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The Crown of Thorns.

A LAST SERMON

PREACHED IN HAWARDEN CHURCH,

BY THE

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“Then came Jesus forth wearing the crown of thorns.”—
S. JOHN XIX., 5.

It is said by those in a position to judge of such a matter that one of the special characteristics of our modern society is a passion for morality, a general admiration of the good life. Of course there are tendencies of thought in an entirely opposite direction; but upon the whole men are now-a-days fain to acknowledge the loveliness of goodness, and more or less earnestly to wish they might themselves attain to it. Virtue then as a result, a splendid product, secures the homage of the world. Men see and recognise, more or less clearly, the wondrous Beauty of Holiness. It attracts and fascinates them, and they unconsciously bend before it. Good men wrestle with the Angel for his blessing,—they eagerly strive in spirit to clasp this glorious prize of man’s high calling,—they seek early the kingdom of GOD and His righteousness,—they try hard to find out the way of Holiness and to walk in it faithfully unto death. Bad men even mimic them—the outside of their lives, because they are so beautiful; and so there is a vast mass of sham goodness—base moral coin current in the world; the devil clad as an Angel of Light. For true goodness has ever a sort of phantom-shadow of unreal, acted goodness close behind it—of that hypocrisy which has been well called the ‘homage which vice pays to virtue!’

And surely, brethren in CHRIST JESUS, no one will complain of this royal honour wherewith men testify their sense of the dignity of goodness. It is not the fault of goodness to be lovely and loveable, and to manufacture hypocrisy as a kind of side result. So we rejoice and are grateful for the general recognition of the glory of being good and doing right, and trust by GOD’S mercy to build upon that, as a foundation, the temple of true righteousness in CHRIST, which is man’s eternal life.

Indeed, brethren, this recognition of the beauty of holiness is an indispensable trait of a Christian, CHRIST-like mind. Depend upon it, the true Christian will learn to see more and more deeply the splendour, the glory,

the gentle beauty, the pure and chastened "sweetness and light" of the life and character wrought out (to use S. Paul's famous expression) "in CHRIST." Yes! and he will advance to a fuller understanding of how all that product of such mysterious loveliness, such ineffably tender delicacy of thought and of feeling, of wondrous beauty, so simple, yet defying all analysis: how all this amazing result,—the Christian life and character,—is to be named and defined only in that far-reaching phrase—"the grace of our LORD JESUS CHRIST." That word "grace" alone seems to explain so much of the mystery of the Divine life of the soul with its rainbow-blending of fair and noble ideas,—freedom, and beauty, and tenderness of love.

It is one thing however to love and admire goodness, and another to aim at the practice of it. Let us endeavour now, by the guidance of the HOLY SPIRIT, to discover and to contemplate the secret of holiness, as CHRIST, the true SON of MAN, has revealed it. It is well from time to time to stand back—so to say—from the details of our Christian life and its mechanism, and take a survey of its principles and the laws which regulate it. Assuming then, that all we who profess and call ourselves Christians, yearn after the Beauty of Holiness, incarnate in our Divine Master, the only perfect Man, and reflected with varying degrees of clearness in the persons of His most faithful followers; assuming that we each one of us in his vocation in life, would be such as JESUS would have been, had he lived now and here and in our position:—What is it we are really aiming at, and how may we hope to attain it?

There are many persons, brethren, with this same noble aspiration to rise to the measure of the stature of the fulness of JESUS CHRIST, who altogether fail to realise their ambition, because they will not listen to His voice, saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it." They love their own self-chosen paths of righteousness, and their self-will entirely misleads them. They recognise the supreme splendour of the CHRIST-like life and character; they *feel* in the depths of heart and conscience the *necessity* of holiness; they *feel* the profound, the absolute truth of the scriptural assertions that there is no *life*

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whatever for man but one,—the life of union with the All-holy GOD, the life of holiness, which is in its very essence eternal,—the only deathless life. But while they aspire to be good, they will not simply learn at the feet of CHRIST how they may become so. They make many a futile effort to shake off the chains of sin ; they writhe beneath an intolerable burden,—impatient, humiliated, mortified. They long for life, but they will not come to JESUS that they might have it ; they will not remember that eternal life, the holy life, is the gift of GOD in JESUS CHRIST our LORD. They think, or dream, they can save themselves ; can wrest the crown of life from the hand of GOD ; can be like CHRIST in their own independent strength. It is the old delusion which Christianity had first to crush ;—the outcome of the overweening self-confidence and pride of the human spirit ; the notion that had so perverted the mass of the Jews with whom our SAVIOUR came in contact, that they could serve GOD rightly and make themselves well-pleasing in His sight, without His special aid.

