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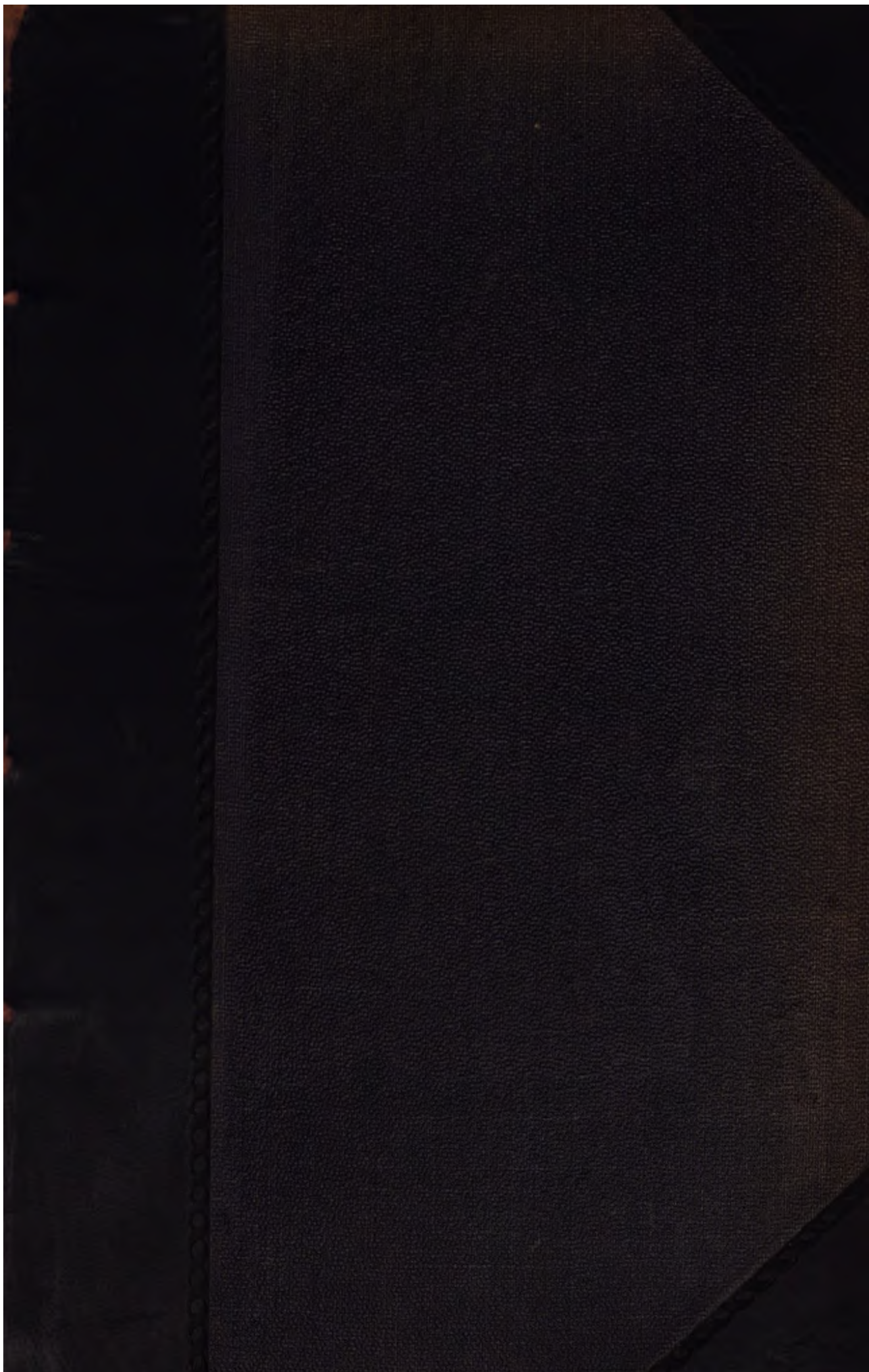
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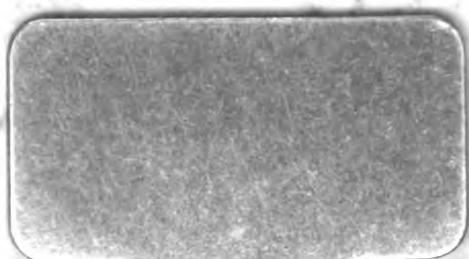


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READINGS
ON THE
FIRST LESSONS FOR SUNDAYS
AND
CHIEF HOLYDAYS,
ACCORDING TO THE
NEW TABLE.

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SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—2 *Samuel* i.

DAVID was at Ziklag, in the extreme south of Canaan, resting after his expedition against the Amalekites, when the tidings came of the defeat of the Israelites on Mount Gilboa and the death of Saul. For some time previously he had been living in the country of the Philistines with Achish, King of Gath; and when the Philistines "gathered together their armies for warfare, to fight against Israel," David prepared to accompany them; and it was only, humanly speaking, in consequence of the misgivings of the Philistine nobles, that he escaped from being actually engaged in the battle of Gilboa. He and his six hundred followers seem to have gone with the Philistine army as far as Gilboa, when the nobles demanded from Achish his dismissal, and he returned to Ziklag.

On his arrival he found the city burnt, and his wives taken captive by the Amalekites, together with all the wives and sons and daughters of his

men. This disaster so exasperated his followers, that they were ready to stone him to death in their grief and anger ; but David “ encouraged himself in the Lord his God,” and when he inquired of the Lord by Abiathar whether he should pursue the plunderers, and received a favourable answer, he went after them into the desert and recovered the spoil.

It was on the third day after his return to Ziklag, that a messenger came from the Israelite army, with his clothes rent and dust upon his head, and announced the fatal issue of the battle on Mount Gilboa. Jonathan and two other sons of Saul had fallen in the battle, and Saul himself, being wounded and sorely pressed by the archers and charioteers of the enemy, had fallen upon his own sword.

The Amalekite, who brought the tidings, measuring David by the standard of ordinary human nature, thought that he could not be otherwise than gratified to hear of the death of his enemy, and the removal of all obstacles between him and the throne. In the hope, therefore, of gaining favour with him, he not only offered the crown and bracelet which he had taken from Saul’s body, but he pretended that he had slain him with his

own hand. How must he have been astonished and alarmed at David's distress at the intelligence which he had hoped would have been welcome !

The death of Saul seemed to promise relief from the troubles under which David had been almost crushed ; but it awakened only sorrow. His tender spirit forgot all Saul's cruelty and persecution. In the presence of his melancholy end, he could think of nothing but what was good and great in Saul : he saw in him only the valiant warrior, the delight of his people, the father of his beloved Jonathan ; and he gave vent to his grief in a Lamentation which bore testimony, in the highest degree, to the wonderful affectionateness and generosity of his heart.

It begins with an account of the battle and its disastrous consequences :—

“ The beauty of Israel is slain on thy high places :
How are the mighty fallen !

Tell it not in Gath ; publish it not in the streets
of Askelon :

Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice ;

Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.

Ye mountains of Gilboa, let there be no rain, nor
dew on you :

Nor fields of offerings.

For there the shield of the mighty is vilely cast
away,

The shield of Saul, not anointed with oil."

It was on the heights of Gilboa that the pride of Israel had fallen; and David prayed in his anguish that neither dew nor rain might rest upon them henceforth. Filled as they seemed to be with fruits and corn for offering, he hoped that a curse might rest upon them. For there the shield of Saul had been cast away in his flight; "neither it nor its royal master would ever shine again, as in former days, with the polish of the consecrated oil."

Then the Lamentation dwells on the prowess of the two heroes, and on their union in life and in death:—

"From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the
mighty,

The bow of Jonathan turned not back:

And the sword of Saul returned not empty.

Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in
their lives,

And in their death they were not divided:

They were swifter than eagles; they were stronger
than lions."

David pictures them to himself as he knew them

in life: Jonathan with his bow, for the use of which he was especially famous; and Saul, with his huge sword, the same which David himself in his youth had attempted to gird on him. He seems to see them both, swift as eagles in darting on their foes, strong as lions when they dealt the blow. He remembers also the love which bound them to each other: "Lovely and pleasant they were in their lives; and in their death they were not divided." "Side by side their corpses lay on Mount Gilboa, and shared the same cruel fate."

"Then the stream of sorrow divides, and David speaks of each of them separately." He reminds the Israelite maidens how Saul, when he returned in triumph from battle, brought for them scarlet robes and ornaments of gold; and he bids them now break out into a funeral wail for the loss they had sustained:—

"Ye daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
Who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights,
Who put on ornaments of gold upon your apparel.
How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the
battle!"

"The fourth stanza is the climax of the whole. Then the national, general sorrow merges itself in the lament of the friend for the friend":—

“ O Jonathan, thou wast slain in thine high
places ;

I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan.

Very pleasant hast thou been unto me :

Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of
women.

How are the mighty fallen,

And the weapons of war perished !”

Jonathan's love for David is dwelt on with great emphasis in the sacred narrative. Commencing from the day of David's victory over Goliath, when it is said that “ the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam. xviii. 1, 3), it continued undiminished until the day of his death. Once and again he interceded for him with his father, and at first with success ; but when Saul's madness increased, and David was obliged to fly for his life, he still clave to him, and the two entered into a solemn covenant with each other. Jonathan caused David to swear again, it is said, because he loved him ; for he loved him as his own soul (1 Sam. xx. 17). He knew God's purpose with regard to the kingdom ; but no jealousy of David's future greatness interfered with the fulness of his affection : “ Thou shalt be king over Israel, and I

shall be next unto thee" (1 Sam. xxiii. 17); such was his feeling to the last: and in this Lamentation David shows how intense and tender was his own love for Jonathan.

The place which this Lamentation occupies in the Bible, seems to give a distinct approval to the natural promptings of the bereaved heart to celebrate in some way the memory of the departed. While it sanctions "the general instinct of humanity," which says, "speak of the dead only that which is good," it teaches us at the same time to be careful to be true, as well as generous, in our commemoration of them. If David makes no mention either of Saul's cruel persecution of himself, or of his sins against God, yet is there not a word of flattery or false commendation. He dwells with delight on what he can say with truth: he is silent as to the rest. Not only all animosity, but, as far as possible, all remembrance of the evil which men have done, should be buried in the grave. We may not, indeed, call evil good, or good evil, in the case of the dead, any more than in the case of the living; but we may, and we ought to, forbear to pass judgment on the persons themselves.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—2 *Samuel* xii.

THE Sunday Lessons take no notice of the earlier and more prosperous part of David's reign. They pass from the day when the death of Saul left the way to the throne open to him, to that terrible day when, in the height of his power, and reposing in luxury after his various labours, he was betrayed, apparently as in a moment, into the great crime of his life.

Though David did not succeed at once to Saul's position as king of the whole country, he went on from the first increasing in power, while the house of Saul waxed weaker and weaker, until at last the whole people gave in their adhesion to him. The neighbouring nations were then brought, one after the other, to submission. Jerusalem was taken, and made the capital of the kingdom; and the public worship of God was inaugurated with great pomp and holy joy. His conquests, however, were not yet complete. Joab and his army were at this very time engaged in the siege of Rabbah, the stronghold of the Ammonites. Though the circumstances of that siege seem to have been very critical, as may be gathered, not only from the length of time that it lasted—very nearly two years—but from

the fact that the Ark of God accompanied the army, David for some reason lingered behind in Jerusalem; and there the deed of shame was wrought, which darkened the remainder of his life.

Perhaps we may see in David's disinclination to take part in the war an indication that a change had come over him, and that increased wealth and prosperity had produced a love of ease and self-indulgence, which was alien to his former character. Certainly his habits for some time past would seem to have made him peculiarly liable to be led into the sin by which he fell. Already, while at Hebron, he had seven wives; and when he removed to Jerusalem, he took to him more wives and concubines. Not to dwell on the apparent violation of the Law of Moses involved in such conduct (Deut. xvii. 17), it certainly appears as if David must have allowed himself to indulge his passions to a dangerous degree, and had so lost the keenness of that spiritual fervour for which, in former years, he had been so distinguished. Under these circumstances, we can hardly be wrong in attributing to an over-attachment to the luxuries of his home, his not going forth to the battle against the Ammonites, according to his wont, but sending Joab instead.

To outward appearance, David's fall was very

sudden ; but it may not have been really so sudden in fact. “ A single leaf of the Bible separates David the upright father of his people from David the adulterer and murderer ; ” but it may be that David had already laid aside his watchfulness, and so the tempter found him comparatively an easy prey. Had it not been so, we can scarcely conceive but that, when the forbidden sight was presented to him, he would have retired at once. Had he not begun, in some degree at least, to fall away from God, he would have been utterly ashamed and afraid to take delight in the indulgence of his lust. No doubt his first thought was only to add one more to his many wives ; but he suffered the evil passion to take such possession of him, that when he found that the object of his desire was the wife of another man, and that man one of his own captains engaged at that moment in doing battle for him against his enemies, he did not draw back ; but lust, having conceived, brought forth sin, and one sin speedily followed after another.

David had been guilty of adultery, and the punishment of adultery was death. Even if there were no reason to fear evil consequences to himself, it would be impossible for the partner of his guilt to escape. He must screen her, therefore, by

any means, from disgrace and from punishment. Other devices having failed, he was driven at last to compass the death of her husband, by ordering him to be exposed in the hottest part of the battle; so that, though the sword by which he fell was an Ammonite sword, it was really David's hand that slew him. With what terrible rapidity has one fall succeeded another! Little did David think, when he first let his eye rest on a forbidden object, in what repeated and complicated transgressions he would before long be involved, and how deep his guilt would be before he should get free from Satan's snares! He did not consider how one sin very often almost necessitates another, and how the temptation to conceal a fault is often more powerful than the temptation to commit it.

There is one reflection naturally suggested by this sad story, viz., what a fearful thing it is to open the door to sin. When a man once remits his watchfulness, still more when he enters on the slippery path of transgression, he cannot tell how far he may be led, how one step leads to another and a lower, until he finds himself guilty of sins which he could not have supposed it possible that he should commit.

Another suggestion, which this history suggests,

is the blinding power of sin. David continued for nearly a year without repentance. We gather, indeed, from the 32nd Psalm, that the whole time was a time of wretchedness and remorse. His outward life went on as before, perhaps even his attendance in God's house ; but who can tell the coldness and misery of those months of estrangement from God, during which, as he says, he kept silence—silence from prayer and self-accusation ? He strove to smother the sense of guilt, but it was all the while like a smouldering fire within him. "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long." Afraid to confess his sin to himself, afraid to confess it to God, he could not escape the pangs of conscience. And therefore he put God forcibly out of his mind. He was miserable ; and he could not but know why it was so ; but he would not look his misery and his sin in the face. He gave himself up to his ordinary business, or his sinful pleasure, and he would not think of God, or of his own state with respect to God. And many are they whom sin hardens and blinds in like manner, and whom God punishes as He did David, by leaving them to themselves for a time, and suffering the evil one to deceive them.

But though the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, He would not keep His displeasure always. He had indeed been speaking to him, all through those weary months, by the goading and pricking of his conscience, and at length He sends the Prophet Nathan to him, as if to obtain redress for a shameful wrong done to a poor man. He told the king of a hard-hearted, selfish man, who, having occasion to provide a feast unexpectedly for a stranger, spared to take of his own abundant store, but seized the favourite ewe lamb of a poor neighbour. The story was so framed, that David did not at the moment perceive its application to himself; and, as was likely, every just and generous feeling of his heart was roused against the offender, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." In so saying, he passed sentence against himself. Selfish and cruel as had been the rich man's conduct, David's crime had been far greater. What restitution could he make for the lamb which he had taken, or for the life which he had given to the sword? And no sooner had the prophet turned on him with the terrible words, "Thou art

the man," upbraiding him as from God for his unthankful return for so many and great mercies, and holding up before him the sins to which for so long he had veiled his sight, than the scales fell off from his eyes, and his own heart passed upon him a more severe condemnation than even the prophet's words. He made no excuses; he cast himself down, thoroughly abashed and broken-hearted; he saw his sin in all its intolerable blackness; and he summed up all in the simple confession, "I have sinned against the Lord." That one thought filled his heart; he had sinned against the Lord. "For though, if any sin had been committed against man, as well as God, this undoubtedly was it,—though David had sinned against his faithful liegeman Uriah, against his own family, against his people, against his accomplice in guilt, against Joab, against all,—yet so much greater, so much more awful, so much more terrible was the aspect of his sin as committed against his God, that, for the time at least, it filled up the whole field of his view, and seeing that he could see nothing else; and, falling down before the Holy One with the bitter consciousness of pollution, casting himself before Him from Whom he had received all things, he groans forth from that

broken heart his cry of self-abhorrence, ' Against Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight.' "

If we would see the reality of David's penitence, we must turn to the Psalms, especially the 51st and 32nd ; they bear witness to the intensity of his self-abasement, and of his loving sorrow, when he awoke to the sense of having wronged Him Whom he loved. But there is another and still surer proof, namely, its immediate acceptance by God.

We have to do with the same loving Father, Who waited so long for David's repentance, and made such haste to accept it at last, Who never can reject any penitent who offers to Him the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart. May God open our eyes to see our sins and to listen thankfully to His reproofs, and to the voice of conscience saying to us, from time to time, " Thou art the man ! " When our sin is brought home to us, may we never try to excuse or palliate it, but confess, with hearty contrition, " I have sinned against the Lord " ! And, so humbling and confessing ourselves, may we have the further grace to trust ourselves entirely to the free mercy of God in Christ ; and may we love Him much, knowing that we have much to be forgiven, and that He is ready to forgive

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—2 *Samuel* xviii.

DEEP and sincere as was David's repentance for his great sin, and entirely as God in His mercy granted him forgiveness, it yet seems as if it left a mark on his character which was never entirely blotted out. Not only were the outward circumstances of his life changed, but he himself was changed. There was a feebleness and shrinking from exertion, which contrasted strongly with the life and energy of his earlier days. The constant remembrance of his sin, which he carried about with him, made him culpably lenient to the crimes of others, while Joab's acquaintance with all the terrible particulars of his guilt, placed him at the mercy of a man who was but too likely to be unscrupulous in the exercise of his power.

One special neglect of duty had a direct bearing on the rebellion related in this Lesson. It was the king's business, as the supreme judge of his people, to sit in the gate, in order that any man who had a controversy might come to him for judgment. To this duty, and to the administration of justice generally, David seems, towards the close of his life, to have become inattentive, and Absalom took advantage of his neglect, and

tried to court popularity by standing in the gate himself, and conversing freely with the people, and lamenting the difficulty which they had in gaining a hearing for their complaints. Thus "did Absalom to all Israel, who came to the king for judgment : so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel."

It was probably fear lest the influence of Bathsheba should secure the throne for her son Solomon that induced Absalom to rebellion. He could not afford to wait for his father's death, because every year increased David's love for Solomon ; and if David appointed Solomon as his successor, he would have an advantage which it would be difficult, if not impossible, to withstand. At the same time it was necessary to proceed with caution, for he could not tell to what extent David still retained his former hold on the affections of his people. By degrees that hold was shaken ; and Absalom felt that the time was come to strike the blow.

It has been suggested, that the great tribe of Judah had taken some offence at David's government, perhaps from finding themselves completely merged in one united Israel ; and that they hoped for a greater degree of power under a prince like

Absalom. At all events, Absalom selected Hebron, the old capital of Judah, as the scene of the outbreak; and Amasa, his captain of the host, and Ahithophel, his chief counsellor, were both of Judah.

The revolt was completely successful at first. The intelligence of the rising seemed to overwhelm the king, and he fled from the city without even attempting to stay its progress. Weeping and barefoot, his head covered with his mantle, and followed by men who imitated him in these signs of profound sorrow, David ascended the Mount of Olives: "it was as one long funeral procession of men wailing over the fall of all their hopes, not knowing what evil more terrible than any that had preceded it might come next." Very shortly afterwards, Absalom with a large force occupied Jerusalem, the inhabitants making no resistance, even if they did not willingly accept the transference of authority. Absalom however was resolved that every man should take his side in the contest; and to make reconciliation between himself and his father impossible, his first act was to take possession of his father's harem and commit incest with the wives whom he had left behind. This was done by the advice of Ahithophel, who, from

being David's confidential friend, had become, from whatever reason, his most malignant and determined enemy. His counsel was, not only to make the breach between the father and son as wide as possible, but to follow up immediately the advantage already gained, and fall upon the fugitives while they were weary and weak-hearted. "I will smite the king only," he said to Absalom, "and I will bring back all the people unto thee." To all human appearance, such an attack, if it had been made, must have been successful; but it was providentially overruled by the counter advice of Hushai, one of David's fast friends, whom he had sent back to Jerusalem to pretend friendship for Absalom, and thwart, if possible, the plans of Ahithophel. Hushai pronounced Ahithophel's proposal imprudent, and advised delay, with the view of giving information to David and allowing him time to collect his army. David, on receiving intelligence, immediately crossed the Jordan and took refuge in Mahanaim, a large and fortified town on the southern boundary of the district of Bashan, which Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, had made for seven years the capital of his kingdom. The size and fortifications of Mahanaim made it not only important, but almost necessary, that

David should occupy it ; and there were several of the neighbouring chiefs who received him with kindness, and supplied him and his people abundantly with provisions.

In the meanwhile Absalom gathered together an army. If he followed Hushai's advice in all particulars, he sent messengers through all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, to summon the people to his standard ; and in that case some weeks, probably, elapsed before he crossed the Jordan to attack his father, who on his part had now collected round him a considerable force, which he placed under the command of three chief captains,—his two nephews, Joab and Abishai, and Ittai, a Philistine of Gath. Another nephew, Amasa, the son of his sister Abigail, had the chief command on Absalom's side. At first the king proposed to go forth to battle in person, and share their perils with his soldiers ; but, yielding to the remonstrances of his followers, he was content to stand at the gate and watch his troops go out by hundreds and by thousands. One special command he laid upon his generals, in the hearing of all the people, to deal gently for his sake with Absalom.

The two armies met in the wood of Ephraim, near Mahanaim ; and it is interesting to know

that the whole neighbourhood is still, as at that time, "covered with thick oaks, and tangled bushes, and thorny creepers, growing over rugged rocks and ruinous precipices." Entangled among the trees and rocks, the soldiers of Absalom were thrown into utter confusion, and while twenty thousand were slain with the sword, the wood, it is said, devoured more of the bewildered army than the sword of the conquerors. Absalom himself, as he was endeavouring to escape, was caught in a terebinth-tree, his head—not his hair (so far as appears from the narrative)—being entangled in the branches, and, after hanging there for some time, was dispatched by Joab, in spite of David's earnest injunction. He was buried in a pit in the forest, and a heap of stones was piled over him, not in honour, but in detestation of his crime. Such was his dishonoured tomb, very different from that "pillar in the king's dale" which he had raised for his sons, and which he, probably, intended should mark the spot where his own remains were laid.

The history describes with great minuteness the manner in which the tidings of the battle and its melancholy end was conveyed to the king. He sat, awaiting the event, in the gateway of Maha-

naim, or rather "between the two gates," that is, in the space of the thickness of the walls, while the watchman stood in the tower above the gate, and called out when he saw any one approaching. Two men were seen, running across the plain; the first was Ahimaaz, the son of Zadok the priest, whom Joab, probably from a feeling of kindness, had endeavoured to dissuade from being the bearer of such sad news; but who urged his request, in order, as it would seem, that he might break the truth gently to the king, or at least prepare him to receive it. He announced at once the defeat of the king's enemies, but when David went on to make inquiries on the subject nearest to his heart, namely, the fate of his son, Ahimaaz spoke only of the confusion in which he left the army. Presently, the other messenger came, Cushie (probably, the Cushite or Ethiopian), a personal attendant of Joab, who, unacquainted with the king or with the effect which his evil tidings would produce on him, revealed abruptly the fatal truth: "The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is."

"Of all the hours of agony in David's life, of all hours of merely human agony in the history of the Bible, that was the darkest." What a picture of

bitter anguish do we see in the aged king, as he broke away from his attendants and messengers exulting in the victory, and went up into the chamber over the gate, weeping as he went, and crying out in despair, "O my son Absalom, my son Absalom! would God that I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

It was not merely a father's love that wrung from David this bitter cry. He knew that the sins of Absalom were specially sent as a punishment for his own transgression. Far worse to him than death was the consciousness that, had it been different with himself, his prayers might have availed to save his son. As it was, he could but bow his head in uncomplaining agony for the bitter chastisement which had fallen on him. Whosoever is tempted to sin by the hope of repenting and being forgiven in the end will do well to remember the long and terrible punishment which came upon David, even after he knew that he was pardoned. Even if God give men grace to repent, He may visit them, as He did David, with overwhelming sorrow, and the thought of this may possibly help those to resist temptation, who are inclined to make light of sin.

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—1 *Chronicles* xxi.

THE later years of David's life were years of bitter sorrow. His great sin, in the matter of Bathsheba, haunted and dogged him to the end. The tide of misfortune kept rolling over him continually from one quarter or another. Not only was the child of his sin taken from him at once, but the children who remained were made a scourge to him in a way still harder to bear, namely, by their sins. His eldest-born committed incest with his sister, and the vengeance which fell on him for the outrage came, not from the hand of justice, but from his own brother. The wicked son, who had already killed his brother, rose up against his father, and David was driven from Jerusalem, in order to escape from the hand of his own child. And the recovery of his throne was only obtained by the untimely death of that most guilty but most beloved son. He was slain by the captain of the host, the faithful but unscrupulous and too powerful Joab, whom David was

obliged to bear with till the last ; leaving it to his successor to take on him the vengeance which he desired to inflict.

The king's return was the cause also of a fierce quarrel among his subjects. The prominent part which his own tribe of Judah took in bringing back the king provoked the jealousy of the other tribes, and the tribe of Benjamin took occasion of that jealousy to endeavour to recover its supremacy. Sheba, the son of Bichri, a Benjamite, raised the standard of revolt, and the whole of Palestine north of Judah followed him. The insurrection was soon quelled ; but for a short time David was in great danger.

The Philistines, too, encouraged probably by these internal disturbances, again took up arms ; and David himself on one occasion very nearly fell by their hands.

Thus was the close of David's life disturbed incessantly by various troubles of mind and body. Nevertheless, his kingdom grew, and embraced all the nations on his immediate frontier, reaching the full limit assigned to it centuries before by God in vision to Abraham (Gen. xv.). It had become also, in its outward surroundings, like one of the kingdoms of the world. And the heart of the

aged king, as he contemplated, in a lull between the storms, his greatness and prosperity, was lifted up with pride. Satan was permitted so far to prevail over him, as to induce him to issue orders for ascertaining the number of his mighty people. In the Book of Samuel we read that the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and He moved David against them, to say, "Go, number Israel and Judah." On the other hand, in the Book of Chronicles it is said, "Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel." One passage speaks of "the anger of the Lord" as moving David, the other of Satan. Why God was angry with the Israelites we are not told; nor can we expect to fathom the difficulty which a comparison of these two passages suggests; but, as far as we can understand, it would seem that, while Satan intended to effect his own purpose and lead David into sin, and while David, on his part, yielded to the temptation, and sinned against the Lord, the evil purpose of Satan and the sin of David were in God's hands instruments for executing the punishment which He designed for those who had displeased Him. "All things evil are" to Him, "but as slavish ministers of vengeance."

We can scarcely be wrong in supposing that the desire to know the number of the people arose from something of arrogance and vain-glory on David's part. In vain did even the unscrupulous Joab remonstrate, and represent the act as one of unbelieving curiosity; in vain did he warn the king against being the cause of trespass to Israel. "Notwithstanding, the king's word prevailed against Joab and against the captains of the host." He did not reckon, however, those who were under twenty years of age, as if he feared that too exact an enumeration would contradict the promise that the children of Abraham should be like the stars of the heaven (1 Chron. xxvii. 23). More than nine months were spent in the task, and even then it was not fully completed; for the tribes of Levi and Benjamin were not reckoned. When David perceived what he had been doing, his heart smote him, and without loss of time he confessed his sin to Almighty God and earnestly prayed for pardon; "I have sinned greatly, because I have done this thing; but now, I beseech Thee, do away the iniquity of Thy servant; for I have done very foolishly."

But God did not withhold punishment on account of David's penitence. The very next morn-

ing after his sorrowful confession of his sin the Prophet Gad was sent to him, offering him the choice of three sore judgments: either three years ("seven years" 2 Sam. xxiv. 13) of famine in his kingdom, or three months of defeat and flight before his enemies, or three days of pestilence through the land. What a terrible message was this! But David knew from long experience the lovingkindness of the Lord, and the cruelty and selfishness of men; and, therefore, he answered, "Let me fall now into the hands of the Lord, for very great are His mercies; and let me not fall into the hand of man."

"So the Lord sent a pestilence" (lit., "a death," as it is expressively termed in the original) "upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed; and there died of the people, from Dan even to Beersheba, seventy thousand men."

At length, in its destined course, it arrived at Jerusalem. The figure of an angel was to be seen with a drawn sword in his hand, standing between heaven and earth, immediately over the top of Mount Moriah, to the east of the ancient city. This rocky eminence, which was at that time outside the walls of the city and of much lower elevation, seems to have belonged to the old Je-

busite chief, Ornan or Araunah, whose city David had taken. For whatever reason, David spared him at the capture of Jebus ; and he and his sons were engaged in threshing wheat on the top of the mount when the figure of the destroying angel appeared.

It would seem (ver. 28—30) that David was on the point of going forth to Gibeon, where the Tabernacle and the brazen altar of burnt-offering were, to inquire of God ; but, seeing the angel, he was afraid to leave the city, and had recourse to immediate humiliation and prayer. He and the elders of Israel, clothing themselves in sackcloth, fell down before the Lord, and David earnestly pleaded for the people ; begging that the Divine vengeance might fall on him, who alone was guilty, and not on the innocent : “ Is it not I that commanded the people to be numbered ? even I it is that have sinned and done evil indeed : but as for these sheep, what have they done ? Let Thine hand, I pray Thee, O Lord my God, be on me and on my father’s house, but not on Thy people, that they should be plagued.” The noble-hearted king, the true shepherd of his people, could not endure that others should suffer for his fault. And the Lord heard his prayer, and sent the Prophet Gad

to him, commanding him to build an altar in the threshing-floor of Araunah. David went forth immediately, and proposed to buy the site of the threshing-floor, in order, as he said, "to build an altar unto the Lord, that the plague may be stayed from the people." It was with difficulty that the old Jebusite king could be persuaded to receive payment. At such an appalling crisis, and in the presence of that terrible vision, he could not think of payment. He was ready freely to give, not only the threshing-floor, but the oxen for burnt-offerings, and the threshing instruments for wood, and the wheat for the meat-offering. All and everything were at the king's disposal. But David could not accept it: he would pay the full price; he could not take what was not his own for the service of the Lord, nor offer burnt-offerings without cost. So David weighed him the money, and built there an altar unto the Lord, and offered burnt-offerings and called upon the Lord. And the Lord answered him from heaven, testifying His acceptance of the sacrifice by sending down fire to consume it. And the Lord commanded the angel, and he put up his sword again into the sheath thereof. And shortly afterwards, on the spot where David's altar stood, the Temple was

reared ; and thus ended, in reconciliation with God, and in the establishment of the great centre of the national worship, the terrible calamity which God sent in judgment for the nation's sin.

If there is much that is mysterious in this history,—if we cannot understand why God was angry with Israel, and had occasion to punish them, and especially why He punished them in this particular way, namely, through the sin of David, yet one thing shines out conspicuously, namely, the lovingkindness of Him Who in wrath remembers mercy. What encouragement does it afford for all times of national calamity ! Though David's repentance did not wholly turn away the punishment which his sin deserved, it certainly seems as if his intercession availed to lessen that punishment ; for the Lord said to the angel, in consequence of it, " It is enough : stay now thy hand." Be it ever so manifest that our sins have not only deserved, but provoked God's judgments, this history teaches us that mercy rejoiceth over judgment.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—1 *Chronicles* xxii.

WE learn from the 132nd Psalm, by whomsoever written, that when David first brought up the Ark of God to the newly-captured Jerusalem, his anxious care had been to provide a suitable dwelling-place for the Lord: "he sware unto the Lord, and vowed a vow unto the Almighty God of Jacob; I will not come within the tabernacle of my house, nor climb up into my bed: I will not suffer my eyes to sleep, nor my eyelids to slumber, neither the temples of my head to take any rest, until I find out a place for the temple of the Lord, an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob." And this earnest desire found further utterance not long after, when he expressed to the Prophet Nathan his sense of shame at the thought that, while he himself lived in a palace of cedar, the Ark of God should still dwell in a tent, as formerly among the tent-dwellers in the wilderness. It seemed to him strange and unseemly that, while he and his people were settled in houses, the Lord should be still as it were a sojourner. But God gave him to understand that it was not His will that a fixed dwelling-place should as yet be provided for Him; that was to be the work of his son, not of David himself. David thankfully

resigned his purpose, and rejoiced in the thought of the honour that was in store for his son. The latter years of his life were largely spent in making preparations and gathering materials for the future Temple.

He fixed also its site. The place of the altar, on which at God's command he had offered sacrifice for averting the pestilence, and where God had answered him by fire from heaven, seemed as if it were specially marked by God Himself as the place where His honour should dwell. "This is the house of the Lord God," he said, "and this is the altar of the burnt-offering for Israel." The Divine vision vouchsafed there had already made it a holy place, and David resolved that it should be ever such, the site of the great Temple which his son was to rear to the glory of Jehovah.

When the Israelites came up out of Egypt, God revealed to Moses upon Mount Horeb the form of the Tabernacle which he was to erect for His worship. He gave him not merely general directions, but, down even to the most minute details of the vessels of the sanctuary and the dresses of the priests, all was appointed by God. "Moses was admonished by God, when he was about to make the Tabernacle, for See, saith He, that thou make

all things according to the pattern showed thee in the mount." This Tabernacle was so constructed as to take to pieces when the children of Israel journeyed, and to be put together again when they rested; and part of it was so sacred, that no one but the High Priest, and he only at stated times, might enter it. Here God willed that there should be a visible manifestation of His presence, showing thereby that it was His will that there should be a certain place specially consecrated to Himself, and partaking, as it were, of His holiness, in condescension to the weakness of His creatures, who, being body as well as spirit, require such outward and visible helps to their devotion. As long as the people were in the wilderness, the Tabernacle was moved continually from place to place; but Almighty God told them that in the land of their inheritance there should be a special place which He would choose to cause His name to dwell there: "thither shall ye bring all that I command you, your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices and your tithes, and the peace offerings of your hand, and all the choice vows which ye have vowed unto the Lord."

At first, when Canaan was unconquered, and the people were still an army, the Tabernacle seems to

have remained for the most part at the head-quarters of the host, at Gilgal; subsequently it was removed to Shiloh, as to the place which the Lord had chosen; after the overthrow of Shiloh, it seems to have been settled for a time at Nob (1 Sam. xxi. 1); afterwards it found its way to Gibeon (1 Chron. xvi. 39), where it continued all the time of David, even after he had brought up the Ark to Jerusalem. Thus, for four hundred years from the giving of the law, God was worshipped in a movable Tabernacle; thither, as to a centre divinely appointed, the prayers and sacrifices of the people were directed; there alone, under ordinary circumstances, could worship be acceptably offered, according to certain rites, which He had strictly marked; so that, though God is a Spirit, and can only be worshipped in spirit and in truth, we see that it was not contrary to His nature that His worship should be, as a general rule, tied down to a prescribed place.

A great change as regards the place of that worship occurred, as we have seen, in the time of David. It seemed to him, that the time was come for the creation of a permanent building for God's honour; and the thought was a right one: "Thou didst well," said Almighty God, "that it was in

thine heart." But because he was a man of war, and had shed much blood, the fulfilment of his purpose was to be transferred to Solomon. We read in the subsequent history how Solomon carried out the intentions of his father, and how at the consecration of the Temple, Almighty God descended in visible glory, and took possession of it—thus proving that it was His will to mark a particular place with a special manifestation of His presence.

It is sometimes thought that the notion of any special local presence of God is inconsistent with His spiritual nature ; but it may be observed that Solomon in his prayer of dedication, when begging that God's special favour might rest on the house which he had built, began by referring to the spiritual Being of God : " Will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth ? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee ; how much less this house which I have built ! " And yet he prays, " Have respect therefore to the prayer of Thy servant, and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to hearken unto the cry and the prayer which Thy servant prayeth before Thee, that Thine eyes may be open upon this house day and night, upon the place whereof Thou hast said that Thou

wouldest put Thy name there ; to hearken unto the prayer which Thy servant prayeth toward this place. . . . Now therefore arise, O Lord God, into Thy resting place, Thou and the ark of Thy strength : let Thy priests, O Lord, be clothed with salvation, and let Thy saints rejoice in goodness ! ”

The special sanctity which belonged to the Tabernacle and Temple of old belongs also to Christian churches : they are not merely convenient places of assembly for Christians, but in some true sense dwelling-places of God, “ the shrines of His intensified presence among men, where He records His name, whither He comes, as elsewhere He does not ordinarily, to bestow blessing and receive homage.” The restriction, indeed, which God put upon His worship in the case of the Tabernacle and Temple is now withdrawn. That worship is no longer confined to the Temple at Jerusalem. Wherever, in all lands, Christians offer worship to Him in spirit and in truth, they are accepted. His covenant with man is no longer national. All men, everywhere, may erect churches to His glory, and in all our churches there is a special presence of God. His throne is in a manner set up there, that we may fall down before Him.

As soon as the persecution which assailed the

early Christians ceased, grand and noble churches arose everywhere, and were consecrated to be Houses of God, and the worship offered in them was believed to have a special efficacy on account of the peculiar presence of God in them. We may say to ourselves, therefore, in regard to our churches, "The Lord is in this place;" and the more we realise this truth, the more shall we attain to that mingled reverence and joy which David felt in the sanctuary of God, and which is also the very temper of the angels, as they pour themselves out in unceasing praise in heaven.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—1 *Chronicles* xxviii.
to ver. 21.

THERE are three recorded utterances of David, which may claim to be considered as his last words. First of all, there is the short song, given in the 23rd chapter of 1 Samuel, which is expressly called his "last words," in which he describes—no doubt for the guidance of his son—the reign of a righteous king: how he who is just to men and reverent toward God is like the brightness of the early morning, while the grass, fresh-

ened by recent rain, glistens in the sunbeams ; but, at the same time, he expresses his fear that his perfect ideal will not be realised in his own house.

Then we have, in 1 Kings ii., what seem to have been actually his last words, when from his death-bed, conscious that he was going the way of all the earth, he charged Solomon to be careful to walk in the ways of the Lord, and bequeathed to him the execution of the well-merited vengeance which he himself had, for special reasons, declined to take on Joab and on Shimei.

And, lastly, we have in this Lesson and the following chapter his farewell address to the nobles and chief men of the kingdom, in which he presented to them his son Solomon, as the successor whom God had chosen ; and solemnly offered to God and entrusted to Solomon the materials which he had prepared for the great Temple, the erection of which was to be the first and chiefest work of Solomon's reign.

This address would seem to have been delivered after the attempt of Adonijah to seize the kingdom had failed ; and, therefore, after David had directed Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet to conduct Solomon to Gihon, and there anoint him

king. At that time David was on his death-bed (1 Kings i. 47), and the expression used in this chapter, that the king "stood up on his feet," would seem to intimate that he made a special effort to rise from his bed, in order to deliver this last charge to the great men of his kingdom. It was an important gathering. There were present all the great military and civil rulers,—the heads of each of the tribes, the twelve captains who commanded the several divisions of the army, consisting each of twenty-four thousand men, who were called out on duty for a month in succession, as well as the inferior officers, captains of thousands and captains of hundreds; the heads of the different departments also, as we should call them, those who had the charge of the royal treasure and the royal farms, the flocks and herds, the vineyards and cellars, together with all the officers (probably, privy councillors) and mighty men.

Having specially gathered them together for the last time, David explained to them, with a loving and thankful heart, his views and hopes respecting the reign of his successor. He began in a most affectionate way, "Hear me," he said, "my brethren and my people;" and he concluded, as we find from the next chapter, with a solemn

prayer and thanksgiving to God. As God had chosen the tribe of Judah to wield the sceptre out of all the tribes of Israel, and as He had chosen David himself out of all the sons of Jesse, so had He in the same way made choice of Solomon above his other many sons. David's own reign had been disturbed and stained with blood; but the Lord had given him a different vision of the reign of his successor. He was to be "a man of rest," in token of which God gave him the name of Solomon, "the peaceful one," promising that there should be peace and quietness to Israel in his days (1 Chron. xxii. 9); but this vision of peace would only be fulfilled, if both the king and the people were steadfast in their allegiance to Jehovah. David, therefore, solemnly exhorts the princes around him "to keep and to seek for all the commandments of the Lord their God;" that is, not only to obey God's will, so far as they knew it, but to inquire after it, and endeavour to ascertain it fully, in order that they might leave the land which God had given them for an inheritance for their children after them for ever. He then turns to Solomon his son and bids him know, that is, believe and love and trust in, the God of his fathers, and serve Him with a perfect heart and

with a willing mind. He warns him at the same time that God would not be deceived by a mere outward service, without the devotion of the heart : he must serve God perfectly, if he would serve Him at all ; and if he would do so, all would be well : “ If thou seek Him, He will be found of thee, but if thou forsake Him, He will cast thee off for ever.”

The dedication of the materials for the Temple was, however, the immediate object of this assembly ; and to this, therefore, David addressed himself. He handed over to Solomon an exact plan of the Temple, even to its minutest details, and charged him to undertake the work with boldness and zeal : “ The Lord hath chosen thee to build an house for the sanctuary : be strong and of good courage, and do it : fear not, nor be dismayed ; for the Lord God, even my God, will be with thee : He will not fail thee, nor forsake thee ; until thou hast finished all the work for the service of the house of the Lord.”

A considerable portion of the later years of David's life must have been spent in making arrangements for the task which he bequeathed to his son. It would seem that he had before his mind, probably by special inspiration, an exact

idea of what the Temple would be in all its parts, just as Almighty God set before Moses a kind of picture of the Tabernacle, according to which all the work was to be executed (Exod. xxv. 9, 40). This idea David worked out on paper, giving to Solomon the pattern and dimensions, not only of the holy place, but of the porch and the courts and chambers, so that, as it would appear, nothing was left to his own judgment. He showed him also the exact use he was to make of the stores of gold and silver and brass and iron and cedar-wood, which he had provided. The weight and number and the material of the several vessels for the Temple were carefully laid down.

The preparations of these details must have occupied a long time; and we may easily imagine the delight with which David, in his extreme old age, spent hour after hour over them. It was congenial work for him, who, all through his life, had taken such delight in the public worship of God.

We know from the Book of Psalms how earnestly, in his wanderings, David longed for the service of the sanctuary: "My soul thirsteth for Thee; my flesh longeth for Thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is, to see Thy power and Thy glory, so as I have seen them in the

sanctuary." "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude which kept holiday O my God, my soul is cast down within me; therefore will I remember Thee from the land of Jordan, and of the Hermons (that is, the peaks and ridges of Hermon), from the hill Mizar."

Then, as soon as he had taken Jerusalem, and had resolved to make it the place of the sanctuary which he had desired to build for God, he brought up the Ark thither with great pomp, himself leading the procession, clad with a linen ephod, as if he were a priest, and singing, in conjunction with the Levites, the beautiful Psalms which he had specially composed for the occasion (Psalms xv., xxiv., lxviii.) He provided also for the regular worship of God before the Ark, when it was placed on Mount Zion.

The old Tabernacle, which had been brought up from the wilderness with the altar of burnt-offerings, was at Gibeon, and David left it there with Zadok the priest to minister in it, and continue the daily sacrifice. In the new Tabernacle, which

he raised for the Ark in Jerusalem, he instituted bands of Levites to carry on a continual service of psalms and hymns and music, in which service it is certain that he himself took special delight.

And now, at the close of his life, we find him more and more absorbed in the preparation for the Temple, which was to gather in one both the sacrifices and the psalmody. Whatever disappointment he may have felt at first, at not being permitted himself to carry out his design of building the Temple, seems to have been soothed by the thought of the honour in store for his son, and by the pleasure of picturing to himself the completed work. It well accords with the meekness and humility which characterise David's penitence, that he should give up, apparently without murmuring, what had been the darling desire of his heart. His life had been a life of blood and wars, of sin and its punishment; his son's reign, he trusted, would be pure and peaceable,—the reign of righteousness and glory. The day when the noble palace, which he had projected for God's honour, should be publicly offered to Him, belonged fittingly to such a reign. For himself, he was not worthy to see that day; but he would rejoice and be thankful in the anticipation of it.

EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—1 *Chronicles* xxix. 9—29.

NOTWITHSTANDING the great and varied trials of David's life, his reign had been, in a worldly point of view, pre-eminently successful. Those forty years made a wonderful change in the condition of the kingdom. His predecessor had fallen ingloriously on the field of battle, after a crushing defeat, leaving the enemy in the very heart of the country: David died peacefully in his bed, "in a good old age, full of days, riches and honour," the undisputed sovereign of a firmly-rooted and well-organised kingdom, which was able to take its place among the great monarchies of the East: peace was established on all sides, the neighbouring nations having been reduced and made tributary.

The account given in this Lesson of David's last public act bears ample witness not only to the respect and honour in which he was held personally, but to the religious devotion with which he had inspired his people. We are to think of him as rising from his bed and standing up, with great

effort, in the midst of the chiefs of the tribes and several ministers of state, and solemnly committing to Solomon in their presence the task of building the Temple. First, he begs their help and sympathy for his son, who was "young and tender," and the work was great, the palace which he was to build being not for man, but for the Lord God. Then he shows to them the abundant stores of gold and precious stones, which "in his affection for the house of his God he had prepared with all his might," and he invited them to make similar offerings. He remembered, doubtless, how in the wilderness Moses had been commanded to invite the people to bring their gifts for the construction and services of the Tabernacle, and with what zeal, gladness, and liberality they had answered the invitation (Exod. xxv., xxxv.); and, therefore, he said to the assembled congregation, "Who is willing to consecrate his service this day unto the Lord?"

"Then the chief of the fathers and princes of the tribes of Israel, and the captains of thousands and of hundreds, with the rulers of the king's work, offered willingly, and gave for the service of the house of God, of gold five thousand talents, and of brass eighteen thousand talents, and one hundred thousand talents of iron. And they with

whom precious stones were found, gave them to the treasure of the house of the Lord." Thus they emulated the example of their fathers in the wilderness, and offered freely, with a perfect heart,—that is, out of true devotion,—not from ostentation, in order to obtain the praise of men, nor from constraint, to please the king, but because in their hearts they desired to honour God. And in this their zeal and devotion and lavish expenditure for the service of God they rejoiced: it was a supreme delight to them freely and nobly to offer their best to the Lord. "The people rejoiced, for that they offered willingly, because with a perfect heart they offered willingly unto the Lord; and David the king also rejoiced with great joy." What a picture of love and devotion do these words present! It is no wonder that David's heart was moved to pour forth that glorious hymn of thanksgiving and prayer which the Lesson contains, and which has been to succeeding ages the model of the true temper of religious munificence, Jewish and Christian.

For, observe how, instead of making much of the offerings, costly as they were, which he and his people had prepared for the service of God, David's one thought was of the exceeding greatness

and glory of Him to Whom they were offered, and of their own unworthiness to offer anything. "Thine, O Lord, is the greatness and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; all that is in the heaven and in the earth is Thine." Men can but offer to God that which is His already, and they are in themselves utterly unworthy to offer it. "Who am I," says David, "and what is my people, that they should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? For we are strangers before Thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers; our days on the earth are as a shadow; there is none abiding." Whatever man's possessions may be, death will soon rob him of them; and the best use he can make of them during the short time that he is allowed to use them, is to offer them cheerfully to Him from Whom they come. David could appeal also to the heart-searching God to bear him witness that his offering came from a true and loving heart; and he rejoiced to see that, so far as he could judge, his people shared in the same spirit of sincere devotion. He concludes with an earnest prayer that Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, would keep them always in the same mind, and especially that He would give to Solomon his son a perfect heart to

keep His commandments, His testimonies, and His statutes, and to build the palace for which he had made provision.

Having thus dedicated his offerings with solemn thanksgiving and prayer, David called on all the congregation to bless the Lord their God: "And all the congregation blessed the Lord God of their fathers, and bowed down their heads, and worshipped the Lord and the king."

This was the last public act, the crown, as it were, of David's life. The day following was observed by all the people as a holy and joyful day; they offered sacrifice, "a thousand bullocks, and a thousand rams, and a thousand lambs;" and they did eat and drink before the Lord with great gladness.

This festival of the dedication of the materials for the Temple was also the day of the anointing of Solomon. He had, indeed, already been anointed and proclaimed king at Gihon, but hastily, in the presence only of a few (1 Kings i. 35, 39). Now the same ceremony was repeated in Jerusalem: "They made Solomon, the son of David, king the second time, and anointed him unto the Lord to be the chief governor; and Zadok to be priest; and all the princes and the mighty men, and the

sons likewise of king David, submitted themselves," that is, pledged their troth and promised obedience, "unto Solomon the king."

We cannot fail to observe the stress that is laid on the costliness and magnificence of the materials which David prepared and dedicated for the house and service of God. The house, he said, must be "exceeding magnificent;" and therefore he prepared with all his might, not only gold and silver, and brass and iron and wood, but precious stones of every kind, "onyx stones and stones to be set, glistening stones and of divers colours, and all manner of precious stones, and marble stones in abundance." As the Book of Exodus bears testimony to the cost lavished upon the Tabernacle in the wilderness, so in this history we see the carelessness of expense and toil with which the Temple was reared in Jerusalem. And when Solomon came afterwards to make use of the costly materials provided for him, he was careful to send, for the purpose, for a cunning man, "skilful to work in gold, and in silver, in brass, in iron, in stone, and in timber, in purple, in blue, and in fine linen, and in crimson; also to grave any manner of graving, and to find out every device which shall be put to him."

If such outward splendour and exquisite work-

manship were fitting for the Jewish sanctuary, it is natural to suppose that they are appropriate also for Christian churches. David's preparations for the Temple seem to show that lavish expenditure in the service of God, if it spring from true devotion, is in itself right and acceptable to God. Our Lord, indeed, condemns in the strongest way the Pharisees for their attention to outward ceremonial, while they were careless about inward purity; but it is their hypocrisy that He condemns. There is no reason to believe that, when the heart is really given to God, He is otherwise than pleased with those who expend money and thought and labour in order to honour Him with their best.

The precious things of the earth—gold and silver, jewels and marbles—what is the right use of them? They belong to Him; and it is far better, surely, to bestow them on Him than to spend them on ourselves. It is His will, indeed, that we should take of them for our own use; but we must take them for use and for duty, not for selfishness or pride. If we give out of ostentation, if we spend money and pains in costly decorations, in order that we may reflect on ourselves, then we spoil our offerings; but if we offer what we can in order to do honour to God, we need not doubt but that He

accepts and is pleased with our offerings. Hence it is that in Christian countries all that is rich and precious in nature, all that is rarest and most wonderful in art, have been consecrated to God, and the general instinct of Christians has led them to follow the example of David and devote their very best to God. It must be right so to do, if only we remember that, after all, our hearts are Christ's true shrines, and that it is but hypocrisy to take pains to embellish and glorify His visible Temple, unless we are careful to cleanse and purify our hearts, that they may be fitting dwelling-places for His invisible presence !

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—2 *Chronicles* i.

SOLOMON had already been twice anointed king—first at Gihon, and afterwards at Jerusalem ; but it seems to have been thought right that there should be yet another solemn inauguration of his kingdom at Gibeon, where the ancient Tabernacle of the congregation still remained, and where, by David's appointment, Zadok the priest still ministered daily at the very altar made by Bezaleel in the wilderness. To Gibeon, therefore, Solomon

repaired very early in his reign, with all the congregation and the great officers of state, and offered burnt sacrifices on the altar. It was a magnificent ceremonial, a thousand victims being offered on the occasion, as previously at Jerusalem (1 Chron. xxix. 21). On the night following the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream, and promised to grant him any request that he might make.

After this sacrificial feast we hear no more of Gibeon. When the Temple was completed a few years later, Solomon returned there, and brought up the Tabernacle and all the sacrificial vessels, and placed them in their new home in Jerusalem; from which time Gibeon sank into obscurity.

Solomon was probably about twenty years old when the vision at Gibeon was vouchsafed to him (comp. 1 Kings xi. 42, xiv. 21),—very young doubtless for the great charge which had devolved upon him, but not so young perhaps as we might have gathered from his own expression, “I am but a little child,” or from the way in which his father speaks of him, as “young and tender.”

Nothing could possibly be more fitting than the temper in which Solomon prepared to enter on his work: “he loved the Lord,” it is said, “walking in the steps of David his father;” and his answer

to the offer made to him was especially noble and beautiful in its deep humility.

What a wonderful and captivating offer it was! "Ask what I shall give thee," said the Divine voice; and the answer, given at once, without hesitation, shows what were the thoughts, and hopes, and fears, which filled the youthful monarch's heart. They were no dreams of worldly ambition or selfish enjoyment which occupied his waking thoughts, and therefore it was not of them that he spoke when God appeared to him in the nightly vision. The greatness of his position oppressed him by its responsibility, rather than captivated him by its splendour. His first thought was, that it was for his father's sake, not for anything in himself, that he was placed where he was: "Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before Thee in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with Thee; and Thou hast kept for him this great honour, that Thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne as it is this day." Then he thought of himself, his youth and inexperience: "I am but a child; I know not how to go out or to come in." He remembered also the vastness of the charge committed to

him. He saw himself placed in the midst of God's chosen people, a great people, that could not be numbered or counted for multitude. How was it possible for such an one as he to know how to deal with them? His one want, and therefore his one chief request, was for an understanding heart, for wisdom and knowledge, that he might be able to judge rightly and prudently, and discern between good and bad.

The humility which breathes in this prayer was, doubtless, Solomon's chief characteristic at that time. His humility made him wise, and "he showed his wisdom by asking for wisdom."

"The speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing." He had not asked for riches, or honour, or long life, or victory over his enemies, but for wisdom; and, therefore, He Who vouchsafes to men more than they can desire or deserve, not only gave him the wisdom which he sought, "so that there was none like him before him, neither after him should any arise like unto him," but He promised also that the wealth and honour which he had not asked for should be added unto him; and He further assured him, that if he would walk in His ways, to keep His statutes and His commandments, as his father David had

walked, he should have, not riches and glory only, but length of days in addition. So truly were fulfilled his own words respecting wisdom: "Length of days is in her right hand, and in her left hand riches and honour: her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."

The wisdom which Solomon desired, and which was granted to him, was, in the first place, an understanding heart to judge the people: it was pre-eminently the power to discern between good and bad, and to administer justice with fairness and discretion,—the fulfilment, that is, of his own prayer in the 72nd Psalm: "Give the king Thy judgments, O God, and Thy righteousness unto the king's son. Then shall he judge Thy people with equity and Thy poor according unto right; the mountains also shall bring blessing to the people, and the little hills through righteousness! Let him keep the suffering folk by their right, let him defend the children of the poor, and the oppressor let him utterly destroy! for he delivereth the poor when he crieth, the needy also that hath no helper: he is favourable to the simple and needy, and preserveth the souls of the poor; he delivereth their souls from oppression and wrong, and dear is their blood in his sight."

This was the first characteristic of Solomon's wisdom, as of that other Prince of the house of Jesse, whom Solomon prefigured, of whom it is said, "With righteousness shall He judge the people, and reprove with equity for the meek upon earth . . . and righteousness shall be the girdle of His loins, and faithfulness the girdle of His reins."

Another characteristic was his "largeness of heart, even as the sand which is on the sea-shore" (1 Kings iv. 29). This expression seems to refer to Solomon's capacity for attaining all sorts of knowledge; "as the sand encloses a vast body of water, so his mind contained an ocean of knowledge." "The wide world of nature, animate and inanimate, the lives and characters of men, in all their surface weaknesses, in all their inner depths, lay before him, and he took cognisance of all." "He spake three thousand proverbs," many of which are preserved to us in the Book of Proverbs. "His songs were a thousand and five": of these, doubtless, the larger part are lost; but there are two Psalms, the 72nd and 127th, which are assigned to him; and there is also the book called "The Song of Solomon," than which there is no poetry in the world more bright and joyous in its

descriptions of nature, or more true and fervid in its picture of faithful love. He spake of trees also, from the highest to the lowest, from the spreading cedar-trees of Lebanon to the hyssop which springs out of the crevice in the wall. He spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes. "His wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt . . . and his fame was in all nations round about."

It is not uncommon for persons, especially young persons, to please themselves with fancying what they would choose, if such a choice as that which was offered to Solomon were given to them. No doubt, in most cases of the kind, the choice is supposed to have reference entirely to things of this world; but supposing Solomon's choice were offered to them in its fulness, how few are there who would follow Solomon's example, and forego all worldly advantages for the sake of some spiritual blessing! It may be, indeed, that Solomon's choice, after all, was not the highest,—not such as his father, for example, would have made, for David probably would have prayed for holiness, and a more entire conformity to the will of God. It may be that Solomon felt his ignorance more

keenly than his sin. But even if it were so, his request was pleasing in God's sight, and it was far beyond what ordinary persons would have made. How few, circumstanced as he was, would have thought of their littleness rather than their greatness,—of the fulfilment of duty rather than the enjoyment of their advantages! His example may well, therefore, be a pattern to all young persons in the opening of life, reminding them that in the great and unknown sea on which they are entering their desire should be, not for enjoyment, but for guidance. They will do well also to remember further, that if they seek for what is according to the will of God—that is, for any spiritual blessing—their request will be as surely granted as was Solomon's, according to our Saviour's promise, "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My Name, He will give it you." And, moreover, if they seek for spiritual gifts, they have another and equally plain promise that all necessary earthly blessings will be theirs also, as God gave to Solomon riches and honour as well as wisdom. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things"—that is, all necessary earthly things—"will be added unto you."

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—1 *Kings* iii.

ONE of Solomon's first acts on his accession was to connect himself with the old enemy of Israel, Pharaoh, King of Egypt. There had been no intercourse between the two countries since the Exodus; now Solomon married his daughter, and among his numerous wives and concubines she seems to have been the chief,—his queen, in fact.

