

Passiontide Sermons
By Henry Parry Liddon, D.D., D.C.L., LL.D.
Late Canon and Chancellor of St. Paul's.

London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1891

SERMON II.
THE HUMILIATION OF THE ETERNAL SON.
Preached at St. Paul's on Palm Sunday, April 2, 1871.

Phil. ii. 5-8.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

IN no passage of his writings does St. Paul carry us more into the heights and depths of Christian doctrine than in these words. Yet his object is a moral and practical one. Human nature was, under the eyes of the Apostles, and within the Church, what it is now within the Church and under our eyes. Christian Philippi was distracted by divisions, not of a doctrinal or theological, but of a social and personal character. One feud, in particular, there was between two ladies of consideration, Euodias and Syntyche, which the Apostle was particularly anxious to heal; but it was probably only one feud among many. Small as it was, the church of Philippi already contained within its borders representatives of each of the three great divisions in race of the Roman world. The purple-dealer from Thyatira; the slave-girl, who was a Macedonian, and apparently born on the spot, and who was, on account of her powers of divination, so profitable a possession to her owner; the Roman colonist, who had charge of the public prison—all became converts to the faith. Here we have an important branch of commerce represented; there the vast numbers of people, who in very various grades made their livelihood in official positions under government; while the divining-girl was a member of that vast and unhappy class to whom the Gospel brought more relief than to any other—in whose persons the rights of human nature were as completely ignored as if they had been altogether extinguished: the slave population of the Empire. He Who represented humanity as a whole spoke through His messengers to every class in the great human family; since “there was to be neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free, but all were one in Christ Jesus.”

And yet, human nature being what it is, this very diversity of elements within the small community which believed on and worshipped Jesus Christ at Philippi, was likely, at least occasionally, to foster disagreements: the serpent of the old Pagan pride in human nature had been scotched rather than killed. Jealousies which were natural, and even admirable, in heathen eyes, were intolerable in Christendom, kneeling beneath the Redeemer's Cross. St. Paul insists upon the duties of social unity. He begs the Philippian

Christians to “be steadfast in one spirit,” to “strive together with one mind for the faith of the Gospel,” to “do nothing through strife or vain-glory.”

For himself, he protests he has no partialities to indulge: he prays to God for all; he thanks God for graces bestowed on them all; he has bright hopes and anticipations about them all; they are *all* of them, he says, his companions in grace; his companions—though severed by seas and countries—in suffering; he yearns after them all—it is a most beautiful and suggestive expression—in the Heart of Jesus Christ.

It is to the Incarnation and Cross of Jesus Christ that St. Paul points in order to justify his advice and to explain his meaning. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” What mind? That question can only be answered by a somewhat close examination of the passage before us.

I.

I. In looking into these words we observe, first of all, that St. Paul clearly asserts Jesus Christ to have existed before His Birth into the world. You and I, my brethren, it is unnecessary to say, had no existence before our natural birth; our immaterial nature is no older than our bodily nature; it was brought into existence contemporaneously with our bodies, by a special act of God’s creative power. Jesus Christ too had a Human Soul, which was created contemporaneously with His Human Body; but before He had either the body or soul of man, He already existed. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, existing (so it should be rendered) in the form of God.” The structure of the language here makes it certain that the Apostle is speaking of a point of time, not merely earlier than that at which our Lord commenced His ministry, but altogether antecedent to His taking human nature on Him. Being in the “form” of God. What is here meant by “form”? The word which is here translated “form,” when applied to objects of sense, means all those sensible qualities which strike the eye of an observer, and so lead us to see that a thing is what it is. Our English word “form” is mainly restricted in its application to objects of sense, so that we know at once what is meant by the “form” of a man or of a public building. But the Greek word was applied quite commonly to immaterial objects, in which there was nothing to strike the bodily eye; the Greeks spoke of the “form” of an abstract idea just as naturally as we speak of the “form” of a house; and thus, the original drift of the word being exactly retained when it is applied to an abstract idea, the “collective qualities” of the idea which is before the mind’s eye of the speaker are termed the “form” of that idea. Thus the “form” of justice would mean those qualities and capacities in man which go to make up the complete idea of justice. God, we know, is a Pure Spirit, without body or parts,—without any qualities that address themselves to sense,—the King Eternal, Immortal, Invisible. The “Form” of God would have meant, in St. Paul’s mouth and St. Paul’s thought, all those attributes which belong to the Reality and Perfection of the One Supreme Self-existent Being. By saying then that Jesus Christ existed in the Form of God, before “He took on Him the form of a slave.” St. Paul would have been understood by any one who read him in his own language to mean that, when as yet Christ had no human body or human soul, He was properly and literally God, because He existed in the “Form,” and so possessed all the proper attributes, of God. 2. St. Paul goes on to say that being God, Christ Jesus “thought it not robbery to be equal with God.” This sentence would be more closely and clearly rendered, Christ “did

