

He repeated it, and added amongst other words, those of our text : "Receive ye the Holy Ghost. If ye perchance forgive, or have forgiven, the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If ye still retain the sins of any, they have been retained."

I invite you to consider these words, not in any controversial sense, but in their simple historical meaning.

What did they mean, just then and there? Had the assembled disciples then condoned the sins of any who were present among them, on this the first occasion of their gathering together after the Lord's death? Were there any absentees from that gathering, absent because they had offended beyond all possibility of restoration, and their sins had been retained?

To ask the question almost answers it. There was then one present, with whom it had been, "as when a standard-bearer fainteth"; who above and beyond all the rest, had professed fidelity unconquerable, undying adhesion to the Master whom they loved: and who, in the hour of shame and peril, had but followed him at a distance, and afterwards denied him thrice. On the other side there was one then present who had stood by His cross to the bitter end, save for one short interval, occasioned by his reception of his Lord's last earthly charge. There were several who had partaken in the first flight and desertion of the leader. There *may* have been among them some of whom we have no specific record, who beside desertion were in some sort chargeable with denial and repudiation, for all we know. There was one absentee, Thomas, not accounted for. There was one more, accounted for in a way only too certain and terrible,—the traitor who had gone to his own place.

Out of these units there was an assemblage of disciples, the first general gathering together after the resurrection, to meet their Lord. And to this assemblage the words of our text were spoken: "Do ye forgive the sins of any? They are forgiven. Do ye still retain the sins of any? They have been retained."