

The Church Guardian

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CALENDAR FOR MARCH.

MARCH 4th—3rd Sunday in Lent.

" 11th—4th Sunday in Lent.

" 18th—5th Sunday in Lent.

" 25th—6th Sunday in Lent.—*Annunciation of Virgin Mary.*

" 26th—Monday before Easter.

" 27th—Tuesday before Easter.

" 28th—Wednesday before Easter.

" 29th—Thursday before Easter.

" 30th—GOOD FRIDAY. Pr. Pss. M. 22, 40, 54, 69, 88.

" 31st—EASTER EVEN.

"PREACHING CHRIST"—WHAT IS IT?

Among many hackneyed expressions to be heard in our day of wide-spread preaching, uttered by persons who would lay claim to being good judges of sermons written and spoken, perhaps there are none more frequently used and less comprehensively understood than the terms "Gospel sermon," "powerful Gospel." Were we to endeavour to draw from such persons as we all know—zealous hearers of sermons, which are no doubt listened to with pious feelings—the real significance of Gospel teaching, we doubt if in nine cases out of ten, the enquirers would get such answers as at all convey the true import of Gospel sermons. The enthusiastic advocates of evangelistic lay-preaching, so general in the present day, are certainly more chargeable with this liability to confine Gospel preaching to one idea, than are the regular hearers attached to a trained ministry; not that we deem all the latter exempt from a very general mistake, which is in a superficial use of terms, and that, also, in a way which may be very fairly termed "cant."

Now we must not be understood in the outset as wanting to cast a slur on any religious sect in particular. This is not our aim. What we have to say will find room for consideration in all divisions of the Christian Church. It would be arrogant assumption to suppose that the mere spiritually-minded intelligent Bible readers need to be instructed as to the meaning of preaching what is often termed a "full Christ," but which term, it is our aim to shew, falls far short, of conveying to the minds of many who use it the "fulness of Christ." Nor are these observations generally necessary for those whose privilege it is to have set before them from week to week, by a divinely-taught and cultured minister, somewhat of the meaning and beauty of the Christ-life and character so exquisitely given to us in the four Gospels, in which every common-place or homely incident, wherever Christ's benign presence is recorded, has a lustre shed upon it that speaks the Divine and human soul of Jesus of Nazareth. He, "The Light of the World," preached a very different Gospel from many of his so-called followers.

To preach an abstract Christ merely; to ring perpetual changes on "Come to Jesus,"

"Believe in the Lord Jesus," and such like, however scriptural such phrases may be, would never we venture to say, if left there, cause any unregenerate soul to find the "light of life"—the secure foundation for a faith and peace, which is tested every hour, of our lives, and that can only grow in the heart of any man or woman by an increasing knowledge of the love of God as shown in the Christ life and teaching. We can hardly think that we lay ourselves open to the charge of doing away with the necessity of laying any foundation in the first instance, for "other foundation can no man lay than that is laid in Christ Jesus." We only question the practical power of the foundation in kind, that is too frequently laid under the name of "Gospel truth."

Let us look a little (we can do no more in our limits) into the nature of that unique teaching which Christ was wont to give during his public ministry of three years. We can only take a few examples, which will be sufficient for our purpose, placing those examples in contrast with the too rapid and barren discourses which are so often held up as "Gospel sermons," "Gospel truth!"

In the first place it will be conceded that Christ's teaching to Nicodemus underlies all that must be learned in the School of Christ, and so the Divine teaching anticipated the enquiries of this "Ruler of the Jews." This "Master in Israel," by directly telling him he must be "born again;"—mark, Christ did not say that birth was to come in an instant; not a sudden conversion, as some would have it,—but He knew that this man, whatever else of knowledge he was possessed, was yet ignorant of the main spring of Christ's teaching, that "he must be born of the Spirit." Even though he acknowledge Christ as a "teacher come from God." We need not dwell further on this truth but go on to present the contrasts we propose, which it is hoped will serve in some degree to bring out the point under consideration.

