

THE JOHANNINE VIEW OF THE CRUCIFIXION.

It is proposed to consider in this article the aspect of the Crucifixion which is brought before us in the fourth Gospel, more especially as it is illustrated by the contrast between the tone, the spirit, of the words, "They shall look on him whom they pierced," as quoted by St. John (xix. 37) with that of their original context in Zechariah (xii. 10), and again with the spirit in which allusion is made to them in Revelation i. 7.

Any great act of wrong which is of sufficient importance to take its place in history affects men in at least three ways. There is pity for the innocent sufferer, as he is assumed to be; there is fierce indignation against the authors of the crime, and, as time goes on, and familiarity with the details of the transaction becomes part of our habitual knowledge, while our emotional expression of pity and of indignation becomes less intense, we learn to view the matter more from the point of view of its historical and permanent significance. In the department of secular history the execution of Charles I., as that event was regarded by High-Anglican Royalists, affords a good illustration of what I mean. It is unnecessary that I should enlarge upon it.

As a matter of fact the great world tragedy which we are now considering has affected mankind in these three ways; and we may conveniently refer to them respectively the three passages in which reference is made to the piercing of the Messiah. The tone, the spirit of the three contexts differ considerably one from the other. I do not mean to say that the difference was designed, but it is there, and it may assist us in the ordering of our thoughts on this subject.

“ In that day . . . I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplication ; and they shall look unto me, whom they have pierced ; and they shall mourn for him as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn ” (Zech. xii. 10). This may be, as Westcott says, (note on St. John, l.c.), “ the vision of a Saviour, late recognized by a penitent people ” ; but there is in the words I have quoted an unmistakable tone of the tenderest pity and regret for the pierced One, as exhibited by those who look unto Him whom they have pierced.

On the other hand, in the preamble to the Revelation of St. John, the look and the mourning are those of hopeless remorse, the surprise and disappointment of the adversaries, and that too recorded by one who feels a fierce indignation against them : “ Behold, He cometh with the clouds ; and every eye shall see Him, and they which pierced Him ; and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over Him. Even so, Amen.” Here we have a tone of indignation against those who pierced the sacred body, indignation which might easily degenerate into sectarian hatred, a tone of triumph in the final and open vindication of the once despised Sufferer, which might easily degenerate into a Tertullian’s vindictive joy over the future torments of unbelievers, a sentiment which has in fact been the ultimate sanction of the cruel persecution of Jews by Christians for many centuries.

It is not necessary to prove that this excessive indignation against those who murdered Jesus is utterly unchristian and unreasonable. “ Father, forgive them ; for they know not what they do.” That is the divine and true appreciation of their act, considered by itself. And as for the moral obliquity which led to that act, do not we, some of us, need to pray, “ From hardness of heart and

contempt of Thy Word and Commandment, good Lord, deliver us"?

"The prophetic vision," says Bishop Westcott (l.c.), "as applied to Christ in the Apocalypse, is primarily the vision of one slain returning to judgment"; and it was natural and proper for the seer of the Revelation to anticipate the confusion and too late remorse of an unbelieving world; but it may be questioned whether Christians of the twentieth century profit much by dwelling on thoughts such as these.

The other look, the look not of remorse, but of pity, may seem to many not only more natural, but also absolutely unexceptionable, if not the only possible way of regarding the Crucifixion: "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow." These words, and others of a similar character from the Old Testament have been constantly applied in Christian literature and devotional works to the sufferings of our Lord. The purely physical aspects of the great tragedy, in their minutest details, have been appealed to, to excite our pity and arouse our sorrow, the insults and the scourging, the cross too heavy to be borne by the weakened frame of the Saviour, the crown of thorns, and the five wounds, the prolonged torture and the despairing cry, all that in modern phraseology would be termed the sensational features of the death of Christ.

"One should be fearful of being wrong in poetry when one thinks differently from the poets, and in religion when one thinks differently from the saints." There is sufficient truth in these words of Joubert to make us hesitate before deprecating, much less condemning, the look of tender pity and commiseration with which many, perhaps most, of the saints of Christendom have gazed on the cross of Jesus. The "*Mater dolorosa*" has many to weep with her. And yet I think it is something more solid than good taste that

makes some of us shrink from the horribly realistic crucifixes and stations of the cross of mediæval and modern Romanism. We feel that there is a capital and fundamental error in this emphasizing of the material details of the death of Jesus, so that the thoughts and imagination cannot take in any other conception of it. This over emphasis of the cruel details defeats its own purpose; for it inevitably and logically invites a comparison with other exhibitions of human cruelty; and not only lowers the death of Christ to the level of a martyrdom, and so impairs its unique significance, but candour compels us to assign it an unimportant place in the ranks of martyrdoms. The annals of the cruelty of man to man, even within the last quarter of a century, supply stories, the horror of which reduce the Crucifixion, if it were only a crucifixion, to the level of a very commonplace event.

