

*THE DEVOTIONAL READING OF ISAIAH.*

*A PAPER READ BEFORE A COLLEGE PRAYER UNION.*

LET me first recall to your mind some of the general rules given by Thomas à Kempis (bk. I. chap. v.) for the reading of Holy Scripture :

Each part of the Scripture is to be read with the same spirit wherewith it was written.

We should rather search after profit in the Scriptures than after subtle arguments.

Enquire not who spoke this or that, but mark what is spoken.

Men pass away, but the truth of the Lord remaineth for ever. God speaks unto us in sundry ways without respect of persons.

Enquire willingly, and hear with silence the words of holy men.

You see at once from these sayings of St. Thomas that devotional reading of Scripture is one thing, and critical study quite another. Devotional reading is possible for all earnest souls, for it depends on two conditions only, viz., on willingness to pray for the Spirit's guidance, and on willingness to learn meekly under that guidance. The only mental equipment necessary is the power to read; only let me here mention my conviction that he who surrenders himself to the Spirit receives a blessing in mind as well as in heart through His influence; and, indeed, I believe that the whole man—body, mind, and soul—is quickened when the heart is given to God.

Devotion, then, brings with it culture of the mind as well as of the heart. I think many peasants, men and women whom we should otherwise call ignorant, are striking examples of this fact. On the other hand, it is not necessary that any elaborate mental equipment or critical knowledge of the Scripture should precede its devotional use. Those who could thus equip themselves and yet reject the opportunity shall (no doubt) "suffer loss,"

but devotional study is possible even for the unlettered villager who has committed passages of the Bible to memory because he cannot read.

I have dwelt on this point because some of you may be thinking that in the case of such a book as Isaiah modern criticism may have interfered in some way with the devotional reading of it. For myself, speaking as one who accepts a good many of the results of modern criticism as most probably true, I should say that the book of Isaiah remains as helpful to devotion as it ever was. We are now concerned with the contents of the book. These lay before our Lord in the form in which we read them to-day; from these St. Philip preached Christ to the Ethiopian eunuch; in these St. Paul found some of his most fruitful spiritual thoughts. In our devotional reading we will put aside such questions as whether many authors or one wrote the great prophetic book, and we will obey St. Thomas' injunction, "*Enquire not who spoke this or that, but mark what is spoken.*"

Now Isaiah is not the first book to which a Christian would turn for devotional study. The Gospels come before it, because they give us the very words of Christ; the Epistles because of the richness of the Christian experience of St. Paul; and the Psalms because we are exercised in the devotional use of them in the daily service of our Church. Moreover, Isaiah contains much that is intricate and difficult.

But are we to avoid the more difficult books of the Bible in our devotional reading? Surely they were given for some purpose. Certainly there is one case in which such a book as Isaiah helps us greatly. It happens not unfrequently that familiarity with the words of the Bible shows itself as an evil. The passages from the Gospel sound too familiar to us, as though (God forgive us!) we had exhausted the meaning. We become dry and cold in

spirit; our spiritual food for the moment has ceased to nourish us. What is the remedy for this? There are several remedies suiting different natures, but the one remedy of which I would speak now is *a change of spiritual diet*. If, for the moment, the Gospels cease to move us, let us turn to the light the book of Isaiah throws on the Gospel story. If St. Paul's exhortations to a Christian life fall flat on our ears, let us shame ourselves by noticing what lessons in faith and patience and spiritual religion can be gathered from writings written centuries before Christ.

Now, I do not say that every passage of Isaiah is suitable for devotional use, and when a verse is really obscure in meaning I do not think it is right to give it a fanciful explanation, even if by so doing a devotional use may be made of the verse. Such a proceeding is not quite honest, and (be it remembered) devotion is nothing if it be not honest. With regard to abstruse passages we should give heed to St. Thomas' warning: "*Our own curiosity often hindereth us in reading the Scriptures, when we will examine and discuss that which we should rather pass over without more ado.*" On the other hand, even a cursory reading of Isaiah will bring to our knowledge many passages which are in the truest sense helps to devotion.

Let me take three such passages as examples, and point out as far as I can see how they may help us. The passages are xi. 1-9; lii. 13-liii. 12; lxiii. 7-lxiv. 12.

I. The first of these (Isa. xi. 1-9) may be called a Vision of the Kingdom of God. The prophet describes a time at which a king of the house of Jesse will reign, upon whom the grace of God will rest *sevenfold*. This king will judge the poor with righteousness; none will hurt or destroy in his kingdom; and the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord "as the waters cover the sea." Here then we have an ideal picture of the future; how will such a picture help us?

In this way, viz., by guiding and quickening our devotion. Devotion (in the fullest sense of the word) means giving ourselves to God for one of God's great ends. St. Paul's great act of devotion on the Damascus road was expressed through the words, *What shall I do, Lord?* (τί ποιήσω, Κύριε; Acts xxii. 10). Our own devotion, like St. Paul's, needs to catch some glimpse of God's great ends, in order that it may not spend itself in aimless feeling. We have been taught to pray, "*Thy kingdom come,*" but it is of no avail to use that petition if we have no notion of that for which we pray. Here Isaiah's vision comes in to help us; we learn from it that the kingdom of God is a kingdom to be realized on earth, that the King is Christ, that all the laws of the kingdom are altogether righteous, that no one citizen shall injure another, that ignorance shall be done away with in the knowledge of God. Isaiah's kingdom is the visible Church of Christ, realized and perfected to Christ's pattern; the prayer "*Thy kingdom come,*" means *May the visible Church grow day by day into the likeness of the yet unseen kingdom.* Here indeed, then, in the prophecy is something to guide and quicken our devotion; the curtain is lifted, and we get a glimpse into the glorious possibilities which lie within the reach of earnest prayer and faithful work.

