

The Denier Alone With His Lord.

BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D.

The Lord hath risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon.—Luke 24: 34

The other appearance of the risen Lord to individuals on the day of Resurrection are related with much particularity, and at considerable length. John gives us the only account of our Lord's conversation with Mary Magdalene, Luke gives us in full detail the story of the interview with the two travellers on the road to Emmaus. Here is a third appearance, known to "the eleven, and them that were with them" on the Resurrection evening, and enumerated by Paul in the list of the appearances of the Lord, the account of which was the common gospel of himself and all the others and yet deep silence is preserved in regard to it. No word escaped Peter's lips as to what passed in the conversation between the denier and his Lord. That is very significant.

The other appearances of the risen Lord to individuals on the day of Resurrection suggest their own reasons. He appeared first to Mary Magdalene because she loved much. The love that made a timid woman brave, and the sorrow that filled her heart, to the exclusion of everything else, drew Jesus to her. The two on the road to Emmaus were puzzled, honest, painful seekers after truth. It was worth Christ's while to spend hours of that day of Resurrection in clearing questioning and sincere minds. Does not this third appearance explain itself? The brief spasm of cowardice and denial had changed into penitence when the Lord looked, and the bitter tears that fell were not only because of the denial, but because of the wound of that sharp arrow, the poisoned barb of which we are happy if we do not know the thought—"He will never know how ashamed and miserable I am; and his last look was reproach, and I shall never see his face any more." To respond to, and to satisfy, love, to clear and to steady thought, to soothe the agony of the penitent, were worthy works for the risen Lord. I venture to think that such a record of the use of such a day bears historical truth on its very face, because it is absolutely unlike what myth-making or hallucination, or the excited imagination of enthusiasts would have produced, if these had been the sources of the story of the Resurrection. But, apart from that, I wish this morning to try to gather the suggestions that come to us from this interview, and from the silence which is observed concerning them.

With regard to—

I.—THE FACT OF THE APPEARANCE ITSELF.

We can only come into the position rightly to understand its precious significance, if we try to represent to ourselves the state of mind of the man to whom it was granted. I have already touched upon that; let me, in the briefest possible way, recapitulate. As I have said, the momentary impulse to the cowardly crime passed away, and left a melted heart, true penitence, and profound sorrow. One sad day slowly wore away. Early on the next came the message which produced an effect upon Peter so great that the gospel, which in some sense is his gospel (I mean that "according to Mark") alone contains the record of it—the message from the open grave: "Tell my disciples and Peter that I go before you into Galilee." There followed the sudden rush to the grave, when the feet made heavy by heavy conscience were distanced by the light step of happy love, and "the other disciple did outrun Peter." The impulsive one of the two dashed into the sepulchre, just as he afterwards tumbled over the side of the boat, and floundered through the water to get to his Lord's feet, whilst John was content with looking, just as he afterwards was content to sit in the boat and say, "It is the Lord." But John's faith, too, outran Peter's, and he departed "believing," whilst Peter only attained to go away "wondering." And so another day wore away, and at some unknown hour in it, Jesus stood before Peter alone.

What did that appearance say to the penitent man? Of course it said to him what it said to all the rest, that death was conquered. It lifted his thoughts of his Master. It changed the whole atmosphere from gloom to sunshine, but it had a special message for him. It said that no fault, no denial, bars or diverts Christ's love. Peter, no doubt, as soon as the hope of the Resurrection began to dawn upon him, felt fear contending with his hope, and asked himself, "If he is risen will he ever speak to me again?" And now here he is with a quiet look on his face that says, "Notwithstanding thy denial, see, I have come to thee."

Ah! brethren, the impulsive fault of a moment, so soon repented of, so largely excusable, is far more venial than many of our denials. For a continuous life in contradiction to our profession is a blacker crime than a momentary fall, and they who, year in and year out, call themselves Christians, and deny their profession by the whole tenor of their lives, are more deeply guilty than was the apostle. But Jesus Christ comes to us, and no sin of ours, no denial of ours, can bar out his lingering, his reproachful, and yet his restoring, love and grace. A sin is inconsistent with the Christian profession. Blessed be God; we can venture to say no sin is incompatible with it. And none bars off wholly the love that

pours upon us all. True, we may shut it out. True; so long as the smallest or the greatest transgression, is unacknowledged and unrepented, it forms a non-conducting medium around us, and isolates us from the electric touch of that gracious love. But also true; it is there hovering around us, seeking an entrance. If the door be shut, still the knocking finger is upon it, and the great heart of the Knocker is waiting to enter. Though Peter had been a denier, because he was a penitent the Master came to him. No fault, no sin, cuts us off from the love of our Lord.

