ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST.

BY WALTER LOCKE, D.D.,

Warden of Keble College, Oxford, England.

In the light of the Lord's saying that "the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he," it is somewhat surprising that the Baptist has been assigned so high a rank within the Christian Church. He stands alone with the Lord Himself as having a special festival for his birth set apart in the calendar of the Episcopal Church; at various places and at different periods there have been festivals to commemorate his conception, his imprisonment, his beheading, and even the supposed recovery of his head; churches, hospitals, colleges have been dedicated to him in all parts of the Christian world; he is one of the most prominent figures in medieval art; his character and the exact relation of his work to that of the Lord are to-day among the most disputed questions of Gospel criticism. It will be the object of this paper to analyze the various causes—for they have been very varying, historical, symbolical, and ethical—which have contributed to this result.

The primary interest was historical, and commences with the Gospels, the writers of all of which are anxious to fix his place in history; but their interpretation is already two-fold. To the Synoptists he is mainly the preacher of repentance, the moral reformer, the successor of the prophets, perhaps the reviser and popularizer of Apocalyptic hopes, who has prepared the way for the Christ; to St. John he is rather the active witness to Christ, who has recognized His true character, who has pointed Him out to his own disciples, yet who never joins Him himself, but feels that he himself must decrease while the Christ increases. Yet it is a mistake to place these two interpretations in too sharp an antithesis; each

implies the other; the Synoptists, who are more concerned with external history and the effect on the outside world, naturally dwell most on the public mission. St. John, who emphasizes the Lord's own claims for allegiance, just as naturally dwells upon the Baptist's witness to these claims, and the denial of any claim on his own part to be the Messiah. Each alike records a saying of the Lord's glorifying the Baptist and his work; each alike adds a saying which draws clearly his limitations; each alike has a pathetic note about the Baptist; the one tells of a faith which can scarcely stand the strain of delay; the other of a joy completely fulfilled, yet all the while conscious of a higher joy into which it cannot enter. These two aspects then complement each other: In the words of "*Ecce Homo*," "it was given to him to do two things; to inaugurate a new regime and also to nominate a successor who was far greater than himself."

There is another point in the Synoptic account to which I should like to call attention. It is remarkable that all of them—and as Mark's Gospel is so short it is especially noticeable in his case—spend so much time in narrating in full the details of the death of the Baptist, although at first sight such a detailed account seems scarcely needed for their main purpose. It is no doubt true that the fact of the death is important to the history. As the imprisonment of the Baptist had withdrawn all appearance of rivalry between the two preachers of the Kingdom, and had left Galilee free for the Lord's teaching—a fact which is carefully noted by the Synoptists ("Now after that John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee"), so the death of John removed the only rival whom the Jewish populace might have wished to choose as a political leader against the Romans. From this moment Jesus stands alone before them and it is at this moment that the Fourth Gospel, although it makes no mention of the Baptist's death, yet with one of those many undesigned coincidences which show the writer's knowl-

edge of the historical background, tells us that the people were about to come and take him by force (ἀρπάζειν) to make him king (6:15), and the Synoptists add, as if there were a danger of the disciples' being induced to join in such a political attempt, that the Lord compelled them (ἡνάγκασε, the word is only used here of the Lord's treatment of them) compelled them to leave him and pass over to the other side of the lake. The fact of the death was then historically important; it left the stage wholly free for the Lord's action; it compelled Him and His disciples to face the choice between a political and a spiritual messiahship. But the fact might have been recorded as simply as that of the imprisonment; why these much fuller details? I suggest that St. Mark, to whom they are mainly due, wished to hint at a parallel and a contrast between the death of John and the death of the Lord, and to prepare the reader's mind for the latter. He has at a later point in the narrative (9:11-13) recorded a saying of the Lord's in which He expressly suggested such a parallel. Soon after the Lord began to speak openly to the disciples about His own death (8:32), He deals with the death of the Baptist. "They asked Him saying, Why say the scribes that Elias must first come, and He answered and said unto them, Elias verily cometh first and restoreth all things and how is it written of the son of man (πῶς γέγραπται ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.) that he must suffer many things and be set at naught? But I say unto you that Elias is indeed come and they have done unto him whatsoever they listed, even as it is written of him (καθὼς γέγραπται ἐπ' αὐτὸν)." The one set of prophecies stand over against the other; the one has been fulfilled; what will happen to the other? So the Lord had suggested the parallel; and St. Mark, whose account of the saying preserves the parallelism far better than St. Matthew's, has, I believe, tried to draw it out in the account of the death. The great forerunner had passed to the tomb; he had witnessed for the right before the secular ruler; that ruler

