

Original

# AGAINST PERSECUTION FOR CONSCIENCE SAKE.

Convertio gladium tuum in locum suum, inimicus enim, qui acciperint gladium, gladio peribunt. Matt. c. 26, v. 52.

Put up thy sword into its scabbard; was the Saviour's injunction to his disciple, who had drawn the sword in his defence, and cut off the ear of Malchus, the High priest's servant, probably the most active in apprehending our Lord. 'Put up the sword into the scabbard; for all they, who use the sword, shall perish by the sword.'

With the view of giving to his followers among his last and most striking injunctions the most important one of forbearance towards their enemies, even towards those actuated by the most deadly malice against them; but more particularly to impress upon their minds that they are not authorised by him to raise their arm of flesh in his defence; and murder or torment their fellow creatures on the pretext of maintaining his cause; and also, as he himself observed upon the occasion, that the prophecy concerning him might be fulfilled, which said that *he should be reckoned among the wicked*; thus designating those, who have recourse to the sword; with this view, I say, did he intimate to his disciple that he should provide himself with a sword and so far permitted him for once to use it, only that he might have the more solemn and public occasion of forbidding his followers the like use of it for ever; adding at the same time the example of rendering good for evil, which he had all along so forcibly inculcated by touching and restoring on the spot the ear of Malchus that had been cut off.

But the most direct object which he seems to have had in view in bringing about this mysterious incidence, was to prove that, however much, as he foresaw, they who might boast themselves his followers, should seek to establish, or uphold what they imagined to be his cause by violent measures; they not only had not his sanction for doing so; but that on the contrary, they were expressly forbidden by him to interpose in his behalf in so summary and cruel a manner, reminding such mistaken and presumptuous zealots that he needs not their aid to accomplish his ends; or, if he wanted aid, that he had the whole host of Heaven, more powerful assistants, at his call. "Thinkst thou," said he to Peter, "that I cannot now ask my Father, and he will presently give me more than twelve legions of Angels?" On the very occasion alluded to he gave a convincing proof that, even in his mortal state, he required no human aid to defend him against his enemies, by sending his pursuers with a word thrice reeling to the ground. And is he now less powerful and more dependant on our help in his immortal and glorified condition?

His disciples, in the excess of their zeal, besought him once to allow them, like Elias, to call down fire from heaven to consume his enemies: but he gave them to understand that his dispensation was one of mercy, not of justice; for that he

was come to seek and to save, not to scatter and destroy.

He was styled by the prophets *the prince of peace* and, *after glory to God on high, peace on earth, and good will to man*, was sung by the angels at his nativity. Meekness was his favourite attribute, and the virtue he commended most to his followers; indeed the one by which he said they should be chiefly distinguished from the rest of mankind.

This is the particularly marked character of the Messiah, as given in the prophecies; which described him as one, 'the bruised reed who would not break; and the smoking flax, who would not extinguish.' Is. 42, 3, Who gave his back to the smiters, his cheeks to those who buffeted them, and who hid not his face from ignominy and spate, 50, 6. Who when oppressed and afflicted, did not complain; but was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers, opened not his mouth, 53, 7. These, and a thousand other passages to the same effect, describe him as most distinguishable by the attribute of meekness; which shone forth most conspicuously in his conduct throughout the whole course of his life, but more particularly towards its close, and in the latest stage of his mortal existence. The last legacy he bequeathed to his disciples before leaving them, was *peace*. *My peace*, said he, *I leave you: my peace I give you, not such as the world giveth*, a treacherous and hollow truce, the effect but of mutual precaution, accompanied always with distrust; but one the pure offspring of brotherly love, derived from its native source the love of God, our common father; both which he strongly inculcated; declaring that *on these two depend the whole law and the prophets*; that is, that on these two the whole duty of man hinges and turns; and assuring them that the main test of their being his disciples, is, that they love one another. 'By this,' says he, 'they shall know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.' Nay, he bade them even forego their just and indubitable rights, rather than quarrel and litigate for them with one another. 'You have heard, said he, that it has been said, eye for eye; and tooth for tooth. But, if any one should smite you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any one should sue you at law, and take from you your coat, let him have your cloak also. You have heard it said, love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies. Bless those that curse you: and pray for those that despitefully use you and persecute you: that you may be the children of your Father who is in heaven, who makes his sun to rise on the wicked and the good, and sends down rain on the just and the unjust. Blessed are the merciful, says he, for they shall find mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God. Matt. 5.' And in that short but all comprehensive prayer which he taught us, he desires us to ask for forgiveness of our offences against God, only in as far as we ourselves forgive those of our fellow creatures, who have offended us. Matt. 6.

