

Sermonettes on the Golden Texts.

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I.

'In Him was life; and the life was the light of men.'—
JOHN i. 4.

WHEN we come across a passage in some of the poets that speaks home to us, and charms by its beauty of thought and power of expression, we sometimes say, 'That's poetry.' We do not qualify the statement by any adjective. We do not say that it is good poetry. It is higher praise to say simply that it is poetry, meaning that it is worth calling poetry. And so the Evangelist, while he could not be briefer in his statement, at the same time could not put it more forcibly when he says of Jesus, 'In Him was life.' It is worth calling life.

St. John no doubt uses the word in a very wide sense as applied to Christ. He is the Source of all life, He is the Support of all life. But let us take it, for the time being, in a narrower sense. Looking simply at the life Jesus lived on earth, in its beauty, its restfulness, its power, we are constrained to say, 'That is life.' It was a life bare of earthly possessions, He had nowhere to lay His head; but Jesus had the true secret and treasure of life in that He had always somewhere to lay His heart. It was a life separate from sinners in its purity, yet so wondrously near to sinners in its sympathy. It was a life that won the hearts of children, and drew also the outcast publicans and sinners. Children and publicans—in some respects, the best and the worst in the land—were alike attracted to Jesus with the firm assurance that in Him they had a Friend. And it was not merely by what He said, even though He spake as never man spake, that such as these were drawn to Him, and that the common people heard Him gladly. The words, once used of another, apply far more truly to Jesus, 'There was something finer *in* Him than anything that ever He said.'

How true that that life has been the light of men! But for Christ, life would be very dark and meaningless. It would be a hopeless thing, with no outlook. It would be a heartless thing, with no sustaining power. Like all light, the light of Christ is a revealing light. It reveals the value of

the human soul. What shall a man give in exchange for his soul? In the light of Christ's teaching, that is a question with no answer. The kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them, are not equal to it. The dearest thing to God's heart is that it might be saved. It reveals also the needs of the human soul. Christ has shed a light that shows to us our destitute condition. We should not know, but for Him, how low we had fallen, and how helpless we lie.

But, still further, Christ reveals Himself as the Saviour and Restorer of the soul. It has been remarked that, when we look upon a landscape lighted up by the sun, we enjoy the scene and never think of the sun by whose light we behold it; whereas, when we look upon a landscape lighted up by the moon, by and by we turn, naturally and almost unconsciously, to glance up at the orb under whose gentle light we stand. And it might be said that of a similar nature to this latter is our action with respect to Christ. Beholding our hearts as He has illumined them, not from any enjoyment of the view in this case, however, but simply from a sense of desolation, we turn away from self, and look up to Him who has shed that light upon us, and who has also made Himself manifest and bright as the Redeemer and Life-giver.

May we find in Him our life and light; may we follow on more and more to know the Lord, and be able to say—

I looked to Jesus, and I found
In Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that light of life I'll walk,
Till travelling days are done.

II.

'And looking upon Jesus as He walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God!'—JOHN i. 36.

NOT grudgingly but gladly St. John the Baptist hands over his disciples to the higher Teacher. He has fulfilled his office as the friend of the Bridegroom. Many would even have acknowledged himself to be the Messiah, but self never in the least eclipsed his message. Not an envious word crossed his lips, and not even a thought entered

his mind that could not have been whispered into Christ's own ear. He stepped down with willing feet from his pedestal, declaring that now his joy was fulfilled. Henceforth 'He must increase, but I must decrease.'

Notice three things in the text,—a great sight, a great saying, and a great sequel. First, *a great sight*. 'Looking upon Jesus, he saith, Behold.' It was the first time that anyone was directed to Jesus. What multitudes since then have been pointed to that same Source, and have found in Him what they sought elsewhere in vain! Four times we read in the Gospels of special attention being drawn to Christ by that word; not all of them, however, in the reverent spirit of the Baptist. 'Behold how He loved him!' said the simple villagers at the grave of Lazarus. 'Behold the Man!' said Pilate; a commonplace utterance on his lips, but his words were wiser than he knew. 'I thank thee,' Roman, 'for teaching me that word.' 'Behold, now ye have heard His blasphemy. What think ye?' said the high priest, as eager to get anything of an incriminating kind as were the French military staff against Dreyfus. 'Behold the Lamb of God!' said St. John to his disciples, and, on the previous day at fuller length, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!'

