

APOCALYPTIC SKETCHES.

II.

THE SEVEN LAMPS.

REV. II., III.

AT the close of the last sketch we saw John the Divine just recovered from his prostration. He had been so overpowered by the unveiling of the glory of his exalted Lord that he had fallen at His feet as dead ; but the touch of the pierced hand, and the reassuring words in the well-known voice had restored him. Hitherto he had scarcely noticed the golden lamps in the midst of which the Lord was standing, so absorbed was he in the central glory. Now he is asked to look at them, and see in them the symbols of the Churches which were so much in his heart in these lonely days.

The number of the Churches named is seven, though there must have been more in Asia ; but seven, being the number of completeness, stood for them all, and indeed for the entire Church of Christ. Remember that John was "in the Spirit," so we are here in the region of the ideal. This poem of the Apocalypse, like other poems, starts from the actual that it may rise into the ideal. It names the particular Churches struggling amid difficulties and discouragements ; but by making them just seven the seer lifts us into the region of the ideal, and suggests the thought that the vision and the prophecy are not to be limited to the particular Churches named, but extended to the whole Church of God. The number seven carries with it moreover the thought of unity. The seven are viewed as one, just as the seven spirits before the throne (i. 4) are not separate entities, but the one Spirit of God considered in the multiplicity and totality of His operation. But observe the kind of unity we are taught to

look for in the New Testament Church—not a single unity as in the old covenant, when the Church was represented by one golden candlestick, but a multiple unity: there are seven golden candlesticks now, a fact which plainly suggests that just as the number seven applied to the Spirit of God represents the variety of His operation, so as applied to the Church of God in New Testament times it represents the diversity of its administration. St. Paul distinctly tells us, “There are differences of administration, but one Spirit.” And what was revealed to the mind of the Apostle to the Gentiles is set in vision before the seer of Patmos in the seven golden candlesticks. Is it not quite evident from this it was never intended that the New Testament Church should be one vast organization under a single outward administration according to the Roman and High Anglican idea? Our unity is not to be outward and mechanical, but inward and spiritual. As the late Dean Plumtre puts it, the number seven indicates “unity developed in diversity and yet remaining one.” We may be and may remain Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Friends: we may be many outwardly and yet one inwardly, one in spirit and in truth.

Clearly also no one of the seven has the monopoly of the Divine Presence, or of the grace of the Spirit. All are alike in the sight of God. Some Church must be mentioned first; but the Church of Ephesus, which has the honour, is reminded in the very first breath that it has no privilege which the others do not equally share: “To the Angel of the Church in Ephesus write: These things saith He which holdeth the *seven* stars in His right hand, He that walketh in the midst of the *seven* golden candlesticks.” Wherever Christ is, there is the Church; wherever the Church is, there is Christ.

The lamps are golden, and all burn with a clear and steady light. Here again we are evidently in the region of

the ideal. When we pass to the real, as we do in the epistles which follow, what a difference! How the fine gold has become dim, mixed with brass and iron and clay! and how feeble and pitiful and flickering the light, in some cases serious danger that the candlestick may be removed out of its place. Ephesus has left her first love; Pergamos is honeycombed with heresy; Thyatira is disgraced with immorality; Sardis has only a name to live; Laodicea is positively repulsive with lukewarmness and self-sufficiency. And they are all searched by these eyes which are like a flame of fire, and to each of them there comes that voice which is as the sound of many waters, "I know thy works." Yet the Holy One bears with them, and stays with them, and acknowledges them as His (think of His patience and long-suffering!), and, when he shows them in vision to their exiled apostle, uses as their symbols seven golden lamps all burning with a steady flame. "A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench."

It is the same God who said of old to the father of the faithful, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then will I spare all the place for their sake," and permitted the number, in answer to his servant's pleading, to be reduced to forty-five, to forty, to thirty, to twenty, to ten. "There are a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments"; and these few names are the salvation of the Church; these few names keep for it a place among the seven golden candlesticks in the midst of which the Son of Man is walking.

