

SIMON AND THE SINNER.

ST. LUKE vii. 36-50.

THIS was the only occasion that we know of on which our Lord was asked to dinner by a man of Simon's class. It was their common cry against Him that He ate with publicans and sinners; that He affected no exclusiveness, religious or social (or both), such as formed in their eyes a most important element in life. It does not however appear that they gave Him much chance of shewing better taste in the matter. While He was gladly welcomed in pious unpretentious homes, like that of Bethany, and while He was often invited by rich and (presumably) vulgar publicans, who were attracted by his kindly and gracious behaviour to them, He was outside the pale of the Pharisees' social consideration, as of their religious sympathy. What it was that probably induced Simon to depart from the usual custom of his order in this case we shall see presently. That he ventured upon the step at all is an incidental proof that it happened early in our Lord's ministry, and that it is rightly placed by the Evangelist in this early chapter of his Gospel: later on in our Lord's career no Pharisee would have dared to invite Him openly to his house.

In *Verse 37* we are met by one of the most curious and interesting questions of the Gospel story. Who was this "woman in the city"? With a singular consent, Christian antiquity,¹ Christian poetry, Christian art, replies myriad-tongued, "It was Mary Magdalene; it was she out of whom seven devils were cast; it was she who stood at the foot of the cross and at the sepulchre, weeping." And, further, with

¹ At least from the time of Gregory the Great.

less of unanimity they reply, "It was Mary the sister of Lazarus." The one argument which supports this latter identification is apparent. St. John says plainly, in speaking of Mary of Bethany, "It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair." Now it must be confessed that the use of a past tense (first aorist) here would be strong evidence, by itself, that St. John was referring to some past anointing familiar to his readers from other sources. But the only anointing mentioned in the two first Gospels is clearly the same with that *subsequently* recorded by St. John. What remains then but to identify the Mary of St. John xi. 2 with the woman of St. Luke vii. 37? Thus there does appear from the text itself some reason (though not sufficient reason) for supposing that this sinner was actually the sister of Lazarus.

Much more curious is her popular identification with Mary Magdalene, because it is due not to anything in the text of Scripture, but to a sentiment—a sentiment which seems to have been universal, which is certainly true and beautiful in itself, but which has led to the confounding of two utterly distinct characters. That Mary Magdalene was one out of whom seven devils had been cast, is to us, with our keen perception of the physical characteristics of "possession," proof positive that she was not the same as the pardoned harlot, that her very misfortune had made such a life impossible. That she was so generally believed to be the same shews how soon the typical and (so to speak) evangelical aspect of the casting out of devils obscured the literal; how instinctively the dispossession of these evil spirits came to be re-

garded as the symbol of our deliverance from the thralldom of lusts and passions. Believing, as I do, that our Lord's miracles are (to us) but so many acted parables, I cannot but feel that there was a certain truth in the instinct which recognized in the Magdalene out of whom seven devils had gone the woman who had been rescued from a life of sin.

But even more potent in forming the legend of the "Magdalene" were those passages which speak of her as standing by the cross and watching by the grave. Where should the sinful woman—sinful no longer, but loving so much, because so much forgiven—where should she be found *but* beneath the cross, beside the tomb? This is surely a true instinct: it is no careless error. Is there among those "holy women" one that is foremost and most absorbed in her passionate devotion? It must be she who was not holy once, who owes it all to Him that she is holy now. True in itself (though mistaken in the particular instance) to Christian experience, as to art and poetry, is the instinct which recognized and hailed the woman that was a sinner in the disconsolate mourner to whom Christ first appeared from the dead: true to the spirit of the gospel was the wish to yield this precedence to the pardoned harlot, to place this crown of favour upon the head of penitence. I almost feel it is a sorry triumph of the dry light of a more critical exegesis to have exploded this mistake, so fruitful has it been of beautiful thoughts and beautiful pictures.¹

¹ As a landmark in the history of this legend, it is worth noticing that the first reformed Prayer-book of Edward VI. had a Collect, Epistle, and Gospel for "St. Mary Magdalene," founded on this identification. These were omitted from the second book in consequence of the doubts which arose on the historical question.