And then the other great lesson, closely connected with this, but yet capable of being treated separately for a moment, which we gather from the fact of the interview, is that Jesus Christ is always near the sorrowing heart that confesses its evil. He knew of Peter's penitence, if I might so say, in the grave; and, therefore, risen, his feet hastened to comfort and to soothe him. As surely as the shepherd hears the bleat of the lost sheep in the snow-drift, as surely as the mother hears the cry of her child, so surely is a penitent heart a magnet which draws Christ, in all his potent fullness and tenderness, to itself. He that heard and knew the tears of the denier, and his repentance, when in the dim regions of the dead, no less hears and knows the first faint beginnings of sorrow for sin, and bends down from his seat on the right hand of God, saying, "I dwell in the high and holy place with him also that is of a humble and contrite spirit, to revive the spirit of the contrite, and to revive the heart of the humble lives." No fault bars Christ's love. Christ is ever near the penitent spirit; and whilst he is yet a great way off, he has compassion, and runs and falls on his neck and kisses him.

Now let us look at—

THE INTERVIEW OF WHICH WE KNOW NOTHING.

We know nothing of what did pass; we know what must have passed. There is only one way by which a burdened soul can "get rid of its burden." There is only one thing that a conscience-stricken denier can say to his Saviour. And, blessed be God! there is only one thing that a Saviour can say to a conscience-stricken denier. There must have been penitence with tears; there must have been full absolution and remission. And so we are not indulging in baseless fancies when we say that we know what passed in that conversation of which no word ever escaped the lips of either party concerned. So, then, with that knowledge, just let me dwell upon one or two considerations suggested.

One is that the consciousness of Christ's love, uninterrupted by our transgression, is the mightiest power to deepen penitence and the consciousness of unworthiness. Do you not think that when the apostle saw in Christ's face, and heard from his lips, the full assurance of forgiveness, he was far more ashamed of himself than he had ever been in the hour of bitterest remorse?

Then, further, another consideration may be suggested, and that is the acknowledgment of sin is followed by immediate forgiveness. Do you think that when Peter turned to his Lord, who had come from the grave to soothe him, and said, "I have sinned," there was any pause before he said, "and thou art forgiven?" The only thing that keeps the Divine love from flowing into a man's heart is the barrier of unrepentance, because unrepented, sin. So soon as the acknowledgment of sin takes away the barrier—of course, by a force as natural as gravitation—the river of God's love flows into the heart. The consciousness of forgiveness may be radical; the fact of forgiveness is instantaneous. And the consciousness may be as instantaneous as the fact, though it often is not. "I believe in the forgiveness of sin;" and I believe that a man, that you, may at one moment be held and bound by the chains of sin, and at the next moment, as when the angel touched the limbs of this very apostle in prison, the chains may drop from off the ankles and wrists, and the prisoner may be free to follow the angel into light and liberty. Sometimes the change is instantaneous, and is no reason why it should not be an instantaneous change, experienced at this moment by any man or woman within these walls. Sometimes it is gradual. The Arctic spring comes with a leap, and one day there is thick-ribbed ice, and a few days after there is grass and flowers. A like swift transformation is within the limits of possibility for any of us, and, blessed be God! within the experience of a good many of us. There is no reason why it should not be that of each of us, as well as of this apostle.

Lastly, notice

III.—THE DEEP SILENCE IN WHICH THIS INTERVIEW IS SHROUDED.

I have already pointed to the occupations of that Resurrection day as bearing on their face the marks of veracity. It seems to me that if the story of the Resurrection is not history, the talk between the denier and the Master would have been a great deal too tempting a subject for romancers of any kind to have kept their hands off. If you read the apocryphal gospels you will see how eager they are to lay hold of any point in the true gospels, and spin a whole farrago of rubbish round about it. And do you think they should have ever let this incident alone without spilling it by expanding it, and putting all manner of vulgarities into their story about

it? But the men who told the story were telling simple facts, and when they did not know they said nothing.

