

“UNTIL HE COME”

“As often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord’s death until he come.”

Such is Paul’s remark concerning the institution we have assembled this morning to observe. Let us fix our attention for a few moments on the last three words, *“until he come.”*

There must have been a suggestiveness in these words to the first generation of believers that we may fail to apprehend in our late day. The *“He”* of the sentence would stand before them with a vividness to which we are necessarily strangers. We have heard of Christ; but they, many of them, had seen him, and if they had not seen him, they had seen many who had, and were living so near the time when he had been on earth as to feel him a contemporary friend so to speak, whose return to them would have none of the dimness about it that the interposition of eighteen centuries is apt to make us feel. The immediate disciples of the Lord, particularly, must have enjoyed the advantage of this position. The Lord’s person was as intimate a figure to them as ours to one another. They had been much in his company, had sat often at the same table, knew his deportment, were familiar with the contour of his countenance and the tones of his voice. He was to them a well-known friend, tenderly loved and deeply feared, as real and practical an object to their mind as anything under the sun. They had travelled and worked with him for a considerable time; they had communed with him in the quietness of the desert, and borne with him the jostle and inconvenience of the crowd. They had hung upon his words and marvelled at his works, and adored his bearing. They had exulted in the prospect of his kingly exaltation in Israel; they had seen him crucified; they had tasted the anguish of the grave’s triumph which, though momentary at the time. They had experienced the gladness of seeing him alive again, and holding converse with him for the considerable period of six weeks. They had seen him, at the end of that time, ascend visibly from their midst to the right hand of power. They had received the consoling assurance:

“This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go.”

When, therefore, they assembled round the table at the breaking of bread to *“do this in remembrance”* of him, *“until he come,”* it would be with a lively interest such as is scarcely possible with us who have had no personal relation to the facts of the case.

Still, the facts of the case are not altered or diminished by our personal insulation from them. The words, *“until he come,”* have the same force in the abstract as if we had all been personal companions of the Lord. Some had to be in our position, of loving without seeing, and it has fallen to our lot. Our business is to accept it cheerfully—yea, thankfully, and make the best of it. Consider the countless thousands who are not privileged to know Christ at all. Even as compared with the Lord’s personal disciples, our position may not be one to be much dissatisfied with. The Lord seems to intimate a special blessedness for those who in the absence of personal witness, have been believing and obedient. His words to Thomas amount to this:

“Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed; blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.”

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard, also, though relating to a different matter, bears in the same direction. The labourers last hired were first rewarded and on equal terms with the first.

The Lord’s return is as much *“due,”* so to speak, now as at the first time the disciples broke bread together after his departure. Nay, it is more so. Many things had to happen before the disciples could hope to see him again. These have all happened so far as their general outline is concerned. In a peculiar sense, the ends of the age have gathered on our generation.

More numerous are the reasons than they have ever been before, for "*looking for his appearing.*" We know neither the day nor the hour; but many converging indications tell us that the time is near, even at the door. The rate at which these indications are developing may be slower than we had been led to look for; but the indications themselves are clear and unmistakable. They are the indications supplied by the Lord himself, apart from which, we should, of course, have been without any clue. Having them, we have a clue. It is clear he intended us to rely on them as affording such a clue. What other meaning is there to his words:

"When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh!"

These "*things*" embrace all that has been divinely revealed as characteristic of the time of the end. Much has been revealed on this head through Daniel, Ezekiel, and other prophets, and especially through John in the Isle of Patmos. Putting it all together, we are able to recognise our time as the time of the "*end*" when the vision shall "*speak*" in a manner that all shall listen to.

