

Passiontide Sermons
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SERMON XIV.
THE TRAITOR-APOSTLE.
Preached at St. Paul's on Palm Sunday, April 16, 1889.

St. Matt. xxvi. 24.
It had been good for that man if he had not been born.

PALM SUNDAY, as it brings before us our Lord's solemn entry into Jerusalem before His last Passover, suggests a great many subjects for reflection, but none more entitled to our attention than the great variety of characters who may be joining, apparently with an absolute unity of purpose, in the services or the devotions which are appropriate to a great religious occasion. The narratives of the entry into Jerusalem distinguish between the parts taken by the Disciples on the one hand, and by the general population on the other; but all co-operated to promote a common purpose—namely, the glory of the Son of David at His solemn approach to the Holy City. The conduct of the multitude has often been pointed to as an illustration of the fickleness of popular opinion; the men who to-day cried "Hosanna to the Son of David" would be shouting five days hence, "Crucify Him! crucify Him!" But the Disciples, who could claim a larger knowledge and a nearer intimacy, who thronged around their Master as His immediate attendants or bodyguard, were they altogether secure from any such infirmity or vacillation of judgment or purpose? Was there no risk lest any of them should exchange the mood of loyalty and devotion for a different attitude towards their Master when the hour of trial should come? We know, my friends, how that question must be answered. The time was not far distant when Christ's first Apostle denied Him; when, at any rate for the moment, all His disciples forsook Him and fled; when of the chosen twelve one only in the hour of danger stood near His Master's Cross of shame." The fear of man and the fear of pain and death will account for this weakness of our Lord's first followers; but these motives would not account for a more startling failure of loyalty which was to be witnessed in the circle that immediately surrounded Him. Side by side with John, who was to stand beneath His Cross; side by side with Peter, who, after denying Him, would repent with bitter tears; side by side with Andrew and James the Greater and the Less, and Thomas and Bartholomew, and Matthew and Philip, and Simon and Jude, there was another, who with them had walked up the long steep road from Jericho, had witnessed the miracle whereby Lazarus was raised from the dead at Bethany, and who now, no doubt, waved his palm branch, and chanted his Hosanna like the rest. Still a member of the Apostolic College, still in closest intimacy with the Divine Redeemer, but already within three days of the Betrayal,—there walked and sang in that solemn procession advancing towards Jerusalem, Judas Iscariot.

"It had been good for that man if he had not been born." It has been observed that our Lord Himself says the sternest as well as the most tender things that are recorded in

the Gospel. He would not bequeath to a disciple the responsibility or the odium of proclaiming truths against which human nature, conscious of its real condition, will always rebel. He did not leave it to an Apostle to announce the unrepentant sinner's doom. And He described the moral characteristics of men and classes and populations who came before Him during His ministry. Chorazin and Bethsaida, though on the sacred soil of Palestine, were, He said, in a worse case than the Pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon. Capernaum, though exalted unto heaven, would be cast down to hell. The Scribes and Pharisees, though sitting in the seat of Moses, were "fools," "hypocrites," "whited sepulchres." Herod on his throne was yet a "fox." But nothing that our Lord ever said of any class of men, or any one human being, approached in its severity this saying about Judas.

They were sitting, He and the Disciples, at the Paschal meal, as the twilight was deepening towards the night. They ate almost in silence; scarce a word was spoken that was not necessary to the ceremony. Suddenly He broke in on the stillness with a saying which carried dismay to the hearts of all present: "One of you shall betray Me." Each, even the most sincere, must have feared lest he should be capable of committing the unparalleled sin. Each was to feel for a moment his liability to a crime of which another might be guilty. Each by his question, "Lord, is it I?" implied withal his consciousness of innocence. Then our Lord proceeded to declare solemnly His approaching self-sacrifice, and the agency by which it would be brought about. He answered and said, "He that dippeth his hand with Me in the dish, the same shall betray Me. The Son of Man goeth as it is written of Him; but woe unto that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born. Then Judas, which betrayed Him, answered and said, Master, is it I? He saith unto him, Thou hast said."

