

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

XXXVI. THE THIRD DAY IN JERUSALEM, XI. 20—
XIII. 21.

AT this point St. Mark abandons the attempt to give each day's events separately and tells us² that Jesus left the city every evening. The Evangelist records sayings and incidents belonging to the period just before the Passion without assigning to each a definite date; but the narrative gives the impression that what is dealt with in this section happened on the same day.

(a) *The Fig Tree Withered*; xi. 20, 21. Another night was spent outside the city, probably at Bethany; a night during which Jesus leaned on Divine strength in His patient waiting for the inevitable end; a night of anxious perplexity for the disciples. In the morning they turned their steps once more towards Jerusalem; and on their way they came to the fig tree which Jesus had cursed. It stood there withered, blasted as it seemed by some supernatural power. Peter called the attention of his Master and reminded Him that He had cursed the tree, and, behold, now it was withered. Jesus made no answer³; to Him the episode was a casual incident, out of the line of

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.

² Chap. xi. 19, R.V.

³ In the Gospel as it stands Jesus replies with an exhortation to faith and forgiveness, verses 22-25. But this paragraph is quite irrelevant to its context, and gives the impression that its contents are sayings of our Lord which the Evangelist found without historical setting, and inserted conjecturally at this point. Either, therefore, the actual answer of Jesus was not preserved, or He did not reply. R.V. omits verse 26.

His special work ; but to the disciples the blasted tree was a happy omen, a foreshadowing of the ruin of their Master's enemies. They forgot that He did not curse His enemies.

(b) *The Authority of Jesus ; xi. 27-33.* They went on again to Jerusalem and the Temple, where Jesus still maintained the new order and prevented the fair from being held. The officials would desire to rescue the sanctuary from "this Galilean fanatic" at the earliest possible moment but without further disturbance to public order.

First they tried moral suasion ; an imposing deputation, chief priests, scribes and elders, confronted Jesus in the sacred courts and challenged His claim to interfere with the administration of the Temple.

"By what authority do you act thus? Or who gave you authority to act thus?"

It was an embarrassing question. The disciples would expect Him to answer that He acted in His own right, or by Divine commission, as the Messiah. Any other reply would have been a denial of His Messiahship ; and yet if He publicly and emphatically proclaimed Himself Messiah in the hearing of a crowd of enthusiastic followers, the city would be in an uproar ; it might soon be involved in the horrors of a popular insurrection. Thus the spiritual ideals for which Jesus stood, and His own personal character, would be lost sight of in the confusion. He had, indeed, allowed the multitude at Bethany to acclaim Him as the "Son of David" ; but the incident made no impression on Jerusalem. By this time, however, Jesus had obtained a hold on the populace, and His claim could not be repeated and pushed without causing dangerous excitement.

Jesus, therefore, met the demand of the deputation by a question, and thus suggested an answer, which He would not give point blank.

"I, in My turn, will ask you one thing. Answer Me,

and I will tell you by what authority I act thus. John's baptism, was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me!"

John the Baptist had borne testimony to Jesus, and if his prophetic calling and Divine mission had been admitted, it would have followed at the very least that Jesus was a prophet and had authority to reform public abuses. It may, however, be doubted whether at this juncture the officials would think of the Baptist's testimony to Jesus, though probably it was known to some of the deputation. Jesus' question had placed them in a dilemma which prevented them considering what bearing it might have on their own demand as to His authority. The dilemma was so obvious that St. Mark does not hesitate to describe the feelings of those whom Jesus addressed, although he can scarcely have been in the confidence of the priestly officials. "They reasoned with themselves," he tells us, "saying, If we say from heaven, He will say, Why did you not believe Him? But if we say, from men——." The latter alternative was impossible as an answer, at any rate, in face of the crowd by whom they were hemmed in—"They feared the people, for all firmly believed that John was a prophet." Possibly the priests and their colleagues drew apart, and discussed the matter amongst themselves in some such terms as these; possibly they were merely conscious that these obvious thoughts were in each other's minds.