If this, however, be a doubtful gain, it is quite otherwise, as it seems to me, with the confusion between the harlot and Mary of Bethany. One must surely have lost all perception of what is true to woman's nature to tolerate the idea that the sister of Lazarus, who had nothing of the passion, nothing of the self-consciousness, of the penitent about her, could have been such an one as the woman in the city. The serenity and quiet piety of that home, as pictured by St. John, and the esteem in which the sisters were held by "the Jews" at the time of their brother's death, make it certain that it never had been the scene of so terrible an upheaval as the fall of the younger sister would have caused. And still more hardly could we imagine that, if she had been such, it would have been written that Jesus "loved Martha, *and her sister*, and Lazarus." God forbid that we should derogate ought from the exceeding love with which He both forestalled and met the love of the penitent sinner; but in his human friendships, in the personal affection which, as man, He had for the beloved disciple and for the Three of Bethany, He surely looked (as the best of us in our measure look) for what was purest, sweetest, most unstained, in man or woman. In this case, therefore, I think that a more true *sentiment* has guided us to a right conclusion, even as a more accurate criticism has in the other case.¹

It is a question of very inferior interest what

¹ It is very remarkable that a living writer, such as Bonar, in one of his most beautiful hymns ("Weary of earth, and laden with my sin"), should give the name of "Mary" to this woman. Whether he identifies her with Mary of Bethany, or Mary of Magdala, or both, I know not; but I should imagine it must be the former, since there is no possible ground in the text of Scripture for the latter.

“city” this nameless one belonged to. The scene of this part of St. Luke’s narrative lies in Galilee; but, on the other hand, this particular section is so far disconnected, that it might quite well belong to one of those visits to Jerusalem of which St. John makes us aware. And no doubt women of her class would be found in Jerusalem far more frequently than in any other city of the Jews: a considerable Gentile element or a foreign garrison would be almost necessary antecedents to their existence. If the narrative of the woman taken in adultery was really written by St. Luke (as many think), and became attached to the Fourth Gospel because it belonged to the ministry at Jerusalem, it would then appear less improbable that we have here another (and, in subject-matter, not dissimilar) fragment from the same ministry, retaining its place in St. Luke’s Gospel. Certainly it is in complete accord with the whole tone and scope of this Evangelist to have preserved two such exquisite pictures of the love of Christ for sinners.

Having got an alabaster vase of myrrh.—St. Luke does not say how she “got” it: perhaps she spent her money on it; perhaps it had been given her in other days, and she had been ashamed to use it on herself: now she feels that what had been only a reproach to her might be turned to holy and profitable account at last.

Verse 38. Standing at his feet behind him.—This implies, as the commentators point out, that the couch on which our Lord reclined at meat was of some height. It does *not* however in itself argue any humility in the woman, as if she would not ven-

ture to "meet his eye:" as our Lord's face was turned to the table, she *could* only approach Him from behind.

This, however, is but a paltry thing to speak of, for here we touch upon a matter most wonderful and beautiful—the blessed audacity, I mean, of the woman in entering Simon's house, and that at the hour of dinner, before the eyes of the assembled guests. It is hardly possible, I suppose, to measure the strength of the barriers which failed to keep her out. *We* know the enormous potency of social barriers which make a rich man's threshold as impassable to the uninvited poor as the flame-defended gate of Eden to exiled Adam. But there were in her case religious barriers quite as strong, comparatively unknown to us. Had she touched one of the other guests, instead of Jesus, no doubt he would have felt obliged to leave the meal untasted, to go home and change his clothes and bathe himself, and still remain unclean awhile, ere he was purged from the taint of that pollution. This she knew and felt, and under any other circumstances would have shrunk into any corner to escape their scornful eyes, and would have crept aside (for who so broken in spirit as they who *have been* bold?) like some beaten animal which seeks to hide itself from sight and notice. But on this day all fear or regard of human opinion left her, or, rather, was swallowed up in an overmastering desire. This one thing she knew, that Jesus was there; this one thing felt, that she must get at Him, must shew Him her devotion, must win from Him, if it were possible, a word of pardon and peace.

