

Passiontide Sermons
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SERMON XI.
THE ASS AND THE FOAL.
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St. Matt. xxi. 3.

And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them.

YOU will remember that these words form part of the instructions which our Lord addressed to the two disciples whom He desired to take the necessary measures for His solemn entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They were to go into the village over-against them, no doubt into Bethphage; and there they would "find an ass tied, and a colt with her;" these they were to loose and to bring them to our Lord. If any remonstrance was made, they were to make a reply which, as they were instructed, would put an end to further resistance or discussion. "If any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them and straightway he shall send them."

It may, perhaps, at first occur to some of us, that this incident is too incidental—too subservient and preparatory to the Great Entry into Jerusalem itself—rightfully to occupy a main place in our thoughts on a day like this. But it will appear, I trust, as we proceed, that this apprehension is not well grounded. We are, in fact, no good judges of the relative importance of words and acts in a Life so altogether above and beyond us as is that of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In such a Life, our common notions of what is of first importance, and what only secondary, do not apply, at least with anything like certainty; it is safest to assume that, on this sacred ground, nothing is incidental, nothing subsidiary, nothing unimportant. It is at least possible that the charge to the disciples, which preceded the public entry, has as much to teach us as the entry itself; at any rate, we may observe that of the more obvious lessons which it suggests, there are three which appear very markedly to claim attention.

I.

Our Lord's words, then, illustrate, first of all, the deliberateness with which He moved forward to His Agony and Death. When He sent the two disciples for the ass and the foal, which were tied up in the street of Beth-phage, He was, as He knew, taking the first step in a series which would end within a week on Mount Calvary. Everything accordingly is measured, deliberate, calm. He first brings into play His power of immediate prophecy,—of prophecy that is directed upon an object in the near future, which could not have been anticipated by the exercise of a man's natural judgment—just as He did a few days after, when He told the disciples to follow a man bearing a pitcher of water, who would show them the way to the room prepared for the Last Supper. He already sees the ass and the foal in the street of Bethphage, and He sends for them. That He should contemplate

riding at all is remarkable; there is no earlier or later notice in the Gospels of His moving from place to place, except by walking—to walk was the symbol of His poverty and of His independence! Now, however, He will ride on an ass; and there is a reason for His doing so. He sends for the ass and the foal, because the prophet Zechariah had introduced these animals into his description of the coming of the King of Zion to His own city, and in a prophecy which the Jewish interpreters, from the first and without hesitation, applied to the Messiah. In ancient days, the sons of the judges rode on white asses; the ass was used by Ziba, Shimei, Mephibosheth, Ahitophel, by David's household, by the old prophet of Bethel. David himself and the sons of David rode on mules, in order to mark their royal station without altogether deserting the old tradition; Absalom in his rebellion introduced chariots and horses; Solomon brought thousands of horses from Egypt. The appearance of the horse, familiar to the Assyrians, to the Egyptians, even to the Canaanites, as a feature to the state and apparatus of the Jewish kings, marked the rise of a monarchy which aped the fashions, and would fain have rivalled the power, of the great Pagan monarchies of the East. The horse is in the Prophets a symbol of worldly power; "I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem," is a prediction of the fall of the worldly monarchy. The ass fell into discredit as the new heathen ideal of royal splendour was increasingly accepted, so that in the last days of the Jewish monarchy the burial of an ass was a proverb for a disgraced end. There was no recorded instance of a king of Judah or Israel riding on an ass. That the King Messiah should come to Zion riding on an ass, meant, for the Jewish people, that He was to have a kingdom not of this world; that He was to be a prophet-king, whose outward bearing should recall those ancient days in which the Lord Himself had been Israel's King—the days which preceded the establishment of the monarchy.

Hence the great amount of attention which was fixed on this passage of Zechariah by the Jews: hence our Lord's care for its literal fulfilment.