Marriage with the Canaanite nations, among whom the Israelites dwelt, was strictly forbidden by the law, on the ground that it would lead them into idolatry (Exod. xxxiv. 11; Deut. vii. 3, 4). As regards other heathen nations, no Ammonite or Moabite was permitted to enter the congregation of the Lord, and therefore the marriage of an Israelite woman with a Moabite or Ammonite was held to be unlawful, though, as we see from the case of Ruth, the marriage of an Israelite with a Moabitess was not considered to be forbidden. The prohibition was less stringent in the case of an Edomite and Egyptian. The Edomite, as descended from Esau, and the Egyptian, as belonging to the nation which had so long shewn hospitality to Joseph and his brethren, were not to be objects of abhorrence, and their great-grandchildren might

be admitted into the congregation of the Lord (Deut. xxiii. 7, 8). Marriage with females of either nation was therefore considered lawful. Hence the marriage of Solomon with an Egyptian princess, however strange it may seem, was not in itself blameworthy.

He was greatly influenced, in all probability, in forming the alliance, by a desire to strengthen his kingdom; and such, undoubtedly, was the result. The new queen brought with her as a dowry the Canaanite city of Gezer, in the south-west frontier of Palestine (1 Kings ix. 16, 17); and in other ways the connection with Egypt was the means of increasing the wealth and power of Solomon.

The 45th Psalm, the title of which is "A song of loves" is supposed to celebrate the nuptials. The writer of the Psalm, after alluding to the greatness of his subject and the fulness of his heart, bursts forth into a song of praise of the royal Bridegroom, first of his beauty, then of his eloquence:—

"Thou art fairer than the children of men;

Grace is poured into thy lips."

Then he dwells upon his majesty and justice:—

"Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty,

With thy glory and thy majesty.
And in thy majesty ride prosperously because of
truth, meekness, and righteousness.
And thy right hand shall teach thee terrible
things.
Thine arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's
enemies :
Whereby the people fall under thee.
Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever :
The sceptre of Thy kingdom is a right sceptre.
Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness :
Therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee with
the oil of gladness above thy fellows."

"The song of loves" here reaches its culminating point in the description of the king: it has portrayed him as man, as warrior, as god-like ruler; now it pictures him as bridegroom on the day of his espousals:—

"All thy garments smell of myrrh, and aloes,
and cassia,
Out of the ivory palaces, whereby they have made
thee glad.
Kings' daughters were among thy honourable
women :
Upon thy right hand did stand the queen in gold
of Ophir."

The Psalmist then turns to address the bride, bidding her forget her native land and devote herself entirely to her new lord and king; so shall he delight in her, and choicest treasures shall be poured at her feet: "The daughter of Tyre, the rich Tyrian people, shall be there with a gift: even the rich among the people shall entreat her favour."

Then follows a description of the queen, as she waits "within"—that is, in the inner apartments of the palace—her clothing of threads of gold, till she is conducted to the king over richly-woven carpets, with her train of attendant maidens:—

"The virgins her companions, that follow her, shall
be brought unto thee.

With gladness and rejoicing shall they be brought:
They shall enter into the king's palace."

Then it is promised that, instead of the long line of princes whom she claims as her ancestors, she shall have children, who shall be princes in all the earth.

"I will make thy name to be remembered in all
generations:

Therefore shall the people praise thee for ever and
ever."

Thus did the sons of Korah greet the youthful

bridegroom, when he brought his Egyptian bride with great pomp to his abode on Mount Zion.

But strictly applicable as the Psalm is to the circumstances of the royal marriage, it is evident that the words cannot be tied down to that, or any other earthly union. It is of One greater than Solomon that they speak. For the Bridegroom, to whom the Psalm refers, is not only a great King reigning among men, whose form is of more than human beauty, and whose lips overflow with grace, and who rules in truth and equity, but he is directly addressed as God, and represented as seated upon an everlasting throne. The Psalm, therefore, is a picture of the glorious union of the Divine Messiah with His Bride, the Church—that union which will be perfected hereafter, when He shall return from heaven to take His people to Himself, when the marriage of the Lamb shall be come and His wife has made herself ready.

After recording Solomon's marriage with the daughter of Pharaoh, the Lesson we are considering gives an account of Solomon's dream at Gibeon, and the wisdom with which he was endowed. The history has come before us already in the First Evening Lesson; but the special in-

stance of his sagacity, in his judgment between the two mothers, which is contained in the latter part of the chapter, is not found elsewhere.

The difficulty of the case consisted in the circumstance, that there were no witnesses; nothing but the statements of the two women, who were both alike positive and vehement. Each of the women claimed the child; but one of them knew that her claim was false. Was it possible to make her convict herself? Was it possible, in any way, to show that she had not a mother's love for her child? If she were the true mother, she would not endure to see her child cruelly treated; if she were not the mother, she would not so much care what happened to it, provided her rival was disappointed. Solomon therefore ordered that the child should be divided, and half given to each claimant. The anguish with which one of them entreated that the child might be unhurt, proved her to be its mother, and drew at once from the king the deserved and undisputed sentence, "Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it."

"Even in morality," says Bishop Hall, "it is thus also: truth, as it is one, so it loves entireness; falsehood, division. Satan, that hath no right to the heart, would be content with a piece

of it; God, that made it all, will either have the whole or none." "Love is the sign of the true mother, the true Church; the false Church is for herself, full of envy and self-seeking: the true Church anxiously yearns for the people of God, willing, with Moses and St. Paul, for herself to perish rather than they." And so in regard to individuals. The true test of love is a willingness to forego our own selfish gratification for the sake of the object of our love. How many fancy that they love, and seem to others to love, who yet are influenced by pride or jealousy or some other selfish consideration. Solomon's famous judgment suggests how we may put ourselves to the proof in the matter. Are we willing to deny ourselves for the sake of the beloved? This is the touchstone of our hearts, by which the all-searching God will try us at last.

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—1 *Kings* x. to v. 25.

It was the report of Solomon's wisdom, especially, which had reached the Queen of Sheba, and attracted her to Jerusalem. She came, it is said, to prove him with hard questions; but they would seem to have been questions "concerning the Name of the Lord"—that is, connected in some way with the truths and precepts of Jehovah. She had heard, doubtless, of the magnificent Temple which Solomon had reared for Jehovah, and the special worship which he had instituted, as well as the extraordinary share of wisdom with which he had been endowed; and therefore, full of burning thoughts respecting the Holy Being Whom Solomon and his people worshipped, and anxious to sound the depths of the wisdom of which such wonderful reports had come to her, she undertook a long journey in order to lay before him the various perplexing questions respecting life and manners, which had suggested themselves to her

own mind, or exercised the thoughts of the wise men around her.

The Sheba here mentioned was the great kingdom in the southern corner of Arabia, so called after Sheba, one of the sons of Joktan (Gen. x. 18; Ps. lxxii. 10; Isa. lx. 6), embracing the greater part of the Yemen, or Arabia Felix; it must be distinguished from Seba or Saba, the Cushite kingdom of Ethiopia, as well as from the other Sheba on the shore of the Persian Gulf (Gen. x. 7). Numerous traditionary accounts exist of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, but all that we really know of her is contained in this chapter, except that Our Lord calls her the Queen of the South, and says that she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon. "She came to Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bare spices, and very much gold and precious stones; and when she was come to Solomon, she communed with him of all that was in her heart."

Solomon had made special mention, in his dedicatory prayer, of the stranger that was not of the house of Israel, who should come out of a far country for God's Name's sake; and he had prayed for him, that God would hear his supplication,

that all the people of the earth might know His Name. And now, as it would seem, his prayer was fulfilled; and we may be sure that Solomon took the opportunity of instructing his visitor in all things connected with the truth and will of God. He answered all her questions, and gave her practical proof of his wisdom, at the same time that he displayed before her the magnificence of his palace and of his court, especially of "his ascent by which he went up to the house of the Lord;" which would seem to mean either the flight of steps ascending from the Tyropean Valley, between Mount Zion and Mount Moriah, to the western entrance of the Temple, or, more probably, the wonderful bridge which spanned that valley and connected the two mountains. The sight of Solomon's wealth and splendour overpowered the stranger queen, so that there was no more spirit in her; but after all, it was his wisdom that specially impressed her, and she not only confessed that, great as had been the fame of his wisdom, the half had not been told her; but she congratulated and almost envied the happiness of his people who were continually benefited by it: "Happy are the men, happy are these thy servants, which stand continually before thee, and

that hear thy wisdom. Blessed be the Lord thy God, which delighted in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel; because the Lord loved Israel for ever, therefore made He thee king, to do judgment and justice." If it was a proof of God's love for Solomon, that He had set him on the throne of his father, it was no less a proof of His love for Israel that He had given them such a king as Solomon.

Our Saviour Himself has taught us how the example of this earnest-minded princess is a pattern to us. So deeply did she feel the reality of life, and the importance of a true understanding of her condition in the world and her duty, that she came from a distant land to receive Solomon's instructions. One infinitely greater and wiser than Solomon condescends to teach us. If we are indifferent to His teaching, if we do not care to listen to His voice, or if, listening to it, we do not heed it—if we do not desire to know what true wisdom is, or, knowing, do not follow it, the Queen of the South will rise up in the judgment against us, and condemn us; for she came from the uttermost part of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, a greater than Solomon is here. Not only are all the treasures of wisdom

and knowledge hid in Him, but He has graciously revealed them to us. Woe be to us, that we show so little care, and take so little pains to profit by His revelation !

The Queen of Sheba came from afar, not only to listen to Solomon's wisdom, but to show respect and reverence to him by offering her choicest gifts. "She gave the king an hundred and twenty talents of gold, and of spices very great store, and precious stones ; there came no more such abundance of spices, as these which the queen of Sheba gave to king Solomon." These gifts are specially mentioned by Solomon himself in the 72nd Psalm : "Let the kings of Tharshish and of the isles give presents ; let the kings of Sheba and Saba bring gifts." But great as were the queen's offerings to Solomon, they were outdone by his presents to her. "He gave her all her desire, whatever she asked."

The mention of these presents leads the historian to dwell on the extent of Solomon's riches, as he had before spoken of his varied acquirements. "He made silver, it is said, to be in Jerusalem as stones, and cedars as the sycamore-trees that are in the valley for abundance." Gold, also, and precious stones and almug-trees—that is,

probably, a kind of red sandal-wood—he brought in abundance from Ophir, by means of the ships which he built and despatched from Ezion-geber, at the northern end of the Red Sea. The precise situation of Ophir is uncertain; some suppose it to have been India, others place it in South Arabia, not far from the kingdom of Sheba.

Solomon's alliance with Hiram opened for him also the traffic of the Mediterranean, and once in three years his ships sailed to Tharshish—that is, Tartessus, in the South of Spain—and brought back stores of gold and silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks. Such at least seems at first sight the meaning of the statement in this Lesson; but learned men seem to think it on the whole more probable that by the expression “the navy of Tharshish,” “ships of Tharshish,” is sometimes meant vessels of a peculiar construction, the strongest and largest ships, such as were fitted for long voyages, and therefore that the point to which the fleet of Solomon went every three years was not Tharshish on the Mediterranean, but some other country, to which they sailed, not from the shores of Palestine, but from Ezion-geber on the Red Sea; and this country is supposed to have been India or some of the Indian islands.

It is a remarkable confirmation of this opinion, that the terms by which the three articles here specified (ivory, apes, and peacocks) are named, are identical with the Tamil names by which some of them are called in Ceylon to the present day. The consequence of this extensive trade was that the furniture of Solomon's palace was rich and magnificent, beyond all precedent. All his drinking vessels were of gold. Sandal-wood was used for pillars in his palace, as well as for musical instruments. He made large shields of gold, to be displayed on grand occasions, and at other times to be hung up in his cedar palace. His workmen also fashioned for him a great ivory throne, and overlaid it with pure gold; it was raised on six steps, each step being ornamented with a lion at each end: "there was not the like made in any kingdom."

"So king Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom." But Christ has taught us how to estimate all this worldly pomp, when, pointing to the lilies of the field, He said that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

The glory and magnificence of Solomon, though surpassed, in truth, by the humblest work of God,

was intended to represent the greatness and majesty of Him Who is emphatically the Son of David. He is the true Solomon, the Prince of Peace, in Whom the hopes and aspirations to which Solomon gives utterance in the 72nd Psalm find their true fulfilment. It is His kingdom which is co-extensive with the world, and co-enduring with time. He it is Who confers peace on men and rules the world in righteousness, and takes the poor and afflicted under His special care :

“ His name shall endure for ever ;
His name shall continue as long as the sun,
And men shall be blessed in Him :
All men shall call Him blessed.”

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—1 *Kings* xi. to ver. 15.

THREE times in Solomon's life did Almighty God specially appear to him : first, at Gibeon, immediately after his accession, when God promised to give him whatever he asked ; and Solomon asked for the gift of wisdom. The next occasion was when he was in the zenith of his power, having completed the chief work of his reign,—the great Temple on Mount Moriah, and also his own

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palace on Mount Zion. For seventeen or eighteen years Solomon had reigned in peace and in splendour unsurpassed, when God "appeared to him the second time, as He had appeared to him in Gibeon" (1 Kings ix. 2). He took up the words of Solomon's prayer of dedication; He promised to hallow the house which Solomon had built, and to put His name there, so that His eyes and His heart should be there perpetually. He promised, moreover, to crown him with prosperity, and to establish his throne over Israel, if he would continue to walk in the ways of David his father. But the message closed with words of significant warning: if he or his children should prove unfaithful, if they should forsake the Lord and worship idols, He would assuredly cast them off, and the Temple, which he had reared to His honour, should become a ruin and desolation, and their enemies would be astonished at the destruction that had befallen it. Now, for the third time, the Lord appeared to him again, not to renew the promise or the warning, but to tell him that, as promise and warning had been alike unavailing, the time of judgment was come, and the kingdom should be rent from him.

There was an interval, probably, of about seven years between the second and third Divine appear-

ance, and during that time a great change had come over Solomon. His fall is not attributed in any way, in Scripture, to his riches, or honour, or worldly prosperity. He had not sought these things of himself: they were God's free gifts; we may well believe, therefore, that He Who gave them as a special mark of favour, would hinder them from being the cause of any harm to him. The sacred history assigns his fall to one cause alone, namely, that he loved many strange women, and these women drew away his heart from God and perverted it to idols. We have seen the mischief which departure from the simplicity of God's appointment, in regard to marriage, brought upon David. He it was who set the example of multiplying wives, contrary to the law; but Solomon carried out the licence which his father had taken to a degree entirely unparalleled. Besides his chief queen, the daughter of Pharaoh, he surrounded himself with an array of foreign wives—from Moab, from Ammon, from Edom, from Phœnicia, from the old Canaanitish races: those nations respecting whom the command had been specially given, “Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.”

At first, probably, Solomon was not entangled in the idolatry of his wives : he only allowed them to practise the worship to which they had been accustomed, and built for them sanctuaries where that worship might be conducted. Three of those sanctuaries, or high places, are specially mentioned, namely, one dedicated to Ashtaroath, or Astarte, the chief female deity of Phœnicia (2 Kings xxiii. 13); another to Chemosh, the war-god of Moab; another to Milcom, or Molech, the god-king of Ammon. These high places were reared on the hill that is before Jerusalem,—that is, one of the summits of the Mount of Olives,—which received the name of the Mount of Offence, from the cruel and licentious rites that were practised there. The idols and groves remained on the summit of the mountain until they were destroyed by Josiah many years afterwards. But Solomon was not content with building sanctuaries and altars where his wives might worship the gods of their childhood; he was himself induced to take part in that forbidden worship. It came to pass when Solomon was old (though he could not have been more than sixty years old when he died) his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God,

as was the heart of David his father. His very wisdom, and the light which God had given him, increased his guilt and his condemnation. "And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the Lord God of Israel, which had appeared unto him twice, and had commanded him concerning those things, that he should not go after other gods; but he kept not that which the Lord commanded." Wherefore God spake to him once more and passed sentence upon him, and this time probably the message was sent by a prophet, Almighty God refusing to appear to him, as on the two former occasions, in consequence of his ingratitude. Solomon had broken the condition on which alone his kingdom was guaranteed to him: that kingdom, therefore, was to be rent away—not, however, in Solomon's time, but in his son's; nor was it to be wholly taken from him, for one tribe was to be left: for David's sake, the kingdom was still to continue in his family, though in a crippled state.

As an earnest of the great disaster that was to fall upon him, two enemies, who had been kept in check in the earlier part of the reign, now attacked the kingdom without meeting with any effectual resistance. The one was an Edomite prince,

named Hadad, who, having escaped from the extermination of his countrymen by the sword of Joab, took refuge in Egypt, and there was hospitably received by Pharaoh, and admitted to marry the sister of Tahpenes, the Egyptian queen. He seems to have returned in course of time to his native mountains, and to have kept up more or less of a petty warfare through a considerable part of Solomon's reign, though it was not until its close that he met with much success. The other was Rezon, a Syrian, who, when David defeated Hadadezer, King of Zobah, put himself at the head of a band of freebooters, and set up a kingdom in Damascus. From his position there he harassed the kingdom of Solomon; though, as in the case of Hadad, it seems probable, from the way in which he is here mentioned, that it was not until towards the end of Solomon's reign that he was able to inflict on him any real damage.

Of all the histories of Scripture there is none more melancholy, none more full of instruction, than this history of the fall of Solomon. We can scarcely bear to think that one so full of promise, so humble, so wise, so devout in his youth, should, nevertheless, come to so terrible an end. We may hope, indeed, and not without reason, that Solo-

mon repented ; but it is to be observed that Scripture, while it speaks plainly of his falling away (see Nehem. xiii. 26), is altogether silent as to his repentance. That silence is very instructive, as if God would not have us so much attempt to lift the veil which hangs over Solomon's latter days, as fix our thoughts on the plain lesson of fear and self-distrust which his sad story so plainly teaches. "Who can but yearn and fear, to see the woful wreck of so rich and goodly a vessel? O Solomon! wert not thou he, whose younger years God honoured with a message and style of love? to whom God twice appeared, and in a gracious vision renewed the covenant of His favour? whom He singled out from all the generation of men to be the founder of that glorious Temple, which was no less clearly the type of heaven than thou wert of Christ, the Son of the ever-living God? wert not thou that deep sea of wisdom, which God ordained to send forth rivers and fountains of all divine and human knowledge to all nations, to all ages?—Which of us dares ever hope to aspire unto thy graces? which of us can promise to secure ourselves from thy ruin? We fall, O God, we fall to the lowest hell, if Thou prevent us not, if Thou sustain us not! 'Hold Thou me up,

and I shall be safe ; yea, my delight shall be ever in Thy statutes. Order my steps in Thy Word ; and so shall no wickedness have dominion over me.' All our weakness is in ourselves ; all our strength is in Thee, O God ! be Thou strong in our weakness, that our weak knees may be ever steady in Thy strength !”

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—1 *Kings* xi. 26.

THE reign of Solomon had been a time of profound peace, as well as of unexampled prosperity ; but when he fell away, God raised up adversaries against him. Hadad, Rezon, and still more, Jeroboam, were as “ whips laid up ” for his correction, which were brought forth when they were needed. Solomon had forfeited the kingdom by his unfaithfulness ; but for David his father’s sake the full sentence that he had deserved was not pronounced upon him. Almighty God had promised to David, “ I will set up thy son after thee, and I will establish the throne of thy kingdom for ever . . . if he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, but My mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away

before thee." Accordingly, when Solomon had sinned, and the kingdom was rent from him, the tribe of Judah was still left to his son, and the family of David reigned over it for four hundred years.

The person whom God chose to be the king of the Ten Tribes was Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, of the tribe of Ephraim.

It would seem that when Solomon was repairing Millo, which is supposed to be the ancient citadel or fortress on Mount Zion, the industry of Jeroboam, who was engaged in the work, attracted his attention, and he appointed him to superintend the labours of the workmen from the tribe of Ephraim. How long he continued in this position we do not know, but it was plainly one which gave him considerable influence and authority. It is also said that he was a mighty man of valour. On one occasion, as he was going out of Jerusalem, he encountered the Prophet Ahijah the Shilonite (that is, a native of Shiloh), who delivered to him a special message from the Lord, the God of Israel. Ahijah drew him out of the road into the field; and then, when they were alone, taking off the new outer garment which Jeroboam was wearing, he tore it into twelve pieces, and gave ten of them

to Jeroboam, as a token to him that it was God's purpose to give him ten out of the twelve tribes of Israel, retaining only the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin for the house of David; and the prophet further promised, that if Jeroboam would be obedient to God's commands, he would make his kingdom and dynasty as secure as that of David: "I will be with thee," the Lord said, "and build thee a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee."

There had been for some time a strong feeling of jealousy between the northern tribes, of which Ephraim was the chief, and the tribe of Judah. From the first conquest of the land, the tribe of Ephraim had taken a very high—perhaps, it may be said, the highest—position in the nation. This was owing, no doubt, partly to the special blessings pronounced on the sons of Joseph, of whom Ephraim, though the youngest, was the chief, both by Jacob and by Moses; and partly, also, to the circumstance that Joshua, the chosen leader of the people after Moses, was of this tribe. However it may be accounted for, it is certain that the men of Ephraim were very jealous of any great exploit undertaken, or advantage gained, in which they had not the chief share. Thus they remonstrated

with Gideon, "Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites?" (Judges viii. 1); and with Jephthah, "Wherefore passedst thou over to fight against the children of Ammon, and didst not call us to go with thee?" (Judges xii. 1); and with David, "Why have our brethren, the men of Judah, stolen thee away, and have brought the king and his household, and all David's men with him, over Jordan . . . ? We have ten parts in the king, and we have also more right in David than ye; why then did ye despise us, that our advice was not first had in bringing back the king?" (2 Sam. xix. 41, 43.) David's appointment to the throne gave prominence, of course, to the tribe of Judah, and it was his great anxiety to keep down any feeling of animosity among the tribes, and to preserve union; but it is evident that the jealousy of Ephraim and the northern tribes was not extinguished, and now, as a punishment on Solomon, Almighty God Himself sanctioned the separation, which this continued jealousy was likely of itself to bring about. The prophet's communication to Jeroboam had been made in private, but it seems by some means to have reached the ears of Solomon, who, though he knew that Jeroboam was only the

instrument in God's hands for his chastisement, was not deterred by the remembrance of Saul's treatment of his father from endeavouring to put Jeroboam to death, and so thwarting, if possible, the purpose of God. Jeroboam fled into Egypt, where he was kindly received by Shishak, and where he continued during the remainder of Solomon's reign. A change of dynasty in Egypt had caused a change of policy. Shishak belonged to a different race of kings from that to which the father of Solomon's queen belonged, and one which was hostile to the Israelites. Solomon's prosperity had, no doubt, awakened the jealousy of the king of Egypt; and as he had already protected Hadad, so now he welcomed Jeroboam, and, according to one account, gave him his wife's sister in marriage.

What a contrast is there between the death of Solomon and that of David! Notwithstanding his great sin and his long and bitter chastisement, David died in peace and hope, looking forward with thankfulness to the reign of his successor; having served his generation, by the will of God he fell asleep, when his time came, in a ripe old age. Solomon, on the other hand, died with the melancholy consciousness that he was leaving a dismem-

bered kingdom to his son. Though his glory and power still remained to him, he knew that the seeds of mischief were at work, and that in the court of the king of Egypt was being sheltered the enemy who by God's own appointment was to deprive his successor of half his kingdom. And so far was he from acquiescing humbly in the punishment awarded him, that his last recorded act is the endeavour to slay the man who was to be the instrument of God's vengeance.

What his inner thoughts and feelings were, as he reviewed his life, may be gathered from the Book of Ecclesiastes. The first prevailing cry of that book is weariness and despair. As he looks back on the past and sums up his experience, he has but one word in which to express his feelings: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity." Amid the ever-recurring changes of nature and of the world, there was really nothing new: "The thing that hath been; it is that which shall be: and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun." First, he had tried to find satisfaction in the wisdom to which God seemed to call him; but he found that "in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sor-

row." Then he surrounded himself with all the means of sensual enjoyment, but the pleasure which he might have derived from them was darkened by the thought of death. Still, on the whole, he seems to have felt that the true secret of happiness lies in the calm enjoyment of God's gifts, and in cheerful resignation to His will: "I know that there is no good in them but for a man to rejoice and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God. . . . Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither thou goest! . . . Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them." And so he comes to the conclusion of the whole matter—that to which all his wisdom and all his experience led him: "Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment; with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil."

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—1 *Kings* xii.

THE dismemberment of the kingdom, which had been announced as a judgment on Solomon for his idolatry, did not take place immediately on his death. Whether it was that the people were not aware of the message to Jeroboam, and of God's purpose to rend the greater number of the tribes from the house of David, they certainly seem to have been disposed at first to accept Rehoboam as their king. "Rehoboam went to Shechem," we read, "for all Israel were come to Shechem to make him king." Shechem was the chief city of Ephraim, and it was probably as a concession to Ephraim and the northern tribes generally, that Rehoboam chose it as the place of his consecration. He wished to forestall opposition, by sending the people to Shechem rather than to Jerusalem; but circumstances occurred there, which caused it to be the capital of the new kingdom.

Notwithstanding the outward splendour and

prosperity of the reign of Solomon, there seems to have been growing up among the people a strong feeling of discontent, on account of the heavy taxes that were laid, not only on the Canaanites, but on the free population. This dissatisfaction at length found a voice at the time of Rehoboam's accession. A deputation from the various tribes waited on him, and begged for a remission of the burdens which had been put upon them by his father. Rehoboam required time for consideration, but promised an answer in three days. In the meanwhile he consulted, first, with the old advisers of his father, who considered that there was justice in the demand of the people, and counselled concession; and next, with certain young men, his own friends and companions, who, partly from insolence and partly from flattery, advised him to treat the request with contempt. In an evil hour Rehoboam rejected the advice of the elders, who would have had him by a soft answer conciliate his subjects, and so make them his servants for ever, and answered the people roughly, according to the counsel of his young companions: "My little finger," he said, "shall be thicker than my father's loins; my father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke; my father chastised

you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."

Nothing could have been more inconsiderate or more disastrous than this reply. It was cruelty and folly enough in Pharaoh to treat with like harshness the remonstrances of his Israelite slaves; it was utter madness in Rehoboam to suppose that unprovoked opposition could force a free people into subjection. But as Pharaoh's heart was hardened, so Rehoboam's infatuation was sent upon him as a judgment: "The king hearkened not unto the people, for the cause was from the Lord, that He might perform His saying, which the Lord spake by Ahijah the Shilonite unto Jeroboam the son of Nebat."

The spirit of discontent was at once roused into open rebellion, and the same cry arose which had been heard once before in the time of David on occasion of Sheba's revolt. "What portion have we in David? neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse: to your tents, O Israel; now see to thine own house, David." It was the battle cry of Ephraim and the northern tribes, who showed at once, by the manner in which they received the messenger whom Rehoboam sent to them, that the breach between the two portions of the kingdom

was no longer to be healed. Whatever may have been Rehoboam's reason for sending Adoram to the people, whether it was simply to levy the usual taxes, or in order to pacify them, he certainly seems to have been a most unfit person for the task, as having been the chief receiver of the taxes during the reigns of David and Solomon (1 Kings iv. 6, v. 14), and as such, necessarily obnoxious to the people. They stoned him to death, and Rehoboam was obliged to leave Shechem in haste, and take refuge in Jerusalem.

The men of Israel immediately invited Jero-boam, who had returned from Egypt, to assume the crown. They made him king over all Israel, and the rebellion was complete, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin only remaining stedfast to Rehoboam.

Rehoboam lost no time in raising a large force of 180,000 men, in the hope of punishing his rebel people, and bringing them again under his sway ; but God sent a message to him by the prophet Shemaiah, bidding him desist from his undertaking, and telling him that the separation of the people was in accordance with His will. Rehoboam therefore, and his people, gave up the project of reconquering Israel ; but there was

continued warfare between the two kingdoms all the days of Rehoboam (1 Kings xiv. 30; 2 Chron. xii. 15).

The first act of Jeroboam was to rebuild Shechem, which had been destroyed by Abimelech (Judges ix. 45) and to make it his capital. He also fortified Penuel, on the eastern side of Jordan, probably because, as commanding the passes of the river, it would protect his kingdom from foreign invasion.

The expressions which Scripture uses in speaking of Jeroboam lead to the impression, that though it was God's will that the ten tribes should come to him, yet his manner of taking them was displeasing to Him. It is said that "he lifted up his hand against the king," that "he rebelled against his lord"—words which certainly imply that though he accomplished God's purpose, he accomplished it in a wrong way. He ought to have trusted Almighty God to give him the kingdom in His own time and manner; he should not have seized it for himself. His "rebellion" stands in marked contrast to the long patience of David, to whom in like manner the kingdom of Saul was promised. And as he took his own steps to gain possession of the

kingdom, so he followed his own devices in order to retain it. It occurred to him, that as the law required every male among the Israelites to go up to Jerusalem three times a-year, his religiously-disposed subjects, being led from time to time to the capital of the rival kingdom, would break away from him and return to their former allegiance. It seemed to him impossible, that they could be true to their religion and true to him at the same time; once let them be accustomed to unite in worship in the old spot with the adherents of the house of David, and their hearts would be stolen away from him. He felt it necessary therefore to draw them away from Jerusalem, and to appoint set places for religious worship in his own kingdom. He fixed on two ancient sanctuaries, the one at Dan, in the extreme north, and the other at Bethel, in the south, and marked them out as seats of national worship, which should rival the great Temple at Jerusalem. Even this was contrary to the law, which expressly commanded, that all public worship should be offered in Jerusalem, where was the Ark of God, and where His appointed priests ministered; but Jeroboam was not content with this; he desired some visible token of God's presence, and therefore

he set up in the two sanctuaries which he had chosen, two golden calves, not as idols, such as Baal and Ashtaroth, rivals of the true God, but rather as figures and representations of Jehovah, saying, "Behold thy Gods, O Israel, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt!"

However Jeroboam may have persuaded himself that he had no intention of checking the worship of the one true God, the God of Israel, he should have known, that any representation of the true God was as much forbidden by the second commandment, as the worship of idols was by the first. But having once set himself to establish his kingdom by worldly policy, instead of waiting simply for God to fulfil His own promise, Jeroboam was led on from one false step to another. Not satisfied with allowing—if he did not actually sanction—the worship of the golden calves, he established a new order of priests, who were not of the tribe of Levi. The consequence was, that the priests and Levites, who were scattered up and down the land, left their homes and went up to live in Jerusalem. And not they only, but all such as set their hearts to seek the Lord God of Israel, came to Jerusalem to sacrifice unto the Lord God of their fathers. He "made a house

of high places,” and “he and his sons cast off the Levites from executing the priests’ office unto the Lord, and he ordained him priests for the high places, and for the devils, and for the calves which he had made : priests of the lowest of the people, which were not of the tribe of Levi ;”—any one, for example, who chose to consecrate himself by offering a young bullock and seven rams (2 Chron. xiii. 9). He changed the solemn feasts, also, and dared to offer incense himself on what he pretended was an altar of Jehovah.

Thus through impatience and want of faith he whom God had chosen to be the king of the Ten Tribes, and who might have been the father of a line of kings and the instrument of God’s special favour to the house of Joseph, fell away from Him, and has been known to future ages as emphatically “Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin.”

Impatience has been fruitful in like evils in all ages. Disorders and scandals in Church and State have not unfrequently led men to take the remedy into their own hands ; and one misguided act of rebellion or schism has necessitated another, until men have found themselves committed to a state of things very different from anything they

had anticipated in the beginning. We may surely trust God to bring about His own purposes, or to remove in His own time the evils which encompass us; if we once allow ourselves to do evil that good may come, we cannot in the least foresee whither we may be carried.

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct thy paths.”

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—1 *Kings* xiii.

IT was on the 15th day of the eighth month, the month which he devised of his own heart, that Jeroboam went up to Bethel in royal state, to dedicate the altar which he had built there in honour of the golden calf. The people were collected from all parts of the country; and, in order to do honour to the occasion, Jeroboam himself came from Shechem to attend the festival, and take part in the solemn service of inauguration. We may picture him in his royal robes, surrounded by an approving crowd, standing before the altar and burning incense, when suddenly a

strange countenance appeared in the inner circle of his courtiers and attendants, and the stately ceremonial in which the king was engaged was interrupted by words of stern and awful denunciation.

A man of God was sent out of Judah to Bethel to be present on the occasion ; but as if he would not condescend to speak to Jeroboam, he addressed the altar, and prophesied of a future king of Judah who would burn men's bones upon it: " O altar, altar, thus saith the Lord. Behold, a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name ; and upon thee shall he offer the priests of the high places that burn incense upon thee, and men's bones shall be burnt upon thee." The threatened vengeance was not to fall for 350 years, but it would fall very heavily when it came. And to prove that it was no idle threat, but the very word of Him Who cannot lie, the altar itself was overthrown, and the ashes poured from it. Nor was that all. When the king, astounded at the boldness of the man of God, and irritated by the sudden check which he had received in the hour of his fancied triumph, put forth his hand to seize the messenger of heaven who had thus outraged his authority, his hand was instantly paralysed ;

and restored only at the prayer of the prophet, who seemed a moment before to be on the point of losing his life.

Thus boldly and faithfully did the man of God perform the task assigned to him ; but his testimony against the rebellion and apostacy of Israel was to consist not in word only, but in act. As if he were entering a country infected by pestilence, he was commanded to enter no house, nor eat and drink there ; nay, he was not even to return to his home the same way by which he came, as if his feet must not touch the polluted earth twice. His duty was clearly marked out, but not easy to fulfil. The trial of his faithfulness came at once. The king, humbled by the judgment which had befallen him, and softened by the mercy shown him in the restoration of his palsied hand, begged him to go home with him and refresh himself, promising him also a reward. The invitation could not be accepted without manifest disobedience ; the prophet therefore answered, without hesitation, “ If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place.” “ So he went another way, and returned not by the way that he came to Bethel.”

So far all was well. He had obeyed God's command to the letter ; he was on his way home ; it would seem as if all danger were past ; he had resisted the king's invitation, and gone away from the scene of temptation by another road, when another and more subtle temptation presented itself.

There dwelt an old prophet in Bethel ; and his sons came and told him all the works that the man of God had done that day in Bethel : the words which he had spoken unto the king, them they told also to their father. The old man seems certainly to have received at times revelations from heaven ; but his living at Bethel, which had become the scene of an idolatrous worship, shows that he had learnt to acquiesce, if not actually to take part, in that worship. It may be noticed, that though he was himself absent from the idolatrous festival, his sons were there, and that not to protest, but apparently from a desire to witness the ceremony. Their account of the conduct of the man of God seems to have touched for a moment their father's conscience, as well as roused his curiosity ; and he earnestly desired to know more of one whose mission from God had been so plainly manifested. He followed his foot-

steps there, and overtaking him as he sat under an oak, begged him to return with him. When the man of God made answer to him, as to the king, "I may not return with thee; neither will I eat bread nor drink water with thee in this place," finding it impossible to persuade him by any other means, he pretended that he also had received a message from God: "I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the Lord, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. But he lied unto him."

It is impossible to determine positively the old prophet's motive in this deceit: most probably, however, he was influenced simply by his anxiety to see and to hear more of the man of God; there does not appear any reason to suppose that he was actuated by any feeling of malice or envy. But whatever his motive may have been, his falsehood was permitted by God for the trial of His servant. And it was a trial, it is plainly implied, which he might have overcome. The command to return home without lingering came to him expressly from God; and, except with the same express sanction, he should not have ventured to think that he was released from obedience. The authority

of a stranger, of whose claim to prophetic inspiration he had no evidence, ought not to have weighed with him for a moment against what he knew to be a communication from God to himself. He believed the lie, however, and returned to the forbidden place, and did eat bread there and drank water.

Whether conscience upbraided him with compliance, we know not; but he was yet sitting at the table, when the very man who had deceived him was constrained to declare to him his punishment: "Forasmuch as thou hast disobeyed the mouth of the Lord, and hast not kept the commandment which the Lord thy God commanded thee, but camest back and hast eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which the Lord did say to thee, Eat no bread, and drink no water; thy carcase shall not come unto the sepulchre of thy fathers." He now perceived at once what he had done, and he felt that the threatened judgment was as deserved as it was inevitable. It came more speedily, however, than he perhaps expected. As he returned home, a lion met him by the way and slew him, but did not devour him, nor touch the beast on which he rode, nor molest other passengers,—a plain token that God's hand was in the visitation.

When the old prophet heard that the body of a man, torn by a lion, had been found on the road to Jerusalem, he exclaimed at once, "It is the man of God who was disobedient to the word of the Lord! And he went and took up his body and brought it back to the city. Then he buried him in his own grave, and mourned over him, saying, Alas! my brother. And he spake to his sons, saying, When I am dead, bury me in the sepulchre where the man of God is buried; lay my bones beside his bones." We may hope that the awful fulfilment of the judgment, which his own lips had pronounced, so wrought upon his heart as to awaken him to a sense of his sin, and make him turn to God at last in true penitence and sorrow.

But it is with the lesson to be derived from the history of the man whom he deceived that we are chiefly concerned. And what is that lesson? Plainly the danger of believing man rather than God. A command had come to him, which he knew and acknowledged was from God; what right had he to suppose that any other man had authority to say that God had revoked that command?

God has given us in like manner certain plain

commands, which we are bound to keep, in spite of the persuasions and plausible arguments of men. They may suggest to us that others are as good judges of right and wrong as we are; or they may say that the particular command in question is unreasonable, or strange, or unimportant. But we must not for a moment allow such assertions to weigh with us in the balance against God. We are not really left at the mercy of the confidence, or the cleverness, or the plausibility of others. There are certain things—doctrines of our faith and maxims of duty—which we must hold fast, let who will assail us. Men may say to us, What is the use of keeping up such-and-such a practice? What is the harm of such-and-such an indulgence? even though the one has been commanded and the other forbidden by the express word of God; or they may say, Why should you think yourself more likely to be right than others? Such solicitations may sometimes be very hard to resist; but God, Who permits us to be tried by them, will give us strength to bear the trial, if we will trust in Him. Only let us adhere steadfastly to those rules of faith and practice which our consciences, instructed by the Bible, assure us to be in accordance with the will

of God. Let neither scorn nor flattery lead us away from Him ; but, striving daily to fulfil our appointed duty with humility, conscientiousness, and prayer, and choosing for our companions those who closely and anxiously walk in the ways of holy living, in which they have the Apostles and Saints of God as an ensample, let us trust in God's protection, and be confident that there shall be no temptation come to us but such as we are able to bear. In every difficulty He will make a way to escape, and will keep from falling those who trust in Him.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—1 *Kings* xvii.

THE account given in the beginning of this chapter of Elijah's interview with Ahab, is the first mention of him in Scripture. He comes before us quite suddenly, just as he appeared suddenly to Ahab. Of his previous history we know nothing, except that he was of the inhabitants of Gilead, a mountain district to the east of Jordan, occupied by an uncivilised population, who partook very much of the character of the inhabitants of the neighbouring desert. In the recesses of the

mountains Elijah had been trained to do God's bidding; and now for the first time he comes to view, with his long shaggy hair streaming down his back and his sheepskin mantle, standing before the king of Israel to announce to him the Divine judgments: "As Jehovah God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand,"—whose constant servant I am,—“there shall not be rain nor dew these years, but according to my word.”

This sore famine was the punishment of Ahab's abominable idolatry, in that, not content with following the sin of Jeroboam, he had introduced into his kingdom the impure worship of Baal and Ashtaroth.

Having delivered his message, the prophet disappeared immediately. Probably he was obliged to fly in haste from the vengeance of the king, or of his still more cruel queen, the notorious Jezebel; certainly, as the visitation which he announced became more and more severe, every effort was made to discover his hiding-place, but to no purpose. The Lord hid him during the time of danger, and maintained him by extraordinary supplies.

His first resting-place was by the brook Cherith, or (to give the exact meaning) in the torrent-bed

of the Cherith, which was probably one of the streams which ran into the Jordan from the east. The bed of the river was concealed by steep and wooded banks, and in the leafy covert thus afforded Elijah found refuge, sustained by a daily portion of bread and flesh brought to him by those ravens which cry unto God, and which He not only feeds, but makes to fulfil His bidding as truly as the angels round His throne. When the water of the stream failed in consequence of the continued drought, the word of the Lord bade him seek another refuge; he was no longer to depend on the birds of the air for his support, but on a poor widow whom God had "commanded to sustain him." He had to make a long journey beyond the borders of the Holy Land, to Zarephath, which belonged to Zidon, a small village on the coast, in the very heart of the Baal-worshippers. The woman to whom he was sent seems to have been herself a heathen, though specially chosen, above any of the Jewish people, to receive God's prophet, and to be supported together with him in a manner wholly unexpected and unaccountable.

When Elijah came to her, she was in the greatest extremity; she had just food enough for a single meal for herself and her only child. When that

should be eaten, it seemed as if nothing remained for them but to lie down and die. But at the very moment of her pressing necessity, the merciful God came to her relief. She had already left her home and gone out of the gate of the town, to gather sticks for the last meal, as she thought,—a melancholy task, assuredly; but she was not so much taken up with her own distress, as to be unwilling to think of or care for others. When the prophet met her and asked for a little water, she went at once to fetch it. But when he made the further request “Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand,” she could but answer, that she had none to bring: a single handful of meal was all that remained to her, and she was at that moment about to prepare it for herself and her son “that they might eat it and die.” “As Jehovah thy God liveth, I have not a cake.” She was acquainted, therefore, with the Name of the true God, the God of Israel; and she knew, moreover, that the stranger who stood before her was one of His worshippers. It is possible that she expected him to relieve her; but on the contrary, he renewed the request! “Fear not: go and do as thou hast said; but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after

make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, 'The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth.'” Here then was the trial of her faith and charity. Would she trust in the promise and give her last cake to the prophet? or would she, in fear and anxiety for her own safety and that of her child, refuse to give what she could so ill spare? Doubtless she had been accustomed heretofore to act strictly and conscientiously according to the light vouchsafed to her; and therefore this further trial was sent, in order that she might win for herself a richer blessing. And by the grace of God she was equal to the trial: “she went and did according to the saying of Elijah; and she and he and her house did eat many days,” that is, as it would seem, two full years. “The barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which He spake by Elijah.”

Such was the first step by which Almighty God would draw this heathen woman to Himself. He saw in her, even in her ignorance, some good thing, which disposed her to receive His special blessing, and therefore He vouchsafed to try her

trust in Him. And when she bore the trial, He granted her a signal manifestation of His Almighty Power.

But He had greater mercy in store for her. He desired to raise her conception of Himself, and to deepen her sense of sin, and therefore He sent another and still sharper trial. "It came to pass, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore that there was no breath left in him." What an overwhelming trouble! Her only son taken away, and she a widow! But mark the effect of the visitation. What different thoughts of her inmate Elijah does it awaken from any that she had had before! The gates of memory are unlocked, and she takes her affliction as a punishment for past sin. "What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? Art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?" "As if a veil should suddenly draw up, or light should burst into a darkened room and manifest to a man some glorious or fearful presence, of which he was till then unconscious, or only half-conscious; and at the same time shew to him all the foul corners of the room, the spots and blemishes and impurities by which he was surrounded, it would

fill him with awe and terror, with confusion and amazement. Such is the searching effect of God's visitation upon hearts tender and open to notice them."

So it was with the widow of Zarephath. There rose up before her in a moment the remembrance of past sin. She felt that God was dealing with her, and punishing her for faults which she had been inclined, it may be, to make light of. The loss of her only son revealed her to herself. And happy are they, who in like manner regard God's visitations as merciful chastisements. Often those chastisements touch men in the very tenderest parts: as David, whose heart overflowed with family affection, lost one son after another by shameful and miserable deaths, and even to the end of his life the sword never departed from his house. It has been truly said, that God's judgments ever make themselves known by pointing, in one or other of their circumstances, to the sins which need especially to be repented of. Well is it with those who, like this poor woman, are led by the calamities which befall them, to look back with penitence into their lives, and to grieve over their past transgressions. With too many it is far otherwise. They think that as soon as they have

repented of their sins, or at all events have turned from them, they may straightway dismiss them from their thoughts, like a settled account, which may be put on the file and forgotten. But sin forgiven is nevertheless very often punished, and that, in order that we may remember and repent of it more thoroughly. And the history of this woman encourages us to hope that the humble acknowledgment of God's chastisement as the due reward of our sin, is the way to true peace: even in this world, we may perceive that God is dealing with us in love; and we may be sure that if our blessings are not restored to us here, it is in order that we may find them in richer abundance in the world to come.

Elijah did not understand the purpose of God's dealings, and his tender heart was moved when he found that his dwelling in the house inflicted such terrible sorrow: "O Lord my God, hast Thou also brought evil upon this widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?" In his distress he had recourse to prayer: he intreated earnestly that the child's soul might return to him; and as at his prayer the heaven had been closed, so now at his prayer the life of the child was restored—the first recorded instance of the kind in the Bible.

And not only was the widow's broken heart comforted, but her faith was wonderfully confirmed, and she said to Elijah, "By this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth."

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—1 *Kings* xviii.

“THE third year,” spoken of in the beginning of this chapter, must mean the third year of Elijah’s sojourn at Zarephath. The events here recorded happened in the fourth year of the famine, which lasted three years and a-half. We hear nothing of any national humiliation, or putting away of idols; all we know of the effect of the visitation was, that a fierce persecution was raised against the prophets of Jehovah, and that Elijah would have fallen a victim to the vengeance of Ahab and Jezebel, if they could have discovered the place of his retreat.

The suffering caused by the long-continued drought was excessive: the cattle were perishing; and at length, as a last resource, Ahab, the king, and Obadiah, the chief officer of his household, divided the land between them, and set forth to search for any patches of herbage which might still be left round the springs and in the clefts of the torrent-beds. It was a matter of life and

death, and, as such, could only be entrusted to the chief persons in the kingdom. Obadiah was startled in his solitary journey by the sudden appearance before him of Elijah, the very man who, in Ahab's thought, had caused the famine, and whom he had so long and so earnestly desired to meet. Obadiah shrank at first from communicating Elijah's presence to Ahab, fearing that he would, as on a former occasion, vanish as suddenly as he had appeared; but Elijah assured him that he meant to present himself before Ahab, and Obadiah, therefore, went to seek him.

Whatever may have been the feelings of anger and purpose of vengeance with which Ahab first encountered the prophet, they soon gave way to fear. "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" exclaimed the angry king. "I have not troubled Israel, but thou and thy father's house," was the answer of the prophet, "in that ye have forsaken the commandment of the Lord, and have followed Baalim." And then he bade him gather together all Israel upon Mount Carmel, with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, or Ashtoreth, who were specially under the protection of Jezebel. It is not clear why Mount Carmel was chosen for this great assembly; it

may have been partly on account of its imposing form and height, and partly because it was already considered a sacred spot, in consequence of an altar of Jehovah, which had stood there in former times and been thrown down.

Ahab forthwith obeyed Elijah's bidding, and summoned the people and the prophets to Mount Carmel. The particular part of the mountain, where they were gathered together, has been ascertained with tolerable accuracy. Carmel itself is a long ridge, branching off from the mountains of Samaria, and running in a north-westerly direction towards the sea: it there stands as a wall between the maritime plain of Sharon on the south, and the more inland plain of Esdraelon on the north. At the eastern end of the ridge is a spot, known to this day as El Maharrakah—"the burning," or "the sacrifice"—the natural features of which are such as to make it peculiarly adapted for such an assembly as is here described. Close at hand is an ancient fountain, the water of which never fails, and which was able, even after the long drought, to supply the water needed for the trench round Elijah's altar.

Let us imagine ourselves standing just beneath the summit of the mountain-ridge, which here

rises to the height of several hundred feet, "in a glade overlooking the plain, somewhat in the shape of an amphitheatre, and completely shut in on the north by well-wooded cliffs." On the lower slopes of this glade were gathered the thousands of Israel, and in front of them stood, on the one hand, the glittering court of the king, with the 850 prophets of Baal and Astarte, in all the splendour of their vestments and the excitement of their sensuous devotion, and, on the other, the solitary figure of Elijah, with his rough and scanty clothing, calm and undaunted in the consciousness of the Divine protection. It was he who had summoned the assembly; and now he comes forward to announce the purpose for which he had gathered the people together. He proposes that the great controversy between Jehovah and Baal should be then and there decided, and that the inconstant people should give in their final adhesion to the one or the other. Let us listen to him as, with a voice of thunder, he appeals to the expectant multitude: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If Jehovah be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him."

A breathless silence ensued. The conscience-stricken people were afraid of the king, and made

no reply. Then the prophet proposed a decisive test, whereby it should be proved once for all who was supreme, Jehovah or Baal. Alone as he was against the 450 priests of Baal, he challenged them to the trial. Let two bullocks be chosen and two rival altars reared; let wood be laid on each and no fire placed under it; and then the God that should answer by fire, let him be accounted God. The people acknowledged the justice of the proposal, and the prophets of Baal could not refuse it. They built their altar and arranged their wood, and set in order their victim, and from morning even until noon they cried aloud, "O Baal, hear us!" But there was no voice, nor any that answered. Elijah in the meanwhile watched their proceedings in silence. As time went on, the idolatrous priests became excited, and leapt upon the altar, trembling for their master's credit. At length Elijah exclaimed, in stern and cutting irony, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is talking, or he is pursuing; or he is on a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth and must be awaked."

Goaded to madness, the miserable idolaters, with frantic cries and wild dances, cut their flesh with knives and lancets, and conjured their god to

manifest his power. But all in vain. The altar was untouched: no smoke issued from the high place. They continued their invocations all the afternoon, till the sun began to sink towards the western waves. Then the work of Elijah commenced. He first summoned the people to draw near, that they might not suspect any deceit or trickery. Standing as he was among the ruins of the ancient altar of Jehovah, he gathered with his own hand twelve stones from the fragments, according to the number of the tribes of Israel, and repaired the altar and laid the victim upon it. Three several times the victim and the altar were deluged with water from the adjacent well; and then at length, as the hour of the evening sacrifice drew on, he sent up to heaven a short and solemn prayer, beseeching Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, to prove that He was indeed the God of Israel, and that he was His servant, and had done all these things according to His word. His prayer was answered at once. The fire of the Lord descended, and consumed not the sacrifice only and the wood, but the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. The triumph of Elijah was complete, and the heart of the people was turned back again;

and, lying prostrate on their faces in solemn awe, they exclaimed, "JEHOVAH, He is the God: JEHOVAH, He is the God." So that Elijah had no difficulty in seizing at once the discomfited prophets, and hurrying them down the steep sides of the mountain to the torrent of the Kishon, which wound along its base, and slaying them there.

Wonderful and imposing as this history is, the scene which followed is scarcely less striking. From the dreadful slaughter at the Kishon the king went up, at the prophet's bidding, to the glades of Carmel, to eat and to drink, that is, to join in the feast which followed the sacrifice. And Elijah, too, ascended the mountain, and, lying on the earth with his face between his knees, he remained rapt in prayer, while his servant mounted to the highest point of all, where there is a wider view of the waters of the Mediterranean over the western shoulder of the ridge. The sun had set, but the cloudless sky was lit up with the long bright glow which follows an Eastern sunset. Seven times the servant climbed and looked anxiously towards the west, to catch the first glimpse of the answer to the prophet's prayer. But seven times he climbed in vain. The sky was still cloudless, the sea still calm; "at last,

out of the horizon there rose a little cloud—the first that had for days and months passed across the heavens—and it grew in the deepening shades of evening, and at length the whole sky was overcast, and the forests of Carmel shook with the welcome sound of those mighty winds which in Eastern regions precede a coming tempest.” The king mounted his chariot in haste, lest the long-hoped-for rain should swell the torrent of the Kishon, as in those days when it swept away the host of Sisera ; and the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he girt his mantle round his loins, and, amidst the pouring rain with which the night closed in, ran before the chariot with supernatural strength to the entrance of Jezreel.

Thus the prayer of Elijah, which in the beginning caused the drought and the famine, now brought the rain. And if we desire that the rain of God’s Word and the gifts of His Spirit should cover those parts of the earth which are now dry and waste and steeped in ignorance and sin, what have we to do but to pray for them ? This history is an encouragement to hope, that in answer to our earnest prayer, though the beginning may be like the little cloud rising up out of the sea, the time will come when the Gospel of Christ will be

published throughout the world, and the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

To return for a moment to the great controversy on Mount Carmel. How many Christians are there, who, like the Israelites, halting between the worship of Baal and the service of Jehovah, are unwilling to yield themselves up with entire devotion to the love of God! Some, *e.g.*, whilst they profess to be God's true servants, and are so esteemed by others, are nevertheless in the habit of giving way to some one or more favourite sin. The indulgence of that besetting sin mars their service; and the best that can be said for them is, that they are halting between two opinions. Others, again, there are, and very many, who make no special profession of religion, and would allow that they are very different from what they should be, who yet cannot resolve to make the needful change in their life: they wish they could, but they cannot; and so they halt and waver between God and the world. They hope that there will come a time when a change of circumstances will induce a change of life; but they put it off for the present. O the folly, and misery, and sinfulness of such indecision! Our only duty and

wisdom and happiness consist in yielding ourselves up to God at once, and with all our hearts, to have no will but His, and to exhibit ourselves to the world as His true and faithful servants in all things.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—1 *Kings* xix.

THE contrast is not greater between the two places to which our thoughts are directed in this and the preceding chapter,—the lonely silent desert, and the hill-side with its swarming thousands,—than between the two conditions of mind in which Elijah appears before us : at one time all fearlessness and confidence, boldly rebuking Ahab, challenging the prophets of Baal, vindicating God's honour and majesty among the multitudes on Mount Carmel, and convincing the people ; at another all fear and despondency—first flying for his life, and then throwing himself down in despair and wishing for death.

The bold and zealous Elijah, who had gone fearlessly, at God's command, to confront Ahab in the height of his rage and fury, and had matched himself alone against the 450 prophets of Baal, is,

humanly speaking, the very last person whom we should expect to hear of as fleeing from the vengeance of Jezebel into the wilderness, leaving the duties which God had laid upon him, and requesting for himself that he might die. What has wrought this change in him? It is not so much fear as disappointment which has thus unnerved him. That had been a glorious moment for Elijah, when he had been permitted to prove, in the most signal way, the power and glory of Jehovah, and when the awe-stricken people proclaimed their allegiance. He could scarcely help anticipating that a thorough reformation was at hand, and that king and people alike would at once renounce their idolatry and cleave to the Lord.

But his bright anticipations were promptly and miserably shattered. Nothing came of all his triumph. The people were not reformed; the idols were not destroyed; the wicked Jezebel still ruled supreme, and Ahab had no power to resist her will. Of what avail, then, was it for him to attempt any longer to stem, single-handed, the torrent of iniquity? The prophet was in despair, and he abandoned the task and took refuge in flight.

His flight, to be effectual, must be distant. He passed, therefore, not only beyond the confines of the northern kingdom, but through the whole extent of Judah also, into the waste uninhabited country beyond Beersheba. There, in the desert, he flung himself under a solitary juniper-tree, and cried, "It is enough! Lord, let me die, for I am no better than my fathers." He had come there without provisions, waiting for death; but God had yet a lesson to teach him, and a work for him to do. Once and again, as his exhausted nature sank in sleep, an angel awoke him and gave him sustenance, and he went in the strength of that food a journey of forty days, to the mount of God, even to Horeb.

There, in *the* cave, "well known then, though uncertain now"—one of the many caverns in that awful mountain range—Elijah passed at least one night. In the morning came the word of Jehovah, the question, "What doest thou here, Elijah? Thou, the prophet of Israel, here in the mountains of Arabia? What stern necessity has brought thee hither, away from thy work, to the spot where the glory of God was so signally manifested in times past?" The prophet made answer at once, but it was in the language of complaint

and disappointment. He had been very jealous for God's honour, but none stood by his side ; His people had been rebellious, His altars overthrown, and His prophets persecuted : he alone was left of those who once owned His name, and his life had been in jeopardy, and he had been obliged to fly.

Now mark the answer of God. It came at first in act, rather than by word. Elijah was directed to leave the cave, and stand on the mountain in the open air, face to face with Jehovah. Then, as he stood, like Moses, awaiting the signs of the Divine Presence, the Lord passed by in all His most appalling manifestation. The prophet listened ; and there came the rushing hurricane, rending the solemn mountain, and breaking in pieces the granite rocks of Sinai. " But the Lord was not in the wind." Then the earthquake shook the ground under his feet, and the crash reverberated through the valleys around. " But the Lord was not in the earthquake." Then the lightning flashes gleamed incessantly. " But the Lord was not in the fire." Then all was quiet ; and presently, " in the deep stillness of the desert air—unbroken by falling stream, or note of bird, or tramp of beast, or cry of man—came the

whisper of a voice as of a gentle breath, of a voice so small that it was almost like silence." But low and still as it was, it spoke more clearly to the heart of Elijah than the roar and blaze which had preceded it. "To him, no less unmistakably than to Moses centuries before, it was proclaimed that Jehovah was merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth." Elijah knew that the Lord was about to speak. He wrapped his face in his mantle, and stood waiting to receive the Divine communication. It was in the same words as before, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" and so was his answer: but a change had passed over him since he had spoken the words before. He had thought the earthquake, the fire, and the wind, must be the great witnesses of Jehovah. But the Lord was not in *them*. Not they, but the still small Voice, had that awe in it, which forced the prophet to cover his face with his mantle. Not in the persecutions of Ahab and of Jezebel, nor in the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, but in the seven thousand unknown worshippers who had not by word or deed acknowledged the power of Baal, was the assurance that Elijah was not alone as he had seemed to be. The tokens of God's presence are silent and *secret*,

rather than public and palpable; and, therefore, the prophet must not be too hasty in judging of the condition of his country. “What doest thou here, Elijah?” He says to him,—“here, without any command from Me? here, in the wilderness, away from thy appointed work? What doest thou, flying from the face of man, when the Almighty God is thy protection? What doest thou, shrinking from a task as hopeless, which has been set thee by Me? Come forth and stand before Me, and acknowledge that My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways. The wind is strong and violent, rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before Me; but I am not in the wind. The earthquake and the fire are exceeding terrible; but I am not in them. It is the still small voice, which is the token of My presence. Be not overmuch disheartened, then, if to outward appearance I seem to have withdrawn My saving light and health from this sinful nation. There is still a remnant left, and a work for thee to do. Go and anoint Hazael to be King of Syria, and Jehu, the son of Nimshi, to be King of Israel, and Elisha, the son of Shaphat, of Abel-meholah, to be prophet in thy stead. Yet have I left Me seven thousand in

Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which has not kissed him. Thou thoughtest thyself most successful when the shouts of the multitude resounded on the heights of Carmel; but thy real success is in the unsuspected allegiance of those seven thousand." Thus Almighty God rebuked the prophet for his impatience, at the same time that He cheered him with the assurance that things were not really so bad or so hopeless as he imagined them to be.