These divine maxims of meek forbearance towards all men, and of charity even

to our enemies were exemplified in himself in a supreme degree. He did not refuse even to Judas the kiss of peace, by which he was betrayed; but only meekly remonstrated with him for making of that symbol of love, a treacherous sign. *Friend*, said he, *dost thou betray the Son of man with a kiss?* He prayed for his very murderers in the midst of all the torments he was enduring upon the cross; and pleaded earnestly with his heavenly father in their behalf; urging the only possible excuse that could be offered for them, their ignorance of the dreadful crime they were committing. *Father, said he, forgive them; for they know not what they are doing.*

Now let them contrast this conduct and these maxims of our Saviour, with the behaviour and maxims of those, who, while boasting themselves his disciples, and acknowledging him to be their perfect model; and his doctrine the unerring rule of their lives; subject their fellow-creatures nevertheless to all kinds of unjust privations, cruel sufferings, and even to death; for daring to differ with them in any degree on points of faith; of which they choose to proclaim themselves, without offering any sure proof of their right to such pretension, the only inspired and infallible expounders; for if they own themselves fallible, in what they so forcibly inculcate, their conduct is then not only unreasonable, but wantonly atrocious.

What a strange and deplorable inconsistency is this, to glory so in being *Christians*; and yet to act in direct opposition to what that title so necessarily implies! Nay, to make a merit to ones self in acting so; offering even as the proof of their being the true followers of Christ, the violation of his strictest injunction, of the very one by the observance of which he said *we were to know and distinguish his followers*: and holding themselves forth to our astonished reason as his more faithful imitators just in proportion as they resemble him the less.

But our wonder at such inconsistency will cease, if we look a little beyond the mere surface of things; and consider, not the plausibly pretended, but the real motives for such conduct: which, however carefully kept out of sight, by the hoodwinking influence of interested sophistry and prejudice; are nevertheless quite obvious to the attentive and impartial observer. To such it will soon appear that all this unauthorised strife about religion, which has proved such a source of misery to mankind for so many ages; so far from originating in a pure and disinterested zeal for the glory of God; is the genuine offspring of worldly pride and of our sinful attachment to the honours and enjoyments of this life; which we could wish either to make all our own, or retain when made; claiming over and above, contrary to the Saviour's declarations, the exclusive monopoly and rightful enjoyment of the good things of the life to come.—In other words, our self conceit resents it as an insult offered to our better supposed understanding, when any one dares to call in question the soundness of its decisions: and they again, whose temporal prosperity, call it *living*, if you choose, depends upon

the general adoption of certain modes of faith, or upon their continuance, when once established, are incited on to this unholy though pretended Christian warfare, some with the hope of snatching, others with the wish of retaining the accursed things, the *Mammon of iniquity*; till in the contest not only the Christian, but the man himself is lost in the remorseless savage; the blood-thirsty and murder-boasting fanatic; than whom there is not in nature a monster more deadly and untameable. It was to such that our Saviour alluded, when he foretold his Disciples that *the time would come when those even who killed them would think they were thus doing a service to God.*

Presumptuous worms! He never required your exerted strength to rear, nor your arms of flesh to prop and uphold his immortal structure, and imperishable fabric. Will experience never convince you that your forbidden interference in such a way, your persecuting efforts, your crafty and unprincipled endeavours, only tend to mar his gracious purpose; and impede, if possible, his merciful design? That your furious zeal is the greatest obstacle to the far and wide dissemination of his holy doctrine; which nothing but his own supporting omnipotence could make it overcome? That infidelity has nothing so plausibly to oppose to the adoption of his gospel truths, as the appalling atrocities committed by you in its blasphemously pretended support? That you thus make his holy name be reviled, and his divine revelation scouted by profane and profligate unbelievers, making that gospel of peace and universal love appear such an endless source of discord and contention; and, instead of a blessing, which it were, if well observed; as a curse and calamity to mankind! Alas! it is from false friends within the fold, and not from openly avowed enemies without, that all this mischief proceeds. It is but of our own making: *perditio tua erit, Israel*. It was Achan in the camp, by coveting and retaining the accursed spoil, not from the foe from without, who brought discomfiture and destruction upon the people of God.

How different from this was the conduct of the primitive Christians! So far from contending with one another for the possession and enjoyment of the good things of this world; they were seen cheerfully to give up all they possessed, in order the more freely to attend to their main concern, the salvation of their souls, by the diligent practice of their Christian duties: following in this the counsel of our Lord, addressed to all those who aspire after perfection, and remembering how he checked on the eve of his passion, the ambitious rivalry of his apostles; as he had done before that of the sons of Zebedee. These were the real champions of Christianity, trained in the school of self-denial and mortification to the bloody conflict of martyrdom; and to victory; not, like the heathens, by desperately fighting; but, like their Lord, by patiently dying.

But no sooner was the Saviour's religion established every where on the ruins of idolatry; and worldly honours and emoluments began to be heaped profusely on its