Men have often asked why the two animals were wanted, and they have observed that St. Mark and St. Luke speak only of the colt. The answer is, not that the foal, not yet broken in, might behave more quietly when its mother was beside it, but that the prophetic passage of Zechariah, so dear to the memory and imagination of the Jewish people, might be rendered before their eyes into a realised picture. Zechariah's redundant language does plainly speak of two animals, not of one and therefore our Lord sent for two. The two animals were symbolical; the disciplined ass under the yoke, and the wild unbroken colt, each had its meaning. The ass itself, an unclean, ignoble, debased drudge, as the Jews deemed it, was a picture of unredeemed man, enslaved to his errors and his sins; but then, within the human family, the Jews had been under the yoke of the law, and were so far broken in; the undisciplined heathen were like the wild unbroken colt.¹ It was thus essential to the full meaning of our Lord's action that He should ride, first on the one animal, and then the other: while the whole circumstance of the entry into Zion, on the part of Zion's king, as conceived of by Zechariah, was preparatory to Zion's deliverance through suffering. When then our Lord sent for the ass and the colt, He solemnly entered on the group of associations which prophecy had traced around His Passion: it was the beginning of the end; it was the first step in the procession to the Cross. "All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell ye the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and

¹ Cf. *Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, by E. B. Pusey, D.D. Zech. ix. 9. pp. 556-59.

upon a colt the foal of an ass.” With most men, as we know, it is otherwise. “They think that their houses shall continue for ever, and that their dwelling-places shall endure from one generation to another, and call the lands after their own names.” During the years of health and strength, human nature still whispers to itself, “Tush, I shall never be cast down, there shall no harm happen unto me.” And when this is no longer possible, how often do we put off the thought of death! We try to disguise from ourselves its gradual approach; we do anything in our power to postpone it: we diet ourselves, we change the air, we give up, if we can, our more exacting employments; we struggle against the inevitable; we hope against hope. There have indeed been, in many, if not in all, generations, noble exceptions to the rule; men who, knowing what they were doing, have gone out to meet death, armed with a strong sense of duty, or inspired by an heroic resolve. Such was the old Roman, whose name was dear to his countrymen for many a succeeding century, who when he was sent back as a captive from Carthage to recommend a discreditable peace, and with the knowledge that failure would entail on him a death of torture, deliberately advised them to reject the proposed terms.² Such have been soldiers, who have volunteered for a forlorn hope; doctors, who have, perhaps within our own knowledge, undertaken duties which they knew must cost them their lives; Sisters of Mercy, who have nursed cholera patients, and laid them out for burial, when their nearest relatives have deserted them. In these and like cases the moral glory of our Lord’s deliberate and voluntary suffering rests in its measure on our human weakness; the great difference is that, with Him, there is no trace of the pressure either of unforeseen outward circumstances, or of sudden heroic impulse from within. He knows that He is going to die, and He gives His orders just as quietly as though He were sitting at the marriage-feast of Cana. He might at any moment withdraw Himself from the tempest of insult and agony that will presently be poured on Him; but His heart is established and will not shrink until He see His desire upon those spiritual enemies—sin and death—whom it is His mission to subdue. The twelve legions of angels are waiting; He has but to summon them; but though He already sees and feels all that is awaiting Him, He sends into Beth-phage for the ass and the foal.

It is this deliberateness in His advance to die, this voluntariness in His sufferings, which, next to the fact of His true Divinity, gives to the Death of our Lord Jesus Christ its character of a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. If it was to be the offering, not merely of an Immaculate Body, but of a perfectly resigned and holy Will, the Victim must say, at each stage of it, “A body hast Thou prepared me; then said I, Lo! I come to do Thy Will, O God.” And this is what our Lord does throughout; it is the motive of His last utterance on the Cross: “Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend My spirit;” it is the motive of the very first measure He takes, when entering on the preliminaries of His Sufferings, and sending into Bethphage, in obedience to Zechariah’s prophecy, for the ass and the colt.

II.

Our Lord’s words illustrate, secondly, the exacting nature of His claims. “If any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them.” No doubt the owner of the animals had work for them to do; in any case, they were his. Yet here is a demand, at first

² The Embassy of Regulus is beautifully described in Cicero *De Officiis*, iii. 27.

sight, not unlike the requisitions, as they are called, of an invading army, when “might becomes right;” when the ordinary rights of property are swept aside at the bidding of a hostile and superior force; and men have to furnish provisions, lodgings, horses and carriages, furniture and equipages, under pain of suffering the extremities of war, if they refuse. Here, too, was a requisition in its way: “Ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto Me. And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them.”