Here is a lesson which we all need. Who is not tempted to turn away from the trials which lie in his path, and to give up the service which God sets him, because nothing seems to come of it? As regards our personal advancement in holiness, we slacken our endeavours and our watchfulness, because we do not perceive that we make progress. And in our efforts for the good of others, we are often so discouraged by disappointments as almost to refuse any longer to waste our efforts in fruitless labour. Such is our danger; but what saith the Scripture? "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you shall find it after many days. . . . In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening withhold not your hand, for you know not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they

both shall be alike good." If we will be patient, and leave matters in God's hands, we may be sure that all will be well, even though we may not ourselves be conscious of it. The dews of God's grace will sink softly, perhaps, and silently, like the still small voice which Elijah heard, but yet surely, into our own hearts and the hearts of those for whom we pray. The seed will spring and grow up, we know not how: first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. Only let us never shrink from the task really assigned to us by God. Let neither fear nor disappointment make us lukewarm or faint-hearted in His service, so that His voice within us should whisper, "What doest thou here in thy sloth and cowardice?" And if at any time God chide us for our negligence, let us take the warning at once, and return to our work and duty, lifting up the hands that hang down and the feeble knees, and remembering that the secret of all true success lies not so much in any great and wide impression that may be produced, as in the altered lives of ourselves and others,—in humble, hearty, unseen work.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—1 *Kings* xxi.

THE city of Jezreel is connected exclusively with the history of Ahab and his family. Without altogether deserting Samaria as the political capital of his kingdom, Ahab lived chiefly at Jezreel. There was the temple of Astarte, with her four hundred priests, supported by Jezebel; and there also was the ivory palace of Ahab on the eastern side of the city, and forming part of the city wall. The royal grounds probably stretched down the hill towards the east; and there in the valley, adjoining those grounds, lay the vineyard which was the patrimony of Naboth, which Ahab desired to have as a garden of herbs, and for which he offered an equivalent either in money or in land. Ahab was not to be blamed, so far as we know, for wishing to purchase Naboth's vineyard: the fault was in his not being satisfied with Naboth's refusal, especially when he assigned as his reason for that refusal, that he was unwilling to part with "the inheritance of his fathers." By the law of Moses (Levit. xxv. 23) the Israelites were forbidden to alienate their land; and it certainly seems from the expression used by Naboth as if it were especially a religious reason which prevented his

acceding to the king's request: "The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee."

The sin of Ahab, then, consisted in coveting what was not and could not rightfully be his, and in allowing himself to be disconcerted when he failed to obtain the object of his desire. He laid himself down upon his bed and turned away his face, and would eat no bread. What a picture of offended pride and helpless anger! His high position, his large possessions, his manifold means of enjoyment, were nothing to him, because he could not obtain the few square yards of land on which he had set his heart. How often does it happen still that men set their hearts on trifles, and the loss of trifles discomposes them! They do not take account of what they have, in comparison with what they crave for. Some paltry loss, some slight injury, some trifling, perhaps unintentional, neglect or slight, will ruffle their tempers and disturb their peace, and Ahab, tossing upon his bed with his face to the wall and spurning his food, is but a true representation of their wretched folly.

Ahab was cowed by Naboth's independence, but Jezebel's proud spirit was roused. She despised

her husband for submitting to be so treated; he was not more than half a king, so long as he suffered one of his subjects to thwart his wishes with impunity. She would take the matter into her own hands, and, having no scruple as to the means to be employed, she promised without hesitation to procure for him the vineyard which he desired.

In the course of a few days, by false accusation, her promise was fulfilled. She wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, commanding the elders of Jezreel, first, to accuse Naboth publicly of treason and blasphemy, and then, without loss of time, to execute the sentence which such an accusation involved. Though the warrant was in Ahab's name, the elders of Jezreel had no doubt that the order came from Jezebel, and accordingly to her, and not to Ahab, was the announcement sent of its accomplishment. The course of proceeding laid down by Jezebel was strictly adhered to. A fast was proclaimed in the city, as if some great public calamity had happened, and an assembly summoned, over which Naboth presided by virtue of his position. Two men of worthless character then came forward and charged him with having blasphemed God and the

king. According to the law, the punishment of the offence was death, and it was executed forthwith. Not Naboth only, but his sons, were dragged out of the city and stoned; and Jezebel, informed of the success of her scheme, told her husband that Naboth was dead. He went down at once to take possession of the property, which, as having belonged to a criminal, was now forfeit to the king. He went down in state, attended by his two captains, Bidkar and Jehu (2 Kings ix. 25); but on his arrival he found the vineyard already occupied by one whom he little expected to see, and whom least of all he desired to see, the Prophet Elijah. Rapid as had been the proceedings of Jezebel and Ahab (for it seems to have been on the very day following the execution of Naboth that Ahab went down to take possession of the vacant vineyard), Elijah was beforehand, waiting to confront him. "Hast thou killed and also taken possession?" was the salutation which met his ear. Murder and robbery were distinctly laid to his charge, though the innocent blood which had been shed was shed probably without his knowledge, and though by the death of Naboth and his natural heirs the land fell to him as a matter of course. But he was willing to accept

the fruit of murder and falsehood, and therefore the guilt of these crimes was most justly laid on him.

And how did he meet the denunciation of the prophet? With shame and fear, as one who felt the truth of the charges and was afraid to take vengeance on the accuser. It is probable that if Elijah had thus addressed Jezebel, she would at once have ordered her guards to seize and punish him; but Ahab was too abashed and conscience-struck to issue any such order: he only gave utterance to an exclamation of helpless vexation. "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" Can I never escape from thy power and thy persecution? Elijah answered, sternly, "I have found thee; because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord." And then followed the terrible curse, which not only struck terror into the heart of the king, but made such a deep impression on his attendants, that years afterwards one of them was able to recal them to his companion: "I will take away thy posterity; I will make thy house like the house of Jeroboam and Baasha; thy blood shall be shed on the same spot where the blood of thy victim was shed yesterday; thy wife and thy children shall be torn in

this very garden by the wild dogs of the city, or devoured by the vultures of the sky" (2 Kings ix. 26, 36, 37).

Ahab trembled as he heard the awful words; and no wonder; for he was convinced they would be fulfilled, and he was conscious that they were deserved. But Ahab did more than tremble; he in some sort truly repented of his sin: "he rent his clothes" (we read) "and put sackcloth upon his flesh and fasted, and lay in sackcloth and went softly." He made no reply to Elijah's warning, but returned to his palace and there openly showed himself in the garb of a penitent in the presence of his Court and his subjects, and in spite, as we cannot help supposing, of the ridicule of his wife; and so he acknowledged, in the most emphatic manner, the greatness of his guilt and the justice of the Divine sentence.

It would be a great mistake to suppose that Ahab's penitence, imperfect as it was, was other than sincere, so far as it went. God Himself has borne witness to its sincerity. Ahab really believed that the judgments which Elijah denounced upon him would be executed; he was really afraid of God's displeasure, and therefore he humbled himself before Him. Almighty God in His mercy

took notice of his humiliation, and called the prophet's attention to it also; nay, more, He so far graciously accepted it as to remit in part the sentence which had gone forth against the offender. "Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before Me? because he humbleth himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house."

But Ahab's repentance, though sincere, was very imperfect. And where was it wanting? In the absence of any real sorrow for his sin as against God. He felt and acknowledged God's justice and His power, but he had no apprehension of His love, no desire or longing for His holiness. He dreaded the consequences of his sins, but we do not find that he put them away. Nothing is said in Scripture of any effort at reformation, any discouragement of idol-worship among the people. He feared God's anger; but it does not appear that he cared for or sought His favour. The wonder is, that Almighty God should be willing in any degree to recognise as penitence what was so miserably imperfect. It shows, more plainly perhaps than any other history in the Bible, how very tender and compassionate He is to our infirmities. He does not despise the day of small

things. He accepts what is imperfect, in order that it may be more perfect. He would lead men on from fear to love. But at the same time He would teach us that fear of His judgments, though it may be the beginning of true conversion, is not of itself sufficient to perfect that conversion. There can be no thorough repentance without a deep sense of God's love, and a feeling of horror at the ingratitude and baseness of sin as committed against that love.

One encouragement above all others this history suggests, that He Who was so gracious to Ahab's unworthy, imperfect, short-lived repentance, will be sure to accept and cherish those who truly humble themselves before Him and mourn to think that they have sinned against One Who has been so loving and merciful.

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—1 *Kings* xxii. to ver. 41.

THE power of Syria had greatly increased since the time of Solomon. In the reign of Omri, the father of Ahab, the King of Syria not only captured a number of Israelite cities, which he added to his own dominions, but he exercised a kind of lordship in Samaria itself, “making himself streets” in the city. The position of affairs was somewhat reversed in the following reign. The Syrians were defeated in their attack on Samaria, and the King Benhadad was taken prisoner, and forced to submit to a treaty, whereby he gave up all his father had gained, and submitted in his turn to the sovereignty of Ahab. Still, however, the border fortress of Ramoth Gilead, which was regarded as the key of the country to the north-east, remained in the hands of Syria; but when Ahab had repelled the Syrian attack on the interior of his kingdom, and had succeeded in obtaining the powerful aid of Jehoshaphat the King

of Judah, he planned an expedition for the purpose of recovering it.

In the beginning of his reign Jehoshaphat had not only kept aloof from the King of Israel, but he had endeavoured to strengthen his kingdom against Israel, placing garrisons in the cities of Judah, and also in those of Ephraim, which his father Asa had taken (2 Chron. xvii. 1, 2). As time advanced, however, the relations between the two kingdoms became more friendly, and for the first time since they parted at Shechem, Israel and Judah were united, the union being cemented by the marriage of Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat, with Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel.

It was in the sixteenth year of his reign that Jehoshaphat went down in state to Samaria to visit King Ahab. He was received with every mark of distinction, sheep and oxen being slain in abundance for him and for his retinue. It was on the occasion of this visit that Ahab proposed to Jehoshaphat a joint expedition against Ramoth-gilead, and Jehoshaphat consented,—an act of compliance for which he was afterwards specially rebuked, for when he returned to his home in peace to Jerusalem, he was met, not with words of welcome, but with the rebuke of Jehu, the son of

Hanani the seer: "Shouldst thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord" (2 Chron. xix. 2).

It would seem, indeed, as if Jehoshaphat had some misgiving from the first, for he proposed, before the expedition was undertaken, that inquiry should be made as to the will of Jehovah. Ahab was aware of the religious character of Jehoshaphat, and would not risk his support by refusing to accede to his request. He thought it more prudent to seem to comply with it, and summoned therefore at once four hundred of the prophets of his kingdom, while he and his brotherking took their seats with great pomp on two thrones in the open space before the gates of Samaria to hear the message which the prophets should deliver. Though they did not scruple to speak in the name of Jehovah, it cannot be supposed that they were in any sense His prophets. They were probably prophets of Baal or Ashtaroath, who took the name of Jehovah on their lips in order to deceive the King of Judah. But the practised eye of Jehoshaphat discovered their imposture at once, and after they had delivered their counsel and with one consent urged the war, he

asked, significantly, whether there was not besides a prophet of Jehovah, of whom they might inquire: evidently implying that he did not consider the men before him to have spoken with His authority. Ahab acknowledged that there was yet one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, of whom they might inquire of the Lord; but he hated him, because he never prophesied good for him, but only evil. Ahab and Micaiah had met before, and it is not unlikely (according to the statement of Josephus), that it was Micaiah who rebuked Ahab for not putting Benhadad to death (1 Kings xx. 35) after his brilliant victory over the Syrians, and that for that bold rebuke he had been, as Josephus further affirms, cast into prison. This account agrees with the circumstance that Ahab knew well where Micaiah was to be found, and was able immediately, when his objection was set aside by Jehoshaphat, to send an officer to fetch him.

Micaiah, therefore, the one true prophet of Jehovah, stood before the two kings, confronting the false prophets, who with one consent had promised success to the royal enterprise. One of them, Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah, just before Micaiah arrived, had made horns of iron, with

which, he announced as from the Lord, Ahab would push the Syrians until they were destroyed. Micaiah was well aware of the excitement in favour of the expedition, and he knew the severity of Ahab's vengeance; but he was unmoved alike by fear or favour. His one resolve was to deliver without reserve the message with which he was charged: "As the Lord liveth, what the Lord saith unto me, that will I speak." At first, indeed, he concurred ironically with the prophets, and bade Ahab act on their advice, as if he would say, "You have set your heart on this expedition; and your prophets assure you of success: go up and prove the truth of their prediction." But the irony was too obvious, and Ahab did not venture to consider him as approving of his design: he adjured him to speak the truth, and thereupon Micaiah foretold plainly the defeat of the army and the death of Ahab: "I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd; and the Lord said, These have no master: let them return every man to his house in peace." He then went on to declare, that he had seen another vision which explained how it was that the prophets had all agreed to advise Ahab to his destruction: he had seen the throne of Jehovah

Himself, with all the host of heaven standing before Him, and he had learnt that He had sent a lying spirit into the mouth of all Ahab's prophets. This plain speaking brought down on Micaiah not only the scorn of the false prophets, but the severe vengeance of Ahab, who ordered him at once to be sent back to the dungeon and fed on the scantiest fare. The king and his unwelcome counsellor parted with the thrilling words, "If thou return at all in peace, the Lord hath not spoken by me . . . Hearken, O people, every one of you."

How it was that, after the prediction of Micaiah, Jehoshaphat consented to accompany Ahab to the war, does not clearly appear. Perhaps he did not fully understand the warning; perhaps he attributed it, as Ahab had suggested, to personal malice; but it is most likely, that he had not courage to resist the will of Ahab. At all events the two kings went forth together against Ramoth-gilead.

Ahab had pretended to make light of Micaiah's prediction against himself, but it is evident that it left a sting in his heart. He was resolved to act on the counsel of his false advisers, but he so far feared the warning of the true prophet whom he hated, that he endeavoured to protect himself

against the danger with which he threatened him. He proposed that he should disguise himself and go into the battle, while Jehoshaphat should appear in his royal robes. This device brought Jehoshaphat into imminent peril, and he escaped only by letting his enemies know, that he was not the King of Israel, whom they had been specially commanded to encounter.

But Ahab's precaution did not avail for his own protection, though for the time it baffled his enemies. A certain man drew a bow at a venture and smote the King of Israel between the joints of the harness. Among the many thousand arrows discharged that day was one specially directed by God against Ahab, and so directed as to penetrate between the joints of his armour and inflict a mortal wound. In spite of his armour, and in spite of his disguise, the arrow of God found him out, and the blood ran out of the wound into the chariot. He continued standing erect, however, in his chariot throughout the day, lest the army should be discouraged; but he died at even, and his body was carried back to the royal burial-ground in Samaria. Thus the words of Micaiah and Elijah were fulfilled; by that evening the people were scattered on the hills as sheep not

having a shepherd; and a few days afterward, when the bloodstained chariot was washed, the dogs licked the blood of Ahab in the portion of Jezreel, where the blood of Naboth and his sons had been shed.

Unlike as our circumstances are in many ways from those of Ahab, yet his sinful life, his half consultation of God, his anger with Micaiah, his disguise in battle, find too exact a parallel in the behaviour of many among us. "How often, for instance, do those whose lives have been sinful and profligate, when they pretend to turn to God, turn, as it were, by halves; do *something*, but not all—refuse to search honestly for the will of God; *leave out Micaiah*, as it were, and so perhaps leave out the very thing, or the very man, who would have led them right."

And the conduct of Ahab, after the warning of Micaiah was given, how like it is to what we see continually around us! "Men will *not obey* the voice of warning; but they dare not *forget* it, and so they devise some middle way. They determine to follow their own will; but, in so doing, they will change, not their hearts indeed, but, as, it were, their *clothes*; they will disobey, but it shall be in disguise of some kind, as Ahab put off his

royal robes when he went into the battle. But however it be, God will find them out. Some stray and random arrow shall pierce them, disguise as they will, and put on what armour they will; God shall suddenly shoot at them with a swift arrow; His eye shall surely find them out and His hand shall reach them."

Thus plainly does this history warn us to "remember that sin leads to blindness, and blindness to ruin, and that no device nor cunning will ever frustrate the judgments of Almighty God."

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—2 *Kings* ii. to ver. 16.

A SPECIAL mysteriousness seems to hang over Elijah, both in his life and in his departure. Though some of the scenes in which he bears a conspicuous part are recorded at length, and it seems to us, in consequence, that a good deal is told us about him in the Bible, it is to be observed that what we know of him has reference only to a very short period of his life. For the most part his history is a secret. As there is no mention of his parents, so neither is there of his ordinary

place of abode. He lived apart, only appearing now and then, like an angel, with a message from heaven. On almost every occasion of his appearance, he comes abruptly and suddenly, when he is not expected. So he appeared to Ahab, when he predicted the three years' drought,—so to the widow of Zarephath, when she was preparing her last scanty meal,—so to Obadiah, when he was searching the land for pasture,—so to Ahab, again, when he went down to take Naboth's vineyard,—so to the messengers of Ahaziah, when they were on their way to the oracle of Baalzebub. Where the rest of his life was spent, we do not know; though there seems reason to believe that he lived rather in the retirement of the prophetic schools, than in the solitude of the desert.

The Lesson before us tells us that his strange and wonderful life came to a strange and wonderful end. He was removed suddenly from earth in a whirlwind; and we know not where he rests. Once again he appeared, no less mysteriously, on the Mount of Transfiguration, to bear witness, as the representative of the Prophets, just as Moses was the representative of the Law, to the glory of Christ, and to consign his authority into His hands. The Apostles were not surprised, appa-

rently, at the appearance of Elijah. The mystery that attached to him had made such an impression on the minds of the Jews, that they were able to realise, more fully in all probability than they would otherwise have done, the prophecy of Malachi, which declared that he should one day appear again. We find from the Gospels that there was a general expectation of his return. Both St. John the Baptist and our Lord were in turn proclaimed to be Elijah. Even the cry of our Lord upon the cross, which bore only a slight resemblance to the name of Elijah, was understood by the bystanders as a call to him for help: "Let be; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him."

Though the prophecy of Malachi, which declares that God would send Elijah the Prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord, to turn the heart of the fathers to the children and of the children to the fathers, was not exhausted by the mission of St. John the Baptist, there can be no doubt that it was partially and signally fulfilled in him.

The first words spoken in the dawn of the New Testament dispensation refer back to those last words of the Old Testament, and the angel Gabriel

declared to Zacharias that the son who should be born to him should go before the coming Messiah, "in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just." And our Lord Himself declared, speaking of St. John the Baptist, "If ye will receive it, this is Elijah, that was for to come."

It may not be unsuitable, therefore, now that we have come to this last Lesson connected with Elijah, and considering that this particular history of his translation has occurred already as one of the Lessons for Ascension Day, if we trace some of the particulars of the correspondence between him and the Baptist.

In the first place, it is obvious to notice the similarity of attire and personal appearance: Elijah the Tishbite, with his girdle of skin and sheep-skin cape, by which he was recognised (2 Kings i. 8), recalls at once the Evangelist's description of St. John the Baptist,—that he had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins.

As Elijah was raised up to be a witness for God at a time of national apostacy, when the mass of the people were abandoned to the worship of idols,

so St. John the Baptist's special mission was to call his countrymen to repentance, and to bear witness for God amidst a generation of profligate hypocrites.

The Baptist displayed the spirit and power of Elijah, also, in the boldness with which he rebuked iniquity in high places. Elijah was God's messenger to Ahab, the worst of the bad kings of Israel, who sold himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel, his wife, stirred up. St. John the Baptist was sent to reprove King Herod, and a prison was considered too light a punishment for his denunciation of the unholy alliance between him and his wife. And the fearlessness of Elijah in doing God's bidding and his scorn of consequences, let the message which he had to deliver be ever so unwelcome, find their parallel in the history of St. John the Baptist. Listen to Elijah, answering Ahab's taunt, "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" with the stern rejoinder, "I have not troubled Israel, but thou and thy father's house." See him confronting the 850 idol-priests on Mount Carmel, and scorning them for the failure of their frantic invocations. Hear him again in Naboth's vineyard, openly charging the king with robbery and murder. And

then turn to his counterpart, St. John the Baptist, when he roughly tore off the mask from the Scribes and Pharisees, who came to his baptism, and warned them of the judgment ready to fall on them ; or when he stood before Herod, and boldly reprovèd him for Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, and for all the evils which Herod had done.

The effect, too, of Elijah's reproofs on Ahab may be compared with the influence which the Baptist gained over Herod. Not only did Ahab find himself constrained to obey Elijah's bidding, but, on one occasion, he so trembled at his word, that he humbled himself before God for the sins for which the prophet rebuked him, and traversed some few steps at least of the path of true repentance. So of the wicked Herod it is said, that he feared John and observed him, and when he heard him he did many things, and heard him gladly. They were both, however, kept back from God by the influence of their abandoned and unscrupulous wives. As Jezebel stirred up Ahab, so it was through his wife that Herod was brought to the great sin of murdering St. John the Baptist ; for Herodias thirsted for his life as fiercely as Jezebel for the life of Elijah.

There is a contrast doubtless between the man-

ner of the departure of these two great saints ; but it is a contrast in appearance rather than in reality. The cruel death of St. John the Baptist did but release him to the same blessed rest into which Elijah had entered long before. It mattered not whether it were the sword of the executioner or the whirlwind that withdrew them from the labours and sufferings of life ; they were taken within the veil, and their souls are in the hands of the Lord.

God grant that when our end comes, and however it may come, it may be so far like the end of Elijah, that though we have to pass through the gates of death, and leave our bodies upon earth, angels may be at hand to bear our souls to Paradise !

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—2 *Kings* iv. 8—38.

THERE is a manifest connection between the two great prophets, Elijah and Elisha. Not only was Elisha specially appointed to succeed Elijah, as “prophet in his room ;” not only did he wait on him as his constant companion for seven or eight years ; but when Elijah was taken away, his mantle fell upon Elisha, in fulfilment of his re-

quest that he might have a double portion of his master's spirit. There is a certain correspondence, too, in their histories. They both lived in the same country, the idolatrous kingdom of Israel; and they both bore witness against the idolatry around them: they both wrought miracles for heathen persons, who were not of the chosen people; they both raised children from the dead. Indeed, it is not uncommon to confound the one with the other.

Nevertheless, there is a very marked difference between them. Of Elijah's early history all we know is, that he was of the inhabitants of Gilead. Like Melchizedeck, he has neither beginning of days nor end of life. Elisha's early days, on the other hand, were passed on his father's land in active labour. Elijah spent the greater part of his life in retirement, if not in solitude, coming forth to view only when he had a special message to deliver: Elisha lived in the world, in known dwellings, mixing with all classes of people, and having dealings with the kings of Edom and Syria, as well as those of Israel and Judah. There is a contrast, too, in the character of their respective ministries. Elijah's was a ministry, for the most part, of judgment, Elisha's of gentleness; and on this account,

while Elijah is taken as the type of St. John the Baptist, we see in Elisha a special likeness to our Lord Himself, not merely in the miracles which he wrought, but in that kind and loving temper which marked him out as a special type of Him Who would not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax.

This character of tenderness and loving sympathy is specially conspicuous in the history contained in this Lesson. Elisha was in the habit of passing continually through the village of Shunem, on his way, probably, to Mount Carmel. The wife of the chief proprietor in the place, having frequently observed him on his journey backwards and forwards, persuaded him to rest at her house, and after a while, his visits being repeated, she came to recognise the hallowed character of her guest, and begged her husband to provide special accommodation for him—a little chamber on the wall, with the necessary furniture, in order that whenever he came that way he might not only find shelter, but a place for retirement and rest.

Her kindness and hospitality seemed to Elisha to deserve some special acknowledgment; and he took an opportunity of expressly inquiring whether there was any way in which he could serve her.

Should he speak for her to the king, or to the captain of the host? (We may notice how this question bears witness to the conscious influence which Elisha had with persons of high station in the kingdom.) His hostess declined his offer: she was quite contented with her lot; dwelling as she did among her own people, she desired nothing. The prophet's servant then whispered to him that she had no child, and her husband was old. The one thing wanting, therefore, to complete her happiness, was that she should be a mother. Elisha promised to her that such should be the case in the course of the next year: she should thus be saved from that which was considered the greatest of all calamities by Jewish women, in that she should be permitted to embrace a son.

The blessing was granted; and from that time there is a pause of several years in the narrative. The boy grew up, or, at least, was old enough to accompany his father into the corn-fields in the time of harvest (those fields are still to be seen, among the richest in the country, sloping down toward the south), where the boy was suddenly struck down by the fierce rays of the morning sun; being carried home to his mother, he died on her knees at noon. In this sudden and overwhelming

blow, the bereaved mother did not seem to hesitate for a moment as to what she should do. She carried the dead body into the prophet's chamber, and laid it on his bed; and then, mounted on an ass, went herself in quest of him. She seems to have concealed the death of the child from her husband, so that he expressed surprise at her wishing to visit the man of God at that time, it being neither new moon nor Sabbath. We gather from this that it was her habit to repair to the prophet at stated times, once a-week at the least, for some religious service. This service was held, apparently, on Mount Carmel, where the prophet spent a good deal of his time.

A wide plain stretches from Shunem to Carmel, across which the Shunamite rode, a distance of twenty miles, for five or six hours without intermission. From the heights of Carmel, which commanded the road across the plain, the prophet saw and recognised her. Alarmed at her unexpected appearance, and, fearing some trouble which had not been revealed to him, he sent Gehazi down to meet her with three inquiries, "Is it well with thee? Is it well with thy husband? Is it well with thy child?" She answered, "It is well," but at the same time she rushed past him up the

mountain to where the prophet was stationed, and threw herself at his feet. The officious Gehazi would have thrust her away, as if her very touch were pollution : but the prophet perceived at once the tokens of a grief too deep for words, and said, “ Let her alone, for her soul is vexed within her ; and the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me.” When at length she spoke, it was not to solicit the prophet’s aid in her calamity. But no direct request could have explained more clearly to Elisha the cause of her distress. The great blessing which Elisha had procured for her, the gift of a son,—she had not expected or desired it : why was it given, if it was to be so soon and so suddenly taken away ? Elisha perceived in a moment what had happened. He ordered Gehazi to go in haste to Shunem, taking his staff with him, which he was to lay on the face of the child. Why Gehazi was sent in this way, it is difficult to determine ; perhaps it might be to hinder the child from being disturbed before the prophet arrived ; or, perhaps, Elisha thought that the child might be restored to life by means of the staff without his going himself to Shunem ; but when the mother declared so positively that she would not return without him, he no longer prayed for a

blessing on the use of his staff, but waited until he should be there in person. It must have been night before Elisha and the mother reached Shunem. They were met on the way by Gehazi, who could report no improvement: "the child was not awaked." Elisha then entered the chamber himself, and shutting the door upon them twain, prayed earnestly unto the Lord. Then, following the example of Elijah, he stretched himself once and again upon the child, and the Lord heard his prayer, and the child was gradually restored to life. The mother was called to receive her son, as it were for the second time, and she fell down in joy and thankfulness at the feet which a short time before she embraced in her sorrow.

There is a further circumstance in the history of this Shunamite recorded in Scripture, which it is worth while to take notice of. Warned by Elisha of a famine that should come upon the land for seven years, she took refuge with her family in the land of the Philistines. When she returned at the end of the time, she found her house and land occupied by a stranger; and immediately made application to the king for its recovery. It so happened that at the very time when she presented herself to the king, he was talking to Gehazi, the

servant of Elisha, and inquiring of him of all the great things that Elisha had done. Gehazi was in the very act of telling the king of the restoration of the Shunamite's son to life, when she was introduced into his presence, and Gehazi, recognising her, exclaimed, "My lord, O king, this is the woman, and this is her son, whom Elisha restored to life." Partly in consequence of this remarkable coincidence, and partly, perhaps, from regard to Elisha, the king ordered the land to be restored, with the value of all the produce during her absence.

We cannot fail to be interested and attracted by the history of this lady of Shunem. Occupying a position of comparative wealth, she seems to have been of a kind and benevolent disposition: otherwise she would not have pressed the prophet to make use of her house as a lodging, before she knew who he was. As she was thoughtful and considerate for others, so was she patient and contented as regarded herself, indulging no desire for anything beyond what God had given her. No sooner did she perceive the true character and holiness of her inmate, than she treated him with the greatest respect, providing for his necessities without interfering with his privacy. She was devout and punc-

tual also in her religious duties ; and when trouble came, she did not hesitate where to look for relief. Nor does she seem to have doubted that relief would be given. She clung to the man of God, as believing that God could and would help her through him. And her kindness and devotion, her patience and faith, were signally owned and blessed by God. He tried her, indeed, as He tries all who are faithful to Him : He turned her choicest comfort into her sorest trouble ; but out of that severest affliction He brought in the end the sweetest consolation ; for we may be sure that, to the end of her life, her chief earthly solace was in the son who was first given her beyond her expectation, and afterwards restored to her according to her faith.

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—2 *Kings* v.

IN many respects, how much to be envied was Naaman, the captain of the host of the King of Syria! Held in high honour for his prowess and achievements generally, there would seem to have been some special success for which his country was peculiarly indebted to him. A Jewish tradition identified him with the soldier whose random arrow struck King Ahab. However that may be, it is certain that in some special way God had "given deliverance to Syria" by him; and the consequence was that he enjoyed the special favour and confidence of his sovereign. But he was a leper.

Had he been an Israelite, afflicted with that particular form of leprosy from which he suffered, he would have been cut off from all communication with others, and obliged to live in a "several house;" but in Syria he not only maintained his intercourse with his own family, but he was allowed access to the king. Nevertheless, the frightful

disease from which he suffered must have been a terrible drawback to his happiness and prosperity. It was the occasion, however, of his greatest blessing. The special mercy of God flowed to him from that which probably he was accustomed to consider his special curse. And it often happens with ourselves, that the one thing which at one time seemed to mar our happiness is that to which we afterwards have occasion to look back as opening out for us the way of peace.

It is very interesting to observe how Naaman's leprosy became to him so great a blessing. In his household was an Israelite girl, who had been taken prisoner in one of the Syrian incursions into the Israelites' country. Shocked and distressed at the sight of her master, covered as he was with leprosy, she remembered the wonderful things which she had heard about Elisha. "If my lord were but in Samaria," she said to her mistress, "all would be well. There is a prophet there who has wrought many signal wonders, and, no doubt, if he were brought face to face with my master, he would cure even this dreadful leprosy." Her words were repeated to Naaman, and he himself communicated them to the king. The issue was, that Naaman was sent with a letter to the King of

Israel, vague and haughty, such as a mighty king might write when he was desiring a favour from a feeble enemy. The King of Israel could not understand why a leper should be sent to him for cure. "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy?" He had but one idea with regard to the letter. "Consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me."

The news of Naaman's arrival at the Court of the King of Israel, and of the king's dismay at the demand made to him, would be sure to spread, and it shortly reached the ears of Elisha, who straightway relieved his master's embarrassment by sending a messenger to him, saying, "Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came, with his horses and his chariots, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. But mark how Elisha received him. While Naaman stood at the door, he contented himself with sending out a message to him, saying, "Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean."

Naaman was both angry and disappointed. He expected some magnificent ceremony, or some im-

posing method of cure. His sense of his own and his country's greatness was wounded by the prophet's message. Why did he not admit him to a personal interview, instead of treating him as an inferior, and sending only a message? Were not the Syrian rivers, the clear streams which flowed down from Lebanon, and made Damascus a very Paradise of the East, better than all the waters of Israel? How foolish, that he should only be required to wash in a river, and that river the Jordan! So he turned, and went away in a rage.

His servants, however, were too sensible, and too unwilling to lose the benefit of their long journey, not to remonstrate with him, though with affectionate respect, on the folly of his conduct. "My father," they said, "if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? How much rather, then, when he saith unto thee, Wash, and be clean?" Happily their remonstrances were successful: Naaman was persuaded to make trial of the prescribed cure. "He went down to the Jordan, and dipped himself seven times, and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child."

Having received the cure, Naaman returned at

once to thank his benefactor. He came with all his company: not standing, however, as before, at the door of the prophet; he made his way in, and stood before him, and solemnly acknowledged as the one true God, Him Whose servant had been the instrument of his cure. In spite of his high position in an idolatrous court, in spite of his being the enemy of Israel, he abandoned his former prejudice, and neither the fear of man nor the desire of earthly honour prevented him from confessing that there was no God in all the earth but in Israel. He desired, moreover, to testify his gratitude by some rich gift. "I pray thee," he said, "take a blessing of thy servant." But Elisha would not be persuaded: "As the Lord liveth, before Whom I stand, I will receive none."

There was one further request, however, which Naaman made, and which we may presume was not refused. Having adopted Jehovah, the God of Israel, as his God, and being resolved henceforth to offer burnt-offering and sacrifice to none other, he begged to be allowed to take away with him some of the hallowed earth of Palestine, with the intention, apparently, of raising an altar of it, rather than of the profane earth of his own idolatrous country. But here a difficulty occurred to him.

Would it be right for him, a worshipper of Jehovah, to assist, although only officially, in the worship of an idol? He would have to accompany his master to the house of Rimmon; he must bow himself before the idol. Would such an act of apparent submission be pardoned by the God whom he had now chosen? The request might seem to indicate a certain worldliness of spirit, which cared more for the favour of his sovereign than for strict obedience to God's commands. But Elisha did not reprove him, as if he were really falling back from the allegiance which he had just professed. On the contrary, he said to him, "Go in peace;" and we may, therefore, conclude that the solemn profession of faith to the God of Israel, which he would make by rearing an altar to Him in Syria out of the soil of Palestine, was accounted the true and sufficient expression of his inward feelings, and as such was accepted by Almighty God.

The history of Naaman closes with the miserable account of the covetousness and deceit of the prophet's servant Gehazi, who could not endure to think that the costly presents which the Syrian general had brought with him should be lost. He promptly followed him, therefore, with a lying

story, which induced the generous Naaman to send back to Elisha's house two talents of silver and two changes of raiment. These Gehazi stowed away in a secret place, and then presented himself before his master as if nothing had happened. But Elisha had followed his every movement; and, in just vengeance, laid upon him the terrible infliction from which Naaman had been relieved. "The leprosy of Naaman shall cleave unto thee and unto thy seed for ever. And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow." We cannot but feel that no punishment would be too severe for one who had resisted the witness of Elisha's holy life, and the many signal proofs which he had seen of his intercourse with the unseen God.

Perhaps we may see in Naaman a representation of the whole Gentile world, which, notwithstanding many great gifts—notwithstanding its skill, bravery, intelligence, generosity, still lieth in wickedness. A deep taint of evil mars its excellence, like the leprosy of Naaman, which interfered so sadly with all his earthly distinctions and enjoyments. And what is Elisha, to whom Naaman was brought for cure, but a type of the one true Healer of mankind, Who has sovereign power over the inward corruption of the soul, and Who came down from

heaven on purpose to say to the spiritual leper, "I will, be thou clean"? And the miraculous cure of Naaman by bathing in the river Jordan is a type of the cleansing power of the Holy Sacrament of Baptism. The same Almighty, all-merciful God, Who gave to the river Jordan a power, which of itself it could not have, of healing the leper, has been pleased of His own free grace to sanctify water to the mystical washing away of sin, and so has attached to the simplest and most insignificant means a blessing which we cannot estimate, and which could never have belonged to it but for His express appointment.

There is always in the human mind a hankering after some great thing. But this history reminds us that it is God's will to work the mightiest ends by the humblest instruments. He did not will, as He might have willed, to set Naaman free from his leprosy by the mere word of Elisha's mouth, unattended with any outward sign. He might have bidden His prophet go forth, and stand and call upon the name of his God, and strike his hand over the place and say, "Be thou clean." But such was not His method. He chose rather to tie the blessing to a simple outward act, and to try the faith of Naaman before He suffered a cure to

be wrought upon him. "It was want of faith in Naaman not to acquiesce in the method of cure which the prophet pointed out to him. It is want of faith in us not to receive thankfully the means of grace, by which our merciful Saviour designs to bless and sanctify us."

Let us be careful, further, to learn a lesson from Naaman's thankfulness after his cure. We cannot, of course, requite God adequately for any of His mercies, just as Naaman could not have bestowed on Elisha any real recompense for the inestimable blessing of health: God's blessings far transcend our powers of return. But it is His will that we should do what we can as a thank-offering to Him. If He give a willing heart, He will be sure to send recipients of our bounty; and in any case, we are bound to shew forth our thankfulness, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to His service, and by walking before Him in holiness and righteousness all our days.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—2 *Kings* vi. to ver. 24.

THE schools of the prophets, which had been founded by Samuel, seem to have been in a

flourishing condition in the time of Elisha. At Bethel, at Jericho, at Gilgal, and apparently on Mount Carmel, were gathered small communities, chiefly of young men, who employed themselves in studying the law, composing sacred poetry, compiling and copying historical records, and from time to time instructing the people and delivering God's messages to them. We cannot doubt that these institutions tended largely to counteract the evil influences of the Court, and that they were mainly instrumental in preserving whatever of true religion still remained in the kingdom. They were standing witnesses for God and for the pure faith in the midst of an idolatrous and licentious people.

A great part of the life of Elisha seems to have been spent in one or other of these schools. His first place of abode, after the departure of Elijah, was at Jericho, where was one of the residences of the sons of the prophets. At another time we find him at Gilgal, with the sons of the prophets sitting before him (2 Kings iv. 38); and now, in this Lesson, he is living with them again, apparently at Jericho. Their habitation had become too small, and they proposed to their master that they should build a new dwelling near the Jordan,

and for this purpose should cut down some of the trees which lined its banks. They would not undertake the work, however, without Elisha's sanction; nor, indeed, without his presence; and he consented to accompany them. As one of them was felling a tree which overhung the river, the head of his axe flew off and sank into the water. In his distress at the loss of the axe, which was not his own, he appealed to Elisha, who immediately relieved his anxiety. Breaking off a stick, he threw it into the stream, whereupon the iron reappeared and was recovered. This is one of several private and domestic miracles which Elisha wrought for the benefit of the community with which he lived.

The other incident recorded in this chapter is of a more public character. The prophet was living at Dothan, about twelve miles north of Samaria, half-way between Samaria and Jezreel. It seems that since the death of Ahab, in the attack on Ramoth-Gilead, the Syrians had been emboldened to penetrate again into the Israelites' territory. Marauding parties were continually making incursions, even into the places which the King of Israel was accustomed to frequent. The Syrians on several occasions laid ambush for him, or for

his people, and were much surprised to find that the Israelites were prepared for them. So frequently was this the case, that the King of Syria suspected that there must be a traitor among his own privy councillors. But one of his servants suggested to him the true explanation: "Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bed-chamber."

The miracle wrought in the case of Naaman must have made a profound impression on all the Syrians who were acquainted with it, and they would be ready to believe any account they might receive of Elisha's supernatural power. It was one of these, doubtless, who made this suggestion to the king. The king, therefore, determined to lay hold on Elisha, if possible. A large host, with horses and chariots, was dispatched at night to Dothan, where the prophet was then living, and surrounded the village. The morning light revealed the danger to Elisha's servant—not Gehazi, but one who had lately joined him, and who was not perhaps fully acquainted with the prophet's powers. Rising early and leaving the house, he saw horses and chariots on every side, and he cried out to his master, "Alas, my master, what

shall we do?" But Elisha had no fear: he only said, "Fear not, for they that be with us are more than they that be with them." Just as Hezekiah, at a later period of the sacred history, comforted his downcast people, in the terrors of an Assyrian invasion, by saying, "Be strong and courageous: be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him; for there be more with us than with him: with him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles;" so now Elisha said, in the confidence of faith, "They that be with us are more than they that be with them." And then he prayed that his companion also might see the spiritual guards that were protecting him, and in answer to his prayer the young man's eyes were opened, and "behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha." Till his eyes were opened the young man could only see the Syrian host, with its horses and chariots, compassing the hill on which the village stood; he saw these plainly, but he saw nothing besides. And to the bodily eyes of Elisha nothing more was visible; it was his faith that was conscious of the presence of his unseen guards, and enabled him to rest securely under their protection.

When the Syrians approached nearer, with the intention of seizing the prophet, he prayed again, and the whole company were smitten with blindness, like the Sodomites at the door of Lot. Elisha then went out to them and told them that they had mistaken the place, but that he would lead them to the person whom they sought. He conducted them to Samaria, into the stronghold of their enemies. Jehoram's first impulse was to take advantage of their helplessness and destroy them, but Elisha would not suffer it: he told the king that he might slay those whom he had taken captive in lawful fight, but not these (such is the meaning of the passage): he should simply give them provision and let them go. It is no wonder that after this the King of Syria withdrew his foraging bands and had recourse to regular warfare.

To the eye of men no situation could have been more hopeless than that of Elisha at Dothan, with only one attendant, surrounded by the armed Syrian host. We cannot be surprised that his servant gave up all for lost. The prophet, however, knew that then, and at all times, he was in God's hand, and that, if it was His will, He could protect him, let the danger which threatened

him be, to outward appearance, ever so overwhelming. It was revealed to him, moreover, that in the present danger God would protect him, and that the horses and chariots of the Syrians were powerless against the horses and chariots of fire which the Lord had sent for his defence. It is not God's will to interfere at all times for the protection of His people. There are occasions when He would have them bear witness to Him by death and suffering, as there are other occasions when He testifies to them by signal deliverances; but in either case they are in His hand, and His angel-guards are watching them, ready to defend them as they defended Elisha, and only withheld from breaking forth in their behalf, as in the case of Our Saviour Himself, because they are restrained by Him Whose servants they are.

We live in two worlds, a world of sight and a world of spirits. If our eyes were opened, we should see myriads of angelic beings waiting on the people of God and guarding them in the midst of danger. What happened to Elisha is true of all God's saints; as the Psalmist says, "The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him and delivereth them." But for the most part the engrossing influence of the things of

sight hinders us from giving heed to the inner and invisible world, which is, nevertheless, as close to us as is the outer world. God and His angels are round about us at all times; but we take no notice of them. Great need have we therefore to pray, as Elisha prayed for his servant, that our eyes might be opened, that we might see things as they really are, and live by faith, not by sight, with a constant sense of God's presence and of His love, and a daily increasing belief that so long as we keep close to Him, He will give His angels charge over us to uphold us in all our ways.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—2 *Kings* vii.

THE supernatural acquaintance of Elisha with all his movements obliged the King of Syria to desist from sending bands of foragers into the land of Israel; but he was only the more determined to humble, if possible, the power of Israel. He, therefore, gathered all his host, and went up and besieged Samaria. The siege lasted for a long time, and the inhabitants suffered almost incredible horrors from famine during their protracted resistance.

The dreadful curse contained in the Book of Deuteronomy (xxviii. 53—57), that in the siege and straitness the tender and delicate woman would be driven to devour her own offspring, was fulfilled now, for the first, though not the last, time. As the king passed to and fro on the broad walls of the city, listening to the complaints of his suffering people, a famine-stricken woman cried to him with the ghastly appeal, that whereas, in virtue of an agreement she had made with another woman, she had given her child for food for them both, her companion had hid her son, and so failed to fulfil her part in the bargain. The king was horror-struck, and rent his clothes; but instead of repenting more thoroughly and calling the people together for humiliation and prayer, he vented his anger upon Elisha, as if he were the cause of the terrible calamity which had befallen them.

It is not unlikely, considering that Jehoram was observed to be wearing sackcloth under his armour, that Elisha had already remonstrated with him, and that the king had been partially moved to listen to his suggestions and to return to God; but this awful story so exasperated him, that he broke away from his good resolutions, and turned all his indignation against Elisha, and, attributing to him

all the evil that they were suffering from, threatened to take away his life.

He sent a messenger at once to execute his threat. Before the messenger arrived, Elisha said to the elders of Samaria who were sitting with him, probably in order to be advised by him how to act in this overwhelming trouble, "See how this son of a murderer" (in allusion to the murder of Naboth by Ahab, the father of Jehoram) "has sent to take away my life." At the same time Elisha bade them fasten the door, and hinder the king's servant from entering, adding, "Is not the sound of his master's feet behind him?" It is thought that the reason why Jehoram came himself to Elisha, after he had dispatched his servant, was to stay the effect of his own rash exclamation; at all events, he followed his messenger immediately, accompanied by the lord on whose hand he leaned; and though he seems to have been afraid to do violence to Elisha, he was so far from being humbled by his sufferings, that he blasphemously complained that Jehovah was the cause of them. "This evil is from Jehovah," he said; "why should I wait on Jehovah any longer?" Then Elisha answered, "Hear the word of Jehovah: Thus saith Jehovah, To-morrow about this time

shall a measure of fine flour be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, in the gate of Samaria." "Nay," interrupted the officer who accompanied the king; "even if Jehovah were to open windows in heaven, this could not be." "It will," replied Elisha; "and thou thyself shalt see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not eat thereof."

The Lesson before us relates how those wonderful words were fulfilled. That very evening four lepers, who, not being allowed to enter the city, had taken up their station just outside the walls, and who probably from their situation felt the rigour of the famine more keenly than the inhabitants of the city themselves, came to the resolution that they would venture down to the camp of the Syrians. They must die from hunger if they remained where they were; and the Syrians could but kill them,—they would run the risk and see how they should fare. To their great surprise, as they crept stealthily, in the twilight, to the edge of the camp, there was a profound silence everywhere; and as they advanced further, they found the camp not only quiet, but deserted.

The Syrians were gone. A supernatural noise had sounded in their ears and terrified them. It

seemed as if a vast army, with chariots and horses, which they presumed to be the kings of the Hittites and Egyptians, come up to the help of the besieged city in its distress, were marching suddenly upon them, and they were unprepared for the attack. Alarmed and bewildered, they took to flight at once, not only abandoning their tents and all their property, but leaving even their horses, which might have accelerated their escape, and flying away on their feet. As the darkness came on, the lepers entered one of the deserted tents, and, having satisfied their hunger, proceeded to secure for themselves as much plunder as they could stow away : silver, gold, and raiment. Then they went to another tent, which they plundered in like manner. Then, conscious that they were acting selfishly in concealing the joyful news from the inhabitants of the city, and fearing that some mischief, either from God or from the rulers, would happen to them if they concealed it any longer, they returned to Samaria, and announced to the keeper of the city gate that they had visited the Syrian camp and found no man there, nor voice of man ; but horses tied, and asses tied, and the tents as they were. Though it was now midnight, the news was carried to the king, who, so

far from remembering Elisha's prediction, and seeing its fulfilment in this occurrence, persuaded himself at first that it was merely a plot of the Syrians to draw the Israelites out of the city. One of his servants, however, suggested that it would be well to test the truth of the report by sending horsemen after the Syrians, to ascertain whether they were really gone. He urged that both men and horses would run no more risk than if they remained in the city. They must die of hunger in a few days, if they were not relieved; and they might as well be cut off in examining into the condition of the Syrians, as in remaining tamely in the city. Two horsemen, therefore, were sent after the Syrians; and, following them to the Jordan, they found the road strewn with garments and vessels which they had flung away in their flight. When they returned with the welcome news, the whole city was roused, and made their way in haste to the Syrian camp.

It was probably in order to preserve some degree of order in the general confusion, that the king entrusted the care of the gate to the officer who had mocked at the prophecy of Elisha; but the pressure was so great that he was trodden down by the crowd; and before night the words of the

prophet were fulfilled to the letter. The famine was at an end ; Samaria was delivered ; but the scornful nobleman had no share in these unlooked-for but most welcome blessings.

How forcibly does this history teach us that God laughs to scorn all human power and foresight ! “ Not long before, Elisha’s servant saw chariots and horses, but heard none ; now the Syrians hear chariots and horses, but see none : that sight comforted his heart, this sound dismayed theirs.”

It may be that we must not expect such miraculous interpositions in our behalf as were vouchsafed either to Elisha at Dothan, or to the Israelites in Samaria ; but God can work His purposes by agencies which appear to us natural and ordinary, as well as by those which are supernatural. How continually do we hear of hair-breadth escapes and unexpected deliverances, which are in themselves quite as strange as those providential interpositions which we should count miraculous ! Such things do not happen by chance : they are all ordered by God. Therefore in all circumstances we may trust ourselves implicitly to Him. Be our difficulties and dangers ever so great, He can in some way or another interpose in our behalf : He

can deliver us if He will. We cannot, indeed, tell beforehand how He means to deal with us in any particular case: we cannot understand how it is that He allows some persons to be carried off by His judgments, while for others He opens a way of escape; but this we know, that whatever happens, we must be safe if we trust ourselves to His hand. No real harm can happen to us in that case. If He does not deliver us from the peril, He will make the visitation, however terrible, a greater blessing than deliverance would have been.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—2 *Kings* ix.

OF the three injunctions laid upon Elijah at Mount Horeb—namely, that he should anoint Hazael King over Syria, and Jehu King of Israel, and Elisha of Abel-meholah as his own successor in the prophetic office—one only, for reasons not known to us, was fulfilled by Elijah himself. He had lost no time in casting his mantle over Elisha ; but the other two appointments, of Hazael and Jehu, were delayed for several years, and were at length made, the one by Elisha, the other by one of the sons of the prophets.

As regards the first of these, the appointment of Hazael, it took place at the time when Benhadad the King of Syria was lying on his death-bed. Elisha was in Damascus, whither he had been sent probably for the purpose of anointing Hazael. Benhadad being informed that the man of God had come thither, sent Hazael to him to inquire whether he would recover of his disease. Elisha's answer, that he *might* recover, but *would* not, led to the announcement that Hazael should

be his successor. On the next day Benhadad was found suffocated, with a wet cloth spread over his face. Whether this was the result of accident or wilfulness, and whether, if it were wilful, Hazael was the murderer, does not seem clear. At all events, Hazael succeeded to the throne; and shortly afterwards we find him engaged in hostilities with Jehoram King of Israel for the possession of Ramoth-gilead. There Jehoram was severely wounded, and obliged to return to Jezreel to be cured.

During his absence Jehu was captain of the Israelite host which was besieging Ramoth-gilead: he was sitting with the other captains, when a young man of the sons of the prophets suddenly presented himself, and abruptly informed Jehu that he had a private errand for him. In obedience to the instructions of Elisha, whose messenger he was, he retired with Jehu into an inner chamber, and then, producing a box of the sacred oil, poured the contents on his head, and announced to him that he was appointed to be the king of Israel and destroyer of the house of Ahab. The young man then rushed out and disappeared as abruptly as he came. It is likely that Jehu's countenance, on rejoining his companions, be-

trayed his sense of the importance of the communication he had received ; but when they inquired the object of the " mad fellow's " visit, he endeavoured at first to evade the question : " You know as well as I," he said, " that my visitor was one of the sons of the prophets, and that he came with a message from Jehovah." They stoutly denied any knowledge at all of the matter ; and Jehu thereupon revealed to them the full truth. Immediately their enthusiasm was kindled, and laying down their cloaks as a kind of rough carpet for him to tread on, and placing him on the top of the stairs, which probably ran round the inside of the quadrangle of the house, so that he would be in full view of the people below, they blew the trumpets and shouted, " Jehu is king."

" So Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat the son of Nimshi conspired against Joram." Raising the siege of Ramoth-gilead, he proceeded at once with a large part of his army to Jezreel, in order that he might himself be the bearer of the news of his conspiracy. He crossed the Jordan, and then advanced rapidly up the valley between Little Hermon and Mount Gilboa towards Jezreel.

The watchman on the walls observed him and his party at a considerable distance—five or six

miles, it is said—and announced their coming to Joram. He despatched first one horseman, and then another, to obtain information; but Jehu detained his messengers, in order that his intentions might be unknown until he himself revealed them. At last he came near enough for the sentinel on the wall to recognise him: “The driving,” he said, “is like the driving of Jehu the son of Nimshi, for he driveth furiously” (lit., “in madness,” like a madman). Thereupon Joram ordered his own chariot to be prepared, and went forth with Ahaziah King of Judah, his nephew, to meet the captain of the host, expecting to hear some tidings of the Syrian war, and without any thought, apparently, of any design against himself. In the Providence of God it was ordered that he should meet Jehu on the fatal plot of land which had belonged to Naboth, and which had been the cause of so much evil to his family. Jehoram perhaps did not recognise it at the time; but Jehu perceived in the circumstance a confirmation of his Divine commission. “Is it peace, Jehu?” asked the unconscious king. What must have been his surprise and alarm when the answer came, so different from any that he had reason to anticipate: “What peace, so long as the whore-

doms of thy mother Jezebel, and her witchcrafts, are so many?" Without a moment's delay he wheeled round his chariot and attempted to escape, but an arrow from Jehu, shot from behind, pierced him through the heart, and he fell down in his chariot. Jehu then ordered his lifeless body to be cast out upon the field of Naboth, that the curse pronounced on Ahab might be further fulfilled, "I will requite thee in this plat."

Meanwhile, Ahaziah King of Judah, perceiving the peril, endeavoured to escape towards the south, but at Jehu's command he was pursued as far as the pass of Gur, near Ibleam, where he was mortally wounded, and as soon as he reached Megiddo he died. Jehu then pursued his way to Jezreel. The queen-mother, Jezebel, the chief mover in all the iniquity of her family, was still there; and when she heard of Jehu's approach, and knew the purpose of it, she did not shrink from upbraiding him with his rebellion, even in the moment of his triumph. Without thought of fear, or cry for pity, bold and defiant, she took her stand at the window of her palace, with her eyelids blackened with antimony, to give them a larger and brighter appearance, and her hair carefully arranged—arrayed, that is, in royal splendour,

rather than as a mourner—she cried out to Jehu as he entered the gate, “Had Zimri peace, who slew his master?” by which she meant to warn him, that as Zimri, who had murdered Baasha, was himself cut off by Omri, the founder of the dynasty which Jehu was then destroying, so the time would come when like vengeance would fall on Jehu for his rebellion against Jehoram. Jehu looked up from his chariot, and having reason, probably, to know that there were some among her attendants who were willing to rise against her if the opportunity offered, he called out, “Who is on my side? who?” Two or three eunuchs immediately presented themselves at the window, and at his command dashed their royal mistress on the pavement. Her body fell in front of Jehu’s chariot, who, with merciless severity, trampled it under his horses’ feet. Then, entering the palace, he sat down to eat and drink, leaving the already mangled corpse of the once magnificent Jezebel to be torn in pieces by the dogs of the city. When at length he remembered the fallen queen, and sent his servants to bury her, nothing was to be found, except the skull and the feet and the palms of the hands. This was all that remained of her that was at once the greatest and the wickedest of

the queens of Israel,—the daughter, wife, and mother of kings. And so the Divine curse was terribly fulfilled ; as Jehu said, “ This is the word of the Lord which He spake by His servant Elijah the Tishbite, saying, In the portion of Jezreel shall dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel ; and the carcase of Jezebel shall be as dung upon the face of the field in the portion of Jezreel ; so that they shall not say, This is Jezebel.”

Hitherto Jezebel had been wonderfully prosperous in her career. She had sinned with a high hand, shrinking from no abomination ; and in spite of occasional reverses she had fulfilled her purposes, and her proud spirit was unbroken. But the time of vengeance came at length ; and when it came, it was with such unexampled severity, as to show that all her life long she had been treasuring up wrath against herself. The spectacle of her miserable end, after a life of haughty defiance to the will of God, is a faint shadow of the wrath which awaits hereafter those who, although they have with hard and impenitent hearts set themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, have nevertheless prospered in the world. Oh, how suddenly will they consume, perish, and come to a fearful end !

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—2 *Kings* x.

THOUGH Jehoram and Jezebel were dead, and Jezreel was in the hands of Jehu, there were still several members and adherents of the house of Ahab in Samaria and in other parts of the kingdom, who, it might be presumed, would be both willing and able to defend their cause against the conspirators.

But Jehu does not seem to have anticipated any formidable opposition, though he was careful to proceed warily, and certainly had no scruples as to the method to be employed to effect his purpose. He wrote letters to the principal persons in Samaria, and to the guardians of Ahab's children and grandchildren, and challenged them to choose some prince of Ahab's house, and place him on the vacant throne, and fight in his defence. This message so terrified them, that they returned answer that they were Jehu's servants, and had no thought of opposing him. Whereupon he wrote again, proposing, as a test of their allegiance, that they should bring with them to Jezreel on the next day the heads of the seventy descendants of Ahab who were in Samaria. His command was strictly and promptly obeyed, and the next day

the heads of Ahab's sons were to be seen lying in two heaps at the gate of Jezreel, where they remained all night. When Jehu came forth in the morning and saw them, he pretended not to know whence they came. It was true (he said) that he had conspired against his master; but who had slain these? It had not been his act; but God had thereby fulfilled His word by the mouth of Elijah, who had threatened entire destruction to the house of Ahab. And he then proceeded to carry the work still farther by slaying all the remaining relations of Ahab, the officers of his court, the priests of Baal, and others who were specially attached to his family, and finally set out in person to Samaria.

Half-way between Jezreel and Samaria he encountered forty-two princes of Judah, relations of Ahaziah (2 Chron. xxii. 8), on their way to Jezreel to pay a complimentary visit to Jehoram and Jezebel, in ignorance, apparently, of the disasters which had befallen them. Connected by marriage with the house of Ahab, they fell within the terms of Jehu's commission, who at once ordered them to be executed at a certain shearing-house, or well-known resort of shepherds, on the way.

Proceeding a little further, he met a man who

he thought, from his previous knowledge of him, was likely to help him in the work he had in hand. This was Jehonadab, the son of Rechab, of the race of the Kenites, who, for whatever reason, had bound himself and his children to live a kind of Nazarite life; they were to drink no wine, nor build houses, nor sow seed, but dwell in tents. Jehonadab seems in some way to have received intimation of Jehu's mission to execute vengeance on the house of Ahab; and when Jehu asked, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?" he answered at once that it was, and, at Jehu's request, ascended his chariot and rode with him into Samaria. There Jehu completed the destruction of Ahab's relations, which he had begun in Jezreel, and then applied himself to the more difficult task of extinguishing the worship of Baal, which he accomplished with that union of boldness and secrecy, amounting sometimes to unscrupulous treachery, which marks his whole career. He called an assembly of the people, and announced that it was his intention to inaugurate the worship of Baal on a scale of great magnificence. "Ahab," he said, "served Baal a little, but Jehu shall serve him much." A solemn festival was proclaimed in the great temple which Ahab had

raised to Baal in Samaria (1 Kings xvi. 32); and on the day appointed the building was filled from one end to the other. The worshippers were arrayed in sacred vestments, and innumerable sacrifices were prepared. The temple was carefully cleared of all the worshippers of Jehovah; and then, at a given signal, eighty soldiers, specially appointed for the purpose, rushed in and slew the unarmed and helpless multitude. Thus, at one blow, the whole heathen population were swept away. The image of Baal was destroyed, and the temple itself was made the receptacle of all the filth and rubbish of the city.

