

Passiontide Sermons
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SERMON VI.
THE CONQUEROR OF SATAN.
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Heb. ii. 14.

That through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.

IN his Rationale of the Book of Common Prayer, Bishop Sparrow tells us that the fifth Sunday in Lent is called Passion-Sunday; "For now," he says, "begins the commemoration of the Passion of our Lord."¹ And in truth, on this day, we pass a frontier-line in the sacred season of Lent; we enter upon the last and most solemn portion of it. In the Christian year, Easter answers to the Passover among the Jews much as the reality answers to the shadow. And as the Jews numbered fourteen days in the month before the Passover-feast came, so do we Christians in our reckoning of the days before Easter. To quote Bishop Sparrow again,—the Epistle and Gospel for to-day both speak of the Passion of our Lord. The Epistle tells us how He gave His Life, both as Priest and Victim, for the sins of men. And the Gospel describes the insult and violence to which He was exposed in the temple, when He told the Jews that before Abraham was born, He was Himself already existing—existing eternally. That scene was a first drop which announced the approaching storm; and so from to-day onwards, throughout the next fortnight, and more particularly during the latter part of it, good Christians will try, as much as they can, to put all other thoughts aside, save those thoughts of their own sinfulness and misery which have hitherto occupied them from the beginning of Lent,—and to devote themselves, heart and soul, in such leisure time as they can command, to considering that wonderful proof of the Love and of the Holiness of God,—the Sufferings and Death of His Only-begotten Son.

And in the text we are reminded of one effect of this great event, which at all times, and especially at the present time, for reasons to which I need not more particularly refer, it is well to bear in mind. Through death, the Apostle says, Christ intended to destroy, that is, not to annihilate but to subdue and render ineffective, powerless, him that had the power of death, that is, the devil. This was one reason why the Son of God took on Him our nature. He took part in our flesh and blood,—so says the Apostle,—that He might put Himself into circumstances where death was possible; in order that thus, by dying, He might free us from our old enemy. He has won His victory; and now that He has died, it is our fault, not His, if we are not free. This is the plain meaning of the passage; and the subject is practical enough to deserve close attention.

I.

¹ Sparrow's *Rationale*, p. 98; ed. 1722.

And here our thoughts turn towards the being who, the Apostle tells us, was to be reduced to impotence by the Death of Jesus Christ. Who and what is he? what do we really know about him, about his history, his character, his power of affecting ourselves and our destiny? There are two considerations among others which make a great many persons unwilling to approach this subject.

1. First, say they, it is an unpleasant subject. If the world and human life *are* haunted by such a being as the Evil One, we would rather, if we can, think of them without him. We like the bright side of religion, as we like the bright side of life. Tell us of heaven, of virtue, of Jesus Christ, of good men; if there is a dark side to the picture, we would rather not see it; if there is a devil, we would rather forget him, or think of him as seldom as we can.

Thus speaks the religion of feeling or of taste, as distinct from the religion of simple truth. True religion must base itself on truth; must desire to see truth all round; must welcome disagreeable truth not less than truth which brings consolation and strength; must desire, like the old Greek poet, if need be, to perish in the light,² but to know all that can be known, and at all costs. Nothing is gained and much is lost by shrinking from fact because it is disagreeable. There are some animals which close their eyes at the approach of the creature which preys upon them; but this precaution does nothing to avert their fate. Religion, beyond anything else, should have the courage to look truth in the face, from a conviction that whatever may be the anxiety or anguish of the moment, she can more than afford to do so, and that, not to do so is to cease to be herself.

2. Secondly, some men suggest that the devil is an unprofitable subject for discussion: they do not think that much practically depends on our believing in him or not. If, they say, a man does what he knows to be good, so far as he can, and resists what he knows to be evil, so far as he can, it does not much concern him whether evil is or is not represented by a powerful invisible being, who makes it his business to administer and to promote it. The whole question, we are told in the phrase of the day, belongs to speculation rather than to practice; and speculation, however interesting to those who have time and taste for it, cannot touch the eternal weal of a being like man.

