

The Incarnation.

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'God sent forth His Son, born of a woman.'—Gal. iv. 4.

No one who seriously observes the movements of thought at the present time could, I think, fail to recognize the tendency to avoid what is popularly called dogmatism, or, in other words, definite statements of scriptural truth. It seems to be felt that there is in such statements so much that can be referred to traditional interpretation, or to doctrinal bias, that what remains can only be accepted in a broad and general form, and as admitting considerable variety in its application to the spiritual needs of the individual.

In a word, the tendency to what is called undenominational religion is, year by year, finding more and more acceptance among the general mass of the so-called Christians of this twentieth century; and, it may be added, is becoming, year by year, more difficult with any clearness to define. Let any thoughtful person look into his own heart and carefully observe its spiritual movements, and the general trend of his own deeper convictions, and he will admit with me that the intelligent maintenance of fundamental doctrines is certainly becoming more difficult, and by consequence less and less attractive to the individual believer. His general and undefined belief seems sufficient to carry him through his course of daily life and duty, and seems also to qualify him for the claim to be considered broad and liberal in his own views, and in his estimate of the views and opinions of others.

But there are times when this spiritual self-complacency is somewhat sorely tried; there are days when a man, if he has any real belief in anything, must find questions brought home to him, to which his easy-going undenominationalism can never supply him with any sufficient and soul-satisfying answer. Let us suppose, for example, that the question seriously comes home to any one of us, What is it our plain duty to believe in regard of the Incarnation of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ? This is surely one of those vital and fundamental questions on the answer to which everything here and hereafter does most assuredly depend. The Creed does not hesitate to say that it is necessary to ever-

lasting salvation that we believe rightly the Incarnation. Such words may, at any rate, remind us that there is a wrong way as well as a right way of believing the Incarnation, and that now, if ever, when seriously strange teaching has been put forth on the subject, is the proper time for realizing the actual nature of the difference.

Let us then at once enter seriously and reverently into the consideration of the vital question which is thus so urgently brought home to us, What ought to be the belief of every faithful son of our Mother Church of England in regard of the Incarnation of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ? The answer, thanks be to God, can be given in general terms at once. A rightful belief in the Incarnation must rest on two fundamental truths—the personality of God the Holy Ghost, and the Virgin-birth of the Saviour of the world.

These are the two foundation truths, on the first of which, the personality of the Holy Ghost, it would seem to be necessary for me briefly, but very plainly, to speak. On this vital subject it is not, I fear, too much to say that even among sober and earnest readers of God's Holy Word there is an amount of clouded and confused thought that prevents the full meaning of numberless passages of Holy Scripture being adequately realized. To many, as it has been sometimes said, the Holy Ghost is really a lost God. His influence is acknowledged, but His holy personality remains unrealized and unfelt.

It has been so, even from the earliest times. We have four or five treatises on the Holy Ghost written by great divines before the end of the fifth century, but not one of them will be found fully to appeal to our higher conceptions and feelings. The best of them is probably the treatise of the blind, though inwardly illuminated, Didymus of Alexandria, but we look in vain in it for that elevating and illuminating recognition of personality which we constantly meet with in that rightly named 'Gospel of the Holy Ghost,' the Acts of the Apostles; and which, I may say, by God's great mercy, is now at length

beginning to pervade the deeper, and more quickening, teaching of our own times.

But the lack of this recognition of the personal working and operation still, I fear, widely prevails, and largely augments the difficulties in such subjects as those which we are now considering.

There is probably no portion of Holy Scripture in which this may be more seriously felt than in those passages which relate, directly or indirectly, to the Incarnation. What is not adequately felt is the profound truth that the Third Person of the blessed and adorable Trinity Himself vouchsafed to take part in that greatest of all conceivable mysteries and miracles which the text places before us—God's Son, born of a woman.

Born of a woman, but how? Here our thoughts at once pass over to that which I have spoken of as the second fundamental truth on which a right belief in the Incarnation must ever unchangeably rest—the Virgin-birth of the Saviour of the world.

But where is that fundamental truth revealed to us? Is it a truth dependent on inferences indisputably certain, or on words spoken by our Lord and His Apostles, on which doubt has never been entertained?—or is it a truth resting on facts revealed to us by the instrumentality of the Holy Ghost on the written pages of the Book of Life? Thanks be to God, it is on this last-mentioned basis that He has permitted the truth of the Virgin-birth of His incarnate Son plainly and historically to rest.

Two narratives there are in which the mystery of Emmanuel is very distinctly set forth, and against the genuineness of which nothing has ever been proposed, save the unverifiable and despairing hypothesis of interpolation.

On these two narratives, in both of which the Virgin-birth of our Redeemer is set forth in language that cannot possibly be explained away, let us now in conclusion reverently meditate.

The first of these narratives forms the opening portion of the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

We thus owe the narrative to an evangelist and apostle, a portion of whose Gospel is believed on good grounds to have appeared at a very early date in the early form of the language of the country in which he lived. If such a primitive Gospel did appear, there seems every reason for

believing, from its structure and tenour, that the first chapter of the Gospel as now we have it formed the introduction to this primitive Gospel, and set forth the undisputed belief of the Church a few years only after the Ascension.