“Thus Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel,” and the worship was never restored. But though he destroyed idolatry, he did not cleave to the Lord with all his heart, for he departed not from the sin of Jeroboam, who made Israel to sin. That there was much, however, that was good and praiseworthy in Jehu, in spite of his vehemence and half-heartedness, appears not only from his being chosen by God for the accomplishment of His purposes, but more particularly from the especial favour shown to him, in that for his zeal against the house of Ahab and his idolatry it was promised to him that his descendants to the fourth

generation should sit upon the throne of Israel. Nevertheless, it is plain that on the whole God was displeased with him, and in the Prophet Hosea (i. 4) it is said that, in consequence of Jehu's sin, retribution would be exacted for the bloodshed by which he came to the throne. "I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu." Thus, by reason of his subsequent unfaithfulness, even his obedience became sin, and a cause of punishment.

It can scarcely be supposed that Jehu was not aware that the calf-worship of Jeroboam was a grievous sin in the sight of God. Though nearly an hundred years had intervened, he must have heard of God's judgments on Jeroboam and the overthrow of the altar at Bethel. Nor can we attribute his conduct to fear of the people. There is no reason to suppose that the people generally were more attached to the worship of the calves than they were to the worship of Baal, and we know how fearless and uncompromising Jehu was in his attack on the adherents of Baal. Perhaps the true account of his following the sin of Jeroboam, when he had taken such pains to root out the worship of Baal, is that, like Jeroboam, he thought that the substitution of some other form

of worship for that which was specially connected with the Temple at Jerusalem would be greatly to his advantage. He feared, as Jeroboam feared, that to allow the people to go up regularly to Jerusalem for religious purposes would draw away their allegiance from him and transfer it to the King of Judah. He could be so far zealous for God as to cut off, root and branch, the family of Ahab, and wage fierce war against the worshippers of Baal, but in so doing he was in no way interfering with his own selfish interest; on the contrary, all that Jehu did tended manifestly to his own aggrandisement. But to follow God's commandments implicitly, and encourage the people to keep the law by going up from time to time to Jerusalem, was plainly to endanger his crown, and therefore he shrank from it. Jehu served God faithfully, so long as in doing so he could serve himself; when his duty to God ran counter to his own interest, then he abandoned it.

How many Christian persons may see in Jehu their own likeness! How many are there with much apparent devotion, and with loud professions of zeal for God, who nevertheless are thoroughly selfish in their religion! So long as it furthers their worldly interest, or tends to increase their reputa-

tion, or ministers in any way to their enjoyment, they are wholly on God's side ; but once let it appear that their interest, or their standing in the world, or their personal comfort will suffer, and they will speedily find some excuse for turning aside from the strict path of thorough obedience. So hard is it for us to persuade ourselves that if we would serve God at all, we must serve Him with our whole hearts ; that it is of no avail to follow Him up to a certain point and then fall short ; that to serve Him for what we can gain by it is in truth no service at all.

Such self-deceit and selfishness are much less excusable in us than they were in Jehu ; for not only are God's requirements more plainly set forth to us, so that we are wholly without excuse if we take up with any such partial obedience as Jehu attempted, but we have the blessed example of One Who never pleased Himself, but in all circumstances considered simply what was His Father's will.

The history of Jehu will be a blessing to us, if it lead us, in humility and self-distrust, to inquire how far worldly and selfish considerations enter into our religion, and whether there is anything whatsoever which interferes with our giving our whole heart to God.

Most especially his history will do us good, if it

warn us of the danger of being indulgent to our own failings and shortcomings, while we are severe against the sins of others. As the blood of the house of Ahab, which Jehu slew in his zeal for God, was afterwards required at his hands, so will it be with those who have been zealous for God in the case of others, but lukewarm and indifferent in what concerned themselves. Their very zeal will be counted for sin, and will be visited with severe punishment.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—2 *Kings* xiii.

THE Syrians had renewed their attacks on the kingdom of Israel, and gained considerable successes, in the reign of Jehu. “In those days the Lord began to cut Israel short.” The tribes on the east of Jordan suffered greatly from the ravages of Hazael, even if, as seems likely, their territory was not wholly occupied by him. The subjection of Israel was carried still further in the reign of Jehu’s son and successor Jehoahaz. As he walked in the steps of his father, and continued the unlawful calf-worship which Jehu had encouraged, the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and the chastisement was continued through the whole of his reign. The Syrians oppressed

them so severely, that the Israelite army was reduced to fifty horsemen and ten chariots and ten thousand foot-men; the remaining forces of the kingdom were utterly annihilated; the Syrians “made them like the dust by threshing.” We seem to learn from the Prophet Amos (i. 3), that there was literal truth in this apparently figurative expression; for the Syrians had drawn threshing instruments of iron over the Gileadites, according to the custom of old barbaric warfare (Isa. xxi. 10.; Mic. iv. 12, 13.)

When the oppression was at its height, Jehoahaz had recourse to the Lord in prayer, and the Lord heard him and sent a deliverer to Israel, though not in the reign of Jehoahaz (ver. 22—25, xiv. 26.) The “helper” here spoken of would seem to be the two successors of Jehoahaz—viz., his son and grandson Joash and Jeroboam, the first of whom recovered from the Syrians all the cities which they had taken (ver. 25), and the other restored the ancient boundaries of Israel (xiv. 25). Thus the Israelites were released from the bondage in which the Syrians had held them, and attained again the blessings of peace; they were able to dwell in their houses as in former times, without being scared and driven away by their enemies.

Although in answer to the prayer of Jehoahaz, and in compassion for the deplorable condition to which the Israelites were reduced, God had compassion on them and remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and sent relief from the Syrian yoke in the reign of Joash, Joash himself persisted in the sin of his fathers. His kindly intercourse with Elisha seems at the same time to indicate that there was some good thing in him, if he could but have had faith to trust in God entirely, instead of following the worldly policy which led to the establishment and renewal of the worship of the golden calves.

It was during the reign of Joash that Elisha fell sick of his sickness whereof he died. As soon as Joash heard of his sickness, he went down to his house to lament his approaching departure. He feared that after the death of the prophet he would have to encounter danger from the Syrians, against whom he looked upon Elisha as the principal guard and defence of his country, and therefore he wept over his face, saying, "O my father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof." He was not therefore altogether without faith and trust in Jehovah, and in Elisha as His servant, but his faith was weak, and Almighty God strengthened

it by a message of comfort from the dying prophet. This message was conveyed by means of a symbolical act, the significance of which could scarcely fail to be understood by Joash, however unfamiliar it may be to us. The king was commanded to open the window towards the east—that is, in the direction from which the Syrian invasion might be expected—and to shoot an arrow thither. As he shot, Elisha placed his hands upon the king's hand with which he held the string, as a token that the promise granted to his bow-shot was from the Lord, and said, as the arrow was discharged, "The arrow of the Lord's deliverance, the arrow of deliverance from Syria; for thou shalt smite the Syrians in Aphek, till thou have consumed them." The discharged arrow was to be symbolical of the help of the Lord against the Syrians to their utter overthrow. The king was then commanded to appropriate the promise by shooting the remaining arrows upon the ground. He stopped, however, at the third arrow, as if he had no strong faith in God's promise of help. He ought to have perceived, that as the arrow first discharged was a token of victory, so the more arrows he shot the greater number of victories he would gain. Three victories were as many as he thought God would vouchsafe, or as he himself cared to obtain, and therefore his

victories were limited to three, and the prophet was justly indignant with him for thus by his unbelief depriving himself of the complete victory which he might have attained: "Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten Syria till thou hadst consumed it; whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice."

Shortly afterwards Elisha died, but even after his death the Lord set His seal upon the truth of his announcements, especially his last unfulfilled prediction concerning the victory over the Syrians. In the spring of the next year the inhabitants of the city near which he was buried were carrying out a man for burial, when they were surprised by a marauding party of Moabites. In order to conceal the corpse as speedily as possible, and to effect their own escape, they opened the grave of Elisha, which happened to be close at hand, and pushed the body into it. As soon as the deceased touched the hallowed remains of the prophet he revived and stood upon his feet. Among the Israelites the dead were neither enclosed in coffins nor covered with earth, but simply wrapped in linen and laid in cells, so that one body would touch another, and there would be no hindrance to moving in case of restored animation.

This miracle showed in the plainest way that the benefits which the Israelites derived from Elisha were not to cease with his death; and more especially both the king and the people might be convinced that the promised victory over the Syrians would be accomplished. Benhadad, the son and successor of Hazael, was three times defeated by Joash, and obliged to surrender the cities which his father had taken from Jehoahaz; but the complete destruction, which might have befallen the Syrians, was hindered by the weakness of Joash's faith.

In like manner, what is it but the weakness of our faith that hinders our gaining a complete triumph over our spiritual enemies? Prayer in the name of Christ may be to us "the arrow of the Lord's deliverance;" if we will but pray in faith, really desiring to overcome our enemies, and thoroughly trusting in the power and willingness of the Holy Spirit to help us, victory is as assured to us as it was to Joash. It is not that we have not the power to overcome our foes, for we have the power if we will but ask for it; what we want is the will to withstand them; we are satisfied with our condition of bondage, and do not desire to be free. Or if at times we are roused for awhile to

resist them and pray for deliverance, we soon desist; we are like Joash smiting the ground three times and then ceasing. O for the prayer of humble persevering faith, which does not merely hope for an answer, but expects and looks for it, and goes forth to the contest in the confidence of such expectation! It is entirely our own fault if evil desires and thoughts continue to hold sway over us, for we may overcome them if we will, just as Joash was the true cause of the renewed subjection of his people to the Syrians; he might have overcome them utterly, if only he had trusted in God.

The battle is not ours, but God's, and the issue of the battle does not depend on us; it is not a case in which we can only hope that, if things turn out well, the result will be in our favour, but that with all our care and earnestness we may possibly fail. We cannot fail, if only we are true to ourselves and persevere in prayer. Let us not be satisfied then with praying once or twice, or even three times, but let us go on praying, laying firm hold of God's promise, wrestling with God for strength to wrestle with our enemies, and we may be sure that He will enable us to prevail: in due time we shall reap if we faint not.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—2 *Kings* xviii.

THE most formidable enemy of the chosen people hitherto, so far as their history has come before us in the Sunday Lessons, has been Syria. Now there has arisen another and more powerful foe, in the great kingdom of Assyria. Ahaz, the father of Hezekiah, King of Judah, having been driven to extremity by an alliance between Pekah, King of Israel, and Rezin, King of Syria, sought the assistance of Tiglath-pileser, King of Assyria. His request was readily granted; Rezin was killed, the kingdom of Damascus brought to an end, and the city itself destroyed. But the help of Assyria was purchased at a costly price. Not only was Ahaz obliged to deliver up the treasures of the Temple and of his own palace to Tiglath-pileser, but he had to appear before him at Damascus as his vassal. He ventured to seek for safety by heathen ceremonies, making his children to pass through the fire to Moloch (2 Kings xvi. 3), countenancing wizards and necromancers (Isa. viii. 19), dedicating horses to the sun, and raising altars on

the housetops for the worship of the heavenly bodies (2 Kings xxiii. 12; 2 Chron. xxviii. 2—4).

Such was the condition of the kingdom, in a religious and political point of view, when Ahaz died and his son Hezekiah ascended the throne. His first act, in the first year of his reign, was to purify and re-open, with splendid sacrifices, the Temple which had been defiled by the idolatrous practices of his father Ahaz and at length entirely closed, and to set on foot a thorough religious reformation. He did not even spare the holy places, which, though tolerated by many well-disposed kings, had at one time or another been profaned by idol-worship. "He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves." Indeed he went further, and destroyed the brazen serpent, which, having been the instrument of cure to the Israelites in the wilderness, was preserved through their wanderings, and had now for some time become an object of religious veneration. The children of Israel, it is said, had been in the habit of burning incense to it. It was not unnatural in itself that so venerable a relic should in time be regarded with superstitious reverence; and the abuse was the more likely, because both among the Egyptians and Phœnicians serpents

were worshipped, as possessing a healing power and the gift of immortality.

Our English version would lead to the belief that Hezekiah justified his act by calling the image *Nehushtan*, that is, a thing of brass, as if it were altogether worthless; but it is not certain from the Hebrew that Hezekiah is the subject of the sentence: it may, and probably ought to be, translated, "one called it *Nehushtan*," that is, the name by which it was usually known was, *Nehushtan* (the brazen). It had come to be regarded as some god bearing *Nehushtan* as its proper name. At all events, Hezekiah shewed his courage and his wisdom by destroying that which had been a cause of sin. He further made an atonement for the sins of the people by a sin-offering, and then summoned the whole nation, the tribes of Israel as well as his own people, to a great Passover feast in Jerusalem, in order, if possible, to rekindle their love for the worship of the Lord; and at the same time he arranged all things necessary for the due administration of the Temple worship.

His zeal for God was rewarded by a large measure of worldly prosperity. "The Lord was with him, and he prospered whithersoever he went." He punished the Philistines for the invasion of

the land in the reign of his father, recovering from them the cities which his father had lost, and reducing them to their old boundary at Gaza (2 Chron. xxviii. 18). He was emboldened also to throw off the Assyrian yoke, and to refuse the tribute which his father had agreed to pay. This act of rebellion would be sure to exasperate the King of Assyria, and we might have expected that as soon as he had taken Samaria, and reduced the northern kingdom, which happened in the fourth year of Hezekiah's reign, the King of Assyria would take vengeance on Judah. But it was not until the fourteenth year of Hezekiah that Sennacherib came up against Jerusalem. He was delayed by his attack on the city of Tyre, which he besieged with all his strength, but the inhabitants made such a vigorous resistance that he was obliged in the fifth year to abandon the undertaking as impossible. When at length Hezekiah perceived that Sennacherib was coming against Jerusalem, he took all available measures for its defence. He repaired the fortifications; he appointed commanders; he stopped up the fountains in order to cut off water from the besiegers, and encouraged the people to trust in the protection of Jehovah (2 Chron. xxxii. 2—8; Isaiah xxii.

8—14). When, however, Sennacherib actually appeared before the fenced cities of Judah, and took them, Hezekiah seems to have thought it necessary, or at least prudent, to send the required tribute, amounting to the enormous sum of three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold, to raise which he was obliged to rob the Temple of its treasures, and even to strip the gold from the doors.

This act of submission seems to argue a want of faith in Hezekiah, but it was overruled for good through the arrogance of Sennacherib, who, though he was satisfied for the time and returned home, renewed the attempt at the end of two years, and sent an insulting message to Hezekiah. The two invasions are not very clearly marked in the chapter before us; but the expedition under Sennacherib himself, mentioned in the 13th verse, is plainly distinct from the attack conducted by his three officers in ver. 17. Sennacherib, on his way into Egypt, attacked the fortresses of Lachish and Libnah—apparently without success; and from Lachish he sent his chief captain, Tartan, with his chief eunuch (Rabsan), and his chief armour-bearer (Rabshakeh), with a large force to Jerusalem, to demand its surrender.

Whoever had the command of the expedition,

Rabshakeh was the chief speaker, and, taking his stand beneath the walls of the city, he proclaimed to the people in the Hebrew tongue the message of his master, in which he ridiculed the grounds on which Hezekiah encouraged them to resist the King of Assyria, and invited them for their own advantage to submit to him at once. For on what did Hezekiah trust? Either he looked to Egypt for help, or he sheltered himself on Jehovah, and felt confident that He would be his rock of defence. "As to Egypt," Rabshakeh says, "it was a bruised reed—not broken, but bruised and crushed—which a man may think to be whole and so deceive himself." The figure is one especially applicable to Egypt, which abounds in reeds; and the truth which it represents had been already pressed upon the Israelites by Isaiah (xxx. 2—5). If, however, Hezekiah professed to trust in Jehovah, Rabshakeh craftily suggested that the reformation in religion which Hezekiah had introduced, and especially the destruction of the high places, was an insult to Him, and as such would be sure to be punished. He pretended, moreover, that he had come against Jerusalem at God's command; and he insinuated that not only was Hezekiah's power so shattered that he could not find in his kingdom

two thousand men who could serve on horseback, even if the king of Assyria were to offer to supply the horses ; but even his boasted trust in Jehovah was vain, for Sennacherib had the sanction and command of Jehovah Himself for his attack on Jerusalem.

Rabshakeh's words were blasphemous and insulting, but they were not unlikely to influence the inhabitants of Jerusalem ; and therefore the servants of Hezekiah entreated him, if he had a message to their master, to deliver it not in Hebrew, which the people could understand, but in the Syrian or Armenian language, which though not the mother tongue of the Assyrians, was the language of a large portion of Sennacherib's dominions, and as such would be familiar to the officers of his court as well as to the servants of Hezekiah. But Rabshakeh's chief object was to address himself to the people at large, and instil into them distrust of Hezekiah, and therefore he went on to speak still more openly, and to warn them not to allow Hezekiah to deceive them, as if it were possible for them to make an effectual resistance : at the same time he invites them to submit to Sennacherib, as the surest way to peace and prosperity. If they would but come out to him, that is, surrender themselves to him, he would take

care that they should eat of their own vine and of their own fig-tree : that is, enjoy the fruits of their own property without disturbance. And in order to reconcile them to the usual Assyrian policy of removing their captives into other countries, Rabshakeh promised that Sennacherib would give them a land as good as their own, "a land of corn and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of oil olive and of honey." The words seem almost a quotation from the description of Canaan in the Book of Deuteronomy (viii. 8, xxxiii. 28), which favours the supposition that Rabshakeh was an apostate Israelite, a conjecture which is further confirmed by his familiarity with Hebrew. However this may be, his words had no effect on the people : they were received in silence, according to Hezekiah's express command ; and the delegates, who had been appointed to receive the King of Assyria's message, returned to Hezekiah with their clothes rent, in token of their grief at Rabshakeh's blasphemous and insulting speech.

The special excellence for which Hezekiah is commended is his trust in God ; and yet it would seem that once and again he fell away from that trust ; first, when he purchased peace by paying a great ransom to Sennacherib, for which he was

obliged to spoil the house of God, and afterwards, by displaying his treasures to the ambassadors from Babylon. In spite, however, of Hezekiah's weakness, it is said that he "trusted in the Lord God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him." Should we at any time be betrayed into fear or worldly dependence, Hezekiah's example should encourage us to return at once to our trust in God. He will not refuse His almighty aid, even to those who at times forget Him and put their trust in an arm of flesh.

We might have thought, that the only question with us would be, May we trust in God? may we cast our care upon Him? may we really believe that He will make all things work for our good? But strange to say, it is very difficult for us to throw off all confidence in man and trust wholly upon God. But if we will do so, we shall be safe. "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is: for he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the time of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit" (Jer. xvii. 7, 8).

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—2 *Kings* xix.

WHEN Rabshakeh perceived that neither his confident words nor his promises had any effect on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, he returned to his master, the King of Assyria, who was engaged in besieging Libnah, at no great distance from Jerusalem. Whether he withdrew at the same time the forces which he had brought with him does not appear. In any case Hezekiah and his people were in the greatest danger. Sennacherib could not but be exasperated at the failure of his summons, and he had with him an immense army with the view of his expedition against Egypt.

What then did Hezekiah do in his peril? He did two things. For himself, he repaired, in mourning garments, to the Temple, to lay his trouble before the Lord; and at the same time he despatched the chief officers of state, Eliakim, the head of his household, and Shebna, his secretary, who had been ejected for his pride from the place which Eliakim now held, and the elders of the priests, to the Prophet Isaiah, confessing that they were in the extremity of danger, and entreating his prayers. The prophet sent them back with words of comfort and encouragement. Hezekiah

need not be afraid of the King of Assyria; the God whom he had insulted and blasphemed would take vengeance on him; He would send a blast upon him, and he should hear a rumour, and He would cause him to fall by the sword in his own land. Very shortly afterwards, while Sennacherib was still laying siege to Libnah, the news reached him that Tirhakah, the great King of Ethiopia, was advancing towards him. He contented himself, therefore, with sending messengers, with a threatening letter to Hezekiah, demanding the surrender of Jerusalem, and marched at once against the Egyptians, in the hope (so it is said) of overcoming them before they were joined by the Ethiopians.

Sennacherib's letter was couched in the same insulting terms in which Rabshakeh had spoken. He reckons up the various nations whom he had destroyed, and proudly denies the power of Jehovah to deliver Jerusalem, any more than the gods of those nations had been able to deliver them. As soon as he had received the letter, Hezekiah repaired again to the Temple, and there spread it before the Lord. In the child-like confidence of faith he takes his trouble to the Lord, assured that he was laying it before One Who had both the power and the will to help him. The eye

of Hezekiah seemed to fix itself, as it were, on the cloud of glory which he knew to be within the veil, resting on the mercy-seat between the cherubim. He knew that the gracious God, of Whose presence the cloud of glory was the pledge, was the Creator and Sovereign of the world, in Whose hands were the destinies of all the kingdoms of the earth; and he prayed to Him with all earnestness to hear his prayer, and to take vengeance on the vaunting words of Sennacherib. It was no wonder (he said) that the kings of Assyria had been able to subdue the several nations whom they had conquered hitherto, for the gods of those nations were not really gods—mere idols, the work of men's hands, wood and stone; but He to Whom he had recourse was the true and only God, and he besought Him to prove that it was so by delivering His people from their enemies.

His prayer was heard, and he had scarcely, as it would seem, left the Temple and returned to his own house, when a second and still more encouraging message came to him from the Prophet Isaiah: "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, That which thou hast prayed to Me against Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard." The message itself contains three parts: the first part, from the 21st

to the 28th verse, is in the form of an address to Sennacherib, answering the defiance which he had hurled against the people of God. The virgin, the daughter of Zion, despised him and laughed him to scorn; for he would be forced to return with his purpose uneffected. It was really Jehovah Himself Whom he had scorned, and Jehovah would vindicate His own omnipotence. Sennacherib had vainly boasted that nothing was beyond his power: he could scale the most inaccessible mountains; he could destroy the most glorious creations of God, and rule over the world according to his own will. There is special reference here to his proposed conquest of Canaan and Egypt; Lebanon, with its noble forests, would fall before him; even the natural obstacles in the way of his expedition against Egypt would be readily overcome; let the intervening desert be ever so dry and toilsome, he would dig wells and drink water there as freely as in his own land; the arms of the great river Nile would not retard him, its waters would dry up under the footsteps of his immense host. But all such boasting was as foolish as it was presumptuous, for, great as had been the achievements of the King of Assyria in times past, it was only by the power of the Lord that he had been able to

accomplish them. He had been His instrument in the destruction of the cities which he had destroyed ; what he had done was really the Lord's doing, Who, from the days of old, had ordered and governed all things. But as, hitherto, Sennacherib had wrought God's will on others, so now that will was to be wrought on him. The Lord knew all his ways, and his rage against Him, and would control him, and cause him to return home disappointed of his great object.

Then, in the 29th verse, the word of the Lord addresses itself to Hezekiah : "This shall be a sign unto thee : Ye shall eat this year such things as grow of themselves, and in the second year that which groweth of the same ; and in the third year sow ye and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat the fruits thereof." During the present and the coming year the country would be occupied by the enemy, so that it would be impossible to sow and reap, and men must live on that which grows without sowing ; but in the third year they would be able to cultivate their fields and vineyards, and to reap as usual. The consequence would be that, severe as were the troubles from which they had suffered, the people whom God had chosen would not be wholly cut off ; a remnant would continue, who

would be winnowed by God's judgments, not left to perish with the heathen.

Then, at the close of the message (ver. 31—35), the issue of his expedition against Jerusalem is plainly set forth : “ Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast a bank against it. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it, for Mine own sake, and for My servant David's sake.” And how did God fulfil His word ? From Libnah, in consequence of the march of the dreaded Tirhakah, Sennacherib pushed on against the Egyptians, hoping to attack and master them before the Egyptian and Ethiopian forces were united. The two armies were encamped within sight of each other, ready for the engagement of the morrow, when in the night the angel of the Lord smote the Assyrians (probably by a sudden pestilence), and poured contempt on all their power ; and when they awoke in the morning 185,000 corpses lay dead in the camp.

The deliverance was complete. A single night alone intervened between a gigantic army and no

army at all. The might of the greatest monarch in the world "melted like snow in the glance of the Lord." Sennacherib fled precipitately to Nineveh, and after a time was murdered by two of his sons, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god.

This remarkable deliverance is one of the most extraordinary events in the history of the world; and we cannot wonder that it sank deep into the heart of the Jews, and they long remembered how God had been their "refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm xli. 1). And, be it remembered, it was vouchsafed in answer to Hezekiah's earnest prayer. Think of him, in the moment of his extreme peril, taking Sennacherib's letter to the Temple and spreading it before the Lord. He went to Him as his best and truest Friend, the only One indeed Who could possibly do him good. He laid the letter down before Him, as feeling that He was personally present there and looking on him, and ready to advise with him in his difficulty. See him in one of the courts of the Temple, with his thoughts fixed on the cloud of glory overshadowing the mercy-seat, and listen to his earnest prayer: "O Lord God of Israel, which dwellest between the cherubims! Thou art the God,

even Thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth : Thou hast made heaven and earth. Lord, bow down Thine ear and hear ; open, Lord, Thine eyes and see ; and hear the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent him to reproach the living God. Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have destroyed the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire : for they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone ; therefore they have destroyed them. Now therefore, O Lord our God, I beseech Thee, save Thou us out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art the Lord God, even Thou only."

Observe the one plea upon which Hezekiah rests his cause. He says nothing of himself, and of the services which he had wrought, and the reformation which he had promoted throughout the land. It was but a small matter that Hezekiah and his people should perish : there might be reasons why God would be pleased to suffer the threatened danger to overwhelm them. But God's own honour was at stake. Hezekiah hoped that He would not suffer the nations of the earth to conclude that He was of no more power and might than the worthless idols, which of course had been unable to deliver their votaries from the hand of

their enemies. He pleaded with Him to vindicate His own greatness, and deliver those who trusted in Him.

Thus Hezekiah sought and found relief in his anxiety, and the account of it is detailed with such fulness in Scripture, not only that we may admire Hezekiah's assured trust and hope in God, but may ourselves go and do likewise. What have we to do, when any danger, affliction, or perplexity befall us, but lay our case before God, as Hezekiah did? Who can tell what a blessing this history would be to us, if the very next time that any bad news was brought to us, whether it concerned ourselves personally, or our family, or our country, or the Church of God, we would go at once, without allowing ourselves to brood over our trouble, and perhaps grow fretful, desponding, and uncharitable, and lay it with all our fear and sorrow before our merciful Father, whether in His own House, to which Hezekiah repaired, or in the retirement of our own chamber? Who can tell how it would soothe and strengthen our hearts, and enable us to bear the impending blow? Even if it should still please God that the blow should fall, the act of communing with Him as our friend, and pouring out our hearts before Him, would be a stay and

comfort, according to those precious words of the Apostle: "Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God; and the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—2 *Kings* xxiii. to ver. 31.

THE reformation which King Hezekiah took such pains to effect, seems, after all, to have been very superficial. If we may judge from the remonstrances of the Prophet Isaiah, the outward observances of religion were in many cases unaccompanied by real devotion; the idols, which were publicly suppressed, were worshipped in private; even the priests and prophets were many of them little better than profligate drunkards. (See *Isa.* i. 13, 14, 29, ii. 20, xxviii. 7.) And accordingly, when, on the death of Hezekiah, his son Manasseh succeeded to the throne at the early age of twelve, the princes who had the charge of him did all in their power to influence his mind against the religion of Jehovah. Probably they had been all

along attached to the heathen practices and worship of Ahaz, and had only been restrained by the strong hand of Hezekiah. All kinds of idolatrous rites began to be practised in Jerusalem with an ardour unknown before. Not only were the high places restored, but altars were erected in honour of Baal and Ashtaroth, even within the precincts of the Temple. The worship of the heavenly bodies, begun by Ahaz, was restored and eagerly followed. The practice of human sacrifice became general, and the cries of their victims re-echoed through the Valley of Hinnom. The old faith was everywhere neglected and despised. The altar of Jehovah was desecrated (2 Chron. xxxiii. 16); the Ark itself was removed from the Holy of Holies (2 Chron. xxxv. 3).

All this was accompanied with extreme moral degradation and with bitter persecution. There were not wanting, indeed, those who testified against the prevailing abominations, and declared that the time would come when the Lord would stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab, and would wipe Jerusalem as when a man wipeth a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. Chief among these faithful witnesses was the great Pro-

phet Isaiah, now nearly ninety years of age, and on him the first stroke of persecution fell. It was at this time, according to the ancient Jewish tradition, that he was cruelly sawn asunder (Heb. xi. 37); while others, less known but not less faithful, were slaughtered in such numbers that the streets of Jerusalem ran with blood.

Their predictions, however, were fulfilled. The forces of Assyria came up against Jerusalem and took it, and carried Manasseh to Babylon, where, loaded with fetters, he was cast into prison. In the solitude of his dungeon he repented of his wickedness and besought the Lord, and He heard him and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom (2 Chron. xxxiii.). On his return he did not forget the lessons and resolutions of his captivity: the idols were removed from the sanctuary, the altar of the Lord was restored, and peace-offerings and thank-offerings were offered to Him thereon, and the people were commanded to serve the Lord God of Israel.

But with all his repentance, Manasseh could not undo the evil which he had done. Even his own son Amon followed the example of his early, rather than of his later, life, and gave himself up wholly to the service of false gods. To his reign

belongs the terrible picture of the moral and religious condition of Jerusalem given by the Prophet Zephaniah,—idolatry supported by priests and prophets, the poor ruthlessly oppressed, the princes luxurious, their dependants violent and deceitful, the people generally shamefully indifferent to evil.

Such was the condition of things when Amon fell a victim to the hostility of his own servants, and his son Josiah, a mere boy of eight years of age, came to the throne. The whole land was full of abominations—profane altars, idolatrous priests, crimes, and vile deeds; and it might well have been feared that the youthful king, unable to stem the tide of wickedness, would have fallen in with the ways of those around him; but, by God's grace, he did nothing of the kind: from his earliest years he set himself to the work of purification with all his heart and with all his soul. Even in the midst of the corruption and idolatry there were witnesses for God—silent witnesses, it is true, many of them, but still witnesses—whose voice was loud enough to be heard by those who had ears to hear. There was the Temple, polluted, indeed, and abused to all kinds of idolatrous and impure practices, but which neverthe-

less testified to Him to Whose honour it had been reared. There was the traditional belief, which not even their repeated backslidings could root out of the minds of the people, that they were God's chosen servants, who, having been signally blessed and favoured by God, were bound to serve Him with all their hearts. There was the memory, still surviving, of the miraculous destruction of Sennacherib's army. There was the still more recent punishment of Manasseh for his idolatry, his repentance, and the efforts which he made to recal his people from their evil ways. All these things made a deep impression on young Josiah's heart, and he determined from the first to choose the good part which could not be taken from him.

Even in the eighth year of his reign, when he was only sixteen years of age, his mind was fixed and his choice made. He began to serve the Lord God of his fathers; and four years afterwards, in his twelfth year, he applied himself actively to the destruction of all idols and altars dedicated to false gods, first in Judæa and Jerusalem, and then in the cities of Simeon, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Naphthali. He made a personal progress through the land, destroying all the idols and grinding them to powder. At Bethel he brake down the

altar and the high places which Jeroboam had set up, in accordance with the remarkable prophecy of the disobedient prophet, by whom Josiah had been mentioned by name three hundred years before; and he scattered men's bones over them, in token of loathing and contempt.

Then, when he was twenty-six years of age, in the eighteenth year of his reign, he entered on the repair of the house of the Lord, and in the course of these repairs Hilkiah the high priest discovered a roll containing the Book of the Law, probably the Book of Deuteronomy, which being read in the ears of the king, he became so impressed with the sinful condition of his people, and the danger under which they lay of being cut off by the Divine vengeance, that he rent his clothes and directed that inquiry should at once be made as to the will of God, in order that, if possible, he and his people might escape the threatened judgment. The person to whom they had recourse was Huldah, the wife of Shallum, the keeper of the king's wardrobe, the most distinguished person, apparently, for prophetic gifts, at that time in Jerusalem. Her answer was, that God's judgments would certainly fall on Jerusalem and its inhabitants, because they had forsaken the

Lord and burnt incense unto other gods ; even the efforts of good Josiah would not avail to avert them. The cloud which had long been gathering must fall on their guilty heads ; but the tender-hearted, penitent king should have found timely shelter. “ Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, as touching the words which thou hast heard, because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the Lord, when thou heardest what I spake against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes and wept before Me : I also have heard thee, saith the Lord. Behold, therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered unto thy grave in peace : and thine eyes shall not see all the evil I will bring upon this place.” While the mass of the people were like the troubled sea, whose waters cast up mire and dirt, the contrite spirit of King Josiah was a pearl of great price, singled out by the all-seeing eye of God in the midst of the miry waters and laid up among His jewels. It was the one bright spot, amid a chaos of sin and profaneness, on which the great God of heaven deigned to look with delight and favour.

Having received the answer of God, the king

repaired immediately to the Temple and caused the dreadful denunciations of God against idolatry and disobedience to be read in the ears of the people; and then, standing by a pillar, he made the people enter into a solemn covenant to keep the law of Jehovah and to adhere henceforth to His pure worship. At the same time he renewed his efforts to abolish every trace of idolatry in the kingdom, and to put down all corrupt and shameful practices. He celebrated also the Feast of the Passover with more munificent offerings and a greater concourse of worshippers than had been seen on any previous occasion. We read of no king more pure-minded, courageous, and godly, than Josiah; and he gained for himself this special praise from the inspired writer of the Book of Kings, that "Like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him."

But the time which Huldah had foretold was drawing on. We learn from the further account of Josiah's death, given in the Second Book of Chronicles (xxxv. 20—24), that Pharaoh Necho, King of Egypt, on his way to attack Carchemish,

a strong city of Assyria, on the banks of the Euphrates, marched through Palestine, and that, for whatever reason, Josiah went out with an army to resist him. Perhaps there was a treaty between the Kings of Judah and Assyria at that time, and Josiah felt himself bound, in the interest of his ally, to oppose the passage of the King of Egypt. However it was, the King of Egypt sent a special message to him, warning him of the rashness of his undertaking: "What have I to do with thee, thou king of Judah? I come not against thee this day, but against the house (the royal family of Assyria) wherewith I have war." He further begged Josiah not to meddle with him, for "God (he said) had commanded him to make haste." Probably this was a mere pretence on the part of the King of Egypt to gain Josiah over by his known purity and reverence for God's commands; or it is possible that by "God" he meant his own idol. At all events, Josiah was not dissuaded from the encounter, but went forth to meet the Egyptian army in the Valley of Megiddo; and, though he was disguised, the Egyptian archers in their long array, so familiar to us from the sculptured monuments, struck and wounded him, so that he was removed from the fight in a chariot

which he had in reserve ; but he died before he reached Jerusalem.

Such was the sad and, as we may feel, disappointing and untimely end of good King Josiah. But he had done his work, and therefore God took him. Early as death came upon him, and painful as were its circumstances, it was really in mercy that God removed him. He himself, we may be sure, would not grieve at his departure, but rather thank God for having taken him from the evil to come. His history seems to warn us against laying too much stress on the circumstances of a man's death, seeing that it is the life that is of real consequence. Our business in the world is to live for God, not to put off to old age the work of youth, nor to the hour of death the labour of life, but to work for God during the time appointed for our work. And then it matters not what the manner of our death may be. If only to us to live is Christ, then death will be gain ; whenever or however it may come, it will be a departure in peace and death in the Lord.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—2 *Chron.* xxxvi.

WITH the death of Josiah, and the great national lamentation with which he was followed to the grave, the history of the kingdom of Judah may be said to end. Josiah was not only the last good king of Judah, but he was the last who could be rightly called king at all. The kingdom lingered on indeed for four-and-twenty years under his four feeble successors, until the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar; but its independence was gone, and its condition was that of hopeless vassalage to one or other of two foreign sovereigns.

There seems to have been a general presentiment, at the time of Josiah's death, that the end was come, for the mourning for him was such as had never occurred before in Jewish history. The whole population attended the funeral, and an elegy over him, composed by Jeremiah, was chanted year by year on the field of battle and in Jerusalem.

The defeat of Josiah at Megiddo placed his

kingdom in the hands of Pharaoh Necho, though it does not appear that he actually entered Jerusalem. He proceeded to Carchemish on the Euphrates, whither he was marching when Josiah came out to meet him. Having succeeded in taking it from the Babylonians, he returned to Riblah in the land of Hamath, on the high-road between Palestine and Babylon. In the meanwhile the Jews had made Jehoahaz (or Shallum), one of the younger sons of Josiah, king in his father's stead, intending probably that he should carry out his father's policy, namely, take part with the King of Babylon against Egypt. If this were so, the design was signally unsuccessful, for as soon as Pharaoh Necho reached Riblah he sent for him, and put him in chains, and carried him into Egypt, where he died. He then set Eliakim, the elder brother, upon the throne, changing his name to Jehoiakim.

Judah thus became a province of Egypt. "For a few years a temporary splendour remained, combined with the restoration of old heathen rites. The king himself, by enforced labour, enlarged his palace, roofed it with cedar, and painted it with vermilion, as if the evil day were yet far off, and he could rest securely under the protection of

the Egyptian power, whose heavy tribute he exacted from his unwilling subjects." But the fall of Egypt was at hand, and Judah must needs fall with it. The King of Babylon sent his son Nebuchadnezzar to take vengeance on Pharaoh Necho for the capture of Carchemish; and in the fourth year of Jehoiakim Carchemish was retaken by the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar then marched upon Jerusalem, as one of the tributaries of Egypt, and the natural fruit of his victory. After a short siege he entered Jerusalem, took the king prisoner, bound him in fetters to carry him to Babylon, and took also some of the precious vessels of the Temple, and carried them to the land of Shinar, to the temple of Bel, his god. But shortly afterwards he so far changed his purpose with regard to Jehoiakim, that he sent him back to Jerusalem, and allowed him to retain his kingly dignity. He was reinstated on his throne for three years; at the end of which time he was rash enough to attempt to throw off the Babylonish yoke. He "turned and rebelled against" Nebuchadnezzar, and thereby brought ruin upon himself and his country. Unable to proceed against him in person, Nebuchadnezzar sent bands of the Chaldees, and bands of the Syrians, and

bands of the Moabites, and bands of the children of Ammon against Judah to destroy it, which cruelly harassed the whole country; and the closing years of Jehoiakim's life were years of extreme misery, until he came to a violent end in the eleventh year of his reign. His body lay ignominiously exposed upon the ground, and was then dragged away and buried with the burial of an ass, without pomp or lamentation, beyond the gates of Jerusalem (Jerem. xxii. 18, 19).

He was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin, who, after reigning three months, was besieged in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, and then carried away, with his nobles and servants, and none save the poorest of the population were left behind. Jehoiachin remained in prison, wearing prison garments, for thirty-six years, till the death of Nebuchadnezzar.

In the meanwhile his uncle Mattaniah, the son of Josiah, and brother of Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, was placed on the throne, and his name changed to Zedekiah. Weak and impoverished as his kingdom was, Zedekiah might have ruled in peace, and preserved his city and the Temple from destruction, had he remained true in his allegiance to the King of Babylon. But, in spite of the

advice of the Prophet Jeremiah, he formed an alliance with Pharaoh Hophra, King of Egypt, which brought down upon him immediately the vengeance of Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian army ravaged Judah, and the whole country was reduced, except Jerusalem and the strong fortresses of Lachish and Azekah (Jerem. xxxvii. 5—11).

When the King of Egypt marched to the assistance of his ally, the Babylonians turned away from the siege of Jerusalem to meet him; but, having warded off all danger from that quarter, they appeared again before the walls of Jerusalem, which they besieged with great vigour, until the wretched inhabitants were reduced to the most fearful straits. Famine of the severest kind prevailed throughout the city. The tongue of the sucking child clave to the roof of his mouth for thirst; the young children asked bread, and no man brake it unto them. Mothers boiled and ate the flesh of their children. The nobles, who had fed delicately, searched the very dung-heaps for morsels of food (Lament. iv. 4, 5, 10). For sixteen weary months the city held out; but at length, on the ninth day of the fourth month, that is, towards the middle of July—at midnight, according to Josephus—the fatal breach was made

in the walls, and the enemy marched in without resistance. "The princes of the king of Babylon came in and sat in the middle gate" (Jerem. xxxix. 3), that is, the gate which led from the lower to the upper city, in the very heart of Jerusalem. The soldiers entered the Temple, and slaughtered not only the young priests and Levites, but others also, old and young, who took refuge in the sanctuary. When the news of the capture of the city reached Zédekiah, he attempted to steal away by some gate at the south side, at the opposite end to that at which the enemy entered, and then, crossing the Kedron, he made his way over the Mount of Olives, to the valley of the Jordan. He was overtaken near Jericho, and there, "in that wide plain, the scene of the first triumph of Joshua, was fought the last fight of the expiring monarchy."

Nebuchadnezzar was at the time at Riblah, and thither Zedekiah was taken. He had broken his oath of allegiance, and could not therefore expect any consideration; but miserable indeed was the fate that awaited him. His sons were slain in his sight, and then his own eyes were put out, and, loaded with brazen fetters, he was taken to Babylon, where he died.

A month later Nebuzaradan, the captain of the royal guard, came to Jerusalem with orders to complete the work of destruction. The Temple, the royal palace, and all the more important buildings, were deliberately set on fire; the walls were thrown down, and left as heaps of disordered rubbish on the ground. The sacred vessels of the Temple were carried to Babylon, and those which were too heavy to be transported, such as the pillars and Solomon's brazen sea, were broken up. The greater part of the remaining inhabitants were also taken away to Babylon, where "they were servants to the king of Babylon and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia: to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths; for as long as she lay desolate, she kept sabbath, to fulfil three score and ten years."

There would seem to be a reference here to a passage in the twenty-sixth chapter of Leviticus, where, after denouncing the most terrible judgments—the sword, pestilence, famine, and captivity—against those who should disobey His covenant, Almighty God says that one consequence of the scattering of the people among the heathen would be, that the land would be left to

rest, and would so far expiate the long-continued breach of the Sabbatical law: "Then shall the land enjoy her sabbaths as long as it lieth desolate, and ye be in your enemies' land; even then shall the land rest, and enjoy her sabbaths. As long as it lieth desolate it shall rest; because it did not rest in your sabbaths when ye dwelt upon it." If, as is thought, the length of the captivity—seventy years—marks the exact number of Sabbatical years which had been neglected, the law must have been disobeyed for a period of four hundred and ninety years, which coincides pretty nearly with the duration of the monarchy.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the wonder of all times, the paragon of nations, the glory of the earth, the favourite of Heaven, how art thou now become heaps of ashes, hills of rubbish, a spectacle of desolation, a monument of ruin! O God, what place shall Thy justice spare, if Jerusalem have perished? If that delight of Thine were cut off for her wickedness, 'Let us not be high-minded, but fear.'" "What pity was it to see those goodly cedars of the Temple flaming up higher than they stood in Lebanon! to see the vail rent, the sacred ark of God violated and defaced, the tables overturned, the altars broken

down, the pillars demolished, the pavements digged up, yea, the very ground where that famous pile stood, deformed! O God, Thou wouldst rather have no visible house upon earth than endure it defiled with idolatries."

The Jews, however, still clung to the holy place, which was not the less sacred because the building was destroyed. It was still to them the centre of hope in their captivity; and at the time appointed the decree of Cyrus was issued, authorising the rebuilding of the Temple. In the meanwhile their penitential prayer, not unmixed with hope, was, "Turn Thou us, O Lord, and we shall be turned! Renew our days as of old. Wilt Thou utterly reject us? Wilt Thou be very wroth against us?" (Lament. v. 21, 22, margin).

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Nehemiah* i., ii., to ver. 9.

NEARLY an hundred years had passed since Cyrus, King of Persia, issued the proclamation referred to in this morning's Lesson, in which he gave permission to the Jews to return to their own land and rebuild the Temple. Though the majority of the captives, having been for several years com-

fortably settled in Babylon, declined to leave their foreign homes, yet a considerable number, amounting to 42,360, with more than 7,000 servants, availed themselves of the king's permission, and returned to Jerusalem. The expedition comprised all classes—members of the royal family, priests, Levites, lay people belonging to various towns and families—and they took with them, besides abundant treasure for the work in hand, the vessels belonging to the old Temple which had been preserved in Babylon.

Zerubbabel, the head of the tribe of Judah, and Jeshua the high priest, were invested with the command of the returning colony. In the beginning of the second year after their arrival in Jerusalem, the foundations of the Temple were laid with great ceremony; and in the twentieth year, that is, B.C. 516, after many interruptions, the building was completed.

Then followed a period of fifty-eight years, of which we have no account: at the end of that time there was a fresh emigration from Babylon, headed by Ezra, the priest and scribe, bringing with them valuable offerings from the Persian king as well as from the Jews who still remained behind. Ezra was well received by the governors of Jerusalem,

but found to his great distress that his countrymen had fallen already into many irregularities, the chief of which was their marriage with the native women belonging to the old Canaanite tribes. He devoted himself promptly and earnestly to the correction of these abuses, and then, as seems on the whole most likely (though it is not certain), he returned to Babylon, his commission from the king having been only of a temporary nature, "to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem," and to convey "the silver and the gold which the king and his counsellors had freely offered unto the God of Israel" (Ezra vii. 14, 15).

Thirteen years afterwards a report reached Nehemiah, as recorded in this evening's Lesson, that notwithstanding the re-dedication of the Temple, the city itself was in a most deplorable condition, "the walls broken down and the gates burned with fire;" it was, in fact, very much in the same condition as that to which it had been reduced by Nebuchadnezzar 142 years before (2 Kings xxv. 10).

Nehemiah was at this time at Shushan, the winter residence of the kings of Persia, in high office as the cup-bearer of King Artaxerxes. He no sooner heard of the state of ruin in which the

walls of Jerusalem continued, and the great affliction and reproach of the inhabitants, than he conceived the design of throwing up the comforts and advantages of his position at the Persian court, and going to Jerusalem to endeavour, if possible, to better the condition of his countrymen. He immediately gave himself up for three or four months, that is, from the month Chisleu, the ninth month, to Nisan, which was the first month, to fasting and prayer. Day and night he besought the God of heaven to prosper his design and grant him favour in the sight of his royal master. With deep contrition he confessed his own sins and the sins of his people, acknowledging that they had dealt very corruptly, and transgressed God's commandments; but at the same time he pleaded God's own promise, that if His people would at any time turn to Him and repent, He would gather them from whithersoever He had scattered them over the whole heaven, and would bring them to the place which He had chosen to set His name there (Deut. iv. 29—31, xxx. 2); and on the strength of this promise, more than once repeated, Nehemiah rested his plea for a favourable answer to his supplication.

On a certain day, when the time seemed to have

arrived for presenting his request to the king, he assumed a depressed and sorrowful expression of countenance while waiting on him. Hitherto he had carefully concealed the trouble which was oppressing him, and had appeared before the king with his usual cheerful air; but now there was a change in his demeanour, and the king perceived it at once, and inquired the cause: "Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart." Then Nehemiah, in great alarm and anxiety, revealed the cause of his melancholy: "How could he be otherwise than sad, when the city, the place of his father's sepulchres, was lying waste, and the gates were consumed with fire? how could he forget Jerusalem? how could he not prefer Jerusalem above his chief joy?" (Ps. cxxxvii. 5, 6). Whereupon the king inquired further what it was he desired to do, and Nehemiah, strengthening himself with secret prayer to God, begged to be allowed to go to Jerusalem in person, and rebuild the city of his fathers' sepulchres. The king gave his consent, on condition that he returned within a certain time, and at Nehemiah's further request gave him letters to the satraps of the several provinces through which he would have to pass,

directing them to further him on his journey, as also to Asaph, the keeper of the royal forests, commanding him to supply timber and other necessaries for the work which he desired to execute. Thus his prayer was heard, and the good hand of his God was upon him, and his many weeks of humiliation and self-denial and prayer received the answer which he desired, but scarcely knew how to expect.

The king appointed him governor of Judea, and supplied him with a troop of cavalry for his protection. On his first arrival at Jerusalem, he kept his purpose and intention private for three days, and on the night of the third day he went out by himself and made a survey of the ruins. The next day he collected the people together, and proposed to them the immediate building of the walls, that the city might be no longer a reproach. They responded to his proposal with great unanimity. By word and example he induced the whole population to put their hand to the work, and in a wonderfully short time the walls began to rise out of the heap of burnt ruins, and to encircle the city again. Great efforts were made, partly by artifice, partly by violence, to check the undertaking; but Nehemiah succeeded at length in

completing it, and Jerusalem was once more restored to its former condition of a fortified town.

It is easy to understand the immense importance of Nehemiah's work. So long as the walls of Jerusalem remained in ruins, it was impossible to maintain order within the city; murder and robbery were rife, the city was deserted, few houses were built, and the services of the Temple were exposed to insult. But with the walls rebuilt, the inhabitants would be safe from the attacks of the heathen, the various offices of religion might be continued without fear of interruption, and the former attachment of the people to the capital of their country would revive.

All this, humanly speaking, was the work of Nehemiah. His love for his country kindled his indignant sorrow at its sad condition; and his simple piety led him to have recourse to prayer as the only remedy, but a sure one, for the evils which distressed him. Who would have thought that the cup-bearer in the court of the King of Persia would be able to achieve so great a work? And mark how it was brought about. As soon as he conceived the desire of benefiting his countrymen by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, he set himself to accomplish his purpose, difficult as it

seemed, by means of prayer. Day after day he prayed and fasted ; day after day he humbled himself before God and besought His help—besought Him to incline the king's heart, so that he might receive with favour a request which, at first sight, it might be supposed he would treat with scorn.

What guidance and encouragement is there here for those who have any especial request to make, whether for the Church at large, or for their own particular branch of it, for their country or their family ! If the object of our desire is one which we are satisfied we may lawfully seek, then let us, after Nehemiah's example, set ourselves deliberately and earnestly to pray for it ; let us make it a special subject of prayer ; let us humble and deny ourselves with a view to its accomplishment ; let us go on praying, as feeling that we have no right to expect that our prayers will be heard at once, and as knowing that God frequently delays to answer prayer, in order that we may pray more earnestly, and He may answer us more abundantly. There is no limit to the power of such persevering prayer. Difficulties which seemed insurmountable will be removed ; dangers which seemed inevitable will be warded off ; blessings which seemed beyond our reach will be granted to us. Only we must be careful to

imitate also the spirit and temper of Nehemiah's prayer, confessing ourselves utterly unworthy to receive any answer to our prayers, but throwing ourselves nevertheless in steadfast trust on the love and faithfulness of Him Who heareth prayer. Nehemiah's prayer is the very model of all intercession—very humble, yet very trustful; for we depend for the efficacy of our prayers not on ourselves, but simply on the promise and grace of God.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Nehemiah* viii.

EZRA the priest had obtained leave from Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem, and take with him a company of Israelites, with certain priests and Levites, thirteen years before the visit of Nehemiah. He carried with him a large free-will offering of gold and silver for the decoration of the Temple; but his chief design seems to have been to effect a reformation among the Jews in Jerusalem, and bring them back to the observance of the Law of Moses. It is most likely—judging from the irregular condition of things in Jerusalem when Nehemiah arrived—that Ezra did not remain there during the whole of the intervening time, but returned to Babylon as soon

as the immediate purpose of his mission was fulfilled, and then afterwards either accompanied or followed Nehemiah, with the express intention of aiding him in his further work of rebuilding the walls of the city.

The functions ascribed in this Lesson to Ezra are entirely of a priestly or ecclesiastical character; but when he was first sent to Jerusalem by Artaxerxes, he seems to have been invested with the chief command in temporal affairs also; at least he had authority to appoint magistrates and judges, with power of life and death over all offenders. The commission given to Nehemiah as governor entirely superseded Ezra's temporal authority; but he did not complain of Nehemiah's appointment, or betray any jealousy towards him; we find them here co-operating together in entire harmony in the cause of God and their common country, the one as the head of affairs in ecclesiastical, the other in secular matters.

One of the effects of the captivity on the Israelites would seem to have been to create a deep reverence for the Law, and for the lawgiver, Moses. Their kings were gone, prophets had ceased from among them; the Law alone remained as a distinctive pledge of their nationality. To it, therefore,

they clung as a bond of union, as well as their only sure guide to the will of Jehovah. As yet, however, notwithstanding the efforts at reformation made first by Zerubbabel, and afterwards by Ezra, they seem to have been in profound ignorance of its requirements, and therefore they begged Ezra to instruct them. The proposal for the public reading of the Law came, it will be observed, not from Ezra or Nehemiah, but from the people themselves. They "gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water-gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe, to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel."

It is very interesting to notice the reverence with which they listened; they not only stood up, out of respect for the utterances of the Lord, but they hung upon the words with profound attention. "Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God; and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground." From morning until noon Ezra read, and the people listened as if they could never be weary; and the Levites explained the meaning—translating, probably, the original Hebrew into

the Chaldean, to which the people had become accustomed. It certainly seems as if the Law was in a great measure strange to the people at this time. The effort made by Zerubbabel on their first return from captivity to re-establish strict obedience soon died away, and though the Temple service was maintained, the people generally relapsed into carelessness. When, however, they found from Ezra's reading how far their practice fell short of the requirements of the Law, they wept; they could not but fear that they had displeased God, and that His vengeance would fall on them.

It was on the first day of the seventh month that the people assembled for the reading of the Law. This was the Feast of Trumpets—according to the appointment of Moses, one of the seven days of holy convocation in the course of the year, and on this account Ezra and Nehemiah and the Levites bade the people not weep or mourn, but rejoice before God. “Go your way,” they said; “eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy unto the Lord; neither be ye sorrowful; for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Every new moon was a time of rejoicing and re-

ligious observance ; but the new moon of the seventh month was an especially holy day, and, like the other festivals, it was to be observed with the thankful enjoyment of God's good gifts, and the glad imparting of those gifts to others ; though, perhaps, on this occasion the Levites had regard, not so much to the particular day on which the reading of the Law took place, as to the reading itself. God had been pleased to feed His people with His own word, of which hitherto, apparently, there had been a kind of famine. It was but fitting, therefore, that the day on which the heavenly food was provided should be to them " a good day, a day of gladness and feasting," and that they should show their thankfulness to Him Who had enriched them in spiritual things, by dispensing freely of their carnal things to those who were in want. " Some eat the fat and drink the sweet, and give no portion, not even the crumbs, to the poor ; but God's bounty should make us bountiful."

The next day, the chief of the fathers, the priests and the Levites, came again to Ezra, to be further instructed in the Law, in order that, understanding it themselves, they might be able to teach the people. In the course of their study of the Law,

they came upon the enactment concerning the Feast of Tabernacles, which was to be kept every year, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, as a thanksgiving for the completion of the harvest, in such a way as specially to commemorate the sojourn of the children of Israel in the wilderness. The Law ordained that the people should take boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees and willows of the brook, and that they should dwell in booths seven days (Levit. xxiii. 39—43). The appointed time for the celebration of this great festival was now nigh at hand, and the people resolved, as soon as they became acquainted with the ordinance, to keep it with great solemnity. They “went forth unto the mount and fetched olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water-gate, and in the street of the gate of Ephron.” The roofs of the houses being flat, the leafy arbours which they raised on them were, doubtless, very pleasant places, and well suited for quiet prayer and holy meditation. And day by day, from the

first day unto the last day, Ezra read in the Book of the Law of God. The people, having once become acquainted with the Word of God, clung to it with continued veneration.

It is impossible for us to think of them listening with such intense devotion—first, from morning until noon, and then day after day for a whole week—to the public reading of God's Word, without self-reproach, when we consider our own indifference and inattention, notwithstanding our great advantages. God speaks to us more plainly and more lovingly in the writings of Evangelists and Apostles than He did to them in the words of Moses; but we too often hear or read without emotion. The holy words are to us as a very pleasant song, but they do not kindle our hearts or affect our lives. We listen to the wonderful story of the love of God, and the salvation which He has wrought for us, but we are not stirred to thankfulness or love. We hear God's judgments denounced against the very sins of which our consciences accuse us, but we do not tremble, nor forsake them.

How will these simple-minded, ill-instructed Jews, hanging eagerly upon the words flowing from Ezra's lips, rise up in judgment against us, in that

they were so attentive to the recital of the mere enactments of the Law, while we are unmoved even by the gracious invitations and promises of the Gospel! Our familiarity with Holy Scripture will be our condemnation, unless we learn to listen to it as to the voice of God, and are careful to profit by what we hear or read. It would be a good rule for us always to endeavour to come to the hearing or reading of the Bible as if it were for the first time—with joy, as eager to hear what our Father would say to us, and yet with penitential sorrow, as we perceive how far short we fall of the standard of His holy will. Above all, let us come with prayer, that the Holy Spirit will open our understandings to understand the Scriptures, and to see the wonderful things of God's law; and that whatever therein we profitably learn, we may in truth fulfil the same.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—*Jeremiah v.*

THERE is no mark of time whereby to fix the date of this prophecy; but as Jeremiah began to prophesy in the thirteenth year of Josiah, and Josiah's reign lasted for thirty years, it is perhaps, on the whole, most likely that it belongs to the latter part of that reign; in which case the account here given of the state of Jerusalem may, in some measure, explain the mystery of Josiah's untimely death. The reformation which he laboured to effect, great as it was, was not so deep and thorough as we might perhaps imagine. The Prophet declares that through the length and breadth of Jerusalem it would be hard to find a single just and truth-loving man: if such an one there were, Almighty God seems to promise that for his sake He would pardon the city, and not send His threatened judgments upon it.

The great mass of the people were still idolaters, and sware by their false gods; and even those who professed to worship Jehovah and to swear by His

name, did not hesitate to perjure themselves and break their engagements. The eyes of the Lord were at all times upon the truth; He looked for truth in His people, but He could not find it: He found nothing but lies. He had endeavoured to move them by correction and rebuke, but to no purpose: they made their faces harder than a rock; they refused to return; they would not answer to the scourge, or turn unto Him that smote them; neither would they seek the Lord.

