

*Dominus Illuminatio Mea.*

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SCALE HOW "MEDITATIONS."

No. 24.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

(*S. John vi., 45–60.*)

"THE BREAD OF GOD."

III.

(v. 45.) Our Lord had disclosed the secret of His kingdom—that only those came to Him who had received into their hearts communications from the Father.

(v. 46.) Now the good Shepherd, as ever, goes in advance of His sheep to forfend them from the dangers of the way. He who has "heard from the Father" may easily figure to himself that he has seen the Father, and so superstitious imaginations and idolatrous images might creep into the worship of Him who must be worshipped in spirit and in truth; there is no vision of the Father for men only in Christ, "He which is from God, he hath seen the Father."

(v. 47 and 48.) Through these repeated assertions [sic] we seem to hear, not only our Lord's solemn witness to the truth and vital importance of His statements, but also an undertone of sadness and protest that words so full of blessing for men must be repeated again and again, and yet they will not understand nor receive. So it is still: we seek "life" in many quests of pleasure or of gain; we will not open our minds to the healing thought that he that believeth hath already that fulfilment of desire which is eternal life, that satisfaction of his soul's hunger which the "bread of life" alone gives.

(v. 49.) "Your fathers did eat the manna," etc. Our Lord again returns to the opening thought of His discourse—the comparison raised by the people between the perennial manna and the fugitive meal which He had provided for them. In the bread they have eaten at His hands, as in the manna which "Moses" gave them, they are to see a figure of which He Himself, standing before them, is the fulfilment. These things showed forth Christ, but with a difference; the manna came as a table of the Lord spread daily for the people, it is true, but the people who had eaten of it, died.

(v. 50.) "This is the bread," etc. And then the King repeats the royal offer of bread, bread enough and to spare for every man, "that a man may eat thereof and not die."

(v. 51.) "I am the living bread," etc. Our Lord stands before the people in that synagogue at Capernaum, a living, breathing Man, and again repeats that amazing saying—that He Himself is the "living bread," the Sustenance of the world, come down out of heaven; that, if any man, whosoever he be, eat of this bread, a principle of life shall be awakened within him, a fulness of life and joy, which can never be extinguished; he shall live for ever.

Yet, “and the bread which I will give is My flesh;” here we have the note of sacrifice familiar to the Jewish people—flesh given, offered in sacrifice, consumed upon the altar—they knew very well what that meant, but not the application of it. How could this man give His flesh in sacrifice and His body as food “for the life of the *world*”? Here is a note that would not strike pleasantly upon Jewish ears; for were *they* not the peculiar people? There was so much else perplexing in this strange discourse that they allowed this saying to pass, but very probably it rankled and swelled the sum of their account against Christ.

(v. 52.) “The Jews therefore strove one with another saying,” etc. No wonder that they “strove.” Such utterances from one in their midst must, we should think, either come home to them with heart-piercing conviction or excite their fierce scorn and indignation. But, standing before Christ, they cannot put His words away from them; a side-issue presents itself—“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Here we have an epitome of the controversy which has raged in the Church for many centuries, and is raging hotly as ever to-day. In this discourse of the bread of life our Lord sets forth the general principle that He is the sustenance of His people, that, whenever they manifest life, in whatever direction, that life, that power and joy, is immediately derived from Him. S. John does not tell us of the institution of that Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ whereto His people are required to come on set occasions, that they may be especially and peculiarly sustained; but the twelve who were present when—“Jesus took bread and blessed and brake it; and He gave to the disciples and said, Take, eat, this is My body”—must have recognised in those words a summing up of the discourse which had in earlier days tested their faith. The teaching at the Last Supper, with its outward and visible signs, is the summing up and embodiment of this unfolding to men of the means whereby they live. Like these Jews, the Christian Church has never argued that it was impossible that Christ should so sustain His people, but sections of the Church have ever striven among themselves as to *how* this thing should be? Is the sacrament of the Lord’s body merely a sign of things spiritual or does it in itself convey spiritual sustenance? Is the sustenance actually contained in the elements in some spiritual and indistinguishable form? Or is it, as the elements are received by the faithful that they convey divine sustenance? Or is it, indeed, that their very substance is changed and they become the true body and blood of Christ? These, and such as these, are the burning questions that have ever divided the Church; and it is well that we should consider how our Lord answers these Jews in some of whom there would seem to be glimmerings of faith. Our Lord is telling in this discourse, if we may say so reverently, labouring strenuously to tell, all of the truth that can be received. If it is possible for His disciples [sic] and the Jews to learn—“*How* can this man give us His flesh to eat?”—doubtless He will reveal that also.