Concerning no other human being is so stern an utterance on Divine authority placed on record. It cannot be explained—against the whole drift of the passage—as though our Lord meant that it would have been good for Himself if Judas had not been born: nor yet as a proverbial saying which should not be taken too literally, since this is to mistake the profound seriousness of purpose with which our Lord used the gift of human speech. Nor does it merely predict that Judas, like such servants of God as Jeremiah or Job, would in a moment of transient despondency curse the day of his birth, since Jesus Himself confirms and utters this judgment of the despairing Judas; it is the Most Merciful Himself Who says, "It were good for that man if he had not been born." As we think over the piercing words, we see how they close for ever the door of hope: since, if in some remotely distant age there were in store for Judas a restoration of his being to light and peace, beyond that restoration there would still be an eternity, and the balance of good would preponderate immeasurably on the side of having been born. It must be good for every human being to thank God for his creation,—for the opportunity of knowing and loving the Author of his existence,—unless such love and knowledge has been made, by his own act, for ever impossible.

Now, first of all, observe that there are sayings about Judas which might seem to imply that his part in life was forced on him by an inexorable destiny. St. John says that Jesus knew from the beginning who should betray Him. Our Lord asked the assembled Apostles: "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" In His great Intercession, He thus addresses the Father: "Those that Thou gavest Me I have kept; and none of them is lost, save the son of perdition." And at the election of Matthias, St. Peter

points to the destiny of Judas as marked out in prophecy: “His bishoprick let another take:” and he speaks of Judas as going to his “own place.” This and other language of the kind has been understood to represent Judas as unable to avoid his part as the Betrayer: and the sympathy and compassion which is thus created for him is likely to blind us to a true view of his unhappy career.

The truth is that at different times the Bible looks at human lives from two very different and, indeed, opposite points of view. Sometimes it regards men merely as factors in the Divine plan for governing the world—for bringing about results determined on by the Divine Wisdom; and when this is the case, it speaks of them as though they had no personal choice or control of their destiny, and were only counters or instruments in the Hand of the Mighty Ruler of the Universe. At other times Holy Scripture regards men as free agents, endowed with a choice between truth and error, between right and wrong, between a higher and a lower line of conduct: and then it enables us to trace the connection between the use they make of their opportunities and their final destiny. Both ways of looking at life are of course strictly accurate. On the one hand, it belongs to the sovereignty of the Almighty and Eternal Being, that we, His creatures, should be but tools in His Hands: on the other, it befits His Justice that no moral being, on probation, should suffer eternal loss save through his own act and choice. The language of Scripture about Pharaoh illustrates the two points of view. At one time we are told that the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, that he would not let the Children of Israel go; at another, that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. The same fact is looked at, first from the point of view of what was needed in order to bring about the deliverance of Israel; and next from the point of view of Pharaoh’s personal responsibility. St. Paul stands at one point of view in the ninth chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, and at another in the twelfth. It is no doubt difficult, if not impossible, with our present limited range of knowledge, to reconcile the Divine Sovereignty in the moral world with the moral freedom of each individual man. Some of the great mistakes in Christian theology are due to an impatience of this difficulty. Calvin would sacrifice man’s freedom to the Sovereignty of God; Arminius would sacrifice God’s Sovereignty to the assertion of man’s freedom. We cannot hope here to discover the formula which combines the two parallel lines of truth, which meet somewhere in the Infinite beyond our point of vision: but we must hold last to each separately, in spite of the apparent contradiction. If our Lord, looking down upon our life with His Divine Intelligence, speaks of Judas, once and again, as an instrument whereby the Redemption of the world was to be worked out, the Gospel history also supplies us with materials which go to show that Judas had his freedom of choice, his opportunities, his warnings, and that he became the Betrayer because he chose to do so.

