

THE OMISSIONS OF THE GOSPEL.

THE Fourth Gospel closes with a confession of its incompleteness, which is sometimes passed by as if it were a mere flourish of rhetoric, but which is really full of significance and suggestiveness, whether we view it in relation to the narrative of the earthly ministry of Christ, or to our knowledge of the highest truths of religion and life. "There are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written." The words are more than the colophon of a scribe; they express a truth which the writer had much at heart. Writing at a period in the Church's growth when the story of the Lord's life was already familiar to Christians, so familiar that it was not necessary to repeat the tradition of the earlier Evangelists, St. John set himself, as it would seem, to supplement their account. They had written of the ministry in Galilee; he would write of the ministry in Jerusalem. They had preserved the teaching to the multitude, the proverbs and parables by which the great Prophet taught the people; he would preserve the discourses, mystic and profound, in which the Lord spoke to His chosen friends and companions, in which He had unveiled to them the mystery of His inner life. But all the while the Evangelist is careful to guard against a false impression. His Gospel is a supplement, but it does not pretend to be complete. "Many other signs . . . did Jesus . . . which are not written in this book." The purpose of the book is not to give a full account of that majestic life, but to reveal its secret. "These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." And at the close of the Gospel the writer repeats, with a touch of Oriental hyperbole: "There are also many

other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which should be written." This reserve, this background of unrevealed facts, is most impressive.

I.

Probably the first thing that the words of St. John suggest to us is the unlikeness of their spirit to the spirit of modern biography. In our day a biography is not considered final or satisfactory unless it gives us every known fact in the life of its hero, large or trivial, significant or unmeaning. Nothing is too sacred, nothing too commonplace, for the professional biographer. From the record of a man's tastes in food to the record of his most private letters, his most impassioned prayers, everything is exposed to the curious public. And it not infrequently happens that this emphasis laid on detail, this greed for facts, entirely defeats the purpose for which biography is intended; that is to say, the presentation of a true portrait of the man. If a biography could ever give an entire and faithful personal history, could record in exact order and in true sequence all the thoughts, the aspirations, the motives, the acts of its hero, then, indeed, there might be justification for the insertion of every minute detail. If all were known, all might be told. But materials are never available for the production of such a book; the world itself could not contain it; certainly no one would have time to read, much less to write it. And thus a biography must of necessity give only a portion of the truth; the skill of the writer is best shown by his command of his materials, by his omissions no less than by his comments, by his grouping of representative incidents and his selection of representative sayings. That was a wise proverb of the Greeks which said that "the half is more than the whole."

An outline sketch often conveys a truer idea than a finished picture. The artist selects those characteristics which seem to him to be typical of the man, and he portrays these alone. For the rest, his picture may not reproduce this or that feature, this or that trick of gesture, with exact precision; but it does reproduce what we wish to remember, what we desire to know.

This is what St. John has done in his Gospel. There is no attempt to tell the story of the earthly ministry of Jesus in its integrity; more than half the book is taken up with the record of the last three weeks in that most eventful and blessed life. And yet how striking is the picture! how deep the impression which the Fourth Gospel has made on the Christian consciousness! Never did a book more fully answer its purpose. The Evangelist does not propose to tell the whole story. He knows that he could never tell it all. But he is content with those representative incidents which fall in with his design. "These are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God."

II.

A vivid picture! And yet we can hardly fail to be conscious at times of a desire for more knowledge of this Master of men, of whom St. John wrote. Quite true is it that this brief story has affected human life as no other story has affected it. Quite true is it that the Personality of Jesus as Son of God and Son of man is portrayed in the Fourth Gospel as nowhere else. And yet how much is there which has been left untold! "Many other signs" did Jesus. So it must have been; and we are content without any further information about them. The miracles which *are* recorded are the signs of One who displayed His Almighty Power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity; and that is what we most need to know. But in other

