

“THE SHORTENING OF THE DAYS.”

“EXCEPT those days had been shortened,” says our Lord (St. Matt. xxiv. 22), “no flesh would have been saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened.” The word which he uses is a somewhat singular one, etymologically. It seems to have been originally applied to cattle dishorned, or wanting horns, like the celebrated “polled” Angus breed. Thence to trees “pollarded,” or to anything else truncated or reduced to smaller dimensions. Whatever technical or special sense the word may have had, however, has disappeared by the time our Lord uses it. When applied to “days” it simply means “reduced,” “cut down,” “abbreviated,” from some period of longer duration. It cannot, however, be taken as equivalent to “short.” It distinctly implies that, according to some fitness of things, to some original design, the days were meant to have been longer, *would* in fact have been longer, if the mercy and goodness of God had not cut them short. It is a common thing, probably, to read the sentence as if it were but a picturesque way of saying that the dread period of the final sorrows would only be, thank God, a very brief one, otherwise the prospect would have been black indeed. But that does not do justice to the words deliberately used. They suggest clearly enough something like a Divine impatience in the Almighty, in virtue of which He cannot bear to let His elect go on suffering to the uttermost; and I venture to think that this does really represent (so far as human expressions can) a law of the working of the Divine mind, which is love. That love anticipates its own victory; it hurries on to the rescue, to the consolation, of the elect who suffer. I do not pretend for a moment to say *how* it works in that order of things which is foreseen and pre-arranged from eternity. I only claim, on the strength of

our Lord's words, to recognise it as an active element in the Divine mind as revealed to us in the New Testament. One remembers, of course, all the while that this revelation is not absolute, but is one of "economy" and adaptation—adaptation to the limitations of human understanding. What one looks to find are principles of the Divine working translated into human phraseology—phraseology upon which it would be manifestly rash to build up an edifice of inference and deduction. Nevertheless the principle indicated in the present case is an actual one, and the recognition of it does really explain some things which need explanation in the words and works of Christ.

Everybody must have been struck with the message of the angel (Matt. xxviii. 7; Mark xvi. 7): "Tell His disciples He is risen from the dead; and lo, He goeth before you into Galilee; *there* shall ye see Him." It is incomprehensible without some explanation. He had indeed told the disciples so Himself before His betrayal (Matt. xxvi. 32; Mark xiv. 28). The message was not untrue. But assuredly it did no justice to the truth—the truth so blessed and glorious for the disciples. They did not have to go into Galilee in order to see Him; they saw Him that very evening in Jerusalem; that very afternoon two of them saw Him on the road to Emmaus, a place which does not lie in the direction even of Galilee. Of course it is asserted by some that the angel's message represents the original tradition concerning the reappearance of our Lord, and that all the stories which we read in St. Luke and St. John and in the section appended to St. Mark about His appearing in Jerusalem belong to another and later and entirely inconsistent tradition. A theory so destructive may be set aside as useless for most of us: we must look in another direction for an explanation. Going back to our Lord's promise in Matthew xxvi. 32, we have to ask ourselves how He *could* have talked about meeting

them again in distant Galilee when He was actually to reappear in Jerusalem itself, and in that very upper room. Was it a subterfuge, an equivocation? Was He playing with them, as we sometimes do with children when we prepare some joyful surprise for them? God forbid. He meant it, without any reservation. If His reappearance was in fact nearer than He had said, it was due to the same Divine impatience which anticipates the hour of reunion, of consolation; which cannot delay to bind up the broken hearts, to set the captives free, to give unto them that mourn in Zion a garland for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning; which shortens the days and cuts them down to hours for the elect's sake. Did He not know then? That is a question which I do not venture to answer with a direct negative; but I *do* venture to believe that He as man found it somewhere in the oracles of God that the risen Redeemer should meet His own again in Galilee. He knew *that*, and the angel knew it—and so they spake. But to Him risen, the Father's only-begotten Son, it was granted by the Father to prevent the hour of reunion for which He longed. As in answer to Abraham's intercession the needful number of righteous was reduced again and again, so in response to the desire of the Saviour's heart the days were shortened which should have separated Him from His own, and He saw them again that very evening.

