

THE BIRTH AND BOYHOOD OF JESUS.

How many will hopefully solace themselves by reading this Christmas season the "old, old story" of the birth of the child Jesus, which has so transformed the world, and is certain to transform it still more! Its freshness and beauty and fitness have not a whit abated, wide though the world has grown. Only two of the sacred historians have thought it necessary to record that wonderful beginning of the incomparable life. These are St. Matthew and St. Luke. St. Luke prefaces his Gospel by three chapters which might well be called the History of the Infancy and Boyhood of Jesus. Tradition makes him a painter as well as a physician. It is true that recent research, and especially the investigations and studies of Abbé Greppo, have shown the external evidence in its favour to be of meagre value. But is there no internal evidence in the Gospel itself?

Even if there had been no tradition, no attenuated thread of transmitted memory, as a clue to the evangelist's occupations or tastes, can we wonder, as his graphic skill appeals to our hearts, that the great guild of Florentine painters, the disciples of Cimabue and Giotto, could find no name more appropriate for their art-union than the "Company of St. Luke?" What wonder that some of the noblest triumphs of the painter's art have been based on suggestions which he has furnished? What wonder if, to one who has depicted in such living and revealing words the faith, the patience, the motherly devotion of the Virgin Mother, should have been ascribed the first portrait of the Madonna!

We must not, indeed, confine our grateful admiration to him alone. He may, not without foundation, be looked upon as the patron of Christian science ("Medicus carissimus") and Christian literature ("Græci sermonis non ignarus fuit"), and, as we have said, tradition has lovingly honoured him as the patron of Christian art. But of the evangelists we may say, as Adam de Saint Victor sings:

"Circa thema generale,
Habet quisque speciale
Styli privilegium."

To each of them we owe something which the others chose to omit. In the early Church, the figures of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle, were chosen (as in fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy) to symbolize respectively the four. "Quia ab humana generatione cepit," says St. Gregory the Great, "jure per hominem signatur Mattheus. Quia per clamorem in deserto, recte per leonem Marcus. Quia vero a sacrificio exorsus est, bene per vitulum Lucas. Denique quia a divinitate Verbi cepit, digne per aquilam significatur Joannes." This ascription has been thus versified and interpreted:

"Est vitulus Lucas, leo Marcus, avisque Joannes,
Et homo Mattheus; quatuor ista Deus;
Est homo nascendo, vitulus mortem patiendo
Est leo surgendo, sed avis ad summa petendo."

To Matthew we owe one of the most significant and characteristic festivals of the Church, and one that is fitly associated with Christmastide—Holy Innocent's Day. Christianity brought not only a new heaven, but a new earth to childhood. "Suffer little children to come unto me" is one of those "sayings of mine" that are laden with sweetest solace for poor humanity. In him and St. Mark, moreover, we find some peculiar touches of sympathy with the poor and weak and lowly; while of St. John it is surely enough to remember that he was "the disciple whom Jesus loved." But it is St. Luke that lays so carefully the foundations of the great Mission in that blending of the homely and spiritual, the human and the divine, the historical and the practical, which characterizes those wondrous initial chapters.

How incomparable are those outbursts of sacred song—*Magnificat*, *Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel*, and *Anci Dimittis*! How suggestive the references to the Mother who "kept all these sayings in her heart!" How much was given her to know who can tell? We can only imagine with what loving care and thought and mingled hopes and fears she watched from day to day that growth of mind and body and soul, and saw with wonder-

ing affection the development of those powers, of which the fame was soon to go through all the regions round about.

What a multitude of associations have clustered around that story of the Nativity! What thoughts and words and deeds it has inspired! How it has influenced the course of events and the destinies of nations! Little the world knew—the world of the Caesars—that a pair of Judean wanderers were tending in that comfortless inn-shed its greatest Monarch; that the day was coming when His sway should be the proudest boast of Rome itself.

A carpenter's son and brought up to his father's trade—in Judæa always an honourable trade—that is what He seemed to the people of the little Galilean community. "More than probable it certainly is," says Delitzsch, "that He who came down from Heaven and took our nature upon Him, and He who was made in all things like unto us, sin only excepted, and who submitted Himself to the law and custom of His people, was not only an obedient Son to His Mother, but also a willing helper to His Father in the work of His calling. And even as it was by no mere accident that His first miracle was wrought at a wedding, so it was by no accident that He was born, not in the house of a smith, who forges the death-dealing weapons of war, but in the house of a carpenter, where He who came to bring peace to the world and to hallow the beginning and end of human life had to work in fashioning both the rockers of the cradle and the planks of the coffin and the peaceful instruments of husbandry and family life. * * * *"

