

CHRIST

BETWEEN

THE TWO THIEVES.

*Abridged from the German of Frederick Arndt,
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“And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.”—

Luke xxiii. 39—43.

WHAT words are these! even a conversation at a place of execution. Three men, each hanging upon a cross, and almost in the hour of death, are speaking to one another. Their words are but few, for dying men are wont to speak but little. Each speaks only once, and yet in the words of each lies the impress of his whole soul. The entire human family in their position before God is pictured in the two thieves; he to the left represents to us the mass of unbelievers, the one to the right all believers; and between them hangs the Lord, the judge of both parties. Jesus speaks solemnly and majestically His second sentence* on the Cross, “Verily, I say unto thee, to day shalt thou be with me in Paradise.”

Let us contemplate, first, the glorious occasion on which these words were spoken, and secondly, their yet more glorious meaning.

(I.) “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they

* The work from which this is extracted, is entitled, “The seven Words of Christ upon the Cross,” and this is the second Lecture, upon the second word.

do,"—was the first sentence which the dying Son spoke. One would have thought that such a word from such a mouth, like an electric shock, would have roused all His hearers to their senses. But no: we read "the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God." Alas! unbelief never perceives that real love forgets itself to save others. The soldiers also insulted the Lord, they brought Him (the superscription on whose cross in three languages announced Him as king of the Jews), sour vinegar instead of kingly wine. "And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us." All classes were united in this, if in nothing else, to mock the Lord. The clearer the truth shines, so much more active and busy is the Father of lies to darken its light. Even a malefactor has his part to play. Although he had so much cause to reflect on his own sufferings and approaching end, he yet could not abstain from adding his mite to the general scorn which our Lord had to bear. He had heard the shouts of those around, "He saved others, let him save himself," and this one thought possessed his soul. Oh! how readily would he have saved himself had he been able, how willingly have delivered himself from execution; and so, thought he, this one in the midst can have no greater wish than to save himself, therefore, he says, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us." And yet we need not wonder, his language is that of unbelievers in every age. Unbelief, in its essence, is nothing else than mockery of the Lord. But Jesus is silent, and we can afford to turn to the thief on the right.

We may suppose, that during his imprisonment, his thoughts had revolved round himself—his crime—his judgment—his punishment. But now the sentence of death is pronounced, and, brought to the place of execution, he beholds, for the first time, Jesus—the man of whom he had heard so much; he sees a "visage marred more than any man," and yet betraying its heavenly origin; discerns in Him a dignity beyond what he had ever seen in human form; witnesses the reproaches which the inflamed

multitude heap upon Him, whilst Jesus "oppressed and afflicted opens not his mouth." Then is the thought awakened in his soul, may He not after all be the Messiah? Can a mere man be so patient, so resigned, under such cruel insults? And now he hears Jesus praying for His enemies, "Father, forgive them." These words sink with divine power into his soul. Such a prayer he had never before heard; such a prayer could never have risen in his own breast. He has been led by God at his dying hour near to the dying Saviour, and this moment is worth more to him than his whole life—a miracle of grace is working in his heart. And now the other malefactor begins to rail "If thou be Christ save thyself and us," and Jesus is again silent. Not so the convinced thief; this were impossible—his soul is too full of his new feelings. "But the other answering," says the Scripture, "rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" as much as to say, That all these around us, with their limbs still at liberty, should rail and scoff is intelligible, but how canst thou, O miserable man! unite with them, seeing thou art so near to death and judgment? Hast thou no fear of Him whose hand has already reached thee? Canst thou in the agonies of death still sport with sin? Are then the torments of this bitter cross in vain? Oh, what love does this malefactor shew to his companion in thus striving to awaken him! He had been partner with him in an unholy life, and now he wishes to make him partaker of a holy death. "And we indeed justly," continues he, "for we receive the due reward of our deeds." What knowledge of himself! he allows both the extent of his guilt and the justice of his sentence. Not a word of excuse or justification: he takes, as from the hand of God, his awarded punishment, and condemns himself alone;—"but this one hath done nothing amiss." What a decided and open confession of Christ, and what a vindication of His character. From a murderer has he become a preacher of the righteousness of Christ, and far more purely than Pilate by the solemn washing of his hands, or Judas by his repentant confession. "This one hath done nothing amiss," says he;

What else is this than to declare that the adjudging of Jesus to death was a crime, that the Jewish council were unjust, the sentence of Caiaphas ungodly, the confirmation by Pilate revolting, and that all Jerusalem was laden with guilt. And oh! most wondrous counsel of God at Golgotha, whilst no single voice is now lifted up for Christ, whilst the disciples have forsaken Him, and the women are weeping silently without, whilst the excited people are harassing and mocking Him, a murderer confesses aloud the innocence of Jesus—Yea, more, whilst the High Priests contrived as a particular affront and deep dishonour to the Lord, that He should die between two murderers,—one of these very men declares before the world, to their tenfold confusion, the innocence of the sufferer, and the wickedness and injustice of the accusers —“This man hath done nothing amiss”—a declaration, at once, of love to his unhappy companion—of acquiescence in his own condemnation—of horror at High Priestly wickedness—and of homage to his dying Lord.