had been impressed by his character and had tried to protect him, but he had been overborne by others and had sacrificed him to their wish; so he had been put to a violent death; but loving disciples had come to take the corpse (τὸ πτώμα 6:29; 15:45); they had laid it in a tomb (ἐθήκαν αὐτὸ ἐν μνημείῳ 6:29; 15:46). Thus far all is parallel, but there the parallel ends; with the Baptist nothing lies beyond the tomb; at the outside, only the credulous fancy of a frightened conscience that he may have risen (6:14); but with the Lord the stone is rolled away and the angelic message proclaims "He is risen. He is not here." The Gospel is thus a "Passionsgeschichte" in a double sense; it is not an "Acta Martyris," but an "Acta Martyrum," and the death of the forerunner casts its shadow beforehand and leads us forward in sad expectation of what will happen to the Son of Man. There will be a similar witness to the truth; a similar effort of the secular governor to save Him, an over-bearing clamor, a binding, a death, a burial; but, mark you, something beyond the burial.

It might be true, further, that the account of the last scene bears the marks of an eyewitness. The picture is so vivid, the birthday feast, the gathering of the nobles, the dancing of Herodias, the rash oath, the interview of Herodias with the mother, the king's regret, the persistence in his oath, the quick command and quick obedience, the very dish on which the head is brought, the formal gift of it from the king to the damsel, from the damsel to her mother—all seem to imply that even if there was no disciple at Machærus, yet at least the account has passed through the hand of a disciple. It has the note of admiration for an heroic leader, of indignation of the way in which such a life had been sacrificed to satisfy a woman's revenge.

In the art of the Middle Ages, the Baptist stands again and again on the right hand of the Madonna and child with a Christian saint as pendant on the left. We may take as specimen the "Ankdei" Madonna by Raphael

that hangs in the National Gallery in London, of which both Ruskin and Pater have treated as the climax of Raphael's art. Here the intent is mainly symbolic,—historically, theologically, and ecclesiastically symbolic. He is the symbol of the historical forerunner who pointed to Christ. There he stands with a face strained, puzzled, expectant, attracted by, but not quite understanding, the sight which he sees; on the other side is St. Nicholas of Bari, the saint of philanthropy, the "Santa Claus;" with features radiant with peaceful love he seems to have absorbed into his whole nature the message of love to God and man which the Incarnation has conveyed and to find happiness in furthering it in his own generation. The one is a hope of Judaism looking anxiously to the future, the other of Christianity turning grateful eyes to the past.

But there is what we may perhaps call a theological symbolism in the scene. The Baptist takes his place as an integral part of the Christian message to the world; he represents the permanent element of Judaism, that which is always of the essence of religion. The message of God's indwelling in humanity is for those who have been trained to look for Him; the message of love and forgiveness is for those who have sought for righteousness and learnt the knowledge of sin. All the revelation of the Old Testament of God as Law-giver, as Judge, as Holy, are needed as a background for the revelation of this love; all the demands of law and morality, self-discipline and the call to repentance, to change of heart and washing away of sin, these still remain a necessity before the higher life of the Spirit can be realized. There must ever be a baptism of water as well as of the Spirit.*

But it is probable that yet a third symbolism, an ecclesiastical symbolism, may be suggested. The Baptist clothed with camel's hair and with a leathern girdle about

*"Deliberate choice, deep-seated change, stern detachment, a humble preparation for the great remaking of things"—these John required, and they will always be needed before the remaking.

his loins is the type of asceticism. The rise of monasticism had given a fresh impulse to the veneration for the Baptist and the painter probably wished to suggest that both the monastic life and the life of active philanthropy in the world, both the roughly-clad ascetic and the bishop in his rich vestments, bear their witness to the message of the Incarnation and find their inspiration in it. It would be an interesting task to compare this Jewish ascetic with his leathern girdle and his simple diet of locusts and wild honey, with our English Christian mystic whose "meditations" have been happily recovered for us within the last ten years. Thomas Traherne, of Brasenose College, Oxford. He describes himself as dressed in leathern clothes, as living on ten pounds a year, and often feeding on bread and water. He was in no Judean desert, indeed, but in a small country, living in Herefordshire in the middle of the 17th century; spent his life in the wistful search for felicity. He found it in a completer sense than the Baptist ever did, found it in prizing highly and enjoying heartily and praising God for the simple gifts of Nature, of life, of his body and soul, and of the lives of his neighbors; but he turns back again and again to Christ and His Cross as having given back to him the power to enjoy which sin had forfeited, and as having placed him under a stronger obligation of gratitude. Each ascetic turns his own eyes and points the eyes of others to the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.

When we pass into more modern times the interest in the Baptist centers mainly in the features of his character. Most commonly he is the model of independence, of the bold outspokenness which fears not to speak the truth to the people or their religious leaders or their ruler, which is ready to denounce discontent in the lower classes and extortion in officials, to hold up to scorn hypocrisy in the church and to rebuke immorality in a king. This is the main moral drawn out in our sixteenth century collect, "Make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life that we

may truly repent according to his preaching and after his example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake."