not look on His equality with God as a prize to be jealously set store by." Men who are new to great positions are apt to think more of them than those who have always enjoyed them; a crown sits more naturally on hereditary monarchs than on soldiers or statesmen who have forced their way up the steps of the throne; and Some thought of this kind, derived from the things of earth, colours the Apostle's language in describing by contrast those mysteries of heaven. Christ, "Who was God from everlasting, laid no stress on this His Eternal Greatness: He made Himself of no reputation, or rather He emptied Himself (that is the exact word) of His Divine prerogatives or glory. Of His Divine Nature He could not divest Himself; but He could shroud It altogether from the eyes of His creatures: He could become a "worm, and no man, a very scorn of men, and the outcast of the people."

3. Of this self-humiliation St. Paul traces three distinct stages. The first consists in Christ's taking on Him the form—that is, here as before, the essential qualities which make up the reality—of a servant or slave. By this expression St. Paul means human nature. "Without ceasing to be what He was, what He could not but be, He wrapped around Himself a created form, through which He would hold converse with men, in which He would suffer, in which He would die.

"The form of a servant." Service is the true business of human nature; man, as such, is God's slave. There are created natures higher than our own—who, like ourselves, are bound to yield a free service to their Maker, and who, unlike ourselves, yield it perfectly,—Intelligences far vaster and stronger than any among the sons of men; Hearts burning with the fire of a love which, in its purity and its glow, surpasses anything that man can feel; Wills which in their freedom and their determination are more majestic than any which rules among the sons of men. Cherubim and Seraphim, Angels and Archangels, Thrones, Virtues, Dominions, Powers, Principalities—Christ surveyed them all, and passed them all by: He refused the elder born, and the nobler, the stronger of creation, and chose the younger, and the meaner, and the weaker.

He took not on Him, St. Paul says, angels, but He took on Him the seed of Abraham. He was made Man. By taking our nature upon Him, Christ deigned to forfeit His liberty of action: He placed Himself under restraints and obligations; He entered into human society, arid at that end of it where obedience to the will of others is the law which all must obey. "Even Christ pleased not Himself:" the Master of all became the Slave of all.

The second stage of this humiliation is that Christ did not merely take human nature on Him. He became obedient to death. St. Paul here implies that it might have been "otherwise; that Christ might conceivably have taken on Him a human form, and have ascended into heaven in it, without dying on the Cross or rising from the grave. Death is the penalty of sin; it is the brand of physical evil set upon the universal presence of moral evil. How then should the Sinless One die? St. Paul implies that He was not subject to the law of death; and that He submitted to it, after becoming Man, by a distinct effort of His Free Will. "He became obedient unto death." This was indeed, it is distinctly stated as a matter of fact, His object in becoming Incarnate:—"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same; that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." It was for our sakes, then, that He died: we die because we cannot help it: "it is appointed

unto all men once to die.”

Death is a tyrant who sooner or later claims the homage of all of us: Christ alone might have defied him, yet He freely submitted to his sway. As He Himself said: “No man taketh My life from Me, but I lay it down of Myself: I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.”

The third stage in this humiliation is that when all modes of death were open to Him, He chose that which would bring with it the greatest share of pain and shame. “He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” The cross was the death of the slaves and malefactors. St. Paul himself no doubt reflected that in this he could not, if he would, rival the humiliation of his Master, as he could not, much more, rival his Master’s glories. St. Paul knew that, as a Roman freeman, he would be beheaded if condemned to die. Upon this death upon the cross the Jewish law, as St. Paul reminded the Galatians, utters a curse; and that Christ should thus have died seemed to present to each section of the ancient Eastern world especial difficulties. Christ crucified was to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness. And yet Christ “endured the cross, despising the shame.” He was bent upon drinking to the dregs the cup of self-humiliation; and God does not do what He does by halves: He is as Infinite in His condescensions as He is in His Majesty. He laid not stress on His Divine prerogatives. If He willed to die, why should He not embrace death in all the intensity of the idea, surrounded by everything that could protract the inevitable suffering and enhance the inevitable humiliation? If He willed to become Incarnate at all, why should He exempt Himself from any conditions of creaturely existence? why not in all things be made like unto His brethren, sin only except? While on the cross of shame He endures “the sharpness of death,” He is only completing that emptying Himself of His Glory which began when, “taking upon Himself to deliver man, He did not abhor the Virgin’s womb.”

