

## The Solitariness of Christ in His Temptations.

BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D.

Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations, Luke 22 : 28.

We wonder at the disciples when we read of the unseemly strife for precedence which jars on the tender solemnities of the Last Supper. We think them strangely unsympathetic and selfish; and so they were. But do not let us be too hard on them, nor forget that there was a very natural reason for the close connection which is found in the gospels between our Lord's announcements of his sufferings and this eager dispute as to who should be the greatest in the kingdom. They dimly understood what he meant, but they did understand this much, that his "sufferings" were immediately to precede His "glory"—and so it is not, after all, to be so much wondered at if the apparent approach of these made the settlement of their places in the impending kingdom seem to them a very pressing question. We should probably have thought so too, if we had been among them.

Perhaps, too, the immediate occasion of this strife should be accounted the greatest, which drew from Christ the words of our text, may have been the unwillingness of each to injure his possible claim to pre-eminence by doing the servant's tasks at the modest meal. May we not suppose that the basin and the towel were refused by one after another, with muttered words growing louder and angrier: "It is not my place," says Peter; "you, Andrew, take it"—and so from hand to hand it goes, till the Master ends the strife and takes it Himself to wash their feet. Then, when He had sat down again, He may have spoken the words of which our text is part—in which he tells the wrangling disciples what is the true law of honor in His Kingdom, namely, service, and points to Himself as the great example. With what emphasis the pathetic incident of the foot-washing invests the clause before our text: "I am among you as he that serveth." On that disclosure of the true law of pre-eminence in His kingdom there follows in this and following verses the assurance that, unseemly as their strife, there was reward for them, and places of dignity there, because in all their selfishness and infirmity they had still clung to their Master.

This being the original purpose of these words, I venture to use them for another. They give us, if I mistake not, a wonderful glimpse into the heart of Christ, and a most pathetic revelation of His thoughts and experiences, all the more precious because it is quite incidental and, we may say, unconscious.

### I. See then, here the tempted Christ.

In one sense our Lord is His own perpetual theme. He is ever speaking of Himself, inasmuch as He is ever presenting what He is to us, and what He claims of us. In another sense He scarcely ever speaks of Himself, inasmuch as deep silence, for the most part, lies over His own inward experiences. How precious therefore, and how profoundly significant is that word here—"in my temptation!" So He summed up all His life. To feel the full force of the expression, it should be remembered that the temptation in the wilderness was past before His first disciple attached himself to Him, and that the conflict in Gethsemane had not yet come when these words were spoken. The period to which they refer, therefore, lies altogether within these limits, including neither. After the former, "Satan," we read, "departed from Him for a season." Before the latter we read, "the prince of this world cometh." The space between, of which people are so apt to think as free from temptation, is the time of which our Lord is speaking now. The time when His followers, "complicated with Him" is to His consciousness the time of His "temptations."

That is not the point of view from which the gospel narratives present it, for the plain reason that they are not autobiographies, and that Jesus said little about the continuous assaults to which He was exposed. It is not the point of view from which we often think of it. We are too apt to conceive of Christ's temptations as all gathered together—curdled and clotted, as it were, at the two ends of His life, leaving the space between free. But we cannot understand the meaning of that life, nor feel aright the love and help that breathe from it, unless we think of it as a field of continual and diversified temptations.

How remarkable is the choice of the expression! To Christ, His life, looking back on it, does not so much present itself in the aspect of sorrow, difficulty or pain, as in that of temptation. He looked upon all outward things mainly with regard to their power to help or to hinder His life's work. So, for us sorrow or joy should matter comparatively little. The evil in the evil should be felt to be sin, and the true cross and burden of life should be to us, as to our Master, the appeals it makes to us to abandon our tasks, and fling away our filial dependence and submission.