II. I would call the second passage (Isa. lii. 13–liiii. 12) a Study of Christ's Passion. The passage, no doubt, contains difficult points for the critic and for the translator, but its main features may be just as clear to the ordinary English reader as to the Hebrew student. No one can gainsay the fact that we find here in a passage written centuries before Christ's coming, the very principles laid down which governed Christ's atoning work on earth; in fact, we might call these fifteen verses a devotional study of these principles.

The passage teaches us:

1. To look upon the Passion of our Lord with wonder. For the worldly man indeed the story has lost all its freshness by centuries of telling, but it must not be so with the Christian. When he thinks of the Story, its Hero the Son of God, its details so strange for *Him*—the carpenter's shop, the gainsaying of Pharisees, the Betrayal, the three crosses set up against the dark sky, he cannot but wonder. There is no *Of course* in this story; the whole is a fathomless mystery of love. "*That which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider*" (lii. 15).

2. The passage teaches us to meditate on the Passion with thankfulness and with confession of our own sin. Notice that this lesson is acted upon in the Communion Service; Thankfulness and Confession both take a deeper tone when we meet at the Breaking of the Bread, to celebrate our Lord's sufferings. But nowhere more than in these verses of Isaiah do we have the very thoughts we need put into the very words which help: "*He was wounded for our transgressions . . . with His stripes we are healed.*"

3. A third lesson from the Passion taught us here is the lesson of self-restraint under injury. "*He was oppressed, yet He humbled Himself*" (liii. 7). This self-restraint, remember, is needed not only in external action, but also in our devotions. When we fall on our knees before God, we must banish the thoughts of injuries we have received or fancy we have received. Prayer must not be allowed to degenerate into mere complaint. The very injuries inflicted upon us become helps if they lead us to humble ourselves in silence before God. "*He opened not His mouth.*"

4. Finally we learn from this study of the Passion to gather satisfaction and even joy from the story of Christ's Death. Our prayers should have in them an element of confidence and joy, for we learn that however slow Christ's kingdom may appear to us in its coming, the coming itself

is certain: "*He shall see of the travail of His soul and shall be satisfied*" (liii. 11).

III. The third passage (lxiii. 7-lxiv. 12) may be called a Model Prayer for one in trouble. It contains the pleading of one (the Israelite nation is meant) who has had a rich experience of God's goodness in the past and is now face to face with crushing affliction.

It is a pattern of devotion for us for four reasons:

1. It begins with recognising the past goodness of God, the Sun now behind the cloud. "*In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His Presence saved them*" (lxiii. 9). Here is a lesson for us; if we keep God's past goodness fresh in mind, we have something solid to meet present trial with.

2. This passage does not merely glance at this goodness, but realizes it by tracing it step by step. In Egypt, at the Sea, in the Wilderness, in the Promised Land, the prophet recognises God's present help (lxiii. 9-14). So we should not merely confess God's guidance in our past lives in general terms; the true spirit of devotion will say, here and there and there again in such a year and on such an occasion God helped me. There is reality about this proceeding.

3. Again the prophet gives us an example of steadfastness in devotion. He has not one eye on God, and the other on earthly help. God fills his thoughts; "*Thou art our father, though Abraham knoweth us not, and Israel doth not acknowledge us.*"

4. Lastly, this passage shows us man's part in the day of affliction, viz., to *wait* and to *work*. [God] *worketh for him that waiteth for Him; Thou meetest him who rejoiceth and worketh righteousness* (lxiv. 4, 5).

I have taken three passages only as examples, but it would have been easy to add to them. I have not noticed passages which appeal directly to the guilty conscience lay-

ing sin bare, such as chap. v. ; nor, on the other hand, those which comfort and invite, such as chap. iv. Indeed few books of the Bible offer such variety of devotional help as Isaiah. In it speaks the Evangelist, the spiritual guide, the spiritual comforter, in almost every tone of the language of the spiritual life.

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*NOTE ON ACTS IX. 19 ff.*

A CAREFUL study of these verses brings to light an interesting point in the spiritual experience of St. Paul during the period that immediately followed his conversion ; and also shows that St. Luke's account of what then occurred is quite consistent with what Paul tells us in the Epistle to the Galatians (i. 15-18) : the extreme accuracy of the information possessed by the writer of the Acts is also clearly shown.

Let us first consider what would be the probable effect on such a man as Paul of the special revelation of Jesus granted to him.

His mind was an intensely logical one, deeply imbued with the methods he had learned in the Jerusalem Schools, and of their accuracy he was profoundly convinced : indeed some of our greatest difficulties in grasping his arguments arise from the fact that he continued to employ those methods in his exposition of Christianity.

Now such a man must have had very definite opinions as to what the Messiah would be, and say, and do, when He came ; these opinions would, of course, be founded on a careful and extensive consideration of the Law and the Prophets, conducted in accordance with the methods learned at the feet of Gamaliel, and he would not admit the possibility of a doubt as to their correctness.