

Project Canterbury

The Deity of Christ
*Four Sermons preached during Advent,
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SERMON IV
The Difference it Makes

"Giving thanks to the Father, who hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light."—Col. i. 12.

I HAVE been trying on these Sundays in Advent to represent to you how it was that the first disciples of Jesus Christ came to answer as they finally did that question "What think ye of Christ?" I have sought to describe to you their experiences when they found themselves, as it were, scholars of that wonderful Master. I have sought to describe to you their dawning faith and then the collapse of that faith under the strain of His seeming failure and death; and how it revived, immutably planted on a rock, under the experience of His resurrection—how they found themselves putting their whole soul into the affirmation of their faith that Jesus is the Lord. That was the first stage; and the record of it you read in the early chapters of the Acts. There you see how Jesus, the unseen risen Jesus, who had sent down upon them His own Spirit, stood to them in such a relation, and they to Him, that you can only describe it by saying that He had for them the values of God; they put in Him the kind of faith which can only be given to God.

But as yet they do not appear to have asked themselves the question "How can this be? How can we so worship Him and trust Him—the man with whom we were in daily companionship, whom we have seen and known as man among men?" And then I sought to show you how it was that, first under the guidance of S. Paul, those first Christians reached their complete faith; how they passed from saying "Jesus is the Lord" to saying "Jesus is the Son of God, the eternal Son who for us men and for our salvation was incarnate, was made man, and died for us and rose again, and by His Spirit lives in us and will come again to accomplish the kingdom of God." It is this faith that is expressed in the New Testament as a whole. It is the faith of the catholic church; it is the meaning of its creeds.

And to-night I am to ask you to consider what a difference it makes—in our own lives and in our hopes for the world—to hold this faith. It is important to consider this, because of course there are a great many people who resent what, perhaps without giving much accurate thought to it, they call dogma. What difference does it make, they are disposed to ask, what exactly we believe about Jesus Christ so long as we take Him for our example? That is the kind of attitude of mind which I have in view. I want to ask you to consider what practical difference it makes—this holding to the faith of the catholic church in the Incarnation, in Jesus Christ as very God in very manhood.

Well, first of all, do not make the mistake of supposing that those who hold this faith believe that apart from it mankind has no real knowledge of God. Christianity is not a

narrow faith. It teaches us to believe that, wherever men have been, there has always been in their reason and conscience some light of God; His Word is the "light that lighteneth every man." Thus Christianity has no interest whatever in disparaging other religions, or in looking jealously at the elements of truth which they contain. The real Christian will be open to the light whencesoever it comes. In art, in science, in philosophy, in poetry, in all the religions of the world, Christianity will expect and welcome the light. Only it will not be satisfied, because it has reason to know that there is something more.

After all, the moral conscience, and the arguments of reason, and the intimations of science, and the visions of artists, and all the natural religions of the world, have left men sorely perplexed; and God has given us something more. "In many parts and in many manners he spake of old times unto the fathers by the prophets; and in these last times by one who was more than a prophet, by his Son." That is the special self-disclosure, self-revelation of God of which the Bible gives us the record. It was given through a narrow channel but for a universal purpose; it was given through the narrow channel of that one little and, as it would seem, insignificant race of Israel, but it came to a climax in Jesus Christ. There it reached finality and there it was made serviceable for a universal purpose. It became the religion in which all the world is destined, so far as it has a good will, to find its satisfaction—not by exclusion of the measures of divine knowledge which men had already attained, but by the inclusion in a more comprehensive light of all the partial rays which had already visited them.

The finality of the Christian faith! That is the point. If you come to think of it, it is necessarily involved in the idea of the Incarnation. If these disciples of Jesus came really, as I have tried to show you, to a true estimate of His person, there is in Him a necessary finality. There can be no self-disclosure of God to man, and no relationship of man to God, completer or fuller for this world than what is involved in Him who is the Word made flesh. There the highest and the lowest are brought together absolutely; there God and man are one; there the inscrutable and difficult things of God are translated into the intelligible lineaments of a human character; and there human life is brought morally and spiritually to its best. Christ Jesus is He that should come, and there is no meaning in looking for any other beyond Him. Faith in Him is the final religion.

But here the progressive mind stumbles. Surely, it says, things advance. It was two thousand years ago that Jesus Christ lived and wrought in the world, and we do not know how much longer the world is going to last. Do you seriously mean that mankind is always to look back for perfection to that remote point in the past? Well, there were progressives in S. John's day too; they were beginning to be called "Gnostics"; they prided themselves on their superior knowledge, and they despised the simple faith of that young catholic church. You know what S. John says of them in his second Epistle. He is talking to those who were in some danger of adopting the opinions of these progressives—"Look to yourselves," he says, "that ye lose not the things which we have wrought, but that ye receive the full reward. Whosoever goeth onward"—progresses, that is the word—"and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting; for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works." You see what he means. He means that the highest spiritual hope for men is really bound up in this faith in the Incarnation; if they let that go in the name of a false progress they let go the ground of their hope and the whole of their certainty about God.

