

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

XXXVI. THE THIRD DAY IN JERUSALEM (*continued*).

(f) *The First Commandment, xii. 28-34.* During the previous conversation, a scribe, a Pharisee, had come up and joined the circle of listeners; he had heard with approval the emphatic testimony of Jesus to the doctrine of the resurrection, and had been pleased with the discomfiture of the Sadducees. Now he too was moved to put a question, probably in a curious mood rather than for the sake of posing Jesus or from any serious wish for enlightenment. From his point of view it was a somewhat academic problem: "Which was the first commandment?" e.g., was the commandment about the Sabbath more important than that about duty to parents, or vice versa? Jesus replied in a more serious spirit, dealing with much larger matters; He named as the first commandment a portion of the *Shema*, the profession of faith which pious Jews repeated twice a day.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and soul and mind and strength."²

This ancient word of Revelation—that the essential element in religion was the right and harmonious relation of the whole nature of man to God—had been set upon a pinnacle above all other ordinances by Pharisaic Judaism, and Jesus endorsed this judgment. Nothing, therefore, could be more orthodox than such an answer. Unfortunately the daily repetition of the *Shema* had not always prevented the Pharisees from setting the Sabbath, ceremonial clean-

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 Deut. vi. 4.

ness, and other matters of ritual above honesty and justice, kindness, generosity, and natural affection; therefore Jesus added:

“The second is this, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’¹ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Thus this last inquirer, in his turn, had been met by an answer beyond criticism; but he was a more appreciative hearer than his predecessors; he did not receive the words in baffled silence, but welcomed them with cordial approval.

“A good answer, teacher; you have said with truth that He is one, and there is none beside Him, and to love Him with the whole heart and intellect and strength, and to love one’s neighbour as oneself is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Jesus had rarely found any one to understand Him so promptly and so thoroughly, and this intelligent sympathy was welcome to His lonely and burdened spirit.

“Thou art not far,” He said, “from the Kingdom of God.” The answer to this scribe brought to an end the heckling to which Jesus had been subjected; the enemies who had sought to entangle Him in His speech had retired in shame and confusion, and now no one dared ask Him any more questions.

(g) *Jesus asks a question in His turn, xii. 35-37.* Having repulsed these attacks, Jesus took the offensive and assailed His opponents with a question of His own.

“How is it that the scribes say that the Messiah is David’s son? David himself said by the Holy Spirit, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I put thine enemies under thy feet.’² David himself calls the Messiah ‘Lord,’ how then is the Messiah David’s son?”

No one replied; indeed, Jesus did not expect an answer; His words were a rhetorical challenge and not a demand for a reply from any particular individuals.

¹ Leviticus xix.

² Psalm cx.

The point of the challenge is not clear, but obviously some teaching of the scribes is attacked; for they were the authorities on Theology and the Scriptures, and were naturally appealed to as to the bearing of a passage of a Psalm on the doctrine of the Messiah. As the question was a counterstroke to the interrogations to which Jesus had been subjected we should naturally seek some light from the narrative of the previous incidents. The priests had attacked His authority as a religious leader; the Sadducees His knowledge and insight as a doctrinal teacher; both implied that He was an impostor, a pseudo-Christ. Again, the question put by the allied Herodians and Pharisees was intended to imperil Jesus' position by bringing Him into collision either with the populace or the Romans, Jesus' counter-question may have been equally concerned with the practical politics of the situation; it discusses one of the characteristic notes of Messiahship, and the thought must, at any rate, have passed through the minds both of Jesus and His hearers, "Did He possess this note? Was He David's son?" If we follow up this suggestion, it would seem that the scribes had brought forward the doctrine that the Messiah must be descended from David as an objection to the claims of Jesus; but the doctrine of Davidic descent could only be an objection, if it was supposed that Jesus was not descended from David, and if Jesus and His family and followers were ignorant of any such descent. As far as our present Gospel is concerned, Jesus never speaks of Himself, nor does St. Mark speak of Him, as the son of David; the only person who calls Him, "Son of David" is Bartimaeus, and in his mouth it is a mere Messianic title, and not a statement of knowledge of physical descent from David. According to this suggestion Jesus' question would imply that the absence of Davidic descent was not a valid objection, because the scribes, theory of the Davidic descent of the Messiah was incon-

sistent with the teaching of the Bible as interpreted by the scribes themselves.

Again the Sadducees had sought to discredit Jesus as a teacher; probably too His last interrogator, the scribe, was partly actuated by a desire to test the claims of the Galilean prophet. Possibly Jesus was now seeking to discredit His adversaries the scribes as authoritative exponents of the national faith. It was on their authority, as the Biblical experts of their times, that Psalm cx. was accepted as Davidic; that Davidic descent was held to be necessary for the Messiah; and that the "Lord" of Psalm cx. was interpreted to mean the Messiah. Hence the incompatibility of these views showed the incompetence of those who taught them. According to this view Jesus need not have had any answer in His mind; His point would have been that the scribes were incompetent, because it was impossible for them to find an answer.

