

OPERA FORIS.

MATERIALS FOR THE PREACHER.

VIII.

NAHUM iii. 8 : *Art thou better than populous No ?*

The prophet warns Nineveh that she cannot expect any happier fate than that of No, the Thebes of Upper Egypt, which Assurbanipal had sacked less than fifty years before. For all her apparently impregnable position, in spite of her resources and prestige, *she was carried away, she went into captivity* ; her magnificent treasures were spoiled, and her splendid traditions went for nothing. How can Nineveh, with this recent warning and example before her eyes, expect to fare better ?

The point of the prophet's oracle is the blind confidence which makes people indifferent to their interests because they secretly believe that they will get off, somehow, with impunity where others have had to suffer. They refuse to do anything or to profit by the example of their neighbours for the simple reason that they imagine they will not be so hardly dealt with. An exception surely will be made in their case. Hence there is a refusal on their part to face frankly the evidence of history. " We lean upon the thought that chance will bear us through," or that there will be some relaxation of the laws of Providence in our favour, oblivious of the plain lessons written upon the pages of recent and contemporary history, that carelessness and pride and callousness bring ruin impartially upon life.

The story of Chalcedon and Byzantium illustrates this truth. When the founders of the latter city asked the oracle of the Pythian Apollo where they should build their city, they were told to chose a site " opposite to the site of the blind " ; i.e. upon that side of the strait opposite to

Chalcedon (Tacitus, *Annal.* xii. 63). The latter city was founded by people who wilfully chose the less suitable site, blind to the natural advantages of the other coast. The Byzantine settlers were to take warning by the patent example of folly furnished them by the citizens of Chalcedon. They did so, and, by their willingness to profit by the fate of their neighbours, succeeded in gaining and maintaining a secure site for their city. Chalcedon stupidly missed her chance. Byzantium was wise enough to recognize her neighbour's error and so to take steps for her own prosperity.

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Luke xi. 5-6 : *Friend, lend me three loaves ; for a friend of mine is come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him.*

A sermon on the motives for prayer : social life and responsibility an incentive to devotion. Human life lies open on the one side to heavy demands made upon its resources. *A friend is come to me . . . and I have nothing to set before him.* These responsibilities and relationships of our life drive us to seek help from God, who is no grudging or reluctant *friend*, as in the parable, but ready to supply us with the wisdom and courage and patience which we need for any practical emergency. It is our sense of personal helplessness, in view of the need of others, which often acts as a stimulus to prayer.¹ The claims made on our affection by contact with other people will sometimes sharpen our sense of dependence upon God and urge us to have recourse to Him for reinforcement. The parable thus indicates the earthly demands and the heavenly resources of the Christian life. One real aid to the practice of prayer is sensitiveness to the claims, spoken and unspoken,

¹ Then I stop
 And feel I can do naught towards helping men,
 Till out it comes, like tears that will not hold,
 And I must pray again for all the world (George Eliot).

which other people make upon ourselves. The friend in need of us makes us realize, as perhaps we should not otherwise have done, our own need of the higher Friend, and any sense of others who may be looking to our example or relying upon our personal character produces, in the truly Christian man, a strong incentive to the practice of communion. The realization of his duty to others quickens his devotion to God. As Jesus suggests in this parable, the feeling that the weakness of others is leaning, and has a right to lean, upon our strength, appealing confidently to our resources, will often prove a stimulus to our own intercourse with the God who willingly supplies our every need. A man ought to be the better as a Christian because he is a parent, a minister, or a worker in the church.

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Luke xi. 33-36.

Despite Wellhausen's judgment that the connexion is "*ganz unklar*," the collected lamp-sayings of this section may be read together in the light of the preceding discourse upon the person of Jesus as His only sign. Our Lord has argued that nothing can prove Him except Himself. *A greater than Solomon or Jonah is here*; the wisdom and the moving power of His own life are their best evidence, and no external sign need be expected. Hence the line of the subsequent sayings, which Luke has inserted at this point. Their psychological continuity is as follows.

(a) God has not made His Messiah to appear in any obscure or eccentric or out-of-the-way form. *No man, when he hath lighted a lamp, putteth it in a cellar, neither under the bushel, but on the stand, that they which enter in may see the light* (ver. 33). Here Jesus is the lamp, set by God in the open sight of the world. His revelation is not esoteric or subtle, requiring some special sign to render it visible. God has acted reasonably in the mission of the Son. Solo-

mon's wisdom was not a secret ; Jonah preached in public. How much more this *greater* than either ! The person and truth of Jesus are conspicuous enough for any one who has eyes to see. Why then do so many miss Him or misunderstand Him ? The reason must lie not in Him, but in themselves, in their prejudices and moral obliquities of vision. Consequently (*b*) the metaphor of the lamp is now shifted from Jesus to human nature, as B. Weiss points out in his recent volume on *Die Quellen des Lukas-evangeliums* (1907, pp. 76 f.). The sole explanation of this untoward blindness in men to the clear revelation of Jesus must be sought in some inward twist or defect in *those who enter in* ; if they do not *see the light*, it is not because the light is concealed but because the normal organ of knowledge and spiritual perception must have become deranged.

