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DISCOURSES

TO MIXED CONGREGATIONS.

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DISCOURSE XIII.

THE MYSTERY OF DIVINE CONDESCENSION.

The Eternal Word, the Only-begotten Son of the Father, put off His glory, and came down upon earth, to raise us to heaven. Though He was God, He became man; though He was Lord of all, He became as a servant; "though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we, through His poverty, might be rich." He came from heaven in so humble an exterior, that the self-satisfied Pharisees despised Him, and treated Him as a madman or an impostor. When He spoke of His father Abraham, and implied His knowledge of him, who was in truth but the creature of His hands, they said in derision, "Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast Thou seen Abraham?" He made answer, "Amen, amen, I say unto you, Before Abraham was made, I am." He had seen Abraham, who lived two thousand years before; yet He was not therefore two thousand years old, more truly than He was fifty. He was not two thousand years old, because He had no years; He was the Ancient of Days, who never had beginning, and who never will have an end; who is above and beyond time; who is ever young, and ever is beginning, yet never has not been, and is as old as He is young, and was as old and as young when Abraham lived as when He came on earth in our flesh to atone for our sins. And hence He says, "Before Abraham was, I am," and not "I was," because with Him there is no past or future. It cannot be possibly said of Him, that He was or that He will be, but that He is; He is always, always the same, not older because He has lived two thousand years in addition, not younger because He has not lived them.

My brethren, if we could get ourselves to enter into this high and sacred thought, if we really contemplated the Almighty in Himself, then we should understand better what His incarnation is to us, and what it is in Him. I do not mean, if we worthily contemplated Him as He is; but, even if we contemplated Him in such a way as is really possible to us, if we did but fix our thoughts on Him, and make use of the reason which He has given us, we should understand enough of His greatness to feel the awfulness of His voluntary self-abasement. Attend, then, while I recall to your mind the doctrines which reason and revelation combine to teach you about the Most High, and then, when you have fixed your mind upon His infinity, go on to view, in the light of that infinity, the meaning of His incarnation.

Now first consider that reason teaches you there must be a God; else how was this all-wonderful universe made? It could not make itself; man could not make it, he is but a part of it; each man has a beginning, there must have been a first man, and who made him? To the thought of God then we are forced from the nature of the case; and we must admit the idea of an Almighty Creator, and that Creator must have been from everlasting. He must have had no beginning, else how came He to be? Thus we should be in our original difficulty, and must begin our argument over again. The Creator, I say, had no beginning; for, if He was brought into being by another before Him, then how came that other to be? And so we shall proceed in an unprofitable series or catalogue of creators, which is as difficult to conceive as an endless line of men. Besides, if it was not the Creator Himself who was from everlasting then there would be one being who was from everlasting, and another who was Creator; which is all one with saying that there are two Gods. The Creator then of the world had no beginning;—and, if so, He can undergo no change. What is everlasting has no growth nor decay; it is what it ever was, and ever shall be the same. As it originated in nothing else; nothing else can interfere with it or affect it. Besides, every thing that is has originated in It; every thing therefore is dependent on It, and It is independently of every thing.

Contemplate then the Supreme Being, the Being of Beings, even so far as I have yet described Him; fix the idea of Him in your minds. He is one; He has no rival; He has no equal; He is unlike any thing else; He is sovereign; He can do what He will. He is unchangeable from first to last; He is all-perfect; He is infinite in His power and His wisdom, or He could not have made this immense world which we see by day and by night.

