

Psalm 78

WE have had read in our hearing this morning a long and beautiful psalm (78)—all about Israel in their wonderful history. It might seem strange to some that such a psalm could have any proper place at a meeting convened for calling Christ to memory in the appointed breaking of bread. It would have seemed strange to us at one time at the time when we occupied the popular point of view in matters of religion. If it does not seem strange now, it is because we have discovered that the popular point of view is a human point of view, an artificial point of view, a point of view which men have manufactured for themselves, which exists only in brains unenlightened as to the purpose of God, and which is destined to disappear with those brains in the devouring grave which waits for all in the ordinary course. The fixed and permanent point of view is God's point of view, and that point of view for the time being is represented by the Bible. When we take this point of view, we find ourselves among the Jews all the way through.

When we go back to the moment when this breaking of bread was instituted, we find ourselves in Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews. When we look at the Institutor of the ordinance, it is the King of the Jews we see. When we look at the twelve men around him on whom he enjoined the institution, we look on a company of Jews. When we ask what brought them together on the occasion, we find it was to keep the passover, a feast of the Jews, in commemoration of the great event celebrated in the psalm before us.

But these are surface considerations. We must look a little deeper. They do not of themselves furnish a sufficient reason for our identification this morning with the history of Israel and the hope of Israel. There is nothing about the Jews as Jews that would lead us to make them a theme of contemplation on this occasion. They are an interesting race, historically viewed, and they are the living monuments of the fact of God having manifested Himself to them: but in themselves, they are deficient in those qualities and features that would kindle sympathy or engage our interest. They are not only rejecters of Christ: they have been disobedient to the God of their fathers from the beginning. They rebelled against Moses repeatedly while he was with them; and in all their generations they have been the murderers of the prophets sent to call them back to His law. It was not only Christ who said they were an evil generation: Moses himself said, "*Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the first day I knew you till now.*" "*The Lord hath not given you eyes to see nor an heart to understand till this day.*"

Why, then, should their history be so precious? Why should we be so deeply interested in them? Why should we desire to be among those who bless and not among those who curse Israel even in their cast-off state? Because of the one great fact which the psalm discloses, and which the Spirit of God, by the mouth of Zechariah, puts into the mouth of the rejoicing nations in the age to come: "*We have heard that **God is with you.***" Their history is unlike the history of any other people. It is a history of what God has done. It was God who brought them out of Egypt, not their own military prowess. It was God who slew Egypt's first-born of man and beast. It was God who opened for Israel the Red Sea. It was God who fed them with manna in a land yielding no sustenance for forty years. It was God who gave them the law.

Take this element of God out of Israel's history, and there is nothing left of any interest or value to a human being. We live in an age characterised by a persistent endeavour to take God out of the Bible, by which they would turn the Bible into a Jewish husk. Much of the learning of the day is devoted to this unholy work, though we have to be thankful that there is learning against as well as on the side of it. It cannot be a successful work because of the nature of the facts. Commonsense will not allow it to be done. Even the enemies of the Bible are obliged to admit facts that necessitate God in the history of the Jews in order to explain it. They are bound to admit that in the beginning Israel came out of Egypt. This is enough. How could a race of bondmen get out of the grip of a martial nation if God had not been with them. They are obliged to admit that Israel crossed the Red Sea; and though they try to account for it by the perfectly gratuitous hypothesis of an extraordinary physical accident by which the sea suddenly receded and remained long enough back to let Israel across, and returned just in time to overwhelm the Egyptians before they got across, they are not out of their difficulty even if they could prove their hypothesis—which they cannot: for they are obliged to recognise that when Moses got his slave-rabble across, they were in a land where there was no food and no water. On the other side of the Red Sea all is desert. How ever did a thousand people—let alone hundreds of thousands—manage to subsist in a land where there was no sustenance; and what object in the world could Moses as a merely natural leader have had in bringing them into such a place. It requires God in the situation to account for it. Give Him His place, and all is smooth sailing. If God broke the power of Egypt by miraculous plague: if God opened the Red Sea to let Israel through; if God gave them manna from heaven, then the facts that have to be admitted even by the unbeliever, which are inexplicable on his hypothesis become all intelligible, including one which comes to our own every day. Israel have the law of Moses in their hands at this hour. They have had it in all their generations since they come out of Egypt. Where did they get it? Their possession of it is an insoluble mystery if it did not come from God: for it is not in the nature of things for such a law to emanate from the brain of one man, or indeed of a thousand men, as men can see when they know the law and know man. If this law is not from God, then it is a great fraud and falsehood, for God is proclaimed the author at every stage. That it should be a falsehood is inconsistent with its character as a prescriber of holiness and the majestic insister on truth and justice and righteousness. That it is truth and no falsehood is self-manifest in every line to those who read with a candid mind. It is declared to be truth by Christ: and this settles it even if nothing else settled it.

If, then, the law is truth and no lie, then God was in the history of Israel; and if God was in the history of Israel, then is He in their history still. This is where the matter becomes of such urgent consequence to us. Paul says, "*God hath not cast away His people whom He foreknew.*" Though they are in dispersion, God has not done with them. He says He will not make a full end of them, though He will correct their disobedience in much affliction. He says He will return in mercy to them and gather them, and make them the ruling nation upon earth, a fountain of blessing to all mankind. He says, "*Thou shalt be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God. Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken, neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate, but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah, for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married.*" "*The sons also of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee. All they that despised thee shall bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet, and they shall call thee the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.*" "*Whereas thou hast been forsaken and hated, so that no man went through, I will make thee an eternal excellency, a joy of many generations.*" "*Thou shalt weep no more: He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry: when He shall hear it, He will answer thee.*" "*And many nations shall be joined unto*

the Lord in that day, and shall be His people.” “The whole earth shall be at rest.” “They shall study war no more.”