But we must make no mistake; Christianity is very far indeed from being an unprogressive religion. Its finality in Jesus Christ is the very ground of progress; for the glorified Jesus in the heavens is a spring of new life for humanity. Moreover, He has made the church to be His body, His organ, His instrument for self-revelation, and that self-revelation to the world through the church is gradual. It was but a very little of what is meant by Christianity that was apparent to that first church at Jerusalem where they were all Jews. It required the genius of the Greeks, their subtle and powerful intellect, to bring out the meaning of the church's message. Christianity was a poor thing without that great Greek church; its theory, its theology we owe to the Greeks. But they were a little too intellectual. So it needed the Roman race, with its magnificent gift of government and law, to show the power of the church to discipline the new races which were surging in over the old Empire and laying the foundations of our modern Europe. And as these new nations grew to strength each national church has exhibited special gifts, and brought out some special aspects of the meaning of the Christian faith. So it has been with the Irish Church, and the French Church, the Church of England, the Russian Church; without any one of them there would have been something missing.

And still we believe we need the Japanese Church and the Indian Church and the Korean Church and the African Church. Aye, we need the contribution which every generation and each single individuality is capable of giving to bring out the full meaning of what is in Christ. That is, I suppose, what S. Paul means when he speaks of the "Church which is his body, the fulfilment of him who is being all in all fulfilled." That is it; Christ is present Himself by His Spirit in the great catholic society as perfect God and perfect Man: and it requires all the particular churches and all the individuals one after the other, and all the developments of knowledge and circumstance, to bring out gradually the full meaning of His person and of the faith in Him. Only the faith itself cannot change; it remains the same. The principle of the Incarnation must be recognized to be final by its very essence; for, as I said, there can be no disclosure of God to man and no relationship of man to God completer or fuller than in Him who is the Word made flesh, in whom the highest and the lowest are one, and the inaccessible things of God are translated into the intelligible lineaments of a human character, the standard for all time.

Now I want you to feel the practical value of that finality. Men drift hither and thither; our age is in a chaotic confusion of mind. What is it we need? It is a clear and distinct understanding of the character, will, and purpose of God. In all the shocks of the War, under the strain of intolerable losses, men and women were asking, "Can it be really so that God is love?" And others are continually talking their shallow talk about God, as if He were a merely good-natured sort of Being who would make it all right for every one at the last. Now look at Christ. There you have something intelligible, final, effective; there you see the character of God translated into a language which you can understand, and which all men can understand. Have you doubts about whether God is love? Well, I cannot deny that that is the most difficult of the Church's doctrines, at least in certain phases of our experience. Only stand before Christ; put yourself there face to face with Him—at any point from the beginning of His mission till its end upon the Cross—and you cannot doubt what He will tell you. "No man knoweth the Father," He says, "but the Son and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him"; and there can be no mistake about that revelation. There the Divine character is translated into the kind of love that we can understand.

On the other hand, are we inclined to that sloppy and unreasonable estimate of God as the good-natured Being who will at the last resort let no one ultimately suffer, however

wilful has been his sin and his refusal of the light? Plant yourself again before the face of Christ; how tremendous is His language! how stern He is towards wilful sin! how severe is His doctrine of God's irreversible judgement! how awfully He warns us of the engulfing hell! Now I say, what an incalculable blessing it is to have this final and soul-satisfying transcription of the Being of God in the words and character of Jesus Christ. It is no unknown God whom I worship. I know in whom I have believed.

Again, you see people all around you quite astray about the moral law. They are perplexed, for instance, with that most troublesome of human impulses, the sexual passion. Half the world appears to be determined to ignore that severe but most blessed law of sexual purity which our Lord emphasized so unmistakably. No teacher could have assured the world with more decisive authority than He of the duty and the possibility of bringing the sexual passions under control, and of the sacramental sacredness and indissolubility of the marriage tie. What does the world need? It needs a final moral standard which shall be the standard for all humanity, and which comes to them with an authority which they are bound to believe is divine. Who can describe the progress the world could make, if it would accept Christ's standard of right and wrong?