Thus, as we read the passage over, we see the successive stages of the humiliation of the Eternal Son. Existing in the real Nature of God, He set not store upon His Equality with God, but emptied Himself of His Glory by taking on Him the real nature of a slave, and being made in the likeness of man—that is the first step in the descent—and being found in outward appearance as a man He humbled Himself among men, and became obedient unto death—that is the second; but when all forms of death were open to Him He chose to die in the manner which was most full of ignominy in the eyes of men—He became obedient to the death of the Cross—that is the third.

II.

Why may we suppose, my brethren, that God, by His providence acting in His Church, places before our eyes this most suggestive passage of Holy Scripture on this particular Sunday? We may, I think, answer that question without much difficulty.

I. We stand to-day on the threshold of the Great Week, which in the thought of a well-instructed Christian, whose heart is in its right place, is beyond all comparison the most solemn week in the whole year. It is the Holy Week, so called because it is consecrated to the particular consideration of our Lord’s Sufferings and Death. Day by day in the Gospels, which are specially appointed, and in the Proper Lessons, the whole story of Christ’s bitter and tragical Passion is unfolded step by step before our eyes, first in the language of one Evangelist, then in that of another, until every recorded incident

has been placed before us. Now, if we are to profit by this most solemn and instructive Narrative, it is of the first importance that we should answer clearly to ourselves this primary question: "Who is the Sufferer?" and that we should keep the answer well in the forefront of our thoughts throughout the week. Even in everyday history we look upon exactly the same misfortunes in the case of different persons with very different eyes when we take into account the moral excellence or even the personal rank of the sufferers. Of the many persons in high rank who had their heads cut off in the Tudor period of English history, people like Sir Thomas More and Lady Jane Grey attract particular interest on account of the lustre of sincerity and goodness which attaches to their characters. Of the many innocent victims of the first French Revolution, Louis XVI. and his queen, Marie Antoinette, will always command a predominant share of sympathy and interest, from the mere fact that each was born of a race of kings, born to an inheritance of luxury and splendour which contrasts so tragically with the last hours and scenes in the prison and on the public scaffold. It will be said, perhaps, that, so far as suffering goes, a peasant may suffer as acutely as a king, and that one man's life is as good as the life of another. True. But, for all that, it is felt that the destiny to which the king was born of itself makes his tragical end more tragical than it could else have been; if the amount of physical agony be no greater than in the case of the peasant, at least there is room for a greater degree of mental agony. When we apply this principle to our Lord, and in the light of the great doctrine which St. Paul teaches the Philippians in the text about Christ's Person, how new and awful a meaning does it give to the whole story of our Lord's Betrayal and Trial,—of the insults, humiliations, and sufferings to which He was subjected,—of the various particulars of His Death upon the Cross. Had He been merely man, the story of His Death would have roused deep human fellow-feelings within us; it is said on one occasion to have moved a multitude of heathen savages to tears by the mere force of its pathetic beauty. What they felt was the innocence of the Sufferer; that He did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth; that when He was reviled He reviled not again; that the blood which He shed was precious, as being that, as St. Peter says, of a Lamb without blemish, and immaculate. Doubtless the sinless innocence of Christ does pour a flood of moral meaning on the history of His Death. If He had no sins to expiate He could not have died for Himself; and we, as we look into our guilty consciences, can only exclaim with the Apostle, that "such an High Priest became us, holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." But that which gives to the Passion and Death of our Lord its real value is the fact that the Sufferer is more than man; that, although He suffers in and through a created nature, He is Personally God. This fact was part of that hidden wisdom or philosophy of which St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, when he tells them that "if the princes of this world had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." This fact is the key-note to a true Christian understanding of the story of the Passion; at each step the Christian asks himself, "Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah?" Who is this betrayed, insulted, beaten, bound, reviled One? Who is this arrayed as a mock monarch, with fancy robe and fancy sceptre—Whose Brow is pressed with that crown of thorns—Whose Shoulders are laden with that sharp and heavy cross? Whom do they buffet—upon Whose Face do they spit—into Whose Hands do they drive the nails—to Whose parched Mouth do they lift the hyssop? St. Paul answers that question as the centurion answered it beneath the cross: it was not one of the sons of men upon whom His fellows were thus venting their scorn and

hate; it was He Who, “existing in the true nature or form of God, did not set store by His equality with God, but emptied Himself of His Divine prerogatives, and took on Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.”

