

*THE LIFE OF CHRIST ACCORDING TO ST.
MARK.¹*

XXIII. THE MISSION OF THE TWELVE, VI. 7-30.

WE read some time since that the Twelve were appointed that they might preach; but so far nothing has been said of any such activity on their part. In the interval, however, Jesus had been training them, for instance He had privately explained to them the parables. Now they were sent out two by two that the preaching of the Kingdom might be multiplied sevenfold. Jesus no doubt intended that His message should be proclaimed in every town and village of Palestine. Perhaps He felt that His otherworldliness placed barriers between Him and ordinary men; the disciples being more practical might be better able to reach the hearts of the people.

The burden of the apostolic preaching, like that of John the Baptist, and of Jesus, was that men should repent. Moreover the apostles were invested with the power to cast out demons, and to heal diseases—the marvellous gifts of Jesus were, so to speak, contagious. When the disciples wished to cure any one they anointed the sufferer with oil, a common remedy, and probably used as such and not merely as a piece of ritual. This combination of ordinary means with the operation of special gifts of healing shows that the Evangelist did not draw any sharp distinction between the natural and the supernatural.

¹ These studies do not profess to be an adequate historical and doctrinal account of Christ, but are an attempt to set forth the impression which St. Mark's account of our Lord would make on a reader whose only source of information was the Second Gospel, and who knew nothing of Christian dogmatics.

The Gospel cites some of the instructions given by the Master ; the disciples were to take with them only a staff and what they stood upright in ; they were to be dependent on casual hospitality for food and shelter ; they were not to be fastidious as to their entertainment, but throughout their stay at any place they were to remain at the house which first received them—a provision which would prevent them from staying long in one village, since the chance guest was expected to depart on the third day, counting the day of arrival as the first. As hospitality was a recognized duty there was nothing extraordinary about such instructions ; and they are probably recorded as a precedent for early Christian Evangelists.

Little is said as to the results of the Mission, and from this silence we may gather that the preaching of the Twelve was a failure—a failure that is to say in the judgment of Jesus and in the light of later history ; it did not serve as a positive preparation for the Kingdom. Yet the Mission was not useless ; individuals were won ; and further progress was made in that proclamation to Israel which was a necessary preliminary of the Coming of the Kingdom. Hence Jesus bade the apostles shake off the dust from their feet against the towns which did not receive them, as a sign that the royal heralds had done their duty, and that the blood of the obdurate was upon their own heads.

But in the eyes of men the preaching seemed successful, it made Jesus more widely known, and the cures wrought by the apostles enhanced, his fame. Jesus, it seemed, was carrying out a systematic plan by which all Galilee, perhaps all Syria, would be brought under His influence. How would he use that influence ? St. Mark felt that the Mission was a crisis in His career ; he interrupts the narrative to tell us what men thought of Him. “ His name,” we read, “ had become known ” ; and as usual men were

specially impressed by the miracles. Some said that He was a prophet like one of the ancient messengers of God ; Israel had long mourned its lack of prophets, and now in Jesus the good old times had come again. Others ascribed to Him the unique position of Elijah restored to life. The final word in the record of prophecy was often understood to be a promise that Elijah would return as the forerunner of the Messiah. If any one objected that John the Baptist had announced himself as the Forerunner, there was an obvious answer : Jesus *was* John the Baptist, risen from the dead. It was this last answer which commended itself to the guilty conscience of Herod, who had put John to death. A popular belief that Jesus was a reincarnation, so to speak, of the Baptist shows that He did not become publicly famous till after John's death, and that the public generally knew nothing of His early life.

It is most striking that, in spite of His miracles, His popularity, and His impressive character, no one seems to have thought that Jesus could be the Messiah—except the demoniacs.

XXIV. THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND, VI. 31-44.

The disciples had discharged their commission with zeal, and were tired with journeying, preaching, and the emotional strain involved in healing the sick and casting out demons ; and, as had happened once before, Jesus and His followers were so beset that they had not leisure even to eat. On that former occasion Jesus continued His work indifferent to hunger and weariness, but He was more careful for His disciples than He had been for Himself. "Come apart," said He, with His usual gracious kindness, "into some quiet place and rest." So they went away in their boat to seek some lonely spot. It is not easy

to make out the geography, but it seems that the rendezvous of Jesus and the disciples after the Mission was somewhere on the western coast of the lake, not far from its northern end, and that they sailed across some short distance to the eastern side. But they did not escape unobserved, and the people followed them along the shore, so that, when they landed, a great crowd had already gathered to meet them. As usual the sense of their spiritual need came to Jesus as an irresistible appeal, and he began to teach them many things; the day wore on; the discourse showed no sign of coming to an end, and still the crowd hung upon His lips. But the more practical disciples became anxious about food for such a multitude, and suggested that Jesus should send them away that they might provide for themselves in the neighbouring villages.

The sequel is only partly intelligible. At the bidding of Jesus, the disciples distributed to the crowd their own small store, five loaves and two small fishes; and the hunger of that great multitude, five thousand men beside women and children, was satisfied. How, we are not told, and conjecture is useless in a matter where it is possible that no illumination can be derived from ordinary experience.

