

ART. III.—NOTES AND COMMENTS ON JOHN XX.

No. VII.

I DO not propose to retrace the lines of comment on verses 22, 23, offered last month. Let me only add to them the remark that if the conclusions then suggested are substantially true, we are led to the thought that the commission given to the Church is given to it, practically, as it is *testis et conservatrix divinorum librorum*, "a" (the Article, XX., in its English, does not say "the") "witness and keeper of Holy Writ." Such a witness and safe-keeper the Church is, undoubtedly; a character too often either forgotten or greatly mistaken. Some Christians think of Scripture as bound up with the Church visible more than it is, some as bound up with it less than it is. Some extend the meaning of Article XX. so far as to make the witness and safe-keeper to be, *therefore and as such*, the only qualified interpreter—a most gratuitous inference, as if a librarian as such were an adequate expositor. Some, on the other hand (it may be from a deep and joyful experience of the living power of the written Word) forget too much its intimate connection and, so to speak, cohesion with the living, breathing congregation of Christian disciples. No doubt it can happen, and in detached cases it does happen, that the Book acts altogether apart from the immediate action of the Church. I know, from first-hand report, of instances in which a Bible has been the solitary means through which Christianity, orthodox and living, has been learnt by one who was an untaught heathen when the Book almost literally fell into his hands. But even in such an instance we trace an indirect co-operation of the Christian Church; for without its existence it is most unlikely that Scripture, as we have it, would have been largely copied, preserved amidst the storms of history, and widely dispersed. On the human side, every copy of the Bible is connected with the existence of the Church, as a condition to its existence. And then, in the immense preponderance of actual experiences, the written Word is brought home to the individual by the spoken witness of the Church, coming (as of course it must ordinarily come) through the voice of some other individual, who in his turn has already been similarly approached. Practically, it is the Christian parent, or friend, or teacher, or expositor, who, in the vastly larger number of cases, is to the individual the "witness" as well as "keeper" of Holy Writ, saying, "This is the Word of God; I have received it; I pass it on to you." It is an individual who speaks (or writes), but an individual who, knowingly or not, has been helped to his or her own

realization of the written treasure by the conditions and aids of Christian membership, and who is thus in some sense, in turn, an organ of that membership in its work of witnessing and keeping.

Doubtless, if every living witness and every Christian uninspired book were to vanish from the earth to-morrow, the Book would still prove its own undying and independent power. But would it, in the actual workings of human life, speak to man nearly as often, or as widely, as before?

It is one thing to dream (it *is* a dream) of a Church-interpretation of Scripture such that the reverent and prayerful soul cannot get at the true sense of Scripture without it.

It is another thing when what we assert is a connection of Scripture with the visible congregation of Christ, such that the world's acquaintance with the Word, reverence for it, and benefit by it, is indefinitely increased and assured by that connection.¹

It is, then, this character of the disciples of Christ, and of their community, as the actual witnesses and guardians of the revelation of Christ, which is referred to specially, if I am right, in the passage before us. The revelation of Christ is, above all things, a revelation with a view to the remission or retention of sin. It reveals, with infallible certainty, the way of remission, the means to it, and, by consequence, how to miss it. The terms of the revelation are sure; its absolution or condemnation is Divine. When St. Paul, for example, or St. John so instructs me as to assure me, penitent and believing, that my sins are forgiven, I am to be as sure of it as if Christ stood by me and spoke the words. And when a Christian friend, in conversation or by example, *brings home* to my thought and heart such an Apostolic—*i.e.*, such a Divine—absolution, or, again, some corresponding Apostolic condemnation of my state or of an act in my state, he is doing me not an accidental service, but one divinely instituted, and implied in the fact that our Lord willed that His followers should be a community, and should live and work with His Word in their possession.