And it is this consideration which enables us to enter into all that the Apostles, and especially St. Paul, teach us as to the effects of the Death of Jesus Christ. Their language seems very exaggerated to those who believe Him to have been only man, and such persons consistently endeavour to empty it of its force by resolving it all into metaphor. There can be no reason for supposing that the death of any mere man would have had the effects which the Apostles attribute to the Death of Jesus Christ. They tell us that Jesus dying is a propitiation for our sins; that He is our redemption from sin; that by His Blood we who were far off were made nigh to God; that His Blood cleanseth from all sin. They thus teach us that we are, apart from Christ, exiles from our Father’s home, captives who have to be brought back from bondage, sinners whose guilt must be expiated before the justice of God; and that this restoration, this reconciliation, this expiation, is the work of our Lord and Saviour, more particularly in His Death.

If it be asked why His Death should have such effects, there are two questions to be separately considered. First, Why should His Death affect us at all? That a great act of self-sacrifice should be a blessing to a man himself, to those immediately in contact with him who have had opportunities of witnessing it, this we can understand. But how is its effect to be transferred to other persons, belonging to distant countries and distant times? The answer is that our Lord stands to the whole human race in the position of its Representative. We know what is meant by a representative man; a man who represents a country, a class, a line of thought, a political or social aspiration. England abounds in representative men in this lower sense of the term. But Christ represents human nature, as Adam represented it; He is, according to St. Paul, the Second Adam, “Who stands out from among all other members of the human family, as occupying a position corresponding to that of the first Adam,—a position which gives His Personality a relationship to all. In the first Adam the whole human family lived by inclusion; and his acts compromised all his descendants by the same law as that which at the present day makes the good or bad character of a father, or a father’s bodily constitution, rendered healthy by sober living, or enfeebled by vice, as the case may be, the inheritance of his child. Between us and the first Adam the connection is natural and necessary: between us and the Second Adam it depends upon our being brought into real contact with Him by faith and love on our part, by the grace which comes from Him through the Sacrament of our New Birth and otherwise, on His. We have, in short, to claim from Him His representative relationship, and what it involves; but when this claim has been made, the acts of Christ become our acts, the sufferings of Christ our sufferings, the self-sacrifice of Christ ours. Thus He bears our sins in His own Body on the tree;— thus as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the ‘Obedience of One many were made righteous; thus “as in Adam all die, even so in Christ” may “all be made alive.” Christ’s Death then does affect us,—not by any arbitrary or capricious arrangement, but because He took on Himself that human nature in which we all claim a share. But what is it that gives His Death its power and significance? It is that He Who dies is more than man. The reason which makes the history of the Passion so interesting and so awful is the same reason which makes its effects of such unspeakable significance. It is the “priceless worth of the person of the Son of God”—to use Hooker’s language—“which gives such force

and effect to all that He does and suffers.” What that force and effect would be we could not guess beforehand without a revelation from Heaven. We could only be sure of this, that the Death as well as the Life of stick an One as Jesus Christ must, from the nature of the case, be very different, in point of spiritual result, from that of any mere man. The Apostles tell us in what that difference consists, when they enumerate the several elements and consequences of what we call the Atonement; when they tell us that by it God and man are reconciled, that a propitiation for man’s sin is offered to God, that man is brought back from captivity in the realm of death. The wonder is—if there be room for wonder—not that so much follows from such a cause, but that, so far as we are told, so little follows from it. Doubtless the Passion of the Son of God has had results in spheres of being of which we know nothing, and of which, since nothing has been told us, it would not profit us to know. But it is natural to ask with St. Paul, “If God spared not His own Son, but freely gave Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” The promise is more than equal to sustain any conclusion which the Apostles actually draw from it.

