

you not be deemed a fool? Yet you buy the world with this certainty.—M. R. VINCENT.

DIVES is the very man who can answer the question in our text. Tell us, thou who hast had experience of two worlds, what hast thou profited?—D. MOORE.

“WHAT shall it profit?” He condescends with amazing love to the language of man’s self-interest. He appeals to the business-like instinct of those whose every energy is devoted to gaining a livelihood, or to making a fortune; and I am bold enough to say, that Christ seems to address Himself with pointed emphasis to the peculiar temper and instinct of us—the English people. “What shall it profit?” It is a question which comes home to a race like ourselves, who are described in an unfriendly phrase, yet with sub-

stantial accuracy, as “a nation of shopkeepers.”—H. P. LIDDON.

WHEN Goethe said that “earnestness is life,” his genius discerned one of the watchwords of the opening nineteenth century, even if his heart did not prompt the utterance. We cannot be earnest merely because we admire the quality of earnestness. We can only be earnest if we have a conviction—an object. Now, I can conceive nothing more calculated to make a man thoroughly earnest about religion than daily repetition to himself, daily reflection upon the words of our Lord Jesus Christ in the text. I would venture to advise every single person to ask each morning and each evening for one month this question: “What shall it profit me if I shall gain the whole world, and lose my own soul?”—H. P. LIDDON.

The International Lessons.

I.

Acts xiv. 8–22.

WORK AMONG THE GENTILES.

1. “Steadfastly beholding him.” The expression is a favourite one with St. Luke when speaking of St. Paul. Does it mean that the apostle had some defect of vision, and had to strain his eyes to see?

2. “In the speech of Lycaonia” (ver. 11), which Paul and Barnabas did not understand. Thus it is clear that the Pentecostal gift did not secure the knowledge of foreign languages.

3. “Which was before their city”—whose temple was at the city gate. Jupiter was their guardian god.

THE lesson before us to-day is full of incident, and so will easily secure the attention of the children. Its divisions are these—

1. *The Cure of the Cripple.*—As there would be very few Jews in Lystra, there could have been no synagogue, and so Paul would take his stand in the most frequented place, and begin to preach the gospel. That was just the place for a cripple beggar to be. As Paul preached, the cripple heard. He heard and he listened. He listened ever more eagerly, till the apostle saw that this Gentile had something of the faith of that other of whom our Lord said, “O woman, great is thy faith; be it unto thee even as thou wilt.” The first gift was bodily healing; but it was given because of faith, and the same faith no doubt secured the health and life of the spirit. Shall we not think of this cripple as one of the “disciples” who stood round the apostle when the people had stoned him till they thought him dead?

2. *The arrested Sacrifice.*—The cure of the cripple had been instantaneous, and it had been complete. The people could not overlook it, and they had no inclination to do so. They even regarded it as the mighty power of God; for these rude Lycaonians agreed, with the cultured Pharisee, that “no man can do these miracles except God be with him.” And they proceeded to offer sacrifice. But it must not be. Jesus did not refuse Nicodemus’s homage, nor Thomas’s plainer “My Lord and my God.” But Paul and Barnabas do everything in the name of Another. “Why do ye look so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk?”

3. *The Sermon.*—St. Luke does not report any of the sermons which the cripple heard. But this was now an unusual occasion, and to some extent an unusual sermon, and he gives a short abstract of it. What are its points? (1) There is one God, and all other “gods” are idols dumb. (2) He is the Maker of all things, and He made them for a witness. “The heavens declare the glory of God,” and we must answer for it if we deny the evidence which they furnish. (3) This witness was “in times past” the clearest of all; but it is not so now.