Two reflections may be offered before the subject is quitted. First, this *diffusion* of the witnessing and keeping office

¹ It may not be out of place to refer to Augustine's well-known words, *Ego Evangelio non crederem nisi sive Catholica Ecclesia commoveret auctoritas*. (*Contra Epistolam Manichæi quæ Fundamenti dicitur*, c. v.) The ample teaching of Augustine on Scripture assures us that he meant anything by this rather than that the Church is above Scripture, or that Scripture owes its Divine authority to the Church. But he felt it a powerful evidence to Scripture (among other evidences) that it came as a fact to him through the historic Christian society as that society's rule of faith.

over the whole Christian congregation is no contradiction to the Divine institution of an ordained and so far separated ministry—a ministry which has a function full of life and blessing, concentrating the witness of the congregation, and securing in a degree otherwise impossible, or at best most precarious, the order and the continuity of Christian worship. Hence the commission to the Church is, in our Ordinal, not unlawfully given with special emphasis to the Christian presbyter; though this was not done in any known ordination-ritual for presbyters before the thirteenth century.

Secondly, on the other hand, whatever is true of the remitting and retaining efficacy of the Church's true witness to Scripture, and true articulation of the message of Scripture, this must be at least as deeply true of the direct witness of Scripture to the soul as the man reads it and ponders it for himself. Of the Oracle itself we may truly say, "Whosoever sins it doth remit, they are remitted unto them." I quote some wise words of Doddridge's, written on this passage 150 years ago, in that often helpful commentary, his "Expositor": "Let us try our state by the character laid down in the inspired writings; in which sense we may assure ourselves that if our sins are declared to be remitted, they are remitted. And if, indeed, they are so, we need not be much concerned by whom they are retained. . . . Men may claim a power which God never gave, and which these words are far from implying. But whatever the sentence they may pass, they whom God blesseth are blessed indeed."

This whole subject is one of continual, and in our time of acute and special, importance. The sacerdotal theory in the Christian Church, in all its parts, and not least in that of a judicial absolution supposed to convey Divine forgiveness, puts a human intermediation between man and God where God would have man see the one Mediator only. It is a contradiction to the sacred first principles of the Gospel.

Meanwhile may our Lord in mercy shorten the days of controversy, and utterly abolish in us that which likes controversy for its own sake; and may He lengthen, till they fill our lives, the sweet hours in which we for ourselves enjoy in glad consciousness, and so are able gladly to assert to others, the holy certainties of the remission of sins for the Name's sake of the Only Begotten of the Father, who died for us and rose again.

But now let us pass at once to some view of a scene which will carry us indeed into the pure light of a direct view of the Lord Jesus Christ, seen in His living glory. We arrive at the record of the doubt and the belief of Thomas, verses 24-29.

Verse 24: *But Thomas, one of the Twelve, whose name means Twin, was not with them when Jesus came.* Verse 25: *So the other disciples began to say (ἔλεγον) to him, We have seen the Lord. But he said to them, Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and insert¹ my finger into the print of the nails, and insert my hand into His side, I will not believe (οὐ μὴ πιστεύσω).* Verse 26: *And after eight days again the disciples were indoors, and Thomas with them. Jesus comes, while the doors were fastened, and took His stand in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you.* Verse 27: *Then He says to Thomas, Bring your finger hither, and see My hands; and bring your hand, and insert it into My side; and do not become unbelieving, but believing.* Verse 28: *Thomas answered, and said to Him, My Lord and My God.* Verse 29: *Jesus says to him, Because you have seen Me, Thomas, you have believed; happy such as saw not, and believed.* Verse 30: *Now Jesus did many other signs as well in His disciples' presence, which have not been written in this book.* Verse 31: *But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, you may have life in His name.*

Of this passage I do not attempt any detailed exposition in this paper; it may be more possible to do this a month hence. At present I merely take up for notice some of its outstanding facts and lessons, asking the Risen Lord to grant writer and reader to realize His presence "in the midst," and to adore Him from the soul as our, nay as my, Lord and God.

We note, then, as often before, the concurrent brevity and minuteness of the record. Its brevity: no remarks or explanations are offered with reference to the absence of Thomas; just the fact is given, as necessary to explain the sequel. We are left to conjecture for ourselves why he was away. And conjecture surely says that his absence at such a time cannot have been mere accident. It was probably an expression of individual character, an act of that peculiar independence passing into self-will which we trace throughout his sketched portrait in this Gospel. I should not think that the mind of Thomas was one in which there was a strong tendency to doubt the miraculous, a Sadducean mind; but rather that he was a man decidedly apt to fall back upon himself, suspicious of over-influence from others, perhaps with something of that morbid honesty (if the phrase is permissible) which doubts because another believes, doubts because it fears, or seems to itself to fear, that it may accept reasons for belief which are