This kind of language appeals forcibly to our national character. We English are, before all things, practical. But is the question in hand so purely speculative, so remote from practical interests, as is here implied? Does it really make no difference whether a man believes only in a vague something, which he calls an "evil principle," or in an intelligent and working, i.e.. a personal devil? Surely, in ordinary matters, it makes all the difference in the world to a man whether he supposes himself to be dealing with an abstract idea or tendency, or with a living will. We should cease to be human if it were not so; if we were not far more profoundly affected by feeling ourselves close to a living being than by feeling ourselves under the vaguer and more intangible influence, termed provisionally a principle, especially of an evil, that is to say, a negative principle. This, indeed, is true whether the principle be good or evil; and the reason is because we know that an abstract principle only affects us so far as we assent to it. It has not independent vital force in itself to propagate and enforce itself, and extend its sway, unless in the language of poetry and metaphor. Apart from human intelligences and human wills, it is an inert thing, not even having any independent existence, as a cloud or a gas has

² Homer, *Iliad* xvii. 647.

independent existence. It affects us just so far as it is apprehended; it has no real range or play beyond the intelligences which it sways. But let it be represented—let it be embodied—in a living intelligence, in a living will, and the case is very different. Then it may act upon us whether we are thinking of it or not; then it is dependent, not on our discretion, but on its own. An abstract evil principle, indeed! Why, any abstract principle, good or evil, without a living representative or embodiment, is like a philanthropic or political enterprise which has not yet found a good working secretary, and which as yet exists only upon paper. It may have much to say for itself in the way of argument; but it does not make much way to men's hearts and purses until somebody takes it up, and, as we say, pushes it. A doctrine in political economy, sound or mistaken, is of little account to the world, while it only exists in a treatise on the shelves of a library; but let a powerful finance minister adopt it, and set himself to give it practical expression, and it may save or ruin a great country. A vision of national unity or of national aggrandisement may for centuries haunt the imagination and inspire the poetry of a race; but until the man has appeared who gathers up into himself all this vague and floating sentiment, and gives it the dignity and force of ardent conviction and determined will—until the abstraction has become identified with the brain, the passion, the purpose, of a Napoleon or a Bismarck—there is before us only a patriotic or literary dream, which makes the fortune of a few publicists or poets, but leaves no trace upon the world. Do you suppose that goodness would still exert the strong attraction which it has for all good men if they believed in no Being Whose Nature it is—Who, as being what He is, embodies and represents it? Doubtless it is true that we fallen men have a bias or warp in the direction of evil; that, in order to assert its empire over us, evil does not require such energetic measures as goodness and truth. But the question here is whether a man's own sense of the power of evil, of the manner in which it is brought to bear on him, of the precautions which he must take against it, of the resistance which he must oppose to it, is unaffected by his belief in its propagation by a powerful, clever, and active being, who devotes himself unremittingly to the occupation? My brethren, if anything in the way of opinion is unpractical, it is the refusal to recognise the immense practical importance of the presence or absence of belief in the personal reality of the devil to the deepest interests of human life.

But further, when men discard the old teaching of the Bible and the Christian Church about the Evil One, and talk vaguely about an "evil principle," it is well to ask, What do they exactly mean by this imposing phrase? How can evil itself be, strictly speaking, a principle? The essence of evil is absence of principle, principle being something positive. Evil is contradiction to positive principle: every sin is in its essence a contradiction of one of those positive moral laws which are part of the necessary Nature of God, and by which He wills to rule the universe. Evil is a perverted, selfish quality of the will of an already existing, personal creature. Evil could not exist apart from such a creature, or unless the will of such a creature was free. Evil has no body or substance in itself: it is only that twist or warp in a created will which makes the creature refuse—not merely in opposition to God, but in opposition to the best instincts of its own being—to own God as its Lord, and to make itself conform to Him. But if this be the case, and it is, I believe, the substance of what the greatest Christian thinkers have always said on the subject, the phrase "an evil principle" melts away before our eyes as a mere mist of the imagination. On the other hand, it is plain that in some way or other evil does operate

most disastrously; its desolating ravages are a mere matter of experience, and the alternative supposition is that this weird negation of good has found, at some time and somewhere, an invisible but energetic secretary,—that it is propagated in every possible manner by a person of the highest intelligence and of very resolute will.