This is not the place to plunge into the thorny questions which surround the thought of the tempted Christ. However these may be solved the great fact remains that His temptations were most real and unceasing. It was

no sham fight which he fought. The story of the wilderness is the story of a most real conflict; and that conflict is waged all through His life. True, the traces of it are few. The battle was fought on both sides in grim silence, as sometimes men wage a mortal struggle without a sound. But if there were no other witness of the sore conflict, the Victor's shout at the close would be enough. His last words, "I have overcome the world" sound the note of triumph and tell how sharp had been the strife. So long and hard had it been that He cannot forget it, even in heaven, and from the throne holds forth to all the churches the hope of overcoming, "even as I also overcame." As on some battlefield whence all traces of the agony and fury have passed away, and harvests wave and larks sing, where blood ran and men groaned their lives out, some grey stone raised by the victor remains, and only the trophy tells of the forgotten fight, so that monumental word, "I have overcome" stands to all ages as the record of the silent, life-long conflict.

It is not for us to know how the sinless Christ was tempted. There are depths beyond our reach. This we can understand, that a sinless manhood is not above the reach of temptation; and this besides, that, to such a nature, the temptations must be suggested from without, not presented from within. The desire for food is simply a physical craving, but another personality than His own uses it to incite the Son to abandon dependence for His physical life on God. The trust in God's protection is holy and good, and it may be truest wisdom and piety to incur danger in dependence on it, when God's service calls, but a mocking voice without suggests, under the cloak of it, a needless rushing into peril at no call of conscience, and for no end of mercy, which is not religion, but self-will. The desire to have the world for His own lay in Christ's deepest heart, but the enemy of Christ and man, who thought the world his already, used it as giving occasion to suggest a smoother and shorter road to win all men unto him than the "Via dolorosa" of the cross. So the sinless Christ was tempted, in various forms, of these first temptations, throughout His life. The path which He had to tread was ever before Him, the shadow of the Cross was flung along His road from the first. The pain and sorrow, the shame and spitting, the contradiction of sinners against Himself, the easier path which needed but a wish to become His, the shrinking of flesh—all these made their appeal to Him, and every step of the path which He trod for us was trodden by the power of a fresh consecration for Himself to His task and a fresh victory over temptation.

Let us not seek to analyse. Let us be content to worship as we look. Let us think of the tempted Christ, that our conceptions of His sinlessness may be increased. His was no untried and cloistered virtue, pure because never brought into contact with seducing evil, but a militant and victorious goodness, that was able to withstand in the evil days. Let us think of the tempted Christ that our thankful thoughts of what He bore for us may be warmer and more adequate, as we stand afar off and look on at the mystery of His battle with our enemies and His. Let us think of the tempted Christ to make the lighter burden of our cross, and our less terrible conflict easier to bear and to wage. So will He "continue with us in our temptations," and patience and victory flow to us from Him.

### II. See here the lonely Christ.

There is no aspect of our Lord's life more pathetic than that of His profound loneliness. I suppose the most utterly solitary man that ever lived was Jesus Christ. If we think of the facts of His life, we see how His nearest kindred stood aloof from Him, how "there was none to praise, and very few to love;" and how, even in the small company of His friends, there were absolutely none who either understood Him or sympathised with Him. We hear a great deal about the solitude in which men of genius live, and how all great souls are necessarily lonely. That is true, and that solitude of great men is one of the compensation which run through life, and make the lots of the many little, more enviable than that of the few great. "The little hills rejoice together on every side," but far above their smiling companionships, the alpine peak lifts itself into the cold air, and though it be "visited all night by troops of stars," is lonely amid the silence and the snow. Talk of the solitude of pure character amid evil, like Lot in Sodom, or the loneliness of uncomprehended aims and unshared thoughts—who ever experienced that as keenly as Christ did? That perfect purity must needs have been hurt by the sin of men as none else have ever been. That loving heart-yearning for the solace of an answering heart must needs have felt a sharper pang of unrequited love than ever pained another. That spirit to which the things that are seen were shadows, and the Father and the Father's house the ever present, only realities, must have felt itself parted from the men whose portion was in this life by a gulf broader than ever opened between any other two souls that shared together human life.

The more pure and lofty a nature, the more keen its sensitiveness, the more exquisite its delights, and the sharper its pains. The more loving and unselfish a heart the more its longing for companionship; and the more its aching in loneliness.