particulars the meagreness of the record is truly surprising. How was the boyhood of Jesus spent? We do not know. Only one little incident breaks the silence of the thirty years' preparation for the work of His Ministry. And as the Child among the Doctors passes from our view we too would fain follow with questions. What fashion of man was He, this Strong Son of God who took our nature upon Him? Was He, as the painters have portrayed Him, perfect in the radiant beauty of unsullied manhood? Or is it true, as the early tradition of the Church had it, that there was no beauty in Him that men should desire Him? What were the tones of that Voice which drew men to follow without questioning, without delay? Did the Christ ever smile? Or was He a Man of Sorrows from His youth? And—to go to graver enquiries—men have often asked, How far did the light of His superhuman origin illuminate his natural faculties of knowledge? Did He know all that man may know? Was the book of Nature open to Him without reservation? Or did the great condescension of His Incarnate Life involve a submission to limitations of knowledge and of power? We do not know; we cannot know. Once more, the deeds of Christ are not all recorded. Nor are all His words. These, at least, we may well believe, must have been all significant. In the words of Jesus preserved in the Gospels the world has found its truest wisdom. And yet how few they are! In how little a book could they be printed! How many must remain unknown! We are reminded how extraordinary has been the interest aroused by that little scrap of papyrus found last winter in Egypt, which professes to contain hitherto unrecorded sayings of Jesus Christ. Yes: men desire to know more than the Gospels have told of His words and works. It was this natural desire which led to the compilation in the early centuries of many strange legends about his childhood and youth, His Ministry and

Resurrection, legends which have affected in no inconsiderable degree our conceptions of Christian doctrine. We remember that such *apocrypha* were always rejected by the Church, whose judgment is, at the least, the only impartial expression of the Christian consciousness. But we note, as much more remarkable, the fact that St. John, writing at the close of the apostolic age, deliberately refuses even to tell all that he knew.

III.

We have seen that reserve may be a necessary condition of faithful portraiture. We have tried at the same time to recognise the craving of Christian hearts for some fuller information about the Christ than that which has been given. The craving is natural; but it is deliberately disappointed by the Evangelists, it was always checked by the Church. There may be a deeper reason for this reserve, this reticence, in the story of the greatest of all Masters—a deeper reason than anything we have thought of yet. For St. John's object was not to draw a picture which men might admire and criticise, but to present to the world the Figure of One who was to be the object of worship. The omissions of the Evangelist remind us of the omissions of the Creeds. In these wonderful confessions of faith there is no mention of any of the episodes in the earthly ministry of Christ. His Incarnation, Nativity, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, are all set forth as the object of Christian faith, the stay of Christian hope; but nothing is said of the miracles of the great Healer, the magic of the Divine words. And this instinct of the Church to lay stress on the supernatural Personality of Him who became man for us rather than on the details of His life when He walked among men, finds expression not only in the Creeds, but in the Christian art of the

Middle Ages.¹ The subjects chosen for illustration by the best mediæval artists are generally the great central facts of the Creeds, not the episodes (if we may call them so) in the Divine life on earth on which modern painters are most apt to let their fancy play. And it may well be that there is a grave danger of missing the greatest message of the Gospels by a too exclusive attention to that earthly ministry, to which the title "The Life of Christ" is sometimes too exclusively appropriated. There may be a warning of this danger in the reserves of St. John. For He of whom the Evangelist wrote was not only the Son of Man. To have told of other deeds of perfect human sympathy or of other words of prophetic wisdom might have only weakened the impression which he desired to leave. Jesus was all that St. John believed and taught. This witness is true. But He was more than lay within the power of His biographer to fathom. For He was God as well as man; and so many things are left unsaid, though what is told is sure.

So does the Church herself teach us about God and His relations to man, here and hereafter. One of whom we knew all could not be the Supreme Himself; He could be no fit object of adoration or worship if His thoughts were to be measured by our thoughts. A true knowledge of God is indeed within our reach, enough for life if not for theory; enough for faith and hope if not for complete intellectual satisfaction here. But as we think of the teachings of nature, of Scripture, of the Creeds, we can

¹ "In mediæval art proper, scenes illustrating the ministry of Christ are comparatively rare. In the windows of King's College chapel nothing is represented between the Temptation, which closes our Lord's infancy, and the Raising of Lazarus, which inaugurates His Passion. The *Speculum Humanæ Salvationis* omits all the events between the Temptation and the Supper at Bethany. The *Biblia Pauperum* goes straight from the Temptation to the Raising of Lazarus, but after that inserts the Transfiguration" (M. R. James, *Cambr. Ant. Soc. Proc.*, vii. p. 46).

hardly refrain from asking at times, Is this indeed all? How many questions are suggested by every clause in the Creed which must remain unanswered in this present life! How many large gaps are there in our knowledge! How fragmentary it is at best!

