

SUNDAY MORNING NUMBER 284

THERE is one figure towards which we can always cast our eyes with perfect satisfaction; and that is, the figure exhibited in the Gospel narrative from which a chapter has been read—the figure of him brought to memory in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine. He appears in various aspects according as we look at him—always admirable, always instructive. Let us take him just as he is presented to us on this occasion. We have read, “*Then came to him the Pharisees and the Scribes*”—a frequent statement in the course of the narrative of the four Gospels. This simple statement starts curious reflections when all things are considered—when we consider who the Pharisees were and who Christ was, according to the standard of the age. The Pharisees were the learned and respectable and influential men of the day. Christ was a mechanic who had but recently emerged upon public view. Why should a mechanic be an object of attention at the hands of the leaders of the people? There must have been something much more than preaching with a man of “no reputation” to constrain the attendance and attention of public men. We have only to imagine the case of an artizan of any trade in our day: if he merely were a remarkable speaker, it would be a long time before the professors, and doctors, and reverends would go out of their way to hear him—especially if he were given to the condemnation of their craft.

What was there about this Jesus of Nazareth to draw not only the attention of the common people in crowds everywhere, but the very *elite* of the highest classes? We have answer in the statement immediately preceding—that “Whithersoever he entered into villages, or city, or country, they laid the sick in the streets and besought him that they might touch but the border of his garment, and as many as touched him were made perfectly whole.” That is an all-sufficient explanation. We should expect the same result from the same cause to-day. If any preaching artizan were not only to be a bold denouncer of the iniquities of the day, but to show the ability to heal the sick in any numbers of any kind of disease by the mere power of his word, the whole world of learning would be sure to have a sharp and curious eye upon him, and watch him, and attend upon his movements. Jesus did these things. This is a true narrative. We must never forget this simple fact which learning exerts itself to conceal. It is the narrative of eye-witnesses who showed their integrity by suffering for their testimony. It has been in the hands of believers from the first day of publication 1800 years ago till now. Its very character as a narrative is evidence of its truth. It is those who saw—those who heard—what Jesus did and said that tell us these things. It is no story at second-hand. “We cannot,” as Peter afterwards said, “*but speak things which we have seen and heard*” (Acts 4:20).

The narrative being a true narrative, beyond all reasonable contradiction, let us dwell on it and get all the good out of it we can. It has but one glorious meaning—the meaning expressed by Nicodemus when he said, “*We know that thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that thou doest except God be with him.*” With what attention we naturally listen to all that such a teacher has to say! In the weary jangle of human argument upon mere nature, it is pleasant to feel in the presence of one who is the very truth itself, and whom we have merely to believe and obey to “*find rest unto our souls.*”

He reminds the people in this chapter (Mark 7.) of what God said by Isaiah: “*This people honoureth Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.*” He said the words of Isaiah were descriptive of the state of the Jews while he (Jesus) spoke. If it was a bad state with them, is it a good state with us? Can God value lip-worship? Who does? What man, even,

does not abominate the lifeless compliances of the lips where the heart is not engaged? Sincerity and warmth are the first conditions of acceptability in human friendship: how much greater is the claim of the Creator on the created? If He abhorred the mere mechanical worship of His own people Israel—if He found no pleasure in their religious services because their hearts were not in it—how can we expect Him to find pleasure in the prayers and songs of a Gentile population whose hearts are in the present evil world, and not on Him at all? Let us deliver ourselves from the current abomination. *“Let us draw nigh with a true heart, in full assurance of faith.”*

Jesus took notice of the criticism of the Pharisees upon the neglect of the disciples to conform to the social custom of washing hands before meat. This, he said, was a mere tradition of man which he might not particularly have disparaged if it had not been for the neglect of the commandments of God on the part of those who were so zealous of the traditions. In many cases, the traditions directly nullified the commandments. *“Ye reject the commandments of God that ye may keep your own tradition.”* They did so in many cases. He instances only one. It had been commanded that they should honour father and mother and keep them in their old age. The tradition of Pharisees taught that a man might buy himself out of this obligation by making a present to the temple. Thus they made the law of the case of no effect. They did not ostensibly reject the law. They acknowledged the law by word of mouth. They would have said, “Certainly a man ought to honour and maintain father and mother: but there are various ways of doing it: and if a man chooses to give a lump sum to God as the equivalent of what he would have to do for his father and mother in case they lived to an old age, it is accepted as the same thing, and the man is free.” Thus they practically nullified the law while nominally confessing it. *“Full well,”* says Jesus, *“ye reject the commandment of God that ye may keep your own tradition, making the word of God of none effect through the traditions which ye have delivered, and many such like things ye do.”*

What was to be done in such circumstances? The only thing to be done was what Jesus and the disciples did: they stood aside, as Jesus said, *“Leave them alone, they be blind leaders of the blind,”* and this, notwithstanding that he had said on another occasion, *“The Scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat.”* You will readily see how this bears on us. We live in an age when a State-supported clergy stand before the people as the professed expounders of the will of God as revealed in the Bible. They claim to be the successors of the apostles. In a sense, they may be said to sit in their seats: for they are the historic survival of an order of men established in the first instance by the apostles. We certainly should have had no clergy if the apostles had not instituted “bishops elders and deacons” for the oversight and guidance of the congregations of believers developed by their labours. But they are not the same thing in many ways. They have departed from apostolic doctrine, and preach the stereotyped formularies of a dead church for filthy lucre’s sake. Like the Pharisees, they have made void the word of God through the many traditions they have invented. The word of God says we must believe the Gospel in order to be saved. The clergy say it does not matter what we believe. The word of God says we must know the truth, and the truth shall make us free. The clergy say that we cannot be sure what the truth is, unless it is that man is an immortal being. The word of God says we must be baptised in order to be savingly united to Christ. The clergy say that you need not be baptised, unless you particularly wish it, except it be sprinkling with holy water when you are a babe, which is essential to your engrafting in the true church of Christ. The word of God says the inheritance of the righteous is the earth, and that the reward which God purposes for His friends is at the resurrection. The clergy say: *“No: away in the ethereal blue, beyond the bounds of time and space when a man dies and his supposed immortal part quits the body.”* The word of God says that the Kingdom of God is