Here, then, secondly, we have *a great saying*. Whence had John that wondrous knowledge of the purpose of Christ's coming? Flesh and blood had not revealed it unto him. There were A.D. people who lived in B.C. times. So says Zangwill, the writer on modern Jewish life, and we might use his words here in a higher sense than that in which he meant them. St. John the Baptist was one of the A.D. people, the last and greatest of the B.C. times, whose privilege it was to open the door and let the King come forth. The Christian world has not even yet fully fathomed the depth of that saying of the Baptist. Yet we may be blessed by it even though we do not fully understand. The source of the Nile was long mysterious, but that did not hinder the people of Lower Egypt from profiting by the beneficent stream, so long as it flowed and overflowed and made the land fruitful. And so, while there are mysteries in the Atonement that Heaven alone, perhaps, will explain, trusting hearts have ever found its results a blessed reality in their experience. Forgiveness, life, and fruit have ever been the effects of that grace and truth

which came by Jesus Christ, and whose springs are hidden in the heart of God.

Thirdly, we have here *a great sequel*. Where, you may say, is the sequel in the text? Why, it is in the whole verse, it is in the fact that we have the verse at all. One of the two, there is every reason to believe, who heard John's words that day was the writer of this Gospel. And that day was an high day in the story of our race, for these two followed Jesus, the first of the countless number out of every kingdom and tribe. And here are we to-day, privileged to read of, and meditate on, that incident of the far past. May we, too, seek with all our heart that Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world, and then truly it will be a great sequel, also, so far as we are concerned.

III.

'This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth His glory; and His disciples believed on Him.'—JOHN ii. 11.

THIS was the starting-point in Christ's public career, and it was a fitting beginning for Him Whose life was to be described so well in the words, 'Who went about doing good.' First things are significant. He began at a wedding, the happiest day in two lives that were then united, and began from that time to go down the long path together. Who the bride and bridegroom were we do not know, nor anything of the story of their united life which began that day; but surely a wedding of true hearts should be looked back upon as the happiest day of life, especially when regarded in that high and holy sense which led Tennyson, for example, to say of his marriage day: 'The peace of God entered my heart as I stood beside her at the altar.'

Was it not symbolically fitting, then, that Jesus should choose the happiest experience of earthly life as the time when He began to manifest His glory? For His relationship to men was to be one of a very close and permanent kind. The Bible can find no more fitting figure for the relationship between Christ and His Church than that of the Bridegroom and the Bride. And is it not true, here above all, that the peace of God entereth the heart that is united to Christ by faith?

This beginning was significant, too, in its transformation of the water into wine. That symbolized what Jesus came to do in many ways. Above all, He transformed religion. The religion

of the time was a dry, heartless, burdensome thing. Even good men, well-intentioned men, made it a yoke too grievous to be borne. But Christ revealed it as a joyous thing. There was a beautiful simplicity and homeliness, too, in Christ's way of putting things. And certainly they do not seem the less heavenly because they were so homely. It is true that, notwithstanding its bright and joyful aspect, there will always be something corresponding to Gethsemane in every Christian life; but even there we may have the helpful assurance that Jesus will not fail, as the disciples did towards Him, to watch with us, yea, and to be to us more than the strengthening angel that appeared to Himself of old.

We are told that, as the result of this manifestation of His glory, His disciples believed on Him. They believed already, for they had joined themselves to Him as His disciples; but by this sign their faith was confirmed. Still, their belief was not of a very high order, for it was long, as we know, ere the full light regarding Jesus' mission dawned upon them. They never dreamed that the Cross, with all its darkness, lay between them and the higher, clearer faith, and that their faith now was as water unto wine compared with what it would one day come to be. It needed the dawn of the Resurrection morn to make plain to them the nature of the Kingdom.

But they loved Jesus, and loved Him all through. Even after his denial St. Peter could still say, 'Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee.' Their love saved them, and, after long perplexity and seeming disappointment, they were uplifted in faith to heights whence they beheld the true land of promise. They loved Jesus with all their heart, and that love carried them on, through darkness and doubt and even despair, till at last the funereal gloom of the Cross was turned into the wedding joy of the Resurrection.

IV.

'For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'—JOHN iii. 16.

THERE is not a superfluous word in this verse. You could not make it shorter without injuring to some extent the meaning. When you are sending a telegram you pay particular attention to your words. Any unnecessary words you omit, while, at the same time, you are careful to have sufficient

to convey your meaning. Now, suppose we had, instead of a whole volume concerning the heavenly message, only what might correspond to a telegraphic despatch. I should say that our text would be a sort of perfect telegraphic message. Every word tells. Nothing could equal it in the way of summary of gospel truth.