4. *The Stoning and the Resurrection.*—The people were fickle, and the Jews from Antioch and Iconium were clever and cunning. They persuaded the people, not that the miracle had never been performed,—that was beyond them,—but that it was done by the power of the devil, no doubt. And then these Jews took the leading hand in stoning St. Paul, for stoning was a Jewish mode of punishment. They dragged him out and left him

for dead. Was he dead? We cannot tell for certain. But some do read it as if he were, and that his rising was a resurrection from the dead. It was a resurrection in any case. For at the least he was on the brink of the grave, and yet he got up and walked into the city as if he never had been hurt.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—A Christian Hindoo was dying, and his heathen comrades came around him and tried to comfort him by reading some of the pages of their theology; but he waved his hand, as much as to say, "I don't want to hear it." Then they called in a heathen priest, and he said, "If you will only recite the *Numtra* it will deliver you from hell." He waved his hand, as much as to say, "I don't want to hear that." Then they said, "Call on Juggernaut." He shook his head, as much as to say, "I can't do that." Then they thought perhaps he was too weary to speak, and they said, "Now, if you can't say 'Juggernaut,' think of that god." He shook his head again, as much as to say, "No, no, no." Then they bent down to his pillow, and they said, "In what will you trust?" His face lighted up with the very glories of the celestial sphere as he cried out, rallying all his dying energies, "Jesus!"

Roberts tells us that "when the gods are taken out in procession in India, their necks are adorned with garlands, with which the priests also are decorated. On all festive occasions men and women wear their sweet-scented garlands, and the smell of some of them is so strong as to be offensive to an Englishman. Does a man of rank offer to adorn you with a garland? it is a sign of his respect, and must not be refused. In the latter part of 1832 I visited the celebrated pagoda of Rami-seram, the temple of Ramar. As soon as I arrived within a short distance of the gates, a number of dancing-girls, priests, and others came to meet us with garlands. They first did me the honour of putting one around my neck, and then presented others for Mrs. Roberts and the children."

When the French ambassador visited the illustrious Bacon in his last illness, and found him in bed with the curtains drawn, he addressed this fulsome compliment to him: "You are like the angels of whom we hear and read much, but have not the pleasure of seeing them." The reply was the sentiment of a philosopher, and language not unworthy of a Christian: "If the complaisance of others compares me to an angel, my infirmities tell me I am a man."

II.

Acts xv. 12-29.

THE APOSTOLIC COUNCIL.

1. "Simeon" (ver. 24). This is St. James's very Jewish way of expressing St. Peter's name.

2. "As it is written" (ver. 16). The quotation is from Amos; but it is taken from the Greek (LXX.) version, not from the Hebrew, and it does not follow even the Greek version quite closely.

3. "Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world" (ver. 18). That is to say, this was God's

purpose from the very beginning, though He has only now brought it into action.

4. "For Moses of old time," etc. (ver. 21). The connection of this verse is not clear. Perhaps St. James means to say that since the Jewish law is preached and practised everywhere, it is necessary to lay these restrictions on the Gentiles, so that the Jews who thus know the law may not be scandalised.

THIS lesson differs greatly from the last. It contains very little incident or action; and the subject of it is one which has long since ceased to be of practical interest.

1. Let us first speak of the meeting. Paul and Barnabas have returned from their first missionary journey and gone up to Jerusalem. There is joy over their success. But the joy is mixed with doubt and hesitation. For the Jewish Christians are not sure that it was right of them to preach the gospel to Gentiles, and accept them without circumcision into the Church. Some are quite sure it was *not* right. So a council is called. The apostles and elders are there, and James the brother of our Lord presides. Then Paul and Barnabas tell their story, and there are other speeches, and then James sums up and gives the final decision.

2. St. James's decision. The apostles have won. The Jewish opponents are silenced. St. James, who is emphatically the apostle of the circumcision, decides that the Gentiles shall be accepted into the Christian Church without circumcision. And a letter is sent to the disciples at Antioch with that good news.

3. There were restrictions, however. The Gentiles must abstain from meat offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from fornication. The first three were necessary for the sake of their Jewish brethren; the last is binding always. And how necessary the last injunction was, they know who read the Greek and Roman historians. Fornication was even reckoned a religious duty in many places; in very few was it counted much of a sin. But it was a heinous sin in the sight of God. And it witnesses to the truth of the revelation which was given to the Jews, that they of all the nations on the face of the earth did abstain from fornication.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—Mr. M'Laren and Mr. Gustart were both ministers of the Tolbooth Church, Edinburgh. When Mr. M'Laren was dying, Mr. Gustart paid him a visit, and put the question to him, "What are you doing, brother?" His answer was, "I'll tell you what I am doing, brother. I am gathering together all my prayers, all my sermons, all my good deeds, all my ill deeds; and I am going to throw them all overboard, and swim to glory on the plank of free grace."