If it be conceded that we have here the probable solution of a real difficulty, we may go on to apply it to a greater difficulty in the same general connection. The saying in Matthew xii. 40 is a stumbling-block to many for obvious reasons. Not indeed because it seems to assert the literal and historical truth of Jonah's incarceration in the whale, because that can hardly trouble any thoughtful mind for long. Supposing the story of Jonah to have been a poetic fiction, that would not have made the least difference. Un-

doubtedly our Lord refers to all the Old Testament stories as if they were literally true ; and He could not have done anything else, being what He was. For Him to have gone out of His way to explain that Jonah was not *really* swallowed by a whale (supposing it to have been a parable of spiritual experiences) would have been as absurd and impossible as that He should have gone about explaining that the sun does not really rise or set, but only seems to. To imagine that our Lord *could* have taken such a line in any such case is to betray an inability to grasp the real meaning of the Incarnation. He did not become a Child of the nineteenth century in any other respect—in manner of speech, or manner of thought : how should He have assumed a nineteenth-century acquaintance with the results of scientific or literary investigation, which would have made it impossible for Him to deal simply and naturally with the men of His own age and race? Happily, this is generally conceded now.

But apart from this altogether, there is the obvious difficulty that our Lord did *not* remain three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The time-limits laid down by the Evangelists make it impossible. By no ingenuity can the statement be made even approximately correct. Commentators have much to say about the loose way in which the Jews calculated time ; but to this looseness of expression there are limits, and the statement about three days and three nights falls far outside any limits that can be reasonably allowed. He was, in fact, two nights and one whole day in the heart of the earth. No person that ever lived, Jew or Gentile, ancient or modern, would describe that period as "three days and three nights." It is necessary perhaps to insist upon this, obvious as it is. It is one of the curious fallacies into which people often fall when they wish to play the apologist. They point out a certain tendency in writers of that age—to exaggeration, to

looseness of statement, to inaccuracy of quotation, and so on—and they seem to think that, once they have pointed out the tendency, they have sufficiently justified any instance (however monstrous) of exaggeration, looseness, inaccuracy, or whatever it may be. Thus, *e.g.*, there is in Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians (chap. xlii.) a misquotation and misapplication of Isaiah lx. 17, which is quite intolerable; and yet his apologists evidently think they have perfectly justified him, and re-established his authority as a teacher, when they have said that "accuracy of quotation was unknown in that age." That may be true, and ought to be allowed for. But obviously there is a degree of inaccuracy which was not permissible even then. And so as to statements of time. They were not so minutely correct as we make them now. But they could not be so incorrect as to leave "three days and three nights" equivalent to one day and two nights. We have therefore a real difficulty to face here.

Some good people solve it easily by regarding this verse as an interpolation which has crept in from the margin—a gloss added by some too zealous transcriber. It may be conceded that it has the appearance, on the face of it, of being of that nature. But there is not the slightest documentary evidence to support this assumption, and in the absence of such evidence it is difficult to discard a verse here or there because we do not like it. At any rate most of us will prefer any other reasonable explanation which may be offered us.

Putting aside therefore the two solutions spoken of above, which do not seem to solve anything, we have our Lord confronted with a downright misstatement. Let us consider how He was led to it. He had been claiming as His own "the sign of the prophet Jonah." He was to be to His own generation what Jonah had been to the Ninevites. Jonah had been a sign to the Ninevites, not, of course, in