Weeping, began to wash his feet with her tears.—

Unrestrained and passionate indeed must have been her weeping! No lightly-passing shower of April skies, but the full downpouring of the lowering swollen clouds of autumn. And surely we have here a tacit reproof to those who look so coldly (as some do) upon anything *passionate*—exaggerated, they would say—in the expression of religious emotion. Had they been there, would they not have said (with some truth, too) that her display of affection was very “earthly;” that she had but turned upon another and higher Object the unrestrained feelings of her former life? Might they not have bid her enter into her closet and weep there, rather than make that show before the eyes of men? To these possible objections our Lord silently but emphatically replies by receiving and commending every circumstance of her passionate service to Himself. Let her weep her heart out; let her kiss her heart out upon his sacred feet; let her lavish upon Him the same endearments she might have profanely wasted upon a human lover, had she ever been able to love one well enough. The safeguard of love towards our dear Lord is *not* to be found in cold restraints, or in warnings to be “spiritual:” it *is* to be found in *Him*. He only, who is God most holy, can receive with perfect safety, without the possibility of harm, the utmost warmth of the most passionate affection. It is sometimes cast as a reproach upon the more devout Christianity of the day that it is “anthropomorphic” in faith and worship. It is not, I think, answered so distinctly and directly as it ought to be—that *our* faith and worship must be essentially

“anthropomorphic,” because it centres about Him who “was found in’ fashion as a man.” Be it that God in *Himself* is “unknowable” (as they say); *we* know the Father in the Son, and the Son we know as Christ Jesus; and no man was ever so thoroughly “knowable” as Jesus, because no man was ever so absolutely consistent with Himself. It is in strict dependence upon this principle that we maintain that in our religious worship all pure human emotions, however passionate, are rightly and laudably directed upon the God-man whom we know, and, knowing, love and adore.

Shall we ask what moved her to weep so bitterly? It was of course her faith; faith, vague and undefined, no doubt, yet faith in Him as one immeasurably better and higher than herself, who yet had stooped, at much cost to Himself, to care for her soul and to seek to save it; and this was saving faith. But, looking at it from a lower point of view, we are not so ignorant of human nature as to be perplexed by that vehement sorrow. If we know anything of the secret of the religious influence of one soul over another for good, we know that that secret lies in the union of personal purity, of tenderness, and of strength. It is such men that take us by the right hand and pluck us out of the slough,—that worst slough of despond in which we were sullenly content to abide because none offered to help us out. It is in the presence of such that the possibility of goodness which we had despaired of, the beauty of holiness which we had disbelieved, and the unspeakable hatefulness of sin which we had laughed at, rush over the soul in a flood which

(for the time) sweeps all before it. Now in Jesus were found, without measure, these three things—holiness, tenderness, strength.

And wiped them with the hairs of her head.—Some see in this the self-avenging conscience of past sins and follies; as if, mindful how idly she had decked her hair, how worse than idly used it as a snare, she would now for his sake put it to the lowest purpose. But then Mary the sister of Lazarus did the same, and we cannot believe that she had any such revenges to take upon herself. Rather it was the unstudied instinct of a love which pleased itself in using the very best, in devoting that which is the natural “glory” of a woman to the service of her Master and Lord.

Verse 39. Spake with himself, saying.—This much Simon said to himself, not aloud; the rest of his internal argument he did not even say to himself. I suppose it was to him so self-evident, so much a matter of course, that it did not even rise into consciousness. This is singularly true to the facts of mental reasoning: the mind does not represent even to itself all the stages by which it reaches its conclusions; it leaps over what is unquestioned and unquestionable to the conclusion which lies beyond. What Simon said to himself was perfectly true, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of person this woman is.” What Simon did *not* say to himself, because he thought it unquestionable, was simply false, “If He knew who she is, He would not suffer her to touch Him.” How often the most ruinous mistakes of mankind lie exactly in those unquestioned assumptions which

they do not put into words, but only argue and act from!

Verse 40. Jesus answering.—Answering, *i.e.* (as so often), the man's thoughts, not his words, and not even the thought of which he was conscious, but the thought which remained latent in his mind, though powerful to produce other thoughts.

Verse 41. There were two debtors to one creditor.—Simon, namely, and the woman; both therefore in the same case and strait, equally helpless, equally at the mercy of the creditor; and that creditor, Jesus. Only not astounding because so familiar, is the calm assumption—all the more monstrous from its very calmness, its absence of colour and rhetoric—of this speech. Our Lord speaks to his own host, whose bread he was eating, and quietly puts him on a level with a harlot as respects Himself. For if both had “nothing to pay,” how was one in any better position than the other, practically? It is true that if the parable stood alone we should not know whether our Lord intended Himself or his Father in heaven by the creditor. But his subsequent words, and the fact that the “much love” of which He spake was unquestionably towards Himself, leave no possible doubt. When Simon thought over these things afterwards, how aghast he must have stood at the enormous presumption of his Guest, who represented Himself as the creditor in whose debt, at whose mercy, lay Simon and the woman, and (*pari ratione*) all the world beside! All this, however, is in exact accordance with those other enormous and truly “superhuman” assumptions which characterize the Sermon on the Mount and other discourses in St.