The lamp of thy body is thine eye ;

When thine eye is single (*ἀπλοῦς*, sound, unimpaired),

Thy whole body is also full of light ;

But when it is evil,

Thy body also is full of darkness.

Look, therefore, whether the light that is in thee (i.e., the soul, as the eye of life) *be not darkness.*

Instead of looking around for signs or external proofs in order to understand the mystery of Jesus, the crowd are bidden look within, and the admonition is clinched with the final word ¹ (ver. 36) : *if therefore thy whole body be full of light, having no part dark, it shall be wholly full of light, as when the lamp with its bright shining doth give thee light.* God's light is clear enough. But what about your light ?

¹ Ver. 36, omitted by D and other MSS., has a tautological ring, and might be left out as a gloss (so Blass, Wellhausen) without affecting the general sense of the passage. Jülicher transfers it, in its Syr-Sin. form, to a place between 34a and 34b.

His lamp is in its right place and in good order. But what about your organ of vision, that lamp of the soul which gets easily out of order, and thus is prevented from receiving the rays of the divine revelation ?

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John xiii. 16 : *A servant is not greater than his lord.*

The setting of the saying here determines its application. Spoken after the incident of the feet-washing at the last supper, these words form a warning for the servant or disciple not to give himself airs. If Jesus the Lord lays aside all pride and superiority in ministering to His people, the disciple must not consider himself above the same duty of helpful and humble service. He dare not stand on his dignity.

This saying on the common lot of master and servant was a favourite word of Jesus, however, and recurs in other passages. Thus it is once applied in Luke vi. 40-42, not to the duties of the disciple, but to the responsibilities of the teacher. Here Jesus is thinking of the fact that pupils depend upon the thoroughness of their teachers. The learner profits in proportion to the skill of his instructor.

Can the blind guide the blind ?

Shall they not both fall into a pit ?

The disciple is not above his master :

But every one when he is perfected (cf. 1 Cor. i. 10) shall be as his master.

Consequently, before one essays to teach or lead others he must pay scrupulous attention to his own character and capacities, lest the imitateness of the pupils makes them copy his faults to their own and to his undoing. The saying is thus a warning, in this connexion, to the superficial and uninstructed teacher. His training determines the level reached by his pupils.

A third application of the proverb or maxim occurs in John xv. 20 (=Matt. x. 24) :—

*A servant is not greater than his lord.
If they have persecuted me,
They will also persecute you.*

Here, the servant or disciple is told to expect no better treatment than that accorded to his leader. Just as he must not consider himself exempt from duties inside the church, to which his Lord stooped, so he must be prepared to face hardships in the outside world similar to those borne by Jesus. Christians have no right to think themselves above involuntary persecution, any more than above voluntary self-sacrifice.

The significance attached to the saying is brought out by the prefatory remark of Jesus in the last quotation—*Remember the word that I said unto you.*

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1 Pet. v. 12: *Silvanus, our faithful brother, as I account him.*

This is Peter's mature judgment on the character of his friend; it is no hasty certificate, signed in a moment of good-nature. He had learned, from his own experience, how responsible a thing it is to permit ourselves to drift into friendships or associations with other people promiscuously. Hence these deliberate words may serve as text for a sermon upon our responsibility for the influence exerted by others upon us, as well as for the ties of friendship which we form, and which quicken us into an activity for better or for worse.

(a) Peter knew how disastrous it was to let any sudden or strong influence determine one's actions. For the sake of personal safety he had allowed the maid-servant in the hall of judgment to control or at least affect his actions and utterances for the moment. For the sake of peace he had permitted the Jewish Christians at Antioch to divert him from the path of principle. (b) On the other hand he

had profited by the friendship of his brother Andrew (John i. 41), and by association with John and Paul, so that both the lapses and achievements of his life had been largely due to the influence of other people upon his character.

His personal history had thus made him careful and prudent by this time about human influence. Any impulsive, warm-hearted nature like his is too apt to admit the sway of other people from time to time without sufficient reflection, and this receptiveness may turn out fatally as well as happily. "The friends thou hast, *and their adoption tried*" are the only ones who are, like Silvanus, to be held fast to the soul with hooks of steel. They must be judged trustworthy, and that judgment cannot rest upon the impression of the moment.

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NOTE.

IN answer to the query on p. 21 of the July number, Mrs. Margaret D. Gibson kindly writes to say that in the Semitic languages the present participle may stand by itself, without an auxiliary verb, to denote either the past, present, or future, it being left to the reader to give his own interpretation in each case. In the Palestinian codices edited by herself and her sister, Mrs. Lewis, as well as in a palimpsest of the sixth century, belonging to the latter, the literal rendering of the Aramaic answering to *συλλήμψη* is "thou [art] conceiving," but it is the same with the undoubtedly future *τέξῃ* in the same verse; and in Acts xxv. 22, "To-morrow thou [shalt be] hearing him"; and Mrs. Gibson tells me that Dr. Nestle, whom she consulted on the point, considers that the present participle, when preceded by the equivalent to *ἰδοῦ*, always denotes the future. She is, however, herself still unconvinced, thinking that we know too little of the Palestinian Syriac to lay down strict rules.

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