

PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

EMMANUEL.

"They shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted, is God with us."—MATTHEW I. 23.

This is a prophecy taken from the writings of the great evangelical prophet, Isaiah. It is a prophecy which was intended to apply to and describe the birth of Messiah. It is not a mere accommodation of another historic event to this one, on account of a general resemblance between the two. It may have had its fulfilment in the birth of a child not long after, and the deliverance of Judah from the yoke of invasion. But even if so the chief reference is none the less to the heavenly child, born of the Virgin Mary, in the fulness of time, for the world's redemption and salvation. "They shall call His name Emmanuel," that is, they shall have good cause and occasion to call Him so; He will be signally entitled to bear the name. They never did actually call the Saviour by this name. He never either assumed or received this name in public, and among men. He was known by the name "Jesus," and by the compound designation "Jesus-Christ." The name Emmanuel is more comprehensively and more grandly descriptive of His nature, His coming, His work among men. A meditation on this subject, if it has truth and wisdom in it, ought to help us to keep our great Christian festival with joy and profit, both to ourselves and others.

There is a sense in which this descriptive title might with propriety be applied—indeed, we find it was so applied—to other persons than Jesus Christ, living in times long before His. It is worth while looking at some of the Old Testament scriptures which bear this out. Genesis xxvi 24 says, concerning Isaac, "And the Lord appeared unto him the same night and said, I am the God of Abraham, thy father; fear not, for I am with thee" in a lower and relative sense Isaac might have been named Emmanuel by his people and by his neighbors—and will bless thee and multiply thy seed, for my servant Abraham's sake." Indeed, this presence of God with His servant was so manifest a thing, that Abimelech and his friends came to him and said, in explanation of their change of disposition and behavior towards him, "We saw certainly that the Lord was with thee, and we said, Let there be an oath betwixt us, and a covenant." So, too, it is said that "the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man." And Jacob said in dying, "God shall be with you, and bring you again unto the land of your fathers." Of young David, while yet in his father's house, it is said, "He is cunning in playing, and a mighty valiant man, and a man of war, and prudent in matters, and a comely person, and"—to crown all with immaculate charm, and to bind all together in undecaying strength, it is called—"the Lord is with him." Solomon prayed at the dedication of the Temple, "The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers." And the prophet Zechariah represents ten men of different nations taking hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, and saying, "We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." So that the idea is not revealed for the first time in the birth and coming of Jesus Christ. There is reason to suppose that even the fact of incarnation was, in a sense, and for some particular occasions, antedated by himself. But how greatly He advances the idea, how singularly and divinely He illustrates the fact, the Gospel history tells us, and this season of the year brings joyfully to our memory.

Emmanuel is a word which natural man could not make, for the idea contained in it is not natural in the bosom of humanity. God above us, away from us, gone up from the earth in displeasure; God ruling the world, and watching His occasions to come forth upon men with reproofs and sudden judgments—those are our instinctive thoughts. They are thoughts, too, which never vanish away; and they are not peculiar to any one age or nation. You find them everywhere, and among all people. A God all smiles, and with nothing but favors in his hands, has never been imagined by man. And is not imagined now. Let some men say what they will, they cannot persuade the mass of men that such a God exists. The human conscience testifies for truth and justice, has respect to some unalterable law, points to God as the source of the law, reproves for sin, calls for moral judgment, and will not accept superficial remedy. If the thought, "God with us," were easy and natural, we should not have our attention called to it in this passage as to a great wonder: "Behold—and they shall call His name Emmanuel." In Him God comes nearer. Or say if you will that He reveals in Him the nearness to which, by our estrangement and sin, or through our natural dullness and incapacity, we are blind and insensible. Say, if you will, that God is naturally near to man, notwithstanding man's natural thought that he is not. It is quite true. He besets us behind and before. He feeds with His own bountiful hand every living thing. He cannot "come down," it may be said, since He is always, in His essential thought and being, beneath all depths. He cannot become merciful, since He is eternally merciful, and kind, and pitiful. Still, if men will not believe this, if they go on repeating to their own hearts that He must also be full of justice, and truth, and holiness; while of themselves they can see no method of harmony by which these apparently diverse and almost opposite qualities in God can act together beneficially for men; we come to the same conclusion practically, that there is a need for some divine interposition of a quite peculiar kind, by which God shall come actually nearer, or by which the nearness that already exists may be revealed in such forms and to such effects as will constitute man's salvation. The entire truth comprehends both ideas. There is a natural nearness of God to man which does not need to be constituted and made, but only to be revealed and explained; and there is also a new and gracious nearness of God which is constituted and made by Him whose name is thus Emmanuel. This last is the nearness into which God "comes," for which there has been moral locomotion; which is, necessarily, a thing of degrees, and is regulated in each particular case by the

amount of readiness existing. This is "coming down" indeed. This is "drawing nigh" by traversing vast moral distances, distances quite measureless by us, and may well, on contemplation of condescension so wonderful, be hailed, as it is in our passage, with an exclamation of surprise:—"Behold—Emmanuel!"—God with us.