The Prophet ventured to hope that this was the case only with the poor and ignorant. They were foolish and ill-instructed (he said to himself); they knew not the way of the Lord, nor the judgment of their God; he would go to the rich and great, who were instructed in the Law and might be expected to teach others; but it was even worse with them: they had altogether broken the yoke and burst the bonds—no restraints of fear or conscience would keep them within bounds. And what was to be the consequence? Their enemies, the Chaldees, like so many ravening beasts, would come down fiercely upon them and destroy them. It was impossible that such deep apostacy could be pardoned. God's people had forsaken Him and given themselves to idols. Though He had be-

trothed them to Himself and taken them into covenant, they were unfaithful, and committed spiritual fornication against Him. "Shall I not visit for these things? saith the Lord: and shall not My soul be avenged on such a nation as this?"

Having thus passed sentence on Jerusalem, the Lord issues His commands to the King of Babylon to go up and execute the judgment which He had determined on: "Go ye up upon her walls, and destroy, but make not a full end." He shows that Babylon was only His instrument, by restraining it from utterly destroying the inhabitants of Jerusalem: her walls and fortifications were to be taken away, for they were not the Lord's; but a remnant was to be left, from which the nation might yet spring up again. The house of Israel and the house of Judah had dealt very treacherously against the Lord, almost denying His existence, and boasting that the denunciations of His prophets were mere wind, and that no harm would happen to them, and that the calamities which they threatened would fall upon the prophets, not on them. Wherefore Almighty God declares emphatically that the effect of the threatenings of Jeremiah should be as speedy and as certain as that of

fire upon dry wood: "Behold, I will make My words in thy mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them."

Then, turning to the people themselves, He tells them plainly what was the judgment that awaited them: "Lo, I will bring a nation upon you from far, O house of Israel, saith the Lord: it is a mighty nation; it is an ancient nation; a nation whose language thou knowest not, neither understandest what they say." Almighty God here takes up the words of the Book of Deuteronomy (xxviii. 49), which, though receiving their full and exact accomplishment in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, applied also undoubtedly to the Chaldeans, who are of course the mighty and ancient (Gen. x. 10) nation here referred to. "Their quiver is as an open sepulchre;" it was full of instruments of destruction: the opening of it therefore would at once seal the fate of Jerusalem. Every kind of misery would follow; only the Lord promised that He would not make a full end—a promise continually repeated (iv. 17, xxx. 11, xlvi. 28). Terrible as the Chaldean destruction was to be, a remnant should be left.

It is possible that the Jews might complain of

God's dealings with them, and inquire why His vengeance was so severe. The Book of Deuteronomy might have explained it (iv. 28, xxviii. 64, xxix. 21—27), but in order that they might fully understand His purpose, He declares plainly, "Like as ye have forsaken Me, and served strange gods in your land, so shall ye serve strangers in a land that is not yours."

Then follows a bitter complaint against the folly and perverseness of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. God had given them rational powers and abundant knowledge of His will, but they would not heed; they would not fear Him. He had made the light, loose sand the barrier of the mighty ocean; its restless and impetuous waves could not pass the bounds which He had set. But His own people were more unruly than the sea; no barriers of law or conscience could restrain them. They neither feared His power nor were grateful for His goodness. He gave them rain in its season—the autumn rain and the spring rain, according to their necessity—and reserved to them the appointed weeks of the harvest. But they had been thankless and careless, and God had withheld His favours: they had not returned to Him, in order that they might be restored. Their iniquities had

turned away these things, and their sins had withholden good things from them. Among God's own people were to be found men as utterly reckless and abandoned as among the heathen. As fowlers in search of game, they were always endeavouring to defraud and over-reach one another; and hence, as the fowler's cage is full of birds, so their houses were filled with deceit, that is, with the produce of deceit—wealth gotten by fraud. Outwardly prosperous and living in luxury, they overpassed the deeds of the wicked, or, as the words rather mean, they overpassed (by acts) the words of the wicked, "they executed and surpassed in deed all that bad men expressed in words." Violent and deceitful themselves, it was not likely that they would punish the wrong-doing of others, or redress the sufferings of the widow and the orphan: they judged not the cause of the fatherless; the right of the needy did they not judge. In spite, however, of their wealth and prosperity, the Lord was preparing to take vengeance on them: "Shall I not visit for these things? saith the Lord: shall not My soul be avenged on such a nation as this?"

The climax of all the wickedness and misery of the people was that the priests and prophets, who

should have been their instructors, and should have given them warning of their sin and danger, combined together to mislead and ruin them. "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and My people love to have it so." They loved the flattering delusions which encouraged them in sin and promised them impunity. But what would become of them in the end, when the words of the prophets were found to be lies, and the truth of Jeremiah's warnings was proved by the outpouring of God's wrath?

It is sad to think how continually in the history of the Christian Church her teachers may take up the Prophet's denunciation of the sin and apostacy of Jerusalem. There have been times when truth and justice, religion and piety, have been as nearly banished from Christian nations as they were from Jerusalem of old, when the poor have been degraded and profligate, neither knowing nor desiring to know the way of the Lord, and when those in high station have been proud and contemptuous, living in neglect of God, and openly justifying that neglect, and when the ministers of religion, whose duty it was to instruct and warn the people, have only lulled them into a false security, and gained for themselves power and affluence by their un-

faithfulness. Indeed, it is to be feared that there are few times and few places to which the Prophet's account of the corrupt state of Jerusalem does not so far apply as that it may well serve as a call to repentance and holiness of life. Christ's true servants are but as few among many. The majority even of professing Christians have little reverence for God's power, or thankfulness for His mercy. It is impossible, therefore, but that thoughtful and loving hearts should be filled with sad anticipations of coming evil. They feel that, sooner or later, God must visit for these things. All they can do is, by the strictness of their lives and the fervency of their prayers, and, as opportunity offers, by raising their voice in behalf of truth and holiness, to endeavour to avert the blow. Who knows how long the faithfulness and the intercessions even of a very few may avail to save a guilty people from punishment?

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Jeremiah* xxii.

THE prophecies contained in this chapter seem to have been delivered at different times after the

death of Josiah. In the latter part, from the 10th verse, we have the denunciations of God's wrath against three kings in succession—namely, Shallum, or Jehoahaz (ver. 10—12), Jehoiakim (ver. 13—19), and Coniah, or Jehoiachin (ver. 24—30); but it is uncertain to whom the message in the early part of the chapter was sent. Some connect it with the preceding chapter, and suppose that Zedekiah is the king addressed, the names of the other three kings being introduced as a warning to him, that as the predictions concerning them were exactly accomplished, so would it be with the warnings addressed to him. Another suggestion is, that the prophecy is a general one, and was repeated in successive reigns.

The Prophet is sent to the palace of the King of Judah, to bid him and his servants and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem to be careful to execute judgment and righteousness, and deliver the oppressed; to do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither to shed innocent blood. And he was instructed to assure them that if they would do so, the line of kings should be continued: there would always be true sons of David to sit on his throne (xvii. 19—27); but if they were lawless and tyrannical, then,

although the house of David were as fruitful as the rich pastures of Gilead, or as strong and lofty as the stately cedars of Lebanon, it would be stripped of its glory and made desolate; the Lord would prepare (lit., sanctify) destroyers to execute His purpose against it, and all the nations of the world should see the judgments which He had brought upon His unfaithful people.

The next three verses (10—12) belong plainly to the short reign of Jehoahaz, who, though one of the younger sons of Josiah, was made king by the people of the land in the place of his father. We may imagine the Prophet's message as being delivered at the time of the great mourning for Josiah. "Weep ye not for the dead," he says, "neither bemoan him." His untimely death, disastrous as it might seem, was not really so much a cause for lamentation as the miserable fate of his son. "Weep sore for him that goeth away," not as being taken, like his father, from the evil to come, but to captivity in Egypt. Jehoahaz had been made king in opposition to Egypt; and accordingly, when Pharaoh Necho returned after his victory at Carchemish, he resented his appointment and sent for him to Riblah, and afterwards carried him captive into Egypt.

The people, it would seem, looked for his restoration some day; but the Prophet declares that he should die in Egypt; and his word came true: he died in the place where they led him captive, and he saw his native land no more.

Then the Prophet goes on to denounce woe upon Jehoiakim, the elder brother of Jehoahaz, whom the King of Egypt placed on the throne in his stead. He was the vassal, first of Pharaoh, and afterwards, when Egypt was conquered by the Babylonians, of Nebuchadnezzar. In this dependent position he reigned for a time in peace, and even in splendour, lavishing vast sums for the gratification of his pride and luxury. He built a magnificent palace, which he ceiled with cedar and painted with vermilion, obliging his subjects to work without wages, and forcing them at the same time to pay large sums to Egypt and Babylon in turns. "Woe unto him," the Prophet says, "who buildeth his house by unrighteousness and his chambers by wrong Shalt thou reign because thou closest thyself in cedar?" His father, Josiah, did not affect such splendour. He lived in plenty indeed, but without oppression or injustice. He was, moreover, the patron of the poor, and his throne was established in righteousness, and it was

well with him. Jehoiakim, on the other hand, was given up to covetousness and extortion, not shrinking even from murder for the sake of gain. Wherefore the Prophet declares that he should be cut off prematurely, and none should bemoan him: "They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah my brother! or, Ah sister! they shall not lament for him, saying, Ah lord! or, Ah his glory! He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem." We do not know the details of his death. Some think that his own subjects rose up against him and cast his body over the walls; others that he was slain outside the city, in some attack which he made on his enemies, his body remaining in their hands; or it may be that his corpse was disinterred three months after his death, when Jerusalem was taken by Nebuchadnezzar (viii. 1, xxxvi. 30). However it was, there can be no doubt that the Prophet's words were fulfilled, and that disgrace and contumely were his portion.

The next verses (20—23) seem to represent the hopeless condition of Jerusalem at the time of the death of Jehoiakim, and during the three months which followed. The Prophet bids the inhabitants of the city go up to the heights of Lebanon or

Bashan, and call for help, and "cry from the passages," that is, from the range of hills called Abarim, on the east of Jordan. Let their voice of distress sound aloud from one end of the country to the other; it would be of no avail; there would be none to take notice of them. All their lovers, their former friends, the foreign kings to whom they looked for help, especially Egypt, would be destroyed, altogether unable to resist the power of their Chaldean conquerors. The Lord had given them timely warning in their prosperity, before the evil days came, but they were obstinate in their impenitence. This had been their manner from their youth; from the very time of their coming forth out of Egypt they had been rebellious against the Lord. Therefore all their rulers should perish; the blighting wind would destroy them; their friends and allies would go into captivity with them, and they themselves would be ashamed and confounded for all their wickedness. The inhabitants of Jerusalem might think themselves safe in the city, as an eagle which had built its nest among the lofty cedars of Lebanon; but destruction would come upon them nevertheless. "How gracious shalt thou be" (or rather, as the word signifies, "how wilt thou groan") "when

pangs come upon thee, the pain as of a woman in travail !”

On the death of Jehoiakim, his son Jeconiah, or Jehoiachin, succeeded. He was only eighteen years old when he began to reign; but he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, and by his bold rebellion cut himself off altogether from God's favour and protection; so that He here declares that, even if he were like the signet or seal-ring on the right hand of the king, the badge and symbol of his authority, He would pluck him off and cast him away; He would cast him out of Jerusalem and fling him away to Babylon. He is here called Coniah—the first syllable of his name, which is a part of the name JEHOVAH, being cut off to show that the Lord had rejected him. Even at his early age, his profligacy and ungodliness were such as to incur God's severest wrath; and He declares that he and his mother, who was responsible in great measure for his wickedness, should be carried away into a foreign land, and there they should die. The false prophets and diviners would fain have persuaded him that he would shortly return to Jerusalem (Jerem. xxix. 1—10); but the words of Jeremiah, who said that to the land whither they desired to return, thither they should

not return, were fulfilled. Jehoiachin lived many years in Babylon, and was kindly treated by Evil-merodach, the successor of Nebuchadnezzar ; but he was never restored to Jerusalem.

Is it indeed so, the Prophet goes on, that this man Coniah is a despised, broken idol, a mere shattered image of wood or stone, than which nothing can be conceived more worthless ? Is it true that he is a vessel to dishonour, made for vile uses, which men turn from with disgust ? And then he asks why it is so—why he and his seed are thus despised. He does not directly answer the question, but implies that it is on account of his sin ; and he emphatically calls on the earth to bear witness to the terrible judgment that should fall on him : “O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord : thus saith the Lord, Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days ; for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah.” It is not meant that Jehoiachin should have no children, for indeed his seed is expressly mentioned, but that none of his offspring should prosper and sit upon the throne of David. He was the last direct heir of David’s house. Zedekiah, who succeeded him, was his

uncle, and could not in any true sense be called king.

Jeremiah's prophecy respecting the three kings mentioned in this chapter was fulfilled. He prophesied that Jehoahaz (Shallum) should not return from captivity: he died in Egypt. He prophesied that Jehoiakim should be disgraced and cast out without burial: this particular circumstance is not recorded, but all that we know concerning him is consistent with the fulfilment of the prophecy. Jeconiah and his mother, he declared, should be carried captives to Babylon, and should not return; and so it was. The judgments denounced were different; but they were all the consequence of sin. God gave His people plain and frequent warning, but it had no effect. He spake unto them in their prosperity, but they would not hear His voice; therefore it was necessary that they should feel the stroke of His scourge. What a lesson to us to listen to God's voice when He speaks to us in gentleness and love, that He may not have occasion to lift up against us the rod of His displeasure!

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Jeremiah xxxv.*

THE alarm caused by the march of Nebuchadnezzar with a great Babylonish army against Judah in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim, obliged several of the inhabitants of the smaller towns and villages to leave their houses and take refuge in Jerusalem. Among those who were thus driven into the city for fear of the army of the Chaldeans was the family of the Rechabites, who had hitherto had no settled dwelling-place, but lived in tents, in obedience to the command of one of their ancestors.

These Rechabites were a very remarkable people, supposed to be connected with the Kenites, who had entered Canaan with the Israelites, and who still retained their wandering habits. Though not enrolled among the Jews, they had embraced their religion, and lived among them for several hundred years. Of Rechab himself nothing is known; but his son, or descendant, Jonadab, impressed a peculiar character upon them by prescribing a life of special strictness, as a protest against the surrounding licentiousness, and in order that they might be a hardy, self-denying, and industrious race. They were to drink no wine, nor build houses, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyards, nor have any.

All their days they were to live in tents, as remembering that they were strangers in the land. No one of these rules was in itself bound upon them by the law of God ; but coming to them with the authority of their forefather, the Rechabites observed them all most scrupulously for more than two hundred and fifty years, until they were driven by the Chaldean invasion, in the reign of Jehoiakim, to take refuge within the walls of Jerusalem.

It is likely that their coming made a great impression in the city. Their obedience was a rare instance of exemplary goodness in very degenerate times ; and therefore they must needs have been noticed. But lest the inhabitants of Jerusalem should fail to perceive the particular lesson to be derived from the Rechabites, the Prophet Jeremiah was instructed to direct public attention to them, and to point out, plainly and forcibly, the great contrast between the obedience of the Rechabites to their earthly parent, and their own disregard of the precepts of their heavenly Father.

By God's command Jeremiah summoned them into a chamber belonging to the Temple, and then, placing cups full of wine before them, bade them drink. Under the peculiar circumstances in which they were placed, considering

that their usual habits had been already broken through, and that the invitation came to them from the prophet of the Lord, it would not have been very surprising if they had complied with it. But filial reverence had more weight with them than the seeming invitation of the Prophet. "We will drink no wine, they said: for so hath Jonadab the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, saying, Ye shall drink no wine, neither you nor your sons for ever." And their careful adherence to their father's command brought down upon them a distinct and special blessing from Almighty God. Jeremiah was instructed to say to them: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto the house of the Rechabites, Because ye have obeyed the commandment of Jonadab your father, and kept all his precepts, and done according to all that he commanded you; therefore, thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not want a man to stand before Me for ever"—a prophecy which remains in force to this day, for we have the testimony of modern travellers to the effect that the race of the Rechabites is still preserved, and that they continue to observe the condition on which permanence was promised to them.

But Almighty God had a further purpose in the trial which He put upon them. He wished through them to rebuke the obstinacy and ingratitude of His own people.

Among the many forcible expostulations delivered by the Prophet Jeremiah there are scarcely any so calculated, one would think, to touch the hearts of the Israelites as this, and to bring home to them a sense of the undutifulness and ingratitude of their behaviour towards Almighty God. At one time he condescends to speak to them in terms of tenderness and compassion, at another of threatening; here he attempts to move them by a sense of shame. The particular and striking points of contrast between the Rechabites and themselves were such as these. Here was a set of men, complying most strictly with a command which had been given nearly three hundred years before,—a command which came to them, not with the authority of God, but only of an earthly parent—a command for which probably they could perceive no reason, which seemed to interfere with the liberty which God Himself allowed, and which, therefore, it might be reasonably doubted whether it were wise or beneficent,—a command, moreover, which

was wholly without sanction, either of reward or punishment; no promise was held out to them if they kept it; they were threatened with no judgment if they broke it. On the other hand, the Jews had received repeated messages from God. Prophet after prophet had spoken to them in His name; He never suffered them to forget Him, or to be long without warning. He was no mere earthly father; He was their Creator, whose pleasure it was the one object of their being to fulfil, their Preserver, to whom they owed all the blessings they enjoyed. He had absolute dominion and authority over them; if He so pleased He could force them to obey Him in all things. His commands too were such as would most certainly conduce to their happiness and welfare. And life and death hung upon their obedience. He set before them the most awful threatenings and the most persuasive promises. If they would but be faithful and obedient, God's richest blessings were in store for them; while the severest judgments were denounced against them if they were disobedient. And yet so it was, that though God's claim to their obedience was so paramount, though His commands were in themselves so reasonable, the dangers of disobedience so terrible, and the

blessings of obedience so attractive, yet His many calls and messages were disregarded, and He had to complain of continued and wanton neglect of His will. Such being the case, the very presence of such persons as the Rechabites among them must have been a standing witness against the Israelites. Their obedience to their father was a continual reproach to them for their disregard of Almighty God.

And are there not those among ourselves who will condemn us much in the same way in which the Rechabites condemned the Jews? It is true that obedience such as theirs is, to say the least, as rare and extraordinary now as then. Children are too apt to disregard the commonest injunctions of their parents, to make it at all likely that they would be willing to forego comforts and enjoyments which are within their reach, and which are in themselves lawful and innocent, merely for the sake of fulfilling a father's commands. But though we may not meet with such examples of dutifulness as that of the Rechabites to reprove us for our disregard of the commands of God, yet are there not wanting instances of scrupulous and self-denying attention on the part of children to their parents which may put to shame our disobedience to

Almighty God. In fact, every dutiful child we see—every instance of exertion or self-denial in son or daughter for the sake of pleasing father or mother—every look of love from a child to a parent—every act which betokens respect or affection—what is it but a witness against ourselves, so far as we are wanting in love and reverence towards our Father in heaven? Almighty God may well point to any such spectacle of filial reverence, and remind us what a sad difference there is between our behaviour towards Him and the conduct of this or that dutiful and affectionate child!

Let us apply, then, the lesson of the Rechabites to ourselves. There are those around us whose dutifulness and affection to earthly parents will rise up in the judgment against us. Let the sight of them bring home to us our slothfulness and ingratitude towards God, and lead us to resolve henceforth to devote ourselves with all our hearts to our heavenly Father, Whose eye is ever upon us and Who is never tired of doing us good.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—*Jeremiah xxxvi.*

THE fourth year of King Jehoiakim was very memorable in the history of God's chosen people. It was the year in which Nebuchadnezzar, having broken the power of Egypt in a great battle at Carchemish, marched against Syria and Palestine, captured Jerusalem, rifled the Temple, and carried away many of the Israelite nobles, and among them Daniel and his three friends. It was the year also, as we learn from this chapter, in which Jeremiah was instructed to gather up all the prophecies which he had delivered at intervals by word of mouth, from the beginning of his career, that is, the thirteenth year of Josiah—twenty-three years in all—and to write them in a book and read them in the ears of the people. Jeremiah did not write the prophecies with his own hand, but employed the services of his faithful servant and scribe Baruch, who took a roll of parchment and wrote what Jeremiah dictated.

The writing was arranged in parallel columns,

like the leaves of a door, as they are called in ver. 23. When the record was finished, Jeremiah, being himself shut up—whether in prison or in concealment we do not know—commissioned Baruch to take the roll and read it in the ears of the people in the Lord's house upon the fasting-day. This fast-day could not be the great yearly fast on the day of atonement, because that was in the seventh month, whereas this was in the ninth (ver. 22); it was rather a special fast, appointed for the deprecation of the Divine judgment. Jeremiah seems to have been aware that such a fast was about to be appointed, and in anticipation of it commanded Baruch to read the contents of the roll in the ears of all Judah that came out of their cities: "It may be" (he said) "they will present their supplication before the Lord, and will return every one from his evil way; for great is the anger and the fury that the Lord hath pronounced against this people."

Baruch obeyed his instructions. From the window or balcony of one of the chambers of the Temple—the chamber of a friendly noble, Gemariah, the son of Shaphan—he read out the words which Jeremiah had dictated. Gemariah himself was not present, apparently, at the reading, but his son

Michaiah heard the terrible words, and being much alarmed by them went down at once from the Temple to the king's palace, where all the princes (and his father Gemariah among them) were assembled in council, in the apartment of the king's chief secretary, Elishama, and communicated to them the prophecies of Jeremiah, as he had heard them read by Baruch out of the roll. The princes immediately summoned Baruch before them and bade him bring the roll with him. He came, and read before them all the words which he had read to the people. They looked at one another with alarm, feeling that it would be necessary for them to communicate the contents of the roll to the king, and not knowing what effect the communication would have on him. At the same time they charged Baruch to conceal himself and Jeremiah, while they laid up the roll in the secretary's chamber and went and told the king. They were afraid, however, not so much because God was angry with them for their sins, but because they anticipated the wrath of the king.

Jehoiakim was sitting in his winter house, probably an apartment facing the south, beside a charcoal brazier. He sent Jehudi to fetch the roll; and Jehudi read it in the ears of the king,

and in the ears of all the princes which stood beside the king. But Jehoiakim had not patience to hear more than a few columns. Seizing the knife, which his secretary used for sharpening the reed with which he wrote, he cut the roll into strips, and threw them one after another into the fire, until it was burnt to ashes—a bold and wanton deed, and one which we should have thought would no sooner have been committed than it would have been repented of, considering Whose message the roll professed to be, and the well-known character and commission of Jeremiah, through whom it had been communicated. But such was not the case: “They were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the king, nor any of his servants that heard all these words.” Some of the princes, who feared God more than man, did indeed make intercession with the king not to burn the roll, but he would not listen to them; he even sent messengers to seize Jeremiah and Baruch; but the Lord hid them.

What a contrast is there here to the conduct of his father Josiah, who, when he had heard the words of the Book of the Law, rent his clothes, and gave evidence of the deepest sorrow and dismay for the national rebellion, in which he had unwit-

tingly been a partaker; and so, because his heart was tender, and because he humbled himself, was delivered from the evil. Jehoiakim's course was different; and different also was his end. He could not change the threatened judgment, although he had destroyed the record; he rather increased its severity. Baruch indeed was overwhelmed with despair at the failure of his mission and his own personal peril: "The Lord had added grief," he said—that is, private grief—to his sorrow for his country's sins and his country's doom (xlv. 3); but he was bidden to take up his pen again and record once more the terrible words. "Jeremiah took another roll, and gave it to Baruch; who wrote therein, from the mouth of Jeremiah, all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and there were added besides unto them other like words."

We are so far in the position of King Jehoiakim that we have the roll of a book sent to us by Almighty God, and read in our ears continually. The Scriptures are His message addressed to each one of us, containing His plain and terrible threatenings against sin. It is true that the Bible is mostly a message of mercy and consolation; but it is also a record of God's denunciations

against those who will not listen to the voice of His mercy. And, alas! men still hear those denunciations, like the wicked Jehoiakim and his servants, in a spirit of shameless defiance.

Our first feeling when we read of Jehoiakim's impiety in burning the roll which contained the Word of God, is that of wonder. Is it possible, we are tempted to ask, that men should know and acknowledge that Jeremiah was a messenger from God, and yet throw his words into the fire? But when we reflect on the matter, we come to perceive that something of the same kind happens still. Men hear the very sins of which their consciences accuse them denounced in the strongest way in the Bible; they know that they will be judged for those sins, and yet they are careless and light-hearted—they go on recklessly in disobedience, as if no harm could ever happen to them. Such hardness is doubtless only reached by degrees. Even Jehoiakim and his nobles were probably moved when they first heard the warnings of Jeremiah. Conscious of their wickedness and danger, they resolved to amend; but when temptation returned and they gave way to it, they came to think less and less of God's threatenings, until at length they were to them mere idle words. So is

it still; the effect of sin, even of what we may consider to be slight sin, is to harden the heart and produce in time a condition of utter blindness and insensibility. Truly it is a terrible thing when any one is able to hear God's warnings without being moved by them; and we have need to tremble for ourselves whenever we perceive any symptom of such fearlessness. It had been better for us to have been brought up in heathenism, than that the words of the Gospel should cease to have their proper effect on us.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Ezekiel ii.*

WHILE Jeremiah was delivering God's message of wrath against His people during the last years of the expiring monarchy, the word of the Lord came to one of his fellow-countrymen, a prophet and priest like himself, on the banks of the Chebar, a river of Babylon, where was a large settlement of Israelite exiles.

The general purport of Ezekiel's predictions is very similar to that of Jeremiah: both foretold the destruction of Jerusalem, and both held out the hope of future restoration. But there is a marked difference in the style and manner of their

prophecies: the pathetic tenderness of Jeremiah is a great contrast to the fervid imagination and unflinching boldness of Ezekiel. It has been supposed that, being contemporaries during part of their mission at least, they interchanged their prophecies,—those of Jeremiah being sent to Babylon, and those of Ezekiel being carried at the same time to Jerusalem. “Thus these two great prophets united, as it were, their lights together; though vast distances intervened, they mingled their tears.”

Ezekiel's first call to the prophetic office was accompanied by a wonderful vision of the glory of Jehovah sitting on a throne, that throne being a winged chariot, on which He was carried into all lands. At the sight of this vision the Prophet fell prostrate before God, in acknowledgment of His great glory, and in the humble consciousness of his unworthiness. And then, having been admitted into the society of the spirits before the throne, he received his commission as a prophet to the rebellious people of Israel: “Son of man,” the Lord said to him, “stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee.” Though permitted to behold the glorious manifestation of the Godhead, and to see visions of futurity, he must not forget that he

was but a son of man, a child of Adam, a sinful, frail, and dying creature. "Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against Me: they and their fathers have transgressed against Me, even unto this very day."

We see from the margin of our Bibles that in the original the word here used to describe the Israelites is not "nation," but "nations"; it is the word commonly applied to the heathen, and seems to intimate that the Israelites had outdone even the heathen in wickedness. From generation to generation they had rebelled against God, and were still disposed to do so; they were impudent in their countenances and hardened in their hearts. But, rebellious and stiff-necked as they were, God would not give them up. We might have thought, indeed, that they would not have required much further warning, in that their sins had already lost them their home and their country, and they were at that time serving strangers in a land which was not theirs. But even to that day, captives as they were, they were rebellious still. Nevertheless Almighty God would show His mercy by sending His Prophet among them: he was to go to them with a special message, saying, "Thus saith the

Lord God." And whether they would or would not regard his message (for they were so rebellious that it was likely that many of them would treat it with contempt), yet they would know by the fulfilment of his prediction that a prophet had been sent to them; the Lord's purpose in sending to them would not be wholly made void by their impenitence. Whether they repented or continued obstinate, they would know that there had been a prophet among them: that is, if they would hear and turn from their sins, well; but if not, they would be without excuse; the event would show that God had sufficiently warned them, and that in the evil which would come upon them they had no one to blame but themselves.

The errand on which Almighty God was sending Ezekiel, though it was one of mercy to the Israelites, was fraught with danger to the Prophet. He must expect that the people, who were so rebellious against God, would be cruel to His messenger. They were as worthless and as tenacious as thorns and briars; they were as venomous and malignant as scorpions: but he was not to be afraid of them; he was to stand his ground, and deliver the message with which he was entrusted, in spite of their angry words or threatening looks;

he was to speak God's words to them, whether they would hear or whether they would forbear.

The trial, of which Almighty God warned Ezekiel, is one which all His prophets have had to bear in greater or less degree. They have found that if they would be faithful teachers, they must be confessors as well. They have been called not only to warn and rebuke in God's name, but to suffer for Him. They have "had trial of cruel mockings, and scourgings, yea, moreover, of bonds and imprisonment; they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented (of whom the world was not worthy); they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and in caves of the earth." Such has been the lot of God's faithful witnesses in past times; and although such persecution is perhaps impossible now, yet are there lesser trials which will be almost sure to befall those who confess Christ openly in the world; they will incur censure and opposition and dislike, cold looks and rude language, and, in some cases, oppression and ill-usage. But they must not mind these things; they must bear them; they must not be dismayed

or think it strange : it is their portion, and He Who has called them to it will enable them to bear it.

“But thou, son of man, hear what I say unto thee : Be not thou rebellious like that rebellious house ; open thy mouth, and eat that I give thee.” While these words were spoken, the Prophet saw a hand sent to him, and in the hand was a roll of parchment, which, being opened before him, he saw to be written on both sides, within and without ; and there was written therein lamentation and mourning and woe : that is, there were set forth in full the many judgments which the Prophet would have to denounce against His rebellious people. The Prophet was commanded to eat the roll ; and, in obedience to the Divine command, he opened his mouth, and the Lord fed him with it, and it was in his mouth as honey for sweetness (iii. 2, 3) ; but afterwards, when he considered the predictions and denunciations which he was instructed to deliver, he went away in bitterness and heat of his spirit (iii. 14). The joy which he first experienced in receiving the Divine message, and the hope of being instrumental in the conversion of God’s people, were turned to anguish and dismay at the prospect of the calamities that were

coming on them, and the opposition which he himself would encounter. But he was unable to withstand the Divine power within him, which constrained him to speak.

There is a remarkable illustration of this eating the roll in the Book of Revelation (ch. x.). A mighty angel is represented as coming down from heaven, having in his hand a little book open; and the Evangelist is commanded to take the book and eat it up; it would make his belly bitter, it is said, but it would be in his mouth sweet as honey. "And I took the little book,"—so he proceeds, "out of the angel's hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey; and as soon as I had eaten it my belly was bitter. And he said unto me, Thou must prophesy again before" (or rather "concerning") "many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings." The sweetness of the book, when he first tasted it, "represents, doubtless, his satisfaction at being informed of, and admitted to know, a portion of God's holy will." (Compare those words of the Psalmist: "How sweet are Thy words unto my taste, yea, sweeter than honey unto my mouth!") "But when the roll came to be not only tasted, but digested—the nature of its contents felt within the man—bitter-

ness took the place of sweetness; the persecutions, the apostacies, the judgments of the Church and people of the Lord, saddened the spirit of the seer, and dashed his joy at the first reception of the mystery of God."

The message of God comes continually to us as to the Israelites; and God leaves it to us whether we will hear or whether we will forbear. He does not treat us as we treat the brute beasts, making us attend to Him by force. If we listen to His voice, we shall assuredly find that it is His voice that we have followed, and that obedience to Him is true blessedness. If we forbear to hear, we shall nevertheless still find that the voice we have despised is the voice of God, and the way in which we have refused to walk is the way to heaven; but we shall find also that we are without excuse, for that God has done everything for us that could have been done, but we have been obstinate and rebellious, and by our wilfulness have ruined ourselves.

SECOND EVENING LESSON. — *Ezekiel* xiii. to ver. 17.

THE false prophets here reprov'd would seem to

be especially those who encouraged the Israelites to believe, that because the Lord was long-suffering and did not execute at once His threatened judgment, therefore the predictions of His prophets had failed, and that the punishment would not come. So widely had this persuasion spread, that it was a common saying, a kind of proverb, among the Jews in captivity, "The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth" (xii. 22). This was said specially with reference to the destruction of Jerusalem: in their unbelief and scorn the people said that it would not happen at all, or at least not for many days to come. Therefore Almighty God bids the Prophet warn them that the event would soon undeceive them, for the days were at hand when the vision would take effect. Within five years from this time Jerusalem was taken and destroyed.

Thus the false prophets would be silenced, and their lying divinations detected. They had seen vain and foolish things for Jerusalem (Lament. ii. 14); but Ezekiel was commanded to declare that there should not be any more vain vision or flattering divination within the house of Israel.

In this chapter he delivers a still more emphatic protest against these false prophets. On the banks of the Chebar he utters the same com-

plaints which Jeremiah uttered in Jerusalem. "A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land," says Jeremiah: "the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so." And again: "Mine heart within me is broken because of the prophets; all my bones shake; both prophet and priest are profane. I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they make you vain; they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord" (v. 30, 31, xxiii. 9—21). In like manner Ezekiel on the Chebar was sent to prophesy against the prophets of Israel that prophesied out of their own hearts, and to say, "Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!" They professed to be "prophets of Israel," and were accounted as such by many; but they had no message from God; they only prophesied out of their own hearts. They were "like the foxes" (or jackals) "in the deserts," that is, in ruined and desolate places; they were rapacious and mischievous as the jackals that frequent lonely ruins, their only care being the gratification of their own selfish interest. They "had not gone

up into the gaps, neither made up the hedge for the house of Israel to stand in the battle in the day of the Lord." As when a breach is made in the walls of a fortress brave leaders repair thither and cover the breach with their bodies, so it might have been expected that these prophets of Israel, when the wickedness of the people had broken down the hedge of the Divine protection, would have done everything in their power, by their intercessions and their warnings, to avert God's further wrath, as the Psalm says that "Moses His chosen stood before Him in the gap, to turn away His wrathful indignation" from the Israelites, "lest He should destroy them" (cvi. 23); but they did nothing of the kind; they neither sought to turn away the approaching calamities, nor to prepare the people for them. They were content to deliver false messages, pretending that they came from God, when God had not sent them, and speaking with such presumptuous confidence that their words were believed, and the fulfilment of them anticipated. "Therefore thus saith the Lord God: Because ye have spoken vanity, and seen lies, therefore, behold, I am against you, saith the Lord God. And Mine hand shall be upon the prophets that see vanity, and that

divine lies: they shall not be in the assembly of My people, neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel, neither shall they enter into the land of Israel; and ye shall know that I am the Lord God." They should be cut off from the assembly of God's people; their names should be expunged from the register of the house of Israel, and their families should either become extinct, or unable from some other cause to have any share in the return from captivity.

The special guilt of these false prophets was that they promised peace and prosperity at the very time when the Divine judgment was ready to fall on Jerusalem. They encouraged one another in deceiving the people. It was as if a man were to build a wall (in the margin it is a slight wall) of small stones loosely laid together, or of masses of clay, and another were to attempt to give it an appearance of strength by daubing it over with untempered mortar—that is, with some cement made of badly mixed materials; and they were to expect that a mere cob-wall so constructed would be able to withstand the influence of the weather. The prophets tried to persuade the people that they would be safe from the attacks of the Chaldeans; they flattered their confident expectations,

and gave a show of truth to what in itself was utterly unsubstantial. But Almighty God tells them plainly by the mouth of His prophet that they were deceiving themselves and others, and seeing visions of peace when there was no peace. The wall which they had been daubing with untempered mortar, in order that it might appear fair outside, was rotten within, and the wind and storm would speedily rend it; the Chaldean army would shortly lay Jerusalem desolate, and those who had ventured to buoy up the people with false hopes would be overwhelmed in its destruction: the fabric which they had raised would be swept away, and they would be taken with it. Thus would He accomplish His wrath upon the wall, and upon them that daubed it with untempered mortar, and would say unto them, The wall is no more, neither they that daubed it.

At all times in the history of the Church of God there have been false teachers, who for their own selfish ends have endeavoured to persuade men that they were charged with a message from heaven, when they really have come in their own name. Scripture is full of warnings against being deceived by them. Our Lord tells us that we shall know them by their fruits. A skilful hypo-

critic may indeed deceive us for a time, but in the long-run the life of the teacher will show whether he is really to be trusted. In this passage the special test of the falsehood of the teachers was that they contradicted the words of those who were known to be the accredited messengers of Jehovah. The people need not have been deceived by them unless they had chosen; but when the prophets prophesied falsely, God's people loved to have it so.

The known Word of God is still the touchstone by which we may determine whether the message which men bring to us really comes from God, or whether they speak of their own heart. Whatever new teaching contradicts the sure Word of God, or puts out of sight any essential portion of that Word, must be received with misgiving. However attractive it may be in itself, or however in accordance with our own fancies, it cannot stand in opposition to God's written Word. There is but one foundation on which all teaching must be based, namely, the truth as it is in Jesus. Whoever brings to us any other doctrine, except this doctrine of Christ, as set forth in Scripture interpreted by the universal Church, must be rejected without hesitation (2 John 9—11).

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—*Ezekiel* xiv.

WE have no means of knowing the precise purpose with which these elders came to Ezekiel, except that they came to inquire of the Lord through him. They sat down gravely before him, and professed to listen attentively to his discourse. But He Who reads the heart saw, that, while they pretended to desire to know His will, they were in their secret hearts no better than idolaters. The word of the Lord therefore came to the Prophet, saying, “ Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumbling-block of their iniquity before their face ; should I be inquired of at all by them ? ” Whether it was that they had altogether fallen from their allegiance to God, and had actually set up idols before their face and worshipped them, or whether the idols here spoken of were certain secret sins which they would not relinquish, it is plain that they were not what they professed to be, true and faithful servants of the Most High. And, therefore, Almighty God instructs His Pro-

phet to deliver to them this terrible message : “ Thus saith the Lord God, Every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumbling-block of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols.” The service which these Jews offered to Almighty God was altogether hypocritical and offensive. They pretended to desire to honour Him and to ascertain His will, but their hearts were really given to idols. And therefore He threatens that He would answer them according to the multitude of their idols: that is, either He would take vengeance on them, proportioned to their crimes, or else He would entirely give them up to be deluded by those idols to their ruin ; as it is added, “ That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are all estranged from Me through their idols.”

Different as is the treatment which these elders received, when they came in apparent meekness to the Prophet, from what we might at first have expected, we cannot really be surprised at it. Had they come in penitence, lamenting their past transgression and turning in earnest from their idols, no doubt they would have met with words of

encouragement, and not of rebuke. But on no other condition could they expect an answer of peace. For, as the Divine message goes on to say, every Israelite, and, indeed, every proselyte, must be dealt with strictly according to this rule : if, for whatever reason, he comes to consult a prophet, while in his heart he follows idols, the Lord will answer him by Himself,—not by the mouth of the prophet, but by His own terrible vengeance ; He will set His face against him, and make him a sign and a proverb, and cut him off from the midst of His people.

Such an inquirer would probably soon be weary of consulting a true prophet, and would make application to those who, like Ahab's prophets, were under the influence of a lying spirit ; and Almighty God here plainly warns him, that the delusion into which he would be led was a judgment from Himself. Not that He is the author of the false prophet's lies, but He makes those lies the means of punishing those who are bent upon believing them. And all this severity was really meant in mercy to the house of Israel, that they might be reclaimed from their idolatry and still continue the people of God.

This message of God to the wicked elders gives

a terrible insight into the condition of the Israelites at this time; and in the latter part of the chapter Almighty God goes on to declare, that the wrath which they had incurred by their disobedience was so dreadful and so determined, that no intercession could avert it. Four times it is repeated with thrilling awfulness, that when the time of God's judgments on the land should come, no righteousness of any individual, even of men so holy as Noah, Daniel, and Job, should avail to the salvation of a single soul besides themselves. Should it please God to send famine on the land, and to break the staff of the bread thereof, though Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness. Or if noisome beasts were let loose on the land to lay it waste, though these three men were in it, they should deliver neither sons nor daughters; they only should be delivered, but the land should be desolate; or if the sword passed through the land, these three men should alone escape, and be unable to shield their neighbours; or, lastly, if a pestilence should be poured upon it, even Noah, Daniel, and Job should be able to deliver none beside themselves.

It will be remembered that when Abraham in-

terceded for the cities of the plain, he obtained from God the assurance that, if there could be found ten righteous men in Sodom, the city should be spared; but the city perished nevertheless. Almighty God would have listened to Abraham, if He could; but He could not. In like manner, when the sins of Jerusalem grew ripe for judgment, God said to Jeremiah, "Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me" (as intercessors), "yet My mind would not be turned towards this people; cast them out of My sight" (Jer. xv. 1). So, here, three other persons are specially singled out as examples of holiness and powerful intercession, who, nevertheless, would not prevail to turn away God's wrath from His guilty people.

We naturally inquire why these three are chosen. Doubtless, because they were greatly beloved of God, and obtained His special praise, though living in very evil times. Noah was a preacher of righteousness during the 120 years in which the flood was delayed. Almighty God Himself specially directs Satan's attention to Job, when he had been walking up and down in the earth, as if it were his domain and kingdom. Daniel was an exile in heathen Babylon, engaged in public affairs, yet a man of special prayer and holiness. And

they all three availed to bring a blessing on others. Noah saved his own house, and was assured that God would not send a second flood on the earth. Job's sacrifice and intercession in behalf of his three friends were accepted. Daniel prevailed for the preservation of the astrologers of Babylon from death. Thus "these three were brought from countries and ages very remote from each other, as if God would cull the choicest flowers of piety of every time, even from the flood to Ezekiel's own day, and weave them in a garland together; and He says, 'Though these three men were in the land, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord God.'"

This mention of Daniel is very remarkable, seeing that he was not only alive at the time, but had not been in Babylon more than eleven or twelve years; it shows, however, that he had obtained a great celebrity for holiness; and it was undoubtedly a singular honour to him to be thus united with two chief saints of early times. He is named here as the great living example of a righteous life; and Almighty God would have the Jews understand that their condition was, indeed, a terrible one, when the holiness of Daniel, and not of Daniel only, but also of two of the greatest

saints before him, should be of no avail, except for themselves.

Still, great as was the guilt of Jerusalem, and inevitable as was the approaching judgment, yet, for His own Name's sake, and in memory of His covenant with Abraham and with David, the Lord promises that there shall be a remnant left, both sons and daughters, who shall be brought into captivity, and there repent of their ways and their doings; and their penitential acknowledgment of the righteous judgment of God will kindle in them hope of comfort and restoration.

The severity of God's vengeance on Jerusalem is a sure token that no nation will be allowed to sin against Him with impunity. "It is no impeachment of God's moral government, that a wicked man should prosper in this world, for there is a life to come, and we must all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ; but there is no resurrection of nations, and therefore, since nations can sin, they must look to be punished in this world." National sins will be sure, therefore, to be followed by national judgments; and there may come a time when no intercession, even of the greatest saints, will avail to avert them. The Jews in Ezekiel's time seem to have hoped that,

notwithstanding their own unholiness, they would be spared for the righteousness and prayers of others ; and it is not uncommon, nor is it, indeed, unnatural, for persons in the present day to regard the piety and the prayers of God's faithful servants in our own land, as that which wards off from us the punishment which our sins have deserved. It is impossible, indeed, to estimate the preciousness, in God's sight, of the prayers or the holiness of His saints, or to determine how far they conduce to bring down His blessing on any land. As they are the salt which saves it from corruption, so are they the shield which shelters it from God's wrath. But there have been times when neither Abraham, nor Moses and Samuel, nor Noah, Daniel, and Job, have been able to rescue the guilty from destruction ; and it may be so again. Therefore it behoves each of us, by our endeavours after personal holiness, to lessen, as far as in us lies, the aggregate of our nation's guilt, and especially to be on our guard against any participation in the sin of those hypocritical elders, who came to inquire of the Lord, while their hearts were given to idols. There is no sin so offensive to Almighty God, or so sure to draw down His punishment, as that of drawing near to Him with the lips while the

heart is far from Him. If we would win God's blessing for ourselves and for our country, we must not only draw near to Him at certain times, but we must walk with Him at all times, and whenever we do approach Him in prayer, or in any other special way, we must be careful to leave our sins behind us. Our great care must be to live always as in His sight, praying without ceasing, and watching daily against sin, in order that we may every day pray better and more acceptably.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Ezekiel xviii.*

THE great truth enforced in this chapter is, that God deals with every man according to his own doings, and not according to the doings of his ancestors. "Behold, all souls are Mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is Mine: the soul that sinneth it shall die." And then several cases are specially mentioned, and the grounds set forth on which men are acquitted or condemned.

First, there is the case of the just man, who has striven in all things to maintain his integrity, who has taken no part in any idolatrous sacrifices on

the high places, nor lifted up his eyes in adoration to any idol whatsoever; who has adhered strictly in every way to the law of purity; who has been guilty of no oppression, either by retaining the poor man's pledge, or exacting usury of his neighbour, or doing violence to any man; who has been kind and considerate to the distressed, strict and conscientious in all his dealings; such an one shall be accounted just and righteous: "he shall surely live, saith the Lord God."

Secondly, we have the case of the wicked son of a righteous father. If this very man, whose conduct is so exemplary, should have a son whose conduct and character are the reverse of his father's: if he is a robber, or murderer, or adulterer, an idolater, an oppressor, or guilty of any other abomination; such a man shall have no benefit from the piety of his father. The cause of his ruin is in himself. "For his iniquity, and the sin which he hath committed, he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him."

Then follows the case of the good son of a wicked father. If, forsaking his father's crimes, he practises and perseveres in virtue, and walks before God as the righteous man above described, he shall not suffer for the iniquity of his father,

he shall surely live ; the father shall die in his iniquity ; but if the son do that which is lawful and right, he shall live. “ The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son ; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.”

The next case is that of a sinner, even the greatest of sinners, who truly repents of his wickedness and leads the remainder of his life in strict obedience to God’s law, doing that which is lawful and right ; such an one shall receive a full and absolute pardon for all his transgressions that he hath committed : “ they shall not be mentioned unto him ; in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live.”

The last case is that of a righteous man turning from his righteousness and relapsing into sin ; his former righteousness shall stand him in no stead ; “ in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die.”

Thus Almighty God repeated and enforced the great rule of His dealings with men ; he that doeth well shall be rewarded ; he that doeth ill shall be punished ; he that repenteth shall be pardoned ; he that falls again into sin shall be condemned.

And there was a special reason why He drew such particular attention to this subject. The captives in Babylon seem to have got into the habit of ascribing the calamities which had befallen them to the sins of their fathers; they had invented a kind of proverb by which they openly charged God with injustice in His manner of dealing with them: they said, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge," by which they meant to imply that they were suffering for their fathers' sins; and they seem to have gone on to argue that in consequence of this law of the Divine dealings it mattered not how they lived, for, whether they lived well or ill they would have to bear the iniquity of their fathers. Thus they encouraged themselves in sin and laid the sin at the door of God Himself. The refutation of this proverb is the burden of the chapter. "As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any more to use" (or rather "ye shall not any longer use") "this proverb in Israel; behold, all souls are Mine; the soul that sinneth it shall die." This is God's unchangeable and unchangeable law. The Jews pretended that their souls were in the hands of their fathers: their fathers sinned, and they were punished.

Not so, says Almighty God : all souls are Mine ; and I deal with them according to this law, that the soul that sinneth it shall die ; if you perish, it will be for your own sins, not your fathers'.

It may be said, however, on the other hand, that not only do we see in the world that men suffer for their parents' sins, but Almighty God Himself seems to say that it should be so. In the second Commandment we find the command not to bow down to idols supported by this sanction. " For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me." The Jews might say that their proverb went no further than this passage, which plainly contains the principle of children suffering for sins which they had not committed. They might have added, that as they looked around them in the world, they saw numberless instances in which, as a matter of fact, the children suffered for what their fathers had done amiss. Poverty, disease, ignorance, captivity, with all the influences of bad example and evil communication, are in many cases the unavoidable inheritance of the children of wicked parents. But such visitations do not really affect the standing of the individual soul in the sight of

God. The disadvantages which a man may labour under in consequence of his father's sin may hinder him, it is true, from rising to a high standard of knowledge or of holiness ; but He Whose law caused him to be placed under those disadvantages will take account of them, and will deal with him according to his opportunities.

There would have been truth in the Jewish proverb, if it had reference merely to the natural consequences, so to call them, of their fathers' sin. The captivity itself was the consequence of the sin of a former generation. As the Prophet Jeremiah says : " Our fathers have sinned and are not ; and we have borne their iniquities " (Lament. v. 7). In this sense it was true that their teeth were set on edge by the sour grapes which their fathers had eaten ; but the proverb was utterly false, if applied to the spiritual condition of each person in the sight of God. No earthly relationship or outward circumstances can affect the judgment of Him Who is no respecter of persons. Every man will be dealt with by Him according to his own deeds, whether they be good, or whether they be evil.

This is the great truth which Almighty God asserts in this chapter ; and it is the same, it will be observed, which He laid down to Adam in

Paradise: "In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." And on this truth every human soul stands before God. When God sends us into the world, He sets before us a certain rule of life, which we are to follow, and our condition in His sight depends on our following that rule and obeying what our conscience tells us is right. If we sin, we shall die; if we obey, we shall live. It is true, that Almighty God holds out to us besides, as a warning against disobedience and an encouragement to obedience, that those who sin will bring punishment on themselves in this world which will affect others besides themselves; and contrariwise, that those who are good and holy may hope to bring down a blessing on their children. But this does not touch the great law of every man standing or falling by his own deeds. All souls are in the hands of God; the soul of no man is in the power of another: it is God's, and will be judged by itself, according to God's law, and that law is that the soul that sins, that goes on in sin and lives in sin, that refuses to repent and hardens itself in wickedness, shall die. But then, on the other hand, God's law of mercy and forgiveness stands forth equally clear: "If the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath

committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live."

By this gracious assurance Almighty God would lead the Israelites to repentance. He would have them leave off speculating about their father's sin and repent of their own, for He still loved them, and had no pleasure in their ruin: "Repent and turn yourselves from all your transgressions, so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed and make you a new heart and a new spirit; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves and live ye."

What cheering and persuasive words must these have been to any Jews who were not utterly hardened against God! and how inexcusable must they have been if they did not accept and act upon them! And these merciful declarations belong to us, as well as to the Jews. Whoever we are, and whatever our condition, if amid the sorrows and trials and temptations of life we endeavour to repent of our sins and to press forward in our heavenly course, we may comfort ourselves with

the assurance that we are in God's hands, that we, as well as others, are the objects of His special care, and that so long as we are in His keeping, no harm can touch us ; we may be surrounded by sin, but neither the sins of our fathers, or brothers, or neighbours, can hurt us, if we will only keep close to the path of holiness.

It may seem to us sometimes well nigh impossible, that those who have been brought up as many are should escape pollution ; they must be blasted and destroyed, we think, by all the evil around them. But they are in God's hands, and He can protect them, though they cannot protect themselves. He Who of old made His three faithful servants to walk unhurt through the midst of the burning fiery furnace, can lead them also through the furnace of sin which surrounds them : and He will so lead them, if they trust in Him. He knows all their circumstances, and will deal with them accordingly.

We all, indeed, have trials and hindrances from those around us. But He in Whose steps we are called to tread, lived in the midst of sinners, yet was undefiled. Let us only strive to keep ourselves untainted by the sins of others, and then no evil which may happen to us from our connection with

them can really hurt us. For our souls are in God's keeping; they are united to Christ, from Whom neither life nor death, poverty or persecution, things present or things to come,—nothing, in truth, but our own sin, can ever separate us.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Ezekiel* xxiv. 15.

MANY of Ezekiel's prophecies were delivered, not in words, but by acts. Thus, he was bidden on one occasion to draw a picture of Jerusalem on a tile or brick, and to represent the engines and works that were employed in the siege of it; and then to lie first, for 390 days on his left side, according to the years of the iniquity of Israel, and then for 40 days upon his right side, for the iniquity of the house of Judah (iv. 1—8). At another time he dug through the wall of his house, and removed his goods through it, carrying them on his shoulders in the twilight, with his face covered, as a token that Zedekiah, the King of Judah, would in like manner go forth from his palace in the dusk of the evening to escape the Chaldeans (xii. 1—3). At another time, on the very day that Nebuchadnezzar set himself against Jerusalem, he was commanded to

take a pot and gather into it the choicest of the flock, to heap on wood and kindle the fire and consume the flesh and spice it well and let the bones be burned, as a sign of the seething wickedness and misery of Jerusalem.

And soon afterwards, apparently on the same fatal day when the armies of Nebuchadnezzar gathered round the walls of Jerusalem, a terrible domestic affliction was sent on him as a warning of the overpowering and inevitable calamity that was coming on the city. On the evening of that day his wife died suddenly; but when he went forth in the morning he showed no signs of sorrow; by the express command of God, he abstained from all those public observances which were usual in such cases; he indulged in no passionate expressions of grief himself, nor did he invite the lamentations of his friends or others; his head was not uncovered, as became a mourner, but he wore his priestly turban as usual; his feet, which should have been bare, were properly sandalled; there was no covering over his upper lip, as there should have been, in token that he was sad and silent; nor did he eat the bread of mourners. He behaved in all things just as he would have done had no calamity befallen him, in order that the attention

of the people might be drawn to him, and his conduct might be a sign to them.

We know so little of Ezekiel's personal history, that we cannot fail to notice the way in which his wife is spoken of, as "the desire of his eyes," an expression which seems to reveal that the Prophet's stern opposition to every form of sin was consistent with the tenderest human affections. At the same time, such was his self-devotion, that he was willing to endure any sorrow that God might think fit, if thereby he might fulfil God's command, and give any warning or lesson to his people, whom he so cordially loved. Nothing can be more affecting than the meekness with which Ezekiel received the terrible blow which God laid upon him, and the uncomplaining exactness with which he set himself to obey God's direction in every particular, suppressing all natural signs of sorrow, even though, as we well believe, his heart was ready to burst with grief.

The people were astonished at the Prophet's demeanour, and eagerly asked the reason of it. "Wilt thou not tell us" (they said) "what these things are to us, that thou doest so?" It was for this very reason that Ezekiel had acted in this way, in order that they might inquire the meaning

of his conduct; just as on another occasion he had been bidden to sigh deeply in their presence, as if his heart was breaking, in order that they might say to him, "Wherefore sighest thou?" (xxi. 6, 7).

Ezekiel was instructed to answer, that in what he had done he was a sign unto them; as his wife, the desire of his eyes, had been cut off by an unexpected stroke, so would it be with Jerusalem, the excellency of their strength, the desire of their eyes, as dear to them as a beloved wife: it would be suddenly and irrevocably smitten; and not only so, but their sons and daughters, whom they had left behind, would fall by the sword. It was God's purpose to destroy the city which He had chosen, and to profane His sanctuary. And when this great and unexpected calamity should fall upon them, Ezekiel says that it would be with them as with him: they would make no outward demonstrations of grief, they would not go bare-headed or bare-footed, or cover their mouths in silence; they would mourn, indeed, but it would be in inward desolation of heart, as the Prophet mourned for his wife, with grief too deep and poignant to find expression in any of the ordinary tokens of sorrow: they should pine away in their iniquity, that is, in

the punishment of their iniquity (Lev. xxvi. 39), and mourn one toward another. Thus Ezekiel would be to them a sign ; according to all that he had done should they do, and when it came to pass, then they would know the power and justice of the Lord. Such was the terrible message with which Ezekiel was charged ; it is no wonder that the roll which was placed in his hand seemed to be written within and without with lamentations and mourning and woe.

But further, Almighty God told Ezekiel that in the day when his words were fulfilled—the day of the capture of Jerusalem and the overthrow of all their hopes and desires—there would come one to him from the captured city, bringing the mournful tidings, and that then he was to open his mouth and speak to the people. In the meanwhile, between the time when he announced the fall of Jerusalem and the day when the tidings should come of the fulfilment of his words, he was to remain dumb and deliver no message. And so it was ; for a whole year or more, during the course of the siege, he continued speechless, so far as his countrymen were concerned, though he poured out from time to time strains of sorrow and exultation over the nations around. At length, when the

fatal day arrived, one that had escaped out of Jerusalem came to Ezekiel, saying, "The city is smitten," and then the Prophet found words again; his mouth was opened, and he was no more dumb (xxxiii. 21). "When the truth of his prophecies was proved, and he would therefore enjoy a more ready hearing from the people, God graciously opened the Prophet's mouth, to comfort them with gracious assurances of love and with manifold assurances of joy."

The love with which the Jews clung to Jerusalem, and the overwhelming grief which came upon them when it was taken, could be compared with nothing so appropriately as the affection of a fond husband for his wife, and his bewilderment and sorrow at her death. Jerusalem was the pride and delight of all true Israelites, and when it fell, and the Temple, its special glory, was laid in ruins, they were utterly overwhelmed by the fatal blow, they had no heart to care for any outward demonstrations of grief; their distress was too deep and real to be expressed by acts and words. Now, as Jerusalem of old was a type of the Church, so the love of the Jews for their city and sanctuary may well represent to us the love and affection of faithful Christians for the spiritual Jerusalem, the Holy Catholic

Church, and the sorrowful lamentations of the Israelites over the calamities which befel the chosen city find their echo in the tears and cries of all loving hearts over the troubles which assail the Church. They are not temporal evils, indeed, such as the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of her people, which are the cause of the sorrows of Christians. Times of persecution and outward calamity are often times of inward joy and prosperity. It is the spiritual condition of the Church, her corruption and distractions, the backsliding and worldliness of her members, which are the true cause for sorrow; and many a devout Christian soul has given utterance to his grief over the imperfections of the Church in the words of the Jewish lamentation over the fall of Jerusalem. It is true that we have Christ's own promise that His Church shall never fail, that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it; but there have been times and places when the Church has seemed to be almost crushed out and her life gone, and the hearts of her faithful children have been well-nigh broken. Nevertheless, their prayers and tears and steadfast trust have won back God's blessing; the light which seemed to be fading away has been rekindled, and Christian love and holiness have

flourished again in the land. What happened to Ezekiel, inasmuch as that, when the worst was come and Jerusalem was laid low, his mouth was opened, and he was charged once more to deliver a message of joy and hope, has occurred again and again in the history of the Church. Her periods of greatest depression by reason of sin have been followed, through the penitential intercessions of the faithful remnant, by seasons of special revival and outpouring of the Spirit. Heaviness has endured for a night, but joy has come in the morning. The Lord has turned her heaviness into joy: He has put off her sackcloth and girded her with gladness. Truly, therefore, and heartily, in spite of occasional over-cloudings of His just displeasure, the Church may take up those other words of the Psalmist, and say, "My song shall be always of the loving-kindness of the Lord: with my mouth will I ever be shewing Thy truth from one generation to another."