After a brief pause they answered Jesus, "We do not know."

Jesus was thus prevented from appealing to the authority of John the Baptist, but the failure of the priests to deal with the dilemma in which He had involved them made it possible for Him to refuse to answer their question.

"Neither do I tell you," said He, "by what authority I act thus."

And under the circumstances they could not very well press the matter.

(c) *The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen*; *xii. 1-12*. And yet He answered them after all : in His characteristic fashion He began telling a story.—A man let a vineyard on condition that he should receive a share of the vintage by way of rent ; but when he sent again and again for what was due to him it was persistently withheld, and his messengers were illtreated, and some of them murdered. At last he sent his only son, thinking that his recalcitrant tenants would not venture to resist his son. But they said one to another, “ This is the heir ; come, let us kill him, and then we may have undisputed possession of the vineyard.” And they seized him, and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.

He finished the story by declaring that the owner of the vineyard would put his wicked tenants to death, and give the vineyard to others.

Then He added a quotation from the Psalms :—

“ The stone which the builders rejected,
The same was made the chief corner stone ;
This was the Lord’s doing,
And it is marvellous in our eyes.”

The story is based on a free adaptation of a passage in Isaiah,¹ and its moral would be clear to the deputation, to the disciples, and probably to most of those within hearing. The vineyard was the people of God, Israel, or, as we should say, the Church ; the owner, God ; the wicked tenants, the rulers of Israel, in the present instance, the priests, scribes, and elders, whose representatives stood before Him ; the messengers were the prophets ; the only son was Jesus.

So far all was clear ; the story, in Jesus’ unobtrusive fashion, asserted His claim to unique authority, to Messiahship ; He had answered their question and told them that

¹ Isaiah v 1-7.

He controlled the Temple as Son of God. But the sequel was unexpected; His audience would expect the tale to end with the triumph of the owner's son over the wicked tenants, but it ended with his death. Thus again we are taken into the confidence of Jesus; He found Himself the object of popular enthusiasm; He had successfully asserted His authority; none the less, He knew that He was doomed.

The parable angered the priests, and at the same time the announcement of His death seemed like an offer to surrender Himself into their hands; they made a movement to seize Him, but His followers interposed and baffled the attempt, and the official deputation withdrew.

(d) *The Tribute Money; xii. 13-17.* The Jewish officials next sought to deal with Jesus indirectly. Some time ago in Galilee the Herodians, the partisans of Herod and the Romans, had allied themselves with the Pharisees, the popular religious leaders, against Jesus. Now the priests succeeded in forming a similar combination in Jerusalem, and sent representatives of the two parties to beguile Jesus into compromising Himself. The allies entered the Temple courts, made their way to Jesus, and presented themselves in the character of anxious inquirers after truth with tokens of the utmost deference.

"Teacher," said they, "we know that you are frank and entirely indifferent to personal considerations, and that you teach the way of God without reserve or compromise. Is it right to pay tribute to Cæsar or not? Ought we to pay, or ought we not to pay?"

Probably they did not expect to deceive Jesus, but they observed the usual forms of polite address in order that they might not irritate His followers. It was another obvious dilemma, and on whichever horn Jesus impaled

¹ Mark iii. 6; cf. viii. 15.

Himself, one or other of the two sets of inquirers was ready to take immediate advantage of His predicament. If He enjoined payment, the Pharisees would detach the people from Him by declaring that He was no patriot, but a friend of the Romans and an enemy of the cause of Israel. If He forbade payment, the Herodians would denounce Him to the Romans, who would promptly arrest Him and put Him to death.