II.

Secondly, Judas’s career illustrates the power of a single passion to enwrap, enchain, possess, degrade, a man’s whole character.

The most Christian poet of our day contrasts the bliss of the Mother of the Redeemer with the sad lot of the mother of Judas—

“Sure us to Blessed Mary come
The Saints’ and Martyrs’ host.

To own, with many a thankful strain.
 The channel of undying bliss.
The bosom where the Lord hath lain,
 The hand that held by His;
Sure as her form for evermore
 The glory and the joy shall wear,
That robed her, bending to adore
 The Babe her chaste womb bare;—

So surely throes unblest have been,
 And cradles where no kindly star
Look'd down,—no Angel's eye serene
 To gleam through years afar.”

Then he tells how

“Christ's Mother mild
Upon that bosom pitying thought,
Where Judas lay, a harmless child,
By gold as yet unbought.”

Judas, we must suppose, had his good points, or he would never have become, by his own act, a disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was not in the position of those of us who are born of Christian parents, and are by Baptism made members of Christ in their infancy, without being consulted. He chose to follow our Lord, when to follow Him implied no gain or credit, and at least some risk of unpopularity or danger. This would seem to show that he must have had some eye for, or capacity of, understanding excellence; that he must have had some pleasure in associating with the good; that he cannot, at any rate at one time in his life, have been wanting in moral courage, self-denial, and a spirit of enterprise for public religious objects.

Judas had one vice or passion—the love of money, carried to a point which filled his thoughts and controlled the action of his will. When this propensity first showed itself we do not know: the germ of it may have been already lodged in his soul when he left his home to follow our Lord Jesus Christ. Certainly he had at first no opportunities for indulging it. Those great operations of modern finance, by which thousands, or even millions of money are transferred from hand to hand, or from one great firm to another, never, it need not be said, flitted before the imagination of this Galilæan peasant; nay, when he first became an Apostle, the rules under which the Twelve set to work forbade their providing gold or silver or brass in their purses, or scrip for their journey. At a somewhat later period, when our Lord was joined by Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, Susanna, and others, who ministered to Him of their substance, a common fund would seem to have been formed, and, either because he was thought to have natural aptitudes for the work, or because he desired it, Judas became the treasurer; he had the bag. That bag contained, probably, at most a few of the small copper coins that were struck by the Roman procurators or by the Herods. But the magnitude of any passion in the human soul is altogether independent of the limits of its opportunity for indulgence. Tyranny is as possible in a cottage as on an Eastern throne; though it may have to content itself with more restricted gratification. Envy, pride, sensuality, maliciousness, though

they may be gratified on a vast area, and with terrific results to millions, or within the narrowest limits of a very humble lot, are, as passions, in the one case what they are in the other—powers that overshadow and gradually absorb all else in the soul, and give it throughout the impress and colour of their own malignity. Just as there are bodily diseases, which, at first unobtrusive and unnoticed, and capable of being extirpated if taken in time, will spread and grow until first one and then another limb or organ is weakened or infected by them, so that at last the whole body is but a habitation for the disease which is hurrying it to the grave; so in the moral world one unresisted propensity to known wrong may in time acquire a tyrannical ascendancy that will make almost any crime possible in order to gratify it.

It is a neglect of this truth—a truth which may be verified by a very little observation of human nature—that has led some modern writers to attempt a revision of the account of the character of Judas which is set before us in Holy Scripture. They think that that account does not explain so tremendous a fall: that the real reasons for it must have been graver, or more numerous, or more complex; that it was profound insincerity from the first; or envy of the moral superiority of Jesus; or resentment secretly cherished for some warning, or rebuke, or fancied neglect; or even a seeming attachment to the Jewish priesthood, to the Scribes and Pharisees, to the orders of men who were prominent in the old religious life of the country. If it was so, it must be a matter of conjecture: Holy Scripture does not say so. If it was so, we may be sure that the ruling passion gradually enlisted these other motives; drew them up into and assimilated them with itself, like the raw levies of subject states, which a conqueror incorporates with his own disciplined forces. Judas was at bottom, and before all, a man who cared for money more than he cared for conscience, or for virtue, or for God; and it was this fatal propensity which, with or without other contributing causes, but at any rate in the first instance, determined his ruin.