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—*Ezekiel xxxiv.*

WHAT a deplorable picture does this chapter give of the condition of the chosen people at the time of the captivity! The shepherds of Israel—their rulers, that is, in Church and State, their princes and governors, priests and prophets—were entirely faithless, both to God and to the people whom they were appointed to look after. Instead of feeding the flock,—that is, watching over and caring for the people entrusted to them,—they fed themselves, they thought only of themselves and their own interest. Like shepherds who take care to enrich themselves by means of the flock, killing for themselves those that are fatted, and clothing themselves with the wool, but who neglect the flock, neither strengthening those that are weak, nor healing those that are sick, nor binding up the bones of the wounded, nor seeking those that have been driven away, treating the sheep with cruelty, like ravening wolves rather than tender shepherds: so these rulers of Israel made

a gain of their position, exacting everything in their power, but neglecting their duty towards them, taking no pains to relieve the distressed, or rescue the oppressed, or instruct the ignorant, or reclaim the wandering. Hence it was no wonder that God's people were as scattered sheep without a shepherd. They had forsaken the Lord and His worship, and had become a prey to their enemies on every side. They wandered on the mountains of the heathen, and were scattered over the face of the earth. Therefore God declared that He would be against the shepherds: He would require a strict account of all the princes and prophets of Israel, and deprive them of their offices, and give them no further opportunity to oppress the people and enrich themselves.

But the flock itself, which had been thus neglected and ill-used, Almighty God had still a purpose of mercy towards it. If its earthly shepherds were wanting in their duty, He Himself would be its shepherd: "I, even I, will search My sheep, and seek them out." As a shepherd, whose sheep have been scattered by some attack of wild beasts, goes after them in every direction, and gathers them together, and spares neither time nor trouble to bring them back to the fold, so

the Lord's eye of pity would be upon His people, dispersed as they were by the storm which the Chaldeans had raised against them : He would gather them from all countries whither they had been driven captive, and bring them back to their own land and be their Shepherd.

This promise was fulfilled in part when the Jewish exiles were restored from captivity under Zerubbabel, and made to settle once more in the cities of Palestine ; but the words have plainly a further scope, and find their true fulfilment in the care of the Good Shepherd for His Church. As God's eye of love rested on Jerusalem and its inhabitants, and brought them back from their wandering, so and much more does He watch over the spiritual Jerusalem, to gather together into it all the children of God that are scattered abroad. There, in His Church, is the good pasture, into which He will lead His sheep ; there will they find rest and peace and refreshment, trusting in His love and rejoicing in the comfort of His sweetest consolations ; there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel. " I will feed My flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again

that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick." It is impossible not to recognise here a special promise of Him Who calls Himself the Good Shepherd, Who came to seek and to save the lost, to bind up the broken-hearted, and to heal them that had need of healing. But while He is thus tender and compassionate to the weak, He will punish the proud and self-indulgent: He will destroy the fat and the strong, those who abuse their strength by tyrannizing over the rest: He will feed them with judgment, with wormwood and gall, rather than with rich pasture.

Hitherto Almighty God has addressed Himself to the shepherds, that is, to the rulers of His people, and has reproved them for their negligence, promising, at the same time, that He Himself will be their Shepherd. Now He addresses the sheep, that is, the people themselves. They all professed to be His flock, the sheep of His pasture; but there was a great difference between them. They were not all Israel that were of Israel; and He Who searcheth the hearts could draw the line and judge between cattle and cattle, between the rams and the he-goats. It is not for us to pretend to decide between one man and another, and to determine their spiritual condition. But God

knows where the line of distinction runs, and at the Last Day He will openly declare it, and will divide the sheep from the goats. The Good Shepherd knows His own sheep and calls them all by their names, and because He knows who are His, He also knows who are not His ; they cannot deceive Him, or escape His notice, and He will assuredly judge them for their falseness and oppression. “ Seemeth it a small thing unto you ” (He says) “ to have eaten up the good pasture, but ye must tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture ? and to have drunk of the deep waters, but ye must foul the residue with your feet ? And as for My flock, they eat that which ye have trodden with your feet, and they drink that which ye have fouled with your feet.” This would apply to those great persons, who do not even suffer the people to enjoy the benefit of their superfluities, but are selfish and indifferent to the wants of others. And, taken spiritually, it belongs to those who, like the Pharisees in our Lord’s time, shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, neither entering in themselves nor suffering them that were entering to go in ; or, it may be, marring the fresh pastures of God’s Word and making them of none effect by their traditions. “ Therefore, thus

saith the Lord God unto them, Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat cattle and the lean cattle," between those who thus lord it over God's heritage, and those whom they oppress and defraud. Almighty God will protect His own sheep, and not suffer the oppressor to have altogether his own way with them. They may thrust with side and with shoulder, and push with their horns; they may put forth all their strength to hurt the poor and feeble, but the Lord will plead their cause and defend them. Or the passage may be explained of those who, relying on their own strength, do not scruple to offend the consciences of their weak brethren: "If we rely on our own spiritual strength, and do not charitably bear with the weakness of our brethren, we become like the cattle of whom the Prophet speaks, who thrust with side and shoulder, and thrust the diseased and feeble with their horns, till they have scattered them abroad; and the scandals in the Church are due to our own want of charity."

"And I will set one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even My servant David; he shall feed them and he shall be their shepherd." Before, Almighty God had spoken of Himself as their shepherd; now He declares that it is in and

by the Person of Christ,—by Him Who emphatically calls Himself the Good Shepherd,—that He will take charge of His flock. “I the Lord will be their God, and My servant David a prince among them.” This could not be David himself after the flesh, for he had long since been gathered to his fathers, nor was he to return to this earth. David therefore must be the Son of David, who was to be raised up to David a righteous Branch, David’s Lord as well as David’s Son. He was to be the One Shepherd, the Shepherd over the Gentiles as well as the Jews, according to His own words, “Other sheep I have which are not of this flock; them also must I bring, and there shall be one flock and One Shepherd.”

Then Almighty God enlarges on the everlasting covenant which He would make with His flock. It would be a covenant of peace; the peace of Paradise would be restored; evil beasts would cease out of the land, and His sheep should dwell safely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods;—that is, all enemies should be destroyed, and they should repose calmly and fearlessly in the confidence of Christ’s unfailing guardianship. Peace is the special prerogative of Christ’s Church. And as there is peace within, so God will make His people

a blessing to all around ; He will bless them and make them a source of blessing ; showers of blessing will descend upon them and cause them to bring forth the fruits of righteousness. He will deliver them from the hand of their enemies ; sin and Satan shall have no more dominion over them, they shall dwell safely, and none shall make them afraid.

The Lord also promised to raise up for them "a plant of renown," or more literally, a planting for a name ; which would seem to mean much the same as those words of the Prophet Isaiah, "They shall be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified." So shall they know that the Lord is with them. In themselves they are but men, weak and corrupt, but the Lord Jehovah would be their God, and in Him is everlasting strength.

Promises such as these could have only a partial accomplishment in the peace and prosperity of the Israelites after the return from captivity. They belong in their fulness, not yet completely realised, to the Church of Christ. But they are in their measure fulfilled in every faithful Christian. He is one of Christ's sheep, an object of the special care and love of the Good Shepherd. He may, if

he will, rest in Him without fear, rejoicing in His love and in the comfort of His Holy Spirit. The picture of a flock of sheep, feeding securely in some green pasture beside a living stream, under the eye of a loving and watchful shepherd, is but a faint image of the repose and peace and perfect safety of the sheep of Christ, Whose eternal tenderness is ever bending over them, knowing the history and circumstances of each one among them, and loving them each one with "a love as personal as if in the whole world's wilderness were none other but that one."

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Ezekiel xxxvii.*

It would seem that during the continuance of the last siege of Jerusalem, Ezekiel received no messages from God to deliver to his captive countrymen; but as soon as the worst was realised and the Holy City had fallen, the word of the Lord returned to him and he spake again. And though, when his voice returned to him, he began with words of reproof, he soon broke away into a strain of hope and consolation. The rulers of Israel had been selfish and cruel, but God Himself would

raise up a Shepherd for them, to Whose care He would entrust them; He would give them fresh and quiet pastures, and rain down showers of blessing upon them. And then Almighty God goes on still further to declare His jealousy for His chosen habitation, and His fury against the people who had spoiled it: "O mountains of Israel, ye shall shoot forth your branches, and yield your fruit to My people of Israel; for they are at hand to come. For behold I am for you, and I will turn unto you, and ye shall be tilled and sown; and I will multiply men upon you, all the house of Israel, even all of it, and the cities shall be inhabited and the wastes shall be builded." Then, addressing the people themselves, He says, "I will take you from among the heathen and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean. From all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. . . . And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, and ye shall keep My judgments and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be My people and I will be your God."

Such was the blessed message of consolation

which the Prophet was instructed to deliver to the exiles on the Chebar, crushed and broken-hearted at the destruction of Jerusalem. Such was the bright vision which he set up before their eyes of a return to their own land, and the full enjoyment, once again, each man of his own vineyard, and his own fig-tree. But how should these things be? They were utterly weak and powerless in the land of their captivity. Ruined and scattered as they were, the blessings which the Prophet foretold seemed most unlikely. Their hope was lost and cut off like a withered branch. To meet such thoughts, and to cheer them in their despondency, God raised a vision before the Prophet's eyes, which he was to communicate to the people. He was carried by the Spirit into a valley, or rather a low plain, full of human bones, the remnants, perhaps, of some great caravan which had perished of hunger in the wilderness, or the victims of some bloody encounter, whose bodies had been left unburied, till the flesh was consumed and the bones alone remained, parched and bleached by the sun.

When the Prophet had gone round and carefully examined these bones, and found them very many and very dry—the marrow within as well as the flesh without being utterly wasted—God inquired

of him, "Can these bones live?" To which he answered, with humility and faith, "O Lord God, Thou knowest." No created power could restore them to life; but if God should please to put forth His might, they might be raised from the dead and live. The Lord then ordered him to prophesy upon these bones, to predict their resurrection, to call upon them to hear His word, concerning their being reunited and restored to life, that they might know His power. This would appear even more hopeless than to prophesy the restoration of Israel to their ancient prosperity, or to preach to the most hardened sinner; yet the Prophet started no objection, but obeyed the Lord's command. And while he was speaking, there was a noise (*lit.* a voice), and the earth shook under his feet, and presently the bones came together, bone to his bone—that is, they went every one in quest of his kindred bone—and they were formed into a vast army of complete skeletons; and the sinews, flesh, and skin came over them, and they became entire human bodies, yet dead and lifeless, like Adam before God breathed into him the breath of life, or like so many corpses from which the life had just departed. Then again the Prophet was ordered to prophesy to the wind, and to command it, in the

name of the Lord God, to blow from the four quarters of the heaven upon these slain men, that they might live; and while he obeyed the orders, they were restored to life, and the lonely desert was peopled with a large army.

The meaning of the vision was plain: it showed how the ruined and shattered hopes of the Israelites would be revived, and they would come forth out of the grave of their captivity, inspired by the Divine Spirit and clothed with fresh and living beauty: "Behold, O My people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves and I will put My Spirit in you and ye shall live, and I will place ye in your own land; then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord."

The Prophet is then instructed to speak of the blessings which would flow from the restoration; and first of all he foretells how the schism between the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah would henceforth be at an end. As on former occasions, so now the prophecy was delivered by a sign. The two sticks which he was to take represented the two kingdoms; they had been as yet like dry wood, but they were to grow together and become one in his hand. The disruption had been a

source of weakness to the nation, and had made them a prey to their common enemies : now united Israel would grow up as a single tree. After the captivity we hear no more of any separate kingdom of Israel ; those of the ten tribes who returned were united to Judah, and Jerusalem became the head and centre of the whole people. As Almighty God here declares, " They shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all."

Another memorable result of the captivity was the rooting out of idol-worship. Though the Jews were guilty of other sins, they never fell away, after the restoration, into idolatry, and so Ezekiel's words were fulfilled : " Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions ; but I will save them out of all their dwelling-places, wherein they have sinned, and I will be their God."

The remaining promises set forth in this chapter seem to look beyond the immediate occasion of the restoration : as the prophecy advances, it takes a wider range and loses itself in the vision of Christ and His Church. As a matter of fact, the Israelites had no king after the captivity, so that the

David here mentioned must mean Christ, Who is the One Shepherd of His people, and to Whom God has given the throne of His father David, and of Whose kingdom there will be no end. Almighty God promises to set up His sanctuary, His tabernacle, among men, and dwell with them in His Holy Church; the nations of the world shall witness His love and favour to His Church, and shall be drawn thereby to believe in and obey Him.

The vision of the dry bones, with which this chapter opens, though designed in the first instance to encourage the Jews by foretelling their return from captivity, is also a representation of the raising up of the bodies of the dead at the last day. As those bones, exceeding many and exceeding dry, came together at God's Word, bone to his bone, and were covered with sinew, flesh, and skin, and the breath came into them, so will it be hereafter in the morning of the Resurrection, when they that sleep in the dust shall awake and their various particles of which their bodies are composed will be brought together again, and they that are dead will hear the Voice of the Son of God and live.

But there is a further spiritual meaning in this vision: it represents the power and grace of the

Holy Spirit in the conversion of sinners. By nature men are dead in trespasses and sins, like the dead bones in the valley, neither possessing life nor conscious of death ; dead, and not knowing that they are dead. And the first thing that men require is, that the Holy Spirit should convince them of sin, and shew them its misery and sinfulness. When the Holy Spirit works this conviction in the heart of any man, it is like the stirring among the bones, it is the captive awakening to perceive his chains and to desire to be free. But this is not all that he needs. It is not enough to desire freedom and holiness and life ; he must be actually made holy ; he must be raised from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. This also is the special work of the Holy Spirit : man cannot do it for himself, any more than the sick of the palsy at Bethesda, though anxiously desiring to be made whole, was able, with his weakness of eight-and-thirty years, to go down into the water by himself.

The Holy Spirit is the giver of life, the author of the spiritual nature in man, Who not only prevents us that we may will what is right, but works with us that we may accomplish what we will. As He breathed life into those dead bodies, after the bones had been gathered together, and enabled

them to walk and move and act as other bodies, so will He give life to our dead souls, not only suggesting holy thoughts and feelings, but enabling us to act upon them; rooting out what is evil, healing our infirmities, and leading us on continually in the way in which we should walk. How earnestly should we pray, that He would of His mercy work this saving change in us and quicken our dead souls with that new and heavenly life which He imparts!

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Daniel i.*

WHEN Hezekiah, in an evil hour, displayed the treasures which he and his predecessors had accumulated before the envoys of the King of Babylon, the Prophet Isaiah was charged to warn him, not only that those treasures would one day be carried to Babylon, but that his sons should be eunuchs in the palace of the King of Babylon (2 Kings xx. 17, 18). A hundred years had scarcely passed away when the Prophet's words were fulfilled to the letter. The treasures of the Temple and of the king's palace were transferred to Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar gave orders that out of the royal and noble families of Israel that had been taken

captive, should be chosen certain children, who were of comely appearance and natural intelligence, who should be taught the language and learning of the Chaldees, and so prepared to stand before the king as his special servants and advisers. Among these was Daniel, who, having been carried into captivity in the third year of Jehoiakim, on the occasion of the first Babylonian invasion of Palestine, was chosen with several other Jewish youths, while yet a boy (probably about fourteen years of age), and placed under the care of the chief of the eunuchs in the Babylonian court. It is generally supposed, though it is not expressly stated, that he and his three companions were themselves eunuchs. Their names were changed—a badge of servitude, designed to obliterate the memory of their early homes, and, in the case of these Jewish children, of their religion. They had all, in the first instance, borne names commemorative of their God: the name Daniel signifies “God my judge;” Hananiah means “The Lord gave graciously;” “Mishael is, “Who is like God?” and Azariah, “The Lord helpeth.” The names of two at least of these were changed into names connected with the idols of Babylon: Daniel was called Belteshazzar, which means “Bel

is the prince," and Abed-nego is "the servant of Nego," or Nebo, the Chaldean name of the planet Mercury. The meaning of the other two names, Shadrach and Meshach, is uncertain; but it is highly probable that they were connected with the names of some Chaldean gods.

The time of training for the king's service was three years, during which they were to be fed from the king's table; but as this could not but involve them in legal defilement, Daniel obtained from the officers charged with their education, that he and his companions might be fed with pulse and water. Daniel purposed, it is said, that he would not defile himself with the king's meat, nor with the wine that he drank. The Prophet Hosea had foretold that, as a punishment for their iniquity, the Jews should eat unclean things in Assyria; which shows the temptation to which the captives were exposed. Everything that was killed with the blood in it was strictly forbidden by the Law as unclean, and all the food and drink which came from the king's table was liable to be mixed up with idols. Therefore Daniel would have nothing to do with them; and in his unflinching loyalty to God he trusted that they would maintain their health and strength as well through the pulse

as through the forbidden food. And so it was: Daniel and his three friends throve so well on the meagre diet which they chose for themselves that they surpassed in the freshness of their looks all the rest who had been fed from the dainties and wine of the king's table.

Bodily temperance brings with it at all times clearness of mind; but in the case of these young men their abstinence was for a distinctly religious reason, and therefore it won for them a special blessing from God. He gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. It is to be observed that though Daniel refused to defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, he did not consider it unlawful to study the literature and sciences of the Chaldees, just as Moses, we know, was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. "As Moses acquired their secular knowledge without their debasing superstition, so did Daniel. As Moses was educated by the priests who were sole possessors of Egyptian learning, so was Daniel by the Magi, the possessors of the Babylonian. All tradition tells us of the varied learning of the Chaldees, and their astronomy; there was therefore a large field for Daniel to

study without entering on their superstition and misbelief. And, indeed, the office which he afterwards held as chief of the governors over the wise men of Babylon, seems to point rather to a general supervision of the whole than to direct connection with details. Each division of the Magi had its own head, and Daniel had the supervision of all. Even in that which was most connected with superstition, the astrological predictions of the wise men, there may have been large scope for correcting abuses and superstitions."

When the time of their training was over, the four Hebrew youths were brought to the king, who soon discovered that in all manner of wisdom and understanding, and in the solution of difficult questions, they were far superior to the wise men about his court, and they were speedily advanced to stations of trust and honour in the palace.

"And Daniel continued" (we read) "even unto the first year of king Cyrus;" that is, as it is said in the margin of our Bibles, "he lived to see the glorious time of the return of his people from the Babylonish captivity, though he did not die then," for he specially mentions (xi.) a revelation that was made to him in the third year of Cyrus.

Wonderful indeed was the man who thus lived

steadfast and unshaken for more than seventy years, in the courts of heathen kings, "honoured during the forty-three years of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, doing the king's business under the insolent and sensual boy Belshazzar, owned by the conquering Medo-Persian; the stay, doubtless, and human protector of his people during those long years of exile; probably commissioned to write the decree of Cyrus which gave leave for that long longed-for restoration of his people, whose re-entrance into their land, like Moses of old, he was not to share. Deeds are more eloquent than words. Such undeviating integrity, beyond the ordinary life of man, in a worshipper of the One God, in the most dissolute and degraded of the merchant cities of old, first minister in the first of the world monarchies, was in itself a great fulfilment of the purpose of God, in converting the chastisement of His people into the riches of the Gentiles."

There are several particulars in which Daniel may be compared with Joseph, who stands at the beginning, as Daniel at the close of the Divine history of the Jews, as the representative of the true God in a heathen court. If Joseph was loved and honoured by successive masters, by the cap-

tain of the guard, the keeper of the prison, the king of Egypt, who "made him lord of his house and ruler of all his substance, in order that he might inform his people after his will, and teach his senators wisdom," so almost the first thing that we read of Daniel is, that God brought him into tender love with the prince of the eunuchs: "the heart of the great king Nebuchadnezzar bowed before him in worship, and still more knit to him in love was the heart of king Darius." If Joseph was conspicuous for his tender love for his brethren, so Daniel wept over his countrymen, and pleaded earnestly for their pardon. Both of them were captives, and early taught in the school of affliction; as it is said of Joseph that "his feet were hurt in the stocks, the iron entered into his soul:" so Daniel lived a life of self-denial and abstinence amid the luxury of Babylon. As Almighty God revealed His secrets to Joseph, drawing near to him in the visions of the night, and whispering to his spirit the interpretation of dreams, so was the eye of Daniel supernaturally enlightened to see into futurity and to perceive the purposes of God. As Pharaoh said of Joseph, "Can we find such a man as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?" so Daniel is

described by Nebuchadnezzar as "the man in whom is the Spirit of the holy gods." And thus, deriving their wisdom from above, they were the wisest counsellors and rulers among men.

It may be remarked further, that these two, Joseph and Daniel, are almost the only saints mentioned in Scripture of whom no failing is recorded. So far as we know, they never fell away from God, as was the case with so many, even of the most eminent of God's servants of old. And as they were alike in their steadfastness, so also were they alike in this, that they remembered their Creator in the days of their youth. The youthful Joseph, steeling himself against the tempter's arts by the thought of God's presence, and the boy Daniel, earnestly resolving that, whatever happened, he would not defile himself with meat offered to idols, are, as it were, companion pictures, equally attractive and equally encouraging, exhibiting to us the blessedness of early piety, and suggesting by their subsequent history that the great grace of perseverance especially belongs to those who seek God early.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—*Daniel* iii.

IT is sad to think that he who had acknowledged the supreme power of the God of Daniel as “a God of gods and Lord of kings” should nevertheless be guilty of the extreme folly and wickedness of setting up this golden image. Probably however, even when Nebuchadnezzar made that confession of belief in the true God,—that is, at the time of the explanation of his dream,—he did not abandon his idols. He acknowledged that the God of Israel was the Supreme God, but not that He was the only God. And now several years have passed, during which his power has grown, and his pride, also (as was not unlikely in the case of one whose conversion was so imperfect), has increased, and we find him so intoxicated by the thought of his greatness as to conceive the idea of displaying it by compelling his subjects to bow down before an image which he set up.

Nebuchadnezzar’s exact purpose in setting up the image and inaugurating it so solemnly is not

explained, but it was certainly intended in some way to manifest, and thereby to increase, his power. The officers of all the provinces of the empire were called together, and the people were commanded to worship the image, because it was the king's will. Perhaps it was a reminiscence of the image which Nebuchadnezzar had seen in his dream, and of which the head was declared to represent himself; or it may have been himself whom Nebuchadnezzar intended should be worshipped in it; in any case worship was demanded as in some way the test of allegiance.

The image was of enormous size, sixty cubits high and six cubits broad. The height was so out of proportion to the breadth that it has been suggested that it was a colossal pillar with a human head at the top of it; which would fall in with the notion that the idea of the image was suggested by that which he had seen in his dream, of which he himself was the head. When the image was completed, Nebuchadnezzar summoned all the civil and military officers throughout his vast dominions to attend at its dedication, and commanded that all who were present should at a given signal bow themselves before the image, on pain of being cast into a burning fiery furnace. Throughout the vast

multitude three alone, so far as we know, refused to obey the king's command. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, the three Jewish youths who had been chosen with Daniel as the most comely and promising of the captives, and brought into the king's palace, and there instructed in the learning and language of the Chaldeans, and who had since been promoted by the king to places of trust and authority, came with the rest of the governors of the provinces to the dedication of the image: but it was utterly impossible for them to bow down before it. The men who had refused as children to defile themselves with the king's meat, lest they should be involved thereby in some transgression of the law, could not fall down and worship an idol, let the penalty for disobedience be what it might. Their refusal was at once reported to the king. There were not wanting persons who were jealous of the promotion of foreigners, and were glad of an opportunity of removing them from their places.

The king was enraged at their disrespect and contumacy; he could hardly believe, however, that they meant to disobey his command, and refuse to worship the image which he had set up; and he was willing therefore to give them an opportunity

of rectifying their mistake, and proving themselves faithful subjects. If they would fall down and worship the image, well; but if they persisted in their refusal, they should certainly be cast into the fire; "and who is that God," he insolently asks, "who shall deliver you out of my hands?"

Here was a great and very severe trial. On the one side were wealth and honour and all worldly advantages; on the other the burning furnace. There was no outward prospect of deliverance. No message came to them from God to strengthen them in their determination. They professed their belief that God was able to deliver them, and that He would deliver them; He would not forget them, but watch over them for good: but they were not careful to discuss the point, because, whether it pleased God to preserve them from the threatened danger, or that they should be involved in it, of this they were resolved, that they would not break His command by worshipping the image. They might be mistaken in their hope of deliverance;—God might not interfere in their behalf, but might permit them to be martyrs for Him, as He had permitted many others; but, even if it were so—even if He should be pleased to give them up to this extremest suffering, so that they

should have to witness for Him in the fire, nevertheless they say, "Be it known unto thee, O king, we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

Herein consists the chief nobleness of the answer of these Jewish youths: it is their "if not," their readiness to meet any consequences rather than break God's command, which seems to elevate them into a place almost among Christian martyrs: they might seem to have listened to those words of Christ, with which He braced up the minds of His disciples to fight the battle of the faith: "Fear not them who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do: but fear Him who, after He hath killed, hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, fear Him."

"Then was Nebuchadnezzar full of fury, and the form of his countenance was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego." But the three young men, in their calm resolution and steadfast trust, were utterly unmoved by the fury of the king: and he did his worst. The heat of the furnace was increased sevenfold, and the mightiest men in his army bound the rebels and cast them into the fire. Such was the intensity of the heat, that even the men who seized them were licked up

by the exuberant prodigality of the tongues of flame. They then, bound as they were, were cast into the midst of the fire. Even yet, to all appearance, there was no deliverance, no manifestation of God's power in behalf of His servants. It was not until they had fallen down enveloped in the flames,—in that extremity of theirs which is always God's opportunity, at the very last, when they had probably abandoned all hope, that God interfered and they found that no harm was done to them. The only thing that the fire was permitted to do, was to burn the bonds that held them, so that they walked unharmed in the midst of the furnace. And with them also was seen in the fire a fourth Form, even the Form of the Son of God, their companion in the midst of the fire, their deliverer from its power; with Him beside them they walked up and down unhurt: their garments were not scorched, nor their hair singed, nor did the smell of fire pass upon them.

Thus Almighty God checked the rage of the insolent king, and proclaimed His own majesty and glory in the presence of that vast multitude, and the image which he set up for his own glorification became the trophy of the victory of Him whom he had defied.

But let us take special notice of the lesson which the example of the courage and devotion of these young men should teach us. We see in their history, a history of all temptations and of the way to overcome them. In the first place, we learn that temptations will come, and very often at the most unlooked-for times. What could have been more unexpected than the sudden storm of temptation which swept over these young men? They found themselves involved in it without any act of their own; and there was no escape. So is it with ourselves: trials will arise from the most unlikely quarters, and when they come, they will be found to be very real and true, turning-points, almost, in our lives. Temptations differ in different persons, but, in one form or another, we are sure to be assailed, and that in such a way as that there shall be a true sifting of our character, a real trial whether we are on God's side in the world or no.

This history shows us also what is God's purpose in trying us. He had not forgotten these His servants, nor ceased to love them, that He suffered them to be so severely tried. No: it was because He desired to strengthen them in the trial and carry them safely through it; because He would increase their faith, and gem their crown with

brighter jewels. In like manner God suffers us to be tried in order that we may overcome, and that the trial of our faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ. God allows us to be tempted, not that we may fall, but that we may stand, and that the several temptations which assail us may be so many steps in the great ladder by which we may rise from earth to heaven. Temptation in itself can do us no harm; of which a token is given us in this history, in that it is said, that not even the smell of fire had passed upon the three children. The most foul temptation may be presented to a man, and he may be severely harassed by it; but if he does not yield to it, it cannot really hurt him. The devil's breath has as it were swept over him, but it has left no mark or stain behind.

But observe also, the secret of these young men's strength. There was a fourth Form walking with them, the Form like as of the Son of God. Is not the same blessed Companion with us also in our trials? His own gracious word is, "Fear not; for I am with thee; be not dismayed, for I am thy God; I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand

of My righteousness." "When thou passest through the water, I will be with thee, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." Let us only be firmly resolved, that, let the consequences be what they may, we will keep close to Him and to the path of duty which He has marked out for us, and we may be sure that He will never leave us nor forsake us. Not only will His eye of love be ever resting on us, but His hand of power will be stretched out for our deliverance, and we shall find in all our dangers that He has opened a way of escape, that we may come forth victorious.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Daniel iv.*

EVEN the wonderful manifestation of Divine power in the preservation of the three children in the fiery furnace had failed to cure Nebuchadnezzar's pride and self-confidence. He was led, indeed, to show special honour to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, and to acknowledge His great power; but there was no act of personal humiliation, no confession of his own insignificance.

in the sight of the great God of heaven and earth. And it was to this that God would in His mercy bring him.

The reign of Nebuchadnezzar was one of unexampled prosperity. After a series of splendid conquests, over Syria, Palestine, Phœnicia, Egypt, he set himself to strengthen and beautify his capital. "His inscriptions give an elaborate account of the immense works which he constructed in and about Babylon itself, while he appears also to have built or restored almost every city or temple in the whole country." "Modern research has shown that Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest monarch that Babylon, or perhaps the East generally, ever produced. He must have possessed an enormous amount of human labour. Nine-tenths of Babylon itself, and nineteen-twentieths of all the other ruins that almost in countless profusion cover the land, are composed of bricks stamped with his name. His wealth and the magnificence of his court seem to have been on a par with the number and size of his buildings. A lavish use of the precious metals characterised his architecture."

Under these circumstances, it is not in itself surprising that towards the close of his reign we should hear of Nebuchadnezzar walking in his

palace and surveying the various buildings of the magnificent city, and then saying in his heart, "Is not this great Babylon that I have built for the house of the kingdom, by the might of my power and for the honour of my majesty?" The city had, indeed, been founded many centuries before; but Nebuchadnezzar had so enlarged and adorned it, that the Babylon which he beheld with his own eyes, might, humanly speaking, be fairly called his creation. As an illustration of the boast which is here recorded, it may be observed that there is still extant a very remarkable inscription, in which Nebuchadnezzar himself describes the various glories and magnificence of the royal buildings in Babylon; in that inscription the words "I have built," occur again and again, thus confirming the impression which the inspired history gives us of the pride and vain-glory with which Nebuchadnezzar was accustomed to contemplate the splendour with which he was surrounded.

Though such pride and self-adulation may not be surprising in themselves, they are surprising when all the circumstances are taken into account and we remember the special warning which he had received. Twelve months before the vain-glorious speech was uttered, a remarkable dream was sent

to Nebuchadnezzar, in which he beheld a great tree standing in the midst of the earth, which appeared as an immense plain ; its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the ends of the earth ; it had strong branches and flourishing leaves and rich fruit. As he beheld, a watcher and a holy one—that is, one who was both a watcher and holy, an angel—came down from heaven and gave orders that the tree with all its branches and fruit and leaves should be cut down, and only the stump of its roots left in the ground. Having said this, the angel seemed to pass from speaking of the tree to make mention of the person whom the tree represented : “ Let his heart be changed from man’s, and let a beast’s heart be given him, and let seven times pass over him.” And all this was to take place (so the angel said) to the intent that the living might know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will, and setteth up over it the basest of men.

The king was much troubled by this dream, and communicated it at first to the wise men of his kingdom, and then to Daniel, of whose skill in the interpretation of dreams he had already had such signal proof that it is strange he did not send for

him in the first instance. When the wise men were unable to explain the vision, or, perceiving that it portended evil, were unwilling to express their apprehension, the king sent for Daniel, whom, however, he addressed by the name of Belteshazzar (so called after his own god, Bel), and as master of the magicians and possessing the spirit, not of the God of the Jews, but "of the holy gods," showing thereby that he was still very far from recognising Daniel as the servant and interpreter of the One true God. When Daniel heard the dream, he was "astonied for one hour," or, rather, "for a short time" (*lit.* the twinkling of an eye), and his thoughts troubled him: he was distressed to think of the heavy judgment which he saw was hanging over the king; but the king encouraged him, and bade him speak out without fear or favour; and then Daniel, not without a kindly expression of his sympathy, proceeded to explain the application of the vision to Nebuchadnezzar himself. "The tree that thou sawest . . . it is thou, O king, that art grown, and become strong, for thy greatness is grown and reacheth unto heaven, and thy dominion to the end of the earth." But he was to be cast down from his throne, and, leaving the haunts of men, live the life

of a beast. This should continue for a certain number of years ; at the end of which time he should be restored, when he had learnt that the heavens do rule—that is, that no earthly monarch, however exalted, but the great King of Heaven, was the Supreme Disposer of all things. Daniel concluded by entreating the king to take in good part the counsel which he offered, and to break off his sins by righteousness, and his iniquity by showing mercy to the poor, if so be there might be a lengthening of his tranquillity. Injustice and oppression were almost inseparable from Eastern despotism, and this advice of Daniel would seem to suggest that the rule of Nebuchadnezzar had been stained by them. Therefore he counsels him to break off his sins and learn justice and mercy, encouraging him at the same time to hope that timely repentance and amendment might yet avail, as in the case of Nineveh, to avert God's judgments.

Thus Daniel fearlessly admonished the king for his sins, and foretold his impending doom. But Nebuchadnezzar did not heed the warning. The merciful God gave him a whole year's respite, in order that he might repent ; but though he did not resent the plain speaking of the Prophet, he

did not profit by it ; he did not lay aside his arrogance and self-complacency.

It was at the end of twelve months from the warning of Daniel, that, when walking in his palace and gazing on the magnificence of his capital, he uttered the proud boast in which he attributed all his greatness to himself ; and then, without further delay, the fatal sentence was executed. While the words were yet on his lips, though they were, perhaps, unheard by human ears, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, " O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken ; the kingdom is departed from thee." And at the same moment the words were fulfilled ; a sudden madness seized him ; and the mighty monarch of the greatest kingdom in the world was driven forth from human society to herd with the beasts, and so continued in a wild state until his hairs were grown like eagle's feathers, and his nails like bird's claws.

The special form of disease with which Nebuchadnezzar was visited, was one which, though of rare occurrence, has been known in other cases, " in which the sufferer retains his consciousness in other respects, but imagines himself to be changed into some animal, and acts, up to a certain point, in conformity with that persuasion." Some have

imagined themselves changed into wolves, others have imitated the cries of dogs or cocks. It is likely, therefore, that Nebuchadnezzar in his madness believed himself to be an ox, and ate grass, and allowed his hair and nails to grow, unshorn and unpared, as if he was the animal. At the same time, it is supposed that he retained a perfect consciousness that he was Nebuchadnezzar during the whole course of his degradation, and that he may have prayed fervently that the cup might pass from him. At all events, it is expressly said that at the end of the days—that is, as we may suppose, when the attack was passing off and reason was beginning to return—he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and blessed and praised the Most High for His justice and mercy, and acknowledged that “His dominion was an everlasting dominion and His kingdom from generation to generation, and that He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest Thou?”

To draw forth this confession, and to humble the proud king, was the especial object of this visitation, and that object was fully accomplished; for no sooner was Nebuchadnezzar restored to his

kingdom than he issued a decree, relating God's wonderful dealings with him and professing his submission to Him as the King of Heaven, all Whose works are truth and His ways judgment, and those who walk in pride He is able to abase. Thus the glory of the Most High was proclaimed throughout the civilised world by a mouth which none dared gainsay. No words could express more fitly the temper of mind which God desired to see in Nebuchadnezzar; and we may well hope and believe that he who could thus publish his own shame to the world in order that he might glorify God, continued in the same mind to the end of his life now very near at hand; and that as his last recorded words are words of faith and humility, so he died at last in thankful trust in the mercy of Jehovah.

For, certainly, the mercy shown to Nebuchadnezzar was very great. What pains did Almighty God take to break his proud spirit and bring him to a humble acknowledgement of His majesty. His dealings with Nebuchadnezzar show that while it is His will to bring certain persons into close relationship with Himself and more certain knowledge of His will, He does not pass by those who are less favourably circumstanced. He is still

their loving Father, Who vouchsafes to them not merely outward mercies, but inward helps and guidance; and the day will come when it will be plainly seen, on the one hand, that not even in the darkest times has He left Himself without witness, and on the other, that in every nation there have been those who have feared Him and wrought righteousness, and who, therefore, have been accepted by Him.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Daniel v.*

A CONSIDERABLE interval—about five-and-twenty years—separates the events recorded in this chapter from the close of the preceding. Not only are Nebuchadnezzar the king, and his son, Evil-Merodach, who reigned only two years, dead, but one or two other kings have risen and disappeared, and at the time of the capture of Babylon, to which this chapter refers, the kingdom of Babylon, according to profane historians, was in the hands of a King Nabonnedus (or Labynetus), who had seized the throne by violence.

It is also stated in profane history that Nabonnedus the king was absent from Babylon at the

time of its capture ; he had gone forth to meet the Persians, and having been defeated by them in battle, had taken refuge in the city of Borsippa, near Babylon, where he was subsequently made prisoner and treated with kindness by the conqueror. The narrative in the Book of Daniel, on the other hand, speaks of Belshazzar as king, and says that he was slain in the night of the taking of the city. There seems, therefore, at first sight, to be a discrepancy between the accounts ; but the discovery a few years ago of certain clay cylinders, one of which contained a memorial of the works of Nabonnedus, the last king of Babylon, has altogether removed this difficulty. It there appears that the name of the eldest son of Nabonnedus was Belsharezer, who was admitted by his father to a share in the government. Hence we learn that "there were two kings of Babylon at the time of the last siege, Nabonnedus (or Labynetus), the father, and Belsharezer (or Belshazzar), the son. The latter was entrusted with the command within the city, while the former occupied a stronghold in the neighbourhood ; the latter alone perished, the former escaped." "The fact that the Babylonian throne was at this time occupied conjointly by two monarchs is indicated in the sacred narrative by a curious *casual* touch.

Belshazzar, anxious to obtain the interpretation of the miraculous 'handwriting upon the wall,' proclaims that whoever reads it shall be made 'the *third* ruler in the kingdom' (Dan. v. 7). In every other similar case (Gen. xli. 40—45; Esth. x. 3; Dan. ii. 48, 49), the reward is the elevation of the individual who does the service to the *second* place in the kingdom, the next place to the king. The only reason that can be assigned for the variation in this instance is, that the first and second places were both filled, and that therefore the highest assignable reward was the *third* place."

There remains the further difficulty, that Belshazzar is spoken of as the son of Nebuchadnezzar, whereas his father Nabonnedus was a conspirator, and not of the royal family; but it has been suggested, as a very probable explanation, that Nabonnedus, desiring to strengthen his newly-acquired throne by alliance with the ancient line, married the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, and that Belshazzar was the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar by his mother's side, and that the queen mentioned in this chapter was the queen-mother, and daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. It is said that neither in Hebrew or in Chaldee is there any word for grandfather or grandson.

During the interval which had occurred since the death of Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, who was now nearly ninety years of age, had retired, apparently, from public occupations, and was almost forgotten by the court. But the time was come when the golden head of the great image which Nebuchadnezzar had seen was to fall off, and Daniel was summoned to announce its fall to the successor of the king who had seen the vision. Babylon was at the time besieged by the Persian army, but the monarch and his people, relying on the strength of the walls, which were three hundred feet high and eighty feet thick, mocked at the vain attempt, and indulged in untimely revelry. A great annual festival (probably in honour of their god, Bel) was being kept, and the king had invited a thousand of his lords to a banquet in his palace, and he himself drank wine before the thousand,—that is, at a separate table, either for safety's sake or that he might be in sight of all. When inflamed with wine, the king in his insolence sent for the sacred vessels which had been taken from the Temple at Jerusalem, and he and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank wine out of those holy instruments of the service of Jehovah, and sang at the same time the praises of their abominable idols,

the gods of gold and silver, of brass, of iron, of wood and of stone, which had given them, as they pretended, the conquest over so many nations, and especially had helped them to trample on the majesty of Him to Whose honour the vessels which they were using were dedicated.

The profane revelry was at its height, when suddenly there appeared the fingers of a man's hand writing mysterious words upon the walls of the banqueting-hall. The walls were coated with plaster, such as is still to be seen in the corresponding palaces of Nineveh. The king not only saw the hand that wrote, but the words remained upon the wall, and though he could not understand them, the strangeness of the sight alarmed him; the brightness of his countenance fled, his thoughts troubled him, and his knees smote one against another. In great haste he summoned the astrologers and soothsayers and Chaldeans, and promised honour and reward to any one who would explain the meaning of the mysterious, awful words; but none of them could interpret the writing. The whole assembly was thoroughly alarmed, and the queen (probably the queen-mother) who had not been present at the banquet, was sent for by the king to give her advice. She bade the

king take courage, because she knew of one who could unravel the mystery. If she was, as is supposed, the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, it is natural that in this perplexity her thoughts would revert to Daniel, and to the benefits which his wisdom had conferred on her father. Though he was now neglected and almost forgotten, the time had been when he was head over all the wise men in Babylon, as being superior to them in knowledge and skill. Daniel, therefore, was sent for immediately, and after declining the king's promised reward, sternly rebuked him because he had not profited by the lesson which the history of his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, should have taught him. Belshazzar knew very well the degradation which Nebuchadnezzar's pride had brought upon him, and yet he had lifted up himself against the Lord, and been guilty of even greater contempt and sacrilege. The old man's eye gazed on the holy vessels of Jehovah scattered on the table, and he boldly reprov'd the king for the insult thus offered to the One true God, in Whose hands his breath was, and Whose were all his ways. Then, looking up to the wall, he saw the hand withdrawn from the writing, and the fatal doom of Babylon and her king there inscribed.

“This is the writing that was written, Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin.” All these words, it is said, have a twofold meaning. “Mene,” for example, means “counted,” “counted to the end;” hence it signifies both “numbered” and “ended,” or, as Daniel interprets it, “God hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it:” it was counted out and so brought to an end. “Tekel” means not only “weighed” but “light” in the scale; as Daniel says, “Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting.” “Upharsin,” in like manner, means not only “And they are dividing,” but also “and Persians;” and therefore Daniel explains it, “Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.”

While the words of interpretation were being spoken, the fulfilment had commenced. Already the Persians had begun their march along the dried-up channel of the river to take possession of the city, buried in sleep and revelry. “In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain, and Darius, the Mede, took the kingdom.” And so the wonderful prophecy of Jeremiah was fulfilled: “The mighty men of Babylon have forborn to fight, they have remained in their holds: their might hath failed; they became as women;

they have burned her dwelling-places ; her bars are broken. One post shall run to meet another, to shew the King of Babylon that his city is taken at one end, and that the passages are stopped, and the reeds they have burned with fire, and the men of war are affrighted (Jer. li. 30, 32).

Terrible was the fate of King Belshazzar. To pass from the midst of his profane feasting into the other world, and to know that the destruction which came upon him was a direct judgment for his sins ; it is scarcely possible to conceive anything more overwhelming. We see in him an example of a man who had been tempting God by his wickedness, and on whom at length judgment fell suddenly. It would seem to have been his sending for the sacred vessels belonging to the Temple, which at last brought down upon him the Divine judgment. In that very hour—in the climax, as it were, of his impiety—the fingers of a man's hand wrote his doom upon the walls of the banqueting-room. The wretched prince had kept no account of his sins ; as a spendthrift keeps no account of his debts, so he went on day after day revelling in pride and cruelty and sensual indulgence, and insulting Almighty God, until he exhausted the Divine mercy, and filled up the cup

of wrath. His hour came unexpectedly; one more sin he committed, and the cup overflowed. Vengeance overtook him in the instant, and that same night he was cut off from the earth—a warning to men not to provoke God to anger by continual disobedience. They cannot tell but that the very next sin may be the coping-stone of the high tower of their iniquity, and the long-suffering of God may be exhausted.

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

MORNING LESSON.—*Daniel* vi.

THE king by whom Babylon was taken was undoubtedly Cyrus the Persian, who became there at once the King of Babylon. "Darius the Mede" would therefore only be a viceroy set up by Cyrus when he had effected the conquest. Passing himself to further conquests, he entrusted Babylon to the care of Darius; and it has been observed that the expressions in the Book of Daniel prove that Darius' authority was given him by another. It is said, for example (ch. v. 31), that "Darius the Mede took" (or more properly "received") "the kingdom;" and again (ix. 1), that he "was made king over the realms of the Chaldeans," both which statements imply that the authority of Darius was a derived one. The name Darius is an official, rather than a personal, name, and it is thought that the prince here called Darius is the same as Astyages, the last king of the Medes, and that Cyrus made him governor of Babylon.

Darius had probably heard of Daniel's int

pretation of the handwriting on the wall, as well as of his long experience in public affairs and his general reputation for supernatural wisdom, and therefore made him chief of the three presidents who were set over the hundred and twenty rulers of the kingdom. Though he was now far advanced in years, he was willing to do the king's business. But the envy which assails all lofty situations found him out. The Medo-Persian princes could not brook such exaltation in a man who was of a despised race, a mere slave, and who had been found, moreover, in the ranks of the enemy, and they determined therefore, if possible, to work his ruin. His conduct in the administration of his office was so upright, that it was impossible for them to find ground for any charge against him there. They prevailed upon the pride of Darius, who was regarded as a kind of god, to issue a decree, which, like the laws of the Medes and Persians, was supposed to be irrevocable, ordering that for the space of thirty days no petition should be offered to God or man, save to the king alone, and that any one disobeying this command should be cast into the den of lions,—a foolish and wicked decree, but one which, for political reasons, Darius was probably not unwilling to issue. “It

was pressed upon him by the assembled governors of the provinces, whom he had himself created. They were governors in a conquered realm. The object of the decree probably was to obtain from the Babylonians and other provinces the special recognition of the king as the representative of the Supreme God, invested with His delegated power, which the Persians already recognised."

Such was the plea which the governors probably urged in favour of the decree, and they succeeded in obtaining it. They knew very well that Daniel would not suffer one day to pass without prayer to his God, and they did not doubt that what he felt it right to do he would go on doing, in spite of danger: and so it was. He no sooner heard of the signing of the decree, than he went into his house, and with the windows of his chamber open towards Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime. He was of course watched and discovered, and his disobedience reported to the king.

Darius now perceived the reason why the decree had been obtained from him, and bitterly did he repent of the mistake he had made in granting it. It had been, however, duly signed and sealed, and it seemed to him impossible, for reasons of state,

to revoke it. It was necessary, therefore, to sacrifice Daniel, or else make a change in the established constitution of the country, which he was not prepared, perhaps had not the authority, to make. He looked about anxiously for some way of escape, some means of rescuing Daniel, without damage to the state; but all in vain. He had rashly placed himself in the power of his wicked counsellors, and they would not release him. Therefore, with a heavy heart, he gave orders for the execution of the sentence. "The king commanded, and they brought Daniel and cast him into the den of lions." This den was probably a large place under ground, with a hole at the top and a door at the side, closed by a stone. The stone was sealed with the seal of the king and the nobles, to prevent the removal of Daniel.

No doubt he was a willing captive. He knew what the penalty of his prayers would be; he knew the savage temper of his enemies and the impossibility of escape; but he was the witness for God among the heathen, and he would bear his witness faithfully, let the consequences be what they may: he was as fearless in the lions' den as in his own chamber. He had doubtless prayed to God to be with him in his trouble; and now his

prayer was heard. God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths, so that they did not hurt him, and he spent a far more pleasant night among the lions than the king in his palace. Darius passed the night fasting and sleepless, neither were instruments of music brought before him; but Daniel had no need of helpers in his song of praise, which went up through the darkness to the ear of God.

“ There was the beautiful 34th Psalm, ready made for his purpose, every verse of which is so applicable to his case, that if we did not read David's name at the head of it, we might have supposed it was Daniel's hymn of praise, when the vision of the angel and of the lions was still fresh in his memory: ‘ O praise the Lord with me, and let us magnify His name together. I sought the Lord and He heard me; yea, He delivered me out of all my fear. Lo, the poor crieth, and the Lord heareth him; yea, and saveth him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord tarrieth round about them that fear Him and delivereth them. O taste and see how gracious the Lord is; blessed is the man that trusteth in Him. The lions cannot lack and suffer hunger; but they who seek the Lord shall want no manner of thing that is good.’ ”

Early in the morning Darius repaired to the den, and found, to his extreme delight, that the Lord had protected His faithful servant, and that no manner of hurt was found upon him. He then ordered that he should be brought out, and his accusers cast into the den in his stead. According to the ordinary Persian custom, their wives and children were included in the sentence ; and so ravenous were the hungry lions, which had miraculously spared Daniel, that they brake all their bones in pieces or ever they came at the bottom of the den.

After the deliverance of the three children from the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar issued a decree that none should speak evil against the God of the Hebrews. Darius went a step further, and ordered that the God of Daniel should be feared and honoured in every dominion of his kingdom, because "He is the Living God and stedfast for ever, and His kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and His dominion shall be even unto the end."

The history of Daniel's devotion has its special lessons, which must not be overlooked. He did not go out of his way, it is to be observed, to run into danger : he went on with his usual devotions

in the usual manner, and trusted God for the consequences. There was no ostentation, no unruly opposition to the king's decree. On the other hand, he did not go to any other place, where his enemies might not have found him; not to any private part of his house, but to his own chamber, the place where he always resorted. Neither did he think it enough to pray inwardly with his mind; he kneeled upon his knees, so that all men might see what he was doing. He prayed three times also; and he did not pray only, and omit the giving of thanks to which he had been accustomed; he did not cut off any part of his usual devotions, in order to make the time of danger shorter. And as he had been accustomed to pray with his windows open towards Jerusalem, he did not close them now. Though the city and the Temple were in ruins, and he was at a distance of several hundred miles, he would still show his reverence for the worship that was carried on there, and his desire that it might be restored, by looking towards Jerusalem when he prayed, remembering how Solomon, in his prayer of dedication, had directed the Jews to do so, whenever they should be in captivity: "If they shall be-think themselves, in the land whither they have

been carried captive and shall pray unto Thee towards their land, which Thou gavest unto their fathers, the city which Thou hast chosen, and the house which I have built for Thy name, then hear Thou their prayer and their supplication in heaven Thy dwelling-place, and maintain their cause."

What a warning and reproach is there in Daniel's history to those who are so full of business that they can scarcely find time for calling upon God morning and evening! Here is the prime minister of the greatest kingdom in the world, discharging his worldly duties faithfully and blamelessly, and yet finding time to pray and give thanks before his God three times a-day continually. And if Daniel's example strips us of every excuse for neglecting our prayers, so does it also no less clearly teach us how we ought to pray,—in the retirement of our chamber, with the world and worldly thoughts as much as possible shut out,—with outward reverence, kneeling upon our knees—praying regularly at stated times, three times a-day, if possible—uniting our private devotions with the prayers and intercession of the Church at large, being careful also to add thanksgiving to our prayers. So may we hope to be blessed, with

faithful Daniel,—to be not only preserved from danger, but to be endued with innocency of life and filled with wisdom and understanding, and at length permitted to stand in our appointed place in heaven.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Daniel* vii. 9.

It seems necessary for the understanding of this Lesson to call to mind the vision recorded in the former part of the chapter, and of which the interpretation is given in this latter part. The Prophet says, that he saw the four great empires of the world shadowed out under the figure of four beasts, a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a nameless monster, “dreadful and terrible and strong exceedingly,” having ten horns, from among which there came up “another little horn, before whom three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots; and behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.”

Side by side with this vision of earthly things, the Prophet beheld a vision of heaven, the throne of God, and the judgment-seat, and the books opened, the record of men’s deeds and misdeeds,

and one like a Son of Man in heaven ; like man, but not a mere man ; Man, but more than man, in the clouds of heaven ; to whom, as Man, was given power and glory and a kingdom, all people serving Him and His dominion an everlasting dominion. Then the Prophet beheld the conflict between the earthly kingdom and the heavenly, and the victory of the latter : “ I beheld ” (he says) “ because of the voice of the great words which the horn spake ; I beheld even till the beast was slain, and his body destroyed and given to the burning flames.”

As the three first beasts represent respectively the Babylonian, Persian, and Macedonian kingdoms, so the fourth beast undoubtedly represents the Roman Empire. The Prophet seems to intimate that this empire will at some time be divided into ten portions, or kingdoms, symbolised by the ten horns, as in Nebuchadnezzar's dream it was represented as ending in the ten toes. Out of these ten kingdoms there will arise another, symbolised by the little horn, which shall be diverse from the rest, as the whole kingdom was to be diverse from those kingdoms which were before it.

Without venturing to enter into any minute

explanation of the vision, it may be said that the little horn certainly seems to correspond with the horned beast coming out of the sea, mentioned in the Apocalypse (ch. xiii.) At first sight indeed, it might be supposed that the ten-horned beast of the Revelation is the fourth beast of Daniel, or the Roman power: but a little observation will show that they are not the same, though both are represented as having ten horns, and that, as was said, the Beast of the Revelation corresponds rather with the little horn, which arose from among the ten horns. He has a mouth speaking great things (Rev. xiii. 5), the very words spoken of the little horn, in Daniel. So likewise it is said both of the beast and of the little horn, that they make war with the saints and overcome them; and they continue for the same space of time, "a time and times (dual), and the dividing of time," that is three and a-half times, or three years and a-half, in Daniel, and forty-two months in the Apocalypse. They both likewise continue till Christ comes in judgment, and are by Him cast into destruction "the burning flame," "the lake of fire" (Dan. vii. 11, Rev. xix. 20). The beast in the Revelation speaks blasphemy against God (xiii. 6); the little horn in Daniel will speak words against the Mos

High. But none of these things are said of Daniel's fourth and ten-horned beast. The period of the little horn, which corresponds with that of the beast in the Apocalypse, cannot be the period of the fourth beast itself, inasmuch as the little horn subsequently arises out of it. It would seem that St. John has a nearer and fuller vision of the little horn of Daniel, which he sees as a great beast of universal dominion.

This little horn, who is the same as the ten-horned beast of the Revelation, would seem to be Antichrist, or, as he is called by St. Paul in the Epistle to the Thessalonians, "the son of perdition," "the wicked one whom the Lord will destroy with the brightness of His coming;" and the impression left on the mind by the way in which he is here spoken of, as well as from St. Paul's words, is that Antichrist will be one man, an individual, rather than a power or a kingdom, though this cannot of course be affirmed positively. We gather too, from this and other passages, that "the coming of Christ will be immediately preceded by a very awful and unparalleled outbreak of evils, called by St. Paul an apostacy, a falling away, in the midst of which a certain terrible man of sin and child of perdition, the special and

singular enemy of Christ, or Antichrist, will appear; that this will be when revolutions prevail and the present framework of society breaks to pieces; that at present the spirit which he will embody and represent is kept under by "the powers that be," but that on their dissolution he will rise out of the bosom of them, and knit them together again in his own evil way, under his own rule, to the exclusion of the Church."

It appears further from this chapter, that Antichrist, when he comes, will be an open blasphemer and a great persecutor of the Church; with which agrees our Lord's warning in the 24th chapter of St. Matthew, "There shall be great tribulation such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved; but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened."

Such being the case, it must be right and wise to anticipate and prepare for what is coming. Those persons who think that the end is very near may be mistaken; the times and the seasons are entirely in God's hands, and it is not for us to speak positively or even to speculate very anxiously. We are not capable of judging as to the length of

time that it will take to accomplish God's purposes. But it cannot be wrong to observe and profit by the signs and warnings of the approach of the end. "The old forms of empire, which have lasted ever since Christ was with us, heave and tremble before our eyes, and nod to their fall. They are they which keep Christ from us: He is behind them. When they go, Antichrist will be released from that which letteth, and after his short but fearful season, Christ will come."

"What a curb upon our self-willed, selfish hearts, to believe that a persecution is in store for the Church, whether or not it comes in our days! Surely, with this thought before us, we cannot but feel that we are, what all Christians really are in their best estate (nay rather, would wish to be, had they their will, if they be Christians in heart), *pilgrims*, watchers waiting for the morning, waiting for the light, eagerly straining our eyes for the first dawn of day—looking out for our Saviour's coming, His glorious Advent, when He will end the reign of sin and wickedness, accomplish the number of His elect, and perfect those who at present struggle with infirmity, yet in their hearts love and obey Him.

May He perform all this in His own good time,

according to His infinite mercies! May He give us strength according to our days, and peace at the last!"

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Daniel* xii.

“AT that time shall Michael stand up;” *at that time*, that is, during the time of Antichrist, to whom the preceding chapter refers. It is thought that some portion of the prophecies in that chapter refer to Antiochus Epiphanes, and were intended to prepare the Jews for the persecutions which they would have to endure from him. But the words of Daniel manifestly look beyond his time; for it has been pointed out that there are many traits mentioned in the eleventh chapter which have nothing to correspond with them in Antiochus. It is true that Antiochus opposed the true God, and so far answers to the description of the infidel king whom Daniel portrays: but he worshipped and was zealous for his false gods, whereas the special characteristics of Daniel’s king are self-exaltation above every god, contempt of all religion, apostacy from the god of his fathers, the honouring of a god whom his fathers knew not. Daniel’s prophecy will have its true fulfil-

ment in Antichrist, and in his great conflict with Christ and His Church. That is the time spoken of in the beginning of this Lesson, when Michael shall appear. Then "there shall be a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time." Our Saviour Himself employs the same words in speaking of the struggle of Antichrist against Himself and His Church; "There shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world." But, great as the distress will be, all the faithful servants of Christ shall be delivered, every one, that is, that shall be found written in the book, or, as it is expressed in the Revelation, all they whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Then, immediately after the tribulation of those days, will come the general resurrection and the judgment. "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." It must not be supposed that by the use of the word "many" the Prophet implies that *all* will not rise. The word means multitudes; and the stress is to be laid on the circumstance that there will be a great number in all parts of the world

who at the trumpet of the archangel will rise from their graves and go to stand before their Judge, to receive the doom of everlasting bliss or woe which He shall assign them. And in that day there will be a special blessing on those who by virtue of their office, or through the promptings of their own hearts, lay themselves out to do good to others. "They that be wise" (or, as it is in the margin, "they that be teachers") "shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever."

These last words bring Daniel's prophecy to a close. He had foretold the rise and fall of earthly empires, the persecution of Antichrist, and the final triumph of the faithful, and the subjection of all things to Christ. And now he was commanded to shut up the words—that is, carefully preserve and seal up his prophecies until the latter days. His prophecies would be as a sealed book until the time of the end, when they would be interpreted by the fulfilment. Then "many will run to and fro"—that is, they will diligently seek after and eagerly remember the words of these prophecies; the approach of the end and the evident accomplishment of his words will stimulate the study of them; and the result will be

that knowledge, true heavenly knowledge, will be increased.