¹ βάλλειν appears never quite to lose a certain force of meaning. Here εἰν ἡ βάλω is not merely "unless I put," but almost "unless I push."

good only for another. Such a character, I venture to take it, was expressed in that marked absence. Reports were about that Jesus had risen. Jesus he dearly, ardently loved (chap. xi. 16), whatever mistakes he made about Him. Perhaps the first notion of His resurrection may have struck bright and glad upon Thomas, as a notion. But with equal likelihood he may have decided against the reports for that very reason: "Too good to be true"—so good that the wish must have fathered the assertion. So he would fortify himself with the reflection that his associates had done just this—had believed because they wished. Then he would unconsciously and easily pass from the spirit of grief to the spirit of pride, pride in his firmness and caution of thought, in his courageous willingness to be in the dark if dark it must be. Neither accident nor intellectual scepticism, but grief passing into a sort of melancholy pride—such seems to me a probable account of the absence of Thomas.

But all this, if true, is unrecorded by the pen of St. John, in his tranquil brevity. Yet, on the other hand, what minute traits of individuality we have in these few touches! How truly Thomas stands out as a real character, altogether different from Peter, for example, and from John; not for a moment to be taken for a mere reflection or echo of another personage. This is not only proof of veracity, of the firm reality which lies as a rock beneath the beautiful narrative. It is not only evidence that we have a record of facts before us, indicated in these brief touches not of art, but nature—for such nature-copying art *was not*, most surely, in Christian circles (if anywhere) when this book was written. It is a phenomenon not only of fact, but of instruction and consolation. The individualities of the Apostles Peter, John, Thomas, Nathanael, Paul are representative individualities. And the fact that they were, each and all, subdued to the same adoring love of Jesus Christ is a representative fact. Were the Apostles for us so many mere names, so many lay-figures attired in Galilean costume and grouped around the Lord, their recorded faith would *teach* us very little. But they are "men of like feelings" with us, *δμοιοπαθεῖς ἡμῖν*, like present-day people in their marked differences from one another. And the Lord Jesus found them all out, and they all found out Him; the one Lord, absolute and unalterable, and yet precisely the right Friend and Saviour for each of these persons.

Such a record as this may be used in the Divine hand to remedy two very possible mistakes.

1. We are apt sometimes, in thinking, praying, speaking for the benefit of the souls of others, to forget too much the

differences of character; to expect and to demand that characters the most diverse from our own shall not only reach the same results, but shall reach them by the same steps, in the same order. A man who has suffered much from intellectual clouds and conflicts, sometimes perhaps to be traced to indolence and half-heartedness, is often tempted, as it were, to insist that some friend now seeking after Christ shall feel just the same difficulties before he attains the light. Strange to say, such an attitude is possible, instead of that of the prayer and longing that into the light we now enjoy, holy and happy, this soul may step by any path our Master shall choose, and the sooner the better, if it be His will.

A mind, again, which has had little or no experience of such trials (and this exemption is sometimes a sign of mental health and strength, not of blindness or immaturity) is apt not seldom to grow impatient and unsympathetic in contact with one of the opposite cast. Let it not be so. True, you are not obliged to experience the conflict with the legions of doubt. But you should thoughtfully watch it, and pray, like Moses on the hill, while Joshua was battling in the valley. You should recognise with respect a different character, training, position; not to doubt whether such a heart needs the same Christ and the same salvation, but to bear with its different pace, its circuitous route, as it comes towards Him and to Him.

2. On the other hand, are not Christian believers often tempted sorely in the other direction, tempted to too keen a suspicion, too serious an estimate of differences of character in the presence of Christianity and Christ? Are we never disposed to say, practically, to ourselves—however whisperingly—that this man or that is so entirely different from myself that he never can, he never will, see Christ, His love, His redemption, as clearly and as gladly as I see it? And then perhaps the thought has already crept in, “and he never *need* do so.”

This is fatalism under a veil. It makes a man's character his fate. It ignores the free and Divine action of the Eternal Spirit upon men. It practically forgets the positive assurances of the Lord Jesus Christ that there is for every human soul a most urgent need that it should come to Him, and deal with Him.