And when we examine afresh the Gospel record we cannot fail to be struck by the reserve of the historians of the Passion, the complete absence of sensationalism in the account they give of the death of their Master. Mr. Row (*Christian Evidences*, p. 78) notes as a "proof of the artless character of the Gospels" the fact that their authors "never once dilate on the great qualities of their Master. . . . All that they do is to record His actions and discourses with scarcely a remark. They have even scarcely a hard word to say of His opponents, although they must have regarded the chief agents in bringing about his Crucifixion as the worst of murderers." "The facts," as Bishop Butler says, "are related in plain, unadorned narratives." And not only do the Evangelists abstain from calling attention to the actual bodily pain endured by Christ, but on the contrary they leave the reader with a picture in his mind of a great spiritual triumph, an exhibition of moral power: "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children." "To-day

shalt thou be with me in Paradise." "When the centurion . . . saw that He so gave up the ghost, he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God.'" It was only in accordance with the spirit of the Gospels that the psalm should run, "Tell it out among the heathen that the Lord hath reigned from the tree."

But while this is true of the Synoptists it is much more true of St. John's narrative. Here we have the effect of the lapse of time exemplified in two ways. As men grow older their characters ripen for good or bad; and when St. John wrote his Gospel, the Boanerges, the Son of thunder, of the Apocalypse had mellowed into the apostle of love, whose only sermon was, "Little children, love one another." "They shall look on Him whom they pierced" had been a feature in his vision of judgment, the look of remorse, of despair; it was now to suggest the look of trust and hope. Experience had taught the Evangelist that "God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him." And therefore he had come to see in the blood and water that issued from the pierced side of Jesus not only "a sign of life in death," but also symbols of the new natural and spiritual life of which Christ is the source (Westcott in loc.). "For He is the very Paschal Lamb, which was offered for us, and hath taken away the sin of the world." And so, as being the Paschal Lamb, "a bone of Him was not broken," and as the antitype of the brazen serpent, on which if a man looked he lived, so they who desire life "shall look on Him whom they pierced"; for "He was wounded for our transgressions."

Again, the years, the generation rather, that had passed since the beloved disciple had stood by the cross of Jesus, produced on his mind the effect of distance on a landscape. The details of savagery were not forgotten by him. How could they be? But they were seen in their true proportion.

Most of them were now perceived to have had no eternal significance. For St. John the main, almost the only, aspect of the death of Christ is the atoning virtue of it. "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" This witness of the Baptist determines the attitude of the Evangelist towards the crucifixion all through the fourth Gospel.

"Even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know Him so no more." This sentiment of St. Paul's, uttered probably in rebuke of the claims of some who thought themselves more highly favoured than he, seems to actuate St. John in his treatment throughout of the Crucifixion.

In the previous part of the Gospel the language used of it is very significant and remarkable: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up" (iii. 14). When ye have "lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am He" (viii. 28). "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Myself" (xii. 32). Elsewhere, as Westcott notes, the phrase "lifted up" occurs in reference to the Ascension. The Bishop's comment on the last passage cited is worth quoting: "St. John does not ever, like St. Paul, separate the Passion as a crisis of humiliation from the glory which followed. The 'lifting up' includes death and the victory over death. In this aspect the crisis of the Passion itself is regarded as a glorification (xiii. 31); and St. John sees the Lord's triumph in this rather than in the Return."

We are here reminded that in this Gospel Christ always speaks of His own "glorification" in connexion with His death, as, for example, "The hour is come that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit" (xii. 23, 24).

Again, in this Gospel our Lord speaks constantly of His death as "laying down His life." The phrase has so completely passed into our current speech that it may be a surprise to some to learn that it only occurs in this Gospel, and once in St. John's First Epistle, and nowhere else. The metaphor, as Westcott suggests, may be drawn from the putting off and laying aside of a robe. It expresses the voluntariness of Christ's sufferings, which is so markedly emphasized in this narrative.

Once more, the death of Christ is treated in a very special way as being, if the phrase may be allowed, an incident in our Lord's arrangements. It is one of the things to which the term "His hour" is applied. "Mine hour is not yet come," He says to His mother at the marriage in Cana. To His brethren He says, "I go not up yet unto this feast; because My time is not yet fulfilled." So with reference to His death we read, "No man laid his hand on Him, because His hour was not yet come" (vii. 30, viii. 20); and "Jesus knowing that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father" (xiii. 1).

And then when we come to the actual narrative we cannot fail to notice that in place of the agony in the garden, and the traitor's kiss, and the desertion by all, St. John gives us the great Prayer of Consecration, the recoil of the officers from Christ's majestic presence, and the calm request, "Let these go their way." In place of the examination before the Council we have the true Messiah confronted with the false high-priest Annas; and the fact is noted that, at first at least, Jesus bore His cross for Himself; and many of the painful incidents recorded in the other gospels are not mentioned. There is nothing approaching to a contradiction or even a correction of the earlier narratives; it is only that the point of view is somewhat changed. It is as though looking back over the years, and viewing the Passion through the medium of the spiritual experiences of himself and of

thousands of his children in Christ, the aged Apostle beheld on Calvary not a gallows, not a crucifix, but an altar throne radiant with an everlasting glory, and on the throne "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, slain from the foundation of the world."

While the joy of the Resurrection morn grows and deepens for the individual soul as it draws nearer to death, and becomes ever more significant for the human race as it advances through the centuries, it must be otherwise with Good Friday. The Christian can never pass a Good Friday, like the first, as passed by St. Peter and his brother apostles. What sorrow could be like his who knows that no bitter tears of sincerest penitence can ever restore to him the Master he has denied, or change the meaning of that last penetrating glance? For us "the darkness is passing away," nay, it is past, "and the true light already shineth." We look unto Him whom we have pierced, solemnized by the knowledge that we have a share in the sins that called for that tremendous sacrifice. But there is, there must be, a prevailing note of thankful joy. "For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by His life."

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