The second statement in which the foundation-truth of the Lord's Virgin-birth is set forth is, as we well know, in the first chapter of an evangelist who had traced the course of all things accurately from the first, and who may with high probability be supposed to have received the account from the holy Virgin herself.

Both these accounts state that He whom, as our text says, God sent forth, was not only born of a woman, but born of a virgin—the ever blessed Virgin Mary—the eternal miracle of God's sending His Son having, if we may so speak, necessitated, as it were, the consequent miracle of a virgin-birth. Christ would never be to us what He is had He come into the world in any other manner than that which is recorded. The person of Christ is itself a miracle, and the soul demands, as it were, that the miraculous should be present in every stage of His divine manifestation.

Let us pause for a moment on the two narratives, and observe the marvellously suggestive manner in which they illustrate and confirm the holy mystery of the Lord's Incarnation, and make us not only believe, but feel in our very inmost souls its reality and certitude. Those two, and those two only, who *could* bear witness, are permitted by God to bear it through the medium of two evangelists, the one of whom may be regarded, from the whole tenour of his Gospel, as speaking mainly to his own countrymen, the other as speaking to the whole Gentile world.

Joseph, as St. Matthew records to us, has revealed to him by a holy angel, not directly, as in the case of the blessed Virgin, but by the medium of a dream, that what his waking thoughts had been resting on with distress and perplexity was miraculous and divine. He was bidden to take to him his espoused wife; and he took her, nothing doubting. Ancient prophecy received its fulfilment; and, in the fulness of time, Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa.

To the other witness to the Incarnation, as St. Luke tells us, the communication was much more explicit and immediate. One of the higher order of the Holy Angels, one who says of himself that he stands in the presence of God, speaks directly

to the highly favoured Virgin of Nazareth, and delivers to her his momentous message: 'Thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.'

And how was that message received? By one humbly uttered question, so holy in its purity and simplicity, so holy in its freedom from every element of implied doubt or disbelief, that an answer was vouchsafed to it. The question was, 'How shall this be?' The answer was that the Holy Ghost, in His adorable personality, shall bring about the transcendent miracle of the Word becoming flesh, and of His entry into the world He had created, along the lowly pathway of purely human development. It is here that we see and feel the connexion between the fundamental doctrine of the personality of the Holy Ghost and the mystery of the Virgin-birth.

We are now able properly to formulate our answer to the broad question, What ought to be the belief of every faithful son of our Mother Church in regard of the Incarnation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? The answer, as we have seen, involves two momentous truths, the union of which cannot perhaps be more simply expressed than as it has been set forth by our Church in the Collect for Christmas, and in the special preface in the administration of the Holy Communion. Using these two forms of careful and well-chosen words, we may now define what ought to be a true belief in the Incarnation. And that belief we may define as—a belief that, by the operation of the Holy Ghost, the only-begotten Son of God took our nature upon Him, was made very man

of the substance of His mother, and that that mother was the pure and ever-blessed Virgin, Mary of Galilee.

This is the right belief in the fact of the Incarnation on which the old creed lays the stress to which I alluded in the early part of my sermon. This is the belief on which everything, here and hereafter, does most vitally depend.

In the first place, without a belief in the personality of God the Holy Ghost, the trustful hope and spiritual freshness of our poor mortal life is irreparably lost. Who is there who can comfort and sanctify save He who our Redeemer has promised should come to us, and be to us even as Himself?

In the second place, without the belief that our dear Lord and Master was born into the world as He was born—born of a pure virgin, what assurance can we have that He is verily our *sinless* Redeemer? Of all the arguments for the sinlessness of Jesus Christ this must ever remain as the chief and palmary argument.

The more firmly we maintain the two truths, on which I have said our belief in the Incarnation will ever be found to depend, the more distinctly will our belief be a right belief, and the more completely shall we realize that it is, as in the earliest ages of the Church it was ever deemed to be—the corner stone of our Christian Faith.

In this holy doctrine God give us all His blessed help more heartily to believe, and believing, more completely to realize, in all its fulness, Christmas hope and Christmas joy.

Contributions and Comments.

'Father, forgive them.'

IN THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, xi. 423, I asked how the seven words from the Cross are to be arranged in a Harmony of the Passion, and remarked that the strangest order is to be found in the oldest Harmony of the Gospels, in Tatian's *Diatessaron*. There the word, 'Father, forgive them,' is placed as next to last, between 'It is finished,' and 'Father, into Thine hands I commend My spirit.' I asked, What can be the reason of this arrange-

ment? Is the word, 'Father, forgive them,' a later insertion, as it is wanting in the Syriac MS. from Sinai? *Is there any parallel to this order?*

As far as I am aware, no answer has yet been forthcoming. To the last question I can now myself give a partial answer.

In the fifth book of the *Apostolic Constitutions* is a very interesting chapter about the fasting in Lent, or more exactly in the Passion Week. It is based on the chronology of the Passion. After it has been stated that the condemnation of Jesus