

THE PULPIT.

No. 59.

Advent of the Church.

SERMON PREACHED IN ST. JOHN'S WOOD CHURCH, LONDON, BY REV. J. MONRO GIBSON, D.D.

TEXT Acts ii.—The Church was born, not made. It was no mere society or association into which men organized themselves for religious purposes. Like him from whom it sprang it was born from above—"I am, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." The advent of the Spirit of God was the birth of the Church. For we must not confound the Church, as many do, with the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven, of which Christ had so much to say in the days of His flesh. The kingdom of God is eternal, without beginning, without end. The work of Christ was not to set up the kingdom of God, but to proclaim it, to tell how near it was, if only men would lift up eyes of faith and look; to tell how gracious a welcome it had for all who would only come to the gate and knock. The Church on the other hand, though a Divine institution, was still an institution, something which had to be begun, to be instituted, to have its foundations laid, and then be built. The work of Christ on earth in relation to the Church was this laying of the foundation, the preparation for its advent. Hence it is that we hear so frequently of it in these early days, He does not even mention it till he is within sight of the end, when at Caesarea Philippi He begins to tell His disciples of His approaching death, and what He says of it even then seems expressly intended to keep them from supposing that it is already in existence—"Upon this rock I will build my church." The 120 in the upper room retained still the familiar designation by which they were known throughout the earthly ministry of Christ; they were His "disciples," they formed a school, the school of Christ, and not till the great day of Pentecost, when for the first time they were fully possessed with His Spirit, did they become members of Christ, His body, the Church; the relation of which to the kingdom may perhaps be set forth in this way. It was a body set apart to seek first the kingdom of God, to pray and work for its coming, and to be the custodian of its keys.

From all this it is evident that what constitutes the Church is the presence and indwelling of the Spirit. "If any man has not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." In the same manner and for the same reason, if any religious body has not the Spirit of Christ, it is none of His. It is not a question of orders or of ordinances; it is a question of the presence or absence of the Holy Spirit. The venerable Church Father Irenæus expresses it admirably, and well if the Church had always remembered his words:—"Where the Church is there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is there is the Church and every kind of grace."

The infant Church, thus born of the Spirit, at once begins to show signs of life. First, it finds its voice: they "began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance," and presently little knots of people gathered round the different speakers—here a group of Parthians, there a band of Medes, yonder a company of Elamites, further on other nationalities: all marvelling greatly because, as they put it, "we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God." As the crowding proceeds and the groups become pressed together into a great concourse, the natural leader of the 120 is called out—the Apostle Peter—who lifts up his voice and in the Greek language, fairly understood by all, preaches his first Christian sermon, giving forth for the first time the Church's message to the world. It is a new message, but it does not set aside the old. Christ had come, not to destroy, but to fulfill. And accordingly, His Apostle begins by making plain that he is no apostle of revolution, that evolution rather is the word, for he shows how all this is done that it might be fulfilled as was spoken by the prophet, "It shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." This is a feature of the Gospel of Christ which ought never to be forgotten. It was not forgotten by the Apostle Paul when in preaching to the Athenians he quoted and confirmed the teaching of one of their own poets, nor should it be forgotten in these days when the treasures of ancient wisdom are so faithfully and diligently explored. Let us rejoice in all the broken lights of other faiths, the stars in the night which heralded the rising of the Sun of Righteousness. While the message of the new Church is set in no

antagonism to any words of the wise, it is something over and above them all. It is no new philosophy, it is no fresh ritual, it is a testimony to the Christ of God and to His great kingdom which embraces all.

Having shown this connection with the revelation of the past, the Apostle proceeds to his great theme. He begins with the name of Jesus, not hesitating to speak of Him as the man of Nazareth, to introduce Him so, and then leads up his hearers step by step to the great conclusion.—"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." It seemed a word of doom—"whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ"—then our enemy is on the throne, our enemy has all power in heaven and on earth, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Not your enemy your Saviour. It is the Prince of Peace, it is the King of Love, who sits upon the throne. This is the kingdom he preached and now it is open and here are the keys:—"Repent, and be baptized every one of you." Just think of that being said to the murderers of Jesus; said to those who had insisted on the nails being driven through His hands and His feet; said to those who had mocked Him, and cried, "Away with him! crucify him!" "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." The very man that drove the nails through, do you say? Yes, if he wished it. "Ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." No wonder hard hearts were melted that day, and no wonder that the same great story of love Divine should continue to melt hard hearts century after century, age after age, from then till now. The extension of the gift of the Holy Ghost to the multitude of new disciples meant of course the enlarging of the Church. For, as we have seen, where the Spirit is, there is the Church. So there were added to them that day "about three thousand souls"—not far from the Master's "thirty-fold"—in a single day.

The fire-symbol, however, is not repeated; this has marked the advent of the Spirit; but now that he is here to abide with the Church forever, the old water-symbol becomes a standing ordinance, according to the Master's word, "Go ye and make disciples of all nations, baptising them into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost." It is an old sign put to a new use, and yet not wholly new, for it still keeps the old reference to repentance and the remission of sins which it had under the ministry of John; but as water is the familiar symbol of the Spirit, it may well embrace the new gift of the Holy Ghost now poured out in fulfillment of the ancient prophecy.

"And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of Bread, and in prayers." In this brief statement we have some insight into the ordinance of the Church, by which she sought the edification of her own members. There is first the teaching of the Apostle. This was distinct from the message to the world. It had indeed a separate place in the great commission, "Go ye and make disciples of all nations, baptising them into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." So far the commission has been already followed, but it does not end here, it adds, "teaching them"—that is to say, those who have been made disciples and have been baptized—"teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." The proclamation of the message to lead men to repentance and acceptance of Christ as their Saviour and King is one thing, the instruction of those within the Church is another. In modern preaching the two are more or less intermingled; from the necessities of the case it is so; but, though intermingled, they ought not to be confounded.

The prominence given to "fellowship," which occupies the place next to preaching, shows that in the early days much was made of the mutual help the members can give one another in spiritual things. I wish we had more of that in our day. There was not only the receiving from the Apostles, but the sharing with one another. Then the ordinary intercourse of life was lifted to a higher plane and heralded by the breaking of bread, which recalled the time when the Lord and His disciples used to sit at the same table, and especially that night on which He was betrayed, when he instituted the sacred rite of the supper and asked His disciples to do this in remembrance of Him.

The "prayers" with which the simple enumeration closes included without doubt praise as well—the whole worship of the Church that she offers to her Lord. For she is privileged not only to hear but to speak, not only to receive but to give. All is simple, natural, beautiful, no hint of any elaborate service, no hint of any gorgeous ritual in this golden age of the Church's history. That it was a golden age indeed is made still more apparent as we follow the sketch which gives us next a glimpse of the life of the Church, full of the soft sunlight of the dawn. Love is the presiding angel. Very fervent is their love to one another—"all that believed were together."