Rabbinic paradox, such dicta as these illustrate the conclusion that, "according to the Rabbis, divorce was allowable for any and every cause."¹ And without pressing such doctrines to their extreme logical issue, we can understand that, en-

¹ Prof. W. H. Bennett, *The Mishna and the Gospels*, chap. 6.

dorsed by leading religious teachers, they could not fail to encourage popular license in a matter on which popular opinion is naturally lax enough. Contemporary practice in Palestine on this point was "far more in harmony with the practice of certain American States than with the teaching of Christ." The evidence shows that divorce was fatally easy, and correspondingly frequent. Remarriage of divorced persons is referred to as a matter of course.

Josephus, for instance, in his *Autobiography*, § 75, relates how, at *Vespasian's* command, he married a captive virgin; "yet," he adds, "she did not live with me long, but was divorced upon my going to Alexandria. However I married another wife in Alexandria." And then in § 76 he continues, "About this time I divorced my wife also (*i.e.* this second wife), as not pleased with her behaviour, though not till she had been the mother of three children. . . . After this I married a wife who had lived at Crete, but a Jewess by birth," and he proceeds to eulogize her character. Now Josephus is not suspected of giving undue prominence to his own defects; and this artless candour about his matrimonial career speaks volumes as to the state of Jewish opinion on the question of divorce.

The woman of Samaria is another sufficiently startling instance. She was indeed discredited in the eyes of her fellow townsmen, but, apparently, because after her fifth divorce she had not gone through the form of marriage for the sixth time. Bishop Westcott remarks (note on John vi. 18) that facilities for divorce are said to have been fewer among the Samaritans than among the Jews!

Only as we realize these prevalent ideas and customs as to the sanctity of wedlock, can we understand the "temptation" of the Pharisees' enquiry "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for *every* cause?", and the deliberate weight of our Lord's reply. He confronts His questioners with the Divine ideal of marriage, as witnessed to by their

ancient Scripture. What is bound in heaven may not be loosed on earth. Why then did the law allow divorce? Only as a concession to the passions of the people to whom it was a schoolmaster. Divorce was permitted by accommodation to the "hardness of heart" of a rude and barbarous time; but it had no place "in the beginning," in the primitive institution of God.

Our Lord then repeats His own law of divorce, already spoken in the Sermon on the Mount, St. Matthew v. 31, 32. In both places He begins with the decisive "I say unto you," as though to emphasize this solitary detail of practical ethics on which (so far as we know) He condescended to legislate. The exact scope of His command, here and in the parallel passages, has been disputed. Yet without entering into controversy, we may say broadly that even if Christ permits divorce for adultery, He forbids it for any other cause whatever.

Now it is hard for us to enter into the prejudices and sentiments of the listening disciples so as to appreciate the staggering effect of such an utterance upon their minds. It turned upside-down their whole traditional ideas on that subject, on which, of all subjects, men cling most tenaciously to tradition. St. Mark tells us that in their bewilderment they "asked Christ again in the house of the same matter," and received the same reply. For these disciples were not cold-blooded Rabbinic casuists, but roughly-bred plain-minded peasants; and their practical sense was struck at once by the practical inconvenience of such a rigid rule. Their comment is naïvely simple. They say in effect, "This would never work. If the bond between man and wife is to be so indissoluble, it were wiser to keep free from its risks." Just as once before, when our Lord had shocked them by His paradox about the difficulty of rich men entering the Kingdom, they were astonished out of measure, and said "who then can be saved?" so now, when He

makes divorce at least equally difficult, they are astonished out of measure again, and say, "Who then dare be married?" Under such conditions the celibate would be better off.

And then our Lord takes up their words, and answers their amazement in sentences which to Jewish ears must have sounded more amazing still. "Yes," He says, in effect, "it is true. You may not understand Me, but celibacy can, in certain cases, be a holier and nobler state than marriage. There are some who are celibate perforce, by defect of nature or cruelty of man. But there are others who elect to live unmarried for the sake of God and His Kingdom." Can we not hear in His tones some conscious hint of His own solitary human lot? Can we not feel His half-mournful sense of His friends' dulness and lack of sympathy, as He looked into their blank faces, and broke off as He began, by repeating "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it"?

These disciples were not able. They were Jewish working-men, bred in the belief that early marriage was one of a Jew's imperative religious duties—a duty which, we cannot doubt, they had almost without exception observed. This exaltation of celibacy, even in Christ's guarded words, utterly confounded them. It shocked their deepest human prejudices. And *just at this moment*, while they stood aghast at His teaching, they found themselves and their Master surrounded with women, who were bringing their little ones for Christ to touch and to bless. The disciples were not thin-skinned; but they could feel the utter incongruity of the situation. They revolted at these intrusive mothers and babes, so painfully out of place and season. The Lord had doubtless caressed children before, but it seemed a profanity to thrust them upon Him just now, with such dark unnatural childless words on His lips. No wonder "the disciples rebuked them."

And then Christ showed the perfect balance of His sacred humanity. In one breath He could speak the beatitude of the lonely celibate. In the next breath He could pray over the children as He took them up in His arms. There was nothing narrow or ascetic or one-sided in the temper of the Son of Man. Dare we reverently recognise in His peculiar tenderness for children some pathetic trace of the hunger of a childless heart? Surely it was not by chance that our Lord made childhood into a sort of sacrament. Just as He took our homeliest bodily acts, the act of washing and the act of eating, and consecrated them into pledges and channels of His grace, so He took the youngest and simplest and most helpless human creatures, and set children to be the mystic representatives of Himself, the patterns of His Spirit, the parables of His Gospel in the world. Amid all the dimness and discouragement of these latter days we can at least be thankful because the modern Church has entered, as never before, into this sacrament of childhood. We may miss the Real Presence in some symbols wherein He was once discerned; but we find Him, as really as ever, when we gather His lambs in our arms and carry them in our bosoms.

Such a spiritual sequence as has been indicated between the two parts of this narrative may at first sight appear over-subtle. At least it explains a very difficult detail; it shows us naturally why

“When mothers of Salem their children brought to Jesus,
The stern disciples drove them back, and bade them depart.”

That attitude of disciples who knew their Master's characteristic fondness for children always seemed inexplicable to me, until a friend suggested the idea which is here worked out, and which grows more convincing as it grows more familiar.

Moreover, if this explanation be admitted, it absolutely authenticates the narrative. For it will be felt at once that such a point is beyond any dreams of possible redactors. The incidents stand here together in this order, because they happened in this order; and the first illuminates the second.

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