

STUDIES IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST.

IX.—THE EARLIER MIRACLES.

MIRACLES, once regarded as the great bulwark of the Christian faith, are now regarded as its greatest burden. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, can be seen the kind and degree of the changes worked by the modern spirit in our fundamental assumptions and general attitude of mind to nature and history. What was once made to prove the Divine origin and authority of our religion, has now to be shewn to be in no way inimical to its truth or prejudicial to its claims. The older apologists used to argue, Christianity is made credible, proved to be supernatural and Divine, by its miracles; they are signs that the God who transcends and created nature thus and then instituted a perfect and authoritative religion. Now it is argued, Miracles are possible and may be credible; need not, therefore, stagger faith or start doubt; events that may occur ought to be believed, when attested by credible witnesses. Once it was common to magnify the offensiveness of the cross, that its early successes might be traced the more directly to its miracles; now it is common to allow its physical wonders to grow pale or be forgotten before its spiritual and ethical glories. Mind, once credulous, is now suspicious of marvels, and can more easily believe truths that speak to its reason than events that appeal to its senses.

The change thus indicated is remarkable and instructive—a change to be welcomed rather than deprecated. The early use of miracles was an abuse, an almost exact inversion of the truth. Events that were by their very nature sensuous and transitory were made

proofs of a faith that is essentially transcendental and permanent. The proofs and the thing to be proved were rather radically opposed than rationally related. Truths which abide for ever, which were full of the light that penetrates the intellect and the sweetness that wins the heart, were made to derive, if not their reason, their authority from events that, appealing to the senses, could never authenticate or guarantee what was spiritual and eternal. Truth is above time ; like God, it can never grow old or become local and irrelevant ; but miracles have at best only an occasional value, become less significant and credible by distance, grow strange to the intellect as they grow remote from experience. The claims of truth on belief increase with time, but those of miracles decrease. The accidents of the birth perish or are forgotten, but the reality of the life is evident every moment in every movement of the living being.

As men conceived miracles in general, they also conceived their special or distinctive relation to Christ. They were made to prove that He possessed supernatural power, could exercise it directly, by a word or act of the will, without any intermediate or instrumental agency. He could anticipate the slow and normal action of natural forces and processes, as in changing water into wine ; could control the fiercest of the elements, as in calming the storm ; could create, as in multiplying the loaves and fishes ; could undo accomplished deeds, not only repeal laws of nature, but cancel events that had happened from their universal and necessary operation, as in raising the dead. These were made to argue Deity, Divine power possessed by nature and exercised by right. But miracles thus be-

came the guarantees of his real being, evidences of his nature and mission. They were his credentials; He was to be believed, not for his own or his truth's sake, but for his works'. This made Him what He had expressly disclaimed being, a worker of signs, a doer of wonders, that brought the kingdom of heaven with observation, a cause of physical events that could never constrain to spiritual faith. But while the miracles reveal, they do not prove, the Christ. They may be necessary to our conception of Him, but it is in their moral rather than their physical aspect; as symbols expressing the quality and range of his activity, rather than as proofs demonstrating the constitution of his person or being. The axiom, We believe the miracles because we believe in Christ, We do not believe in Christ because we believe the miracles, is true when rightly understood. The power to work miracles could never prove its possessor to be a person so extraordinary as we conceive Christ to be; but Christ once conceived to be the extraordinary Person we believe Him to be, miracles become to Him both natural and necessary. They are the symbols of the reality He is, the appropriate expressions of the force He embodies. They complete the picture of the Divine goodness He manifests, shew that its action in the physical is in essential harmony with its action in the moral sphere. The natural action of moral beings is moral action; the miracles of Christ are physical witnesses to his essential spirit and aims — therefore formally physical, but materially moral. They, as it were, personalize for us the moral action of God, shew how He acts towards the miseries and weaknesses of his creatures, and thus become essential elements in the declaration of the Father made by the Only-Begotten.