It will be profitable for those who are only too apt to be satisfied with a one-sided string of little more than high-sounding religious phrases, to observe the various methods and remarkable words Christ used in leading ignorant and simple men and women to know themselves on the one hand, and to believe in Himself on the other, as "the way, the truth, and the life." In His own most blessed invitation (Matt. xi. 26 and following verses), He does not offer a bare invitation to come to Him, but He shows what it is to come to Him,—not safety merely—but a learning from His spirit. "Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me for I am meek and lowly in heart." This is what we are to learn, and not salvation merely, if we take salvation in its limited sense.

The earnest, but it often happens, untrained evangelist, eager to gain what are too readily supposed to be converts to Christ, keeps telling people to "come to Jesus," often adding, "You need do no more."

Now we object entirely (even in the first place) to this way of bringing the Gospel message to dead souls. How can it be expected that those, at least, who know little or nothing of the Scriptures, can all of a sudden profess to believe in Jesus as their Saviour, on mere hearsay. We do not limit the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in shedding light upon any darkened mind, by any means, and there are instances of souls being struck with a sense of sin in a moment, that, when followed up with sound teaching, led to a grasp of Christ in the heart, which results in a changed spirit, not merely an outwardly changed life, through fear of punishment; but those cases represent instances the more extraordinary working of the Spirit, than the ordinary, if we may venture to say so. If we take an example from natural, every-day experience, do we not find that we are very slow to believe, and love, and trust, some individual without having much know-

ledge of the character of that person? Indeed, sincerity blames those who are too prone to profess a genuine love on a slight acquaintance, and the depth of that so-called love may well be doubted.

Again, when the young ruler came to Jesus with, doubtless, a sincere enquiry as to "what good thing he might do to inherit eternal life," Christ did not tell him to believe in Him; the young man did not want to be told that; he evidently knew that Christ was a divine teacher but Christ made him aware of the hindrance which he did not suspect himself, and so his outwardly fair life, expressed in the words "What lack I yet?" was tested, and he could be no longer blind: in other words—self-deceived.

In our usual, regular congregations and Christian assemblies, it is an accepted fact that Jesus Christ lived and died to redeem mankind. To keep perpetually telling a professedly Christian congregation this known fact—that Jesus died, repeated, perhaps, many times, is only to repeat a truism. This is why there are so many lifeless professors, having "a name to live by," and who are starved for want of the "bread of life," which is no doubt "freely offered!" but offered so as not to feed. "The sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby" is what they want. They will tell you they believe in Jesus as well as you. Now, the disciples had Christ with them, when He taught them in that long continued and intensely practical sermon on the Mount; and before that time He had gone about all Galilee teaching and preaching in the synagogues.

We need hardly say that the call to believe in Christ as a Saviour in our time, is a different thing from the call to believe in Him in the early days of His manifestation, and of first-apostolic preaching. The now-prevailing acceptance of an historical fact—an all-convincing power—that is leavening society nearly all over the globe, necessitates a vaster and deeper study of the sacred Scriptures, to meet the growing intelligence of a more enlightened age. The infancy of the Christian Church was never destined to remain such, no more than any other infancy. The pioneers of the early church but paved the way, no doubt gloriously, sealing their testimony by their blood. In John the Baptist's time it was no truism to call upon men everywhere to "repent and believe the Gospel," but he did more than herald the Saviour—he charged the Pharisees and Sadducees to "bring forth fruits meet for repentance," when they came to his baptism with, doubtless, some idea in their minds that they were all right, as the descendants of Abraham. He rebuked vice, in high places, and that personally, and his life paid the penalty of uncompromising faithfulness.

To take another example of Christ—His manner of teaching—we find Him, in the case of self-righteous inquiry, meeting it with distinct teaching as to dead works; witness His answer to the question, "What shall we do that we might work the works of God?" "This is the work of God that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent." But he did not stop there. Christ knew these people only sought Him "because of the loaves which they did eat and were filled" (John vi. 26), and in the precious discourse that followed He opened up to them the true "Bread of life."

To those who feel a sort of fear lest what they are pleased to term "Sound Gospel" should take too practical a tone, and, according to their ideas, cut at the root of our cardinal Protestant doctrine of "justification by faith," we need only say that we believe in St. Paul's and St. James's definition of faith and works, as one and the same; one inseparable truth from different stand points.

Thank God for it, we need not travel far in these days of Bible research to find excellent preaching with the range of trained and cultivated preachers, (not trained orators merely),