

THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST IN PRAYER.

PRAYER is the most characteristic action of the spiritual life. The more we know of the spiritual life, the better can we pray. And so it is natural to examine the manner in which Christ prayed, for He was (in the lowest view of His Personality that serious men have accepted) the Supreme Master of the spiritual life. How did He pray? And in what sense can His example be profitable for us who only half understand Him?

Christ taught us to pray, indeed, for He left us the Lord's Prayer as a model; but at least one of its petitions was such as He could not have used for Himself. He had no need to ask to be *forgiven*. How did He pray Himself?

There is a sense in which our prayers cannot and ought not to be expressed as His prayers must have been, for His fellowship with God was unique. He never said "Our Father"; He said "My Father." That filial relationship which is the heritage of all the sons of men meant something peculiar, and not to be explained completely, for Him who was *the* Son of Man. None of us could say with sincerity, "Thinkest thou that I cannot beseech my Father, and He shall even now send me more than twelve legions of angels?"¹

And yet He was the Son of *Man*. He chose to live within the conditions of human life. The differences between His manner of prayer and ours ought to be pondered with anxiety before we decide that they are wholly due to His Divine Sonship. Our habit, to take only one illustration, is to think of the limitations of the power of prayer, of what we must not expect it to do; His habit, on the contrary, was to assume its unmeasured possibilities. Perhaps we ought to be bolder in our prayers, more largely expectant

¹ Matt. xxvi. 53.

than most of us venture to be. At any rate, the Lord's example here is confirmed by the definiteness of His precept, "Ask and ye shall have."

Or, again, our most sincere and intense prayers are generally called forth by our sense of need, of failure, of weakness, of an incapacity to meet the calls of life, as we should like to meet them. But the consciousness of such weakness was not the motive of the greater prayers of Christ. "Can we not feel that it might be a yet nobler prayer which sprang from the realisation of entrusted power, and from a sense of the responsibility which such power involves?"¹

Consider this record, the record of the first day of the Lord's public ministry, as told by St. Mark. He called busy men from their fishing, and they left their nets. They could not resist the voice of power, which said, "Follow Me." He went into the synagogue and taught—He, a stranger—and they were astonished at the ring of authority in His voice. He bade the spirit of uncleanness to depart, and it passed away. He healed a sick woman by His touch. He cured the sick and the distracted, so that "all the city was gathered at the door." And, then, in the night after His amazing success—as we should call it—He went out quietly and prayed. That is, surely, the prayer of strength, not of weakness. And there is even more. For in the midst of His prayer one came and said, "All are seeking Thee." But the quiet answer of authority is only this: "Let us go elsewhere." He who is Master of all is the Master of Himself.

It is no isolated episode. We have the same thing after the Feeding of the Five Thousand, the same thing after the Coming of the Greek inquirers—the forerunners of Gentile Christendom—to His presence. Prayer before our great undertakings we understand a little; Christ prayed

¹ *Cambridge Theological Essays*, p. 300.

when success had been reached. The prayer of thanksgiving is indeed the natural expression of the strong. But in the Gospels something more is taught about Christ's thanksgivings. "I thank Thee that thou heardest Me" came before, not after, the deliverance of Lazarus from the tomb. We wait—indeed, we feel that we must wait—until our work has been crowned before we give God thanks. Yet, even the saints of the Old Testament might teach us differently. The chant of the soldiers of Judah before the battle was not a prayer for victory. It was, "Give thanks to the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever."¹ Even so, the Last Supper before the Cross and the Resurrection was a Eucharist, a giving of thanks.

Who will presume to say that we can reach these heights? But perhaps we ought to remind ourselves of them.

There are other features of the Lord's habit of prayer, which we can set ourselves more hopefully to imitate.

I. It is a very remarkable thing that our Lord was accustomed to observe the Jewish customs of public worship. He was the prophet and the Founder of a new Church, and He knew it. But for all that, He observed the Feasts of the old Church. The worship of the village Synagogue, the worship of the Temple at Jerusalem, He shared, although He knew—as no one else knew—that it was only the shadow of things to come, to be fulfilled in the worship which He was to inaugurate and to bless. His habit of private prayer did not supersede in His own practice the hallowed observances of the ancient Law. "I must needs go up to the Feast." It is difficult to suppose that these visits to the Temple at sacred seasons were solely for the sake of His brethren in the flesh, and that He did not in His own person use the opportunity thus offered of communion with the Father. Just as difficult would it be to suppose that His

¹ 2 Chron. xx. 21.

references to the Old Testament Scriptures were only for the sake of edification, and that they do not rather point to one of the springs from which His spiritual life, as Man, was continually replenished. Nay, we have here an example for our own imitation. It is in the ancient prayers, the hallowed rites of Christendom, that we may best find strength and refreshment for ourselves. No esoteric or electric coterie of religious companions must be permitted to supersede the Church's fellowship in prayer, if we are to follow the example of Him who is our Master.

We are not, indeed, left in doubt as to the familiarity of our Lord with the old prayers of Jewish piety, when we read the story of the Passion. The Lord's Death was a perfect human death, and as with us men the prayers that came to His lips in the last moments were no new prayers. The two personal cries to God which He uttered from the Cross were both of them consecrated by the devotion of many centuries. In the darkest hour of all, the mysterious agony of Redemption is expressed in the old, sad words: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" And the last words of calm assurance are the words of another Psalm, in which a saint of olden time had consecrated not his death, but his life. "Into Thy hands I commend my spirit." In death, the thoughts and habits of life always express themselves. What a habit of prayer is here revealed! Here, at any rate, we may follow His method, as our example, — His habit of using the hallowed phrases of the saints of the ancient days.