Next, this follows from what I have said;—that, since He is from everlasting, and has created all things from a certain beginning, He has lived in an eternity before He began to create any thing. What

a wonderful thought is this; there was a state of things in which God was by Himself, and nothing else but He. There was no earth, no sky, no sun, no stars, no space, no time, no beings of any kind; no men, no Angels, no Seraphim. His throne was without ministers; He was not waited on by any; all was silence, all was repose, there was nothing but God; and this state continued, not for a while only, but for a measureless duration; it was a state which had ever been; it was the rule of things, and creation was an innovation upon it. Creation is, comparatively speaking, but of yesterday; it has lasted a poor six thousand years; say sixty thousand, if you will; what is this to eternity? nothing at all; not so much as a drop compared to the whole ocean, or a grain of sand to the whole earth. I say, through a whole eternity God was by Himself, with no other being but Himself; with nothing external to Himself, not working, but at rest, not speaking, not receiving homage from any, not glorified in creatures, but blessed in Himself and by Himself, and wanting nothing.

What an idea this gives us of the Almighty! He is above us, my brethren, we feel it; how little can we understand Him! We fall in even with men upon earth, whose ways are so different from ours that we cannot understand them; we marvel at them; they pursue courses so unlike our own, they take recreations so peculiar to themselves, that we despair of finding any thing in common between them and ourselves; we cannot make conversation when we are with them. Thus stirring and ambitious men wonder at those who live among books; sinners wonder at those who attend the Sacraments and mortify their passions; thrifty persons wonder at those who are lavish of their money; men who love society wonder at those who live in solitude and are happy in it. We cannot enter into our fellows; we call them strange and incomprehensible; but what are they compared with the all-marvellousness of the Everlasting God? He alone indeed is incomprehensible, who has not only lived an eternity without beginning, but who has lived through a whole eternity by Himself, and has not wearied of the solitude. Which of us, or how few of us, could live a week in comfort by ourselves? You have heard, my brethren, of solitary confinement as a punishment assigned to criminals, and at length it becomes more severe than any other punishment: it is said at length to make men mad. We cannot live without objects, without aims, without employments, without companions. We cannot live simply in ourselves; the mind preys upon itself, if left to itself. This is the case with us mortal men; now raise your mind to God. O the vast contrast! He lived a whole eternity in that state, a few poor years of which to us is madness. He lived a whole eternity without change of any kind. Day and night, sleep and meal-time, at least are changes, unavoidable changes, in the life of the most solitary upon earth. A prison, if it has nothing else to relieve its dreariness and its hopelessness, has at least this, that the poor prisoner sleeps; he sleeps, and suspends his misery; he sleeps, and recruits his power of hearing it; but the Eternal is the sleepless, He pauses not, He suspends not His powers, He is never tired of Himself; He is never wearied of His own infinity. He was from eternity ever in action, though ever at rest; ever surely in rest and peace profound and ineffable; yet with a living, present mind, self-possessed, and all-conscious, comprehending Himself and sustaining the comprehension. He rested ever, but He rested in Himself; His own resource, His own end, His own contemplation, His own blessedness.

Yes, so it was; and, if it is incomprehensible that He should have existed solitary through an eternity, is it not incomprehensible too, that He should have ever given up that solitariness, and have willed to surround Himself with creation? Why was He not content to be as He had been? why did He bring into existence those who could not add to His blessedness, and were not secure of their own? Why did He give them that gift which we see they possess, of doing right or wrong as they pleased, and of working out their ruin as well as their salvation? why did He create a world like that which is before our eyes, which at best so dimly shows forth His glory, and at worst is a scene of sin and of sorrow? He might have made a far more excellent world than this; He might have excluded sin; but, O wonderful mystery, He has surrounded Himself with the cries of fallen souls, and has created and opened the great pit. He has willed, after an eternity of peace, to allow of everlasting anarchy, of pride, and blasphemy, and crime, and hatred of Himself, and the worm that dieth not. Thus He is simply incomprehensible to us, mortal men; well might the ancient heathen shrink from answering, when a king, his patron, asked what God was! He begged for a day to consider his reply; at the end of it, for two more; and, when the two were ended, for four besides; for in truth he found that the thought, instead of bringing him towards the solution

of the problem, did but drive him back; the more he questioned, the vaster grew the theme, and where he drew one conclusion, thence issued forth a hundred fresh difficulties to confound his reason. For in truth the being and attributes of God are a subject, not for reason simply, but for faith; and we must accept His own word about Himself.