It is the same Jesus who in His great intercessory prayer said of His disciples to His Father, "They have kept Thy word," though they had grieved Him so often and disappointed Him so much. These eyes, which are as a flame of fire, look beneath the outward appearance and read the heart. The hypocrisy of a Judas cannot escape them; but just as little can the loyal-heartedness of all the rest.

Who or what are the Seven Angels of the Churches? We are often told that angel means bishop or pastor; but if John meant this, why did he not say it? And does it not seem that the attempt to identify the angel with an individual man is wholly at variance with the poetical structure of the book? Consider how angels meet us at every turn of these visions, and they never mean men. There is an angel of the waters (xvi. 5), an angel of the fire (xiv. 18), an angel of the abyss (ix. 11), four angels of the four winds (vii. 1), and so on. Now surely the seven angels of the Churches are to be interpreted in the same way as these other angels. Clearly the angels of the Revelation have the same position and function in the poem of the Apocalypse which in a modern poem would be assigned to spirits. A modern poet would say the spirit of the waters, the spirit of the winds, and so on, as for instance in Shelley's *Arethusa*, where he speaks so beautifully of the spirit of the waters, and in *Prometheus Unbound*, where the different spirits introduce themselves in this way:

As the birds within the wind,
As the fish within the wave,
As the thoughts of man's own mind
Float through all above the grave;
We make these our liquid lair,
Voyaging cloudlike and unpent
Through the boundless element:
Thence we bear the prophecy
Which begins and ends in thee.

They are part of the machinery, so to speak, of the vision. We must remember that nature in the poet's view is not dead, but alive; not soulless, but soulful. There are some who speak as if Wordsworth first taught us effectually to recognise thought and feeling and life in what men call the inanimate creation; but even Wordsworth himself did not

strike that high note more distinctly or emphatically than the poets of the Bible, who speak of the joy of the heavens, and the gladness of the earth, the mountains and the hills breaking forth into singing, and all the trees of the field clapping their hands. The high spiritual view of the heavens and the earth and all that are in them is as characteristic of the poets of the Bible as it is of any of the moderns. Let it not be forgotten that John was in the Spirit. The whole action of the book is in the region of the Spirit. How appropriate then that he should be asked to write not to the Churches themselves, the actual congregations of people living in these cities of Asia, but to their representatives in the spiritual sphere, the spirits of the Churches as we would say, the angels of the Churches as he said. The seven golden lamps were the symbols of the Churches as outward organizations, but each of them was regarded as a unity having a soul, and it was this soul or spirit of the Church which was spoken of as the angel of the Church. These angels or spirits of the Churches were set forth under the symbol of seven stars.

We come now to the messages to the Churches, the great object of which is to summon them to faithfulness and patience and endurance to the end in the days of fiery persecution. Happily they are all quite familiar and stand in much less need of exposition than any other part of the Apocalypse. I shall therefore confine myself to some general characteristics.

1. While it is the same exalted Son of Man who addresses all the Churches, He is revealed in a different aspect to each. After the full revelation of His glory set forth in the great vision of the first chapter, at sight of which the beloved disciple fell as dead, we have it broken into parts in the second and third chapters. Ephesus sees one part, Smyrna another, Pergamos another, and so on ;

and it is only by putting them all together that we have the whole. Moreover it will be found that in each case the description of the glory of Christ, in so far as it is revealed to the Church, is appropriate to the message which follows. For example, to the Church at Smyrna, which is to be tried by persecution unto death, it is, "These things saith the First and the Last which was dead and is alive again"; and to the Church in Thyatira, which is to be searched with the fires of Divine judgment, the message begins, "These things saith the Son of God, who hath His eyes like a flame of fire and His feet like unto burnished brass."

Should we not learn from this to be very modest in our judgment of those whose views of truth are not exactly ours? Let us not suppose that, because we are right, they are wholly wrong. May it not be that we see one phase, they another, of the glory and the grace of Him who is the Truth? And are not those persons and Churches really the most orthodox who are most willing to learn from others, and most ready to accept the special witness of each and all?

