

“NOT AS I WILL, BUT AS THOU WILT”

Here we are again to call Christ to remembrance. What an extraordinary thing it is that after 1,800 years, men should be found from week to week so engaged. There have been many great men in the earth, so-called, but where is there one among them all who has a feast held every week to his honour? And this man was not in his day esteemed one of the great men of the earth. As the prophet had said: “He was despised and we esteemed him not.”

Augustus, Caesar, and Antony, and Brutus and Cassius, and Herod were among the bright lights of that age; Jesus was a mechanic in an obscure village of Galilee, whom the authorities executed as a felon. Yet here, in our day, his name is above every name. All other names are in eclipse by the side of his. What is the meaning of this extraordinary fact? Investigation yields but one answer that meets all the demands of reason. The name of Jesus is now worldwide, and his memory had in reverence by believing thousands in every age since his crucifixion, because he wrought miracles while alive and after death rose again, and sent forth to the world by the hands of his chosen companions and friends, a miraculously-attested message, affirming these facts, and calling upon them to turn to God in faith and repentance with the coming dispensation of his judgment and goodness when he should return.

This being the only rationally-admissible explanation of the undeniable ascendancy of the name of Jesus in this our 19th century, let us look at him and the meaning of him as bearing upon ourselves this morning. Looking at him, as exhibited to us in the gospel narratives, we see many wonderful things. Let us consider the one aspect in which he appears before us in the chapter read this morning. We look and see a prostrate figure under the trees in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus has thrown himself upon his face. He is visibly convulsed in agony of mind. As we listen, we hear words come from his mouth which are those particularly deserving our consideration on this occasion:

“Father, all things are possible with Thee: take away this cup from me.
Nevertheless, not what I will, but what Thou wilt.”

The “cup” in question was the death on the cross to which the Father had made known His desire he should submit—the prospect of which, the chapter informs us, made him “sore amazed and very heavy.” The feature that stands out so clearly is the conflict between two wills and the willing subordination of one to the other. The Father wished, willed, desired, required, that Jesus should surrender himself to the violence of cruel foes, and submit to the torture and ignominy of being nailed through hands and feet and hung up on a Roman cross in the face of the sun till he should die. From this terrible ordeal Jesus shrank with fearful apprehension. He wished not to suffer it, he desired to avoid it. It was his will to escape it, “if it were possible,” that is, if the Father’s objects in the case could admit of its omission. It was in his power to evade the terrible death before him if he had chosen to prefer his own feelings to the divine command. Here was where the conflict lay. It was the great historic conflict—the will of God versus the wish of man—brought to a focus. The conflict ended in victory, we know, otherwise we should not be here to celebrate the resurrection. But what was the nature of the victory? It was the deliberate preference of the Father’s will to his own: “not what I will, but what Thou wilt.” He was enabled

to exercise this preference by reason of what he was, as the Son of God. Still, it was by what we may call the operation of reason in the discernment of truth. Paul informs us that: "For the joy set before him he endured the cross."

This shows us the power of mental view in sustaining him, and leading him to "overcome," which is the term he himself employed in afterwards describing the achievement.

It is according to our experience of human life. A strong idea will carry a man through anything. Of course, if the idea is visionary, it will lead to nothing; still, it will impel a man to action, though the action may be a plunge into the ditch, like Frederick's soldiers at the battle of Prague, who mistook a morass for a grass field, at the other side of which was the enemy. Here is where the power of the Truth comes in. The discernment of its reality, resulting in conviction, renewed and strengthened by daily contact in the reading of the Scriptures and prayer, will lead us to overcome where Christ overcame, as he says: "To him that overcometh will I grant that he sit with me on my throne, even as I also overcame and am sat down with my Father on His throne."

But some have the idea that we have no opportunity of overcoming as Christ overcame. They are apt to say "We have not been commanded to submit to crucifixion as he was, we have no occasion to say 'Not as I will, but as Thou wilt'." Now, in this there is much apprehension of a dangerous kind, of which it will be our wisdom to get rid as entirely and as speedily as possible. It is true that as regards the particular form in which Christ was called upon to submit to the will of God, we cannot imitate him. It would be no pleasure to God if we were to get somebody to literally crucify us. He has not required this at our hands. But is there no sense in which He has required us to submit to crucifixion? Those who keep close to the Scriptures will have no hesitation in answering this question. We are commanded by Paul to "crucify the old man with his affections and lusts." This is a command direct to every one of us from God, for Paul said: "The things that I write unto you are commandments of the Lord."

Now, what is this crucifixion of the old man but the repression and denial of every natural desire that goes against the Law of God? The old man says, when any one injures him, "I will do to my injurer as he had done to me." The Law of God says: "Avenge not yourselves." "Say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the Lord and He shall save thee" (Rom. 12:19; Pro. 20:22). The wise man will repress the impulse of nature; will crucify the old man and say to God: "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt."

The old man says, "I hate my enemies; I am not going to put any advantage in their way." The Law of God says: "Do good to them that hate you . . . If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink."

The wise man will quench the resentments of the natural mind. He will crucify the old man. He will say to God, "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt," and he will benefit his foes if he can. The old man says, "I love money, and I must have it. I like the pleasures of the world, and I don't see why I should deny myself any more than other people. I

relish the honours of life, and I do not see any harm in putting myself in the way of receiving and enjoying them.”