This fatalism, a branch of a subtle and far-spread disease, we are helped to resist, to give the lie to, by this same wonderful record of the individualities of the Apostles. They, or at least the leaders of these leaders, were sharply and deeply differenced from each other. And the Lord Jesus dealt with them in widely different ways. But He led them all to the

same end—Himself; Himself seen and known by each as his all in all, his peace, his joy, his power, his purity, his Lord and God.

With admirable vividness this comes out in their artlessly-recorded words and deeds. How different was Thomas in mental and moral cast from John! Yet it is John who observes, who records with loving care, and so embraces, as it were, for his own the final faith of Thomas. How different was Thomas from Paul, the Galilean from the marvellous youth of Cilicia trained into the Pharisaic expert in the school of Gamaliel; the rugged peasant-mind from him in whom the pride of the genius, the savant, and the zealot were, till grace changed him, all combined! And very different was their intercourse with Jesus, and with the followers of Jesus. But by "this same Jesus" they were both led into the same blessed results as regards faith in Him. "My Lord and my God," exclaims Thomas, at once adoring and appropriating, as true faith should ever do. "I live," writes Paul (Gal. i. 20), "by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me," adoring and also appropriating the same Person with the same heaven-given simplicity of faith; *his* pride also quite broken up, *his* difficulties also quite done away in the sunlight of Christ, *his* inmost heart also freely opened to learn what God would have him learn of the glory and the love of His Only Begotten.

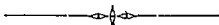
For the present we close the Gospel. But, at least, we have already gathered some fresh encouragement to patience and to faith from this first view of the story of St. Thomas. May we be, for our study, at once better able to sympathize with the differing characters and circumstances of others, and yet, all the while, more sure that, each and all, they need Christ, and the same Christ, with an absolute need. Above all, let us be sure of Him, trustful of Him, certain that He knows the way and holds the key, however impenetrable to Him this or that mind or heart may seem to us. The more we recollect and realize these things, the better we shall, on the one hand, delight to do what we can to bear our humble witness to such a Redeemer, and the more truly, on the other hand, will our Christian witness be borne not to ourselves, but to Christ Jesus our Lord.

Meanwhile, let us thank God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, that out of the darkness of the Apostle's doubts, and out of the darkness of the doubts of many a doubter since, He has brought forth light, the light of fresh and living evidences of the presence, the patience, the love, the glory of His dear Son. We may thankfully breathe as our own the prayer of the Church, written by the Reformers,

and appointed for the memorial day of the once-perplexed disciple :

Almighty and everliving God, who for the more confirmation of the faith didst suffer Thy holy Apostle Saint Thomas to be doubtful in Thy Son's resurrection; Grant us so perfectly and without all doubt to believe in Thy Son Jesus Christ, that our faith in Thy sight may never be reprov'd. Hear us, O Lord, through the same Jesus Christ, to whom, with Thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, now and for evermore. Amen.

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ART. IV.—PROJECTS OF CHURCH REFORM,

1886-1892.

UNLESS any unforeseen crisis occurs before the close of the present decade, the years 1832 and 1885 will be known to future generations as the two great epochs in the constitutional history of this country during the nineteenth century. By the Reform Bill of 1832 the centre of gravity of political power was shifted from the aristocracy to the middle class; while in 1885 the revolution which had been commenced by Mr. Disraeli's measure of 1867 was completed, and what are popularly called the working classes were admitted to a preponderating share in the government of the country. On each occasion the Church, from its intimate connection with the State, necessarily felt the effects of the change. After the first Reform Bill had become law, the cry of "Down with the Church!" was loudly raised, and was answered by the counter-cry of "Reform the Church!" Happily, the latter prevailed. The national profession of Christianity was maintained, but the ecclesiastical organization was in many respects readjusted to suit the wants and ideas of modern times. Tithes in kind were commuted into an annual money payment. The Ecclesiastical Commission was established, and our bishoprics and cathedral chapters were docked of their excessive revenues, the surplus being devoted to parochial purposes. In 1840 the Church Discipline Act was passed for amending the method of proceeding against criminous clergymen. Two new sees, those of Ripon and Manchester, were created, and facilities were provided for forming new parishes and ecclesiastical districts.

History always repeats itself, and history never repeats itself. The course of events during the last seven years