But, brethren, if we, in singular unanimity with the whole civilized world, are obliged to confess that there has never been but one perfect Master (if we may so speak in deep reverence) of Holiness ; one only who by word and life revealed the full and entire will of GOD for man ; surely it follows, that He alone can be trusted as an authority in the great question of our own personal sanctification. There He stands—the only Holy Man—the only true and perfect Son of Man—the only Man who was found to succeed in “doing the truth,” unique and alone in the ineffable glory of His holiness—in the dazzling whiteness of His purity, wrapped in the love of GOD, in the sunlight of righteousness, in the radiance of Heaven. No truthful human heart but melts when it beholds Him ; no earnest spirit but reaches forth and yearns to embrace Him, to clasp and to claim though it be but one ray of His unearthly splendour. Nothing upon this earth can so fascinate, so delight, so entrance the soul as this vision of the CHRIST—the altogether lovely One, chiefest among ten thousands : full, indeed, of amazing peace and bliss, and ecstasy that expands, uplifts, inebriates. But as, forgetful of ourselves, we bow before

Him, the Revealer of holiness divine, shall we not implore Him to be Himself our Master, and the guide of our life—Him, the Conqueror of Hell and of death, living and dying once indeed some centuries ago on earth, but, in a higher and deeper sense, by virtue of His holiness, living ever and dying never, linked inseparably in His Humanity to the eternity of GOD!

“Thou art the King of Glory, O CHRIST.

Thou art the everlasting SON of the FATHER.

Thou sittest at the right hand of GOD, in the glory of the FATHER.

We therefore pray Thee help Thy servants.”

“Show Thou us the way that we should walk in, for we lift up our hearts unto Thee.”

It is thus, brethren, assuredly that the admiration (to use so cold a word) and love of the Beauty of Holiness in the Face of JESUS CHRIST, should lead us to faith in Him and in His teaching as to our own sanctification. But there are those in the world who profess the former feelings and who revere the beauteous character of JESUS, who nevertheless do not hesitate in refusing to accept His doctrine, and to follow His rules of life and conduct. They explain away or deliberately set aside large portions of His teaching on one pretext or another. Of course this is chiefly amongst those whom we should say were not—formally at all events—Christians. But is it not true that, even within the Church, there are multitudes who seem to attach no weight whatever to very many of the sayings of JESUS CHRIST, their LORD and GOD and SAVIOUR: they do not by any means consciously go right against the law of CHRIST, but instead of accepting the guidance of the Spirit of JESUS, and His Church—accept the guidance of the other great interpreter of the Bible—I mean the World: the World, you know, does not find it answer to go clean contrary to Christianity, so it has its own commentary upon the Scriptures—its own way of explaining them or explaining them away. The dark, austere sayings about sin and its consequences—the death with which it is ‘inveterately convolved’: the severity which JESUS teaches as the shield of virtue, the guardian of that purity of heart which sees GOD: the precepts respecting self-denial—the crucifixion of the

flesh with its affections and lusts—the duty (under given circumstances) of cauterizing our natural affections, and learning to hate where we should spontaneously love: Or, again, such an injunction as that to the rich young man (by the bye, is it possible that there are none of the same class now on earth?), “sell all that thou hast and give to the poor:”—In a word, all the hard, stern, ascetic aspects of the Christian life, so prominent in the teaching of our Blessed Master—all contact with the Cross, every shade of holy suffering—from this the world recoils with a shudder of disgust, and has to invent fiction after fiction to gloze over the plain meaning of CHRIST. Hence comes the danger—so widely fatal—of Christians accepting the easy-going and wide path offered by the world, while they flatter themselves they are on the hard and narrow path of JESUS. It is true that precept upon precept, as they read the Gospels, seems to confront them with a solemn warning or condemnation. But the world tells them, that one is obsolete and meaningless now-a-days; and another is local and occasional and for some reason or other does not apply to *them*; and another is to be spiritually, not literally, interpreted—and it vanishes in the process; and another is merely a rhetorical statement of a moral truism; and allowances are to be made of this kind and of that; till the plain mind of the believer is dazed and bewildered, and he is tempted to think that, after all, decency and respectability and the fashionable modicum of religion is all that CHRIST expects of him.

