

The Ascension.

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"And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. And it came to pass, while He blessed them He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven."—Luke xxiv, 50, 51.

"And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight."—Acts i: 9.

Two of the four Evangelists, viz., Matthew and John, have no record of the Ascension. But the argument which infers ignorance from silence, which is always rash, is entirely discredited in this case. It is impossible to believe that Matthew, who wrote as the last word of his gospel the great words, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth . . . lo! I am with you always . . ." was ignorant of the fact which alone made these words credible. And it is equally possible to believe that the Evangelist who recorded the tender saying to Mary, "Go to my brethren and say unto them, I ascend to my Father and their Father," was ignorant of its fulfilment. The explanation of the silence is to be sought in a quite different direction. It comes from the fact that to the Evangelists, rightly, the Ascension was but the prolongation and the culmination of the Resurrection. That being recorded there was no need for the definite record of this.

There is another singular fact about these records, viz., that Luke has two accounts, one in the end of his gospel, one in the beginning of Acts; and that these two accounts are obviously different. The differences have been laid hold of as a weapon with which to attack the veracity of both accounts. But there again a little consideration clears the path. The very places in which they respectively occur might have solved the difficulty, for the one is at the end of a book, and the other is at the beginning of a book; and so, naturally, the one regards the Ascension as the end of the earthly life, and the other as the beginning of the heavenly. The one is all suffused with evening light; the other is radiant with the promise of a new day. The one is the record of the tender farewell, in the other the scene of parting has almost been absorbed in the forward look to the new phase of relationship which is to begin. If Luke had been a secular biographer, the critics would have been full of admiration at the delicacy of his touch, and the fineness of keeping in the two narratives, the picture being the same in both, and the scheme of coloring being different. But as he is only an Evangelist, they fall foul of him for his "discrepancies." It is worth our while to take both points of view.

And there is another thing to be remembered, that as the appendix of his account of the Ascension in the book of Acts, Luke tells us of the angel's message. "This same Jesus . . . shall . . . return." So there are three points of view which have all to be combined in order to get the whole significance of that mighty fact; the Ascension as an end; the Ascension as a beginning; the Ascension as the pledge of the return. Now take these three points.

I.—WE HAVE THE ASPECT OF THE ASCENSION AS AN END.

The narrative in Luke's Gospel, in its very brevity, does yet distinctly suggest that retrospective and valedictory tone. Note how, for instance, we are told the locality. "He led them out as far as Bethany." The name at once strikes a chord of remembrance. What memories clustered round it, and how natural it was that the parting should take place there! Not merely because the crest of the Mount of Olives hid the place from the gaze of the crowded city; but because it was within earshot almost of the home where so much of the sweet earthly fellowship that was now to end had passed. The same tone of regarding the scene as being the termination of those blessed years of sweet and familiar intercourse is marked by the fact, so human, so natural, so utterly inartificial, that he lifted his hands to bless them, moved by the same impulse with which so often we have wrung a hand at parting, and stammered, "God bless you!" And the same valedictory hue is further deepened by the fact that what Luke puts first is not the Ascension but the parting. "He was parted from them." That is the main fact, and he was "carried up into heaven" comes almost as a subordinate one. At all events it is represented as being the medium by which the parting was effected.

So the aspect of the Ascension thus presented is that of a tender farewell; the pathetic conclusion of three long, blessed years. And yet that is not all; for the Evangelist adds a very enigmatic word: "They returned to Jerusalem with great joy." Glad because he had gone? No! Glad merely because he had gone up? No! The saying is a riddle, left at the end of the book, for readers to ponder, and is a subtle link of connection with what is to be written in the next volume, when the aspect of the Ascension as an end is subordinate, and its aspect as a beginning is prominent. So regarded, it filled the disciples with joy. Thus you see, I think, that without any illegitimate straining of the expressions of

the text, we do come to the point of view from which, to begin with, this great event must be looked at. We have to take on the same view, and to regard that Ascension not only as the end of an epoch of sweet friendship, but as the solemn close and culmination of the whole earthly life. I have no time to dwell upon the thoughts that come crowding into one's mind when we take that point of view. But let me suggest, in the briefest way, one or two of them.

