

*Dominus Illuminatio Mea.*

No. 5.

**(S. John i., 29–34.)**

(v. 29.) How graphic the picture is. We see "the mild Son of Man" drawing near with that gracious dignity which we know must have been His; as He approaches, a word of amazing insight is given to the Baptist. The tender image of "the Lamb of God" is so dear and so familiar to us that we can hardly realize that it came to the Baptist as a sudden flash illuminating the whole history of the Jews since their deliverance from Egypt and opening up the meaning of every Paschal Feast,—and this, of a Man, standing in their midst! It must have been to the disciples of the Baptist a very shock of revelation:—"In this Man, of countenance so benign, of aspect so meek and lowly, behold the interpretation of all the sacrificial rites which have become to you a religion in themselves. Behold in this Man the great deliverance; it is He that taketh away the sin of the world!" How could they receive so great a gospel for which they were so little prepared? Can we receive it? Do we receive it when we are overwhelmed with the thought of our own unworthiness, of the unspeakable wickedness in the world? But John, for this moment at any rate, entered into the larger hope. Looking a fellow-Man in the face, unfettered by the limitations of sense and circumstance, he could say "which taketh away the sin"—not of the Jews, but—"the sin of the world." Only as we have this faith, have we faith enough to go on with; can we believe—of the sins which make us mourn, of the faults which vex us in those dear to us, of the depths of wickedness which are without us on every side,—that He taketh away all this sin; taketh with a constant, steady, unceasing action of taking until in the end He hath taken all away, and there shall be no more sin.

(v. 30.) Again, while all eyes are turned upon the approaching Presence, John takes occasion to repeat his saying about the precedence of Christ; no mere social precedence such as we yield to those above us in rank, but, as we have it in the marginal reading, "first in regard of me," the greatest concern of all his concerns, the subject of his continual thoughts, the object of all his desires. Nor was the Baptist satisfied withal that he had attained; we read elsewhere this deep law of the Christian life as formulated by him—"He must increase, but I must decrease."

(v. 31.) "And I knew Him not." The two related families may not have met, or, in his kinsman, John may not have recognised the Christ. But the stir of His coming was in the air and we may believe that much of John's wilderness life was spent in meditation upon the character and work of the coming Messiah—the more intent and passionate because he knew that he himself was the forerunner, that, indeed, his baptism with water should be as it were a condition of the manifestation of Christ.

"For this cause:"—how well for John to know his life sanctified by a great purpose which was not of his choosing but was his vocation, calling. And how rich is our life, too, when we perceive that there is no calling among men too lowly to have for its purpose the manifestation

of Christ. Pleasant ways and kindly words and simple duty-doing, in these things of every-day life Christ is manifested.

(v. 32.). [sic] “And John bare witness saying,”—this introduction seems to point to a testimony borne on still another occasion. There is no direct account given in the Gospel of S. John of Our Lord’s baptism, only this indirect reference made by the Baptist. To him, as to each of us, the revelation of Christ came by the Holy Spirit; “he beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven and it abode upon Him.” Most of us have observed how the every-day sights of the natural world have been hallowed, whether by association with our Lord, or, by His use of them to convey deeper truths. The lambs upon the hillside, the reeds in our lakes, the shepherd and his flock, the grass, the cornfield, the wind, the face of the sky, the sea and the fishing boats and the fisher folk, and many other sweet natural associations, are as bonds of sympathetic thought between us and our Lord. But perhaps we fail to realize that those things which He observes with His eyes and hallows by naming with His lips, are but types of the rest chosen to point to us the fact, that nature teems with teaching of the things of God, that every leaf on every tree is inscribed with the divine Name, that the myriad sounds of summer are articulate voices, that all nature is symbolic, or, as has been better said, is sacramental. Realizing the close correspondence and inter-dependence between things natural and things spiritual, that God nowhere leaves Himself without a witness, and that every beauteous form and sweet sound is charged with teaching for us, had we eyes to see and ears to hear, we shall better understand any single emblem brought before us than if we suppose it to be chosen arbitrarily and taken away from its connection with the natural world. The Church of Christ has always loved this emblem of a dove, this embodiment which the Holy Spirit assumed when He descended upon Christ and abode with Him. The dove, “sweet messenger of rest,” moving upon the face of the waters, was a pledge of restoration; its return to the Ark typified the homing instinct of men; tenderness and peace, confidence and comfort, constancy and sweetness, abiding love, unfailing gentle-ness, quiet ways, these are among the notions which men by nature associate with the dove, and which through this image we learn to associate with the “gracious Spirit, heavenly Dove.” It is worth while to consider the meanings that our great nature-poet finds in the dove—though they have no obvious reference to the event of the Baptism.

“I heard a Stock-dove sing or say  
His homely tale, this very day; . . . .  
He sang of love, with quiet blending,  
Slow to begin, and never ending;  
Of serious faith, and inward glee;  
That was the Song—the Song for me!”

It is solacing to the heart of Christendom to know that our blessed Lord was not without the comfort of this “mutual love,” “serious faith,” “inward glee,” that the joy of the Lord was with Him even while He dwelt among us, a Man of sorrows. What a thought of joy at the baptismal font, of consolation throughout life amid the tossing of the waves of this troublesome world, is this of the Divine Spirit coming to us, also, in the likeness of a dove. It was by the dove which rested upon Him that John was taught to know his Lord; and, wherever Christ is, the Divine

Spirit will brood in gentleness and tenderness, in quietness and confidence, and in unspeakable “inward glee;” for, “He baptiseth with the Holy Spirit.”

(v. 34.) “He shall testify of Me” says our Lord of the Divine Spirit. So it was with John. With the coming of the Spirit he reached the summit of the mount of vision. He was at his greatest; for, according to our faith and insight, is our power for action and influence, “Great is the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh”:—the Baptist sees it all,—“this is the Son of God,” of the essence of the Father, very God of very God. To know this of a Man standing in the midst of other men was indeed triumphant faith. As our Lord said after to S. Peter, when he too saw the veil lifted, “flesh and blood hath not revealed this unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” Only so can any of us know the Christ. “Lord increase our faith.”