Matthew, assumptions which have always seemed to me more conclusive of the Divinity of Christ than any number of isolated texts, because morally irreconcilable with any other theory of his Being. Had He been anything less than in the fullest sense Divine, by what possible perversion could our sins have been represented as a debt owing to Him? by what conceivable arrogance could the forgiveness of those sins be made dependent upon love to Him, shewn forth by personal attention to Him?

*Verse 44. Seest thou this woman?—*He had seen her, to scorn and condemn her: our Lord wants him to see her, to admire and envy her. In the contrast that follows it is needful to bear in mind the respective places of these three things—the water for the feet, the kiss, the oil for the head—in the social code of that day. To offer water for the feet, in a country where sandals only were worn in the streets and nothing in the house, was an act of the most elementary courtesy, and its omission a piece of downright rudeness; to give the kiss of welcome was an act of conventional politeness, the withholding of which was a slight; to present fragrant oil for the head was a mark of friendliness which by itself our Lord would perhaps hardly have expected from Simon, and hardly perhaps have accepted. That Simon had omitted all three courtesies shewed conclusively that he was not disposed to treat our Lord as a friend, or as an equal. He had, no doubt, asked Him to dinner out of curiosity, having heard many strange things of Him, and desiring to hear Him for himself. But having done this much he felt that he had gone quite far enough, and would go no further; he could

not bring himself to be polite, not even to be commonly civil, to his invited guest.

No doubt, also, this feeling of his was as much social as it was religious. If we should say that Simon thought that he was a gentleman, and that *our Lord was not*, we run the risk of offending our own sense of propriety, but we are probably not far from the truth. There can be no doubt that much social hauteur and much consideration of wealth mingled with the religious exclusiveness of the Pharisees. Nor can there be any doubt that Simon treated our Lord, who "for our sakes became poor," with personal rudeness just because He was poor. And, what is much more surprising at first sight than the fact of Simon's rudeness, is the fact that our Lord felt the rudeness and made no pretence of not feeling it: He called attention to it most pointedly and plainly. Most of us, so treated, would have affected not to notice it; pride, if nothing else, would have kept our mouths shut. I need not say that there was no place for pride in *Him*. But I may point out that the absence of pride was not simply due to his humility, in which He bowed his head meekly to every insult: it was also due to that consciousness of his own immeasurable superiority which could not leave Him. Simon's rudeness caused Him pain; but the pain was for Simon himself, who had lost (and worse than lost) so glorious an opportunity of entertaining, not angels, but the Lord of angels, unawares: salvation had come to his house too, as to Zacchæus's,—but he had despised so great salvation. And yet, as good ever comes out of evil, so Simon's rudeness, sad as it was, only serves to set off

for ever by way of foil and contrast the lavish and lowly affection of the woman.

Verse 47. WHEREFORE *I say unto thee.*—Notice then that our Lord makes all to depend upon the personal treatment He had received from the Pharisee and the sinner. What *we* often do in our insolence and self-conceit, as though every man's real worth were measured by his respect for us, *that* He did, the meek and lowly One, in his infinite truthfulness and love. Had He been any other than He was, we should have said that in that "wherefore" He attached a natural but exaggerated importance to personal attentions to Himself. But we know that He was throughout consistent in this;¹ we know that He went so far as to lay down the very same rule as that which shall decide the fate of all nations at the last day: "I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat," &c.; "I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat," &c. In a word, it is with us as with Simon and that woman; our treatment of Him now will decide his treatment of us hereafter. Nor let any one say that there is any real difference between the cases; that it was the relief of necessities which our Lord insisted upon in the one case; that it was the display of affection and reverence on which He dwelt in the other. No line can be drawn between them. Simon would never have dreamt of visiting our Lord if He had been "sick and in prison:" this woman would have sought Him *there* more gladly than in Simon's house. Hence there arises this notable lesson, that

¹ Compare, *e.g.*, as a slightly different expression of the same phase of his character, that saying in St. John xix. 11, "Therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin." In any other accused person, however exalted and innocent, it would be intolerable that he should occupy himself in weighing the comparative degrees of guilt in his enemies.

any failure in courtesy, any lack of genuine politeness, any withholding of kindly offices from those whom we think socially beneath us, is just as great an affront to Christ as though it had been shewn to Himself,—for “inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it not to me.” The spirit of hauteur and disdain is just the spirit of Simon; and it is the sad necessity of Simon now that he often has Jesus for his guest, and always for his neighbour.