And now proceed to another thought, my brethren, which I have partly implied and partly expressed already. If the Almighty Creator be such as I have described Him, He in no wise depends on His creatures. They sin, they perish, they are saved, they praise Him eternally; but, though He loves all the creatures of His hand, though He visits all of them without exception with influences of His grace so numerous and so urgent, that not till the disclosures of the last day shall we rightly conceive of them; though He deigns to be glorified in His Saints, though He is their all in all, their continued life, and power, and blessedness,—still they are nothing to Him. They do not increase His happiness if they are saved, or diminish it if they are lost. I do not mean that He is at a distance from them; He does not so live in Himself as to abandon the creation to the operation of laws which He has stamped upon it. He is every where a vigilant and active Providence; He is in every one of His creatures, and in every one of their actions; if He were not in them, they would fall back into nothing. He is every where on earth, and sees every crime committed, whether under the sun or in the gloom of night; He is even the sustaining power of those who sin; He is most close to every the most polluted soul; He is in the midst of the eternal prison; yet nothing touches Him, though He touches all things. The sun's rays penetrate into the most hideous recesses, yet keep their brightness and their perfection; and the Almighty witnesses and suffers evil, yet is not touched or tried by the creature's willfulness, pride, impurity, or unbelief. The lusts of earth and the blasphemies of hell neither sully His purity nor impair His majesty. If the whole world were to go and plunge into the eternal gulf, the loss would be theirs, not His. In the dread contest between good and evil, whether the Church conquers at once, or is oppressed for the time, and labors, whether she is in persecution, or in triumph, or in peace, whether His enemies hold out or are routed, when the innocent sin, when the just are falling, when good Angels weep, when souls are hardened, He is one and the same. He is in His blessedness still, and not even the surface is ruffled of His everlasting rest. He neither hopes, nor fears, nor desires, nor sorrows, nor repents. All around Him seems full of agitation and confusion, but in His eternal decrees and infallible foreknowledge there is nothing contingent, nothing uncertain, nothing which is not part of one vast plan, as fixed in its issue and as unchangeable as is His own essence.

Such is the great God, so all-sufficient, so all-blessed, so separate from creatures, so inseparable; so unapproachable. Who can see Him? who can fathom Him? who can move Him? who can change Him? who can even speak of Him? He is all holy, all patient, all serene, and all true. He says and He does; He delays and He executes; He warns and He punishes; He punishes, He rewards, He forbears, He pardons, according to an eternal decree, without imperfections, without vacillation, without inconsistency.

And now that I have set before you, my brethren, in human language, some of the attributes of the Adorable God, perhaps you are tempted to complain that, instead of winning you to the All-glorious and All-good, I have but repelled you from Him. You are tempted to exclaim,—He is so far above us that the thought of Him does but frighten me, I cannot believe that He cares for me. I believe firmly that He is infinite perfection; and I love that perfection, not so much indeed as I could wish,—still in my measure I love it for its own sake, and I wish to love it above all things, and I well understand that there is no creature, but must love it unless he has fallen from grace. But there are two feelings, which, alas, I have a difficulty in entertaining; I believe and I love, but without fervor, without keenness, because my heart is not kindled by hope, nor subdued and melted with gratitude. Hope and gratitude I wish to have, and have not; I know that He is loving towards all His works; but how am I to believe that He gives me personally a thought, and cares for me for my own sake? I am beneath His love; He looks on me as an atom in a vast universe. He acts by general laws, and, if He is kind to me, it is not for my sake, but because it is according to His nature to be kind. And hence it is that I am drawn over to sinful men with an intenser feeling than to my glorious Maker. Kings and great men upon earth, when they appear in public, are not content with a mere display of their splendor; they show themselves as well as their attributes; they look around them; they notice