Here is the end, which circles round to, and is of a piece with, the beginning. "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go unto the Father." The Ascension corresponds with, and meets the miracle of, the Incarnation. And as the Word who became flesh, came by the natural path of human birth, and entered in by the gate through which we all enter, and yet come as none else have come, by His own will, in the miracle of His Incarnation, so at the end, he passed out from life through the gate by which we all pass, and "was obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross," and yet he passed likewise on a path which none but himself have trod, and ascended up to heaven, whence he descended to earth. He came into the world, not as leaving the Father, for he is "the Son of Man which is in heaven," and he ascended up on high, not as leaving us, for he is with us "always, even to the end of the world." Thus the Incarnation and the Ascension support each other.

But let me remind you how, in this connection, we have the very same combination of lowliness and gentleness with majesty and power which runs through the whole of the story of the earthly strife of Jesus Christ. Born in a stable, and waited on by angels, the subject of all the humiliations of humanity, and flashing forth through them all the power of Divinity. He ascends on high at last, and yet with no pomp nor visible splendor to the world, but only in the presence of a handful of loving hearts, choosing some dimple of the hill where its fold hid them from the city. As he came quietly and silently into the world, so quietly and silently he passed thence. In this connection there is more than the picturesque contrast between the rapture of Elijah, with its whirlwind, and chariot of fire and horses of fire, and the calm, slow rising, by no external medium raised, of the Christ. It was fit that the mortal should be swept up into the unfamiliar heaven by the pomp of angels and the chariot of fire. It was fit that, when Jesus ascended to his "own calm home, his habitation from eternity," there should be nothing visible but his own slowly rising form, with the hands uplifted, to shed benediction on the heads of the gazers beneath.

In like manner, regarding the Ascension as an end, may we not say that it is the seal of heaven impressed on the sacrifice of the Cross? "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted, and given him a Name which is above every name; that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow." We find in that intimate connection between the Cross and the Ascension, the key to the deep saying which carries references to both in itself, when the Lord spoke of himself as being lifted up and drawing all men unto him. The original primary reference no doubt was to the elevation of the Cross—"As Moses lifted up the serpent," a figure which comes in immediate connection with the other. But the final, and at the time of its being spoken, the mysterious reference was to the fact that in descending to the depth of humiliation he was rising to the height of glory. The zenith of the Ascension is the rebound from the nadir of the Cross. The lowliness of the stoop measures the loftiness of the elevation, and the Son of Man was most profoundly abased. The Cross and the Ascension, if I might use so violent a figure, are like the twin stars, of which the heavens present some examples, one dark and lustreless, one flashing with radiance of light, but knit together by an invisible vinculum, and revolving round a common centre. When he "parted from them, and was carried up into heaven," he ended the humiliation which caused the elevation.

And then, again, if one had time to dwell upon it, I might suggest that, regarded in its aspect as an end, this Ascension is also the culmination, and the natural conclusion of the Resurrection. As I have said, the Scripture point of view with reference to these two is not that they are two, but that the one is the starting-point of the line of which the other is the goal. The process which began when he rose from the dead, whatever view we may take of the condition of his earthly life during the forty days of parenthesis, could have no ending, rational and intelligible, except the Ascension. And thus we think of the Ascension not only as the end of a sweet friendship, but as the end of the gracious manifestation of the earthly life, the counterpart of the Incarnation and descent to earth, the end of the Cross and the culmination of Resurrection. The Son of Man, the same that also descended into the lowest parts of the earth, ascended up where he was before.

Now let us turn to the other aspect which the Evangelist gives, when he ceases to be an Evangelist, and becomes a church historian. Then he considers

II.—THE ASCENSION AS A BEGINNING.