Another alternative might possibly be suggested by the question of the scribe—that Jesus was merely raising an academic question from motives of curiosity; but such a view is quite inconsistent with His character.

(h) *Denunciation of the scribes, xvi. 38-40.* The question was not answered, and Jesus pushed His attack in a more direct fashion; He charged the scribes, that is to say, the Pharisees, with being possessed by sordid vanity, a mean craving for trivial social distinctions; they were greedy and grasping, and given to an ostentatious display of unreal unction.

"Beware of the scribes that love official robes to walk in, salutations in the market places, and seats of honour in synagogues and at feasts; that eat widows out of house and home, and pray ostentatiously at great length."

These men were popularly regarded as models of zeal, piety, and holiness, and as authorities on faith and practice; but according to Jesus they deserved, and would receive, the severest condemnation.

(i) *The Widow's Mite*, xii. 41-44. Sometimes, in these last days, Jesus withdrew from the labour of teaching and the jar of controversy. On one occasion He sat a little apart from His disciples over against the offertory boxes of the Temple treasury, and watched the worshippers putting in their contributions. His interference with the festival Fair in the Temple courts had not destroyed confidence in the maintenance of public order; in other respects things went on as usual, and the gifts were many and liberal. Jesus sat and watched. It seems that, on the modern principle of subscription lists and open offertory plates, the arrangements were such that the bystander could see the amount of each offering. One after another richly dressed men of dignified bearing came up placing large gifts in the boxes, and passed on. Some perhaps noticed the observant prophet and went away with a pleased feeling that he would be favourably impressed with their generosity. Other worshippers made their offerings; at last one of them specially attracted the attention of Jesus; a woman poorly dressed in the garb of a widow threw in two brass coins of small value and went on her way like the rest. Something in her manner, a note of radiance, a touch of exaltation inspired by a great sacrifice, betrayed her secret to the Seer who watched her. He called His disciples to Him and said to them:

“Verily I say unto you, that this poor widow has cast in more than all they that are casting into the treasury; for they all cast in of their superfluity, but she of her want cast in all that she had, even all her living.”

Here St. Mark's record of the public ministry of Jesus closes. Let us look for a moment at these last days from the point of view of the opponents of Jesus, of the people of Jerusalem, of the disciples and of Jesus Himself. His

public appearance as Messiah and His assumption of control over the Temple had added the Jewish officials to the number of His active enemies. Nevertheless He had more than held His own; yet He had gained nothing but Pyrrhic victories; His assailants were only baffled for the moment, and their temporary discomfiture intensified their hostility. So far, however, they were perplexed by His failure to make practical use of His influence over the people and by His mysterious hint as to His coming death.

In the same way the populace of Jerusalem were puzzled by the Galilean prophet, who seemed to unite in Himself so much that was contradictory. On the one hand, He had been declared the Messiah, and indeed He was in many ways most remarkable; His personality was both winsome and commanding, and He had a most attractive eloquence, to which they listened with much enjoyment. And yet in other ways, He seemed to have nothing Messiah-like about Him. He had a great reputation for miracles, but He wrought none in Jerusalem; He had successfully asserted His authority over the Temple, but He had taken no further steps to make Himself master of the city; there was no sign of His being the Warrior-King who was to drive out the Romans and establish the Kingdom of God in Israel.

Most of all the disciples were bewildered by the apparent inconsistencies of Jesus; sometimes His popularity and His triumphs over His opponents excited exultant anticipations of the immediate coming of the Kingdom; at other times their hearts were sick with hope deferred, and His gloomy forebodings of impending doom filled them with vague apprehensions.

And Jesus Himself? He was not conscious of any inconsistency, for in simple, straightforward fashion He fulfilled his duties, and used His opportunities as they came. He knew that the end was both near and certain, and the knowledge isolated Him more than ever from the ordinary

concerns of life and even from His disciples. It was a time of suspense, of waiting for a blow without knowing when it would come, yet with the assurance that it might fall at any moment, and that it could not be long delayed. He was like a man sentenced to death, but not knowing the day of His execution. He might contemplate mundane affairs with a certain detachment, and watch the bickerings of Pharisee and Sadducee, priest, scribe, and centurion with the serene interest of a stranger studying the politics of a foreign capital. Jerusalem and its people would seem dim and shadowy, and the Kingdom of God the only true reality.

Yet one day passed after another, and the blow did not fall, and He remained alive, at liberty, and a great power among the people. The strained and overwrought situation might become familiar and seem normal and capable of being indefinitely prolonged. The natural vitality of a vigorous man in his prime would instinctively protest against acquiescence in death and suggest renewed hopes and a happier issue. He retained an unshaken confidence that the Kingdom of God would come through Himself, but He might sometimes doubt whether His anticipations of death and resurrection were to be accepted literally; there might after all be some less rugged path to the assured end.

Meanwhile all concerned expected a crisis at the Pass-over; friends and foes alike would suppose that Jesus was planning some decisive step on the great day of the feast; and on the other hand the priests would feel it an urgent necessity to regain control of the Temple courts before the festival actually began; and Jesus Himself might expect some clear indication of the will of God at that sacred season.

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