

GOD ALSO BEARING THEM WITNESS

There are chapters in the Bible that stand out like the events that are turning points in a man's life. Such is the chapter read in our hearing—the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. It marks a new trend in the current of divine affairs upon the earth. Let us devote a part of the short time we are together this morning to the endeavour to realise the momentous bearing it has on our own life and the life of the world in the final upshot of things.

It is a narrative of events, to perceive the bearings of which, we must consider what happened during the previous two months. Christ, whose wondrous ministry had filled Judea with a new and extraordinary excitement for three years and a half, had been publicly executed, and had been buried under a public certificate of death, and a public guarantee against the surreptitious removal of his body. On the third day, his grave had been officially certified as empty. That same day, as Acts 1:3, and other parts of the apostolic testimony inform us, *“He showed himself alive . . . by many infallible proofs”*—proofs not leaving the smallest loophole for unbelief or doubt; every proof by which it was possible for a man once dead to demonstrate to his friends that he had come alive again, showing himself to them in a succession of interviews, first to one group and then another, and then to all simultaneously allowing himself to be handled, exhibiting marks of personal identity with which they were acquainted, talking with them of matters they were all aware of, and finally eating in their presence of food provided by them, which when he was gone was gone also.

Not only so, but he gave them instructions for their guidance when he should be taken from them (as he had often said to them he would be). The instructions were quite practical. We read in this first chapter of the Acts, that—

“Being assembled together with them, he commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem but WAIT for the promise of the Father which (saith he) ye have heard of me. Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

There is something here deserving the deepest consideration. The apostles were to be “witnesses,” because they had “seen and heard” the things which they were to bear witness to (Acts 4:20). As Peter so frequently said afterwards in his public addresses, they were “his witnesses to the people” (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 4:20-33; 5:32; 10:39 and many other places). But if they were to be his witnesses in the sense of declaring what they had been personally cognisant of, why was it necessary that they should “wait” a certain time before beginning their work? The whole narrative shows us. The object of their testimony was to create conviction with reference to the things testified. Now, had they presented this testimony in the form of their own personal knowledge merely, it is certain that their labour would have been unsuccessful. The things they had to testify were so extraordinary that the people could not have believed from them on the mere assertions of any number of witnesses. The apostles were to be qualified to give an effective testimony by the witness that God should give to their witness, in the “*miracles, wonders and signs,*” which they should be enabled to work. This is what Jesus had said:

*“When the comforter is come whom I will send unto you from the Father, he shall testify of me, and ye also shall bear witness **Because ye have been with me from the beginning**”* (John 15:26).

The words of Paul are to a like purport:

“Confirmed unto us by them that heard him, God also bearing them witness by signs and wonders and divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (Heb. 2:4).

It was for the promise of this powerful cooperation that Jesus told the disciples to “wait.” Jesus did not tell them how long they would have to wait. As a matter of fact, it was only ten days. The occasion and form of its arrival challenge the utmost admiration in view of the object to be accomplished. So far as we know, it had not been revealed that the feast of Pentecost would witness the fulfilment of the promise, nor had the apostles been apprised of the arresting and convincing form the manifestation would take. What rendered the occasion so suitable was the presence at Jerusalem at that time of –

“*Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven*”

(verse 5).

The very cream of the Israelitish race, in a spiritual sense, were brought together at such a time, in the spirit of obedience to the Law; a prepared accumulation of good soil for the good seed to be sown. The city would be crowded with people at holiday leisure, and in a mood to be interested in what would be said and shown to them. The disciples, also, when “*the day of Pentecost had fully come,*” were “*all with one accord in one place,*” to keep the feast in the same spirit that had brought together large numbers of devout Jews from all parts. This was a suitable moment chosen for the bestowal of the promised equipment for the apostolic enterprise, and now consider the form of it. A “*sound of a rushing mighty wind filled all the house where they were sitting.*” This was the first token of the preternatural crisis that was upon them. By itself this would have been nothing as a sign to the unbelieving community of Jerusalem. What could a sound like the swaying of trees have signified, either to believers or unbelievers? So next, the rushing, however, concentrated itself over the heads of the twelve apostles in the form of “*cloven tongues, as of fire, sitting upon each of them.*” But this also, by itself, would have failed of intelligible significance. Men would simply have exclaimed, “What an extraordinary thing. Whatever can be the cause? What a state these men’s blood must be in to show a fiery appearance like that.” But quite another complexion was given to it by the next phenomenon. “*They began to speak with other tongues,*” not unknown tongues—not jabber or jargon that nobody could understand. There is much misunderstanding among the common run of people on this point. They have the idea that what happened on the day of Pentecost was on a par with the incoherent rave of modern delusionists, who think they imitate the apostles in pouring forth a stream of inarticulate and meaningless rodomontade. This is a terrible mistake. These fishermen spoke in the known language of their day, which they had never learnt. One spoke in Latin, one in Greek, one in Coptic, one in Persian, others in other current dialects, all in a clear grammatical style. They discoursed intelligibly in these tongues which they had never learnt, on “*the wonderful works of God.*” In the crowded state of Jerusalem the marvel soon got noised abroad, and the visitors from other lands, in large number, “*came together and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in their own language.*” Their curiosity was intensely aroused. The question was, “How is this?”