But perhaps that which appeals most deeply to religious hearts in these days of eager competition, of political ambitions, of the hot haste of rivalry and emulation, is the noble generosity, the self-effacement, which willingly and gladly sees his followers pass from himself to join another leader, which has the insight to see that another is greater than himself, which has the faith to recognize God's ordering not only in the gifts which he has received from Him, but in the limitation to those gifts, which can believe that

"still His love is shown
In what He gives and what denies."

and is content to know that he himself must take a lower room. "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from above"; that is to say, I cannot claim to be the Messiah, I cannot give the Spirit; but He can; it has been given to Him; heaven has borne its witness to Him. Yet I, too, have had my gifts; it was given to me to prepare the way; it was given to me to be the bridegroom's friend, to know the joy of friendship with Him, to be the minister to His great joy. It is God Himself who has drawn the line clearly; I am not worthy to be His slave; why try to make me His rival? He must increase, I must decrease. Such recognition of superiority is a difficult task. It is difficult as a metaphysical problem to understand how it is possible for us to recognize and appreciate qualities which we do not possess ourselves; how can the warrior enter into and admire the excellence of the peaceful student? How can the high-spirited admire the humble and meek? How can the self-disciplined ascetic, who comes neither eating nor drinking, admire Him who, with radiant and sunny ease and naturalness, eats and drinks with publicans and sinners. Is it that we all receive at birth

human nature as a whole, that potentially each has the capacity of all virtues lying in the background of his personality, though perhaps in different proportion and through circumstances mould each differently and bring out one quality in one man, and another in another, without destroying the bond of sympathy with those that remain undeveloped in ourselves? And may it also be that all virtues do in their ultimate analysis spring from one and the same root, that they are all expressions of the principle of love, of love for God or love for man, of that which draws man out of self, away from self-seeking and self-endedness, into self-control for the sake of others, into the activities of obedience and service? If this is so, we can understand how a nature, which out of love of God had disciplined itself by asceticism into a hard, rugged preacher of repentance, could recognize the same love of God and man though mixing freely in all the happiness of human intercourse, deepening that happiness, and admiring the lilies of the field and the fowls of the air, and

“Whatsoever loving things enjoy
Simply the kind simplicity of God.

But whatever the metaphysical explanation may be, there is no doubt that after the recognition of another's superiority there still comes the moral struggle to efface oneself before it. The Pharisees, no less than John, recognized the superiority of Jesus to themselves; they recognized that His influence was supplanting their own (cf. John 3:26. *ἴδε, πάντες ἤχονται πρὸς αὐτὸν* with 12:19 *ἴδε, ὁ κόσμος ὁπίσω αὐτοῦ ἀπῆλθεν*): but the result with them was envy and the desire to put away this standing reproach against themselves. “He is grievous unto us even to behold; for his life is not like that of other men; his ways are of another fashion; let us condemn him with a shameful death.”

This contrast helps us to see more clearly the greatness of the Baptist; he sees equally the contrast to him-

self, the life not like that of other men, the ways of another fashion, yet he effaces himself and longs to see the increase of that light before which his own lamp must pale ineffectually. Like Moses preparing Joshua to lead his people into a land which he himself may only see from afar; like David preparing the materials with which Solomon may build the temple which he himself had longed to build, but which is never to bear his name, like every true prophet, who has the "intuitive grasp of novelty," whose "mind discerns, though it may not understand, the coming of a change long before it can be known by other men," "John the Baptist, that strange figure watching and waiting in the desert for some mighty event which his heightened powers could feel in its approach, but could not see,"* remains the type of self-effacement, the type of a passing generation which can recognize the rise of new ideals and nobler aims, and leave them room to develop in God's own time.

Of all the graces in the life of the Baptist, perhaps this is that for which we may be most grateful, for it leaves us with our eyes fixed on the future in a spirit of hope. It was doubtless his detachment from the material comforts and enjoyments of life which disciplined him to achieve this harder detachment from the love of followers, from popularity, from fame. Some such spirit of detachment is surely needed more than ever in this age of far richer possibilities of enjoyment and ease and material blessings; a detachment in spirit which shall always keep material things subordinate to all that is high and spiritual; and a literal detachment in self-denial, in a simplicity of life, which shall leave us more free to help the needs of others, and more free to let the spiritual life develop within ourselves. Without such power of detachment the greatest in the kingdom of heaven may find himself less than the Baptist; with it he may pass into that higher region of full happy consciousness of the love of God and response to that love which was denied to John.

*Cf. Evelyn Underhill, "The Mystic Way," pp. 84-85.