God with us in wonderful condescension.—For, what is the coming thus announced and signalled, that is to be for ever above all other Divine comings among men? It is not an advent illustrated by any visible glory on the heavens. It is not the "rending" or "bowing" of the heavens that He may come down, as He once did, in fire and storm proclaiming His majesty and holiness to a sinful, trembling world. Nor is it a swift passage round the earth in whirlwind—cloudy dust scattered from His feet. It is not even the shining of God through the angel face nor the appearance of the Divine power in the person of some virtuous and mighty monarch gathering the splendours of this world about him while he reveals a far greater. It is the virgin's womb, the manger-cradle, the lowly conditions, the poor estate. Of course the great step in Divine condescension is for God to be in human nature at all—to take truly a human body and human soul as the shrine, and residence, and organ of the Deity. The incarnation is the great miracle of love, holding all miracles in itself. But it is quite conceivable that the incarnation might have been accomplished by means of very different earthly circumstances, and so as to be divested of all those special marks of condescension which, as we know, impart to it, as it is presented to us in the Gospel history, such considerateness, such tenderness, such grace of love and thoughtful sympathy. How beautifully touching are all the circumstances of the case! The Church never wearies in recalling them. The story of the Saviour's birth is told, is read, is listened to every year afresh without the least abatement of interest. A new edition of the book is as it were published every year. There have been eighteen hundred editions, and the interest is growing and not waning. Why does the story thus find its way so surely to the common heart? In part, we cannot but imagine, because it is a story which has its unfolding from first to last amid scenes of common life. The simple maiden-mother from the village among the hills; the birth on a journey away from home, the birthplace among the cattle in a baid stable, or as probably in a limestone cave used for stable and for shelter for pilgrims when the inn was full; the worship of the shepherds, the condescension in all that is not only striking, but tender and beautiful. It appeals to the common heart. It interests the simple. It comforts the poor and fills them with a wonder they cannot express, as they see how near God has come, not to humanity alone, but to them. They—all the simple and the poor, and the villagers, and the shepherds, and the tillers of the ground, and the country-folks, and all mothers, and all young children, can put a special emphasis if they will into the word Emmanuel, and say God with us; while also, in proportion as the learned, and the wealthy, and the great are in disposition simple and childlike, they will sympathize with their humbler and poorer brethren, and be glad of the mode as well as of the fact of the great manifestation, since thus without compromise of dignity or shadowing of true glory, there is as it were a touch of favour given to those who numerically constitute the great mass of mankind.

II.

Emmanuel—God with us to take away the sin that hinders us from being with God, and from believing fully that God can be with us. Evidently this is one of the special things that needs to be done by the coming of God among men. If this were not done, nothing else, of any real or permanent worth, could be done. If sin were not taken away from us, no matter what might be brought, Heaven itself might be brought, in description and picture, but of what avail if the elements of hell are left all through the world, and brooding in the individual breast? In a hospital filled with sick and wounded men you may put coloured windows, you may hang pictures on the walls, and you may fill the air with soft music; and the wounded weary men would probably, most of them, look and listen for a little while with some interest, and then they would say, with only a deeper weariness, "You are very kind, but oh if you could only make us well!" Then, this descent of God in Christ, this drawing near to us in the moral and vital relations of our life in Him, what is it in relation to sin? Certainly no merely artistic treatment of the matter. He does not come as a monarch with a great procession. He does not come as an artist to open galleries of celestial pictures, nor as a philosophic describer and teacher of recondite things, nor as a poetic singer of heavenly lays to be chanted by angelic choirs. He comes as a physician. Right into the heart of the sick, weary, heavy-laden world He comes; and looking round with profoundest sympathy, and as though almost made sick Himself by the sight, says, "I am come to heal you, but I cannot do it by prescription, or by good advice, or by showing the example of perfect health in Myself. No way but one—I must die that you may live." We are presuming thus to put words into the mouth of Christ, but they are words only feebly descriptive of the facts and deeds of His life and history. He is here, as an Infant, introduced into the world by the angels in their brightness and with their songs; but we know that when the years of His youth and opening manhood shall have sped, He will go away, and will have no angels to attend Him then. See, He goes away in anguish, in deep death-sorrow, in loneliness, and with a cry, "bearing our sins in His own body on the tree," "making an end of sin by the sacrifice of Himself." Emmanuel, also, to make an end of sin in us, and to give us a living part in His own holy life. Emmanuel to be born in us, reproducing Himself, a true Christ in every believing breast: thus making thousands of Bethlehems in every part of the world, some higher and some humbler than the first. Christ in us the hope of glory. Christ changing us into His own image, and ever more and more, "from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.

III.