What is the justification of this demand?

A modern German Socialist writer, Weitling, traces here the right of those who are in want to help themselves out of the possessions of their well-to-do neighbours, and he laments the false refinement of our days, when the disciples would have been at once arrested and charged with theft before the nearest magistrate. This writer’s idea is that our Lord was really what would now be called a communist, and that He claimed the ass and the foal as really belonging to the community of which he was a member. This account of the matter would ill accord with our Lord’s solemn proclamation, that He came not to destroy the moral law, but to fulfil it. He certainly did not abrogate “Thou shalt not steal.” Yet the eighth commandment is unmeaning, unless property, in the sense of private property, is of moral right; you cannot steal that which belongs to nobody in particular, and on which every one has an equal claim. The community of goods described in the early part of the Acts of the Apostles was a very different thing from communism; it was a fruit of the spontaneous action of Christian charity; it rested upon the voluntary surrender of their private rights by the first Christians. In one of his sermons, three and a half centuries later, St. Augustine describes a very similar state of things in his own household at Hippo.³ Every one who entered it voluntarily subscribed a declaration by which he disposed of his property in favour of a common fund, which, supported them all; and any one who, after this, claimed to be the owner of any sort of property, was expelled from the community. But this, like the life of the first Christians, was a very different thing from the communism which denounces property as immoral, and which would confiscate it to public purposes, whether its present owners would or no. Property, it might be shown, if this were the time and place to do so, is not an arbitrary or vicious product of civilisation; it is an outcome of forces which are always at work in human nature and life; it is a formation or deposit which human industry is always accumulating; it is an original result of the terms on which men—at once industrious and free—live together as members of a society. It has its duties, no doubt, as it has its rights; its duties are not really matters of choice, any more than its rights are matters of sentiment; but if property is in any sense imperilled, if communism is ever destined to get the upper hand in modern Europe, it will be because the holders of property have thought only of its rights, and have forgotten its duties. Nevertheless, while its rights may for high moral purposes be surrendered voluntarily, they are rights which may be retained and insisted on; and they cannot be violated without doing violence to the nature of things, without breaking the eighth commandment of the Decalogue.

This then brings us back to the question of the principle on which our Lord claimed the ass and the colt in the street of Bethphage. It is a question which can only be answered in one way—namely, that Christ was all along the true Owner of the ass and the colt, and that the apparent owner was but His bailiff. “The Lord hath need of them.”

³ St. Aug. *Serm.* ccclv. vol. v. p. 1381 (ed. Ben.).

How would the owner of the animals have understood this reply? We cannot doubt, from the general tenor of the narrative, that the owner was in some sense a disciple; that Christ foresaw not merely the presence of the ass and the colt in the street of Bethphage, but the state of mind of the person to whom they belonged, and that by "the Lord" the owner of the ass would have understood "the Lord Messiah." Not merely Messiah "the Master," but Messiah "the Lord"; not here merely "the Son of Man," His favourite description of Himself, but the Lord, the word being employed, no doubt, in the original language which was used of the Lord Jehovah. "The Lord hath need of them." He claims what He has lent for a while; He resumes what has always been His own; we hear the voice of the Being to Whom man owes all that he is and has, "Whose we are, and Whom we serve."

Certainly, my brethren, this claim of our Lord's implies His Divinity, but it is a very modest claim when compared with others which He made on those who heard Him. To ask for a man's cattle is little compared with asking for his affections, his thoughts, his endeavours, for the surrender of his will, for the sacrifice of his liberty, for the abandonment, if need be, of all earthly happiness, and of life itself. Yet nothing less than this was meant by the warning that a man may have to hate father and mother, and wife and children, for His sake and the gospel's;—nothing less than this by the stern sentence, "No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God;" nothing less than this by the peremptory command, "What is that to thee? Follow thou Me." Christians, at any rate, if they are still Christians, can only feel and express surprise at our Lord's requiring the ass and the colt, if they have forgotten what He asks of themselves as a condition of any serious discipleship, and how this demand throws any claim upon their property entirely into the shade.

