

*HOW JESUS MET RECRIMINATION.*

(JOHN VIII. 48-51.)

THE course of our Lord's discussion with the Temple doctors down to this point had been so irritating, that no one can be surprised they should have resented it. He has denied that they belonged to the household of God in any real sense. He has told them that they were not children of the Most High. He has striven to prove, on the contrary, that they bore the marks of an opposite lineage, and were spiritually sons of Satan. Very calmly, but not the less terribly on that account, He has shown that He was aware of their secret plots against Himself, and saw to the bottom of their evil hearts. All this was not easy to be borne—all the less easy since their consciences probably told them it was true. When men detest the truth, it is usual for them to turn upon him who speaks it. Unable to deny, unwilling to admit, the resource of a hard-pressed sinner is to lose temper and begin to scold. Occasionally, to be sure, it is a sign that the word of God has begun to tell on people when they grow cross under it, since there are those who conceal the first stages of conviction of sin beneath a cloak of ill-nature. More often it is nothing better than a refuge of convicted or exposed wrongdoers to rail against the preacher whom they cannot answer. It was so with these Jews. Quite unconsciously they proceeded to give evidence how true had been the Lord's verdict upon them, the verdict which in terms they resented; for, shut up by the unanswerable logic of One who could not reason falsely, they did the double deed which showed them to be of the seed of the devil—they rejected God's truth and they hated His Son.

To begin to throw hard names was in their case the next step to throwing stones. Orientals have always been less dignified in the use of abusive epithets than we are, giving

free vent to their ill will in forms of which a European of similar social position would be utterly ashamed. By way of retort, they first styled Jesus a Samaritan. It was a term of abuse. The Samaritans, although a mixed people, descended in part from remnants of the ten tribes left in Palestine at the first captivity, and in part from a colony of idolatrous Assyrians, yet claimed to share in the worship of Jehovah as a genuine section of the chosen people. When pure-blood Jews of the restoration disowned this claim, the outcast Samaritan dissenters set up a rival temple of their own, and, greatly to the chagrin of the Jew, persisted in calling themselves the people of Jehovah. Nay, by degrees they came to say that they were not simply a portion of Israel, but the true people; that they only were Israelites, the others only Jews. To render this pretension plausible, they were led to discard nearly all the sacred books of the old covenant, and to read backwards, as it were, the best sections of Hebrew history. In this way it is intelligible how "Samaritan" became on Hebrew lips a term of the most bitter opprobrium. To call a Jew by that name was as much as to say that he was an apostate and schismatic, a false pretender to the privileges of God's ancient race and of His holy Temple. This is very like retaliating upon Jesus the precise charges which He has just been making against them. He has been denying to them any title to true spiritual descent from Abraham, calling them nominal sons of his after the flesh only, not his spiritual descendants. They retort that He for His part is no better than He calls them, worse indeed—as much a false pretender to be a true son of the covenant as any half heathen, excommunicated "Samaritan."

Pursuing the same style of retort, they add that He is possessed by a demon. He has just been alleging of them that they bore the moral likeness of their spiritual parent,

the devil. And although they do not like exactly to say as much of Him—since, indeed, they could not meet His challenge to convict Him of any sin—yet they venture on something akin to it. Recollecting how usual it was to refer insanity to demoniacal influence, I understand them to be explaining His language on the theory that spiritual self-conceit had driven Him crazy. So read, the charge cannot be set down for a mere outburst of senseless malice. There was at all events some semblance of reason in it. To hear any man fancy himself to be the only Son of God on earth, and call all others children of Satan, might well enough suggest to a bystander that the demon of religious pride had turned his brain. The conclusion could only be maintained, however, in this case, if this Man had not sustained His claim by works unmistakably Divine, enforced His charge against His enemies with unanswerable argument, and beaten back their countercharges by the majesty of a holy wisdom and stainless purity which are not of this world. It is really the only alternative to our acceptance of our Lord as that which He claimed to be: an alternative quite inadmissible now, no longer advanced even by the most ingenious or implacable of His modern adversaries. At the time, and on these men's lips, it was the most plausible and even kindly outlet which their baffled enmity could find.

Yet, after all, an outlet for baffled enmity. No fairly dispassionate observer of our Lord's career could say that He exhibited the signs of a maniac. But it is far from rare for the wisdom of God to be called folly by the tongues of men. How often, when His servants have spoken out "words of truth and soberness" about human sin and the certainty of God's awful judgment seat, have the men whose sin they rebuked turned aside the edge of the truth by calling them words of extravagance or of fanaticism! I am persuaded that the bulk of unregenerate men do in their

hearts believe, although they may not all like to say so, that to call them children of the devil is to use wild language. "Say we not well that Thou art a Samaritan, and hast a demon?"