But for Jesus the question raised a somewhat different problem, with which He had been confronted throughout His ministry. If He endorsed the claims of the Roman government, He destroyed the faith of the people in Himself and His mission; but if He repudiated those claims, He made Himself the leader of a political revolt, in which His spiritual character and work would be lost sight of—a revolt which would discredit His message by its inevitable failure. Jesus must have thought much on this urgent problem; He must have become familiar with it in all its bearings, and have solved it for Himself as far as its more general aspects were concerned; indeed, He had probably considered the special difficulty with which He now had to deal.

Naturally He at once discerned the hostile purpose, which was only thinly veiled by the profusion of polite phrases.

"Why," said He, "do you set traps for Me? Get a denarius and show it to Me."

They brought Him the coin.

"Whose," said He, "is this image and superscription?"

"Cæsar's," said they.

"Render unto Cæsar," said Jesus, "the things that are Cæsar's; and to God the things that are God's."

Thus He again extricated Himself from what was apparently a hopeless dilemma, and His opponents were amazed at what seemed to them a superhuman, demonic

ingenuity ; He had not only extricated Himself, but had succeeded in putting them in the wrong. The Pharisees, in the light of Jesus' answer, had acknowledged the imperial government by using Roman coins ; and the crowd would readily identify the Herodians as those who did not give God His due.

But Jesus' answer was no mere quibble ; the Pharisees and Herodians were insincere, but their question raised a real difficulty, which Jesus met by providing, once for all, a solution for such problems—the secular authority might be obeyed in its merely material demands ; its decrees must be ignored when they clash with the diviner dictates of the quickened conscience and the enlightened soul.

(e) *The Sadducees' Question ; xii. 18-27.* Later on Jesus was assailed by another set of *soi-disant* anxious inquirers ; this time the company were Sadducees—the name occurs only here in Mark ; but the Sadducees were the dominant element of the Jerusalem priesthood, and the party must have been represented in the first deputation. But the officials, and the Pharisees too in their way, were men of affairs and ecclesiastics ; they, therefore, did not suppose that a prophet in the flood tide of his popularity would be upset by theological conundrums ; their questions turned on practical politics, and an incautious answer would have meant disaster to Jesus and to the cause of the Kingdom.

But the new problem submitted to Him was comparatively trivial ; these Sadducees represented the scholarly rather than the political wing of the party ; they may have taken a real interest in speculative theology. Now in matters of doctrine the Sadducees represented an older orthodoxy, which stigmatized the Pharisees as heretical innovators. Jesus, it seems, had accepted the Alexandrine and Pharisaic doctrine of the Resurrection, which the Sadducees rejected as an unsound novelty. It was on this

point that they attacked Him ; they were in happy possession of an ingenious puzzle, by which they had often posed bewildered Pharisees, at any rate, in their own estimation. They now looked forward to a similar triumph over the Galilæan prophet.

“Teacher,” said they, “Moses wrote that if a man died childless, his brother should marry his widow, and that the dead man’s family should be continued by the children of this new marriage. There were seven brothers ; the first married and died childless ; the second took his wife, and also died childless ; so also the third, and the rest of the seven. None of them had any children by her. Last of all the woman died also. In the Resurrection whose wife shall she be ? She was married in turn to each of the seven.”

There is a touch of scorn in the answer of Jesus, which is given with a fulness and freedom in marked contrast to the cautious reserve shown towards the priests and Pharisees.

“Surely you fall into error because you do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God ; when the dead rise they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels in heaven. And concerning the raising of the dead, have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the section of the Bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’ ? He is not the God of dead men, but of living men. Your views are quite wrong.”

Jesus does not hesitate to give a prompt, authoritative decision as to the conditions of the future life, but it is not clear whether the decision is given as a new *obiter dictum*, or as following some authority. Probably it was a new decision, otherwise it would have been known to the Sadducees. On the general question of the future life the passage cited is less explicit than the last chapter of

Daniel. Jesus did not use this book, because the canon of the Sadducees, the representatives of a stricter and more ancient orthodoxy than that of the Pharisees, did not recognise Daniel as Scripture.

W. H. BENNETT.