A New Zealand girl was brought over to England to be educated. She became a true Christian. When she was

about to return, some of her playmates endeavoured to dissuade her. They said, "Why do you go back to New Zealand, you are accustomed to England now? You love its shady lanes and clover-fields. It suits your health. Besides, you may be shipwrecked on the ocean. You may be killed and eaten by your own people. Everybody will have forgotten you." "What!" she said, "do you think I could keep the good news to myself? Do you think that I could be content with having got pardon, and peace, and eternal life for myself, and not go and tell my dear father and mother how they can get it too? I *would go* if I had to swim there!"

When Paulinus, the Christian missionary, asked our Anglo-Saxon fathers to embrace his faith, an old warrior rose up in the national assembly, and argued thus before the king: "On some dark night, O king, when the storm was abroad, and rain and snow were falling without, when thou and thy captains were seated by the warm fire in the lighted hall, thou mayest have seen a sparrow flying in from the darkness and flitting across the hall, and passing out into the darkness again. Even so, O king, appears to me the life of men upon the earth. We come out of the darkness, we shoot across the lighted hall of life, and then go out into the darkness again. If this new doctrine can tell us aught of this darkness, and of the soul of man which passes into it, let it be received with joy."

III.

Luke ii. 8-20.

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST.

1. "This shall be a sign unto you: ye shall find the babe" (ver. 12). The Authorised Version is singularly unfortunate here. "This shall be *the* sign unto you: ye shall find *a* babe"—that is the correct rendering; and how great the difference!

2. "On earth peace" (ver. 14). Not peace such as the world gives. "Peace I leave with you, *My* peace I give unto you; not as the world gives, give I unto you." It was said when He was on the way to Gethsemane and Calvary.

1. THE keynote of this Christmas lesson is joy, "Good tidings of great joy" is the strong and striking announcement made to the shepherds. And it was more striking than we now understand or can conceive. About this time the world was very sorrowful. Men—even the best men—were losing all faith in God, in such a God as they knew; and, as a consequence, they were losing all trust in their fellow-men. Some rushed into pleasure to drown sorrow, and the *games* which had

become so passionate and absorbing a pursuit of the Roman populace were one of the saddest spectacles the world has ever seen. Some rushed into early death by debauchery; some chose the gate of suicide. The world was full of sorrow.

2. But what was this gospel of great joy? It was that a Babe had been born. "This shall be the sign unto you: ye shall find a babe." The shepherds could not easily be persuaded that the world, which had become so weary, would experience this great joy. They required a sign. What sign showest thou? they seemed in their hearts to ask the angel. His answer is unexpected enough. "This shall be the sign unto you: ye shall find a babe."

3. Thus from the very first preaching of the gospel—for this is the earliest gospel sermon—faith has been needed to accept it. How easy for the shepherds to scoff! "A babe!" they say. "You spoke of a Saviour; you named Him Christ the Lord, and now you tell us to find a babe!" But they took the angel's word for it, that this Babe was Christ the Lord. Their faith sent them to the manger to see. Their faith saved them.

4. "Saviour—Lord;" in these two words the gospel lies. One points to sin, the other points to surrender of heart. Both are needed to a full gospel—to any gospel at all.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—When the messengers of the Pope told Cincinnatus of his elevation to the office of a dictator, they found him at his plough; and when his term of office had expired, he returned to that humble occupation. So, if you expect visits from angels, they will most likely come while in the discharge of everyday duties; attention to daily duties cannot but command the highest blessings.

Gibbon, writing of Timour, a great conqueror of the East, refers to the millions of victims he sacrificed to the establishment of peace and order. What a contrast to the work of Christ! He, to restore peace to a disordered universe, sacrificed no life but His own; and the results are so grand and glorious, that each soul affected by them may well invoke blessings on His gentle sway.

In the Polar regions, towards the time at which the long-absent sun is to reappear, the inhabitants climb the loftiest hills; and when the first beams of the welcome sun are seen, they hasten with delight to tell their neighbours, exclaiming, "Behold the sun! behold the sun!" Shall not we imitate them and the shepherds by telling others of Jesus?