individuals; they have a kind eye, or a courteous gesture, or an open hand, for all who come near them. They scatter among the crowd the largess of their smiles and of their words. And then men go home, and tell their friends, and treasure up to their latest day, how that so great a personage took notice of them or of a child of theirs, or accepted a present at their hand, or gave expression to some sentiment, without point in itself, but precious as addressed to them. Thus does my fellow man engage and win me; but there is a gulf between me and my great God. I shall fall back on myself, and grovel in my nothingness, till He looks down from heaven, till He calls me, till He takes interest in me. It is a want in my nature to have one who can weep with me, and rejoice with me, and in a way minister to me; and this would be presumption in me, and worse, to hope to find in the Infinite and Eternal God.

This is what you may be tempted to say, my brethren, not without impatience, while you contemplate the Almighty, as the conscience portrays Him, and as reason concludes about Him, and as creation witnesses of Him; and I have dwelt on it, in order, by way of contrast, to set before you, as I proposed when I began, how your complaint is answered, in the great mystery of the Incarnation. Never suppose that you are left by God; never suppose that He does not know you, your minds and your powers, better than you do yourselves. Do you not suppose, that, if the complaint be true, He has thought of it before you? "Before they call, I will attend," says He, "and while they speak, I will hear." Add this to your general notion of His incomprehensibility, viz., that though He is infinite, He can bow Himself to the finite; have faith in the mystery of His condescension; confess that, though He "inhabith eternity," He "dwelleth with a contrite and humble spirit," and "looketh down upon the lowly." Give up this fretfulness, quit these self-consuming thoughts, go out of yourselves, lift up your eyes, look around, and see if you can discern nothing more hopeful, more gracious in this wide world, than these perplexities over which you have been brooding. My brethren, we are so constituted by our Maker, that we *can* love Him for His own sake, and He has given us means of doing so. He has not founded our worship of Him in hope, nor made self-interest the measure of our veneration. And we have eyes to see much more than the difficulties of His essence; and the great disclosures, which nature begins, revelation brings to perfection. Lift up your eyes, I say, and look out upon the material world, and there you will see one attribute above others on its very face which will reverse your sad meditations, on Him who made it. He has traced out many of His attributes upon it, His immensity, His wisdom, His power, His loving-kindness, and His skill; but more than all, its very face is illuminated with the glory and beauty of His eternal excellence. This is that attribute in which all His attributes conalesce, which is the perfection, or (as I may say) the flower and bloom of their combination. As among men youth, and health, and vigor, have their finish in that grace of outline, and lustre of complexion, and eloquence of expression, which we call beauty, so in the Almighty God, though we cannot comprehend His holy attributes, and shrink from their unfathomable profound, yet we can, as creatures, recognize and rejoice in the brightness, harmony, and serenity, which is their resulting excellence. This is that quality which, by the law of our nature, draws us off ourselves in admiration, which moves our affections, which wins from us a disinterested homage; and it is shed in profusion, in token of its Creator, over the visible world.

Leave then the prison of your own reasonings, leave the town, the work of man, the haunt of sin; go forth, my brethren, far from the tents of Cedar and the slime of Babylon; with the patriarch go forth to meditate in the field, and from the splendors of the work imagine the unimaginable glory of the Architect. Mount some bold eminence, and look back, when the sun is high and full upon the earth, when mountains, cliffs, and sea, rise up before you like a brilliant pageant, with outlines noble and graceful, and tints and shadows soft, clear, and harmonious, giving depth and unity to the whole; and then go through the forest, or fruitful field, or along meadow and stream, and listen to the different country sounds, and drink in the fragrant air which is poured around you in spring or summer; or go among the gardens, and delight your senses with the grace and splendor, and the various sweetness of the flowers you find there; then think of the almost mysterious influence upon the mind of particular scents, or the emotion which some gentle, peaceful strain excites in us; or how soul and body are rapt and carried away captive by the concord of musical sounds; where the ear is open to their power; and then, when you have ranged through sights, and sounds, and odors, and your heart kindles, and your