Emmanuel—God with us to change weakness into strength, and to keep the strength from falling. After the fever are the days of convalescence. The death-sickness has gone, but the full life-strength has not yet come. That comes slowly, and in part fitfully. To the personal consciousness the strength at times is no more than that of the bruised reed or the bending willow. To will is present, but how to perform that which is good—how to perform the very thing that has been willed—is not found. How to find that secret, how to get practical daily strength for daily need and duty, for the carrying out of the practical convictions, for the doing of what the hand has found to do? That is the great discovery. It was never fully made until Christ came; or by those who were expecting His coming. It could not be made. There was no strength anywhere to be discovered. No sealed fountain of energy lay in human nature ready to rise at the first unceasing touch. Not in natural virtue or courage did the secret lie. Not in blood, not in flesh, not in the will of man—all these are but the terms of weakness and insufficiency considered in themselves; and there needs to be in them and through them, the strength of all strength, the thought of all thought, the steadfast willing which never changes, nor ever fails of accomplishment. Well, but all this is but to say that our need is a present God, a Lord Jehovah in whom is everlasting strength, in whose power we may work, on whose arm we may lean, by the breath of whose Spirit we may live and move, and have this our better being. Jesus is Emmanuel for this end among others—to enable us to say that when we are weak then are we strong, because His strength is ours, and because it is made perfect in weakness.

IV.

Emmanuel—God with us, to wipe away our tears, and to comfort us in our sorrow. This is the child who is to be "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." His human life is to be a burden to him rather than a joy. He is to weep at graves, to groan and shudder in dark gardens of agony, raise the piercing death-cry on a cross—and yet, or rather, we might say therefore, He is to be such a comforter of others, as never has been in the world before. His voice in sick rooms and on lonely paths will be softer than summer breeze, sweeter than a lover's voice. He is to stand by the bed that holds the dead child gazed at and sorrowed over by the weeping mother; by the bier of the young man carried out to his burial; by the grave after it has received its tenant, and say to every stricken mourner who will hear his words—"Let not your heart be troubled." Is not all this some fulfilment of the beautiful promise—"And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."

It is also true that Emmanuel brings sorrow into the world with Him. He teaches us what to be sorry for, and how to weep. "Our affliction aboundeth by Christ." But all such sorrowing ends in joy. The consolation runs quickly and fully along the very channel which has been opened or deepened by the affliction. This weeping endures for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

V.

Emmanuel—God with us, to relieve and soften the deep dark mysteries of this life—mysteries which, without Him and His grace, would completely overcloud and, in the spiritual sense, overwhelm us. The real mysteries of this life are, substantially, as deep and as dark now as they were thousands of years ago, indeed, ever since the human world began. Here they stand around us, some of them quite close to us, others farther off making a dim and sad circumference to our life; and all this world's great progress flashes no light upon them, furnishes nothing which approaches or promises even an intellectual solution of them. The Gospel itself is not an intellectual solution of them. It is a moral victory over them; but they are not annihilated or made less. Sin still works in every rational soul. Evil stalks abroad in the light of day, and there is none to hinder it. Monarchs and mighty men who turn whole nations into battle-fields, and whole peoples into armies, are largely on the side of evil. They call evil good, and there is none to rebuke or answer. Pain racks many gentle sensitive frames, tenanted by gentle and sensitive spirits which have sinned far less than multitudes of the strong and healthy to whom pain never comes. And disaster sweeps like a desolating flood over many a field of human industry. And death, sudden and unexpected, darkens many a happy home. And the grave is as silent as when Abel was buried, as when patriarchs were gathered to their fathers. And hearts may break with anxiety, and the air may, at times, be full of sighs and questionings. But there is no reply. Not a grave stirs. Not a star from on high gives answer. Not the flash or the wafting of an angel passing anywhere; nor the softest words spoken to us by any who have died. It sometimes grows awful. And the more, that your wise men can do just as little as your foolish men, as little as the babes in your cradles, to give explanation.

But now listen—"God with us"—not to reason with us until we shall declare ourselves satisfied; not to explain to us all we might desire to know; not to institute schools of celestial philosophy, or higher systems of theology all over the world; but God with us to say: "It is I, be not afraid; to tell us that the world is not fatherless, is not forsaken, is not neglected, that all things are ruled, that nothing is happening by chance, and that we must trust and wait. Yes, the substance of the Divine revelation on the mysteries of our life and of this world is this—and the more we consider it, the greater it will appear—"You do not know, but I know—let that be enough. Keep near to me. Be afraid of no darkness when you grasp my hand. Possess your soul in patience, and watch for the morning."

VI.

God with us, to prepare us for going to be for ever with Him. Out of birth comes death; but out of death comes birth again. Out of change comes that which itself must change and pass away. But all this transiency, and wasting sickness of the world, and perpetual passing away of men, is furnishing to immortal spirits the secret elements of perma-