

SCALE HOW "MEDITATIONS."

Dominus Illuminatio Mea.

No. 12

THE LAST WITNESS OF THE BAPTIST.

(*S. John iii., 22–iv., 4.*)

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(v. 22.) Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea out of Jerusalem as we might say we go into Middlesex out of London. "Tarried with them"—a pleasant suggestion of rest and converse after the ministry at Jerusalem (*cf.* "Come ye apart into a desert place and rest awhile"). But now, as then, there was little leisure; crowds followed. "And baptised,"—noticeably, immediately after the teaching given to Nicodemus about baptism.

(v. 23.) Here we have the suggestion of another encampment by the Jordan. Ænon was considerably further north than our Lord's station in Judea, six or eight miles to the south of Galilee. The necessity for "much water" appears to show that "great multitudes" still resorted to the baptism of John, like the three thousand on the Day of Pentecost, like the ten thousand converts baptised by S. Francis Xavier at Travancore.

(v. 24.) "John was not yet cast into prison." The Evangelist only alludes to a circumstance fully recorded in the synoptic gospels, whose contents were, no doubt, well known to the Church.

(v. 25.) "Questioning" with a Jew about purifying. This Jew had probably attended our Lord's teaching about baptism on the banks of the Jordan. We are not told what He said on this occasion, but we gather from the gospels that it was His habit to fix new truths in His hearers' minds by almost verbal repetitions on several occasions. Our Lord's teaching appears to have been always addressed in the first place to His disciples. They no doubt were present in that common sleeping-room where Nicodemus came to Him by night, and we may believe that He repeated His teaching as to the baptism of regeneration by the Holy Spirit here by the Jordan. Now the baptism of John was, we know, that of "repentance for the remission of sins."¹ There was nothing mysterious or divine in it. It meant no more than "I am sorry I have done amiss and will turn over a new leaf." But this sacramental Baptism with hidden meanings, out of which a man came a new creature, because the Spirit of God came upon his spirit, this was different. To the mind of the curious Jew two opposite sects would doubtless appear to have arisen.

(v. 26.) The baffled disciples of John came to their master. They are a little sore. He that was baptised of John (and surely the less is baptised of the greater), He to whom John bare witness (and surely the greater bears witness of the less), He was baptising in Jordan and all men came to Him. This is the first measure we have of what we should call the success of our Lord's teaching in Jerusalem—all men, crowds, multitudes. The disciples of the Baptist are a little like furious school boys, with their "It's a shame," "it's not fair."

(v. 27.) The Baptist answers with one of those words of marvellous insight, expressed with the terseness and force of an epigram, which make him perhaps a more distinct and

powerful personality to us than is either of the apostles. "A man can receive nothing except it hath been given him from heaven." For the present difficulty, how sufficient an answer! If "all men" go to Christ, it is because God so wills it. May a teacher sent from God object to the will of God? What an illuminating maxim for us—a teaching of peace and acquiescence in all the circumstances of our lives! If we seem to ourselves to have been called to a special piece of work in God's world and to have been graced with great success, what heart-burnings arise when somehow the work passes out of our hands into those of another. But what can we say, how can we resent and rebel, how can we fume and fret, when we realise that "a man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven"? It may be that the other is more fit than ourselves. It may be that we have spoiled our work by some form of vanity or other display of egotism. Anyway, we bow with sincere submission to the decision that comes from above.

Again, this saying of the Baptist's sheds lustre on every little detail of joy and blessing that comes into our lives. It is so good to know that these things are *given* one by one. And again in failure, disappointment, when we are humiliated by reproof, apparently unjust reproof, how the irritation of our spirit is soothed when we recollect that,—

"Shimei's stone and Shimei's curse
Are kind rebukes from Thee."

(v. 28.) "I said I am not the Christ." This appears to point to an effort on the part of the Baptist's disciples to exalt him unduly and to receive him as the promised Messiah. He is able to refer them to his own consistent denial.

(v. 29.) Here, for the first time, we have the exquisite figure of the Church as the Bride. "The Church," no longer the "we" of the conversation with Nicodemus, but the "all men" who came for baptism. Instead of chagrin and envy the Baptist has the joy of the friend of the bridegroom. In the rumour that many people came to the teaching of Christ, he hears the Bridegroom's voice.

(v. 30.) Here we have again an epigrammatic saying in which is contained the whole law of the progress of the Christian life: "He must increase, but I must decrease." It applies in the first place to John's popularity and apparent success as a teacher. But in these words we find also the blessed law, "less of self, and more of Thee" which Christian people find fulfilled in themselves to their great ease in living. There is no greater compensation for the freshness of youth with its keen pains and exquisite joys than the greater sense of simple, natural, inevitable dependence that comes in later life, together with that rather pathetic humility which is no longer shocked at fall or failure because it has ceased to expect anything good of self and waits upon Christ for every goodness and every grace.

(v. 31–36.) Bishop Westcott regards these verses as the comments of the Evangelist upon the witness of the Baptist. It is practically an echo of the conversation with Nicodemus, with, however, a special indication to the particular case in point. "He that cometh from heaven is above all." Christ has already expanded this thought. It was He who descended out of heaven and ascended into heaven. John is of the earth and speaketh of the earth; his baptism belongs to things of the earth which all men can understand.

(v. 32.) Again the Evangelist re-echoes our Lord's words (S. John iii., 2), but he uses the singular "He" instead of the plural "we." Our Lord came to bear witness, to reveal to us those

things which no man can see.

(v. 33.) “Hath set to His seal that God is true.” The reference appears to be to the prophetic teaching which all men accepted but no man applied; those who saw it fulfilled in Christ recognised the truth of God. “He giveth not the spirit by measure.” The reference is to Isaiah lxi., 2. “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath annointed [sic] me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.”

(v. 35.) The Evangelist again enforces the truth of the united action of the Father and of the Son.

(v. 36.) Again we have a repetition of our Lord’s words about eternal life. “He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life,” now, at the present moment. “Obeyeth” and “believeth” are, as it were, synonymous; for that entire recognition of our Lord’s person and work in which is eternal life—love, joy, hope, perfect peace—begins, must needs lead to obedience. “He that obeyeth not, shall not see life.” “I can’t see what you mean by new life, being born again, and so on.” The things of the Spirit are spiritually discerned. “The wrath of God abideth”—the judgment of God which the sinner practically pronounces upon himself when he chooses darkness rather than light.

(Chap. iv., 1–3.) Here we have an instance of our Lord’s exquisite consideration for the feelings, not of John whose faith was strong, but of John’s disciples who were sore and vexed for their master. When Christ heard the rumour of His teaching and baptising which had troubled the disciples of John He did away with the cause of offence by leaving Judea and departing again into Galilee. It is interesting to read that from the first our Lord received converts into His Church through His disciples, “Jesus Himself baptised not, but His disciples.”

¹ S. Luke iii., 3.