Very significant and pathetic are many points in the

gospel story bearing on this matter. The very choice of the twelve had for its first purpose, "that they should be with Him," as one of the evangelists tells us. We know how constantly He took the three who were nearest to Him along with Him, and that surely not merely that they might be "eye witnesses of His majesty" on the holy mount, or of His agony in Gethsemane, but as having a real gladness and strength even in their companionship amid the mystery of glory as amid the power of darkness. We read of His being alone but twice in all the gospels, and both times for prayer. And surely the dullest ear can hear a note of pain in that prophetic word: "The hour cometh that ye shall be scattered, every man to His own, and shall leave me alone;" while every heart must feel the pitiful pathos of the plea, "Tarry ye here, and watch with Me." Even in that supreme hour He longs for human companionship, however uncomprehending, and stretches out His hands in the great darkness, to feel the touch of a hand of flesh and blood—and alas, for poor, feeble love! He gropes for it in vain. Surely the horror of utter solitude is one of the elements of His passion grave and sorrowful enough to be named by the side of the other bitterness poured into that cup, even as it was pain enough to form a substantive feature of the great prophetic picture: "I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none."

So here a deep pain in His loneliness is implied in these words of our text which put the disciples' participation in the glories of His throne as the issue of their loyal continuance with Him in the conflict of earth. These, and these only, had been by His side, and so much does He care for their companionship, that therefore they shall share His dominion.

That lonely Christ sympathises with all solitary hearts. If ever we feel ourselves misunderstood and thrown back upon ourselves; if ever our heart's burden of love is rejected; if our outward lives be lonely and earth yields nothing to stay our longing for companionship; if our hearts have been filled with dear ones and are now empty, or but filled with tears, let us think of Him and say, "Yet I am not alone." He lived alone, alone he died, that no heart might be solitary any more. "Could ye not watch with Me?" was His gentle rebuke in Gethsemane. "Lo, I am with you always," is His mighty promise from the throne. In every step of life we may have Him for a companion, a friend closer than all other, nearer us than our very selves, if we may so say—and in the valley of the shadow of death we need fear no evil, for He will be with us.

### III. See here the grateful Christ.

I almost hesitate to use the word, but there seems a distinct ring of thanks in the expression, and in the connection. And we need not wonder at that if we rightly understand it. There is nothing in it inconsistent with our Lord's character and relations to His disciples. Do you remember another instance in which one seems to hear the same tone, namely, in the marked warmth with which He acknowledges the beautiful service of Mary in breaking the fragrant ointment of nard upon His head?

All true love is glad when it is met, glad to give and glad to receive. Was it not a joy to Jesus to be waited on by the ministering woman? Would he not thank them because they served Him for love? I trow, yes. And if anyone stumbles at the word "grateful" as applied to Him, we do not care about the word so long as it is seen that His heart was gladdened by loving friends, and that He recognized in their society a ministry of love.

Notice, too, the loving estimate of what these disciples had done. Their companionship had been imperfect enough at best. They had given Him but blind affection dashed with much selfishness. In an hour or two they would all have forsaken Him and fled. He knew all that was lacking in them, and the cowardly abandonment which was so near. But He has not a word to say of all this. He does not count jealously the flaws in our work, or reject it because it is incomplete. So here is the great truth clearly set forth, that where there is a loving heart there is acceptable service. It is possible that our poor, imperfect deeds shall be an odor of a sweet smell acceptable, well-pleasing to Him. Which of us that is a father is not glad at his children's gifts, even though they be purchased with his own money, and be of little use? They mean love, so they are precious. And Christ, in like manner, gladly accepts what we bring, even though it be love chilled by selfishness, and faith broken by doubt, and submission crossed by self-will. The living heart of the disciples' acceptable service was their love, far less intelligent and entire than ours may be. They were joined to our Lord, though with but partial sympathy and knowledge, in His temptations. It is possible for us to be joined to Jesus Christ more closely and more truly than they were during His earthly life. Union with Him here is union with Him hereafter. If we abide in Him amid the shows and shadows of earth, He will continue with us in our temptations, and so the fellowship begun on earth will be perfected in heaven: "If so be that we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together."—Selected.

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