

THE LIFE OF CHRIST ACCORDING TO ST. MARK.

PREFACE.

The object of these studies is to present the impression of Christ which would be derived from St. Mark's Gospel by a reader who had no other source of information ; a reader who knew nothing of the other Gospels, or of Christian theology. Such an impression would be inadequate both from the point of view of history, and from that of Christian doctrine ; nevertheless, it would reveal some features of our Lord's character and work more clearly than a picture which sought to combine in one harmonious whole the information given by the Four Gospels and the doctrines of the Christian creeds and confessions.

I. INTRODUCTION, I. 1-8.

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,” therefore, as far as the knowledge and judgment of St. Mark were concerned, nothing before the coming of John the Baptist was an essential part of the Good News. The Good News, as we gather from the contents of our book, was partly about Jesus, and partly proclaimed by Jesus ; it is unfolded in the following chapters. Thus the subject and the preacher are one, “Jesus Christ the Son of God.” The reader would understand from the term “Christ” that Jesus was a Jewish leader and teacher, who was believed to be the Messiah or Saviour-King whom the Jews expected. He would suppose that the man who was called “Christ, the Son of God” was a teacher with extraordinary gifts ; but he would easily learn that both the terms “Christ” and “Son of God” were used in many different meanings ; and he would look to the book itself to explain exactly what they meant when they were applied to Jesus of Nazareth.

The Good News about Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, natur-

ally begins with a quotation from the Jewish Scriptures. The title and the quotation show that the work and teaching of Jesus spring out of the religion of Israel. The quotation speaks of a messenger or herald who was to appear in the desert, and prepare the way of his Lord by going before Him, and with loud shouts proclaiming His approach. This then was to be a token of the Messiah; He would be preceded by a prophet who would announce His speedy coming. St. Mark goes on to tell us that this token had been given in the case of Jesus. There had appeared in the wilderness a certain John the Baptizer, who preached repentance and promised forgiveness, and made his disciples undergo a baptism or ceremonial washing, as a sign, no doubt, that their sins were washed away. This John had been an ascetic, wearing coarse clothing and eating simple food, and he had brought about a great religious revival; crowds had flocked to him in the wilderness, "the whole district of Judea and all the men of Jerusalem," and had accepted his baptism. At the very zenith of his fame and influence, John proclaimed the coming of One greater than himself, One so great that John was not fit to untie His shoe-strings. John had baptized with water, the One who was yet to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit. John could only wash the body as a symbol of spiritual cleansing, the Coming One could wash the very souls of men with the Spirit of God.

The token, therefore, had been given; there had come a great prophet who had declared that he was the Fore-runner of some one far greater than himself; this Greater One, therefore, according to the Old Testament prediction, was the Lord, the Messiah. It is clear from the context that the "Greater One" is Jesus.

The circumstance was remarkable apart from any question as to the authority of the Jewish Scriptures. There have been many prophets; some of them in their declining

years have nominated successors—Moses committed his office to Joshua; the mantle of Elijah was assumed by Elisha—but where else do we read of a great preacher who had drawn a whole people after him declaring in the full tide of his success that he was the mere herald of One greater than himself? The reader would expect much from the Teacher to whom such testimony had been borne.

II. THE BAPTISM, I. 9-11.

While the crowds kept on gathering round John to hear him and to receive his baptism, Jesus came amongst the rest from Nazareth of Galilee. Simply "Jesus . . . from Nazareth," no other description, nothing about His family. Have we not read that He was "Son of God"? He could derive no additional dignity from the most splendid ancestry. Nothing about His age or His personal appearance, or his social position, or His occupation. On the last point we shall learn something incidentally further on. The silence as to age suggests that He was in middle life, so that men were not struck by his age, and did not think of Him as either old or young. He came from Nazareth of Galilee, a busy provincial town in a district where many peoples met—Jews, Phœnicians, Syrians, Arabs, Greeks, sometimes even Romans and men of the far East and the far West. A reader might reflect that in such surroundings the smouldering embers of Jewish faith might be kindled afresh into flame at the touch of the free breath of a wider and more vigorous life. This Jesus, therefore, came to John and was baptized; John invited men to repent and offered them forgiveness, and Jesus accepted the invitation. Yet the reader who remembered that He was Christ, the Son of God, the Coming One who was greater than John, would not think of Him as driven from Galilee to the Jordan by the pangs of a guilty conscience. Now and then, but rarely, very rarely, there arises a prophet so

pure and perfect that he does not need to guard his virtue by separating himself from ordinary men. Rather he is possessed by a sense of fellowship with that life of humanity of which his own life is a part; he repents on behalf of the impenitent, and seeks forgiveness for those who are yet hardened in sin. So it came about that Jesus took His seat on the "penitent form" of His days; but the casual spectator saw no difference between Him and the sinners crowding to be baptized; it seemed to be His "conversion" as well as theirs.