2. But besides this, it is well that we should take to heart the particular lesson which St. Paul draws for the benefit of the Philippians from the consideration of the Incarnation and Passion of the Son of God. It is a lesson which is as valuable to us as members of civil society as it is valuable to members of the Church of Christ. What is the main source of the dangers which threaten the wellbeing of civil society from very opposite directions? It is the assertion of individual self-interest, real or supposed, pushed to a point at which it becomes incompatible with the interests of the community. The real enemy of human society is individual self-assertion,—intolerant of wealth, reputation, power, in others,—intolerant of any supremacy except the supremacy of self, of any glory except the glory of self, of any aggrandisement except the aggrandisement of self. This assertion becomes sometimes a despotism, which sacrifices the liberties of an entire nation to the supremacy of a single man; sometimes, as we see in that beautiful and hapless city across the Channel, at this moment a revolutionary chaos, in which a thousand aspirants for power and wealth are talking of nothing more and thinking of nothing less than the real good of their country. And the source of this mischief lies in a false ideal of human excellence; in the notion that it consists in self-assertion rather than in self-repression; in making the most of life for self, rather than in spending it for others. Now here .St. Paul teaches us that Christ Incarnate and Crucified is the true model for Christians—for mankind. If He did not set store on glory which was rightfully, inalienably His, why should we? If He shrouded it, buried it away out of sight, lived amongst men as if it had no existence, took on Him the form of a servant, why should we do otherwise? If when He might have humbled Himself without suffering, if, when two roads of sacrifice were open to Him, He chose the most exacting and the most painful, does this say nothing to us? Surely, brethren, we see here, perhaps more clearly than in any other place of Holy Scripture, how closely the moral teaching of Christianity is bound up with its doctrine. As Doddridge says in his noble hymn—

“When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My chiefest gain I count but loss.
And pour contempt on all my pride.”

Humility is so beautiful in Christian eyes because Christ was humble: self-sacrifice—even to death—is so glorious, because He is its conspicuous Example. He has settled the question of what high excellence in life really consists in, for all time: and it can never be re-opened. Pagans might admire self-assertion; the making the most of a position for personal and selfish ends; the clinging anxiously to the poor shreds of reputation, or wealth, or power which it may confer on a possessor. Yet they too knew that all this ended with the grave: and they could only bid men make the best of the fleeting hour, and shut their eyes to its inevitable close. Christ has taught us Christians a better way, not by precept merely, but by example. He has taught us that the true force and glory of our human life consists not in self-advertisement, but in self-repression; not in enjoyment, but in sacrifice of self. The principle which was to heal the divisions of the little Christian society at Philippi is the only principle which can save society, imperilled as it is in so many ways in the Europe of our day. All who have lived for others rather than for themselves in His Church,—all who have, at the call of duty, laid aside wealth, honour, credit, and embraced ignominy and suffering, have been true to Him—true to the spirit of His Incarnation and His Death, true to what St. Paul calls “the mind that was in Christ Jesus.” And the true saviours of society are the men who care more for labour than for honour, more for doing good to others than for high place and name, more for the inner peace which self-sacrifice brings with it than for the outward decorations which are the reward of self-assertion. Such there are in every generation; and they are in a line with, or rather they are pale reflections of the Saviour of the world. Still more certain is it that the Mind of Christ in saving us is the only mind which enables us individually to accept His salvation. St. Paul describes the Jews as “being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, and so not submitting themselves to the righteousness of God.” The most fatal thing in religion, next to insincerity, is that confidence in self which makes much of what we are, and forgets what, by God’s grace, we might have been,—which thinks much of the good opinion of friends and little of the accusing voice of conscience,—which is fully alive to personal excellencies, and blind to that vast mass of evil which the Holy God, and the pure beings who surround His throne, see in us, May He teach us, at least, to be true. The self-deceit which makes us think much of self is impossible when a man’s eyes have been opened to see what God really is in His Awful Sanctity: “Now mine eye seeth Thee,” he cries, “wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” Only penitent and broken hearts have any rightful place at the foot of the Redeemer’s Cross; but there is no reason why any or all of us should not, by God’s grace, in this our brief day of life, and especially at this blessed season, learn true penitence and contrition. It is the moral rather than the intellectual eye which discerns the true majesty of the Humiliation of the Son of God; it is the man who has emptied Himself of self-complacency who finds in the Redeemer, disfigured with wounds and robed in shame upon His Cross, “an hiding-place from the winds of life, and a covert from the tempest; and a river of water in a dry place, and the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.”