the hope, and that the kingdoms of this world are to become His, and that Christ and his people will reign for ever over them: the clergy say the kingdom is the church or realms above or the state of grace in the soul. The word of God says we must obey the commandments of Christ in order to find acceptance with him in the day of his coming: the clergy say, with the Bishop of Peterborough, no man can obey the commandments of Christ, "The world cannot be conducted on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount." The word of God says Christ rose from the dead: the clergy say it is a subject involved in great doubt—about which they cannot be sure. The word of God says we must rise from the dead in order to receive everlasting life: the clergy either say, with Hymenæus and Philetus, that the resurrection is past already; or that it is impossible and unnecessary.

Thus, and in many other ways, with their infant sprinklings and churchings and confirmings and confessionals, &c., &c., &c., they make void the word of God through their own traditions, and we have had no alternative but to "leave them alone" and stand aside. How could the truth grow inside the church? Who could grow in his knowledge of it or in his fealty to it or in his love of it in association with the clergy? All orthodox fellowship stifles it and kills it. There was nothing for it but to stand aside and make a new beginning outside. There was nothing for it but to make a fresh start on clear ground. It has not been agreeable to our feelings or conformable to our interests to do this: but we had no choice. Coming to know the truth, there was no alternative but to obey the precept which says, "*Come out from among them and be ye separate.*" "If we are to withdraw from every *brother*" who refuses to submit to the doctrine and the institutions apostolically delivered, what doubt can there be as to our duty in relation to a church which is no church: which denies and quenches and kills the light of God as revealed in the Scriptures; preaches slavish subjection to a priesthood which have become, like the Pharisees, "*blind leaders of the blind*"?

We have seen our duty in this matter and acted on it, and in this we are greatly privileged. But let us take our privilege in the right way. We may find great delight in rejecting the Bible-nullifying traditions of men, and along with it be contentious, and boastful, and proud, and subject to the bias of an evil-thinking and evil-acting heart. Let us be on our guard here. While leaving the clergy alone, let us get close to the miracle-working grave, divine teacher who stands before us in this chapter, and who says that no man living in disobedience of his commandments can hope for his favour at last, however much he may know the right way. Hear ye him. He has something to say on the subject of moral cleanness—without which, no man shall see the Lord. He says that while nothing outside of a man can defile him, something inside of a man and coming out of him can: "*For from within, out of the heart of man, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all **these evil things** come from within and defile the man.*" With these, let us have nothing to do while rejecting traditions; let us not forget to conform to the reverse of all these things of which Jesus speaks. The reverse of them we know: "Good thoughts, conjugal faithfulness, chastity, savings of life, givings, unselfishness, righteousness, candour, purity, a single eye, praise, humility, wisdom." Those who do such things, he says, will be welcomed in the day of glory when all others will be rejected—even the very children of the Kingdom themselves—the Jews, who are such only in flesh and not in heart. This he took occasion to say to one who, like the Syro-Phenecian woman spoken of in this chapter, acknowledged himself a dog. "*Many (such),*" said he, "*shall come from the east and the west, and the north and the south, and shall sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of God.*" We belong to the east, west, north, and south, spoken of. We may hope to be included among those who will come.

If, meanwhile, we are sorely grieved with many things, we are only fellow-sufferers with multitudes that have gone before. Look at the psalm that belongs to to-day's readings (Psa. 74.). It is a prayer of sorrow, with joy in prospect. It is the expostulation of affectionate submission in the midst of evil: "*Why hast thou cast off? Remember thine inheritance—this Mount Zion, wherein thou hast dwelt. How long shall the adversary triumph? How long shall thy hand be concealed? Forget not thy congregation: deliver the soul of thy turtle dove. Have respect unto the covenant; arise, plead thine own cause. The tumult of those that rise up against thee increaseth continually.*" All this we can pray with an intensity begotten of a like experience. Some of the things we cannot say without the modification peculiar to our age. We cannot say, "We see not our signs," except in the sense of direct token. We cannot even say with the precise meaning of the Psalmist, "There is no longer any prophet." We have no living prophets: but since David wrote, there has been a galaxy of prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and many others. Since David wrote, the world has been enlightened with the great light that shone in Jesus and the apostles on whom the spirit of prophecy rested to a degree not realised by our generation. By their writings, we walk in the light and see the signs—the appointed signs of the drawing on climax of God's great purpose of gathering together all things under one head—even Christ. Still we have to say, "The foolish man reproacheth thee daily." Still we have to bemoan the absence of those visible interventions when Israel's "*God was king of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth*": when He divided the sea by His strength "*and broke the heads of the (political) dragons in the waters*": when He "*clave the fountain and the flood and dried up mighty rivers.*" Like David, we are distressed at the cruelties of men and the afflictions of the distressed, and the barbarous aversion to the glory of God.

Let us bear it all as David did, in the confidence of the promise. The vision will not always tarry. It is visibly drawing on. The current of public events is steadily drifting in the right direction: the desolator of Yahweh's land is in the throes of final dissolution. The Lord will shortly cause his face to shine on Zion; and if we endure in the path of obedience to the end, and share in her salvation, we shall rejoice in having been permitted not only to know the truth, but to share in the dishonour incident to its profession in this cloudy and dark day which will shortly have an end.

(Sunday Morning Number 284 by Bro. Robert Roberts)