God who brought Israel out of Egypt will also do these great things which He has promised. He made mention of them at the very time of the exodus, while placing on record in the Memorial Song which He taught them before they entered the land (Deut. 32), the fact that they would apostatize from Him, and that they would fall into great and destructive and prolonged trouble in consequence; He also said that in their latter end, when their power was gone, and they were without resource, and they should fully recognise the justice of their treatment, He would unsheath His sword on their behalf, and be *“merciful to His land and to His people,”* with whom He called upon all nations to rejoice. We have therefore to say emphatically with Micah: *“Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob, and the mercy unto Abraham, which thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old.” “Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage: He retaineth not His anger for ever, because He delighteth in mercy. He will turn again: He will have compassion upon us: He will subdue our iniquities: and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.”*

Now to these things, as the brethren of Christ, if we are accepted, we stand related: for the restoration of the kingdom again to Israel is the establishment of the kingdom to which we have been called by the gospel. *“I appoint unto you a kingdom,”* said Christ to the apostles, *“as my Father hath appointed unto me, that ye may eat and drink with me at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”* Although this promise was personal to the apostles, we are embraced in it in a general sense, in so far as we are fellow-heirs with them—*“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.”* The throne of Christ is *“the throne of his father David,”* as the angel told Mary. It is *“the throne of David and his kingdom,”* that *“the child born, the son given,”* is to gloriously occupy; and he has made the fellowship of his throne the subject of promise, in saying, *“To him that overcometh will I grant that he sit with me on my throne.”*

Consequently, the Psalms of David, rehearsing God’s dealings with Israel, are much in place at the table of the Lord. They help us to keep our faith fixed in the right place. *“Salvation is of the Jews,”* and our hope is the hope of Israel. It is a hope growing out of tangible facts that are before the eyes of men to see if they would but look. It is not a sentimental may be. It is not a matter of opinion, or speculation, or hearsay. It is a matter of personal knowledge attested to us, not only by Moses and the prophets, but by the apostles who were *“eye-witnesses of the word.”* They did not preach fables, or even convictions. They preached knowledge, as actually and practically known to them as a man knows his friends or his business—the knowledge of Christ’s sayings and doings in their presence—the knowledge of his resurrection after he was put to death. They preached facts. Wise men demand facts, and let theories come afterwards.

Here are the facts—that God wrought on the wide theatre of the world, and in the palpable sphere of public life, and *“brought a nation from the midst of a nation by mighty acts of power,”* organised it on the basis of a law direct from Himself: sustained them in a sterile wilderness for forty years: uprooted great nations before them in Canaan, and settled Israel in their stead: spoke to them for a thousand years by the prophets: sent Christ into their midst, and wrought by him such mighty works as had never been done before: and when they killed him, raised him from the dead, shewed him many times to many witnesses, and set him on His own right hand, with a promulgated promise that He would send him again at the

appointed times of restitution, spoken of by all the prophets for the salvation of all who should believe and obey him.

Here is where this extended and consistent system of facts reaches down to our day and lays hold of us at this moment. We are here to remember the personal centre of it all. Remembering Him, we in a manner bring all to mind. We bring God to mind, who cannot be seen by any of us, though He is not far from every one of us: God who made the world; God who called Abraham; God who revealed Himself to Moses, and sent him to do this great work in Egypt; God who overshadowed Mary, and became the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, sending him forth in the abiding fullness of His power to declare His name and show His power: the God of our being—the God of our salvation: who shines before us in all these things as the God of our love and the God of our praise. By this, He dwells in us and walks in us, and we are His people. We delight in His name, we adore His ineffable excellence, we rejoice in His mercy: we keep His covenant and remember His commandments to do them. We look forward with desire to the consummation of our service in the great change to the incorruptible. We humbly hope for an entrance into His glorious Kingdom.

It is not that we can feel ourselves deserving of such great things. Doubtless we all feel as the Lord told us to feel when we should have done all that was commanded us: “*We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which it was our duty to do.*” Doubtless we are all ready to say what Jacob said: “*We are unworthy of the least of all the mercy and the truth which thou hast shown to us.*” How dare we hope then? Daniel supplies the answer: “*Not for our righteousness, but for thy great mercy’s sake, we present our supplication before thee.*” If we are defective and erring, we can at least claim to be believing, loving, and obedient. We can say with Peter: “*Lord, thou knowest that we love thee.*” This is not all. We have to remember the joyful truth that the love is not all on our side; that, indeed, it is nearly all on the other side, for “*we love Him because He first loved us.*” Though affliction for a time is a divine dispensation, it is only so as called for by wisdom and the true effectuation of love: “*He doth not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men.*” With sin must come evil, but His love has made a way of extrication without compromising with sin. He forgives sin though He does not tolerate it. There is a very great difference between the two things. Through the Lord Jesus is preached the forgiveness of sin, but not continuance in sin. The very condition of forgiveness is repudiation. It is to the humble and contrite that God will show Himself merciful in the passing by of all their sins and shortcomings at the last for Christ’s sake.

While, therefore, we joyfully wait the hope of the promise of all the good things that God has covenanted to Israel, we must not forget what the word of wisdom says to us by John: “*Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself.*” From what? Another apostle answers: “*From all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.*” While comforting ourselves in the forgiveness of sin, we must never forget that it is the Lord’s standing order to us: “*Be ye holy in all manner of conversation*”; and that it will be made literally manifest to all the world at last what was so conspicuously and incessantly betokened in all the law of Moses, that “*without holiness, no man shall see the Lord.*”

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