We see this motive in full energy when Mary anointed our Lord's Feet at Bethany. Judas could see in her action no ray of the love which made it so beautiful. He had only one thought,—the money's worth of the box of ointment.

It might have been sold, he said, for three hundred silver pence and given to the poor. Covetousness will often give itself the airs of a far-sighted philanthropy, which protests against the waste of money on what it describes as mere sentiment. Our Lord did not note the fact that Judas was dishonest, and would have had the price of the ointment in his keeping had it been sold. He only observed that Judas would have other opportunities for befriending the poor, and that Mary had used her one opportunity of doing honour to His Burial by anticipation. But Judas understood the rebuke; and no doubt it quickened the determination he had already formed. If he could not have the three hundred silver denarii, he at least might have thirty shekels, about one-fifth of it; and his revenge for the scene at Bethany into the bargain.

III.

Thirdly, the history of Judas shows us that great religious privileges do not of themselves secure any man against utter spiritual ruin. It would, of course, be ingratitude to God to deny that such privileges may and should further our highest interests. But religious privileges only do their intended work when they are responded to on our part by the

dispositions which can appropriate and make the most of them; by sincerity of purpose, by a humble, that is to say a true, estimate of self, by sorrow for past sin, by watchfulness, by an especial care not to let any one acquire that preponderant and supreme place in the soul which may render all helps to holiness useless, and may forfeit all prospect of eternal peace.

What religious opportunities could be greater than those which were enjoyed by Judas Iscariot? He was one of those twelve men who were most closely associated with the Redeemer of the world during His Ministry. He was admitted to an intimacy which was denied to those of our Lord's first-cousins, "brethren," as they are called, who were not already Apostles; nay, which, when His Ministry had once begun, was denied to His Blessed Mother. Judas shared a Companionship compared with which the purest and noblest intimacies that this earth has known were worthless and degrading. He heard the very Words, he witnessed the very Works, which are recorded in the Gospels. He heard and witnessed many more which have not been recorded. He received upon his understanding and his memory, if not within his heart, the impress of that one incomparable Life revealing itself insensibly, incessantly, by a thousand rays of Charity and Wisdom playing all around it.

How often may we have heard men say, "If I had not to live among the degenerate and inconsistent Christians whom I see around me, if I had lived eighteen hundred years ago with Jesus of Nazareth in His own Galilee, I should be a better man than I am." But is it more certain that this would be so than that the brethren of Dives, who heard not Moses and the prophets, would have been persuaded by one rising from the dead? If anything could have roused a man to a sense of moral danger we might think that the teaching of Jesus Christ, to which Judas listened, would have done so. Judas must have heard our Lord's warnings about the guilt of unfaithfulness in the "unrighteous mammon." Judas would have listened to the Parable of the Sower, and the explanation how the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the Word of Truth in the soil of the soul. Judas may well have thought that the saying, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon;" or the proverb, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven," were meant for him. Judas was even one of those who asked the question with regard to this proverb, "Who then can be saved?" But the very greatest religious advantages do not compel the understanding to be sincere, or the conscience to be sensitive, or the affections to be warm and quick, or the will to be straightforward and vigorous. Judas lived in the closest intimacy with Jesus; but this intimate relation with Jesus did not save Judas from a crime compared with which that of the Jewish rabble, and the Roman soldiers, and Pontius Pilate, and the Chief Priests and Pharisees, was venial:—it did not save him from becoming the betrayer.