At this season, indeed, we think of our Lord's claims upon us less in the light of His Divine Person than of His Redeeming Work. He has a right to make them, not merely as our Lord, but as our greatest Benefactor; not merely as having created us by His Power, but as having redeemed us by His Blood. Assuredly, in these solemn days on which we are entering, He does not claim our service chiefly as the Infinite and the Eternal, He claims it as the Incarnate and the Crucified. Has He then no right to some return for those thirty-three years of humiliation and toil; for that long Agony of Soul and Body in which they ended; for sufferings so various, so violent, so subtle, so protracted, above all, so voluntary; for a tragic Death, each incident in which seems to plead to the Christian heart,

"This have I borne for thee, What doest thou for Me?"

It is not exaggeration, it is simple Christian feeling, with its eye on the Cross of the Divine Redeemer, which sings—

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

And if conscience whispers to you or me that He has need of something which we have not yet given Him,—of our substance, of our time, of the work of our hands or of our brains, is it possible that we can hesitate as to the answer?

III.

And, thirdly, our Lord's words show how He can make use of all, even the lowest and the last; nay, how, in His condescension, He makes Himself dependent on them for the fulfilment of His purposes. It was of the ass and the colt that He Himself said, "The Lord hath need of them." What was the need? Was it that He was too tired at this particular time to ascend the Mount of Olives on foot, or that He desired, in going to meet the multitudes who were eagerly waiting for Him, to be raised above the accompanying crowd of disciples around? These were very subordinate elements of the need, if elements of it at all; He wanted the ass and the colt, as we have seen, that He might enact before the eyes of the people the literal fulfilment of Zechariah's prophecy. This ass and colt, insignificant in themselves, had become necessary to our Lord at one of the great turning-points of His Life; they were needed for a service, unique and incomparable, which has given them a place in sacred history to the end of time. They were to be conspicuous in that great Sacrificial Procession (for such it was) in which He, the Flower and Prince of our race, moved forward to yield Himself to the wild wills of men, who to-day can shout "Hosanna!" as to-morrow, they will cry "Crucify!"

The needs of God! It were surely too bold an expression, if He had not authorised us to use it: we might well shrink from implying that anything is necessary to Him, Who is alone complete in Himself, and is the Source of all that is. Yet there they stand—the words, "The Lord hath need of them." He needed the ass and foal in the street of Bethphage. We ask, almost with impatience, Could He not have done without them? In one sense,—Yes; in another,—No. He might beforehand have so ruled matters as to make their service unnecessary. He might—so we may reverentially suppose—have originally inspired His prophet to colour the picture of the future somewhat differently; to throw into another form those predictions, whose behests, in an after age, He would Himself obey. But when the prophetic word had gone forth, it could not return to Him empty. Prophecy, being in Zechariah's mouth what it was, the true Messiah could not but obey it. Prophecy being what it was, He did need the ass and foal in order to fulfil it; it was too late, if we may so speak, to raise the question whether the lesson which they taught might have been otherwise rendered into symbol. The ass and the colt might count for little among the villagers of Bethphage; but they had a necessary place marked out for them in the Passion of Christ—a place and a work on that first Palm Sunday, which higher, nobler, more intellectual beings could not have supplied or undertaken.

The needs of God! My brethren, if anything is necessary to carrying out His purposes, it is because He has made it so. He gives laws to the world of nature; and lo! there arises some particular physical necessity, as we call it, that is, to speak plainly, God's necessity that some condition should be obeyed in order to meet the exigencies of a particular law. Health, for instance, has its appointed conditions; they cannot be set aside, without miracle; God has made health depend on food, air, and exercise, and we may dare to say that ordinarily He needs these conditions,—in order to secure it to His creatures. In like manner God has made human society dependent for its wellbeing and coherence upon the maintenance of certain principles and rules, and then a state of things presents itself in which some man, or transaction, or course of events is necessary, if these are to be maintained and society is not to go to pieces. Once more, He has made the strength and continuance of the Christian life depend on an inspired Bible, on an organised Church, on the preaching of the Faith, on duly administered Sacraments.