(v. 53.) The answer vouchsafed by Christ offers no explanation. He does but reiterate solemnly the one principle of life with the addition that “ye have not life in yourselves” except by this eating and this drinking. It may be that the sustenance of life like the source of life is an ineffable mystery which the heart of man cannot conceive and which therefore cannot be revealed. It may be that our Lord would bid us do our part, the spiritual eating and spiritual drinking, and leave it to Him to impart His flesh, which is meat indeed, and His blood, which is drink indeed, how He will. Anyway, all attempts to define where He has not defined would appear to end in controversy and schism, and perhaps we shall not do amiss if we, as members of His Church, make it our prayer that the eyes of all Christian people, whether clergy or laity, be turned away from the sore and burning question of *how* the spiritual life is imparted, and be

turned towards that most comforting assurance, that, if we will eat we shall be fed, and in feeding upon Christ shall have everlasting life.

(v. 54.) [sic] "Except ye eat" was pronounced as a condemnation, and is followed by the renewed promise that "He that eateth hath eternal life"—expansion, joy, fulness of living here, hardly to be interrupted by death itself; for, "I will raise him up at the last day" to the untiring energising, uncloyed fulfilment of the perfect life beyond.

(v. 55.) "My flesh is true Meat;" "My blood is true drink." We feed ourselves upon dead sea apples, and find them dust and ashes in our mouth. But the true meat which replenishes, which sends us on our way vigorous and rejoicing, the true drink which exhilarates and vitalises our dull frame, this we seek in vain at the sources of knowledge or fame, or of human love even, which is not "in Christ."

(v. 56.) It would appear as if our Lord could find no words to express too strongly that most intimate tie which exists between Him and His believing people who feed upon Him. They abide, not with Him, nor near Him, not by Him nor beside Him, but in Him, and He abides in them, and this not occasionally—a passing visit—but a continual abiding; an abiding in the full life of Christ as one abides in one's home; not, alas, but that we go in and out, and in the hardness of our hearts forsake at times the Life that is ours, but we weary and hurry back as "doves to their windows," and are at rest once more in the abiding life.

(v. 57.) With one more argument does Christ enforce this supernal teaching—"As I live because of the Father," that is, by means of, so "He that eateth Me shall live" by means of the influx of Life proceeding from Me.

(v. 58.) "This is the bread," etc. Our Lord sums up in these closing words the whole of this great discourse. "This," indicating Himself, "is the bread which came down out of heaven," and is therefore heavenly, spiritual, not earthly, material. Therefore it is not like the manna of which men eat and died, but "he that eateth this bread shall live for ever."

(v. 59.) "These things said He in the synagogue." The remains of the synagogue are still to be seen among the ruins of Tel Hûm, which mark the site of the ancient Capernaum. A stone still exists bearing a carving of the pot of manna preserved in the ark, and this may possibly have served as the text of our Lord's "object lesson."

(v. 60.) "This is a hard saying; who can hear it?" We, in our poor measure, are sometimes aware, when we give out the best that is in us, that we have not been understood, and have only succeeded in alienating our hearers. But what is our poor little measure of truth compared with the great revelation which Christ has just made, and what is our disappointment to His, as He sat in the synagogue yearning infinitely over the souls of His hearers? The Jews might well be unprepared; but His own disciples, had they not been led up carefully, step by step, to the very sum and heart of the truth which He has now disclosed to them? Will they not receive it joyfully and eat and live? They find it a "hard saying," and turn from Him in resentment. This was not what they wanted; they had followed the Messiah, the King of the Jews, whose glory should be open and known to all men; and now what had they instead? This mystic talk of His flesh, and bread, and eternal life, and resurrection,—things for which no man carried any test or measure! Surely some of the bitterness of Gethsemane was felt by our Master in that synagogue at Capernaum.