What St. Paul has celebrated as the "meekness and gentleness" of Christ comes out in His reply. "Being reviled, He reviled not again." It really is not an easy thing to take such words with calmness. I do not mean merely, what every schoolboy knows, that nicknames are ill to bear. Grown men find that a worse poison is left behind by stinging terms like these. When people, whose good esteem is of value, insist on thinking only evil of a man, and travesty his character before the public by the circulation of false charges; when a public teacher is supposed to be capable of conduct which he abhors, and under that imputation is set in a light so odious that his whole power for good is neutralized;—then deeper pain is caused than personal vexation. The nobler any man is, or the more devoted to the cause he represents, so much the less likely is he to preserve an unruffled temper when his work suffers through such false attacks upon himself. Calumny need not always be condensed into one pungent epithet of scorn. The polish of modern manners may substitute smoother insinuations for such outspoken abuse as we find here. It is neither polite nor safe now-a-days to be too plain of speech. I am not sure that the modern equivalent gives less suffering to the patient. To have base motives suggested, or one's character defamed, will wound every sensitive and honourable man, no matter how delicately the thing be done. To know that ill-natured people are whispering statements to one's discredit, which for no consideration would they say plainly to one's face, is not a great improvement on the old way. Those who have had the most of this to bear will best appreciate the dignity and composure of our Lord's rejoinder.

To their rudeness He returned, in fact, the calmest of all calm answers: "I have not a demon"—I am not mad, that is to say—"but I honour My Father, and ye dishonour Me." How admirably quiet, and at the same time how dignified is His bearing! For while these words betray no trace of irritation, they are equally remote from meanness of spirit. There is a gentle emphasis laid on the personal pronoun, as though to say, "It is not *I* who am possessed," which prepares us to find in the words which follow a contrast betwixt His own behaviour and theirs: "God, My Father, I live to magnify, which is far enough from the way of demons; but you, what are you doing when you thus pour scurrilous abuse on Me?—dishonouring Me, and through Me Him whose Son I am! Surely the Father's credit is identified with His Son's. The reproaches that fall on Me are reproaches upon God."

Less than this by way of rejoinder would have been too little for self-defence and for the protection of honour; since it is the part of every upright man to meet calumny with denial, in order to guard, as far as he may, that good name which is one's best possession, which he who filches from me had better far have robbed me of my purse. But Jesus had no mind to let this talk degenerate into a personal squabble, or an idle bandying of names. Neither is it His chief concern to care for His own honour, or what men choose to say or think of Him. For His Father's honour has He said so much; *that* it is His business to care for, and while He cares for that, He is content to leave His own good name to the Father's care. "I seek not Mine own glory; there is One that seeketh and judgeth." With these words He stops the personal controversy, to lift it into a serener atmosphere.

Let it be noticed how the perfection of Divine love betwixt the unseen Father and His Son in flesh brings about in Each of them the most unselfish concern only for the

Other. As on a humble scale, we sometimes see two human lovers so wrapt up in one another, that the parent (say) thinks only of the child's welfare, the child not of itself at all, but entirely of its parent's comfort—beautiful interaction and rivalry of love, intent not on itself but wholly on its object—so, to liken small things with great, do this celestial Father and Son, continuing an interchange of affection which had endured within the Godhead from eternity. It is the Father's design that the Son of His love should be honoured by all men upon earth, even as they honour the Father; nor can we please Him better than when we exalt Him who for love "made Himself of no reputation," as St. Paul wrote to the Philippian disciples. Everywhere in Scripture is the elevation of Christ to honour, His ascension, enthronement, adoration by the angels, exaltation as King over men, and final manifestation in glory, spoken of as the Father's doing—the compensation and reward with which paternal love rejoices to wipe out that sore dishonour which the blessed Son endured on earth, and to this hour, alas! endures. Yes, "the Father seeketh and judgeth." On the Son's part however, it is equally fitting that He should forget Himself in seeking to restore the glory of His Father's name among a fallen race. To magnify the Father's law, to make reparation to the Father's honour, to display the Father's holiness and love, to win men back to the Father's service—for these ends He came, and in the pursuit of these high, unselfish ends was He not content to live and die dishonoured? It was part of our Lord's trial of faith that He should accept, without a murmur, the utmost indignity and personal outrage at men's hands, attempting no vindication of Himself, not avenging His own cause, not grasping prematurely at the honour which was due to Him, but, serenely patient, leaving His cause contentedly to the care of One who was sure to see justice done by bringing forth

His Son's "righteousness as the light, and His judgment as the noonday." What shall we say of such utter self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice on either side, such mutual confidence in one another's love, such devotion to one another's honour? That it opens to our reverent insight a glimpse into the moral life of the Divine nature! That it helps us a little to comprehend how He for whose glory all things are and were created, can yet be the most unselfish and perfect of lovers, setting our grasping, narrow hearts the hardest and noblest of all examples, a lesson to be for ever learnt!