To handicraft * * * belongs the honour that the Saviour of the world sprang from an artisan's house. The first King of Israel was taken from behind the plough: the second King of Israel was called from the sheepfold: and the second David, the Messiah of Israel, was called from the carpenter's shop." His mother-tongue was Aramaic, but He spoke Greek also, no doubt, and came in contact with men of many races. Tradition assigns to Him an extraordinary influence over His companions, even in His boyhood, and though His advent was a surprise to His own generation, that there were foreshadowings of that supremacy which He was to exercise over the minds of men we may be certain. "His outward life was the life of all those of His age, station and place of birth. He lived as other children of peasant parents in that quiet town, and in great measure as they live now." But He had the consciousness of a mission of which few of them could dream. That He had in some way tried to impart its nature to His parents would seem to be indicated by His explanation on being found among the doctors in the Temple:—"Did ye not know that I must be about my Father's business?" They were astonished to find him in such company, sitting among the teachers of Israel, and not only hearing their expositions, but propounding questions and making replies, such as they had never heard before.

His Mother's voice recalled Him to the duty of the present, and He quickly left His learned companions, and, with His parents and the other pilgrims, returned to Nazareth. On the way, no doubt, he confided to Mary the secret of those aspirations that stirred His soul, and which made His words and acts so mysterious to those that "understood not." For it is at this point that we read that she "kept all these sayings in her heart."

The eighteen years that followed are enshrouded in a veil which none may raise. Amid what surroundings they were spent, however, we have some means of knowing. "The hills which form the northern limit of the plain of Jezreel," writes Dr. Farrar, "run almost due east, from the Jordan Valley to the Mediterranean, and their southern slopes were in the district assigned to the tribe of Zebulon. Almost in the centre of this chain of hills there is a singular cleft in the limestone forming the entrance to a little valley. As the traveller leaves the plain he will ride up a steep and narrow pathway, brodered with grass and flowers, through scenery which is

"neither colossal nor overwhelming, but infinitely beautiful and picturesque. Beneath him, on the right hand side, the vale will gradually widen, until it becomes about a quarter of a mile in breadth. The basin of the valley is divided by hedges of cactus into little fields and gardens, which, about the fall of the spring rains, wear an aspect of indescribable calm and glow with a tint of the richest green. Beside the narrow pathway, at no great distance apart from each other, are two wells, and the women who draw water there are more beautiful, and the ruddy, bright-eyed shepherd boys who sit or play by the well-sides, in their gay-coloured Oriental costumes, are a happier, bolder, brighter-looking race than the traveller will have seen elsewhere. Gradually the valley opens into a little natural amphitheatre of hills, supposed by some to be the crater of an extinct volcano, and there clinging to the hollows of a hill, which rises to the height of some five hundred feet above it, lie 'like a handful of pearls in a goblet of emerald,' the flat roofs of a little Eastern town. * * * and that little town is *En Nasirah*, Nazareth, where the Son of God, the Saviour of mankind, spent nearly thirty years of His mortal life. It was, in fact, His native village, His home for all but three or four years of His life on earth; the village which lent its ignominious name to the scornful title written upon His cross; the village from which he did not disdain to draw his appellation when He spoke in vision to the persecuting Saul. And along the narrow mountain paths which I have described, His feet must have often trod, for it is the only approach by which, in turning northwards from Jerusalem, He could have reached the home of His infancy, youth and manhood."

Eighteen years of obscurity He is to spend in the quiet Galilean village, and then He passes from the baptism of John to a work which is still continued in His name. "There went a fame of Him through all the region round about." Those who heard Him, perceived that there was a power in Him of speech and deed, of insight and sympathy, of precept and example, such as no other teacher had ever manifested before. "The world was taken by surprise. All His teachings abounded in surprises." We read that, when the day was come on which He was to begin the Mission on which for those eighteen years He had been brooding, He opened the book to take His turn, as is still usual in the Jewish synagogues, in the reading of the Scripture, and the lesson was one from the prophet Isaiah that His hearers must have read and heard many a time before. But from His lips it had a new significance. He put His soul, Himself, into the words, and ever since they have been peculiarly associated with the creed that bears His name.

They were these: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." We cannot pierce the darkness which conceals from us the years that separate Christ's first clear consciousness of what His "Father's business" was, from His conviction of the duty of being about it. But we know that, from the moment that He applied to Himself the words of the Evangelical Prophet, until He bowed His head and died upon the cross, He verified them by perfect obedience. He showed men how they might be blessed forever by faith in Him as what He claimed to be and by following in His footsteps. He swept away all theories of human happiness that were based on the thought of self, however disguised or refined. He proved that self-sacrifice was possible by giving His life for the world and made plain the mystery that he who loses his life shall save it. J. C. TEMPLE.

A great portion of the unhappiness in this world is caused by anticipating casualties which never take place.

To have false ideals is the danger of youth,—to have none is the danger of old age; and these two are connected.