The place which it holds in the Acts of the Apostles

explains the point of view from which it is to be regarded. It is the foundation of everything that the writer has afterwards to say. It is the basis of the church. It is the ground of all the activity which Christ's servants put forth. Not only its place explains this aspect of it, but the very first words of the book itself do the same. "The former treatise have I made . . . of all that Jesus began both to do and teach"—and now I am to tell you of an Ascension, and of all that Jesus continued to do and teach. So that the book is the history of the work of the Lord who was able to do that work, just because he had ascended up on high. The same impression is produced if we ponder the conversation which precedes the account of the Ascension in the book of Acts, which, though it touches the same topics as are touched by the words that precede the account in the gospel, yet presents them in a different aspect, and suggests the endowments with which the Christian community is to be invested, and the work which therefore it is to do in consequence of the Ascension of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Peter had caught that thought when, on the day of Pentecost, he said: "He being exalted to the right hand of the Father hath shed forth this which ye see and hear." And throughout the whole book the same point of view is kept up. "The work that is done upon earth he doeth it all himself."

So there is in this narrative nothing about parting, there is nothing about blessing. There is simply the ascending up, and the significant addition of the reception into the cloud, which, whilst he was yet plainly visible, and not dwindled by distance into a speck, received him out of their sight. The cloud was the symbol of the Divine Presence, which had hung over the tabernacle, which had sat between the cherubim, which had wrapped the shepherds and the angels on the mountain-side, which had come down in its brightness on the Mount of Transfiguration, and which now, the symbol of the Divine Presence, received the ascending Lord, a token to the men that stood gazing up into Heaven, that he had passed to the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Thus we have to think of the Ascension as being the groundwork and foundation of all the world-wide and age-long energy which the living Christ is exercising today. As one of the other Evangelists, or, at least, the appendix to his gospel, puts it, he ascended up on high, and "they went everywhere preaching the word; the Lord also working with them, and confirming the word with signs following." It is the ascended Christ who sends the Spirit upon men; it is the ascended Christ who opens men's hearts to hear; it is the ascended Christ that sends forth his messengers to the Gentiles; it is the ascended Christ who today is the energy of all the church's power, the whiteness of all the church's purity, the vitality of all the church's life. He lives, and therefore, there is a Christian community on the face of the earth He lives, and therefore it will never die.

So we, too, have to look to that risen Lord as being the power by which alone any of us can do either great or small work in his church. That Ascension is symbolically put as being to "the right hand of God." What is the right hand of God? The Divine Omnipotence. Where is it? Everywhere. What does sitting at the right hand of God mean? Wielding the powers of Omnipotence. And so he says, "All power is given unto me;" and he is working a work today, wider in its aspects than, though it be the application and consequence of, the work upon the cross. He said there, "It is finished!" but "the work of the ascended Jesus" will never be finished until "the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ."

There are other aspects of his work in heaven which your time will not allow me to dwell upon, though I cannot but signalize them. By the Ascension Christ begins to prepare a place for us. How could any of us stand in the presence of that eternal Light if he were not there? We should be like some savage or rustic swept up suddenly and put down in the middle of the glittering ring of courtiers round a throne, unless we could lift our eyes and recognize a known and loving face there. Where Christ is, I can be. He has taken human nature up into the glory, and other human natures will therefore find that it is a home.

The ascended Christ, to use the symbolism which one of the New Testament writers employs for illustration of a thought far greater than the symbol—like a high priest has passed within the veil, "there to appear in the presence of God for us." And the intercession which is far more than petition, and is the whole action of the dear Lord who identifies us with himself, and whose mighty work is ever present before the Divine mind as an element in his dealings, that intercession is being carried on for ever for us all. So, "set your affections on things above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God." So, except his help is your work, and do the work which he has left you to carry on here. So, face death and the dim kingdoms beyond, without quiver and without doubt, assured that where the treasure is, there the heart will be also; and where the Master is, there the servants who follow in his steps will be also at last,

And now there is the third aspect here of