This lesson is not left to mere inference. There is an express summons to every one to listen, not only to what the Spirit of Christ has to say to His Church, but to what He will reveal to all: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the Churches." What a lesson to those bigoted people who imagine that God speaks only to Anglicans, or only to Presbyterians, or only to Wesleyans, and make up their minds that what is revealed to others and not to them is not worth listening to! Let us not be deaf to the voice of the Spirit, through whatever channels it reaches us. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the Churches"—to all the Churches, even to those which are as heretical as that of Pergamos, or as corrupt as that of Thyatira.

2. Each Church is judged, not by its creed, not by its

ritual, not by its orders, not by its standing in the community, not by its resources, but by its works. "I know thy works," are the solemn words with which all the messages begin. But the kind of works specially noted and commended are not those of external conduct, such as the paying of debts, the living a sober and industrious life, and showing a little kindness now and again to some friend or acquaintance. It does not need eyes like a flame of fire to see works of that kind. All this should go without saying in the case of Christian people. The works, the presence or absence of which is specially noted, are specifically Christian. Take the enumeration of the Thyatiran works as a specimen: "thy love, and faith, and ministry, and patience," each one going deeper than ordinary morality.

3. Most noteworthy is it also that the Churches afflicted with heresy or scandal are not by any means the worst in the sight of God. The world in such cases would see only what is bad, and judge by what it sees. But it is otherwise with these searching eyes. While the abuses and scandals of Pergamos and Thyatira are faithfully dealt with and rebuked, the good in each of them is as carefully noted and commended, and far severer condemnation is meted out to reputable Sardis, and rich and prosperous Laodicea. There was no heresy in Sardis, no controversy, no trouble of any kind as it would seem. But why was all so peaceful and serene? Because neither people nor Churches get into trouble when they are sound asleep; and all is quiet in the cemetery. The severest message of all is to Laodicea, a Church so prosperous that it thought itself in need of nothing, and yet had to be told that it was "poor and miserable and blind and naked and in need of all things," a striking contrast to the case of Smyrna, to which came the reassuring word, "I know thy poverty, but thou art rich." There seems to have been as little trouble of any kind in Laodicea as in Sardis; there was peace as well as

prosperity, but it was the peace of apathy and cold indifference. Any person in Laodicea might think as he pleased and do as he pleased so long as he did not violate the canons of respectability. "Neither cold nor hot," therefore worse than all. Heresy and schism are bad, but not so bad as apathy and death.

4. All through, mercy rejoices over judgment. We have seen how, even in the case of Churches where there was most to condemn, the Lord found much to commend, and eagerly took hold of it and made the most of it. Further, while those in a good condition spiritually are not left without a word of warning, those in the worst condition are not left without a word of encouragement. Even Sardis, with only a name to live, is recognised as not quite dead, and called upon to "be watchful and strengthen the things that remain that are ready to die"; and lukewarm Laodicea has the tenderest assurance of all: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me."

5. Each message closes with a great promise. All the seven are different, just as the seven descriptions of the risen Lord in the opening of the messages are different; and just as in that case, so in this we have to add all together to get an adequate idea of the exceeding greatness of the reward "to him that overcometh."

And here again it is worthy of note that the worse the Church the richer the promise. This seems strange at first; but a little thought will find good reason for it. The promise is not to the whole Church, not in any case. The whole Church shares in the revelation of Christ, in His word of appreciation, and encouragement, and warning, and rebuke; but when it comes to the final reward, it is not to the Church as a whole, but "to him that overcometh." It is a great misfortune to belong to a faithless or dead or

lukewarm Church ; but, God be thanked, that does not necessitate our being faithless or dead or lukewarm ; we may overcome ; and is it not reasonable that to him that overcometh under such serious disadvantage there should be accorded the highest honour and reward ?

6. While the Churches are dealt with as Churches, and each message is to the angel or the spirit of the Church as a whole, the final word in every case is to the individual. It will not be as Churches but as individuals that we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. It will not serve then to have belonged to the best Church in Christendom if thou thyself art overcome of evil ; rather will it increase thy condemnation ; nor will it be to thy prejudice that thou hast belonged to the very worst, if thou thyself hast been faithful and true ; rather will it be to thy everlasting honour in the great eternity. " He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the Churches."

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