Here there is much positive pain to be encountered in the doing of the will of God. God says,

“Love not the world nor the things that are in the world.”

“Set your affections on things above.”

“Deny all ungodliness and worldly lust.”

“The love of money is the root of all evil.”

“Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.”

“How can ye believe that receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only.”

What can a wise man do but set himself against all these desires of the flesh and of the mind. What can he do, but, like the apostles, “obey God rather than man?” What can he do but “crucify the old man” and say to God: “Not as I will, but as Thou wilt.”

Again, the old man delights in all manner of uncleanness—libidinous thoughts, lustful exercises, impure habits, as exemplified in the whole round of worldly custom in the large cities—smoking, drinking, theatre-going, light talk, jesting, frivolous reading, gay company—folly, everywhere. The old man says, “Why should not I have the liberty that everybody takes?” “Why should not I please myself also? Why should not I indulge in these pleasing diversions that chase away the dullness of life and open to me the solace and refreshment that the world has in all directions?”

There is an answer to the old man which the old man does not like, and which it inflicts the highest pain on him to receive. That answer is: The Law of God forbids. God says:

“Ye are called to holiness;”

“Be ye holy in all manner of conversation—holy both in body and spirit.”

“Without holiness no man shall see the Lord.”

“Fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness let it not be once named amongst you as becometh saints, neither filthiness nor foolish talking nor jesting which are not convenient but rather giving of thanks.”

“Flee youthful lusts, but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart”—“hating even the garment spotted by the flesh”—“having no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reproving them.”

In all things, there is but one course for every true lover of Christ, and that is, to bear him company in the garden of Gethsemane, and say with him: “Not my will but Thine be done.”

The conflict may be painful for the time being; but it never can be so painful as that through which he went in prospect of the prolonged agony that ended in the “loud cry” at the ninth hour. And however painful, it prepares a sweetness of victory that no language can exaggerate. Even in this present life, the results of conformity to the will of God are most precious, most noble. Who does not admire the beauty of the new man who avenges not himself, and walketh in holiness and kindness in all his ways? Who would not buy with much money if it could purchase it, the peace of God that passeth all understanding, filling the heart and mind of those who put on the new man, and follow Christ in righteousness and true holiness? But who can adequately speak of “the end of the matter?” It is the precept of eternal wisdom by Solomon: “In everything consider the end.”

The end of the world’s ways—dishonour, misery, and death. The end of those who crucify the old man is exaltation, joy unspeakable, and life everlasting. There is no proportion between the sacrifices and the recompences of holiness. Paul, with much fervour, declared that the one was “not worthy to be compared with the other.”

“Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

To see this clearly is part of the discernment that enables us to overcome. “For the joy set before him,” Jesus was enabled to “endure the cross.” A similar exercise of mind will similarly strengthen us. True intelligence will perceive that—“Wisdom excelleth folly as far as light exceedeth darkness (Eccl. 2:13).

There is every high inducement to constrain us to submission. Look round on human affairs. What good is there for man in all the multifarious forms of his experience? Supposing he get his highest desires gratified? Let it be in business, in fame, in friendship, what does it amount to at last? We may not be able to give a clear answer in the case of our own affairs, because we so strongly feel in our own case that if we could just carry our point, whatever it may happen to be that is engaging our attention, it would be perfectly and substantially and satisfactorily well with us as it has perhaps never been with anybody else before. (This is how we feel.) But in the case of those who have preceded us, we can see the matter clearly enough. Take the people who lived only 50 years ago—that is, those who were in their prime and in full current of life’s affairs 50 years ago. We can get a peep at them by looking up the files of, say, the Birmingham Journal of 50 years ago. We see in the advertising columns mention of many matters that were very urgent with the advertisers 50 years ago. In the news-columns, we read of public meetings at which testimonials were presented to successful men, or of business enterprises that were opening out in a very successful way, or of the awarding of prizes and diplomas in some educational or other competitions, or perhaps of some popular wedding in which the parties were the imagined possessors of supreme bliss. We read, and it all seems so very real—just as it seemed at the time. We take our eyes off the paper, and how does it seem when we realise that it is all gone—that all these people have got through, and that all the affairs that they had in hand have disappeared as entirely as if they had never been!

Now what is the difference between their affairs and ours? Only this, that we know their affairs, however large and urgent at the time, were a mere phantasmagoria, and that we have to try and remember that ours are the same, theirs have passed and ours

are passing. The best we can achieve in mortal life is “but a vapour that appeareth for a very little while and then vanisheth away.” Is there then no abiding good for men? The answer is without uncertainty. It must be so, just as there are in nature more enduring substances than vapour; just as there is a sun in the heavens, as well as shifting clouds in the sky, just as there are precious stones and incorruptible gold, as well as perishable grass and flowers, so there is a life higher than mortal life, and a state far beyond the experience of human life. We should have inferred this as a matter of reason if we had not been told it; but what, as reasonable beings, can we feel but enthusiastic and immovable confidence in the presence of the name and the revelation of Jesus Christ, whose influence has already remodelled the world; whose command this morning we obey to “show forth his death until he come,” and for whose reappearing we wait as for the sun that shall arise with healing in his beams, at whose bright presence darkness of all kinds will forever flee away.

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