Daniel was at this time standing on the bank of the river Hiddekel (or Tigris); and as he looked around he saw two angels, one on one side of the river, and the other on the other side: he saw also upon, or above, the waters of the river a Man clothed in white linen, "whose loins" (such is the fuller description given in the 10th chapter) "were girded with fine gold of Uphaz; his body also was like the beryl; and his face as the appearance of lightning, and his eyes as lamps of fire, and his arms and his feet like in colour to polished brass, and the voice of his words like the voice of a multitude." This description corresponds so closely with St. John's account of Christ's appearance to him, in the first chapter of the Revelation, that we are led to believe that it was He Whom Daniel saw clothed in linen, as our High Priest, and standing upon the water, as ruling over the various peoples of the world. One of the attending angels inquired how long it would be to the end of these wonders, or rather, "How long shall the end of these wonders be?" The Man clothed in white linen lifted up both his hands to heaven, as swearing by the greatness of Jehovah, and said

that it would be for a time, and times and a-half—that is, for three times and a half time. This period of three years and a-half, or forty-two months, or twelve hundred and sixty days, is continually spoken of as the period of Antichrist.

When Daniel heard this, he was conscious that he could not understand it; he therefore made further inquiries, and was again reminded that the words were closed up and sealed unto the end of the time: that is, their further explanation must be deferred until the time of the accomplishment of the prophecy. One of the signs of the time of Antichrist will be, that the daily worship will cease, and the abomination of desolation will be set up: that is, some special act of impiety and desecration will be perpetrated. In the time of Antiochus the ritual of the Temple was abolished, and a heathen altar was set up within the sacred walls; and something parallel with this impiety will take place in the last times, and will last twelve hundred and ninety days. The persecution under Antiochus lasted twelve hundred and sixty days; the times of Antichrist, during which the fire of persecution will rage more fiercely, will last twelve hundred and ninety days, that is thirty days, or a month, longer.

In other words, "it will be *like* that persecution, but will exceed it in intensity and duration."

In the next verse the Angel seems to specify a still further time, thirteen hundred and thirty-five days, that is, seventy-five days beyond the time of the overthrow of Antichrist; by which he would indicate that the final consummation will not follow immediately on the cessation of the persecution; there will be an interval between them. "Blessed is he that waiteth," and endureth unto the end, "and cometh unto the thousand three hundred and five-and-thirty days," that is, to the time "when God shall arise to restore and glorify His Church and to put all enemies under the feet of Christ."

"But go thou thy way" (so the Angel addresses Daniel in conclusion) "till the end be;" ages will intervene, and fierce persecution will assail the Church; but thou shalt rest in the grave for the appointed time, and then thou shalt rise and stand in thy lot at the end of the days; thou shalt have thy appointed place in the heavenly inheritance of the saints.

How blessed was Daniel, who was not only specially mentioned by Almighty God Himself, as one of the righteous men with Noah and

Job (Ezek. xiv.), but alone, of all the sons of men, so far as we know, had it revealed to him, that he should be safe in the last judgment, and should stand in his lot at the end of the days! The reason of this special honour may perhaps be, that of all trials the hardest to bear is worldly prosperity and honour. Throughout a long life, spent not only in the press of worldly business but in the exercise of almost supreme power, surrounded by the luxuries of a magnificent court, Daniel walked with God, discharging faithfully all his earthly obligations, and maintaining by prayer and self-denial an inward spiritual life.

And so he stands forth as a special example to those whose lot it is to live in the world. If they will but be steadfast and devout, humble and conscientious, as Daniel was, it is possible for them not only to attain to the highest holiness, but to hold such communion with God and the unseen world, as would seem to belong only to a life of uninterrupted contemplation. Daniel's history teaches us that worldly engagements are no necessary hindrance to a life of faith and self-denial. But such a life can only be attained by Daniel's method, namely, by constant prayer and daily self-denial.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—*Hosea* xiv.

THIS last chapter of *Hosea* is a great contrast to the rest of the book. The preceding chapters are almost wholly one long dirge of woe, in which the Prophet rehearses the guilt and the punishment of his people. This last chapter is one of almost unmingled brightness. The Prophet calls to repentance, and God in His own person accepts it, and promises a large supply of grace. The prophecy is addressed to Israel, and contains a promise of spiritual restoration.

As a separate kingdom, the Prophet had declared again and again that Israel should be destroyed ; but side by side with the threatenings of temporal judgments had been promises of spiritual blessings in Christ, which are gathered together in this chapter. The time would come, we are here taught, though not until after many days of separation, when Israel would repent and turn to God, and, together with Judah, would be accepted in One Head, namely, Christ. Their temporal greatness and prosperity were gone ; but there was a bright

future of blessing open to those among them who would hereafter seek the Lord and David their king. And in this chapter Almighty God not only invites them to repentance, but declares that they will answer to His call and be accepted. "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity." The destruction which had come upon them was to be attributed, not to chance or necessity, or to any secondary cause, such as the folly of their rulers or the decay of the national strength and prowess, but entirely to their own sin: they had destroyed themselves by their iniquity; they could only be restored by putting away their iniquity and returning to their God. Almighty God therefore begs them to return, and that not merely "unto," or "towards," but (such is the full meaning of the word) "quite up to," Himself. He entreats them not merely to turn back and look towards Him with a partial and imperfect repentance, but not to leave off till they were come quite home to Him by a total and sincere repentance and amendment.

But how were they to return? Almighty God did not require great deeds or costly sacrifices; all He desired was words—words of humble confession and prayer—but they must be sincere words, not

the mere fruit of the lips, but the true expression of the feelings of the heart. He Himself suggests to them a form of words which would be acceptable to Him : they were to say, " Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously," or (according to the literal meaning of the words) " receive good," that is, the good which He Himself had given them, the service which He enabled them to offer. They were to pray to God to take away their sin, to forgive them what was past and preserve them for the future, and at the same time to accept what they had to give, imperfect as it was. Then with their lips would they proclaim His praise. They would render to Him their lips as calves or sacrifices. Instead of the sacrifices which were offered and consumed upon His altars, they would render to Him perpetual thanksgiving ; as the Psalmist says, " I will praise the name of God with a song, and magnify it with thanksgiving. This also shall please the Lord better than a bullock that hath horns and hoofs " (Ps. lxix. 31, 32).

Together with the prayer for pardon must come the promise not to return to their former sin. They were not only to beg of God to take away all iniquity and receive good, but they were at the same time distinctly to renounce their evil : " Asshur

shall not save us ; we will not ride upon horses ; neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods ; for in Thee the fatherless findeth mercy." " Trust in man, in their own strength, in their idols, had been their besetting sin : now, one by one, they disavow them." Casting aside all other trust, they desire to cling to Him Who is the God of the fatherless, and are safe.

Then follows Almighty God's gracious answer to the prayer which He had put into His people's mouth : " I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely ; for Mine anger is turned away from him." The special sin of the Israelites from the first had been to fall away from God : " Their heart was not whole with Him, neither continued they stedfast in His covenant." This unsteadfastness Almighty God promises not only to pardon, but to cure ; as the Psalmist says, " Lord, Thou art become gracious unto Thy land : Thou hast turned away the captivity of Jacob. Thou hast forgiven the offence of Thy people, and covered all their sins. Thou hast taken away all Thy displeasure, and turned Thyself from Thy wrathful indignation " (Ps. lxxxv. 1, 2, 3).

" I will be as the dew unto Israel," refreshing and quickening what would otherwise be parched

and bare. "He shall grow up as the lily," the emblem of softness and purity: God's grace shall make them lovely and attractive in their holiness. But as the lily is only a fading flower, Almighty God adds other images which express strength and permanence. "He shall cast forth his roots like Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive-tree, and his smell as Lebanon." The firmly-rooted cedar, the ever-green olive, the fragrant flowers which cover the lower parts of Lebanon represent the various aspects of the work of grace in the souls of men. He Who is as the dew unto His people will make them not strong only, but lovely and beautiful, not fruitful only, but fragrant and delightful.

"They that dwell under His shadow"—that is, under the shadow of restored Israel, who had just been described under the image of a magnificent tree uniting in itself all perfection—"will return," that is, come back to Him from Whom they have wandered; "they shall revive as the corn," which first dies and then is quickened; they shall "grow as the vine; the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon."

No image can be conceived more suggestive of refreshing beauty than Lebanon, with its cool

breezes, its fragrant vines, and the rich odours of its innumerable aromatic shrubs; and this is the image which Almighty God employs to set forth the graces with which the Holy Spirit will endue the souls of His people.

In those days Ephraim, who had been joined unto idols, will utterly renounce them, and say, "What have I to do any more with idols?" and Almighty God declares that He will graciously accept his profession: "I, I Myself, have heard him and observed him." Ephraim, exulting in God's goodness, exclaims, "I am like a green fir-tree," that is, ever-green and ever-fresh. And then, once more, comes the answer of God: "From Me is thy fruit found." As the fir or pine does not bear fruit useful for food, it has been suggested that the Prophet here fills out one image by another, and says that restored Israel, the Church of God, or the soul in grace, shall not only have beauty and majesty, but what is not, in the way of nature, found united therewith, fruitfulness also.

Such is the exquisite picture of the work of grace and sanctification which Almighty God will carry on in the hearts of His people, and the fruits of the Spirit with which they will abound.

The Prophet concludes by saying that every wise

man will lay to heart these exhortations and encouragements, "Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? prudent, and he shall know them? for the ways of the Lord are right, and the just shall walk in them; but the transgressors shall fall therein." There is need of heaven-taught wisdom, or men will fail to profit even by the wonderful tidings of the long-suffering and forgiveness of God; as Daniel says, "None of the wicked shall understand, but the wise shall understand." All God's dealings with men, and all that He requires of them, all His ways towards us and for us, are just and right; and they whom His grace instructs and influences will walk in those ways, but they who resist His grace will stumble therein.

The promises of this chapter belong to us and to our time; to us as well as to His chosen Israel God reveals Himself as full of mercy and pity to the penitent. But unless He give wisdom, we shall not profit by His revelation or walk in His way. He does not force us to attend to Him any more than He forced His people of old. He allows us to choose whether we will turn to Him and walk in His way and live, or whether we will reject His mercy and stumble at the revelation of

His will. May He give us grace to choose aright! May He make us wise to attend to His teaching; and then we too shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord!

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Joel* ii. 21.

THE prophecy of Joel begins with a bitter lamentation over a great calamity which had befallen his native country of Judah. Swarms of locusts had come up and done infinite mischief; the whole land was desolate and barren. What the palmer-worm had left the locust had eaten, and what the locust had left the canker-worm had eaten, and what the canker-worm had left the caterpillar had eaten. They had come up a nation strong and without number, whose teeth were like the teeth of a lion, and the cheek teeth like those of a strong lion; they had laid the vines waste, and barked the fig-tree and made its branches white. All other crops likewise were injured; the corn was wasted, the olives destroyed, the grass was gone, the beasts groaned, because there was no pasture, the flocks and sheep were desolate. Therefore the Prophet calls on the people to turn to God with fasting, penitence, and prayer, in order that the

scourge might be averted : “ Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people, sanctify the congregation.” The whole people were to present themselves holy before the Lord ; “ none were on any pretence excused, not the old whose strength was declining, nor the young on account of their feebleness.” “ Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and say, Spare Thy people, O Lord, and give not Thine heritage to reproach, that the heathen should rule over them ; wherefore should they say among the people, Where is their God ?” If the people would thus repent and pray, the Prophet declares that all would be changed. He Who before had been set upon their destruction, would now be jealous for His land and pity His people ; He would remove the locusts and cast them into the sea.

Then, in this evening’s Lesson, in anticipation of this signal deliverance, the Prophet breaks out into a stirring appeal to the land to rejoice in God’s mercy : “ Fear not, O land ; be glad and rejoice ; for the Lord will do great things.” Before, they were bidden to tremble, now the command is, “ Fear not ;” before, they were bidden to turn in weeping, fasting, and mourning, now to bound

for joy and rejoice ; before, the land mourned, now the land is told to rejoice ; the enemy had done great things, now the cause of joy is, that God hath done great things, the Almighty-ness of God overwhelming the power that had been put forth to destruction. Thus the whole former sentence was reversed ; the cattle which had shared so deeply in the destruction would now be comforted by the return of plenty. “ Be not afraid, ye beasts of the field ; ” before, they groaned and were perplexed and cried to God : “ for the pastures of the wilderness do spring ; ” before, the pastures were devoured by fire, now they spring with fresh and tender life ; “ for the tree beareth her fruit, the fig-tree and the vine do yield their strength ; ” before, the fig-trees were withered, the vine languished, now they should yield their strength and put out their full vigour : for God was reconciled to His people, and for their sake all things were restored.

The children of Zion, however, ought not merely to rejoice in the temporal abundance bestowed on them, but in Him Who was the Giver of all their comfort, even the Lord their God : “ Be glad, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God ; for He hath given you the former

rain moderately, and He will cause to come down for you the rain, the former rain and the latter rain," the rain of autumn and of spring, in the first month. He will replenish also the storehouses and granaries, which had been emptied in the years of famine; they should eat in plenty and be satisfied, and know that God was in the midst of them, and was the Lord their God, and none else, and His people should never be ashamed.

Though the words of the Prophet, in describing God's judgments, had reference, doubtless, in the first instance, to the terrible visitation of locusts which should come upon the land, it would seem that they are not to be limited to it: the Prophet is supposed to have in his mind a judgment far greater, an enemy far mightier than the locusts, namely, the Assyrian invaders of Palestine, "the northern," or "northman," as he calls them. In view of the terrible day of the Lord, Joel calls the people, in God's name, to repent, and promises them upon repentance entire forgiveness and the restoration of everything that had been withdrawn from them. Nay, the time should be a most joyful time; for after the punishment of the Jews and their deliverance should come the outpouring

of His Spirit, by which God would impart to His worshippers increased knowledge of Himself, and after the destruction of the enemies of His people would extend the blessings of true religion to heathen lands. “And it shall come to pass afterwards”—or, as it is quoted by St. Peter, “in the last days” (Acts ii. 17)—“I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh”—no longer upon a few favoured men, one here and another there, nor upon any particular class, but upon the whole race of mankind, without distinction of sex, or age, or rank, upon sons and daughters, young men and old, yea, upon the very slaves and handmaidens. It does not include every individual in the race, but it includes the whole race, and individuals throughout it: on all the Holy Spirit would be poured.

The promise is, “I will pour My Spirit,” that is, will give largely and abundantly, without stint and measure. He does not say that He will bestow graces or gifts, ordinary or extraordinary, but His Spirit. God the Holy Spirit Himself will come and dwell in the hearts of men. As Christ, the Son of God, was made flesh and took our nature upon Him, so the Holy Spirit is poured upon the whole race; there is not one among them

in whom He will refuse to dwell. This promise began to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured upon the Apostles and on the multitudes who were converted by their preaching; and it has ever since been fulfilled continually in the indwelling of the Spirit in the Christian Church.

Besides the inward gift of the Spirit, the Prophet makes mention of certain outward gifts, which should at the first accompany and attest His inward presence: "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" —a prediction abundantly fulfilled in the early history of the Church. "And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out My Spirit." "The prophetic word circles round to that wherewith it began, the promise of the large outpouring of the Spirit of God; it began with including the heathen: 'I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh;' it instances individual gifts, and then it ends by resting on the slaves. . . . He begins, 'I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh,' and then, in order to leave the mind resting on those same great words, He inverts the order and ends, 'And upon the ser-

vants and upon the handmaidens will I pour out My Spirit.' It leaves the thoughts resting on the great words, 'I will pour out My Spirit.'"

The Prophet then passes on to speak of the Last Day and the signs of its approach. The dispensation of the Spirit is the dispensation of the last days. How long soever the interval between its commencement and its close, between the first and second coming of Christ, the Prophet sees the dispensation as a whole; his eye passes at once from the dawn of the kingdom of Christ to its full accomplishment in power and great glory: "I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth." "These wonders began in the first coming and Passion of Christ, grew in the destruction of Jerusalem, but shall be perfectly fulfilled towards the end of the world before the final judgment and the destruction of the universe." The blood and fire and pillars of smoke shall be the signs on earth; and the turning of the sun into darkness and the moon into blood shall be signs in heaven. Our Lord speaks of both, when He says that before the day of judgment there shall be "signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars: and upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts fail-

ing them for fear and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth." But in that great day, the great and terrible day of the Lord, there shall be deliverance for all them who, in true faith, call upon and worship the name of the Lord; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, that is, in the Church which began on Mount Zion, shall be deliverance, as God Himself has appointed, and in the remnant whom the Lord shall call. "He had said before, whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered; here He says that those who should so call on God shall themselves have been first called by God. God must first call us by His grace; then we obey His call and call on Him."

This blessed promise of the outpouring of the Spirit, though spoken so many hundred years ago, is meant for us and for our children. No age or condition is shut out from it. Pledged and sealed to us in our baptism, God is ready to shed Him abroad more abundantly in our hearts, so that we may be filled with Him and with the strength and comfort and holiness which He imparts. Be it our care to empty ourselves of all things else, in order that the gracious Spirit may come and take entire possession of us!

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Joel* iii. 9.

THE time referred to in the beginning of this Lesson is the time of Antichrist. There will then be a gathering together of the enemies of God, a gathering which, though intended for the overthrow of His people, will, in truth, bring destruction upon themselves. Almighty God, “by a solemn irony, bids the nations prepare, if by any means they can fight against Him.” He summons not only the mighty men and men of war, but the husbandmen and vine-dressers: He bids them beat their plough-shares into swords, and their pruning-hooks into spears. He calls on the sick and feeble to forget their weakness, and to take part in this great gathering of the people of the world against Him. He summons them to the valley of Jehoshaphat, that is, the valley of the Kedron, lying between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives; as before (ver. 2) He had said, “I will also gather all nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat.”

It is a common opinion that as our Lord will descend hereafter in like manner and in the like form of man in which He went up, so will He also one day appear in the very place of the

Ascension ; as it is said in the prophet Zechariah (xiv. 4), " His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east." Thither Almighty God will assemble the nations together, and He mentions the purpose for which He will gather them : " For there," He says, " will I sit to judge the heathen round about " (lit., from round about), that is, from every side, from all the four quarters of the world. " In their own blind will and passion they will come to destroy ; in God's overruling Providence they will be dragged along by their passions—to be judged and to be destroyed." As their wickedness was great, and they were ripe for judgment, God would cause His angels to put in the sickle and reap the harvest and gather the vintage ; the ripeness of the harvest and the fulness of the vats are both used in this place to denote ripeness for destruction. " They were ripe in their sins, fit for a harvest, and as full of wickedness as ripe grapes, which fill and overflow the vats through the abundance of the juice with which they swell. This ripeness in iniquity calls, as it were, for the sickle of the reaper, the trampling of the presser."

Scripture speaks continually of men's iniquity rising and increasing, until at length it overflows,

and the Divine long-suffering is exhausted. So was it before the flood ; so was it with the nations of Canaan (Gen. xv. 16) and Jerusalem (St. Matt. xxiii. 32, 35), and so will it be in the end. When the iniquity of men has so abounded as in a manner to cover the earth, then will the judgment come. The same vision was also presented to St. John in the Apocalypse ; he saw an angel come out of the temple which is in heaven, having a sharp sickle, and another angel cried with a loud voice to him that had the sharp sickle, " Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for her grapes are fully ripe. And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great wine-press of the wrath of God " (Rev. xiv. 18, 19).

As the Prophet contemplated the vision, he was amazed at the vast numbers assembled together to meet their doom ; " multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision." From all quarters they came, throngs upon throngs, tumultuously raging together and imagining vain things against the Lord and against His anointed : but it was to the valley of decision, that is, of judgment, that they came. " The valley is the same as that before called the

valley of Jehoshaphat ; but whereas that name only signifies ' God judgeth,' this further name denotes the strictness of God's judgment." " For the day of the Lord is nigh in the valley of decision : " the last act of defiance, by which they gather against the Lord, will be the immediate precursor of their destruction.

And this manifestation of the power of God will be accompanied with dreadful outward signs: " The sun and the moon shall be darkened, and the stars shall withdraw their shining." As the elements bore witness to the heinousness of man's sin at the time, when the love of God was preparing an expiation for it upon the Cross, so will they also testify to it, when the time is come for taking vengeance. " The Lord also will roar out of Zion, and utter His voice from Jerusalem." This may perhaps be taken literally to mean, that from His throne in the air above Jerusalem the Lord will terrify His enemies with His voice of thunder ; or by Zion may be meant the saints and angels which will accompany Him ; and the passage in that case will be parallel with those words of Jeremiah, " The Lord shall roar from on high, and shall utter His voice from His holy habitation ; He shall mightily roar upon His habitation ; He

shall give a shout, as they that tread the grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth " (xxv. 30). " The heavens and the earth shall shake ; " the whole visible creation will be thrown into confusion ; as He says elsewhere, " Yea, once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven " (Hag. ii. 6). But in the midst of all these terrors, God's true people will find in Him their refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble ; they need not fear, though the earth be moved, though the hills be carried into the midst of the sea ; God is in the midst of her, therefore shall she not be removed ; God shall help her, and that right early ; as He Himself declares in the next verse, " So shall ye know that I am the Lord your God dwelling in Zion, My holy mountain ; then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no stranger pass through her any more." God will not only protect His Church, but will cleanse and sanctify it, so that it shall become " a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but holy and without blemish."

" And it shall come to pass in that day that the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, and a fountain shall come

forth of the house of the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim." "After the destruction of Antichrist, there will, it seems, still be a period of probation in which the grace of God will abound and extend more and more widely." It will be in the Church, as if the very mountains and hills of their own accord gushed forth with wine and milk, to refresh and strengthen the children of men. So God will pour forth of His own free will the riches of His grace; and "all the rivers of Judah shall flow with water," that is, every soul of the elect, however feeble and insignificant, shall be filled, according to its capacity, with a perennial stream of joy and thanksgiving; "and a fountain shall come forth of the house of the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim." It is thought that there is an allusion here to the living stream under the Temple at Jerusalem, which carried off the blood of the sacrifices, which Ezekiel subsequently beheld in a vision swelling into a mighty river and fertilising the desert of the Dead Sea (xlvi. 1—12). So here Joel speaks of its watering the valley of Shittim, which was in the land of Moab, on the other side of the Dead Sea. The meaning seems to be, that the streams of God's grace should go forth from His Church and carry fer-

tility to barren and thirsty lands at a distance ; for it is in such lands that the shittah (or acacia) grows. The never-failing stream of water which issued from Jerusalem was an image of the peace and blessing which should flow from the Church in the latter days.

At that time all His enemies shall be destroyed ; those that reject the grace of God shall be themselves rejected. " Egypt shall be a desolation ; Edom also shall be a desolate wilderness, for the violence against the children of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in the land." Egypt and Edom are instances of the enemies of God's Church and people, who, after they have served their purpose by executing God's judgment on His people, shall themselves be visited with judgment. " But Judah shall dwell for ever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation ;" " not earthly Judah nor earthly Jerusalem, for these must come to an end ; it is the one people of God, the true Judah, the people who praise God, the Israel, which is indeed Israel. Egypt and Edom and all the enemies of God should come to an end ; but His people should never come to an end. The gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church. The enemy shall not destroy her ; time shall not con-

sume her; she shall never decay. The people of God shall abide before Him and through Him here, and shall dwell with Him for ever."

"For I will cleanse" (rather, I will pronounce innocent) "their blood that I have not cleansed;" the blood of His people which their enemies thought that they shed justly as the blood of guilty persons, He will declare to have been innocent by punishing those who shed it; "for the Lord dwelleth in Zion." This is the great and distinguishing blessing of the Church, that the Lord dwells in her; there is His rest, His dwelling-place. His presence is the source to her of strength and holiness in this world, as well as of perpetual joy and glory in the life to come. In view of the great conflict which awaits the Church, her one comfort is in the promise of Christ's perpetual presence. He will not leave her nor forsake her. Be it our anxious care to abide steadfastly in the communion and fellowship of the Church; and then we may be sure that, let the temptations which assail us be ever so severe, He will make a way to escape, and in the end will number us with His saints in glory everlasting.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—*Amos* iii.

AMOS, although a native of Judah, was especially a prophet for Israel, his mission being directed chiefly against the calf-worship of Samaria. After denouncing the sins of the several nations bordering on the chosen people, Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab, he goes on to include Judah also in the circle of God's visitation. "Thus saith the Lord, For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof, because they have despised the law of the Lord, and have not kept His commandments; but I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall destroy the palaces of Jerusalem." Then, last of all, he turns to Israel, and declares how for their covetousness, oppression, impurity, and idolatry God would not turn away the punishment from them either.

Before, however, he concentrates himself upon Israel, he has a message in the early part of this morning's Lesson for Judah and Israel together: "Hear this word that the Lord hath spoken against

you, O children of Israel," against the whole family—Judah, therefore, as well as Israel—"which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." So signal had been God's favour towards Israel, that it seemed in comparison as if He had disregarded all other people. "Knowledge, with God, is love, and so He seemed not to have known those to whom, although He left not Himself without witness, He had shown no such love. Whence our Lord shall say to the wicked, 'I never knew you,' and contrariwise He says, 'I am the good Shepherd and know My sheep, and am known of Mine.'" But instead of being on that account allowed to sin with impunity, the sin of Israel would be more signally punished, because of the favour which they enjoyed. "Nearness to God is a priceless but an awful gift. The nearer any is brought to God the worse is his fall, and, his trial over, the more heavily he is punished."

"Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" as much as to say, is it possible that God can continue with those who are not of one mind with Him? as He said in the book of Leviticus (xxvi. 23, 24), "If ye will walk contrary unto Me, then

will I also walk contrary unto you, and I will punish you seven times for your sins." God's people, therefore, had cause for fear, for their sin would assuredly bring punishment: indeed, God had already given them warning of that punishment. He had roared from Zion, and uttered His voice from Jerusalem: and He would not have so threatened, unless He had been about to punish. It is with Him as with the lion, which sends forth his terrible roar only when he is about to spring upon his prey; therefore He asks, "Will a lion roar in the forest when he hath no prey? Will a young lion cry out of his den if he have taken nothing?" Then, by another image, He further warns the people of their danger: "Can a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where no gin is for him? Shall one take up a snare from the earth, and have taken nothing at all?" Birds are not caught in a snare by chance, it is laid for them; and for the most part the snare does not rise unless a bird is taken. So the troubles which would befall the people were prepared by God; they came from Him. As surely (according to another image) as the sound of the trumpet gives warning to the inhabitants of a city, and they are satisfied that there is ground for alarm, because the trumpet has

sounded, so does the warning voice of God betoken danger. "Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?" "Refer not," the Prophet would say, "the ills which ye suffer, and will suffer, to any other causes, as men are wont to do. God in His displeasure sends them upon you. And that ye may know this the more certainly, whatever He shall send He will first reveal to the prophets, and by them ye shall be forewarned. See, then, that ye despise not my words, or the words of the other prophets. Men ascribe their sufferings to fortune, accident, any cause, rather than the displeasure of God. But do you receive what happens to you as God's visitation."

Having thus expostulated with Judah and Israel conjointly, and warned them of coming evils, Almighty God turns especially to Israel, and henceforth through the rest of the book Judah is only mentioned incidentally. It is to Israel, the house of Israel, the house of Joseph, Samaria, Bethel, that the several messages are addressed.

In the remainder of this chapter Almighty God calls on Philistia and Egypt to behold the wickedness of Samaria. He tells His prophets to make

proclamation on the palaces of Ashdod and Egypt, that is, on the flat roofs of their high places, whence all could hear, and summon the people to Samaria to witness her sins. Samaria stood on a steep hill, in the midst of a kind of amphitheatre surrounded by mountains. These mountains were much higher than the hill of Samaria, and besiegers had therefore a full view of all that went on within the city. The Philistines and Egyptians were bidden to take their stand upon these mountains, and behold the iniquity of the city, "the great tumults in the midst thereof, and the oppressed in the midst thereof," that is, "the alarms, restlessness, disorders, and confusion of a people intent on gain, turning all law upside down, the tumultuous noise of the oppressors and oppressed." "For they know not to do right"—they have not known—they have lost all sense and knowledge how to do right, because they have so long ceased to do it. They store up violence and robbery; they store up, as they thought, the gains and fruits. "It is added, as an aggravation, 'in their palaces.' What was wrung from the poor was laid up *in palaces!* Deformed as is all oppression, yet 'to oppress the poor, to increase his riches' (Prov. xxii. 16) has an unnatural hideousness of its own."

“Therefore, thus saith the Lord God, An adversary there shall be” (Salman-esser, King of Assyria, 2 Kings xvii. 5, xviii. 9, 10) “even round about the land; and he shall bring down thy strength from thee, and thy palaces shall be spoiled. Thus saith the Lord, As the shepherd taketh (rescueth) out of the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear; so” (that is, so few and insignificant, a mere remnant) “shall the children of Israel be taken out that (now) dwell in Samaria (at ease) in the corner of a bed, and in Damascus in a couch,” or rather, in Damascus, a couch. The hill of Samaria was one large luxurious couch, in which its rich and great rested securely, propped and cushioned up on both sides in, what is still the place of dignity, the corner of a bed or divan, that is, the inner corner where the two sides meet. Damascus also, which Jeroboam had won for Israel, was a canopied couch to them, in which they stayed themselves. It is an image of listless ease and security, like that of those whom the false prophetesses lulled into careless stupidity as to their souls, “sewing pillows to all armholes,” or wrists, whereon to lean in a dull inertness. In vain! Of all those who then dwelt at ease and in luxury, the good Shepherd Himself should rescue from the lion (the enemy, in the first

instance, the Assyrian) a small remnant, in the sight of the enemy and of man of little account, but precious in the sight of God. The enemy would leave them, perhaps, as not worth removing, just as when the lion has devoured the fat and the strong, the shepherd may recover from him some slight piece of skin or extremity of the bones. Amos, as well as Joel (ii. 32), preaches that same solemn sentence, so repeated throughout the prophets, "A remnant shall be saved." So, doubtless, it was in the captivity of the ten tribes, as in the rest. So it was in Judah, when certain of the poor of the land only were left for vine-dressers and for husbandmen (1 Kings xxv. 1, 2; Jer. lii. 16). After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans a poor remnant only escaped.

"Hear ye, and testify in the house of Jacob," solemnly protest in the Name of God, and bear witness against the house of Israel, "that in the day that I shall visit the transgressions of Israel upon him, I will also visit the altars of Bethel; and the horns of the altar shall be cut off, and fall to the ground." The altar of Jeroboam in Bethel was made in imitation of the true altar in Jerusalem, with a horn or projection at each corner, to which the victim was tied and on which the

blood was sprinkled (Exod. xxix. 12; Lev. viii. 14—17; Ps. cxviii. 27). The overthrow of that altar had been foretold by the man of God nearly 200 years before; now the sentence is repeated, though Josiah, who was to execute it, was still unborn.

“And I will smite the winter house with the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end, saith the Lord.” Samaria was at this time in the very height of its luxury and prosperity, with its ivory houses,—that is, houses panelled or inlaid with ivory, such as Ahab built,—and its other noble residences, some facing the south for the winter, and others facing the north for the summer: the Prophet declares that they shall all be destroyed and come to an end.

What do we learn from this prophecy, but that not only worldly wealth and splendour, but even special spiritual advantages, will be of no avail if the love of God be wanting? Our Christian privileges, as they will increase our guilt if we walk unworthily of them, so will they increase our punishment; as our Lord has said, “The servant which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many

stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required; and unto whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more."

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Amos v.*

THE reign of Jeroboam II., during which Amos prophesied, was a time of outward prosperity and wealth, and the ancient dominion of Israel, which had been cut short under previous kings, was in great measure restored. How strangely therefore must the message of entire overthrow, with which Amos was charged, have sounded in the ears of the people of Samaria! They thought themselves safe and to be envied, when the Prophet poured forth a lamentation, a kind of funeral dirge over them, "The virgin of Israel is fallen; she shall no more rise; she is forsaken upon her land" (she hath been dashed down upon her land); "there is none to raise her up." The Prophet looked forward over the eighty-five years which would elapse before the fulfilment of his words, and he sees Samaria utterly prostrate, fallen so as never to

rise again ; for thus saith the Lord God, " The city that went out by a thousand " (that is, probably, that sent out a thousand fighting men), " shall leave an hundred " ; " she was to be decimated ; only a tenth was to be rescued alive ; nine-tenths were to be destroyed. And this alike in large places and in small. The city that went forth an hundred shall leave ten. One common doom was to befall all. Out of all that multitude a tithe alone was to be preserved, the remnant which God always promised to reserve."

But notwithstanding these terrible denunciations Almighty God still invites them to repent. If it was not to be expected that they would listen to the invitation as a people, yet there would be individuals among them who would hear ; therefore Almighty God says, " Seek ye Me, and ye shall live ; but seek not Bethel, nor enter into Gilgal, and pass not to Beersheba." From this it would seem that Gilgal and Beersheba had become, like Bethel, seats of idol-worship, and that, although Beersheba was far away in the south of Judah. The only connection between Israel and the rival kingdom of Judah was in this idol-worship of Beersheba (viii. 4). Almighty God calls on the Israelites to abandon the worship of the calves, and

to seek Him, "lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Bethel." Bethel, the centre of their idol-hopes, so far from aiding them, would not be able to help itself, nor would there be any to help it; "for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nought." Hosea (iv. 15) had called Bethel, "house of God," by the name of Beth-aven, "house of vanity:" Amos here takes up the word and says that Bethel should be "aven," that is, vanity.

The Prophet then specifies more definitely who they were whom Almighty God invited to repentance, and what were the sins of which they would have to repent: "Ye who turn judgment to wormwood," that is, who are filled with all iniquity, and turn the sweetness of justice into the bitterness of wormwood, "and leave off righteousness in the earth," that is, cast down righteousness to the earth, dethrone and trample on it, "seek Him that maketh the seven stars and Orion," the Creator of the stars, the Sovereign Lord and Disposer of all things, "that turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night," that is, causeth the day and night to succeed one another with perfect regularity, kindling

day out of night, and then changing the brightness into gloom : “ that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth,” by the heat of the sun drawing up the moisture from the salt briny sea, which could of itself bring but barrenness, and discharging it anew in life-giving showers on the surface of the earth : “ the Lord Jehovah,” the One self-existent, eternal God, “ is His name ;” “ that strengtheneth the spoiled against the strong,” or, as the passage has been rendered, that maketh devastation to smile on the strong. “ The smile in anger attests both the extremity of anger, and the consciousness of the ease wherewith the offence can be punished. They were strong in their own strength—strong, as they deemed, in their fortress ; but their strength would be weakness. Desolation, when God willed, would smile at all which they accounted might, and would come against the fortress, which, as they deemed, cut off all approach.” What then had His enemies to expect but inevitable destruction ?

The Prophet then enters still more minutely into the sins on account of which God’s judgments would fall upon the house of Israel : “ They hate him that rebuketh in the gate, and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly.” They hated the

Prophets, who did not hesitate to reprove their sins publicly, in the place of general concourse ; indeed, any one who spake the truth was to them an object of abhorrence. They would not be reprov'd ; and therefore they hated every one who either directly or indirectly rebuked them. They were ever trampling upon the poor, receiving from them presents of winnowed corn, which they kept for themselves, while they sold the refuse (chap. viii. 6) ; they built for themselves houses of hewn stone, and planted pleasant vineyards ; but God would not suffer them to enjoy the possessions which they had gathered by fraud and oppression ; He knew their corruption and injustice, how they took bribes and turned away the poor from their right. " Therefore," says the Prophet, " the prudent shall keep silence at that time ; for it is an evil time : " which may mean either that the times were so evil and dangerous, that prudent persons would refrain from complaining, lest their sufferings should be thereby increased, or that it was wise to be silent, because reproof would increase the condemnation of those who would not listen to it.

Amos, however, did not consider that it was his duty to be silent. He takes up his former exhortation : " Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live ;

and so the Lord, the God of Hosts, may be with you, as ye have spoken." The Israelites claimed God's presence with them, because they were His people according to the flesh, without being careful to obey Him thoroughly. Therefore the Prophet warns them, that if they really desire that God should be with them, they must be with Him, hating the evil, and loving the good, and establishing judgment in the gate instead of trampling upon it, as they had done hitherto. "It may be that the Lord God of Hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph." "There is no question but that God is gracious to all those who hate evil and love good, but He does not always deliver them from temporal calamities. If Israel had hated evil and loved good, perchance He would have delivered them from captivity, although He frequently said they should be carried captive. For so He said to the two tribes in Jeremiah (vii. 3), 'Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place.'" But inasmuch as God knew that most of them would not repent, He speaks only of the "remnant of Joseph," and goes on to say that the approaching calamities would fill the streets and highways with lamentation. From all the places of public resort there

would be but one cry, "Alas ! alas !" or "Woe ! woe !" the husbandman, having lost his occupation, would join with the hired mourners in one common lament ; what had hitherto been scenes of joy would be turned into sorrow ; the very vintage would be " not of wine, but of woe." " In the destruction of the firstborn in Egypt, God did not pass *through*, but passed *over* them, and they kept, in memory thereof, the feast of the Passover. Now God would no longer *pass over* them and their sins ; He would pass through them and take strict account of them."

The Prophets often spoke of the day of the Lord as at hand, and some of the people, either in scorn or presumption, desired that it might come. They said, We are often threatened with the day of the Lord, but it has not come yet : it will never come at all ; or, if it does come, it will not be so very dreadful. Thus they either denied the coming of the day of the Lord altogether, or denied its terrors. Therefore the Prophet says to them, " Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord ! to what end is it for you ? the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light." One calamity would follow another : " Before and behind, without and within, abroad under the roof of heaven, or under

the shadow of a man's own roof, everywhere is terror and death." It is as if a man, having fled from a lion, should be met by a bear, or, having leant his hand trustfully on the wall of his own house, were to be bitten by a serpent. From the lion and the bear there might be escape by flight ; but when danger followed him to his own house there could be no escape. Therefore the Prophet says again, " Shall not the day of the Lord be darkness, and not light ? even very dark, and no brightness in it ? "

But the Israelites did not only scorn God's threatened judgments ; they had a special ground for confidence that those judgments would not hurt them. They relied on their religious observances, which they pretended were acts of worship to the true God, though under the idol-form of the calf : they had their feasts of joy, their burnt offerings and peace offerings, their songs and music. But God declares that He would not accept, and could not endure them, so long as they continued in sin. If they desired that their prayers and sacrifices should be acceptable, they must " let judgment run down as waters ; " that is, justice, which had hitherto been perverted in its course, must roll on like a mighty tide of waters, sweeping before it all

hindrances, turned aside by no bribery, but pouring on in one perpetual flow, "and righteousness as a mighty" (or ceaseless) "stream." Let justice have its free course; that would be the beginning of a hopeful reformation, without which no sacrifices would be of any avail.

"Did ye offer unto Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? But" (at the same time) "ye bare the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images, and the star of your God, which ye made to yourselves." The service which they offered in the wilderness was a divided service; they worshipped (as they pretended) the true God, but at the same time they followed idols: they carried about little shrines and images of false gods; and moreover, as St. Stephen said, "God gave them up to worship the host of heaven." There is no special mention of their idolatry in the Pentateuch; but after the rebellion which brought down the sentence of exclusion upon that generation, there is scarcely any mention of the rebels at all. "Therefore," that is, because such had been their way from the beginning until now, "will I cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus, saith the Lord, Whose name is the God of Hosts." Hitherto Syria had been the most

powerful enemy of Israel, and at the time of this prophecy there was no reason to fear trouble from Assyria; but here is a distinct prediction of a captivity beyond Damascus, which was fulfilled when "the king of Assyria carried them away into Assyria and placed them in Halah, and in Habor, and in the cities of the Medes."

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Amos ix.*

THE altar over which the Prophet saw the Lord standing is supposed to have been the altar which Jeroboam set up in Bethel for the worship of the golden calves. There, in the midst of the idolatry which He hated, the Lord appeared and commanded the destruction of the building where that worship was carried on, and the slaughter of the worshippers. He spoke to the angel of the Lord, and bade him smite the lintels, or the chapiters and capitals of the pillars, of the doors, that the posts might shake and totter, and cut and wound the worshippers on the head, all of them, for He was resolved to slay them all with the sword of His vengeance. If there were any who were not crushed in the fall of the Temple, and who at-

tempted to flee away, they should not escape: there should be no place of refuge from the omnipresent and omniscient God. Should they dig into the centre of the earth and bury themselves in the grave, there God's hand would take them and place them in His presence for judgment. If they were to climb up into heaven and place their throne among the stars of God, thence would He bring them down. As David says in the 139th Psalm, "If I climb up into heaven, Thou art there; if I go down to hell, Thou art there also." Or should they hide themselves in the top of Carmel, perforated as it is with innumerable caves, He would search them out and bring them down. Or should they take refuge in the depths of the sea, even there the fierce sea-serpents, with their venomous bite, would attack and devour them. Or, once more, should they go into captivity, and think that, as being captives, they were at least safe from destruction, even there, in their captivity, God would command the sword and it should slay them; for He would set His eyes upon them for evil and not for good.

It is Jehovah, the Lord of Hosts, Who will do this. He it is "that toucheth the land and it shall melt." "He hath no need to put forth His

strength ; a touch, the slightest indication of His will, sufficeth." And if it is thus with the solid earth, how much more with its inhabitants ! " All that dwell therein shall mourn ; and it" (the land) " shall rise up wholly like the flood, and shall be drowned, as by the flood of Egypt." " As the Nile rose and covered the whole land like one vast sea, and then sank again, so the earth should rise, lift up itself, and heave and quake, and then fall." The great globe should tremble and be made desolate at His presence. It is He again " Who buildeth His stories in the heavens," that is, hath set stars above stars as steps to His great throne, " and hath founded his troop" (*lit.*, band) " in the earth ;" that is, as it has been explained, founded His arch upon the earth, that is, His visible heavens, which seem, like an arch, to span the earth ; " He that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth ;" Who can at His pleasure bring all the waters of the ocean to cover the earth, as at the time of the Flood : " the Lord," Jehovah, " is His name," Who has all power in heaven and earth.

And there was no reason why He should not put forth His power against His people ; for as

they had forsaken Him, they were no longer "children of Israel" unto Him, but "children of the Ethiopians," descendants of Ham. It was true that He had brought their ancestors out of the land of Egypt; but other nations had been transplanted as well as they. God's favour had lost its meaning for them by reason of their apostacy. Their deliverance from Egypt became no more than any other event in His Providence, by which He brought up the Philistines from Caphtor (probably in Lower Egypt), who were aliens from Him; and the Syrians from Kir, who (so He had foretold, Amos i. 5) should be carried back thither.

But though the eyes of the Lord were set for evil, and not for good, upon the sinful *kingdom* of Israel, to destroy it from off the face of the earth, yet would He not utterly destroy the *house* of Jacob. There is a contrast between the kingdom and house or family of Israel. The one He would destroy utterly; of the other a remnant should be preserved: as He goes on to say, "Lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth." "The whole earth is, as it were, one vast sieve in

the hand of God, in which Israel is scattered from one end to the other." God has scattered them among all nations, but His eye has been upon them in their dispersion; and He declares that not the least grain, not one solid corn, should fall to the earth. The righteous should be tried and shaken, but not one lost. On the other hand, all the chaff should be swept away; not one transgressor should escape: "All the sinners of My people shall die by the sword, which say, The evil shall not overtake nor prevent us." They shall utterly perish in their presumption and false security.

The Prophet concludes his message of woe, as does Hosea, with a promise of signal blessing. As a kingdom Israel would perish, but the promise would be fulfilled spiritually to individuals through the house of David, of whom Christ was to come. "In that day," when the sinners of His people should be cut off and only a remnant left, God says that He "will raise up the tabernacle of David that was fallen, and close up the breaches thereof." The house of David, though at the time when Amos wrote comparatively flourishing, would shortly be destroyed and laid in ruins, and the restoration here spoken of may refer in part to

the revival of Jerusalem after the captivity; but the expression "the tabernacle" (*lit.*, the booth or hut) "of David," seems to imply that it is not of an outward and earthly kingdom that the Prophet is speaking, but of the spiritual kingdom of the Messiah, or Son of David, which should be begun in the Incarnation, and perfected by His reign over all nations.

And the spiritual Israelites were to be built up, in order that they might be the means of bringing others also to God, that they might preserve the remnant of Edom, that is, the residue that should be converted out of Edom, and not Edom only, but all the nations on whom His name should be called. And so it is. The spiritual kingdom of David has spread throughout the world and gathered the nations into it. St. James, in his address at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts xv. 14—17), quotes these words as having begun to be fulfilled in his time, in the admission of the Gentiles to the privileges of the Christian Church. "Simeon hath declared" (he said) "how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle

of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, on whom My name is called, saith the Lord, Who doeth all these things." St. James quotes from the Greek Version of the Scriptures, which differs from our Hebrew copies. For example, instead of the words, "That they may possess the remnant of Edom," he has "that the residue of men might seek after the Lord." The meaning, however, is the same. Edom, the nation most hostile to Israel, stands as a type of the heathen generally; and to say that the Gentiles should seek the Lord is in effect the same thing as to say that the Christian Church should inherit the Gentiles.

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed." There is a similar promise in the Book of Leviticus: "Your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing-time." When the Prophet therefore says that the ploughman shall overtake, that is, throng or join on to the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed, he seems to mean that the harvest

and the vintage should, for their abundance, not be over before the fresh seed-time. This represents the unceasing labour of the preacher of the Gospel. The seed sown shall at once bear fruit, and the rich harvest shall encourage fresh toil. There shall be "one unceasing round of toil and fruitfulness." "And the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt" (*lit.*, dissolve themselves). "Such shall be the abundance and superabundance of blessing, that it shall be as though the hills dissolved themselves in the rich streams which they poured forth." This represents the spiritual joy and delight which the Holy Spirit will shed abroad in the hearts of His people.

"And I will bring again the captivity of My people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them: and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof: they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of the land which I have given them, saith the Lord God." This promise was in part fulfilled when the two tribes were brought back from captivity; they were then planted in their own land. But as they were sub-

sequently banished from it, it is plain that the Prophet's words looked beyond the restoration from captivity; and, without entering on the question of a future national restoration, we cannot doubt that they will have their complete and more worthy fulfilment in the Christian Church. There it is, emphatically, that men are delivered from captivity, from the slavery of sin and spiritual death; there, the dry and barren become fruitful; there, men are planted as choice vines in God's own garden, and cannot be plucked up "without their own will; neither passion within nor temptation without, nor the malice or wiles of Satan, can pluck them up. None can be plucked up, who doth not himself lose his hold." For Christ has said, "They shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand."

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—*Micah* iv. and v. to ver. 8.

THE prophecy of Micah divides itself into three sections, each introduced by the words “Hear ye,” and each commencing with rebuke and threatening, and ending with a promise of future mercy. The first section comprises the two first chapters, the second the three next, and the third the two last. In the second section, beginning with the third chapter, the Prophet addresses himself especially to the princes and heads of the people, and rebukes their avarice and rapacity. As they had been deaf to the cry of others, they too should cry unto the Lord and He would not hear. The Prophet declares himself inspired by God to denounce the covetousness of the princes, who judged for reward, of the priests, who taught for hire, and of the prophets, who divined for money; and to declare that on account of their iniquity Zion should be ploughed as a field, and Jerusalem should become heaps, and the mountain of the Temple should be as an uncultivated woodland height.

But this message is immediately followed (as in ii. 12, 13) by a promise of restoration: "It shall come to pass in the last days," that is, in the times of the Gospel, "that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established on the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills." Instead of the Temple mountain covered with the wild growth of the forest, he sees the mountain of the house of Jehovah established on the top of the mountains, and nations like rivers flowing into it. This house of the Lord is the great Church of Christ, the house of His presence, which shall be exalted above all earthly things, and established strong and firm; and people shall hasten into it, in order to learn to know and to do the will of God.

And the setting up of Christ's kingdom will inaugurate a time of peace: "They shall beat their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Peace is the characteristic of the Gospel; and the Christian, so far as he obeys Christ, is at peace both with himself and with those around. If the promise has not yet been fully accomplished, it is because God does not force men's wills or their

acts. If men will fulfil God's commandments, and yield themselves to His grace, then there will be perfect peace, according to His promise; and not peace only, but rest and security; they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig-tree, and none shall make them afraid—a perfect “picture of domestic peace, each family gathered in harmony and rest under the protection of their God; each content with what they have, neither coveting another's, nor disturbed in their own.” The nations of the earth were careful to walk in the name of their gods, that is, in the ways which corresponded with their idolatry; so God's people should be careful hereafter to walk in the name of the Lord their God, doing all things in His name, and according to the standard of holiness which His name expresses, and that for ever and ever.

“In that day.”—the last days of Christ and the Gospel—“in that day, saith the Lord, will I assemble her that halteth, and I will gather her that is driven out, and her that I have afflicted; and I will make her that halted a remnant, and her that was cast off a strong nation; and the Lord shall reign over them in Mount Zion from henceforth, for ever.” “Hitherto Micah had pro-

phesied of the glory of Zion chiefly through the coming in of the Gentiles; now he adds how the Jews should, with them, be gathered by grace into the one fold, in the long last day of the Gospel, at the beginning, in the course of it, and completely at the end." As in the former prophecy of restoration (chap. ii. 12, 13), so here the Prophet speaks of the chosen people as a scattered flock, worn out by its wanderings, driven away and afflicted; and he declares, on the word of God Himself, that though only a remnant should be saved, that remnant should become a strong nation, strong not in earthly greatness, but through the spiritual might of Him who should be their King for ever.

"And thou, O tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of Zion," or rather, O tower of Edar, Ophel of the daughter of Zion, "unto thee shall it come, even the first dominion." The tower of Edar, which was about a mile from Bethlehem, is here put for Bethlehem, and Ophel, a shoulder of Mount Moriah on the south, is a symbol of Jerusalem. •The first or former dominion, that is, the dominion of the house of David, should come to Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Lowly as Bethlehem was, He Who was to be born in her

should be "great, and called the Son of the Lord," and the Lord God should give Him the throne of His father David, and He should reign on the throne of the house of Jacob for ever."

In the meanwhile, however, before that kingdom should be set up, there would be deep sorrow and tribulation for Judah. The Prophet's words are to mark three separate times of trouble, each introduced by the same word "now" (iv. 9, 10). The first has reference to the captivity in Babylon, the second apparently to the combination of forces against Jerusalem in the time of the Maccabees, and the third to the Roman invasions under Antiochus and under Titus. The Prophet's eye is turned on each of these periods, and he sees in each case the trouble and the deliverance. He turns himself first in the midst of the sorrows of Judah, and out of them draws promises of comfort. "Dost thou cry out aloud? Is there no king in thee? Is thy counsellor perished?" As much as to say, "Is all lost, because thou hast no visible help, none to counsel thee or consult for thee? Wilt thou yield to disconsolate sorrow? Thy present travail pains, which will end in joy. Be patient, and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, as a woman in travail; for now shalt thou give birth to a king."

out of the city, and thou shalt dwell in the field, and thou shalt go even to Babylon; then shalt thou be delivered; there the Lord shall redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies." The crisis of her calamity would open the way for her deliverance.

The Prophet next looks forward to the Syrian oppression under Antiochus and the deliverance by the Maccabees. Many nations would then gather against Zion, praying that as she had become defiled in herself, she might be outwardly profaned, distinguished no longer by any mark of God's favour, and so they might be able to look with pleasure on her sufferings. "But they know not the thoughts of the Lord, neither understand they His counsel;" they know not that though God permits the heathen to execute His punishment upon His people, He is always ready to accept His people's penitence, and then He will take vengeance on those who oppose or injure them: He "shall gather them as sheaves into the floor" to be threshed. Zion, weak as she was, would be strengthened to cast her enemies to the ground as with a horn of iron, and then to trample them as with hoofs of brass, so that they should be utterly beaten to pieces, and devoted to the

Lord, and, being devoted to Him, should never recover themselves and be restored.

Once more the Prophet foresees trouble for Zion. "Gather thyself in troops" (he says) "O daughter of troops," that is, as the word properly means, "bands of robbers;" he calls Judah "daughter of troops," on account of her violence and robbery, and bids her gather herself in bands against her enemy. He sees the Roman army laying siege to Jerusalem, and the Roman power lording it continually over the Jewish rulers; while the Jews, on their part, had nothing to oppose to them but disorganised and lawless troops. But (as before, chap. iv. 3) he sets his eye upon Bethlehem, and on the Ruler that should come forth from thence. "Thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel; Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." The chief priests and scribes, in quoting this passage (St. Matt. ii. 6), gave the substance, rather than the exact words, as if the Prophet had said that Bethlehem was not the least among the princes of Judah. "Micah speaks of Bethlehem as it was in the sight of men, too small to be counted among the thousands of

Judah ; the chief priests, whose words St. Matthew approves, speak of it as it was in the sight of God, and as, by the birth of Christ, it should become." The great Ruler and King of Israel was to come forth from Bethlehem, as His birth-place, but that birth on earth and in time was not the beginning of His being ; His goings forth had been from of old, from everlasting ; from all eternity He had been the Son of the Father, with God and Himself God.

“ Therefore,” because it is God’s purpose both to visit His people for their sins and to deliver them, “ therefore will He give them up ” to the power of their enemies, “ until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth,” that is, until the virgin who should conceive and bear a Son, should bring forth that Son. “ Then the remnant of His brethren shall return unto the children of Israel,” that is, the residue of those who are Christ’s brethren after the flesh shall be admitted to the privileges of true Israelites, and not His brethren after the flesh only, but all those whom, though afar off, the Lord our God shall call, and whom Christ is not ashamed to call His brethren ; and so all Israel shall be saved, whether Jews or Gentiles.

“ And He ” (that is, the Ruler that is to be born) “ shall stand and feed ” His people as their Shepherd, and shall feed and guard them, but it will be with Divine might, “ in the name of the Lord, and in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God ; and they shall abide ”—“ and security and unbroken peace under their Shepherd and King ; they shall not go to and fro as heretofore ”—“ for now shall the Lord be great unto the ends of the earth.”

And this promised Ruler and Shepherd will bring peace, the Prince of peace, “ when the Lord shall come into our land.” The Assyrian was the fiercest and deadliest of the foes of God, and the meaning is, that in the most terrible persecutions Christ would give them peace ; he would trample upon their palaces and shatter the towers of their glory ; but the good Shepherd would rise up against him seven shepherds and eight principal men, that is, shepherds and teachers, in abundance to defend them. “ As the number seven denotes a great, complete and sacred multitude, so by eight is designated an increase almost countless multitude.”

“ And they shall waste the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod in the

thereof; thus shall He deliver us from the Assyrian, when he cometh into our land, and when he treadeth within our borders." This describes the victory of the Chief Shepherd, and of the shepherds under Him, over the world and Satan. Satan's malice will be turned to good, and wherein he hoped to waste and injure the Church, he will be himself wasted. Persecution will only have the effect of proving the greatness and strength of the Church. And "the remnant of Jacob," that is, the little flock that should be converted to Christ in the early times of the Gospel, the apostles and their disciples, "shall be in the midst of many nations as a dew from the Lord, as the showers upon the grass, that tarrieth not for man nor waiteth for the sons of men," beyond the reach of human help or culture. The heavenly doctrine of the apostles would bedew and refresh the dry and barren soil of men's hearts, and cause them to bring forth fruit for Christ.

It is our happy lot to live in the times of which the Prophet speaks, in the kingdom of the great Ruler, Who was to come forth from the city of David: He is our Shepherd, our Peace, Who pours upon us the dew of His blessing, and enables us to tread down our enemies, and bring forth the fruits

of holiness. God's promise of restoration to the unstable people of old may well therefore be an encouragement to us. However lukewarm or feeble we may feel ourselves to be, His grace is sufficient for us; and though our enemies may seem to triumph over us, and fancy that we shall be an easy prey, He can strengthen us against them, and enable us to do all things through the might of His indwelling Spirit. May He increase in us more and more the blessedness of our union as members of Christ's spiritual kingdom, and enable us to use aright the grace which is thus bestowed to us.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Micah*

IN the two last chapters of Micah, which form the third and concluding section of his prophecy, the Lord is represented as holding a controversy with His people, pleading with them in justification of His conduct towards them, and the reasons of His requirements. Then the people are shown returning to Him in penitence, and are reassured by His promise of deliverance, and the section concludes with a triumphal song of joy for God's unequalled mercy and compassion.

The Prophet is bidden to go forth among the mountains and rocks, and to call on them to listen, while Almighty God sets forth the blessings which He had showered on His people, and the ingratitude, negligence, and sin which they had manifested in return; for "the Lord had a controversy" (a contention, a trial) "with His people, and He would plead" (*lit.*, implead) "with Israel." He would hear if they had anything to say against Him. He appeals to the lifeless mountains to bear witness to the justice of His cause.

"O my people" (so Almighty God begins His expostulation) "what have I done unto thee, and wherein have I wearied thee?" They were His people, His chosen; He had not oppressed them with burdensome service; as He says by Isaiah, "I have not caused thee to serve by an offering, nor wearied thee with incense; but thou hast been weary of Me, O Israel: thou hast wearied Me with thine iniquity." "For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants, and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam;" and not that only, but He had turned the curses of Balaam into blessings. He entreats them to remember this, and to remember also "from Shittim unto Gilgal," that is, all

the great works of God from Shittim, the last campment of Israel out of the promised land, where they so sinned in Baal-peor, unto Gilgal, the first campment in the promised land, which they entered by a miracle, and where the ark rested amid the victories given them, and where the covenant was renewed. There is a pause in the Hebrew before the words "from Shittim unto Gilgal," which seems to indicate that the word "remember" should be understood again. The Israelites were especially to remember not only Balak's attempt to ruin them, but also the whole passage of their history presented by the words "from Shittim unto Gilgal," from their great danger through the devilish counsel of Balaam to the time when they were safely camped in the land of promise, on the other side of the Jordan. "That ye may know the righteousness of the Lord," His truth and faithfulness in the promises made to your fathers.