The wealth of the text is embarrassing. Let us confine our attention to two great thoughts in it. The first is that God *loved and gave*. These two things must always go together. You might give without loving, but you can't love without giving. It is of the very nature of love to give. The sun could no more exist without shining than could love without giving. St. Paul tells us many things, in his wonderful eulogy of love, that it does. Love beareth all things, for example. But love is not satisfied with bearing. Jesus, in His love, bore our sins; but far more than that He came to do—not only to bear but to bestow. At the same time, it is possible, St. Paul reminds us, to bestow all our goods, and yet not have love. That just means that, in love's giving, there must always be a bit of self. It is the measure of self that is in our gifts that gives them value in the highest sense.

You may have noticed that in connexion with the Christmas cards you have recently been getting. Here is one card, say, with a verse upon it, which you find, when you read it, is entirely inappropriate to your condition. Evidently the sender had just purchased almost the first card he laid his hands on, without giving the matter any further consideration,—and you value it accordingly. But here is another with a verse that speaks home to your special need. You may have passed through some sorrowful experience, and the words, you find, are peculiarly fitted to your case. The sender had been thinking about you, and had taken some pains to find a card that would specially suit you. It is a trifling gift, but the giver put something of himself into it. He gave you a little thought and consideration, and that bit of self in the gift enhances its value and touches your heart. Well, what a wondrous gift God gave to men, when He gave His Son! That was not a giving out of His superfluity. That was not a giving without consideration of our case. We needed a Saviour, and, when there was none other to save us, God spared not His own Son. Verily God gave Himself when He gave His Son.

There are other two things that are coupled together in the text,—*believing and living*; and these two are as inseparable as the loving and giving. Knowledge is power, it is true, but faith is power in a far higher sense. In the Bible it is faith that is at the root of every good man's life, every man who did, or became, anything worth recording. It was not talent or genius that made Moses encounter all the difficulties in Egypt. He had these, too, in large measure, and he had sympathy with his Hebrew brethren. These and other helpful qualities he had, but it was faith in God that strung them all together, it was faith that united and energized them. And so, through every life that had anything of the good and true in it, faith runs as a solo, and at last, in the eleventh chapter of the Hebrews, all is summed up in one grand chorus, the time failing the writer to tell of all who through faith subdued kingdoms and wrought righteousness.

A faith like that means life, life here and now, the life more abundant, the life everlasting, the life that can enter the very gates of death singing—

When the breath of life is flown,
When the grave must claim its own,
Lord of life, be ours Thy crown—
Life for evermore.

V.

'But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.'—JOHN iv. 14.

WOULD it be a desirable condition to be in, never to experience the sensation of thirst? Is not thirst a healthy sign, and hunger too? There is an old riddle which runs somewhat as follows:—What is that which we try to get, and no sooner do we get it than we try to get rid of it? The answer is an appetite. There is nothing more pleasant than a good appetite, if you have the means of satisfying it. A newspaper correspondent, writing on the recent Soudan campaign, speaks of what he calls the Soudan thirst, and the delight of quenching it. Only, it is terrible should you not have the means of quenching it. The irony of it, he says, is that there is so much thirst there, and such a limitless means of supply here. 'If the Soudan thirst could be sent home in capsules, it would make any man's fortune in an evening.'

But the demand and the supply may be far separate.

Now, what Jesus clearly meant, by that saying to the woman of Samaria, was not that thirst shall cease, not that 'desire shall fail,' but that it will be abundantly satisfied. There will still be the demand, it will be greater than ever, but, as to the supply, it will be as a well of water *in* him, springing up into everlasting life. How shall we put it? A constant desire and a constant satisfaction, a craving and a possession, a desert thirst by the side of the water brooks.

There is a longing in man's soul for that which this world can never supply, but it is found in Christ. What a hopelessly sad condition would humanity's be if there were that longing, and yet nothing to satisfy it!

Better the ox that lies fat and supine,
Even his gross contentment can never be mine.

It is sometimes said that the mere search after truth is in itself pleasant. Well, in some ways that is true enough. Did you ever search for a four-bladed clover? Whether you got it or not, the afternoon among the fields and in the sunshine was very pleasant all the same. But just imagine a mother searching for her lost child, and sitting down in the middle of the search, before she had found again her treasure, and saying, 'Well, this is delightful. There is an exhilaration about it. I hope to find my child ere long, but meantime the search itself is very stimulating'! Nay, there could be no joy for her, save the joy of discovery. And so is it with the heart longing and searching for God. 'Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.' In some things we may find pleasure even in search that comes to nothing; but, when it comes to be a longing soul,—a soul seeking to be rid of the burden of sin, seeking for a sustaining cup of joy,—there can be no satisfaction save in the finding.

Christ, then, both satisfies and increases our soul thirst. He can become, as it were, a well of water in us springing up into everlasting life. And all other professing or supposed sources of supply have been found, and ever will be found, to be but as

A sinking buckets into empty wells,
And growing old in drawing nothing up.