Beloved, if the history should have ended here; if we had not heard another syllable about this malefactor, we should be constrained in sympathy and wonder to dwell with him awhile, and to allow that he has already proved himself to be better than his judges, better than thousands of our educated and high born fellow citizens, better than many wise men, princes, heroes and devout persons; for he has attained the highest wisdom, since he has learned Christ “the wisdom of God;”—he has performed a deed worthy of a hero—he has apprehended and mastered himself;—he has conquered the most glorious kingdom, for he has taken the kingdom of Heaven by violence,—he has arrived at the summit of all piety, for he has become a believer in Christ. But, God be praised! the thread of the history is not broken off, it rather opens to us a deeper and more blessed entrance into the heart of this condemned one.

To acknowledge the Lord,—and to hope in and call upon Him, is ever but one act in the heart of believers; the malefactor therefore prays to Christ, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.” Unbelief mocks,

Faith prays. Herein is the great contrast simply and forcibly marked ;—and what does he pray? “Lord”—Thus he addresses Christ.—To outward appearance there was nothing like Lordship to be seen ; He was hanging in the deepest abasement and helplessness on the cross ; whilst on the other hand the kingship of Christ was held up to scorn by the superscription and by the crown of thorns. Notwithstanding all this, he calls Him “Lord,” and speaks of His “kingdom”—no other goes before him in this confession—not another joins with him in it. On the contrary, all rail at and vilify the Lord—the High Priests, the scribes, the intellectual among the people—and, horrible as were their blasphemies, it must be confessed that there was nothing in the circumstances around Him to contradict them ;—yet the poor murderer makes no mistake—his faith staggers not—he overcomes all difficulties, and confesses the Lord.—He sees a divine glory in the human shame, light in the darkness, health in the wounds, salvation in the curse, riches in the poverty, heaven in the hell. He has learned more at the cross, than all the High Priests and scribes out of the Scriptures—he has got further in a few hours, than Judas during three years in immediate companionship with the Lord. Judas was changed from an Apostle into a murderer—this poor malefactor from a murderer into an Apostle. What faith! Truly it was an Abraham’s or a Moses’ faith,—“he endured,” so to speak, “as seeing Him who is invisible.” Great as was the faith of the Centurion and of the Canaanitish woman, of which even Jesus Himself boasted, yet they did not exceed this poor malefactor. These saw the Lord in the midst of His miracles, but this one in His necessities and deepest shame.

We cannot deny the workings of grace in the soul of the malefactor in this moment of his death—he worships the Lord, he fears God, he repents of his crime, he seeks to save his hardened companion,—he believes, he lives, he hopes ; he has become a new man, his faith is a living faith, and his heart filled with new affections. The whole company of believers is represented in this thief. Deeper or further we cannot get in the longest life, than did he

a peaceful reception among the faithful departed—now deservedly an outcast from the world, and yet to day, through the grace of God, received into glory—now dying on the cross with Christ, and yet to day blessed with Him in Paradise. And, as about the sixth hour the sun was darkened, and nature mourned with the Son of God, as the earth shook and quaked upon which Golgotha stood, as his senses became confused, and the objects before his eyes began to swim, so that he might even lose the consciousness of the Lord so near him,—would not the victorious cry of Jesus, “It is finished,” strike on his ear as a call upwards, and at last when the soldiers brake his legs, and the agonies of death redoubled, would he not amid the sufferings of earth, anticipate the delights of being with Jesus in Paradise.

But the other, how will he have died? - Without repentance, without fear of God, without faith in Christ, without desire of heaven. What a condition to be in! Jesus was silent when he spoke. Ah! this silence is his condemnation. There he hangs, poor wretched man! till at length death seizes him, and as he dies under,—so he goes into judgment—into an endless separation from grace, from blessedness, and from peace. How, reader, is it with your own soul? Have you received, as a lost sinner, the words of mercy and life from Jesus? or, are you, like the thief to the left, still in your natural, that is, in a perishing condition?

At Golgotha all is quiet again. The three dying men have spoken, and oh! what all important words! But that blessed record still remains, “To day shalt thou be with me in Paradise.” May it be for the comfort of many a weary soul. Let us learn from this dying thief, how to be pardoned and saved. “Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his.”

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