This paper, then, is not meant to be a defence of miracles, but rather a discussion and exposition of their right relation to Christ. That relation, indeed, is the best apology for their truth, and the true vindication of their worth. It lifts them into a sphere where they become intelligible, rational, necessary, legitimate effects of an adequate cause. The objections that annihilate miracles annihilate Christ; what preserves his Person saves their being. In the region of thought and history where He becomes a reality, they too become real. His and their opponent lives and thinks on the plane of the natural, and his nature is very shallow and circumscribed. It is a nature whose order can be transcended as little by personalities as by events. Persons, indeed, are to him but a series of events, determined in their sequence by a named or nameless necessity. Nature is but sentient man, man but perceived or remembered nature, determined in all his choices, as in his coming and going, by forces ever persistent, yet ever in process of permutation; no freer in his action than the falling stone, or the ebbing and flowing tide, or the rounded and rolling star. And this invariable order, though it be termed the order of nature, is but another name for the imperfectly understood or ill-interpreted experience of man, is what he has observed, the way of nature as revealed to his senses rather than as explicated by his reason. But if the question be lifted from nature into spirit, from the domain of necessity into that of freedom, from the sphere of events into that of personality, then it is radically changed. It is no longer a question as to whether the order of nature can be broken, but as to what a given personality is, and what its normal action must be. The acts of ex-

traordinary persons are extraordinary, measured by the ordinary standard, but becoming and natural, measured by their own personality. If events happen according to the order of nature, acts done are in harmony with the nature of the actor. If persons are not the products of physical forces, it is but rational to think that their acts will conform to the power or nature they embody, rather than to the order that did not produce them. Given, in short, the Person of Jesus, and it is more natural that He should than that He should not work miracles; they become the proper and spontaneous manifestations, the organic outcome or revelation, of his actual or realized being. Our supernatural was his natural; what we call his miracles were but the normal expressions of his energy, as nature is but the manifested activity of the immanent God.

Of course, this position affirms that the Person of Christ is, in a sense, a stupendous miracle. The nature of the physicists could not have produced Him. He was, in relation to their laws and forces, transcendental, supernatural. To a supernatural person supernatural action is proper or native; where he seems most ordinary he is most extraordinary. Now, personality everywhere transcends nature, and only the universality of the transcendence hides its essentially supernatural character. What is realized in varying degrees in man was realized in the most pre-eminent degree in Christ. His transcendence is an historical fact. The forces unified in his person have proved themselves unique alike as to quality and kind. His place in history but illustrates and explicates his historical person, enables us to judge the energies that lived in Him through the power and influence He has exercised.

In Him was life, and the life has been the light of men.

It is, however, certain to be argued, A miraculous person is no more possible, no more credible, than a miraculous event. While every person transcends nature in the narrower sense—that of the physicists—nature in the larger sense—that of the philosophers—is the common mother of all persons, the maker of all personalities. It were a small thing to say, We concede the point; it is the very point for which we contend. Nature in the larger sense is nature creative, not simply created; includes, does not exclude, the Divine energies. What nature, so understood, does, God does; and its products or achievements must be interpreted, not through our idea of nature, but through our idea of God. While the former cannot explain Christ, the latter can; measured by the first, He is a miracle, measured by the second, He is a natural and spontaneous product. Our notion of Christ's personality may contradict the idea of nature we owe to the physicist, but it is in harmony with our idea of God, nay, grows necessarily out of it. And the latter is here the determinating idea; while the effect may explicate the cause, the cause alone can explain the effect. So long as Christ is conceived in harmony with this all-determinating idea, our conception of Him has the same rational basis as our conception of the being and becoming of the universe.

A discussion as to the possibility or impossibility of miracles is meaningless, unless carried back to first principles. These principles are in the last resort philosophical, concern our notion of nature or God, and our notion of man. These notions, though dis-

tinguished, are subtly and inseparably connected. As we conceive God, we conceive man. Our conception of the universe is variously, yet faithfully, mirrored in our conception of the individual, of the personal and conscious mind. Yet it is convenient to distinguish the notions, and Spinoza and Hume may be respectively used to illustrate how the notion of God or nature, in the one case, and the notion of man, in the other, determines the question as to the possibility and credibility of miracles.

To Spinoza, God and nature were one and the same ; its laws were his decrees ; nothing was contingent in it, everything necessary, determined alike as to being and action by the necessity of the Divine nature. God was the one and only substance, extension and thought were his attributes, and everything existed and behaved in a manner absolutely determined by his nature or essence. The only Cause, alike in nature and spirit, was the immanent God, whose actions were always the necessary results of his perfections. Hence any contradiction of natural law was a contradiction of the Divine nature. To affirm that God had done anything against physical law was, as it were, to affirm that God had acted against his own essence. The fundamental conception was a rigorous Monism, and to a Monism, theistic or materialistic, miracles are not only impossible, but absurd. The objection of the pantheist and materialist to miracles is the same, only stated in different terms. Each recognizes but one force in the universe, necessary, mechanical, homogeneous in nature, uniform in action, revealed in the order disclosed to sense ; and so each is obliged to deny anything that requires or presupposes an active or conscious will

above, yet within, the material universe. But if their first principles are denied, their inferences cannot be received as valid. If nature is held to reveal a personal reason and an active will, it is but logical to conclude that the universe will be governed as reason and will alone can govern—in ways that are voluntary and for ends that are rational. These may imply or manifest the miraculous, but our miraculous is God's natural—*i.e.*, is the obedience of the Divine will to the ends or purposes of the Divine reason. What seems to contradict nature as real need not contradict it as ideal, as the arena on which a God works in ways and for reasons worthy of a God. While He remains the supreme object of our faith and thought, it is but the highest reasonableness to interpret through Him the greatest personality in history, the most natural when conceived through God, the most miraculous when conceived through nature.