II. More obvious, and therefore, probably, more important, are the indications in the Gospels of the Lord's habit of special prayer before any crisis, that is, before what we should call any new departure in His public ministry. This is specially evident in St. Luke's Gospel. All the Synoptic Gospels tell, as we should expect, of the Prayers at Gethse-

mane; but St. Luke gives other instances. For instance, the selection of the Twelve Apostles was preceded by a night of intercession. "He went out into the mountain to pray, and He continued all night in prayer to God."¹ There is sacred precedent for the ember weeks of prayer before the ordination of Ministers.

Or, again, the great decision that the time had come to tell the Apostles that the end of His public ministry would be the Cross, was preceded by prayer. It was an announcement which must have tried their loyalty to the uttermost; and, before He asked them what they really thought about Him, "He was praying alone."²

Or, again, He is about to reassure the choicest members of the little band of His companions by a vision of His majesty. "He took with Him, Peter and James and John, and they went up into the mountain to pray. And as He was praying, the fashion of His countenance was changed."³ The Transfiguration was preceded by prayer, not now of solitary intercession, but of prayer with His friends.

Every crisis of His ministry was prepared for thus.

III. And, lastly, notice the directness and the restraint—if that is the right word—of Christ's prayers for those who are called to be His disciples. "Simon, Simon . . . I made supplication for thee, that thy faith fail not."⁴ Here is the intercession for the individual friend who is in danger from spiritual foes. The prayer is that, however he may fall, his faith may not utterly fail. And it did not fail, as we know.

So, in like fashion, He prayed for all the Apostles, in the great Intercession recorded by St. John alone. "I pray not that Thou shouldest take them from the world, but that

¹ Luke vi. 12.

² Luke ix. 18.

³ Luke ix. 28.

⁴ Luke xxii. 32.

Thou shouldest keep them from the evil one. . . . I pray for them : I pray not for the world, but for them whom Thou hast given Me.”¹

And then the circle widens, as it always does in prayer. “Neither for them only do I pray, but for them also that believe on Me through their word.” The prayer for the known and trusted friends enlarges itself into a prayer for *their* friends, for those in whom they are interested, until at last it embraces the whole Christian people of the future, “that they all may be one” . . . even in such an inseparable fellowship as that which unites Him to His Father, “as we are one.”²

The order of the petitions in this prayer of Christ is, we may be sure, significant. We desire to imitate Him in His prayer for Unity ; there can be no doubt that it is His Will that His Church should be One—in visible reality which all the world may see, because of the invisible oneness of life which is the heritage of the Christian people. We cannot doubt it, and so we set ourselves to pray, sometimes—at any rate, we know that we *ought* to pray—for the consummation of the Lord’s will in this as in other things. But it is very difficult to do it—very difficult to take into our charity so various a company, or to lift our thoughts to the grandeur of such a hope. And, to say it frankly, our prayers do not seem to advance the reunion of Christendom very effectually. There are many reasons, to be sure, why we must not be in haste ; but I desire to suggest this one thing only now. If we are to fashion our prayers for Unity after the model of Christ’s prayer for Unity, we must begin at the beginning. First, the prayer for those who are our own dear friends and comrades in the Christian life, for each according to his need, that they may be kept safe in the one Name which is the Name of Christ the Re-

¹ John xvii. 15, 9.

² *vv.* 21, 22.

deemer.¹ It is not very easy even to get as far as that, for these comrades of ours are men of various minds and temperaments, sometimes very unlike our own, and will take their own line, as God has taught them, if they be true men at all. Their divergences from our ways of thinking affect us more intimately than the wider divergence of others at a greater distance, and we are sometimes inclined to magnify that which is near, very unduly. Nay, we must school ourselves to pray, first, for those of our own Church and household in all its parts, before we venture to lift our eyes to the larger unity that is beyond. And, then, when we have learnt thus to pray for our friends, we shall find it easier to pray for those also that believe in Christ "through their word" (v. 20), for that larger company, still more remote from our daily life, whom they influence and inspire. Few of us get as far as that. Yet it was after all this, that the Prayer of Christ was prayed for the Unity of the whole Christian people, "that they *all* may be one." And I suppose that the lesson of this order in the prayer of Christ is that in prayer, as in all other things, we must proceed from the known to the unknown; practise it first where we vividly realise that its practical bearing is to be, and then, when we have learnt to do that, trust ourselves to pray for a consummation of which we very imperfectly understand the issues. We must creep before we can fly. We must learn to pray for our own before we can pray for strangers. Christ prayed first for His friends, then for their disciples, then for all who were to call themselves by His name. That was His method. Perhaps it ought to be ours, in some measure, too.

He may be our example in Prayer—in its largeness of petition, in its thankfulness, in its intensity at the crises of life, in the order of our intercessions. Yet all these we may

¹ v. 11.

hope will come right if only we take Him for our Example in the frequency of His prayers. What prompted the disciples at the first to say to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray," was that they saw Him at prayer. And then He taught them the Lord's Prayer.

JOHN OSSORY.