Whether any part of this provision might have been otherwise, consistently with the great purposes of Redemption, it is too late now to inquire. God's declared Will is that they should be necessary, and thus we find Him, as it seems, constantly in need of poor, feeble human instruments in order to give effect to His own high purposes of grace and mercy. "The Lord hath need of them." Whether it might have been otherwise is not for us to ask; our business is to take note of what is,—of the needs of God, which He Himself points out to us.

The needs of God. Yes! And what is much to be remarked is that He often needs those whom we, as we think, if we were in His place, could have dispensed with. We measure Him by our own standard of experience; we know that we habitually depend on intellect, on ability, on wealth, on power, and that we do not want the unintelligent, the feeble, the poor, the uninfluential. We are, whether consciously or not, anthropomorphic in our conceptions of the needs of God: if we had been on the Throne in Heaven eighteen hundred years ago, we should in our stupid way have hoped to convert the world by gaining the good graces of rulers of men like Tiberius and Nero, of literary men like Seneca or Tacitus, and should have taken small account of the fishermen of Galilee. But with Him it is otherwise. The difference between the highest intellect and the narrowest and feeblest is as nothing, because it is a measurable distance when compared with the distance between what we call the highest intellect and the Eternal Mind. The difference between the strongest and the weakest of beings is as nothing when compared with the distance that parts the strongest from the Almighty Strength of the Creator. And He constantly reminds us of this by exhibiting Himself as needing not the great forces which awe thought, or which direct events, or which reconstruct or uphold society, but the humble, feeble, half-perceived, or unseen agencies which are taken no account of by that ordinary human estimate of men and things which passes for wisdom.

Yes! "The Lord hath need of them." Let none hereafter say: "What can God want of me, a mere unit among the millions of the human family? He is not without resources; He raises up great men to carry out His purposes; but I am too insignificant, too remote from the scene and the capacity of effective action to contribute anything to a cause, to a Church, to a world, that is what it is because He has willed it."

No, my brother, the Lord hath need of thee too; though thou wilt not believe it. He might, it may be, originally have dispensed with thee; He might have left thee out of the group of influences which were to work His will in thy day and generation. Thou canst not penetrate the secrets of His predestination; but, as things are, He needs thee; if it were otherwise, thou wouldest not exist. He needs thee for some service, great or lowly, trivial or magnificent, which none else can do; which will not be done, at least as He had designed it, if it be not done by thee. God's abstract power of dispensing with each of His creatures, or with all of them put together, is one thing; His actual plan of governing the world, as expressed in the series of forces and events amid which we live, is another. In fact, He does not release Himself, except upon critical occasions, from the empire of His own rules or laws; and if this or that agent, to whom He has assigned some special work or service, drops out of his place, the omission is not supplied by miracle; the work is left undone, the immediate, though not the ultimate, purpose of the Creator is frustrated.

If this is an awful, it is surely still more a very consolatory, thought. Numbers of persons are oppressed by the conviction that they are of little use to anything or anybody; that God has no work for them to do: that they belong to the waste of the moral world,

not to its legitimate and productive substance. Let them think, when these gloomy thoughts take possession of them, of the ass and the colt on Palm Sunday. For all of us, the weakest and the humblest, there is a place and time of special service, to be rendered sooner or later to the Eternal King, Who condescends not merely to expect, but to need it. For that hour we have been created; towards it we have been tending, consciously or unconsciously, during the years of life; and at last it comes; perhaps it passes; perhaps it never repeats itself. Happy we if we are only ready to give and to be given to Christ when He deigns to ask for us; to contribute our little all to His triumphant advance across the centuries, on His errand of beneficence and judgment, among the sons of men.

May He enable us all during this Passiontide to understand the freedom of His atoning Suffering for us; to yield what we can in answer to His demands upon our love; to be sure that we, too, have some work to do in His kingdom, which can be done by none other, and which, if done faithfully, He will own.