Surely this is a most serious consideration for those who are already, by God's great goodness and mercy, privileged to know much of religious truth, and to have much to do with the duties and privileges that more especially belong to Religion. Especially, as I would remind myself, does it concern us of the clergy, who are necessarily associated more closely than other men with the works, the advantages, and the truths that belong to Religion; who have to use the language of Religion; and who may too easily assume that this of itself implies an immunity from moral and spiritual disaster, that is by no means assured to us. Who does not know, or may not easily discover, that this necessary familiarity with holy things has dangers which are peculiarly its own; that it may easily

foster a mechanical and formal temper which robs language of its sincerity, and prayer of its power and efficacy, and a man's inner life of the strong and pure motives that alone ennoble it; that, unless there be great watchfulness over what is going on within, as well as care to do and say sincerely what has to be said and done in the way of outward duty, almost any measure of spiritual ruin is only too possible? And what is true of clergymen is true of all who have knowledge of and contact with the things of Religion. To be close to Jesus Christ may be to be as St. John; but it may be to be as Judas. Let us, one and all, not be high-minded, but fear.

If any one, whose business it may have been to study the infidel literature of our day, should set himself to inquire whence have come the most intelligently bitter and deadly thrusts at the power and work of our Divine Master, he will not, I think, find that they proceed from the layman, who has perhaps known nothing of religion in his early years, and has been kept throughout life by a thick integument of prejudice from making any real acquaintance with it in his later life. No! rather will they be found to come from men who have been trained, or even cradled, amid sacred associations: from the teacher in a Christian school; from the seminarist who was looking forward to Ordination; from the Divinity student who was destined to occupy, or who already occupied, a professor's chair; from the companions and associates of those who have had most to do with kindling among their contemporaries the sacred flame of religious conviction.

In order to betray religion effectively, a man must have been, in some sense, intrusted with it: he must have explored and shared its sacred secrets; he must not only have studied it from afar; he must have taken it to his heart. Everybody does not know enough to be a Judas—enough to pierce religion in the part which, to the common apprehension, shall seem to be most vulnerable, or where the sensitiveness of Christian faith will be most deeply pained. Every one does not know enough to be sure where Jesus will be found after dark,—under the olive-trees in the Garden; enough to lead a rude company of followers, all of them indignant, but most of them uninformed, down across the steep valley of Jehoshaphat, and up again to the gate of Gethsemane, and then to go straight to the Object of their search, without hesitation or error, and utter the “Hail, Master” which is to show them their intended Victim.

Observe, too, in the betrayal of our Lord, the survival of religious habit when the convictions and feelings which make Religion real have passed away. Judas betrayed the Son of Man with a kiss. The kiss was a customary expression of mingled affection and reverence on the part of the disciples when meeting their Master.

To suppose that Judas deliberately selected an action which was as remote as possible from his true feelings is an unnecessary supposition. It is more true to human nature to suppose that he endeavoured to appease whatever there may have been in the way of lingering protest in his conscience, by an act of formal reverence, that was dictated to him by long habit, and that served to veil from himself the full enormity of his crime at the moment of his committing it. In like manner, brigands in the south of Europe have been known to accompany deeds of theft, and even murder, with profuse ejaculations, whether of piety or superstition: and cases have been known further north of picking pockets when the thief and his victim were kneeling or sitting side by side in a Church or meeting-house. In these instances Religion may be employed, not simply as a blind to an immoral act, but as a salve to a protesting conscience; the passing thrill of emotion seems to do something towards reducing the magnitude of the crime which

accompanies it.

The kiss of Judas! It has become a proverb for all those procedures whereby, under the semblance of outward deference for Religion, or of devotion to its interests, its substance and reality are sacrificed or betrayed. The general conscience of mankind is still too alive to the importance of basing human life on sanctions that are drawn from a higher world, to welcome, or even to permit, attacks upon all Religion, on the ground of avowed hostility to it. Accordingly, its opponents generally assume some garb of discipleship: they commonly profess an interest in it to which its ordinary professors or defenders are strangers: if they attack its doctrine, they are only anxious to remove what they conceive to be excrescences, and to restore in its purity some creed which they attribute to the earliest times: if they assail its discipline, it is in the interests of some theory of personal liberty which they would have us believe is essentially bound up with real piety; if they would confiscate its material revenues to some secular purposes, they assure us that what they really have at heart is the restoration of the Church to a condition which shall satisfy their ideal of apostolical poverty.