But I am asked in turn, What do you mean by a person? This question has been at least in part already answered; but it is of importance to be as clear as may be. Since it first entered into the speech of the Western world, the word “person” has had an eventful history. It meant at first the mask or disguise by which the face or figure of an historical character was represented on the stage; and in this sense men spoke of a great or of an insignificant person, but it was soon felt that that which marks off one man from another is not the countenance so much as the character; not the bodily form so much as the invisible soul or spirit. Accordingly the word “person” was transferred from the mask to the supposed bearer; from that which meets the eye to that which is beyond the ken of sense, and which belongs to spirit. And thus, in modern language, personality means the very central essential being of man; his conscious intelligence, his self-determining will. In this sense “person” is commonly opposed to thing.” The mineral, the vegetable, nay, the mere animal are “things.” Man is a person; but man is not alone in personality. God, the All-surveying Intelligence, the absolutely Free, Who does what He ordains, and is bound by no law save His own Perfections,—God is the First of Persons, utterly distinct from the created things with which He has surrounded Himself, both in that they are created, and in that they lack personality. And good angels, whose existence and capacities are revealed to us, are persons,—possessing as they do, probably in very varying degrees of range and intensity, self-conscious intellect and self-determining will. If then we speak of the personality of Satan, we mean that he too is an Intelligence capable of reflecting on his own existence, and a Will which has had the power of determining its destiny; he possesses the very properties which are the essence of our manhood, only on a much larger scale than we.

II.

Now, whether an invisible person like Satan exists or not is one of those questions which cannot be really settled by the senses. Only the Author of this universe can tell us about portions of it which are so entirely beyond the reach of our observation; and Christians believe Him to have done so in Holy Scripture. When a modern writer compares Satan to Tisiphone, and says that “they are alike not real persons, but shadows thrown by man’s guilt and terrors,”³ he really assumes that the Bible is a mere reflex of human weakness and human passion instead of a Revelation of the Will of God. For all who believe the Bible to be a trustworthy source of information on such subjects, there is no real room for question as to the existence of a personal evil spirit. You must deliberately expunge a great many passages from the Bible if you would get rid of the belief. All that implies personality is attributed to Satan in Holy Scripture as distinctly as it is attributed to God. Read the description of Eve’s temptation at the beginning of Genesis; or the account of the origin of the trials of Job; or the explanation of the pestilence which followed David’s numbering the people as given in the Book of Chronicles; or the still more vivid picture of Satan’s resistance to Joshua in Zechariah. In these histories you have before you a

³ M. Arnold, *God and the Bible*, pref. p. 25.

being who gives every evidence of self-conscious thought and determined purpose. And in the New Testament this representation is much fuller and more sustained. Not to dwell on what St. Paul teaches as to the various ranks of energetic evil spirits with whom Christians wrestle—as principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world; or on his description of their chief as “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience;” or on his warning to the Ephesians against the “wiles” of Satan; or to the Corinthians against his “devices;” or to Timothy, three times, against snare;” not to dwell on St. Peter’s account of him as a roaring lion, going about seeking whom he may devour;” or on St. John’s vision of his struggle with St. Michael and the good angels; or on St. James’s warrant, that if even we resist him, he will flee from us;—let us consider what Jesus Christ, our Lord and Master, has said upon the subject. How significant is His warning in the parable of the Sower against the Evil One which takes away the Divine seed sown in the heart of man and in the parable of the Tares against the “enemy” who sows them along with the wheat: thus representing him first as destroying good, and next as introducing evil within the range of his influence! How full of meaning is the announcement, “The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me;” the declaration, “I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven;” the warning to St. Peter, “Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat;” the saying about Judas, “One of you is a devil”—a judgment which would be pointless enough if no such being existed to which Judas was already self-assimilated; the literal reality which is attributed to Beelzebub, the prince of the devils, associated historically with a form of neighbouring idolatry; in the tremendous denunciation to the Jews, “Ye are of your father the devil, and the works of your father will ye do. He was a murderer from the beginning. . . . When he speaketh of a lie, he speaketh of his own, for he is a liar, and the father of it;” the prayer bequeathed to Christians for all time, “Deliver us”—not from evil, but, as it should be rendered—“from the evil one.”