But why did not Peter say anything about it? Because nobody had anything to do with it but himself and his Master. It was his business, and nobody else's. The other scene by the lake reinstated him in his office, and it was public because it concerned others also; but what passed when he was restored to his faith was of no concern to any one but the restorer and the restored. And so, dear friends, a religion which has a great deal to say about its individual experiences is in very slippery places. The less you think about your emotions, and eminently the less you talk about them, the sounder, the truer, and the purer they will be. Goods in a shop-window get fly-blown very quickly, and lose their lustre. All the deep secrets of a man's life, his love for his Lord, the way by which he came to him, his penitence for his sin, like his love for his wife, had better speak in deeds than in words to others. Of course while that is true on one side, we are not to forget the other side. Reticence as to the secret thing of my own personal experience is never to be extended so as to include silence as to the fact of my Christian profession. Sometimes it is needful, wise and Christ-like for a man to lift a corner of a bridal curtain, and let in the day to some extent, and to say, "Of whom I am chief, but I obtained mercy." Sometimes there is no such mighty power to draw others to the faith which we would fain impart, as to say, "Whether this man be a sinner or no I know not; but one thing I do know, that whereas I was blind now I see." Sometimes—always—a man must use his own personal experience cast into general forms, to emphasize his profession, and to enforce his appeals. So very touchingly, if you will turn to Peter's sermons in the Acts, you will find that he puts himself there (though he does not hint that it is himself) when he appeals to all his brethren, and says, "Ye denied the Holy One and the Just." The personal allusion would make his voice vibrate as he spoke, and give force to the charge. Similarly, in the letter which goes by his name—the second of the two Epistles of Peter—there is one little morsel of evidence that makes one inclined to think that it is his, notwithstanding the difficulties in the way, viz., that he sums up all the sins of the false teachers whom he is denouncing in this: "Denying the Lord that bought them." But with these limitations, and remembering that the statement is not one to be unconditionally and absolutely put, let the silence with regard to this interview teach us to guard the depths of our own Christian lives.

Now, dear brethren, have you ever gone apart with Jesus Christ, as if he and you were alone in the world? Have you ever spread out all your denials and faults before him? Have you ever felt the swift assurance of his forgiving love, covering over the whole heap, which dwindles as his hand lies upon it? Have you ever felt the increased loathing of yourselves which comes with the certainty that he has passed by all your sins? If you have not, you know very little about Christ, or about Christianity (if I may use the abstract word) or about yourselves; and your religion, or what you call your religion, is a very shallow and superficial and inoperative thing. Do not shrink from being alone with Jesus Christ. There is no better place for a guilty man, just as there is no better place for an erring child than its mother's bosom. When Peter had caught a dim glimpse of what Jesus Christ was he cried: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" When he knew his Saviour and himself better, he clung to him because he was so sinful. Do the same, and he will say to you: "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee. Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole. Go in peace, and be whole of thy plague."

Freedom as Affecting Character.

BY S. C. MITCHELL.

"Development of character under the responsibility of freedom is of much more consequence than conformity of conduct under the eye of authority." This well-balanced thought of President Hyde, of Bowdoin College, clings to the mind like a burr. I confess to a liking for all the words in the first prong of the sentence—"development," "character," "responsibility," "freedom." These deep-souled terms stand over against a series of words that suggest something outward, hollow, metallic; development is opposed to conformity, character to conduct, responsibility to eye-service, freedom to authority. In the contrasted phrases of this sentence we have revealed to us two contradictory aspects of mind, which pursue rival processes in school, society, State and church. The first glows with optimism, relying upon the intuitive and the initiative in man and believing in the progressive striving of his nature; the second is full of distrust, fearing that man cannot stand alone, and refusing in all the activities of life to take account of anything but the friction. The one directs its course according to principle; the other, according to rule. The one, placing its ear next to conscience, hears therein the murmur of the Infinites, as the roar of the ocean rever-