We look back upon past generations of believers and see them all more or less exercised in the same way. Probably, Daniel himself had sanguine expectations that the purpose of God was soon to be consummated. His study of Jeremiah had shown him that the then prevalent desolation of Yahweh's land and people was not appointed to extend beyond seventy years. The seventy years were nearly at an end; what did he know but the promised "*Branch*" would spring forth from David's roots at that time, and establish the blessedness of Israel and the nations, spoken of by all the prophets in that connection? There was nothing to correct any anticipation of this sort in which he might have indulged, until he received the visions recorded in his book, showing him that the vision was "*yet for many days*"; that the Messiah would after a long interval be cut off, and that after him, for a long time, Gentile desolation would prevail over land and people. No wonder the ampler information turned him sick with disappointment. We know as a fact that the disciples in the days of Jesus "*thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear*" (Luke 19:11); and we know that the ecclesias of the first century were full of expectation that the Lord would soon appear, till Paul (who was more deeply instructed by visions and revelations than any of that age) wrote to the Thessalonians that certain preliminary events were indispensable. Paul did not know all, for it was not till A.D. 96 that Jesus (who received the knowledge from the Father) vouchsafed a full knowledge of the particulars. These were exhibited to John in the Isle of Patmos, and communicated by him to seven nominated ecclesias for the information of the rest. By these, they were enabled to perceive that there was an extensive programme of events to be accomplished in the history of the world before the time could arrive for the kingdoms of the world to become the kingdoms of Christ. But even this information was communicated in a form that allowed successive generations of believers to hope for the appearing of Christ long before the appointed time. The *Thirteen Lectures on the Apocalypse* make manifest the peculiar structure of the vision by which the end is apparently reached several times, and yet only once finally reached, when the whole of the inner sections of the vision are drawn out telescopically, one after the other. This peculiarity has led to the expectation of Christ's appearing being indulged in, apparently with good reason, by several generations of believers since the Lord's departure. It may strike you as strange that this premature expectation could be indulged in, in view of the periods of Daniel which reach down to the end of the nineteenth century; but then, we must remember that it was expressly intimated to Daniel that the vision shown to him was "*closed and sealed till the time of the end*" (12:9). When the hand of God is upon a matter, no man can see it, however visible it may be in a natural sense. Consequently the brethren were not able to check and rectify their apocalyptically-engineered expectations by the information contained in Daniel. There was a

wisdom in this which we may see. It would not have been advantageous for the brethren to know that the time was far distant. Such knowledge would have been calculated to depress and paralyse. They were, therefore, permitted to indulge in the hope of an earlier consummation of things that came within the scope of the divine purpose.

It may be suggested that we ourselves may be in a similar position. To a certain extent it has been so; but the state of affairs in the world forbids the idea that it can be so to anything like the same extent. There are too many elements in the calculation to leave room for error in the result. There are too many concurring periods—too many separate and independent signs to make it possible that our expectations can prove as premature as those of our brethren of past ages. The entire disappearance of Papal coercive power at the time appointed; the armed and arming state of the nations resulting from French influence and initiative; the increasing decrepitude of the Turkish Empire; the steady aggrandisement of the Czar of all the Russias; the eastern overshadowing position of Britain; the revival of the Holy Land and the emancipation of the Jews, and the many schemes for the reunion of both under British protection, make it certain that the hour of Christ's return is at hand. The only uncertainty is the exact time. This has been hidden. It was assumed that it coincided with the time appointed for the fall of the Temporal Power. Time has shown this assumption to be wrong, but it has also confirmed the general ground with which the assumption was associated, and has established the conviction immovably as to the fact of the end having arrived, and the Lord's return in a general sense being "due."

It is easy to realise that it is good the exact time of the Lord's appearing has not been revealed. Supposing it had been communicated that on such a day in such a month in 18—something or other, Christ would come, a variety of evil effects must have ensued. Those living in the first and other early centuries would have been liable to feel it was a long way off, and would have lacked consequently some of the stimulus that comes with the impression that the Lord's coming is a proximate possibility at any time. In fact, all believers living more than a generation before the time must have been more or less affected in this way to their detriment. Then as regards those living when the time came near, they must have been highly exercised in a manner that would have had more of sensationalism in it than that intelligent loving faith which is the basis of acceptable service. There would have been a large crop of mere sensationalists as the time drew near, and a scanty growth of robust believers in the earlier times. There would thus have lacked that completeness in the body of Christ, which will be secured by the plan that has been adopted. It will probably be found that this plan has secured representatives of every century, so that the body of Christ will be a living epitome of human history, from Abel outside the garden of Eden, down to the believers who are found alive at the Lord's coming, busy upholding his name in the earth, watching the signs, and looking for his appearing.

The absence of sensationalism, and unexpected lapses, have had the effect of winnowing believers, and leaving those only whose adhesion is based upon sound principles of the truth independently of the mere transient phases of things involved in the signs of the times. We have seen this even in our own day, and it is in our own day perhaps that we are more particularly interested. Some of us can look back to the interest created by the signs of the times twenty-five years ago, and as we look round upon the present circle, we can think of one and another who have wearied in the attitude of waiting for the salvation of God, and surrendered to the secular influences that bear upon every one. Their lamps have gone out. They have been overcome of the world. Even those who have withstood the trying effects of apparent delay experience some of the quietude that comes with hope deferred. They are not so easily elated with the signs of the times. They rejoice in the general drift of things but they are prepared to wait. There is a danger of this mood going too far. Patience may degenerate to

indifference. A middle ground is the ground pointed out by reason—looking for the Lord, watching the signs, and preparing for his coming by acting the part of his servants.

Jesus said,

“In such an hour as ye think not, the Son of man cometh.”