The distinctive point in Hume's position was the denial of the credibility rather than the possibility of miracles. The point is characteristic, though his reasons were a curious blending of principles he owed to his scepticism with principles derived from the dogmatism he subtly concealed in its later form. Hume's scepticism, logically developed, did not allow him to pronounce against the possibility of miracles, but required him to pronounce against their credibility. He had resolved man into a series of sensations, a succession, without any rational connection or order, of conscious sensuous states. Knowledge was made up of impressions and ideas, or lively and faint perceived and remembered sensations. Its cause was thus external and unknown; our knowledge was made for us,

not by us—formed by our experience, created by our circumstances or environment. What could not be resolved into a sensation could not be an object of knowledge; what transcended experience belonged, as neither an impression nor an idea, to a region absolutely inaccessible to mind. To such a psychology only one conclusion was possible—the inexperienced was the unknown, the incredible; and Hume might have pushed it much farther than he did, or rather than he dared to do. His principle was fatal, not simply to the belief in miracles, but to knowledge—was as destructive of science as of religion. If his psychology is denied, his logic is deprived of its premisses. If we refuse to recognize man as a series of impressions and ideas, a succession of actual and remembered sensations, he loses the assumption that can alone lend plausibility and force to his argument. If mind creates experience rather than experience mind, the argument is reversed, the position turned. The only philosophy that can explain knowledge is the philosophy that seeks reason behind and before sensation. Thought is first, not last, is not a product of sensation, pure and simple, but the only power that can translate and transmute it into knowledge. But if so, if without the transcendental elements in knowledge the elements furnished by experience are impossible, Hume's elaborate proof of the incredibility of miracles is but a castle in the air, no more consistent than the structure of our dreams.

We cannot, then, feel the force of logic that starts from premisses we deny. We do not feel that they in any way touch our faith in the Person of Christ. He may be a stupendous miracle, but He is a miracle it became God to work. While God is to us what Jesus

represented Him to be, we must always conceive the appearance of Christ as supremely agreeable to his nature.

We come, then, back to our position : the main thing in the matter of the miracles is to discuss and determine their relation to the Person of Christ. The mysterious conscious force we so name was one, but the unity was variously manifested, and always in the most extraordinary forms. His spirit was revealed, or, as it were, incarnated in four forms, speech and conduct, institutions and action. These are organically related to each other and to Him, were rooted in the unity of his thought, expressed in their several manners his mind and aims. They are all alike remarkable in character, in their quality as works of the Spirit. His speech stands alone, constitutes an order by itself. There is no speech that can be compared with it, so simple, so transparent, so pre-eminent in power. His words could hardly have been fewer or mightier, have, indeed, behaved more like creative spirits ceaselessly multiplying themselves than like spoken words. His conduct, too, is unique, is our highest ethical ideal embodied. The religious genius He is confessed to have been is even more manifest in his conduct than in his speech. Love to God is more grandly illustrated by his life than enforced by his words ; duty to man He more finely exemplifies than enjoins. Here He is incomparable, our one perfect Son of God and Brother of man. Then, his idea of a Divine society, a kingdom of God, is an idea extraordinary in its sublime and daring originality, and still more extraordinary in its realization. It was an absolutely new thought, a new ideal of the relations of God and man, realized at once

in forms that created a new society, yet ever struggling towards realization in forms of greater perfectness. The Creator lives in his creation ; the society of Christ is a permanent incarnation of his Spirit.

Now, the Person manifested in these three forms—in his speech, his conduct, and his kingdom—is a unique Person, characterized throughout by the rarest and most exceptional power. Were He as unique in action it would be but natural. The force He embodied could hardly be denied a physical expression. It was no more extraordinary to have miraculous power over nature than to have miraculous power over men. Miracles of sense are no more supernatural than miracles of spirit. To be the moral being He was, to live the life He lived, to die as He died, to achieve in man and society the changes He has achieved, is to have accomplished miracles infinitely greater in kind and quality than those of multiplying the loaves, walking on the sea, or even raising the dead. To be equal to the greater is certainly to be more than equal to the less. It cannot surprise us that the Creator of the speech, the conduct, and the kingdom of Christ, should also be the Creator of health in the diseased and sight to the blind. It had rather surprised us had one whose position is so pre-eminent in man and history been feeble and commonplace in relation to nature and action.