Brethren, it is not so. Beware of the smooth-tongued, easy-going, compromising world. Listen with unprejudiced and simple mind to the only teacher of Righteousness, who tells you that He will save you, as He preserved the perfect life of His Humanity, if you will but hearken to His Voice, and give yourselves to His obedience. He expects enthusiastic hearts, inflamed by contact with His Holy Spirit. He expects absolute faith and devotion—unquestioning loyalty to His command. “I am come to send fire upon the earth.” Awake, then, ye sleepers, drowsy Christians, and be on fire for God: fire is strong, and leaps Heavenwards, and offers up all that it may touch. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and ye hear the sound thereof, but cannot tell whence it cometh, or whither

it goeth." The wind too is strong and fierce, and though it works unseen, scourges the ocean to stupendous rage, and hurls headlong the mighty trees of the forest, and mocks to scorn the structures of human strength and scientific skill: gentle one moment as the breath of the sleeping babe—all but omnipotent the next in the furious blast and destruction of the gale—subtle, fantastic, wayward, wild and free—a mighty mystery is the wind. And "so is everyone that is born of the Spirit"—so are you, friends in CHRIST JESUS, born anew in babyhood of water and of the SPIRIT: you are endued with power from on high. You have an independent and mysterious force within you, if you will but yield yourself to the Spirit, and obey His impulses of good. Are you ever conscious of these stirrings of grace—these movements of the HOLY GHOST within your souls? Have you—how have you—responded to them? Have you been brave and independent and true to CHRIST your Captain, and taken your own line—the line marked out by GOD, by the silver star wherewith GOD offers to lead you from your home on earth to your truer home with JESUS—and dared to go *against* the world—against shallow or faint-hearted or earthly-minded friends—against the mere conventionality and the frozen religious practice of the narrow-minded, inperturbable professors of a religion whose heart they have never touched? Then may you have been indeed the faithful servants of Him who "maketh the winds His Angels and the flames of fire His ministers."

Indeed, there must be something of this likeness to "wind" and to "fire" in the Christian's spiritual life. There must be something of enthusiasm—of the sense of being inspired—enlightened and upheld by the creative and regenerative Breath of GOD. It will be the mysterious source of that ceaseless aspiration, that constant yearning and effort to rise higher—to grow in grace—to be more like CHRIST, which characterises the true Christian. It cannot inflate him, cannot fill him with pride, because it is only in proportion to his self-resignation, his utter lowliness of spirit, that he is conscious of it. It will certainly give him strength and confidence,—but the strength of conscious weakness, and the confidence of utter self-distrust. Indeed it is the peculiar excellence

of Christian virtue that, from first to last, there is no room for self. It is GOD that worketh in all the faithful. "By the grace of GOD I am what I am." "I live, yet not I, but the grace of GOD, which is in me." Faith is the foundation of Christian morals; and faith implies utter self-resignation, self-forgetfulness, self-distrust, and an entire leaning of the soul upon an outside power. Yes, and further, even this foundation, this elementary principle of faith, is not of ourselves, "it is the gift of GOD." Let us then lay firm hold on this great principle of Christian ethics: that holiness after all is the work of GOD in the soul, the revelation of the indwelling Spirit of JESUS CHRIST. "Our sufficiency is of GOD."

And every virtue we possess, and every conquest won,
And every thought of Holiness—are His alone.

There is a wrong way of trying to attain even to virtues and spiritual graces, as there is a wrong way of pursuing happiness. Both are to be attained, but both must be regarded as results wherewith GOD will crown our efforts, but not as ends to be pursued independently of Him. Seek for pleasure, grasp at happiness, and it crumbles into dust beneath your touch: Seek first the kingdom of GOD and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. Somewhat similarly, strive in your own unaided strength to develope Christian virtues in your soul, to conform yourself to CHRIST's image, without the support of His grace, and you may indeed clothe yourself in the outer semblance of a Christian, but your virtues are whited sepulchres, and your "graces" are empty phantoms. With some kind of self-culture and discipline of life you may "plant and water;" you may enrich the soil—you may supply every human condition of spiritual life and growth, but you will find that after all the lovely and majestic flower of Christian holiness will rise only beneath the Almighty hand of Him "who giveth the increase," and all its tenderness of colour, and grace of form, and pervading fragrancy are the fashioning of the angels whom He sends forth as ministering spirits to minister to the heirs of Heaven. "Every good gift, and every perfect gift (of soul, not less than body or mind) is from above, and cometh down from the Father

of Lights." Such then is the first thing to observe about Christian holiness,—that it is the creation of GOD in the soul of man, a gift of grace; the crown of our life bestowed by Him; falling (as it were) from Heaven in mysterious secrecy, like the angels' food of old at midnight in the barren wilderness.

But there is a second point of equal importance to be added: man's will must work together with the grace of GOD. "This is the will of GOD, even your sanctification." Yes; but there must be no trespass upon the great primal ordinance of man's free-will. It is our glory and our privilege willingly to offer ourselves to CHRIST, willingly to tread in His blessed footsteps, willingly to obey His laws.