It seems to me most natural to assume a pause at this point. The long discussion has reached a stage at which (one thinks) it might even take end. The impression which His words in the earlier portion of it had produced on some of His audience had been wholly favourable. Of this favourable impression He had tried to take advantage, from the thirty-first verse onward. But His words found no entrance or understanding; and the discussion since then about the spiritual position of the nominal Israelite has terminated in the use of hard words on both sides—a breach between the disputants which might be thought past healing. From the risk of an unseemly altercation Jesus has only saved Himself by drawing Himself up once more in an attitude of lofty, but to these men nearly unintelligible, self-assertion. Weary of strife, He seems for the moment to have closed it by a solemn reference of the case between Him and His adversaries to the supreme arbitrament of the Father, the Judge of all.

Why does not the conversation terminate here? Simply, I think, because these men have not yet absolutely refused to hear Him any longer; and therefore the inexhaustible kindness and hopefulness of Jesus prompt Him to try once more if He can win an entrance for His message. As I

read the connexion, He reopens His discourse after a pause, and the conversation therefore takes a fresh departure, as it were. Jesus ceases to dispute with men, that He may afresh preach the gospel to them. Of that He is never weary. Even to these men, after all that has come and gone—sons of Satan as He knows them to be, “demoniac” as they term Him—He has a wonderful offer to make, the offer of the life eternal. For thus does He reopen His lips of grace, after a few moments of silent thought, in a tone far more gentle and winning than before: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep My word, He shall never see death”—literally, death he shall not see at all for ever.

Into the meaning of these words, and the subsequent issue of the conversation to which they gave rise, I cannot enter now, but must reserve them for another paper. But let it be observed that He has here solemnly reverted to the point at which He was setting out in ver. 31, when He was interrupted, and the painful discussion began. Is there not, when one thinks of it, a suggestion of kindness in this recurrence to the ideas of ver. 31? Consider what had led Him at that point to address them in such words as these: “If ye abide in My word, then are ye truly My disciples; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Was it not the hopeful beginning of belief in the breasts of some? Well, His attempt to follow up that hopeful beginning has failed. It has issued in a bitter exchange of reproaches. Nevertheless the charity of this Preacher will hope all things. He is unwilling to let so promising a state of mind slip away unimproved, or to give up all hope of leading some of them to the light. In spite of all that has transpired, therefore, He cannot forget how softened they had been a few moments back, and returns to catch up afresh that dropped thread. Therefore are His words an echo of the former ones: *If any man*

(not "ye" this time) *keep My word*—abide in it, as I said before—*he shall*, not merely be free from sin, but live for ever, and *never more taste death*. Therefore, too, these words, for all their intense solemnity, are unspeakably gracious, holding out a promise richer and stronger even than the last. Therefore they are made so startlingly absolute and unlikely. For they are intended to arouse curiosity afresh, to stimulate inquiry, to set the hearers off on a new and more profitable track, in the hope that some among them at least may by searching deeper reach the truth, and with the truth the life that is everlasting.

Yet are the words also full of warning. The condition of receiving life eternal is declared to be a state of mind the precise opposite of these men's present state. Captious, disputing, prejudiced, supercilious, self-righteous men cannot taste the life eternal. Such men, instead of keeping the words of Christ, quarrel with them. It is only the candid, receptive soul, needy and trustful, eager to hear words of life, because conscious of eternal death in itself—it is such a soul that welcomes the message from the Father, and lets the words of the Son enter and find lodgment in its affections, grasps and feeds on saving truth. To such a soul the entrance of that word does bring, not light only, but life; not freedom only, but life eternal. For to keep Christ's saying in this way leads a man into vital fellowship with Jesus Himself. His words are not dead things, but the living thoughts of God, instinct with Divine life, pulsing with Divine love; and through them we touch the very heart of Jesus, the Son of the Father. "They are spirit, and they are life." How many hear the word of God, year in, year out, yet never keep it close in to their own warm souls, that it may quicken in them a heavenly life! Oh, if once one's poor, dead soul hungered for God! how should it then catch at these sayings of

Jesus our Saviour, and clutch them and hang on them, and suck hope from them as draughts from above! How should one set oneself steadily to put them into practice, to keep and to do the word and will of God—that one's soul might live!

J. OSWALD DYKES.