It is impossible to separate miracles from the historical Christ: they are inextricably interwoven with the evangelical history. The words of Jesus often imply works that were held miraculous ; no theory that allows veracity to the first can deny reality to the second. The older Rationalism, with its forced natu-

ralistic explanations, became incurably absurd, died, indeed, of its exegetical absurdities. The mythical hypothesis was more scientific, but hardly more successful. It failed to explain why no miracles were attributed to John; why they were attributed to Jesus alone, why so integral parts of his history, so necessary to the picture of his historical appearance. Then, it had a still more radical fault. It made the New Testament miracles echoes or imitations of those recorded in the Old. Jesus was arrayed in the marvels that had been made to surround the prophets. What they had done He had to do, in order that in Him the prophecies and economies of the past might alike be fulfilled. But to this theory it was necessary that the miracles of Christ should exactly repeat and reflect those of the Old Testament; a difference in character and design was failure at a point where to fail was fatal. And here the failure was complete. The miracles of the Old Testament are mainly punitive, but those of Christ mainly remedial. The first express for the most part a retributive spirit, but the second are acts of benevolence. An attempt to persuade Jesus to work a miracle in the manner of the Old Testament evoked nothing but a reproof to the tempters.¹ His miracles express his will, show that He is gracious in word as in work. He is good, and does good. He is the enemy of disease, of pain and misery in all their forms. His speech is illustrated by his action, would be without it without its divinest meanings. Matthew, with wonderful insight, makes Christ's miraculous power express a vicarious and redemptive relation. He healed that He might fulfil the prophecy, "Himself took our infirmi-

¹ Luke ix. 54-56.

ties and bare our sicknesses." ¹ He came to redeem from disease as from sin, bore our sufferings that He might cure our sorrows. His action was like the incorporated or articulated will of God; shewed it in its essential qualities active and exercised in relation to man. And this relation to the Divine Will lies at the root of his power over nature. His will is ethically so one with God's that the ethical becomes almost like physical identity. His Father works, and He works; ² and his works are his Father's. This connection of absolute obedience to the Divine will with possession of Divine power helps us to estimate at once the ethical and evidential value of Christ's miracles. They are evidences of ethical perfection, of moral completeness. Nowhere does Pharisaic malice seem so malicious as when it attempts to trace his power to the devil, while his vindication of Himself is nowhere more victoriously complete. ³ The miracles, admitted by his enemies, are proved to express the will of God, and to reveal the ethical quality of his own spirit.

But this ethical quality is seen in repression as well as in exercise—perhaps even more in the former than in the latter. The miraculous action of Christ is distinguished by what can only be called miraculous moderation. His abstention from the use of his power is even more remarkable than his exercise of it. Supernatural power is a dangerous thing to possess, an awful temptation. Few men could possess it without being depraved by the possession, without at least often using it unwisely. It is a power with which we should hardly be inclined to trust any man, and we should certainly

¹ Matt. viii. 16, 17.

² John v. 17.

Matt. xii. 24-30; Mark iii. 22-27.

regard its owner with the most unsleeping and jealous suspicion. But the extraordinary fact stands; the people believed Christ to possess it, and yet trusted Him, and He justified their trust. He was never untimely, extravagant, or ungracious in the exercise of his supernatural gifts. They were never used on his own behalf. He had power above nature, but He lived under the laws and within the limits she sets for all her sons. He was often hungry and athirst, but He never fed Himself as He fed the multitudes on the hillside, or refreshed Himself as He refreshed the wedding guests at Cana in Galilee. He suffered, knew heart-break, pain, and death; but He never asked any sovereign might to lighten his sorrows, heal his wounds, or roll back the ebbing tide of life. Then, too, his power is never exercised for defensive or hostile purposes. His enemies acknowledge his miracles, yet do splendid though unconscious homage to his goodness by attributing them to the presence or help of infernal agencies, so confessing that He had a power more than human, but not the will to use it devilishly. His prayer on the cross explains and illustrates his conduct. What He asked his Father to do He was always doing—exercising mercy, forgiving men who did not know the sinfulness of their doings. He was thus, in what He abstained from doing, a witness to the Divine grace He incarnated, restraining anger and leaving evil men unharmed to life and time and possible penitence. And this repression becomes, in one aspect of it, sublimest self-abnegation, divinest sacrifice. A being so gifted with supernatural power did not need to suffer, to die, as Jesus did. His sufferings and death were voluntary, results of his own choice. As He willed to heal men,