And indeed the Baptism was the occasion of a spiritual crisis, one of those personal experiences of God which make men into prophets. "Forthwith," says St. Mark,—we may pause for a moment over the word, because we shall meet with it again and again; nearly everything happens "forthwith." The brief career of Jesus was an hour of crowded life in which one critical event after another presented itself with startling suddenness. The Evangelist tells his story in a somewhat breathless fashion; the mingled awe, excitement, and fascination of those marvellous days still stir within him.

"Forthwith as He came up out of the water" in which He had been baptized "He saw the heavens part asunder, and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well pleased." He had made Himself one of a crowd of obscure penitents, feeling in His pitiful sympathy and generous chivalry as if their sin were His; and in that very moment heaven opened before His dazzled eyes, and a Spirit came forth from the Eternal Presence, and saluted Him as the Beloved Son. He had laid Himself and His life at the feet of the Righteous Judge; and Infinite Holiness had set upon Him the seal of its approval, "In Thee I am well pleased": He had humbled Himself under the mighty hand of God, and had been lifted up.

III. THE TEMPTATION, I. 12, 13.

“And forthwith the Spirit driveth Him into the wilderness; and He was in the wilderness forty days.” Jesus would interpret what had befallen Him by what he had heard of the ancient prophets; the spirit of God had taken possession of Him. But to what end? What were to be His mission and His message? He must be alone to think it all out; He must wrestle with the Spirit that had come upon Him, as Jacob had wrestled with the angel through the night by the Jabbok. Not even John could help Him.

He separated Himself from the crowd, and went out into the wilderness that He might become better acquainted with the Spirit of God; and He found Satan the Tempter. The inevitable reaction followed on the moments of inspired exaltation. After all He was a man, no mere visionary ascetic. His brain was alive with a sense of penetrating insight; His nerves were tingling with the consciousness of power. Life beckoned to Him with inviting hands, and called Him with seductive voices. The greatest careers lay open before Him.

Then with a violent revulsion, a horror as of thick darkness settled down upon His soul at the thought that visions of earthly pleasure, power, and fame had occupied even for a moment the mind of Him who was the Beloved Son of God, in whom God was well pleased.

For a while, perhaps throughout the forty days, the struggle went on between spiritual exaltation and spiritual depression, till at last the tide of feeling was spent; human nature asserted itself; the preoccupation with the inner life vanished, and Jesus awoke to see things in the light of common day. He found Himself alone in the wilderness, His only companions the wild animals of the desert. He seemed to Himself an ordinary man, lonely, faint and hungry; the spiritual exaltation and the spiritual depression seemed passing moods that had no permanent meaning for

His life ; the Divine Spirit and the Tempting Devil seemed mere phantasms of a dream.

But "the angels ministered unto Him" : help came to the weary body and the over-wrought spirit : food, rest, wise and loving counsel. Jesus was once more master of Himself : He knew that the experiences of the Baptism were real, that the vision and the voice had brought a true message of God to His soul ; that the other earthly visions were such as might well stir a man's ambition ; but that He was called with a higher calling.

IV. THE BEGINNING OF THE MINISTRY, I. 14, 15.

We do not read of any immediate sequel to the Baptism and the Temptation. Jesus waited, we do not know how long, or where, or with whom. He did not go home ; He could not go back and live the old life as if nothing had happened ; neither could He appear again amongst His brothers and sisters and say, "I have had a revelation that I am the Beloved Son of God." It was hopeless to try and make them understand His experience ; as yet He Himself only partly understood it. Perhaps He went back to John, and became for the time being his disciple.

Then John was "delivered up," betrayed, and thrown into prison ; a natural answer to the call to repentance, the "ethical demand" as we should say in modern times. His disciples scattered, and Jesus returned to His native province, preaching the Good News of God. He had seen in the imprisonment of John a call to begin His ministry. The message concerning repentance and forgiveness had hitherto been delivered by a "voice crying in the wilderness" ; men had to leave their homes and make a journey to hear it. The voice was silenced, but the new Teacher brought the message into the towns and villages. Men could stand at their house-doors and listen ; they could hear it at the Sabbath service of the synagogue. It was still

the same call, "Repent"; but it had become more than a mere call to repentance and offer of forgiveness. Jesus proclaimed the Good News of God, the appointed time had come and the Kingdom of God was at hand. Such words in the mouth of a Jew speaking to Jews could mean only one thing. "The appointed time" was that spoken of by the prophets, the time when God would deliver Israel; the "Kingdom of God" was the new dispensation of righteousness and prosperity. The Hope of Israel took many forms; usually the Messiah, the Saviour, Conqueror and King was a prominent figure; but the preaching of Jesus, so far, said nothing about the Messiah; the watchword of the Good News was the Kingdom of God, following the teaching of those who hoped that God Himself would intervene directly to redeem His people, and to establish the new order. How had the assurance come to Jesus that the Kingdom of God was at hand? All Jewry had been stirred by the preaching of John; Jesus had felt Himself possessed and moved by the Spirit to some great end; and He had seen the apparent triumph of evil in the imprisonment of the preacher of righteousness. In some moment of inspiration like that which followed His Baptism, the conviction seized and held Him that these were the signs of the coming of the Kingdom. He knew now to what mission He had been called; He was to preach the Kingdom of God. One article of the preaching was faith, men were to believe the Good News.