XXV. THE WALKING ON THE WATER, VI. 45-56.

When the meal was ended, Jesus sent His disciples back in the boat to the western shore, while He Himself dismissed His guests. When they were gone He betook Himself alone into the solitude of the hills to pray. These special seasons of retirement for fellowship with God were associated with crises in the life of Jesus. It was after the Baptism that He withdrew into the wilderness; He sought some lonely place for prayer after the first exercise, probably the discovery of His marvellous gifts, i.e., after He

had cleansed the demoniac in the Synagogue at Capernaum, and had healed Peter's mother-in-law. Now these evening hours were His first leisure since the disciples had given Him the report of their mission, and had afforded Him fresh evidence that Israel would probably reject His message. Moreover we have seen that the mighty works of Jesus were not wrought without cost to Himself. The Feeding of the Five Thousand was so strange an event that the Evangelist cannot find words to describe it clearly. Its circumstances and its sequel may well have involved some wonderful experience for Jesus, including perhaps some new light as to the character and disposition of the people and of His own disciples ; some new light that gave Him pause and called for reflection on the end to which His work was tending. Hence, in the privacy of night in the lonely hills He surrendered Himself to the fellowship of God that He might understand His life and the Father's purpose concerning Him. He knelt to share

" The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love."

Meanwhile the disciples were making small progress in their voyage, for they were labouring at the oars against contrary winds ; and St. Mark tells us that towards dawn Jesus came to them walking on the sea ; and they thought that they saw a ghost, and were frightened ; but He reassured them, and went up into the boat, and the wind ceased. St. Mark goes on to tell us that they were astonished, because they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. It seems that the Feeding of the Five Thousand was a mystery even to the ministers of the feast. Had they understood, St. Mark seems to imply, they would not have been astonished at the further wonder of the Walking on the Sea. To the Evangelist that mysterious feast was an exceptional proof

of miraculous power, but it does not seem to have made the same impression on the disciples who were eye-witnesses. This fact and the obscurity of some features in the story suggest that at this point St. Mark was not so well informed as usual, and that he obtained the account indirectly from tradition.

The concluding verses of this section tell us how Jesus was again beset by crowds seeking to be healed: probably a consequence of these new marvels.

XXVI. THE TRADITIONS OF THE ELDERS, VII. 1-23.

The last few sections have dealt with incidents which added to the fame and influence of Jesus, and therefore stimulated the hostility of His opponents. We now find Him in collision with certain Pharisees reinforced, as on previous occasions, by Scribes from Jerusalem; and, as usual, they were the assailants; Jesus did not spontaneously denounce them, but they attacked the disciples, and in defending His followers Jesus was led to repudiate the Pharisaic doctrine.

In this case the cause of offence was neglect of ceremonial washings before meals, a sin which was not due to the teaching of Jesus, but to the natural carelessness of fishermen and peasants. Had they continued fishermen the Pharisees would not have troubled about the master; but the disciples were now the chosen friends of a religious leader, and they had recently been preaching themselves. It was scandalous that they should neglect forms observed by all religious folk; to use a modern parallel, it was like a minister omitting to say grace.

The scribes then had noticed that some of the disciples did not wash their hands before a meal, and they came to Jesus for an explanation of such laxity. Somehow the

demand roused Him to one of His rare outbursts of indignation. He addressed these cavilling informers as hypocrites; their anxiety for an explanation and their zeal for the traditions were alike insincere, cloaks for the personal animosity of the fanatic towards those who differ from him. Jesus applied to them Isaiah's description of the Jews of his own time—

“This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; they offer me useless worship, for they teach mere human precepts.”

Further, their insincerity was shown by the fact that some of their cherished traditions were inconsistent with the law itself; so that while they professed to be zealous for the Divine ordinances, they rejected the commandments of God that they might keep the traditions of men; or, in other words, the professed champions of the Bible were its worst enemies. For instance, Moses bade a man honour his father and mother, but according to tradition a man might let his parents starve if he devoted his property to God.

This incident affords a striking illustration of the points at issue between Jesus and the Pharisees. Neither the washing of hands before every meal nor the maintenance of parents in old age are expressly laid down in the Pentateuch; but both are legitimate inferences from what is laid down. If the eating of unclean food was an evil to be avoided at any cost, the hands must be washed before every meal, for the chances were that the hands had contracted some ceremonial uncleanness which would communicate itself to the food, unless it were removed by washing. Similarly the command to honour parents implied the relief of their destitute old age. But it would be impossible to press all the multitudinous ordinances of the Pentateuch to their extreme logical implications; some of these would soon be found to clash with one another. More especially

the development of humanitarian precepts would soon be checked by the exaggeration of ceremonial demands. Which was to give way? Wherein could man's love to God be best shown? In the external observance of sacred acts and seasons, in reverence for sacred places and officials, or in service to neighbours and kinsfolk. The Pharisee claimed that ritual ordinances as to cleanness, the Sabbath, and so forth were to be maintained at any sacrifice; but according to Jesus, the dictates of humanity and the claims of natural affection took precedence of such demands.

This encounter prompted Jesus to make a public declaration, which widened the breach between Him and the legalists. Jesus had already broken with Pharisaic tradition, but hitherto He had in no way explicitly challenged any of the Mosaic ordinances as given in the Pentateuch. Now He called the multitude to Him, and declared that men were not defiled by anything from without, but by that which came from within. These words seem clear enough, but they were so startling that the disciples could hardly believe their own ears. When they were alone with Jesus, they asked Him what He meant. He then said plainly that a man is not defiled by what he takes unto him, i.e. by food, but the words and acts which proceed from him. St. Mark adds the comment that thus Jesus made all foods clean, i.e. He revoked the Mosaic Laws as to clean and unclean meats. He could not intend that His followers should at once abandon the ordinances as to food, but He regarded them as mere matters of custom and expedience which had no religious value.

This episode was critical both for Jesus and for Christianity. It secured for the Church independence of Judaism, and on the part of Jesus it involved a larger claim of authority, and a more hopeless breach with current orthodoxy. From the outset Jesus set His authority above that

of the Pharisees, He now asserted His right to overrule Moses. It was due to the recognition of this claim that the Christian Church did not remain a Jewish sect, but became an independent organization.

W. H. BENNETT.