A religious reason is generally produced for the abandonment of any interest, truth, or duty of religion. Eternal Punishment is set aside out of anxiety to assert God's Mercy: the Pardon of penitent sinners from devotion to His strict Justice: Sacraments are depreciated under cover of our profession of lofty spirituality: practical energy is decried for the honour of some doctrine, certainly not St. Paul's, of Justification by Faith. Something of the nature of a kiss is required by public opinion in Christendom in order to disguise the process of delivering Jesus to His would-be murderers: so that even the most extreme forms of infidelity find it necessary to preface an assault upon fundamental truth, of vital import to the very heart and life of religion, by an expression of concern for a very transcendental essence of religion which is to survive, and indeed to profit by, the rejection of the particular truth which is being assailed.

But this affectation of interest in religion on the part of its opponents belongs only to particular phases of public opinion. The professed friends of Jesus are always in danger of betraying Him. The Scribes and Pharisees, the Roman soldiers, Pilate and Herod, could apprehend, insult, torture, condemn, crucify our Lord; but they could not betray Him. For this it was necessary to be more or less in His confidence. We Christians can do Him a more deadly injury than can any who know Him not, and have no part in Him.

Let us put each before himself the misery that it will be if He, Who made us for Himself, and Who redeemed us and sanctified us, that we might be His in time and in Eternity, should pronounce any of us, for such a reason as this, to be one who had better not have been born. Let us reflect that it is not impossible for us to incur the sentence which was uttered over the fallen Apostle by the Most Merciful. We may be nearer acting the traitor's part than, in our security, we think: the outward signs of the gravest effects in the spiritual world are, like the kiss of Judas, often insignificant enough: a word, a smile, a slight act performed or omitted, even a shrug of the shoulders, may leave on another spirit an impression that will last throughout Eternity. And if we would escape this misery let us do one thing,—aim at, long for, pray for, a single aim in the service of God. St. Bernard used often to ask himself the question which our Lord put to Judas, "Friend, wherefore art thou come?" Why hast thou been created and placed in this world at all? why hast thou been made a member of Christ in Baptism? why hast thou been led by

Providence to this or that state of life? Art thou here to do thy own will; to live without obeying any above thee; or wouldst thou indeed serve God, and by labour and suffering prepare for His Everlasting Presence? "Friend, wherefore art thou come?" If we would sincerely press that question home, how different might be the aim and the perfectness of our work throughout each day; secular occupation, intercourse with others, prayers public and private, Communions,—all would receive a new elevation from the dread lest, through vanity, or insincerity, or worse, we should after all have our part with the traitor.

And if we will often ask ourselves this question, it will make and keep us watchful over what is going on within our souls. Where this watchfulness is lacking, vices may spring up, and grow unobservedly, until they have eaten out love, moral force, spiritual beauty; leaving only the external semblance of what once was life, and biding their time for the occasion which, by one fatal crime, shall discover to the world and to the conscience itself the dread reality of an utterly perverse and apostate will. Nobody ever became very bad indeed all at once; and to grapple with tendencies to evil before they have had time to acquire the strength which can enlist the passions in their service, and make a home and empire within the soul, is indeed the part of Christian prudence. Let these words of our Redeemer, which fell to no purpose on the ear of Judas, sink deep into our souls; lest for us too His Precious Blood should have been shed in vain. "Try me, O God, and seek the ground of my heart: prove me, and examine my thoughts. Look well if there be any way of wickedness in me; and lead me in the way everlasting."