“*How hear we every man in our own tongue wherein we were born—Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea and Cappadocia, in Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God? And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, ‘What meaneth this?’*”

What could it mean? It was something entirely beyond human experience or capacity. It was as if a company of working men should begin all of a sudden to lecture learnedly in French or German, or Russian, on the profundities of chemistry or electrical science. No wonder that enquiring attention was fixed. This was one of the very objects aimed at. When people are curious to know, they are prepared to listen. There were, of course, some foolish

suggestions as to the meaning of it, as is the manner with a crowd. Some *“mocking said, These men are full of new wine.”* Absurd! Drunkenness has been known to take away what sense and utterance a man has, but who ever knew of it imparting knowledge to him—whether of languages or anything else?

Peter stands up with the eleven and gives the true explanation. To appreciate the force of it, we must remember that the public execution of Jesus had taken place in less than two months before, and that the immense crowd assembled in the front of the house knew all about it, some from report and some from personal knowledge.

“These are not drunken as ye suppose.”

It is something else altogether. It is connected with—

“Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know. Him . . . ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain . . . This Jesus hath God raised up whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he hath shed forth this which ye now SEE AND HEAR . . . Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God hath made that same Jesus whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

It is not possible to conceive a more convincing testimony to the resurrection of Christ. The conjunction between the personal witness of the apostles and the evidence of divine cooperation with them was overpowering. No wonder that the crowd was stirred to the very heart, and anxiously enquired what they were to do. They had been convicted of being murderers of the Son of God; and the pain of the conviction would not be much assuaged by the apostolic assurance that the crucifixion was a matter of the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, and that *“David had spoken concerning the matter.”* What hope could there be for the perpetrators of such a crime?

“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

Peter told them what to do (verse 38) and they did it, *“and the same day, there were added unto them about 3,000 souls.”* Thus was a beginning made to the work of planting the name and the faith of Christ in that position of worldwide acceptance and honour which they occupy in our own day. Thus was the foundation of Christendom laid and though Christendom is a poor counterfeit, having but little in common with the faith of Christ as originally promulgated by the apostles, yet its existence is of great value to us as an evidence of powerful means having been employed to establish it in the first case.

The nature of the means is manifest. It is nothing short of an absolute demonstration of Christ's resurrection. Nothing else could have caused thousands to embrace the faith of it at a time when to do so was to sacrifice everything dear to men. Having been so established, the fact remains unchanged and unchangeable to the present day, however much men may forget the fact or be weary of it.

Christ has not died since he rose, nor can he die any more. It is a glorious fact in itself; but how much more when coupled with the other fact that he is coming again and that the world, in a short time, will know him as it has never known him in times past as a powerful, personal, actual ingredient in the current, visible, practical life of men in all countries.

It is not possible that God could have contrived a more convincing testimony to the resurrection of His Son. We have only to imagine such circumstances in connection with the case of any public men in our day being publicly executed, as Ravachol or Valliant was recently executed—to see the force of them in carrying conviction. Some say, “Yes, very forcible, but you see, such circumstances do not happen in our day.” Friends, if they would be

forcible in our day, they were forcible 1,800 years ago, and their force cannot be spent by the lapse of time.

Men fail to feel their force merely because they lose sight of them through engrossing attention to other things. Lift the veil of time, by means of the undeniable record of them, and there they stand in all their naked glory. It is the part of wisdom to be influenced by facts, however much our immediate surroundings may seem to shut them off. It is our part therefore to open the mind and heart without reserve to this fact of facts that Jesus rose from the dead, and was proclaimed to the nations of the earth as the ground of hope for man through reconciliation with God.

The same "some" say the case would have been more satisfactory if the resurrected Christ had been shown "to all people," and not "*to witnesses chosen before of God who did eat and drink with him after he arose from the dead.*" This is both unreasonable and a presumptuous criticism. It is unreasonable because the divine object in the case required the belief of accredited testimony, as the means to be employed in working the work of salvation among men with which the restoration of Christ to familiar intercourse with men would have been incompatible. It is presumptuous, because it is the part of created intelligence to bow in the presence of an attested work of God.

True reason tells a man that whatever God appoints or enjoins must be wise and of binding force, and that a man must be a barbarian to raise the least demur. The only question in any case is: Has he appointed? To this there is but one answer in the case of the resurrection of Christ: it is the demonstrated work of God for the salvation of men who believe and obey His Word in the case. Be it ours to have the wondrous appointment always before us, and the heart in that docile and loving attitude on which Christ lays so much stress when he says:

"Except a man receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, he shall in no wise enter therein."

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