For she loved much.—In these words, as compared with the foregoing parable (which itself is echoed in the clause following), lies the theological difficulty of the passage. One while our Lord intimates that she loved much because she *had been* much forgiven; another while He says that she was much forgiven because she loved much. There are of course many parallel instances of a kind of “inversion” of which our Lord was evidently very fond. Everybody will recall his answer to the question, “Who is my neighbour?” which takes such an unexpected and subtly instructive turn, and is (in form) no answer at all. Still, that a difficulty exists is clear, and the commentators, who are obliged to make it quite clear and logical, are full of doubts which statement to enforce and which to explain away. The Vulgate indeed has actually rendered ἀγαπήσει by *diligit* in Verse 42, “which of them *doth love* him more?” as if to suggest that the greater debtor was forgiven most because he was already most in favour.¹ I need not

¹ Cornelius à Lapide actually argues at length for this reading of the parable, although he knew that the Greek has the future. I give some of his words, because they are so strange: “Is qui plurimum a suo creditore accepit remissionem passim iudicabitur, ideo majorem hanc remissionem a creditore ac-

say that this is a wanton perversion, both of the literal reading and of the manifest meaning of the passage: the only difference intimated between the debtors is in the amount of their debt before, of their gratitude afterwards.

Can then both be true? Is it our conception of forgiveness as a definite and formal act *in time* that is in fault? Shall we say that forgiveness exists and has existed in the mind of God eternally—aye, and forgiveness of individual sinners, too—though only in the “fulness of time” doth it pass forth and lodge within the soul which welcomes it? Is not the very inversion of which we are thinking—the apparent interchange of causal relation between human love and Divine forgiveness—meant, not so much to destroy, as to supplement, the formality of our ideas and dogmas as to the remission of sins? There was, it is clear, a sense in which forgiveness frank and free was not only possible, but extant, for the sins both of the woman and of Simon; and in some way from the knowledge of such forgiveness sprang the eager love of the penitent. There was also, we must not shrink from maintaining, a sense in which the eager love of the penitent (itself an effect of Divine grace) was found worthy to be crowned with the further grace of pardon for all the past. I do not think that a true theology will try to balance itself between these by verbal reconciliations, much less to set forth one at the expense of the other; but, glorifying both, to leave them as complementary, not coincident, aspects of one blessed truth.

cepisse, quod magis eum dilexerit, ac plura ei officia et signa benevolentiae exhibuerit, ob quae plura vicissim illi remisit et condonavit creditor: simili ergo modo,” &c.

Verse 50. Thy faith hath saved thee.—To hold a correct dogmatic definition of “saving faith” has been—I suppose is still—considered the most important criterion of a standing or a falling Church. Yet I defy anybody to put into dogmatic shape this woman’s “saving faith.” It put itself into shape, but it was the shape of feeling and of action; of love which braved all to express itself in outward acts of reverence and affection; of sorrow which found more joy in bitter weeping than ever in laughter and in song; of personal devotion which recked nothing of any one else’s opinion, if only it might gain one kind word from Him. Whoever they be whose faith makes them thus to feel and thus to act towards the Blessed One, they need not fear but that theirs is “saving faith.”

RAYNER WINTERBOTHAM.

THE RICH YOUNG RULER.

ST. MATTHEW XIX. 21.

To the Editor of the Expositor.

SOME time since I chanced to attend a Service of which, as I picked up at it a new expository idea—to me at least it was quite new—it has struck me that both you and your readers might like to have a brief report. While sauntering through one of our large provincial towns, with an evening on my hands, I came on a gate opening into a garden in which there stood a large room lit up (apparently) for worship. Seeing two poor but respectable looking old men turn in at the gate, I asked them whether service was going on, and whether it was open to the public. “Yes,” they said, and would I go in; I should be quite welcome. Accordingly I followed them into a well-furnished room, in which some thirty or forty persons were assembled, most of whom were evidently of a higher social class than the two old men who conducted me. There was a look of intelligence about this small congregation, and an air of quiet devotion, which gave promise of a pleasant hour. My conductors were obviously quite at home—more