

*THE INCARNATION-PARABLE.*

IN recent years much earnest labour has been bestowed by students of the New Testament on the attempt to realise, as much as may be, the condition of the early Christian society after their Master had been received up. These inquiries have been directed in the main to attaining a fuller insight into the sources and growth of those written records which have come down to us from the primitive Church, and to answering those interesting questions which arise in great numbers out of a comparison of the Gospel narratives one with another. Many and profitable have been the results of this study, and not least to be welcomed is the evidence it has supplied that, for the great work to which Jesus had sent them, the apostolic band were (as men would judge) but feebly equipped; so that we more than ever appreciate how entirely the progress which they were able to make in founding the Church of Christ must be set down not to the human instruments, but to the power from on high with which they were endued.

But such investigations may afford other fruit. While they help us to appreciate the weakness of the agents and to understand their needs, they may also point out to us how the supply of some of those needs was cared for in anticipation, though the provision made was not understood till the Spirit had taken of things of Christ, and made known their full import.

The commission given to the Apostles asked powers beyond any they possessed. The world was to be won for Christ. But the message which they had to deliver was one at the first words of which the world was sure to stumble. They were the heralds of the greatest of mysteries, the mystery of God incarnate. They were to

teach others to believe of their Master, even as they themselves believed; to persuade the world that the Jesus whose ministers they were was the very Son of God, sent down from heaven; that He had willingly left the home of His glory, taken upon Him human nature, and lived and died that in Him mankind might have redemption, might taste the consolation for which Israel had been taught to hope.

As means for the accomplishment of this mighty enterprise, the Apostles at the Ascension had for their text only the oral lessons of Jesus and the story of His life. And of this they had only been witnesses during the years of His public ministry. Doubtless they had heard those narratives of the Nativity, and of those Divine messages which preceded it, and of which such simple records are given by St. Matthew and St. Luke. They had lived in some companionship with the Virgin-mother, and she was among those who, after the Ascension, waited with them in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. To her all the wondrous things which she had pondered in her heart were now made clear. The sword of which Simeon spake had pierced through her soul. And we cannot doubt that the disciple to whose home she had been commended had been told much of the angel visits and heavenly visions that had preceded the Saviour's birth. Those forty days, in which the Lord's rare and fitful appearances prepared them for His entire departure, were a time to prompt and to suit with communings like these.

But it was not from human lips that the first preachers were to derive their most helpful instruction concerning the Incarnation or to draw that confirmation which might establish them in their faith. They had the promise of another Comforter when Jesus should depart, and to that promise it was added that a special portion of the Spirit's office should be to bring to their remembrance whatever Jesus had told them. But it was to be no simple reiteration

of the Master's words. The Holy Spirit was to take those things, the acts and sayings which they treasured as specially belonging to Jesus, and to declare (*ἀναγγέλλειν*) them in their full meaning and significance.

Much, nay, almost everything, which they had heard in those three years was replete with such instruction as, unaided, they could not fathom; many things there were to be opened out of His lessons which, before the Spirit was given to support them, they could not bear. They needed strength as well as illumination, and, lest their hearts should fail, Jesus left much in parables spoken or acted which, when expounded by the Holy Spirit, was to clear and confirm, to them and to others, the doctrines which they were sent to publish.

One of these veiled lessons was given to them in what we may call the Incarnation-parable. It was just when our Lord's life was drawing to a close that it was acted out before them. He knew, says St. John (xiii. 1), that the hour was come that He should depart from the world and then He showed to His beloved ones His love (*εἰς τέλος*) to the uttermost. They were all gathered about Him, and had eaten a meal together. Then, conscious of His approaching departure, He expressed in outward action the fulness of His humiliation. To the uttermost he descended in abasement, that herein they might have a measure of His love. But He wrought in such wise that at the moment they comprehended only a part of His lesson, while there was stored in it a teaching which in the future the Spirit should illumine and declare in its fullest meaning. He, their Lord and Master, rose from the supper, and, having laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself therewith. Then He poured out water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded.

That Jesus had in mind the deep significance of His

lowly act, that He intended this humiliation to receive in days to come its full explanation, that He meant it to be left among the things which the Spirit should expound to the hearts of His servants, is plain from what He presently said to St. Peter. The Apostle scrupled to accept the lowly service from his Lord. Jesus put aside his hesitating question, "Dost Thou wash my feet?" saying only, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." The words are however strikingly significant. Thou knowest not (*οἶδας*), thou hast no full, complete knowledge, but (*γνώσῃ*) thou shalt be brought to know, shalt learn with ever-growing clearness hereafter. The act which was performed and the self-abasement of Jesus therein were fully comprehended by St. Peter. Hence his reluctance to suffer it. But behind what all of them could see at the moment there lay a deeper meaning which they could not fully grasp of themselves, nay, of which they would be learning more and more as life went on, even the love of Christ, which is beyond all learning.

In after days they would see how in that scene they had an epitome of the whole history of the Incarnation. He who rose from the supper was the Son of God, who had freely left His home with the Father and laid aside His heavenly glory, had deigned to clothe His divinity in the vesture of human flesh, and, though very God, to be found in fashion as a man; and in His humanity had suffered humiliation, indignities, mockery, and at last death itself, that by His suffering He might wash men from their sins.

The "hereafter" of which Jesus spake began on the day of Pentecost. Not only were the tongues of the Apostles loosed, but the eyes of their understanding were enlightened on that day. And as we read the Gospel story in this chapter of St. John, we can see how much of confirmation there would be given by it, when they were made to comprehend it, to all that they had heard from Joseph or Mary.