It has, I know, been said that this language of Jesus Christ must not be pressed closely, because He is only adapting Himself to the belief and intelligence of the men of His day. His own knowledge, it is patronisingly hinted, was in advance of such beliefs; but He accommodated Himself to them in the hope of doing such good as was possible among a superstitious people like the Jews.

It is difficult to understand how such a method of dealing with our Lord’s teaching can possibly be adopted by any one who respects Him, I will not say as a Divine, but even as a human teacher. For what is the necessary inference as to Himself, if the current faith about the Evil Spirit to which He so solemnly and so repeatedly set the seal of His approval is really false? He either knew it to be false, or He did not. If He did not, then in the eyes of those persons who now reject it lie was Himself the victim of a stupid superstition. If He did know it to be false, and yet sanctioned and reaffirmed it, He was guilty of a much graver fault in a religious teacher than ignorance. Yes! it must be said, He encouraged acquiescence in known falsehood. What would you say, my brethren, of us, His ministers, if you had reason to suspect, that in order to uphold existing institutions, or to conciliate sympathies which would be otherwise irreconcilable, we were, not simply to connive at what we knew to be untrue, but, to reaffirm it—to enforce it with all the solemnity which belongs to an utterance in the Name of God? What is the condemnation which the human conscience has pronounced, in all countries and in all ages, on this crime against known truth, but the sternest that could be uttered? And

how is it possible for any but His bitterest enemies to dare to impute even the shadow of such an offence to Him Who spake—the world itself being witness—as never man spake?

No; our Lord Jesus Christ has identified the truth of this doctrine of a personal evil spirit with His own character as an honest Teacher of the highest truth. We cannot consistently deny the doctrine and continue to revere the Teacher Who reaffirmed it so solemnly; we cannot exculpate Him as if He were some Pagan philosopher, who had a secret truth for his chosen friends, while he patronised the current superstitions of the vulgar as being all that they were equal to. This contempt for humanity, blended with an equal contempt for truth, is utterly at variance with the Character and Mission of Him Who said on the eve of His death, “To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I might bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth My Voice.”

And do not the facts of human life, when we have once learnt to do them justice, bear out what we learn on this subject from the Christian Revelation? On the one hand we see great efforts for good produced upon men’s characters and upon human society, at this or that period of the world’s history; we see sudden and inexplicable conversions, like those of St. Paul or St. Augustine; we see immense efforts unaccountably made by bodies of men for such truth and virtue as they know of: and we say, “This is not only or simply human nature; here is another Agent at work; who is the real author of this momentum? we know what human nature is when left to its own resources; here is the Finger, the Spirit of God.” But, on the other hand, when we see, as we do see, individuals and communities pursuing evil with deliberation, although they know from experience, and without reference to a future state, that evil on the whole means misery; when we study characters and movements, ancient and modern, which have astonished even a bad world by their enthusiasm for pure unrighteousness; when we mark how much sin lies, so to speak, off the highway of nature, and is contradictory to nature; how the abandonment or murder of young children, cruelty to wives, dishonour and insult to parents, are matters of daily occurrence in the life of this vast hive of human beings; nay, when we who are in this Church, look each and all of us within ourselves—all of us, of all classes, noble and humble, rich and poor, the aged and the young, clergy and laymen,—and find that we too have to repeat after the Apostle the paradoxical confession, “The good that I would I do not, but the evil that I would not that I do,”—is it not reasonable to say, “Here, too, there is a personal agent at work of another kind; acting upon the propensities, the weaknesses, the passions of man; nature, we know, has a bad hereditary twist, but even depraved nature is ruled, when left to itself, in some degree by common sense?” And common sense, if it were alone and could have its way—common sense, gathering up man’s accumulated experience of the results of moral evil—would surely counsel us to guard against evil as against an epidemic, to exterminate evil like a ferocious wild animal. This enthusiasm for evil as such which is to be observed in the actions, the conversation, the writings of no inconsiderable portion of mankind, is reasonably to be explained by the Christian doctrine, that in dealing with evil we have to do not with an impalpable abstraction, but with a living person of great experience and accomplishments; whose malignant action, within a smaller area, tells its own story as the action of a living person, just as truly as, on a larger scale, and in an opposite direction, does the action of the Merciful and All-good God.