There are so many points of view in which you can consider the finality of Christ. There is the sense of sin and its urgent cry for redemption. Plant yourself again before the face of Jesus and hear His words: "The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins." I am free, I can break with all the miserable past; and neither the multitude nor the magnitude of my sins is any obstacle to that fresh start of which He assures me, "Take up thy bed and walk." I can run the way of God's commandments because He has set my soul at liberty. I am absolved, that is free! But who, except the Supreme, can assure mankind of this wonderful liberty which certainly is not the message of nature?

Or is there any spiritual aspiration which is not satisfied by the rich doctrine of illumination and grace which the books of the New Testament unfold to us? Surely it is final. So far from wanting anything more, we wonder whether the whole course of time can exhaust its possibilities.

And all this sense of finality, this satisfying faith, is possible only because we believe Jesus to be what the church was led to believe Him to be: that is really God in manhood. Otherwise, if He were a man only, howsoever close the fellowship with God into which He had been brought, there might always be another beyond. There are saints many; there are prophets many; one succeeds another and none is final: all are but partial or onesided. There may be always a fresh communication to be expected. If the unspeakable gift of assurance and finality is to be ours, that must be because we believe in Jesus Christ as something which cannot be surpassed, which can have no second: that is the Word made flesh.

Once again and for the last time, to believe in Jesus is the great surrender. "I know whom I have believed," said S. Paul, "and am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed to him against that day." S. Paul knew very well what the surrender meant; he knew how grim were the difficulties, how tremendous was the sacrifice involved; but he knew that it was worth while, because the issue both of the individual life and of the whole life of humanity was to be the absolute sovereignty of Jesus and the establishment of the kingdom of God. Therefore it was worth while to bear all and to suffer all and to do all, because nothing done in the name of Christ would ever be unfruitful; however much it might seem to fail, even as the Master had seemed to fail, at the end it would prove to have been taken up into the everlasting treasure-

house, and to stand as a stone built into the city of God, when Jesus should come in glory to judge the quick and dead. Here you come to what is called in modern language "eschatology": that is the doctrine about the end, about "the last things"; and here you come upon a difficulty about which I promised you last Sunday I would say something, because it is in a good many people's minds to-day.

They say, "Yes, Jesus taught a good deal about the end, but He was in fact deluded; what He taught was that the last day was going to come immediately; He was under a plain delusion in this respect, and if He was deluded in this respect why not in other respects? How can I put my faith in one who was so deluded or believe Him to be God?" Well, I think they are right. I can indeed see that the Incarnation of our Lord must have involved limitation of knowledge; so He declares Himself. "Of that day and of that hour," He says, "knoweth no man, no, not the angels that are in heaven, neither the Son." He clearly says that there is no map of the future spread out before His human eyes. He proclaims the limitation of His human knowledge. Thus throughout His ministry He shows not the slightest signs of having anticipated the disclosures of modern science or modern criticism.

Limitation of knowledge, then—that I recognize in Jesus on His own authority; that I can understand to be necessary. I can understand that the Divine Person, coming into our human life under its conditions and its limitations, must have so accepted the limitation of knowledge; otherwise there could have been no true manhood, no real human faith and hope. But He was come for only one purpose, and that was to teach men about God and lead them to God. And if in His spiritual teaching—and He gave no other—there were mistake and delusion, that would seem to me to be incompatible with the idea of the Incarnation.

Thus people glibly say that He shared the delusions of His age as to the existence of evil spirits. Well, He certainly taught that there were evil spirits; He certainly looked out upon an evil world, and saw a rebel will at work there behind man's will—"an enemy hath done this." But I have yet to learn what is the superior wisdom which is to pronounce that estimate of things wrong, in spite of and in the face of the experiences of the greatest saints—down to Frederick Denison Maurice, who said he could not otherwise explain the facts. I see no reason to believe Jesus was deluded about the devils. I see no ground of right that men have to assume the sort of omniscience which should declare Him in that respect mistaken.

Coming now to the "eschatology" of Jesus, I want, if I can, to embrace a large subject in a few words, and to tell you what, after much study and pondering, I believe to be the truth. I would say first, read the prophets. Wherever they see some great world power, of a plainly godless sort, flaunting itself in the face of God, like the fierce Assyrian empire, or Babylon, or Edom, they pronounce its doom; God, they say, must judge that insolent power. And again and again in pronouncing these oracles of God against Babylon, against Edom, against Assyria, they throw their clear prophecy upon the background of something vaster, dimmer, more nebulous—a great world catastrophe. So they speak of the sun and the moon ceasing to shine, and the stars falling from heaven, and the heavens being rolled up like a scroll—the very words which our Lord used later—which He borrowed and repeated. What did they mean? They prophesied the judgements on each particular nation in the immediate future, and their particular prophecies were fulfilled. Those great lawless powers were doomed, and they fell. We read the history of those giant forms of empire on their way to ruin; and they are no more. But history went on and there was no catastrophe of the world as a whole.