This was certainly true as regarded the expectation of those whom he addressed, for they had no idea that the events lay eighteen hundred years from their day. But it may have an application in the closing scene. The delay, if further prolonged, may have the effect of engendering a feeling that the Lord’s coming is out of all calculation, and may lead many to resign themselves to secular aims. There may be a lull in the development of events to favour this tendency—to give emphasis to this trial. At such a time—“at such an hour as we think not”—when some may have made up their minds that the Son of Man is a long way off, he may be proclaimed in our midst. The parable of the ten virgins, though having a wider scope, may find an illustration in this closing episode:

“They all slumbered and slept.”

“And at midnight, there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.”

Though all involved in the general slumber, as regards the attitude of attention and eager watchfulness, there is a great difference between the different sections of the same class. The “wise” have “oil in their vessels”; and at the summons, it is a mere question of getting the lamps into burning form, but the “foolish” are without oil, and cannot light their lamps. It requires no recondite exposition to make the meaning of this apparent. We all know that light, as a scriptural figure, represents the enlightenment that results from the indwelling of the truth. The oil from which this light is combusted, is the instruction contained in the Holy Oracles. With this oil, the wise have their vessels abundantly supplied, consequent on their obedience to the precept which tells them to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly. Whatever lack of success there may be in the public tokens of the Lord’s coming, their love of Yahweh’s testimonies in their daily readings is like David’s. The foolish, on the contrary, have neglected the daily reading and study of the Scriptures, and find their vessels empty on the arrival of the crisis in which only visible signs interested them. Their minds are a blank and a waste in divine things. Having given themselves up to the present evil world, its literature, its pleasures, its honours, its friendships, and its pursuits—they find themselves unfurnished for the relation of things which the Lord’s coming introduces. They make a great and frantic endeavour to get into a state of readiness. “Too late” is the only suitable response to their excited appeals. Spiritual preparedness for the Lord’s coming is not a thing that can be hurried up in a moment. It is a state reached by a process of growth, and that process is indicated by Peter when he says,

“As new born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.”

What shall we say in view of these things? There is manifestly but one safe course. Whatever phase public events may assume, favourable or unfavourable, as we may construe them, let us “walk with God,” in the close adherence to the reading and meditation of his word which becomes increasingly precious as time hurries past, and the vanity of all mortal things becomes the more and more apparent. Let us concurrently with this, addict ourselves to the assembly of his people, and to all those activities that have to do with the publication and the honour of his name, and the development and service of his people. In this line of things, we shall be fortified to endure any amount of waiting. We shall be prepared to wait. The waiting will sit lightly when our whole affairs are dedicated to the Lord, and used as the means and occasion of a waiting stewardship. We shall even see that waiting is good. It is good in so far as it is preparing for us the zest of realised expectations. It is one of the

principal elements of the joy of the coming salvation—that it has been waited for. It is a feature expressly mentioned in the prophets—

*“It shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him . . .
We will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”*

How much greater our gladness will be than if we had not to wait; we can realise this if we compare our feelings now, after having waited and been made to appreciate and to long for what God has promised. Suppose it had come the year before we were enlightened, how totally unprepared we should have been. Therefore our waiting has a bright side: of course it is the dark side that we most readily feel. The weariness of the delay—the burden of *“this tabernacle”* which cleaves to the earth—the mental depression arising from the spectacle of so much evil around us—are all liable to weigh us heavily to the earth, and make us groan. Do not think that *“some strange thing has happened to you.”* Remember it has been the experience of all the saints. Even David, as we find in the psalm this morning, has to rally himself on the subject. He had to ask himself,

*“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? Why art thou disquieted within me?
Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.”*

Paul also, in the chapter read from Romans, exclaims,

“O wretched man that I am!”

What also means the testimony concerning the Lord that he was a man of sorrow, but this, that cloud and sadness are the normal experience of this probationary time? True, there is an *“always rejoicing”* associated with it as an undercurrent. Still, sorrow has the larger place. It is by appointment. It is no accident. Yea, it is the inevitable adjunct of a state and a time when mankind is not in friendship with God. Let us recognise the fact. It makes its endurance easier than if we carry our burden with the idea that things ought to be different. Let us never give in. Let us bravely breast the dark billows. Let us remember that we are not alone in the storm. God is near us all the time; and what time our spirit is overwhelmed, let us fly unto him, whom David well describes as the Rock that is higher than we. He maketh light to arise in the darkness for the upright even now. He will not put upon us more than we are able to bear. After we have suffered awhile, He will establish, strengthen, settle—even now. And at the end of the dark journey, there waits a welcome whose sweetness and joy it hath not entered into our hearts to conceive.

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