III.

There are two points in the Christian representation of the Evil One to which attention should especially be given.

i. The Satan or devil of Scripture was not always what he is now. He was once a glorious archangel: he became what he is by his own act and deed. Observe the importance of this, as sharply marking off the Christian belief from that Zoroastrian doctrine of an eternal evil principle, with which it is mistakenly confounded, and from which more mistakenly still, it is sometimes said to be derived. The difference is vital. The Oriental Ahriman is nothing less than an original anti-god; the existence of such a being is inconsistent with that of a Supreme and All-good God. It is inconsistent too with the fact that evil cannot be personal in any being in the sense in which good is personal in God. Evil cannot be personal in or of itself: it can only obtain the advantages of personal embodiment and action by being accepted by an already existing creature, endowed with will—a creature which freely determines implicitly to accept it by rejecting good. And therefore the Bible always represents Satan—not as a self-existing evil being—but as a fallen and apostate angel.

St. Peter speaks of the angels who sinned, and who were cast down to hell; St. Jude of the “angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation;” St. Paul of the “condemnation of the devil,” as resembling that of a novice among men “lifted up with pride.” In Satan evil has become dominant and fixed as in a previously existing personal being; there was no such thing in the universe of the Almighty and All-good God as a self-existing or originally created devil.

2. The Satan of Scripture has limited, although extensive, powers. It is necessary to remember that Milton’s Satan is an audacious creation of poetry; invested with more than one false title to interest which the Satan of Scripture and of fact does not possess. It is a mistake to think of him as omnipresent; he is often enough in the way, but not always or everywhere. It is a still greater mistake, to deem him omnipotent, or in any sense a rival, after the fashion of the Eastern Ahriman, to the All-good God. He is like a rebel chieftain who maintains a destructive warfare for a given period, but who might, and will eventually, be crushed.

“Why boastest thou thyself, thou tyrant, that thou canst do mischief?

“Whereas the goodness of God endureth yet daily. Thy tongue imagineth wickedness, and with lies thou cuttest like a sharp razor.

“Thou hast loved unrighteousness more than goodness, and to talk of lies more than righteousness. Thou hast loved to speak all words that may do hurt, O thou false tongue! Therefore shall God destroy thee for ever.”

The evil principle of the East is practically invincible; he defies the Goodness and the Empire of God. Satan is only tolerated; “the devil,” says the Divine Book, “is come down having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.”

And if the question is asked, “How can you reconcile the continued toleration by God of such a being as the Evil One with God’s attributes of Goodness and Almightyness?”—it must be answered that the full explanation must lie beyond our present range of vision. Only observe that the difficulty, if greater in degree, is the same in kind as that which we feel at the spectacle of a human being of the character and in the position of the Roman Emperor Nero, who may be regarded, like all very bad men, as a

serious approximation towards being a visible Satan. Here is a man invested with absolute power over millions of his fellow-creatures, and who employs that power after a fashion which entails the execration of the world, who contrives to do, within the range of his action, an amount of moral and physical mischief which it is appalling to contemplate. His reign comes to an end in time; but the question, why he is allowed to be where and what he is, during the few short years of empire, is the same question—different in scale, but the same in principle—as that about the toleration of the devil in the invisible world. Why are either of them, the devil, or Nero, tolerated even for a while, by such a Being as God? It is one department of that supreme mystery, the existence of evil, in a universe controlled by a Being who is All-powerful and All-good. We can only say that the Master of this Universe sees further than we do; and will one day, perhaps, enable us to understand in a measure those rules of His government which perplex us now. Meanwhile, experience comes here, as so often, to the aid of faith; and the facts and history of this visible world in which we live present exactly the same problems to our thoughts respecting the ways of God as that invisible world, the inhabitants of which are known to us only by Divine Revelation.

