

No. 9.

THE FIRST CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE.

(*St. John ii., 12–19.*)

(v. 12.) "Went down to Capernaum," *i.e.*, in the sense of going down from the capital. He went further north. "He and His mother and His brethren and His disciples." Our Lord had not yet had occasion to say, "A man's foes are they of his own household." We have here a picture of a united family group, in which the new disciples were included, attending the progress of the Son of man. We may read between the lines the glow of hope and promise, the impulse of personal affection, which attended the opening of His ministry. Here, too, the Son of man trod the way we all have to follow. Every earnest worker has known what it is to begin buoyed up by the faith of some fond hearts, and to drop his nearest and dearest one by one by the way, because they cannot understand that the glory which belongs to a divine mission is not ease and praise but continual sacrifice. Let us rejoice when in this also we are called upon to tread in His steps.

"Not many days." The Synoptic Gospels record a lengthened stay in Capernaum, "his own city," "his own country." But the order of events as given in the fourth gospel is generally accepted. S. John takes up the record after the temptation with the testimony of the Baptist, and he alone tells us of the first Passover, the public opening, as it were of our Lord's ministry.

(v. 13.) It is probable that Jesus had gone up with His people to each passover since his twelfth year. But now He goes, officially as it were, to take up His work as Messiah.

(v. 14.) "Those that sold oxen and sheep and doves and the changers of money." We need not imagine that the desecration of the temple was so great even as that of old S. Paul's where the nave was used as a common thoroughfare for cattle, horses, and foot passengers. There is probably no building in existence magnificent enough to aid our conception of the temple of Herod in all its new splendour. The plan was the same as for the tabernacle and the earlier temples—a Holy of Holies, a holy place, and an outer court. The last was surrounded by cloisters, and these were supported on innumerable Corinthian pillars of white marble nearly forty feet high. It was these cloisters which were appropriated by the astute priests and rulers to uses which they would, no doubt, claim belonged to worship of God. For was it not a kind office to have close at hand the animals needed for sacrifice, the coinage required for tribute, so that worshippers from afar could supply themselves at the least cost of time and trouble? We need not ask how far the coffers of the temple and the income of the priests gained by this means.

(v. 15.) The Lord of the temple came to His temple and He pronounced judgment. He came in the majesty and power of a king. His instrument of chastisement was no more than a scourge of small cords, but no man dare resist Him, no beast might turn upon Him. We see the money-getting crowd driven forth by this one Man, not even daring to stoop and gather up the precious coins scattered on the pavement. We can believe that S. John as he wrote had before

him his apocalyptic vision of the wrath of the Lamb.

(v. 16.) "Make not My Father's house a house of merchandise." As usual, in the great crises of His life, our Lord declares the principle upon which He acted. He sweeps off the web of hypocrisy, all pleas for making the offices of religion easier for the people, supporting more worthily the worship of God, and so on. "There is no justification," He seems to say, "for exchange and barter concerning the things of God and in the House of God."

(v. 17.) "The zeal of Thine house shall eat me up." His disciples *remembered* what the Psalmist had written.¹ How we perceive the aged Evangelist recalling the flash of recollection and conviction which came to his soul as he watched Christ in the Temple, and, "with the rapture of a sudden thought," perceived that he was looking on at the fulfilment of a prediction which was one of the marks by which men might know the Messiah. We all know the feeling in some degree when we watch work, that of others, or it may even be our own, and suddenly perceive that the Lord is in presence, and that the work is being done by Himself, in His way.

"He went about doing good," is a record of Christ's life which remains on every Christian soul. Men have argued that such work could only be done in the strength of a passion, and that it was in His passion for humanity that our Lord was strong, and hence that such a passion for humanity is in itself worship, the whole of religion. But every now and then in our Lord's life we get a glimpse, as though a mantle were blown back by the wind, of His ideal, His hidden impulse, His enthusiasm, His master-passion, if we may reverently say so. It was not what has been called "the enthusiasm of humanity." That was the consequence, not the moving cause. "My Father's business," "My Father's house"; in such phrases as these we get the key to the life of Christ. That men should know the Father, should live that life of serene passion and meek and lowly enthusiasm which is the final possibility of human nature—for this Christ came into the world; and every glimpse we get of His own "zeal," enthusiasm, may well be as fuel to the fire in our cold hearts. "It is only as we live in the ideal [sic], says Bishop Westcott, [sic] that sameness of work does not become monotony of life. [sic] We cannot escape sameness of work if we wish to effect anything. The greatest achievement evolves itself out of endless petty and unnoticeable details; but, thank God, we need none of us suffer from that last dreariness, monotony of life. One thought of God, one glimpse of our ideal, and we go to work with renewed impulse and quickened powers, remembering that all the power of Christ is behind every scourge of small cords with which we would cleanse the defilement of our own hearts or of the world.

This, at least, do we learn from the glimpse afforded of the Personality of our Lord. From His action, the obvious lesson is the reverence due towards the house of God, the place of His Presence: reverence in the care and worthy keeping of whatever is set apart for divine worship, reverence in our own deportment, and, as we gather from the immediate turn of thought by which our Lord associates a building made with hands with that other temple of God, the human body ("Ye are the temple of the living God"²)—we have the further reverence of consecrated thoughts in holy places. We perceive that we are not allowed to think about our neighbours' bonnets, nor about the little peculiarities of the clergyman, nor about the thousand trifles so tempting to our inconstant minds, nor are we to think thoughts of traffic and barter, nor allow that inner temple of ours to become a public thoroughfare for worldly thoughts in hours and places consecrated to worship. Neither are we allowed to go about with our guide-books irreverently and rudely in foreign churches, disturbing the worship of others.

(v. 18.) The Jews, priests, and others, stand petrified. They perceived that a sign had been done before them, but have not the candour to accept it. They dally with their consciences, and ask for a sign from God to confirm that which had been done before their eyes. Our Lord, as ever, gives an enigmatical answer to the double-minded, an answer containing a deep truth which they were unable to read—the truth that a temple of God is at the best only a type of that other temple which every man carries in his own person, the temple of the body consecrate to contain the presence of God.

(v. 19.) “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” In the days to come this was the one charge His enemies were able to maintain against the sinless Son of man, that He had said this thing. And the saying bore fruit where alone it fell as a seed. His disciples remembered that He spake this when He was raised from the dead. The words of Christ sink deep, and this saying of the sanctity of man will yet bring forth fruit ten-thousandfold in the care of Christians for the ignorant and the sinful and the afflicted.

¹ Psalm lxi, 9.

² II. Cor. vi., 16.