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(S. John i., 18–29.)

THE WITNESS OF THE BAPTIST.

We read in the other Gospels of the religious revival which the preaching of the Baptist had brought about. It does not belong to the purpose of the writer of the Fourth Gospel to tell us of the multitudes who came to hear the Preacher in the wilderness; but it was evident to all men that an important religious movement was going on and the Church at Jerusalem could not ignore it. Besides, they also were looking for some great One and—might not this be He? He appeared amongst them at any rate with the credentials of a prophet which had ever been found in a message.

(v. 19.) This man had plainly a message, and his hermit life and his hermit dress, keeping up the traditions of the prophets, added a certain authority to his message; so the rulers of the Jews sent a deputation to ask the Baptist who he was. He might even be the Christ Himself, for, though prophecy is so luminous in the light of its fulfilment, the Jews do not appear to have looked for prophet, king, priest, and sacrificial victim, in One.

(v. 20.) John confessed and denied not. He said "I am not the Christ." We can conceive that even he might have been misled by his success as a preacher into an awed questioning with himself as to whether he were indeed the Coming One. But the preacher in the wilderness escaped this danger because his thoughts were not concerned with himself.

(v. 21.) His questioners seemed determined to find in him the fulfilment of prophecy, and they were right and John was wrong. "Art thou Elijah?"¹ they say, looking for the fulfilment of the prediction in Malachi. And he said, "I am not." But our Lord says of him "And if ye will receive it, this is Elijah which was for to come."² Teachers sent from God hardly recognise the significance of their work; much less that they themselves have been thought of from of old in the counsels of God. One more question—"Art thou the Prophet?"—the Prophet like unto himself, whose coming was foretold by Moses,³ who was to be, as he, a leader and commander of the people. "No," was the simple answer.

(v. 22). [sic] The questioners are baffled and begin to be displeased. If the Baptist have indeed no divine sanction, what right has he to carry away people with his authoritative preaching? What account has he to give of himself?

(v. 23.) John replies by a figure, familiar to the prophets, taken from the progress of an Eastern Monarch. To this day it is the same. The King is preceded by his messengers who run before him hot-foot crying—"Make ready the way, make ready the way," and every labourer who hears is bound to leave his work in the fields and hasten to mend the ruts or even to lay miles of road, where none existed, that the King may have a smooth progress. The Baptist has declared his mission; he is not the Christ, but his coming is a certain proclamation of the near approach of Him who was the expectation of the Jews.

(v. 25.) They understand well enough this reference to the prophecy of Isaiah,⁴ but

they are captious; they are not ready to receive that which they hear; and so they challenge John's right to baptise if he has no authority to make disciples.

(v. 26.) It might be that at that moment the eye of the speaker alighted upon Him Whom he had just proclaimed as King. "I baptise with water," he says, to repentance, that the people may be ready; but, in the midst of you, among you at this moment, all unaware to you while you question me, standeth that very One, the King, for Whom I am not worthy to do the office of the humblest slave. We long to know the rest, whether conviction came to this deputation of the Jews and what answer they took to those that sent them. But these are not important matters. Most important for us, parents and teachers, helpers and guides in any way to those about us, it is to study this example of a man sent from God to bear witness of the Light. To all of us who get a following of disciples, if it be only the little ones about our knee, are put these very questions to which the Baptist was able to give faithful answers. We, who teach and train, can hardly do better than to take S. John the Baptist as our patron saint, and prepare ourselves, by his example, with unconscious answers to the questions which are unconsciously put to us. Whenever we allow our little following to suppose that our opinions are final, our authority absolute and self-sustained, our teaching right and other teaching wrong; whenever we try to hem them in by the narrow thoughts of the school, the sect, the family, are we not failing from the faithfulness of the Baptist? Are we indeed giving his simple and emphatic denial, "I am not the Christ?" Well for us if our Master should say to each of us, as to the Baptist, "Friend, go up higher," (This is Elijah which was for to come); and, when we say in our humility—"we are no heaven-sent teachers with a special message from God," He should say of us that we too are, in our small way, prophets and teachers sent forth by Him to bear witness of the Light.

Once more the Baptist sets us an ensample. He does not choose to be anybody; he empties himself, he has no personal claims, he is "a voice," a voice whose office it is to herald the approach, proclaim the nearness, of our King. In a sense each of us is a voice; we all seek expression; the more modes of expression we find, the fuller and richer is our life. Expression is to us, life; suppression, death. But not all voices utter the same name. Does a great artist paint a picture and, behind and through the marvellous technique, does his inspiring idea speak to our souls? If so, the artist utters another Name than his own. But are we content to admire the picture for itself and in itself? Does it fail to reach out of itself towards any of those thoughts by which men live, though it be in the broad sweep of a sky, the seal upon a countenance? In such a picture the artist utters a name, but it is his own. It is not only the great works of great people that express a name. We all remember the vivid scene in that carpenter's shop where Adam and Seth Bede each produces a door. Seth, though he had great spiritual searchings of heart, made a door which expressed his own name, a poor, incomplete, thing, the scoff of the workshop. Adam, though he would not have called himself religious, made a door fit and perfect; which expressed the highest Name. It is well to remember that, not only in our words but in our works and ways, we must needs express always a name, that name which is above everything to us, and which must needs be either our own poor name or the name of Him Who stands amongst us in our midst and Whose shoe's latchet we are not worthy to unloose.

In one more respect we, as teachers, shall do well to consider the example of the Baptist. He had only one concern,—“to prepare the way of the Lord,”—and we may lay it to heart that our teaching is effective only as it works towards this end. “There is only one thing worth living for—to be of use”—has been well said, and we may believe that every act of service, whether for the health, the virtue, or the happiness of the community, is a

preparation of the way.

(v. 29.) How “deed enlarges scope.” On the morrow, and again on the next morrow, come new opportunities for the Baptist to bear witness for Christ, and he seizes each opportunity. This witness of his is recognised by his Master. “Ye have sent out John, and he hath borne witness of the Truth,” says our Lord;⁵ and Christ is no man’s debtor. He, in turn, bears witness of John: “Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater,”⁶ He says, who knows all things from the beginning. So we find it to-day. Every poor little word of witness of ours is so abundantly magnified and made fruitful by the Word Himself that we are amazed. If our witness persistently fail, we had better examine ourselves. There is one common source of failure, what the prophet describes as “bowing down to our own nets.” Perhaps this is the unsuspected defect in most of the teaching that fails in its witness.

¹ Malachi iv., 5.

² S. Matthew xi., 14.

³ Deut. [sic] xviii., 18.

⁴ Isaiah xl., 3.

⁵ S. John v. 23.

⁶ S. Luke vii., 28.