" Strong SON OF GOD, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen Thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove.

* * * * *

" Thou seemest human and divine,
The highest, holiest manhood, Thou;
Our wills are ours, we know not how;
Our wills are ours, to make them Thine."

It is ours to believe and trust Him who is Faithful and True, and to accept the means and methods which He sets before us. What if He command us to make use of Sacraments—mysterious and beyond our understanding! We are bound to receive them as the very means He chooses. If GOD alone can sanctify us, and not we ourselves, we cannot question the fitness of the agencies He employs. If our faith is tried, happy are we, for trial is our perfection. If in loyalty to JESUS, and firm adherence to His rules of life, we find ourselves engaged in a bitter and distressful struggle; if all the world seems ranged against us, and temptations are strong and painfully severe; if life itself is very dreary and chill, and the Mercy of GOD seems faint and far; if the chastenings of Providence are scarcely to be borne, and the Cross overshadows our Heaven and earth; if our natural life quivers with pain—sinks (as at times it may) to a very agony, and our spiritual life the while is a strain and weary effort—inwrought with desolation and anxiety, and

unrefreshed by streams of grace :—O poor, and faint, and trembling human hearts, bowed to the earth and wounded sore ; O suffering and bleeding hearts, you are in your Master's footsteps and you tread the royal road of the Holy Cross. Will you not learn the lesson of your SAVIOUR's passion ? Will you not believe that it was with wound-printed Hands He blessed the world with His divine Peace ? Will you not blend your sorrows with His, and sanctify your wounded spirit by suffering with Him ?

Stand there before Pilate in his Judgment Hall and see him point to the LAMB OF GOD, and hear him say "Behold, the Man." And gaze, gaze upon that pale, sorrow-stricken, blood-stained Brow. Do you not discern beneath the shadow and the pain, that Glory of Humanity, that Loveliness of Grace, the amazing Beauty of Holiness, which still melts your hearts with yearning love and passionate desire ? Do you not see the peace asleep upon the pain—as the iris rests upon the tost and trembling spray of some great water-fall ? Do you not *verily* "behold the Man,"—the true and perfect and ideal SON OF MAN,—royal, peaceful, strong, triumphant, while His pallid countenance is marred even with tears and blood ? See the crown of His true Kingship on His Head : He stands there victorious over shame and suffering—dying and behold ! He lives. "Thine eyes behold the King in His beauty,"—Yea,—assuredly, He is King and wears His royal diadem. But look, gaze more closely, and see how it is woven out of cruel, piercing thorns. O Sinless Sufferer, O Divine JESUS, teach us so to bear our sorrows that they may fashion our "crown of life." Help us so to suffer with Thee that we may be glorified together. Give us grace so to follow Thee across the "waste howling wilderness," the desolation and the pain of our trials and temptations here, that we hereafter may behold the land of promised rest and joy. Fashion us after Thine own likeness, though it needs must be on Thy bitter cross ; and enable us day by day to weave the sharp and piercing thorns, wherewith Thou willest to strew our earthly path, into a coronal of glory and of life,—the transfigured, golden crown,—of them whom Thou shalt call to be joint heirs of Thy heavenly kingdom.

Brethren in CHRIST JESUS, strive hard to the end ; wrestle against sin ; bear manfully your daily cross, and wilfully neglect no means of grace, and the higher CHRIST-life will arise within you, though you know not whence it cometh ; men will look on, wonder, admire, and learn to love, to follow, to imitate. And as you rise Heavenward in the power of divine grace, your light will shine before them ; you will bless the world as best you may, by offering it the rare example of a faithful CHRIST-like life. The hand of JESUS will clothe you in the mantle of truth and love and purity ; the sunlight of righteousness will rest upon you ; you will, in your measure, reflect—in all and through all—the fairest and noblest vision of earth—the Beauty of Holiness in CHRIST JESUS our LORD.

Forgive me, brethren, kind friends in CHRIST, one word in conclusion. I have a request to make to you—that if in the time to come you should remember a voice that you no longer hear, but through which GOD may perchance have spoken now and again to your minds and souls—O if that voice of him, who was called for a while to minister to you, should ever have struck some chord of sympathy in your hearts, or awaked some kindly interest in him ; and if hereafter you should recall some message which GOD sent you through him—some light upon your own thoughts or feelings, some counsel or encouragement you think was useful ; if he have in any degree unveiled to you the Beauty of Holiness, the dignity and glory of the Divine Life in CHRIST :—will you of your charity remember him in your earnest prayers—that GOD's pardoning mercy may be extended to the many failings, sins and negligences of the past, and His blessing and His grace may guard, and guide and shelter him in the time to come.

D. G.