Our Lord then follows the prophets. Solemnly, undisguisedly, unhesitatingly, He pronounced the doom, not now on some foreign power, but on Jerusalem which had rejected the Christ. I do not think it is possible to doubt that our Lord solemnly pronounced this speedy coming of the doom of God upon Jerusalem; and that prophecy was fulfilled in the year A.D. 70.

I think that all that our Lord said about the immediate coming of the judgement is in the manner of the Jewish prophets, and must be referred to that particular doom which He pronounced upon Jerusalem. This is the meaning of the words "this generation shall not pass away until all these things are fulfilled." What He is speaking of is the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple; that is the particular doom, the particular coming of the Lord in judgement which men are to see in their generation. But like the old prophets also He plants this judgement on the background of a vaster doom. History too, the whole of human history, this world's order, must have an end; and that is the day of God. The particular judgement on Jerusalem is only a prelude to something vaster. But did He tell them when that was to occur? No; I see on the whole convincing evidence of His not having done so. It is quite true that there is some confusion in the reports, and we have, I think, no ground for believing in such an inspiration of the Evangelists as would guarantee their verbal accuracy. It seems indeed quite inconsistent with the divergencies between their reports.

But taking the whole evidence you see two currents in our Lord's teaching about the end. He is always teaching men to expect the coming of God in judgement, and to be ready for it; He is also teaching them to expect long periods of trial and the strain on faith, when they shall desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man and shall not see it, and when faith shall almost fail. So it is He asks the awful question, "When the Son of Man cometh shall he find the faith on the earth?" Thus, I think, that when He used those words of ignorance and uncertainty—"Of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father only"—it was of the uncertainty of the last day that He spoke. And you remember that again He said to His disciples after His resurrection, when they asked Him a question about the great restoration of the kingdom to Israel, "It is not for you to know times and seasons which the Father hath set in his own authority, but ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you"—power to do your work here and now without knowing the future. That is it. Our Lord pronounced a certain doom upon Jerusalem to be shortly fulfilled. But also, after the manner of the prophets, He threw it upon the background of the great final judgement; and that He left in the vagueness and mystery of uncertainty.

It is quite true that the disciples anticipated the immediate coming of the end of the world; they confused the ultimate with that which was to be its symbol and its foretaste. But Jerusalem fell; and they or their immediate successors did not see the coming of the end. No; they saw another vast power rising up to oppress and crush the church in the Roman Empire, and their faith suffered no shock; they went simply forward. All the old prophetic teaching, which Jesus had made His own, is repeated by John in his Apocalypse; only now not with regard to Jerusalem, which had already fallen, but to the Roman Empire turned persecutor; and again he pronounced the doom of God—now upon Rome, which in its turn fell. And again he throws that doom upon the background of the great final end.

This then is the sufficient summary of the whole matter. To believe in Jesus Christ means to believe that the end of every individual life, and of every institution—however rebellious, and however seemingly powerful—and the end of all human history, is to be

the indisputable and disclosed spectacle of the doom of God upon the insolence of men, and the sovereignty of Jesus, and the coming of His kingdom. But of the manner of the end, or its times and seasons, we are left in ignorance. We are taught only in figures—through a glass darkly.

Once again, then, here is the mark of finality. And here is both tremendous warning and the comfort of security. Here is tremendous warning if we are negligent of Him, like the sinners in Zion, about whom you heard in the Lesson which I read to you from Isaiah just now—"The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?"—the devouring fire and everlasting burnings of the divine presence. But on the other hand, "Even so, come Lord Jesus!" In the despair that seizes upon the heart of a good man, when he sees goodness so weak and evil so strong within him and without him, this is what he needs—the assurance, the absolute assurance, that the end of all is the triumph of Jesus—of the true manhood, of the true Jerusalem. It is the coming of the King, now with all limitations removed, and all oppositions cast down to destruction—that is the end. And to believe that gives us constancy, hope, courage, endurance.

I would say to you, then, once more and for the last time, do not pretend to despise theological questions or dogmas as if they did not matter. Whether you believe Christ to be only a good man, or whether you believe Him to be the incarnate Son of God, makes the greatest possible difference to you personally and to the whole world. John was right; the deepest hopes of the world are bound up with this belief that Jesus is God. And I would urge you with all the seriousness which I can bring to bear, to get your souls face to face with this question. But no, I will not say with this question; I will say to get your souls face to face with that Person—that Figure in the Gospels, until the gift of sincere faith is given you and you can say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God."