This is the truth at the heart of what is called Agnosticism, a truth which no serious person can overlook. What we know is but a fragment of a larger whole. Every student of science is conscious how little that is which he can be said to know in comparison with the great unknown on which his gaze is fixed. And if this be true of Nature, it is much more true of God. What we know is not indeed doubtful; it does not perplex if we recognise its partial character. But what we do not know far transcends that of which we have experience. Such a sense of the unmeasured greatness of God has deeply affected all modern thought; it inspires much that is best in modern literature. Can we doubt that it is this conviction which has brought about the remarkable Renaissance of Idealism that the last ten years have witnessed in these countries? A quarter of a century ago there was an eager desire for positive formulæ; the philosophy of empiricism seemed likely to carry away the best intellect of the time. No one can say that such a spirit is dominant now. Many men call themselves *Agnostics*; but if we press them, we find that they mean nothing more than this, that God and the world are problems too great for man, that the mysteries of life and thought and sin cannot be reduced to any cheap and easy formula.

We seriously mistake if we think that there is no place for such thoughts within the bosom of the Christian Church. The Athanasian Creed itself bids us remember that the Father of all is incomprehensible, not to be measured by man's feeble mind. A God whom we perfectly understood would not satisfy the craving of the

human soul for a Supreme in whom it may place its trust and find its rest. The peace of God of which the apostle speaks is a peace which passeth understanding. It was not the saying of an Agnostic, but of that sober Churchman, Richard Hooker, that "our safest eloquence about God is our silence." No! the Church knows as well as those who refuse her guidance that she is not possessed of the sum of knowledge. But she would teach us at the same time that the partial and imperfect knowledge of Him in whom we live and move and are, which is attainable by man, is not illusory but true; and she proclaims with an increasing confidence and an increasing awe that such knowledge is best revealed in the Person of Him who is the centre of her worship, who gave us our best thoughts about God and man, for He was Himself God and Man in one adorable Person. The Church does not profess complete knowledge. She leaves finished and final theories to the metaphysicians who have, each of them, a complete theory which satisfies no one but its discoverer. Nor does she profess to give us a detailed and exact theory of life. Many problems still torment and vex the curious soul. Still is the question asked by many an ardent spirit, anxious to reduce the world to its own narrow rules, "Lord, and what shall this man do?" But the answer is still the same, stern in its refusal to supply theory, un-failing in consolation and strength as a guide to life, "What is that to thee? Follow thou Me."

This is not, to be sure, the thought prominent in St. John's words at the close of the Gospel. He does not speak of impassable barriers to knowledge, of mysteries not yet disclosed because of the incapacity of our minds to receive them. For what St. John seems to say is that he knew of much which he did not think it fitting to record. Much that we might have understood of the gospel history is not told us. Yes, but that is also true of the know-

ledge of God. It may be that there is much within our powers which we have not yet been found worthy to receive. So it is indeed, and it is part of the discipline by which we are guided, as it opens out the promise of the inheritance to which we are to succeed. It may be part of our discipline that we are kept in intellectual unrest; part of our discipline lest in unruly pride we come to think that God is a mere creature of our imagination, a conception of which we have entire mastery. But it is also part of our inheritance; for thus is there ever more and more which we may learn. As the centuries have passed much insight has indeed been gained into the gospel story. The brief incidents have supplied each a precious fragment of biography which it has been the unceasing endeavour of the Christian Church to place in their right relations to the Central Figure. Much has been learnt. It is not too much to say that we know more of the gospel story, that we understand better its proportions, its significance, its reserves, than did the Christians of early ages. Above all we are learning, though slowly, to apply it to the details of our manifold life. And so it is with that deeper knowledge of God, not the knowledge of the historical Christ, but the knowledge of a living Master, knowledge not for theory but for practice, which we desire for ourselves and for those who shall come after us. Something we have learnt through His grace; and it is the promise and the pledge of the larger inheritance which is to come. And so we repeat once more the closing words of the Gospel, "there be many other things which Jesus did," with reverence and with hope. With reverence, as we perceive that our knowledge is but in part; with eager hope as we look for the day when we shall know even as also we have been known.

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