The parable of the washing would receive its interpretation, and would stand to them as the Lord's own assurance. They would feel no need of a narrative from the lips of any one, but could declare (after the manner of the Samaritan people to the woman who had brought them her report of the Christ), "We believe not because of any saying of others; we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world."

In the washing of their feet Jesus gave His disciples a sacrament, an outward sign of what His love and grace had effected for man's redemption. The symbolical action figured for them the wondrous humiliation of the Divine Son, and supplied, when unfolded, a spiritual conviction of its truth. And it is set down for all time, the Lord's own testimony to the verity of the Incarnation. It is veiled, as so many of His lessons were, but it is so delivered that it may stimulate the penetration and awaken the spiritual discernment of those who have eyes and desire to see, who have ears and desire to hear.

But in the sequel of this acted parable the Divine Instructor has gone farther, and supplied lessons full of comfort and help, first to His disciples, then to all those who hereafter shall believe on Him through their word. For the condition and attitude of St. Peter is constantly reproduced in Christian lives. The Apostle and his companions had confessed that they saw in Jesus the Son of the living God. But yet how halting that faith was had been shown as soon as the Master began to speak of His coming sufferings. "Be it far from thee. This shall not be unto Thee" (Matt. xvi. 22) was an utterance which betrayed that the whole mission of Christ, all the purpose of the coming of God to man, had neither been accepted nor understood. And they manifested, through their spokesman, the same imperfect faith still: "Lord, dost Thou, my Lord and Master, wash the feet of me, a man so sinful?" and in that passionate

rejection of the lowly aspect of Divine condescension, "Lord, Thou shalt never wash my feet."

It is ever the same struggle. It has to be faced and mastered in the experience of every Christian age, nay, in every Christian life. Till it be mastered the fulness of faith is never attained. Men know of Christ in some sort, they make a confession of Him, and hold it for very real. But when the test comes, which asks for obedient submission, for the acceptance of things which are not known as yet, but only dimly shadowed forth in sacramental figure, when the steps must go forward in faith, there is opposition awakened in various wise. It seems impossible to accept Christ's grace manifested in His humiliation and suffering as a free gift. Men feel at one time as if the washing of Christ were far more than they are meet to receive, and withal there arises a longing to do something of themselves for their own purification. They would have their part in the cleansing process, and cannot leave it to the Lord, cannot be assured that He knows, while they are in ignorance.

But the love of the Master endures to the uttermost; He helps the imperfect rudimentary faith by a lesson that makes clear to men their own helplessness. "Unless I wash thee," were His words to St. Peter, "thou hast no part with Me." And here again the Lord's words show us that we are moving in the realm of parable; that it is a spiritual cleansing of which He speaks, a purification such as will unite men to Himself, and of which the washing of the body is but a figure. The terrible alternative came as a shock to the Apostle. To have no part in his Master's love, in his Master's service; at such a prospect, he, who with his eager frailty was soon about to profess, "Though I die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee," was overwhelmed with dismay; and, impulsive as ever, he rushes to the opposite extreme and begs, "Lord, wash not my feet only, but also my hands and my head."

In the answer to His Apostle's change of mind, we come upon another word of Jesus, which was intended to wait for the Spirit's unfolding, but which, since the day when St. Peter preached, "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins," Christians can hardly hesitate to refer to the sacrament of Baptism, that institution of Christ by which believers are received into His family, brought to have a part in Him. "He that hath been washed" (*λελουμένος*), are His words, "needeth not save to wash (*νίψασθαι*) his feet, but is clean altogether." The altered word at once suggests another sense of washing, even that to which the Apostle to the Hebrews (x. 22) alludes as having for its accompaniment the sprinkling of the heart from an evil conscience, and which is the outward sign of the loosing from sins by Christ's own blood (Rev. i. 5). He that hath been thus washed, who has accepted in faith that washing which is an assurance of the cleansing of the heart by the sacrifice of Jesus, he will need, it is true, the constant purification from those sins by which he is beset in his daily life, but yet he will be clean. He will feel as long as he is in the world that sin lives in him and needs to be resisted, but his desire and constant effort will be not to live in sin. And such a one God for Christ's sake will accept, even as Peter and his fellows were accepted and sent forth to be the witnesses for Jesus.

"Ye are clean," says He, and afterwards (John xv. 3) enlarges on the saying: "Ye are clean because of the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in Me." They were in Him as branches in the vine, a part of Himself, but still dependent on His support and sustenance. But that support was certain. And so He says, "Ye are clean"; and the spirit of His words has been repeated in that constant expression of the apostolic writers, when they speak of those who have been received into Christ's Church as

already "saints," "called to be saints," because in spite of many infirmities they call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Like the Apostles, their spirit is willing though their flesh be weak. And though in their lives there is many a spot and stain, the laver of repentance washes these away, and with thankful hearts they recognise the mercy which says of them too, "Ye are clean through the word."

In this way the parable and its sequel, left to the disciples, that through the illumination of the Spirit they might draw from it confirmation and assurance, becomes luminous to every succeeding age. In new generations there arise new aims and new trials, but they who humbly seek to have their part in Christ know (with St. Paul) whom they have believed, and that knowledge and faith makes them clean, clean through the word, and they learn ever more and more of the love of Christ which passeth all learning and is an ever-opening prospect of help and grace ; and in joys and trials alike they find the words of the Divine Master a strong stay : "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter."

J. RAWSON LUMBY.