V. THE CALLING OF THE FIRST DISCIPLES, I. 16-20.

He had come into Galilee, but He still avoided Nazareth, and made His way to the Sea of Galilee, and there, walking by the lake, He saw fishermen fishing or mending their nets. He bade them follow Him, and He would make them fishers of men. He reveals Himself as a born leader of men, conscious of the right and power to

command ; instinctively He strikes the note of authority. And, as mostly happens when that note is struck by the born leader, the men obeyed.

Probably He had known them before in a familiarity which had not bred contempt. Thus from His friends we learn His social standing. These men, Simon and Andrew, James and John, belonged to the lower middle-class. They were working owners of fishing-boats ; James and John had a father living who still worked at the fishing, and employed men to help him. It was an occupation which gave full play to many qualities of body and mind—courage, industry, intelligence, and so forth. These masters of fishing-smacks had to contend with the treacherous moods of the inland sea in order to win their fish ; and when they came to sell them they had to match themselves against the wily Greek or Syrian trader.

They were called that they might become fishers of men. The new Leader, it seems, had the gift of holy epigram ; He could speak truths that went home to the hearers' hearts in half-a-dozen words such as

Men remember,
Till they forget themselves.

The new disciples understood once for all that the energy, persistence, and dexterity which had swept fish into their nets by hundreds were to be used to gather multitudes into the Kingdom.

VI. THE PREACHING IN CAPERNAUM, I. 21-28.

Then the Man of Nazareth and His four fishermen went into the nearest town to inaugurate the new dispensation. The sentence might have been written then by a scribe of the Pharisees in contemptuous sarcasm ; and it is the greatest marvel in the world's history that the words can be used now as a simple statement of actual fact. The town was

Capernaum on the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee, a busy place where there were great shoals of human fish. The Sabbath came—perhaps it began the very evening on which Jesus arrived—and He went to the service at the synagogue. There, as He knew, He would have an opportunity of delivering His message. Judaism did not try to limit the Spirit by silencing all except an official class of preachers; but any one who had a word of exhortation for the people was invited to speak. Jesus, therefore, delivered His message. We are not told what He said; the message probably did not specially interest the audience. It is one of the troubles of the true prophet that his hearers think about the man and not about the message; they are taken up with the delivery, the anecdotes, and the illustrations, and care little about the teaching. The one thing that men remembered about this sermon was the air of authority with which Jesus spoke, the contrast between Him and the scribes. If a scribe had preached about the coming of the Kingdom, he would have quoted the dictum of Rabbi A, who had made a calculation based on the figures in *Daniel*, and compared it with Rabbi B's explanation of the seventy years of *Jeremiah*; the scribe would further have given the comments on these views which Rabbi C said he had heard from Rabbi D in the name of Rabbi E; and so on through a whole alphabet of learned authorities. Jesus said simply, as of His own certain knowledge, that the appointed time had come, and the Kingdom was at hand. He seemed quite sure about it, and made His hearers feel as if He really knew, and the audience were astonished.

Then there came an interruption; there was present a man with an unclean spirit. Probably he was harmless and inoffensive under ordinary circumstances, the commonplace routine of the synagogue service made no impression

on him. But the new authoritative voice excited the demoniac, and brought on a crisis of his malady. The speaker and congregation were startled by a wild cry, "Why dost Thou meddle with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Didst Thou come to destroy us? I know Thee; thou art the Holy One of God!" Again the impression which was made and remembered had to do with the man and not with the teaching. Here was another challenge from the Powers of Darkness; the Temptation had followed the Baptism, then John had been imprisoned, and now Satan confronted Jesus at the outset of His ministry. "Let the Saint of God talk with His fellow-saints about the Kingdom of God, but let Him not meddle with lost souls possessed by evil spirits; these belonged to the Kingdom of Satan." There would be a pause in the address, a hush of expectation in the audience. Then Jesus rebuked him, "Hold thy peace, and come out of him." Torn asunder by the contending forces the victim writhed and shrieked in his convulsions. At last peace came with exhaustion; the devil had departed, and the man was in his right mind. Even before this, Jesus' manner of speech in His teaching had revealed His personality; now, for the moment at any rate, this victory over the demon seemed a full confirmation of His authority. An excited throng streamed out of the synagogue, eagerly comparing notes about the "new teaching" with its unaccustomed note of "authority"; and before the Sabbath was over all Capernaum had heard of Jesus the prophet and worker of miracles, and the news began to spread to the neighbouring towns and villages.

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