He willed to die for man. The motives that induced Him to work miracles moved Him to die. He exercised his power that He might save from suffering; He withheld it that He might save from sin. And so to his disciples his final and crowning miracle was his acceptance of the cross, his submission to death. The act of repression was the exercise of the highest power, the power to lay down his life, to give himself a ransom for many. Here men have found the wonder of the ages—"God commending his love to us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

But the miracles stand in as intimate and indissoluble relations to the teaching and aims as to the character, or, as it were, historical ideal of the Christ. His words and works are as branches springing from the same root, twin bodies inspired by one spirit. Especially in the Galilean period—which is, too, pre-eminently the period of miracles—when He could order his life as He willed, when his path was not watched by the jealous hate of Pharisee and Sadducee, when the homes of the people were the scenes of his daily ministry, a fine harmony reigned between his speech and his actions, the first creating the light that cheered the spirit, the second creating the health that renewed the body. He conceived health to be as necessary to happiness as knowledge, and so He loved as well to make the diseased whole as to make the ignorant enlightened. The motives that moved Him to speak moved Him also to action, compassion in each case ruled his will.¹ The men that most profoundly touched his sympathies were the publicans and sinners on the one side, and the diseased and pos-

¹ Matt. ix. 35, 36; Mark i. 39-41.

sessed on the other;¹ and as their sorrows drew Him to them his gracious and quickening sympathy drew them to Him. He had come to be the physician of the sick, to seek and save the lost. It had been said that the days of the Messiah were to be days of health as of happiness,² and He fulfilled the prophecy. The prophetic words He used to declare and define his mission³ find an instructive echo in the words He used to describe his works, the signs which were to enable the Baptist to judge as to his character and claims.⁴ In relieving suffering He was overcoming sin. His acts of healing were victories over the devil. By them He confirmed faith,⁵ cast out Satan,⁶ conquered evil, created peace, by creating one of its most essential conditions. His acts, like his words, contradicted tradition. He would not be silent to please the scribes or the schools, and He would not be prevented by an inflexible and inhuman law from lightening human sorrow. As He taught that the Sabbath was made for man, He healed on the Sabbath.⁷ As He taught that humanity was greater than Judaism, that to be a man was to be a neighbour, owing the neighbourly duties of help and consolation, to all men, He carried restoration and comfort to the alien as to the Jew.⁸ If we interpret his works through his words, we can see how beautifully significant and ideal they were, the symbols of the Messiah and his age coming with hopeful and happy health to sick and wasted humanity.

These scattered and fragmentary paragraphs have not even pierced the surface of a great subject, but they

¹ Matt. ix. 10-13; Mark i. 32-34; ii. 17.

² Isaiah lviii. 8.

³ Luke iv. 17-19.

⁴ Matt. ix. 4-6.

⁵ Ibid. ix. 2, 29.

⁶ Ibid. xii. 22-29.

⁷ Ibid. xii. 10-13; Mark ii. 27; John v. 16.

⁸ Matt. viii. 5-13; Mark vii. 24-30; Luke vii. 2-10; x. 36, 37.

may have indicated in a rough and hurried way the relation of the miracles to the mysterious and variously manifested personality we call the Christ. In conclusion, it may be enough to remark that, if we are right in our interpretation of this relation, it ought to shed some light on the once celebrated controversy as to the comparative value of the internal and external evidences. The miracles are no more external to the system of Jesus than his speech. Both are rooted in his personality, express his thought, reveal his spirit, manifest the inner and essential qualities of his heart and mind. Without either we should be without true and sufficient knowledge of his marvellous Person. His words exhibit the ideal, his works the real; the former explain Divine benevolence and human obedience, but the latter shew Divine beneficence curing human misery, creating human happiness. What blossoms in the flower was contained in the seed; what was evolved in the history was involved in the Person of Christ. The sign to the sense is a symbol of the spirit, and miracles are but means by which the hidden and internal qualities of Christ become manifest and real to man.

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*SHORT PAPERS UPON THE PROPHET
JEREMIAH.*

NO. 6.—THE CAPTURE OF JERUSALEM, AND THE FLIGHT
INTO EGYPT.

ONE period of Jeremiah's life still remains for our consideration, and in it we shall find him a true patriot, faithful to his king, his country, and his God; but his old fate still attends him. Cassandra-like, he speaks to