Above all, let us, as we take leave of the subject, fix in our minds the words and the lesson of the text. Christ came that He might render powerless him that had the power of death, that is, the devil. And He has done this: He has done it, when we might have least expected it, at that which, to the eye of sense, might have seemed the climax of His own humiliation and shame. Satan, the Apostle tells us, had the power of death. Like those brigand chiefs who ply their dark trade upon a mountain frontier or on a lonely road, so the Evil One had established a kind of recognised, though illegal, jurisdiction along the indistinct and mysterious boundary-line which parts the world of sense from the world of spirit. In addition to the physical anguish of dissolution there was present to the minds of generations of the dying the sense that in that dark hour something worse than bodily weakness or agony was to be apprehended: nothing less than the subtle and malignant onset of an invisible spirit, the soul's enemy and the enemy of God. Sin was the weapon by which he made death so terrible; "the sting of death is sin." And it is from this apprehension that the faithful are freed by the Death of Jesus Christ. By dying, the Apostle tells us, our Lord, as Man, invaded this region of human experience and conquered for Himself and for us its old oppressor. When lie seemed to the eye of sense to be Himself gradually sinking beneath the agony and exhaustion of the Cross, He was really, in the Apostle's enraptured vision, like one of those Roman, generals whose victories were celebrated by the most splendid ceremonies known to the capital of the ancient world,—He was the spoiler of principalities and powers, making a show of them openly, triumphing over them in His Cross. The Day of Calvary ranked in St. Paul's eyes, in virtue of this one out of its many results, far above the great battlefields which a generation before had settled, for four centuries as it proved, the destinies of the world,—Pharsalia, Philippi, Actium. Satan was conquered by the Son of Man; because the sting of death—sin—had been extracted and pardoned; because it was henceforth possible, for all who would clasp the pierced Hands of the Crucified, to pass through that region of shadows as more than conqueror through Him That loved them.

Here, brethren, we can only follow the guidance of faith. That there is an evil being who is at work in the world,—at work around, it may be upon or within ourselves,—is what we should naturally infer from what we see. Evil, like good,

organises itself, propagates itself, forces its way, as if it could bring happiness and blessing to mankind, with a consistency and a vigour that, on its more limited scale, rivals the working and directing Providence of God, and betrays the scarcely concealed presence of a practised hand and an indomitable will. Do not let us refuse to recognise it; do not let us try to explain it or any other fact away; do not let us afford to our enemy a fresh proof of his practised genius and adroitness by ceasing, if we can cease, to believe in his existence. But, also, do not let us fear him; since for Christians he has ceased to be formidable. Such is the grace and mercy of our Lord, that all these evils which the craft and subtlety of the devil worketh against us will be brought to nought, and by the providence of Christ's goodness will be dispersed. Such is Christ's grace, I say, that, in answer to prayer, it will please Him to beat down Satan under the feet⁴ of the weakest of His true servants. When, we are tempted to break any one of the known laws of God, to disown or contradict any portion of God's truth, we know who is near, luring us on, if he only can, to our failure or our ruin. But we know also Who is nearer still, his Ancient Conqueror and our own Best and Wisest Friend; and one aspiration to Jesus Christ from a believing soul will place all His grace and strength at our disposal. The results of Calvary do not really lessen with the lapse of time; and among these not the least blessed is the enfeeblement of Satan, and the deliverance of those who, through fear of death, would else be all their life time subject to bondage.

⁴ Cf. Prayer in the Litany.