respect that he had been aforetime swallowed by a whale (with which incident the Ninevites could not possibly have been acquainted), but in respect of his sudden and startling appearance, alone, unfriended, helpless, in their midst. They had been the cruel enemies of his people, and yet he came, at his own cost and risk, without fear and without hope of reward, to save them from wholesale destruction. Such had Jonah seemed to the Ninevites, such was our Lord to the world. His helplessness, His fearlessness, His Divine disinterestedness was the heavenly counterpart of Jonah's. Like Jonah He adventured Himself without any protection into the midst of His enemies, with words of solemn warning, with purposes of love and pity. Our Lord then recognised Jonah as a type of Himself in His mission. But He was led further than that. One cannot doubt from His recorded words (as in John xix. 28) that He scanned the Scriptures narrowly for indications of what was to happen to Him, and of how He was to be obedient unto death. These indications, so far as His resurrection was concerned, must have been found almost entirely in the *types*, and especially in the human types such as Isaac and Jonah. One may reverently believe that our Lord was led to take to Himself the latter type as foreshadowing the death and rising again to which He looked forward. Unquestionably Jonah in the story was as good as dead and buried; he was cut off from the land of the living; he was incarcerated in a living tomb; and from that tomb he emerged alive, by a wholly unexpected and unprecedented resuscitation. So He took the type to Himself as one of the prophetic anticipations of Holy Scripture, and declared that He, too, was destined to be three days and three nights withdrawn from sight and sound within the earth. I venture to suggest, with all reverence, that this was the mental process whereby our Lord was led to that declaration. He reached it through the Scripture, and by means

of His divinely illuminated, but still thoroughly human, reading and searching of the Scripture. How then shall we account for the fact that His declaration seemed to be falsified by the event? By that law of anticipation, that willingness of the Father to shorten the days for the elect's sake. His words were not literally fulfilled for the same reason that those other words of His about meeting the disciples in Galilee were not fulfilled—not, I mean, in what they obviously implied. The days could not have been "shortened" unless there had been some normal and original term (so to speak) of separation and of sorrow to be superseded and cut down by the working of the Divine love. "According to the Scriptures" (may I say?) He was due to spend three nights and three days in the underworld. So it was written of the type, and the Scripture must be fulfilled, and hence arose a kind of antecedent measure and necessity of things; but, in fact, the Father raised Him up very early on the third day. The days were shortened for the elect's sake, for the sad and broken-hearted disciples' sake; ay, and for *His* sake, that He might the sooner, the more illustriously, be declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead.

It will no doubt be objected to the position here taken that it implies a certain divergence between our Lord's expectation of things and the actual event. Taking His words as the only real indications of what He thought, I venture to believe that He *did* expect to remain for three days and nights in the tomb, and *did* expect to rejoin His disciples in Galilee. That is inconsistent with the belief commonly entertained that, by virtue of His Divinity, He knew all things with an infallible certitude. But the only possible line of advance in our knowledge of our Lord's human life and mind is found in the study of the Gospels as they are, apart from any preconceived notions. It is

absolutely useless to begin with the assumption, *e.g.*, that He *could* not have been mistaken about anything. The question is simply, "Have we any real evidence in the Gospels themselves that He was? and if He was, may we go further and trace the origin and nature of the mistake?" Taking the Gospels as they stand, I have pointed to two instances in which our Lord's predictions about Himself were (in a sense) incorrect. In one of these the prediction was clearly connected with our Lord's recognition of Jonah as a type of Himself. Apparently it grew immediately out of that recognition. In both instances our Lord's own anticipation was falsified in a happy and blessed sense by the working of a Divine principle which He Himself declared, whereby it pleases the Father to anticipate the appointed end, and to shorten the days for the elect's sake. Again, I say the days could not be "shortened" unless the length of them had in some way been fixed—a length which could be reduced by the tender pity of God. And how could the days be fixed for our Lord unless it were in the Old Testament Scriptures, for which He showed so profound a veneration? It was from these Scriptures that He argued the *pre-established necessity* for all His own sufferings as the Christ (Luke xxiv. 26). It was from them that He anticipated even the details of His passion (Matt. xxvi. 24, 54, 56; John xix. 28). The natural conclusion is that as man He was left, with special illumination, no doubt, of the Holy Spirit, to gather His own destinies, and to form His own anticipations, from the Old Testament Scriptures. That these anticipations were once and again falsified by the event was due to the fact that, while God is always as good as His word, He is sometimes even more good. He shortens the days for His elect.

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