Then, as if acknowledging the justice of their reproach, the people inquire what God would have them do; they would not be so ungrateful as to fulfil all His requirements: "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord," that is, be before Him with Him, anticipate His wishes, and bow before the high God? "Shall I come before

with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old?" They were willing to bring their best and choicest offerings, if only they knew what would be acceptable to Him. If the burnt offerings prescribed by the law were insufficient, would He be satisfied with more costly oblations, "with thousands of rams, or ten thousands of rivers of oil"? Should the oil which accompanied the burnt-sacrifice flow in rivers? Or should they give their children, their first-born, to atone for their transgressions—the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul? Such eager inquiries, plausible as they might seem, were mere hypocrisy; for they knew already that what they proposed to offer was not only unnecessary, but an abomination; God had long before showed them what was good, and what He required of them, namely, to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God.

It was no new thing, no great thing, that God looked for; no costly sacrifice, but righteousness, love, humility. He had told them what He required when He said by Moses, "And now, Israel, what doth the Lord require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the command-

ments of the Lord and His statutes, which command thee this day for thy good?" (Deut. 32:1). "Micah changes the words of Moses in order to adapt them to the crying sins of Israel at that time:" and then he goes on to upbraid the people for those sins in detail. The Lord's voice comes from the city, that is, Jerusalem,—crieth aloud that all may hear. However it may be with us, "the man of wisdom shall see His name and shall perceive His power and glory, and shall not be afraid to hear the rod," the scourge of God's wrath. Who it is that has appointed when and how the people shall fall. God's will was abundantly made known by His prophets and by His judgments, but only the wise who took notice of it.

"Are there yet," after all God's warnings and correction, "the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked?" treasures gathered in by violence and fraud, and the scant measure (an ephah of leanness) which is abominable. An ephah was a corn-measure containing about two bushels; the rich, in whose house it was, were sellers; they were the necessities of life for the retailers of corn were selling dishonestly to the people." "Shall I count them pure?" (as in the margin, shall I be pure) "with t

balances, and with the bag of deceitful weights?" The Prophet puts himself, as it were, in their place, and asks whether it was possible that he should not be defiled by such dishonesty. "For the rich men thereof" (that is, of the city) "are full of violence," the *rich* men, not the poor and destitute, but those who had least need, "and the inhabitants thereof have spoken lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth." The whole city is given up to lying and violence.

Therefore God denounces His judgments upon them: "I will make thee sick in smiting thee," He says; as thou madest sick the heart of the poor oppressed, so will I by My grievous and severe punishment make thee sick and desolate because of thy sins. "Thou shalt eat, but not be satisfied;" so great should be the scarcity, that they should never enjoy a full meal; "thy casting down shall be in the midst of thee," in the very city where they had lived in wealth and luxury, and where they had laid up their treasure, there should they sink down and decay. "Thou shalt take hold in order to deliver," but thou shalt not wholly "deliver, and that which thou deliverest," for a time, "I will give up to the sword." All power of rescuing from the enemy what he had taken away

will be gone; they would be utterly w destitute. "Thou shalt sow, but thou s reap; thou shalt tread the olives, but th not anoint thee with oil; and sweet w thou shalt not drink wine." The threate the law (Lev. xxvi. 16; Deut. xxviii. 30, should be fulfilled in them; it should bitter lot to lose the produce of all their industry, and see others enjoy it.

"For the statutes of Omri are kept, and works of the house of Ahab, and ye walk counsels; that I should make them a de and the inhabitants thereof a hissing; t ye shall bear the reproach of My people." special sinfulness is implied in the sta Omri we are not told, but they are clos nected here with the works of the house o and we may well believe that the reckless which induced Ahab to ally himself with t worshipping King of Tyre had been lear father's house. If it is said of Ahab, that evil in the sight of the Lord above all t before him and served Baal, so that there v like him who did sell himself to work wi in the sight of the Lord," so it had bee said of his father Omri, that he "wroug

the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all that were before him," so that Omri and Ahab seem to have been in some sort partners in guilt; and it was their hateful maxims and example that Judah followed instead of the statutes of the Lord, the abominable rites of Baal rather than the pure worship of Jehovah. What could be the end of such profaneness and ingratitude, but that God should make them a desolation, and the inhabitants thereof a hissing, and cause them to bear the reproach of His people—the reproach which must attach to those who, having been made God's people, forsake Him, and are in turn forsaken? The heathen would trample over them in their affliction, because God had abandoned them; and so they would be a reproach to their neighbours, a scorn and derision to them that were round about.

Almighty God has a controversy with His people now, with each one of us individually, as well as with Israel of old. He has a controversy, a contention, with us for our souls, which are very precious in His sight, and which He has not only created for Himself, but which He has redeemed from bondage by the blood of His Son, and which He has sanctified by the grace of His indwelling Spirit. Our souls are His, and He claims them

for Himself; they are His by creation, by adoption, by regeneration; His by all that He has done and suffered for them; His by all the happiness and glory which He has prepared for them hereafter. And as they are His, so He requires of them, namely, to love Him with all their hearts and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with Him in Justice and love towards man, humility and abasement towards God, constitute the whole duty of man. Let us only bow ourselves down before God as nothing in ourselves, but desiring to do what He wills, and let us at the same time deal with our fellow-men justly and mercifully, and being content with God's dealings with us, and we may be assured that we are doing what God would have us do, and are offering to Him that acceptable service which any sacrifice, however costly, is about to be.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Micah*

THE Prophet had pronounced in the close of the preceding chapter God's judgments on Jerusalem for her sin, more especially for her iniquity and idolatry; now he acknowledges and bewails the justice of the sentence. The number of the inhabitants had sadly diminished, and gross corrup-

vailed in the land. There were none to stand in the gap and ward off the threatened judgment. "Woe is me!" (he says) "for I am as the gatherings of summer fruit" (with special reference to the fig-harvest), "as the grape gleanings of the vintage; there is no cluster to eat; my soul desired the first ripe fig." It was as if a man went into a garden or vineyard desiring the sweet and early figs, or a cluster of grapes, but desiring them in vain, for the fruit was gathered; there were only gleanings left, scanty and poor. "There were none through whose goodness the soul of the Prophet could be spiritually refreshed." "The good man is perished out of the earth," taken away by an untimely death, taken from the evil to come; "there is none upright among men," bloodshedding and treachery abound everywhere. As hunters lie in wait for wild beasts, so men for their fellow-men; both their hands are upon evil to do it well: that is, they excel in doing evil; their princes and judges pervert judgment for a bribe; their great men do not hesitate to utter all the mischief that is in their hearts; they wrap it up (*lit.*, twist or intertwine it); they twist one sin upon another; they are ever adding sin to sin: the best and most upright of them are as hard and piercing as briers, as

mischievous and impracticable to those dealings with them as a thorn hedge. If the best are the best, what must the worst be?

The day of visitation which the wise prophets had long proclaimed must be when all was so corrupt, the day of must be at hand. "Now," that is, at once, delay, "shall be their perplexity," the trial and destruction. And so great shall be the perplexity, so harassing the trial, that a man will be impossible. "Trust ye not: put ye not confidence in a guide; keep of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy For the son dishonoureth the father, the riseth up against her mother, the daughter against her mother-in-law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house." "The worst as they go on. First, 'the friend,' or the common band of man and man; 'guide' (or, as the word also means, one united by intimacy, to whom by continuing course the soul was used); then the wife in the bosom, nearest to the secrets of then those to whom all reverence is due, mother. Our Lord said (St. Matt. x that this should be fulfilled in the hatred

Gospel: and the acts of the martyrs tell how Christians were betrayed by near kinsfolk for private interest, or for revenge, because they would not join in things unlawful."

"Therefore," seeing that there is no safety or confidence in men, "therefore," says the Prophet, "I will look unto the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me." Corrupt and faithless as the people were, the Prophet would pray for them, and he was confident that God would hear his prayer; he would look with longing eyes to the God of his salvation, and he was sure that he should not be disappointed of his hope.

In this confidence he identifies himself with the people, and exults in their recovery and the overthrow of their enemies. Foreseeing the future trouble of Jerusalem, he says in her name, "Rejoice not against me, O my enemy;" Babylon or Edom or her other enemies might rejoice in the calamities that had befallen her, but their triumph would be of short duration: "when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me." In her darkness and sorrow she felt that she was not utterly cut off; she would turn to the Lord, and He would raise her up and

shine graciously upon her. In the meanwhile she would submit patiently to the chastisement which she had deserved: "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against Him, until He plead my cause, and execute judgment for me," that is, "until God Himself think the punishments inflicted enough, and judge between me and those through whose hands they come." She acknowledges that God's dealings with her are just, and she leaves herself in His hands, to be delivered in His time; but she is satisfied that He will bring her forth to the light (of His countenance and favour), and she shall behold His righteousness. Though He punish, He will pardon her, and will one day manifest His truth and righteousness in her restoration and the overthrow of her enemies. "Then she that is mine enemy shall see it, and shame shall cover her that said unto me, Where is" (He in Whom thou boastest) "the Lord thy God?" The time had been when the enemies of Zion exulted over her, saying, "Where is now thy God? let Him come and save thee." Now the case would be reversed, and Zion would look upon her enemies, and behold them trodden down as the mud in the streets—trodden down so as never to rise again.

Thus the penitent people look up to God, confident that He would hear their prayers. And then comes the promise of deliverance. The passage in the original is very abrupt and concise: "A day to build thy fences (cometh); that day, far shall be the decrees; that day and he shall come quite to thee; up to and from Assyria and the cities of strong land (Egypt); up to and from strong land and even to the river (Euphrates); and sea from sea and mountain to mountain." The day of her restoration was coming, when the decree of the enemy by which he held her captive should be removed and be far off, and one by one her banished captive scattered children should be brought quite home to her from all parts of the earth, whither they have been driven, from Assyria and from Egypt.

But the words look beyond the restoration of the Jews to the conversion of the world, which was the object of the restoration of Israel. "From the boundaries of the world, the world was to come." "Notwithstanding, the land shall be desolate, because of them that dwell there, for the fruit of their doings." "This sounds almost as a riddle and contradiction; 'the walls built up,' 'the people gathered in,' and 'the land desolate.'

Yet it was all fulfilled in the letter as well as in the spirit. Jerusalem was restored; the people were gathered, first from the captivity, then to Christ; and yet the land was again desolate, through the fruit of *their* doings who rejected Christ, and is so until this day."

As he draws his prophecy to a close, the Prophet offers an earnest prayer for his people, that God would restore and protect them: "Feed Thy people with Thy rod, the flock of Thy heritage, which dwell solitarily in the wood, in the midst of Carmel; let them feed in Bashan and Gilead, as in the days of old." The Prophet sees the people dwelling alone and desolate in their captivity in Babylon, which was to them as a wild homeless tract, and he prays that God would watch over them there, and feed them as in their own peaceful Carmel, or in the rich pastures of Bashan and Gilead. To this prayer the Lord answers, that He will show forth His power among them as when He first made them His people: "According to the days of thy coming out of the land of Egypt will I show unto him marvellous things." As He had brought out their fathers from Egypt, so would He deliver them from Babylon. The spectacle of this deliverance would awe and silence the sur-

rounding nations : " They shall see and be confounded at all their might ; they shall lay their hand upon their mouth," in token that they were reduced to silence, having no more to say ; " their ears shall be deaf ;" they shall be silent as though they had heard nothing, as if they were both dumb and deaf. " They shall lick the dust like a serpent, they shall move out of their holes like worms of the earth ; they shall be afraid of the Lord our God, and shall fear because of Thee." They shall be degraded like the serpent, abject and terror-stricken like the worm of the earth, fearing the wrath of God Who had pleaded the cause of His people. Such is a true picture of the enemies of God at all times, trembling and ashamed before Him, and yet obstinately deaf to His voice.

The Prophet closes with a joyful thanksgiving for the forgiving mercy of God and His faithfulness to His promises : " Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage ?" He declareth His Almighty power not so much in the wonders of creation, but most chiefly in showing mercy and pity. It is His forgiving love which is His special glory : " He retaineth not His anger for ever, because He delighteth in mercy. He will

turn again ; He will have compassion on us, He will subdue our iniquities," not only to overcome them, but to overcome them, save us both from their rage and power. "And Thou shalt cast"—but—"all their sins into the depth of the sea." "As the Egyptians, which sank as leaves in the mighty waters, never again rose, so shall we, unless revived by us, never rise against our condemnation, but shall in the day of judgment be cast into the abyss of hell, as if they had never been." "Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob, the mercy to Abraham, which Thou hast sworn to our fathers from the days of old ;" or, as the prophet takes up and enlarges the Prophecy, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel ; for He hath visited and redeemed His people ; as He hath said in the mouth of His holy prophets, which He hath said since the world began ; that we should be delivered from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us ; to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant, which He swore to our father Abraham, saying, He would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might dwell without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life."

The language of the Prophet, when he identifies himself with his people in their penitence, full of hope as trusting in God's strength to overcome His enemies, and yet full of patient acquiescence in the will of God, is the very pattern of the temper of the true penitent at all times: "Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy; when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me. I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against Him, until He plead my cause, and execute judgment for me; He will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold His righteousness." We must not despair, knowing that God is on our side, and that it is His will that we should be restored even after many falls; we must not repine, knowing that we have deserved all that He may lay upon us. We must learn lovingly to adore the hand that afflicts us, and boldly to lean on His forgiving love, which is not quenched even by repeated provocations.

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY.

MORNING LESSON.—*Habakkuk* ii.

HABAKKUK commences his prophecy by bewailing the iniquity of his people: cruelty and oppression were on every side, and he was constrained to behold them. He complained that his lot was cast in such evil times, and he cried earnestly to the Lord for help. The Lord made answer, that He would raise up the Chaldeans as the instruments of His vengeance; and their irresistible might is described in very vivid language. The Prophet was perplexed and astonished that God should employ such proud, treacherous, and cruel men to work His will. “Thou art of purer eyes” (he says) “than to behold evil; wherefore keepest Thou silence, when the wicked devoureth him who is more righteous than he?” Will the Lord indeed suffer the vainglorious Chaldeans to prey continually on His people?

Such is the perplexity which the vision of the rapacity and boastful impiety of the Chaldean hosts awakened in the Prophet’s mind; and now, in the

second chapter, he represents himself as waiting in silent yet hopeful expectation for an answer: "I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what He will say unto" (*marg.* "in") "me, and what I shall answer when I am reprov'd." The Lord commanded him to receive the answer in an enduring form, as of great importance: "Write the vision," that is, the prophecy, "and make it plain upon the tables," such as he was accustomed to use, "that he may run that readeth it." It was to be written probably in some public place, so as to arrest the attention of the passers-by. For the time of its accomplishment was fixed, and though in man's sight it might seem to tarry, it would surely come, it would not be after its time.

Then he gives the answer itself in the words: "Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith." The Prophet need not be alarmed, as if God confounded the righteous with the wicked. He saw the pride and self-confidence of the Chaldeans; they had no uprightness in them; they could not stand before Him; He saw also the patient trust of the righteous, and they should live thereby.

He then proceeds to pour out a terrible denun-

ciation against the Chaldeans in the form of a fivefold woe, pronounced against them by the nations who had suffered from their oppression. He describes the King of Babylon as intoxicated by his success and insatiable in his desire of conquest; but his empire would be overthrown, and the very nations whom he had vanquished would exult over him with taunting words.

Five times they denounce him, each denunciation, except the last, beginning with the word "Woe," and occupying three verses. The several prominent vices of the Chaldeans are denounced in turn: first, it is their insatiable ambition. "Woe to him that increaseth that which is not his! how long? and to him that ladeth himself with thick clay!" His ill-gotten dominion and treasure were as great a burden and encumbrance as thick clay. But sudden retribution awaited them; they would rise up suddenly that should bite them, and awake that should vex them: as the Chaldeans had spoiled many nations, a remnant of those nations would join in spoiling them, to avenge the innocent blood which they had shed, and especially the violence which they had done to Jerusalem and its inhabitants.

The second sin denounced is their covetousness

(ver. 9—11): “Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his seat on high, that he may be delivered out of the power of evil!” that he may be exalted above his rivals and out of their reach. Their covetousness and rapacity had made them unscrupulous and cruel in their method of self-aggrandisement; but it would only bring shame and guilt upon themselves. For if other witnesses were wanting, the very stones out of the wall would cry out and say that it was built by blood, and the wood would answer and say the same (cf. Luke xix. 40).

The next woe denounced against the Chaldeans was for their cruelty: “Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity!” Babylon was built or founded in blood; its greatness was the result of much hardness and oppression. But all the labour bestowed on it would only be to provide fuel for the fire, and the people would have wearied themselves in vain. For it was God’s purpose to destroy Babylon, in order to the rebuilding of Jerusalem, that the Redeemer might go forth from her, and the whole earth might be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.

Again, the Chaldeans are denounced for their

drunkenness (ver. 15—17): “Woe to him that giveth his neighbour drink, that putteth thy bottle to him, and makest him drunken also, that thou mayest look on their nakedness!” As they delighted in tempting men to excess, in order that they might expose them and put them to shame, so would they themselves be led to drink to excess and be put to shame, and would receive from the Lord’s hand the cup of His fury; for as they had spoiled others, so the army of the Conqueror should deal with them and tear them in pieces, as wild beasts do their prey; so would they suffer for men’s blood which they had shed, and the violence they had done to Judah and Jerusalem.

The last sin denounced is their idolatry. This denunciation differs from the rest in form, in having an introductory verse before the “Woe.” “What profiteth the graven image, that the maker thereof hath graven it; the molten image, and a teacher of lies, that the maker of his work trusteth therein, to make dumb idols?” The idols of Babylon could not profit those who made or trusted in them; they were utterly vain and worthless, and therefore woe is denounced against those who should be so foolish as to say to the wood, “Awake,” or to the dumb stone, “Arise, it

shall teach." However magnificent and costly they might appear outwardly, yet, as being lifeless, they must be inferior to the meanest of God's creatures. In contrast with these worthless idols, the one true God dwells in heaven as in His temple; and the Prophet bids the whole world be hushed in awe and reverence in His presence. "The Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him."

This chapter is the answer to the Prophet's perplexity with regard to the sufferings of the righteous and their persecution by the wicked. The evil which the Chaldeans would inflict upon God's people would fall on the faithful as well as on the unfaithful; how was this to be reconciled with the justice and holiness of God? Almighty God answers that a day of retribution would certainly come, when vengeance should overtake the enemies of God for their ambition, covetousness, and cruelty. But those who walked in God's way and trusted in Him should live; let them only commit the keeping of their souls to God in well-doing, and they would be safe. Such patient trust is the very essence of Gospel faith: it is looking away from self and leaning sweetly but bravely, amid darkness and danger, on the love and good-

ness of God; it is to say with the Psalmist, "I am alway by Thee, for Thou hast holden me by my right hand: Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel, and after that receive me with glory. Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever."

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Habakkuk* iii.

THOUGH called "a prayer," this is more properly a hymn or psalm, "the echo of the feelings aroused in the Prophet's mind by the Divine answer to his appeal." It is said to be a prayer "upon Shigio-noth," that is, after the manner of Shiggaion (Ps. vii. 1), which is supposed to mean a poem of irregular metre. The words appended to the prayer, "To the chief singer on my stringed instruments," imply that it was intended to form part of the Temple services, and that Habakkuk himself was to share in the sacred music that accompanied it. Though founded on the previous prophecies, it is in itself a perfect whole, and was appointed to be sung accordingly.

The Prophet had listened attentively to the answer which God had given to his perplexity in respect of the afflictions of the righteous among God's people. He had heard how vengeance was threatened on the enemies of Israel; but there was no clear promise of deliverance for Israel itself. On the contrary, it was manifest that captivity and trouble awaited her, and the Prophet was alarmed: "O Lord, I have heard Thy speech, and was afraid." Therefore he prays that God will revive His work in the midst of the years. His work seemed to be dead; the Prophet begs that God would quicken it, and stretch forth once more His power and love on behalf of His people, and in the midst of wrath remember mercy.

Almighty God had in former times miraculously interposed to deliver His people, and the Prophet celebrates those former interpositions, in order to encourage himself for the future: "God came from Teman," that is, Seir, "and the Holy One from Mount Paran," which is to the north of Sinai. The words seem to describe (as in Deut. xxxiii. 2) the glorious manifestation of God in the wilderness in the giving of the Law: "His glory covered the heaven, and the earth was full of His praise; and His brightness was as the light, and He had

horns" (*marg.*, bright beams) "coming out of His hand"; "rays of glory beamed forth, like an anvil of light, not only from His forehead, but from His hands." Yet the glory which men beheld was not a hiding, rather than the display, of His power. His outward manifestations were the veil which hid from the presence of His true glory, while they covered His face. Pestilence and fire went before Him, and He passed through the land of Egypt, and sent plagues upon His own people in the wilderness. "At the brightness of His presence His wrath was kindled, hailstones and coals of fire." "He measured the earth; He beheld and scattered asunder the nations." He allotted the land of Canaan as the inheritance of His people, and drove out before them the ancient inhabitants; the whole country seemed to be disturbed and thrown into confusion at His presence: "The everlasting hills were scattered; the perpetual hills were bowed down as a bow."

"I saw" (so the Prophet goes on) "the King of Cushan in affliction," that is, Cushan Rishathaim, King of Mesopotamia (*Judg. i.*), the first recorded oppressor of Israel; "and the tent curtains of the land of Midian did tremble," in allusion to the fear of the enemies of Israel at the

festation of God's favour for His people. Was the Lord displeased with the rivers? was His anger against the rivers? was His wrath against the sea, that He rode upon His horses, and His chariots of salvation? It was not displeasure against the rivers or the sea that caused Him to turn the waters of the Nile into blood, or to drive back the Jordan, or to make a pathway for His people through the Red Sea. His anger was against the enemies of His people; against them He had laid bare His bow; He had drawn it forth from its cover, and revealed it in the fierceness of His vengeance. And all this He had done in fulfilment of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their posterity.

The Prophet goes on with his account of the marvels which God had wrought. He opened the rocks, and the waters gushed out; the mountains felt His presence and quaked before Him; they were in pain, as of travail (in allusion, apparently, to the throes of the earthquake, Ps. lxxvii. 16), as is said in the psalm, "O God, when Thou wentest forth before the people, when Thou wentest through the wilderness, the earth shook and the heavens dropped at the presence of God, even as Sinai also was moved at the presence of God, Who

is the God of Israel" (Ps. lxxviii. 7, 8; Judg. v. 4, 5). "The overflowing of the water passed by," the overflowing waters of the Jordan passed away to the Dead Sea, and left the way open for His people; "the deep uttered his voice, and lifted up his hands on high;" the waters of the Red Sea roared as the tempest parted them, and, piled up on either side, they seemed to lift up their hands in adoration of the Divine presence. "The sun and moon stood still in their habitation," when, in answer to Joshua's prayer, the prolonged day enabled the Israelites to break effectually the power of the Canaanites. "At the light of Thine arrows they went, and at the shining of Thy glittering spear." "The Lord thundered out of heaven, and the Highest gave His thunder, hailstones and coals of fire. He sent forth his arrows and scattered them; He cast forth His lightnings and destroyed them." But God's people were enabled to go on and conquer. Their conquests, however, were altogether the Lord's doing: He marched through the land in indignation, and threshed the heathen in His anger, driving them out of His presence, and planting His people in their stead. He went forth for the salvation of His people, even for the salvation of His anointed, of

those who were especially set apart and consecrated to Him (Ps. cv. 13). He "wounded the head out of the house of the wicked, laying bare the foundation unto the neck"—that is, smiting the house at once, above and below, with an utter destruction: "He smote the chief persons among the families of the wicked, as when a building is razed to its foundation." This was fulfilled when God smote the first-born in the land of Egypt, and so crushed their power. He "struck through with His staves"—that is, the sword of His anointed—"the head of his villages" (rather, of his rulers). They, the rulers of Egypt, "came out as a whirlwind to scatter God's people; their rejoicing was as to devour the poor secretly." He walked through the Red Sea with His horses, through the heap of great waters. The Egyptians thought to devour the defenceless Israelites; but God led them through the sea as through the dry land, making the waters to stand on an heap, and then bringing them down suddenly on His enemies to destroy them.

Thus the Prophet derived faith and hope for the future from God's past miracles of mercy to His chosen people. When he first heard of the trouble that was coming from the Chaldeans, he was

greatly disturbed; his body trembled, his lips quivered, his limbs tottered under him; though he was assured that he should find rest in the day of trouble, yet he trembled within himself when he beheld in vision the King of Babylon coming up against Jerusalem and its inhabitants, and cutting them in pieces. Nevertheless, he would not lose his confidence in God. Let the desolation which the Chaldean invasion might cause be ever so great, he would not despair, nor relax his faith and hope. Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, and there be no fruit in the vines; though the labour spent on the olive should fail, and the corn-field yield no fruit; though the flock be cut off from the fold, and no ox be in the stall, yet he will rejoice in the Lord: he will joy in the God of his salvation; the Lord God, his strength and comfort, will supply every want. He would make his feet swift and sure like the feet of the hind, and cause him to walk upon His high places; that is, He would give him possession of the commanding positions of the land, and so make him to have it in subjection; he would preserve him out of reach of his enemies, and grant him the full enjoyment of the privileges of his inheritance.

What a lesson of hope and encouragement may

the Christian believer derive from this outbreak of joyful trust! As the Prophet recounts God's former mercies to Israel in Egypt and in Canaan, he is persuaded that whatever affliction may be in store for his people, there will be peace and triumph in the end. So in the midst of the disasters of the Church, however she may be decayed within and persecuted without, the true believer will rest in the remembrance of His promise for the time to come. God will not utterly forsake His people. His eye will be upon the faithful in the spiritual Zion; He will carry them safely through all outward trials, and, in spite of those trials, will enable them to rejoice in Him, and to say with the Psalmist, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Though an host of men were laid against me, yet shall not my heart be afraid; and though there rose up war against me, yet will I put my trust in Him. Therefore will I offer in His dwelling an oblation with great gladness: I will sing and speak praises unto the Lord."

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Zephaniah* iii.

AFTER denouncing in the preceding chapter God's judgments on the enemies of Israel, on Philistia, Moab and Ammon, Ethiopia and Nineveh, Zephaniah turns to address Jerusalem, which he reproves sharply for her violence and disobedience.

His prophecy was delivered in the reign of Josiah—probably before the reformation effected in the eighteenth year of his reign, after the discovery of the book of the law; indeed, Zephaniah's reproof may have prepared the way for that reformation. "Woe to her that is filthy" (or rather, rebellious) "and polluted, to the oppressing city!" The inhabitants of Jerusalem were so given up to violence and impurity, that they could not listen to the voice of God, or profit by His correction. As the contemporary prophet Jeremiah said of them, "O Lord, Thou hast stricken them, but they have not grieved; Thou hast consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction; they have made their faces harder than a rock; they have refused to return" (chap. v. 3). Her princes were greedy and cruel, like fierce beasts, like wolves that prowl about in the evening, and leave not so much as the bones to the next day; her prophets were

greedy and perfidious; her priests polluted the Temple by their crimes. But the Lord Who was in the midst of her was just and righteous; He could not do iniquity by conniving at her wickedness: day by day He revealed His judgments, but they were shameless in their iniquity. He had given them abundant warning by the desolation which He had brought upon the other nations. He said to Judah, "Only fear thou Me, and receive instruction." If they would but fulfil this command, their dwelling should not be utterly cut off.

But instead of repenting, they were more and more bent on wickedness, and corrupted all their doings. Therefore, inasmuch as even the chosen people had become corrupt, Almighty God calls on the faithful to wait for *Him* and for the fulfilment of His promise, until the time should come when He would execute His judgment on the unbelievers. For *then*, that is, at the very time when He should inflict punishment on the heathen nations of the world, then would He give back to them a pure language (*lit.*, a clean lip), that they might all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent. "God will judge the nations, and in consequence of these judgments their conversion will take place." From the most distant regions—

from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia—Ethiops, the children of His dispersed people, offer to Him spiritual service. The Prophet looks forward to the times when Jew and Gentile shall be united in one holy Church: “In the day when thou” (the spiritual Jerusalem) “not for all thy doings, wherein thou hast trusted against Me:” they would repent and their sins would be blotted out; all selfishness on account of spiritual privileges would be removed; in the holy mountain of God’s presence pride should cease. God’s people, the remnant of true Israelites whom God will leave in His Church, shall be an afflicted and persecuted people, meek and lowly in heart; but they shall be called by the name of the Lord; they shall be blessed in all their doings also in their actions and true in their hearts; they shall be fed and protected, and their enemies shall make them afraid.

What a picture of the lowliness and peace of the Church! No wonder the Prophet, as he contemplates it, breaks forth in a call to rejoice: “Sing, O daughter of Zion; be glad and rejoice with all thy strength, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all thy strength, O daughter of Jerusalem.” The Lord shall be in the midst of His Church shall be he

from all evil, and the pledge of victory over her enemies, that she may serve Him without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him. The Lord her God in the midst of her is mighty; He will save; He will rejoice over her with joy; He will rest (*lit.*, be silent) in His love; His love for His Church will be to Him a fountain of joy: He will repose and rest in it, as a source of pure and calm delight; nay, He will break forth at times into bursts of joy, as men rejoice over the objects of their love; He will rejoice over her with singing.

Then Almighty God Himself takes up the promise, and speaks in His own name: "I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assemblies," those who grieve, that is, for the cessation of the feasts and holy ordinances of religion, for such a state of things as that bewailed by Jeremiah in the Lamentations (ii. 6, 7); "He hath violently taken away His tabernacle, as if it were of a garden; He hath destroyed His places of the assembly: the Lord hath caused the solemn feasts and sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion, and hath despised, in the indignation of His anger, the king and the priest. The Lord hath cast off His altar, He hath abhorred His sanctuary, He

hath given up into the hand of the walls of her palaces; they have made the house of the Lord, as in the day of feast." Almighty God promises that store those assemblies and joyful feasts away with the reproaches of those who their discontinuance: "Behold, at that will undo," that is, I will destroy, afflict thee; and I will save her that hath gathered her that was driven out;" the flock who were worn out with their and dispersed He would gather Micah iv. 6, 7); "and I will get them fame in every land where they have been to shame. At that time will I bring you again in the time that I gather you; for I will give you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity and your eyes, saith the Lord." As elsewhere (Ezekiel i. 1; Joel iii. 1; Amos ix. 14), the Prophet's call beyond the temporal restoration which was to place under Zerubbabel to the spiritual restoration, to the love and favour of God, will be vouchsafed to them in the Christian

The Prophet's call to the Church to be addressed to us. God's grace has made

bers of the Church, and all the privileges here ascribed to her belong to us. Not only does Christ dwell in the whole Church, but in each of us individually; and He dwells with us in order to save us, to deliver us from our enemies and to strengthen our weakness. He not only loves and rejoices over His whole Church, but He loves each one and delights to do him good.

What joy in the world is to be compared with the joy of knowing that God loves and rejoices in us! But He must hate sin, though His loving heart may yearn over the sinner. He cannot take delight in us, so long as we transgress His will. Therefore our one endeavour, day by day, should be, to become more and more such as He can love.

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER

MORNING LESSON.—*Ecclesiastes* x

IF the object of the Preacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes is to point out where true blessing is to be found, amid the distresses and sorrows of life, that object is most distinctly seen in the two concluding chapters. He has previously declared that men's chief business in this world was to do good and to enjoy tranquillity and contentment that came from God (iii. 13); now he returns to this and enforces more plainly the duty of charity towards men and piety towards God. However lawful and right it may be for men to enjoy the good gifts of God, he must not be contented with himself up in mere selfishness, let it be how apparently innocent; he must lay himself out to do what good he can to his fellows, whatever taint or disappointment may attend his efforts.

“Cast thy bread upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days.” Whatever the exact force of the metaphor here employed, its meaning is plain; men's time and

money should be freely bestowed on others, even where there is but small prospect of any favourable result. Do not grudge to offer them, the Preacher seems to say, for in the end, like a merchant-ship sent forth on the waters, they shall bring thee a good return. Be not in haste to stay thy hand; give not only to two and three, but to seven and eight: when thou hast given to seven, remember that there are yet others that need thy help; give largely, and when thou hast so given, be not satisfied, but give more largely still, for thou knowest not how soon evil may befall thee, and then the good thou hast done will stand thee in better stead than all the good things thou enjoyest.

“If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth:” as the clouds exhale the water, in order that they may discharge it again, so God permits men to gather wealth and knowledge and influence, in order that they may use them freely for the benefit of others. For the time will come when there will no longer be a possibility of so doing: “If the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there shall it be.” The south, the warm and sunny region, is the emblem of

acceptance with God, while the north represents condemnation. According as men die in God's favour or in His wrath, so must they abide ; they cannot live again, in order to do more good in their generation. Do not weigh too carefully, so the Preacher goes on, what may be urged against the exercise of charity, lest in the end thou never give at all: "He that observeth the wind, shall not sow ; and he that regardeth the clouds, shall not reap ;" he that watches the weather too anxiously will miss the seedtime and lose his harvest. Neither be too anxious to see the result of thy labour in all cases ; thou knowest not the things around thee, the way of the wind, whence it cometh and whither it goeth, nor how the babe is formed in the womb ! how canst thou then expect to know the ways and purposes of God, Who doeth all this ? Therefore do what good thou canst and leave the issue with God. "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand : " thou canst not begin too early, or leave off too late ; be instant in season, out of season ; make use of every opportunity, in youth and in age, in perplexity and adversity ; be not weary in well-doing, for in due time thou shalt reap, if thou faint not. The success of thy efforts rests with

God, and "thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good." Let this be the purpose of thy life, to do what good thou canst, without waiting to see the effect of thy endeavours; for though life is pleasant and the moderate enjoyment of the good things of life desirable, yet life is vain, and earthly enjoyment must come to an end. It behoves thee, therefore, to remember the days of darkness—that is, not merely sickness and death, but the outer darkness of the other world—for they shall be many.

Solomon then enlarges on this contrast between the brightness of youth and the days of darkness. Youth in itself is a joyous thing, and men may rightly take delight in it, if only their joy is limited and chastened by the remembrance of judgment. "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thy heart, and in the sight of thine eyes; but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment." It is sometimes supposed that these words are to be understood as ironical, and that Solomon's real meaning is, that men should beware of rejoicing in their youth, and of walking in the ways of their

heart and in the sight of their eyes, because they would bring them into the judgment of God. But it would seem better to take this seriously as an injunction to joy in youth, than to let it be remembered that for whatever is done in youth God will bring man to judgment. They should therefore, may put away from them so much of their trouble and enjoy themselves while they are young, for childhood and youth are vanity and will pass away. The joy of youth must be tempered with the thought that it cannot last for ever, and that there is an account to be given of it.

The true rule for the conduct of youth should be consecrated to God: it is well to remember Him before the days of sickness and old age, the days and years in which men say, "I have no pleasure in them." And then the text goes on to draw a picture of those days. The joy for pleasure is gone. Even the sun and the warmth and brightness and the beauty of the world are, as it were, obscured and darkened, so that they can no longer derive pleasure from them. Sorrows also follow thick and fast, one upon another; there is no cessation or calm; the dark clouds were to return after heavy showers of the bright blue sky. The keepers of the

the hands and arms, have become feeble, and tremble when their help is needed. The strong men, the pillars or legs, are bowed down under the weight of what once they carried easily. The grinders or teeth are mostly gone, and the few that remain are nearly useless. "Those that look out of the windows" (the eyes) "are darkened." "The doors are shut in the streets," that is, the lips in the mouth, "when the sound of the grinding is low:" they are disinclined to speak in public companies, their voices having lost their power and distinctness. Their spirits are so weak and their sleep so light, that they are startled by the slightest sound: the voice and the ear, those "daughters of music," can no longer perform their functions. They are afraid to climb a hill, or to stand on any height, or even to walk alone in the way. The head, covered with silver hair, is like the almond-tree in blossom; the slightest weight or trouble is a grievance; all appetite or relish is gone; for man is approaching his eternal home, and his family and neighbours will soon mourn for him. Then will "the silver cord be loosed," that is, the spinal marrow, which, by means of the nerves, carries sensation from the brain to every part of the body; "the golden

bowl," that is, the heart, from which the life flows, "will be broken, and the pitcher broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the axle." The lungs will cease to play and the blood will not circulate, and the whole earthen vessel of the body will become useless; the dust will return to the earth, and the spirit to the God Who gave it. The man will be judged according to his works. The thought of this end causes the Preacher to "sing more the knell of the nothingness of all that is earthly:" "Vanity of vanities," saith the Preacher, "all is vanity."

With these words, which are the concurring burden of the whole book, the Preacher's warning seems to come to a natural end. He adds a few verses more, in order to give weight to his authority as a teacher, and to induce the people to listen to him. He had been renowned for his wisdom; with great care he had set his words in order, and arranged many proverbs; he had taken care to speak attractive words as well as words of wisdom and simplicity. The words of the warning, he meant, he says, to be as goads to the people, and also as nails fastened in a sure place (Eccl. ix. 8; Isa. xxii. 23, 25), on which the people might hang for support; the masters of

gregations were given by one Shepherd. However many the subordinate teachers might be, their teaching came from the one Shepherd and King. Therefore it behoved men to receive and profit by it.

On one other point Solomon would give warning to his son. He had written many books on various subjects (1 Kings iv. 32, 33); but all such studies were a wearisome labour, except so far as they led on to that which was the conclusion of the whole matter, the sum and substance of all he had to say: "Fear God and keep His commandments: for this is the whole of man," his chief good, his one business, honour, happiness, and duty; for the righteous judgment of God will one day set all things right, recompensing to men good or evil according to their works. Men have but one thing to do or care for on earth, namely, to fear and obey God, to seek Him and His righteousness, to love Him with all the heart and soul and strength. For these various expressions all resolve themselves into the one duty of surrendering ourselves entirely to the will and service of God. This is the one thing needful, which alone can give peace amid the sorrows and distractions, the changes and chances of the world, or enable

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us to stand "accepted in the Beloved" in the day of final reckoning. May we learn from Solomon's experience to cease to be troubled about many things, and to choose with all our hearts that one good part, which shall never be taken away from us.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Haggai* ii. to ver. 10.

THE great purpose of Haggai's prophecy was to denounce the lukewarmness of the exiles who had returned from Babylon, and to stimulate them to the rebuilding of the Temple of God in Jerusalem. The work of rebuilding had been commenced in the reign of Cyrus, sixteen years before the delivery of Haggai's prophecy; but after a short time it was suspended, in consequence of the opposition of the Samaritans, until the second year of Darius, when the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah urged the renewal of the undertaking, and obtained the permission and assistance of the king. "Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the son of Jozadak, and began to rebuild the house of God which is at Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God helping them" (Ezra v. 2).

The prophecy of Haggai consists of three messages from God to the people, all delivered in the course of a few months in the second year of Darius. In his first message, which was delivered on the first day of the sixth month, the Prophet reproaches the Jews for their listlessness in allowing the house of God to lie roofless and desolate, while their own houses were grand and costly, and he warns them that the drought and scarcity from which they were suffering were God's judgment on them for their negligence. The words of the Prophet sank into the hearts of the people; they feared the Lord and obeyed His voice, and set themselves at once to make preparation for the work.

Whether it was that the zeal of the people soon began to slacken, or for whatever reason, on the twenty-first day of the following, the seventh, month another message came to the Prophet, bidding him assure the people of God's presence with them, and promising them that, stately and magnificent as had been the Temple of Solomon, the glory of the latter house should be greater than the glory of the former.

It is with this second message that we are now concerned. Almighty God Himself takes notice

of the contrast between the Temple people were then engaged in building the Temple of Solomon. We read in the book of Ezra, that when the foundations of the second Temple were laid, many of the priests, Levites, and chief of the fathers, who were men, that had seen the first house, which had been destroyed fifty years before, wept with a loud voice (iii. 12); and now, sixteen years after the building had been left in an unfinished state for some time, Almighty God sent a message to Zerubbabel and Joshua and the rest of the people, who were employed in the building, saying: "Who is left among you that saw the first Temple in its first glory? and how do you see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as a little? Sixty-six years had passed since the destruction of the first Temple, but there were still some men, apparently, who had seen the former Temple in its youth, before they were carried to Babylon; and they were so pained by the contrast that they were almost ready to stop the work of restoration; and it was to prevent the people from being disheartened that God sent the following message by the Prophet: "Yet now hearken, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord; and hearken, O Joshua, the son of Josedech, the high

be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work; for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts. According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth among you; fear ye not." Let their discouragements be what they might, they were not to be faint-hearted or desponding, but strong in the consciousness of God's presence, strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Two special grounds of encouragement the Prophet indicates,—first, the covenant of God, which was a perpetual assurance of His favour towards them; and secondly, the presence of His Spirit with them, which was a never-ceasing fountain of strength and consolation. Then with respect to the special cause of distress and despondency, namely, the meanness of the new Temple, the Prophet assures the people that God would remove the hindrances which seemed to make it impossible that the splendid announcements of the older prophets should be fulfilled. He would shake the kingdoms of the earth and deprive them of their power, and the consequence would be that the glory of the temple which was now rising before them would far surpass that which preceded it. "For thus saith the Lord, Yet once, it is but a little while,

and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land." By this shaking of the whole system of the world is meant the overthrow of earthly powers; the time would come when the heathen nations would be broken up, and a way opened for the introduction of the new economy of God. "I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come." The desire of all nations is supposed by many to be Christ Himself, Who may fitly be called the delight and beauty of all the nations; and in that case the reason why the glory of the latter house would eclipse the glory of the former would be the presence of the Messiah in it: the incarnate Son of God would personally visit the second Temple, and thereby fill it with glory. But it is at least possible that the words of the Prophet are not to be understood personally of Christ. By the desire of all nations may be meant the choice of the nations, that which is desirable and excellent among them; and the reference may be to the coming in of the Gentiles into the Church of Christ. This second Temple would see the commencement of that glorification of Christ which would consist in drawing all men unto Him (St. John xii. 20, 23). Our Lord Himself applies to it that passage in which the Prophet

declares that God's house would be the house of prayer to all nations (St. Luke xix. 46; Isaiah lvi. 7).

The Jews need not be disturbed, because the new Temple lacked the outward splendour of the old. "The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine, saith the Lord of Hosts." He could therefore, if He pleased, make His second Temple rival, or even surpass, the first; but He had a greater glory in design for the latter house, and for the spiritual temple which was to take its place, namely, the glory of gathering into itself the souls of men: "And in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of Hosts." As the Messiah Himself is called the Prince of peace, so His kingdom, of which the second Temple was a type and emblem, is the kingdom of peace; in God's design the Gospel is peace on earth,—outward and visible peace, if men do not thwart His will, but certainly inward and spiritual peace to all who are faithful members of His kingdom—peace with God through the blood of Christ.

God's glory consists not in the embellishment of His earthly temples, but in the building up of His spiritual temple by the conversion of souls to Himself. He does not indeed reject men's gifts, if

offered in love and reverence, but the most acceptable offering is the offering of themselves. And it was the foreknowledge, not so much of the personal presence of Christ, as of the work of Christ in the gathering in of the heathen, with which the second Temple was connected, which made that Temple precious and glorious in the eyes of the Lord. What an encouragement to us in our efforts to make known the name and work of Christ in the world, to be assured that we are thereby not only promoting the happiness and salvation of men, but advancing in the highest possible way the glory and good pleasure of God!

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Malachi* iii. and iv.

THERE is a close connection between the third chapter of *Malachi* and the last verse of the preceding chapter. There the Prophet said that the mass of the people, who were heartless worshippers rather than open despisers of God, were very offensive to Him, because they profanely accused Him of taking pleasure in the ungodly rather than in them; they longed for an interference of God in their behalf; they asked, Where is the God of Judgment? be-

cause, as they complained, God had no delight in them, the righteous, but in the evildoers.

To these murmurings an answer is given in the beginning of the third chapter. Almighty God declares that He would soon vindicate His righteousness by sending His heavenly messenger: "Behold, I will send My messenger, and he shall prepare the way before Me: and the Lord, Whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant, Whom ye delight in; behold, He shall come, saith the Lord of Hosts." It is plain that He Who speaks, and Whose way is to be prepared, is one and the same Lord, the messenger of the covenant, Who shall suddenly come to His temple. And our Lord Himself marks their identity in His reference to the passage, by making what is here said by Jehovah of Himself to be addressed to the messenger, saying of St. John the Baptist, "This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face, which shall prepare Thy way before Thee (St. Matt. xi. 10; St. Luke vii. 27). This passage is our Saviour's commentary on the words of the Prophet. St. John the Baptist is the messenger who was to be sent to prepare the way for the promised Messiah, Whom the people professed to desire and take

delight in. "Behold, He shall come, to your desire," saith the Lord of Hos

"But who may abide the day of H and who shall stand when He appear John the Baptist said of Him, "His fa hand, and he shall thoroughly purge He would be like the fire which purg dross from precious metals, or like the cleanses and whitens garments. Aln declares that He would cleanse and people, and especially the sons of Levi, should come forth from the furnace purified in the fire, and should offer acceptable sacrifice. This was fulfilled in lation which the Church endured in its in the holy worship of the early Chr more especially when a great company of were obedient to the faith.

At the same time He would assuredl geance on those who transgressed the l sorcery and impurity, their oppression hood. He Himself could not change always be both just and merciful, and t would punish His people, not consume t while He thus threatens to execute swif on the transgressors, He calls them c

repent and turn to Him ; and He tells them plainly wherein their transgression consisted, and how they were to amend. Their negligence in the matter of tithes and offerings had brought them under a curse, as robbers of God ; but let them remedy this fault, and render to God what He demanded of them, and He would yet pour on them His richest blessings. The locust should no longer devour their fruits, nor should their vineyards fail ; and all the surrounding nations should acknowledge and rejoice in their prosperity.

In the next verses Almighty God repeats the complaint which He had before made (ii. 17), that the people accused Him of taking more delight in the heathen and ungodly than in them and in their service. It was in vain (they said) that they walked in God's ordinances and humbled themselves before Him ; the haughty despisers of God were the prosperous ones : " The workers of iniquity are built up ; yea, they tempt God and escape." Almighty God does not immediately take notice of their accusation, but turns away from the scorers to look upon the faithful remnant who feared Him, and who held converse with one another in submission to His will and in opposition to those who accused Him of injustice. His

eye is upon them, and His ear listens to them. He notes, as it were, in a book their thoughts, and He promises that they shall be His possession, His peculiar treasure, in His judgment. He would no more suffer the righteous to perish with the ungodly than a father would involve a dutiful son in the destruction of his enemies. And so they would perceive the difference between the righteous and the unrighteous, between those who served God and those who served Him not.

This is a direct answer to the murmur which complained that God was unjust in His distinction between the good and the bad. Almighty God declares plainly that there shall be a distinction, but it would be for the benefit of those who feared God and were His true servants, and not of those who were only His servants by name.

“For, behold, the day cometh that I will visit them as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day shall burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts. It shall leave them neither root nor branch. Only will God distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, but the wicked shall be destroyed. This is said not only with

the destruction of Jerusalem, and the sufferings which the Jews should then endure, but also to the day of judgment and the final punishment of the ungodly. But unto those who fear His name, righteousness shall shine forth as the sun, with healing and enlivening power. He Who is the Lord our righteousness shall shed the bright beams of His light upon them, and virtue shall go forth from Him to cleanse and sanctify them: "They shall go forth and grow up" (rather, leap and exult) "as calves of the stall." Delivered from the bondage of sin, they shall exult in the sunshine of Christ's presence, and in the free pastures which He has opened for them.

The Prophet concludes with a solemn injunction to the people to remember Moses and the law which he gave them. The time was come when the Jews should have no more prophets until Christ appeared; therefore it was especially necessary that they should take heed to the teaching of Moses, and continue in the path which he had marked out for them. There was a great and terrible day at hand: Israel's only safety was in adhering to the law, lest they should be awakened out of their sleep of forgetfulness by the thunder of God's judgment.

Before that day dawned, however, there was one special voice of warning: God sent Elijah the prophet, who should turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers, lest He should come and visit the earth with a curse. There can be no doubt that by Elijah is meant the messenger whom God had promised to send before Himself, to prepare the way. And the reason why he is here called is, because, coming in a time of general apostasy, his business, like Elijah's, would be to turn the people to repentance: he would draw the hearts of the fathers and the children together by the bands of love those whom sin had separated. The fathers are meant the old patriarchs, and the children a separation between the fathers and the children, because the children were estranged from the fathers, and the children could be brought back to love God, then the fathers and the children would be brought together again.

These closing words of the Old Testament were taken up by the angel Gabriel, when he appeared to Zechariah, and applied to St. John the Baptist. He it was whom God would send to prepare the way for Christ, and to restore the degenerate hearts of the fathers and the children to the temper of their believing

and so save them from the curse which must otherwise fall on them.

The people, to whom Malachi's prophecy was addressed, pretended to look forward with hope to the coming of the Messiah; but he tells them plainly that unless they repented of their sin, His coming would be a day of shame and sorrow to them, not of joy. He sets before them the separation between the faithful and the hypocrite which would be effected by the preaching of Christ and His apostles; and he warns them that if they would escape the doom of the hypocrite, they must be very careful to walk in the faith of their forefathers, and in obedience to the law.

A great and terrible day of the Lord awaits us, of which from time to time God gives us warning, and in anticipation of which He bids us repent. Then will be the great and final separation between the true and the false; then will be the full revelation of God's wrath against the one, and of His love and blessing in the other. What have we to do, looking forward to that day, but to walk in the old ways and keep close to the ordinances of God? As when Christ came the first time, He came with a special blessing to those who, accord-

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ing to the injunction of the last of the prophets, remembered the law of Moses, and walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the law blameless ; so will it be well hereafter with those, and those only, who rule themselves carefully by the commandments of God's Word and the ordinances of His Holy Church.

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT.

MORNING LESSON.—*Isaiah i.*

THIS first chapter of *Isaiah* may be regarded as a kind of preface or introduction to the whole Book: "it sounds the key-note of the whole, fires of judgment destroying, but purifying a remnant." Such is the burden all along of *Isaiah's* prophesyings; and this chapter is an epitome of them.

The Prophet endeavours to soften the hard hearts of the people, and to set forth before them their sin and danger. As we read his words, "we may fancy that we hear the very voice of the seer, as he stood (perhaps) in the court of the Israelites denouncing to nobles and people, there assembling for Divine worship, the whole estimate of their characters formed by *Jehovah*, and His approaching chastisement."

He begins as *Moses* began his song (*Deut.* xxxii. 1), by calling on heaven and earth to bear witness to the complaint which the Lord had to make against His people: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for *Jehovah* speaks." His complaint is

that of a father against unthankful, faithless children. "I have nourished and brought up children; and they have despised Me; rather, perhaps, I have brought up calves, and they have despised Me; and they have raised them high—"and they have rebelled against Me." He had watched over them in their infancy, and guarded them as they advanced with His love and care, and formed them as His great people; but they had broken away from Him, and had been more senseless and unthankful than the brutes. "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not consider; they do not think that they were God's children, and do not give every blessing upon Him alone.

Thus as a sorrowing father the Lord looks over them. Then the Prophet takes up the voice in his own person, and upbraids them as a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a generation of evil-doers, children that were corrupted, who have forsaken the Lord, provoked the Holy One to anger, gone away backward." Still His pity mingled with his rebuke. He asks sadly why it should be necessary to punish them any more, when they had suffered already for their sins: "Why should ye be punished any more? will ye revolt more and more?"

the whole people were like a diseased body, one mass of wounds from head to foot; their land a desert; their cities burned with fire; their ground—foreigners consumed it before their eyes; it was a desert, overthrown by foreigners. This was the picture which the Prophet beheld. Though their worldly condition was at that moment, in the reign of Uzziah, flourishing, the Prophet saw another scene before him—their land laid waste, and Jerusalem as “a cottage,” or tent, “in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers,” the temporary resting-place of the watchman guarding the vineyard or garden, “as a besieged city.” Had it not been for the special mercy of God, Jerusalem would have become like Sodom and Gomorrah, utterly destroyed: as it was, only a small handful were left.

Here the Prophet pauses for a moment, and seems to himself to hear the remonstrances of those whom he was addressing; they complained of his accusations against them, and appealed to their religious observances as a proof that they were very different from what he represented, and did not deserve so severe a censure. The Prophet rejects their plea, and launches forth against the accusers of God: “Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom,” as

ye are; "give ear unto the law of our people of Gomorrah. To what purpose multitude of your sacrifices unto Me, Lord." They were a mere empty show; being a satisfaction, they were an abomination to Him, as offered by unclean hands. He desired not of such offerings: He wanted no more of them; did He require them to tread His courts with their feet, while their hearts were far from Him? He bade them discontinue their hypocritical offerings. "Bring no more vain oblations; your sacrifices is an abomination to me; the new moons, the sabbaths, the call of festal meetings, I have hated with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting; a crowded festal gathering, or a pompous ceremony, combined with iniquity and barrenness, was a contradiction which could not endure. The stain of innocent blood was upon their hands: He would not regard them when those hands were spread forth in prayer. They might pray loud and long, but He would not hear them.

But there was love hidden behind the sternness ready to break forth: Almighty God called them to repent and amend, and promises the pardon; let them place themselves in

God's countenance, and put away honestly all the evil things which were displeasing to Him. This was to be the beginning of their reformation; but they were moreover to learn to do good, as well as cease to do evil—a difficult task for men who had long been accustomed to sin, and not to be accomplished by good wishes and intentions only.

The Prophet specifies particularly the good works which they should be careful to perform. They all have reference to the administration of justice, in which we may suppose they had hitherto failed. "Seek judgment," devote yourselves to it with zeal and assiduity; "relieve the oppressed," or, as the words may be rendered, set right the oppressor, bring him into the right way; "judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." It was of no avail that they multiplied prayers and services, while they neglected the weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. Almighty God therefore casts away indignantly the husks of their dead works, and demands the good corn of truth and holiness. Still, in His wrath He remembers mercy: He does not desire their destruction, but their complete salvation; He ceases therefore to accuse them, and invites them lovingly to look at the true state of the case between Him and them. If He were

extreme to mark iniquity, they could not abide, they could not stand in the trial with Him, they must be condemned. But He would not stand on justice; He would deal with them according to the multitude of His mercy; He would pardon their sin and wash it clean away. "The reddest possible sin should become through His mercy the purest white." "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Thus out of His free compassion God offers them pardon and cleansing; but it depends upon themselves whether His purpose for them shall be fulfilled or not. Blessing and cursing lay before them; if they were willing and obedient, they should eat the good of the land, living in peace and prosperity and God's blessing; but if they refused and rebelled, the sword should eat and devour them. Such is the Lord's sentence, and it cannot be gainsaid.

There is a pause in the mind of the Speaker after this appeal. He waits, as it were, to hear what answer the people would give to Him. Will they accept His gracious offer, and enter on the saving path of obedience and pardon opened for them? It was too much to hope for. Jerusalem was too far gone in sin, even for such undeserved mercy to pre-

vail with her. And therefore the Prophet breaks forth into a sad lament over the city which had fallen so utterly from its earlier virgin purity, and confesses that the conditions which God requires for pardon and acceptance (ver. 17) were sadly wanting. "How is the faithful city become an harlot?" She had not only broken her covenant with the Lord by following strange gods, but she had been unfaithful in heart, even when outwardly she clave to Him; as our Saviour says of the Jews of His time that they were "an adulterous generation," notwithstanding their outward profession of obedience. "It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers." The time had been, in the days of David and Solomon, and especially of Jehoshaphat, when Jerusalem had been full of justice; righteousness dwelt in her as in its home, but now it was the abode of murderers. "Thy silver is become dross, thy wine mixed with water." "The present was nothing but the dross and shadow of the past." "Thy princes are rebellious, the companions of thieves; every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them."

Therefore, as they would not accept the hand of

mercy, they must feel the stroke of judgment. The Divine sentence must go forth, "I will visit My adversaries, and avenge Me of My enemies." He will burn out their sins in the smelter of His judgments: "I will turn My hand against thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and all thy tin:" the *dross* should be purged, and He would not destroy Jerusalem itself, but only the ungodly in Jerusalem. And so the effect of the Divine judgment would be, that Jerusalem should be purified, and brought back to its original state. "I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning: after that shall be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed, and her converts with righteousness. The days of David would be restored, and the judgments upon sin and sinners would draw nearer to Himself—a promise which has its fulfilment in the true Zion of the Christian Church.

"And the destruction of the transgressors: the sinners shall be together, and they shall be consumed. The Lord shall be consumed." The false gods, their services under the oaks (or terebinths) in the pleasant gardens shall be all put away, and their idols and their worshippers shall be pro-

less, like a withered leaf and a waterless garden, for the worshipper and his idols shall bring destruction on each other, as the tow and the spark, when brought together, must cause flame, wherein both are consumed. The sinners in Jerusalem shall perish in their much-loved idolatries.

The afflictions which God sends on His Church and people are the truest token of His love, according to His own word, "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth." The profane and hypocrite may be destroyed thereby, but the faithful will be purified and strengthened, they will be redeemed more and more from the bondage of sin, and enabled to walk before God in righteousness and true holiness.

What a warning is there in this chapter against outward service and forms of worship without real obedience! Alas! there may be many Christians now to whom God says, "Your Church-going, your Church ordinances, your strictness and formality My soul hateth: I am weary to bear them;" because He sees that their hearts are given to covetousness, or dishonesty, or lust. At the same time, what comfort is there in the assurance that if we will but repent and amend, if we will cease to do evil and learn to do well, there is a fountain

opened for sin and for uncleanness, in which we may wash and be clean: not only may our most heinous sins be pardoned, but our souls may be cleansed, and we ourselves may become the very opposite of what we were before.

May the good Lord, in whatever way, purge and cleanse our wicked hearts, and lead us forth in the way of righteousness for His name's sake!

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah* ii.

AFTER the summary of rebuke and warning in the first chapter, *Isaiah* begins his prophecy anew with a fresh title: "The word that *Isaiah* the son of *Amoz* saw concerning *Judah* and *Jerusalem*." He speaks of the message which he had to deliver as "the word which he saw." "When men speak to one another their words are not seen, but heard; but when God spoke to the Prophet, it was in a way above the senses, and the mind qualified to perceive what is above the senses is altogether eye." Therefore the Prophet is said to have *seen* the word which God entrusted to him.

He begins his prophecy with a glowing description of the exaltation of *Jerusalem* in the last days.

This description is found also in the Prophet Micah (chap. iv.); and whether Isaiah took it from Micah, or whether both Isaiah and Micah took it from some other common source, it is, at all events, generally supposed that it was not in the first instance delivered by Isaiah. The spirit of prophecy sets before Isaiah's mind the prophetic utterance of another, and makes it the starting-point of the further message, with which he was charged. "It shall come to pass," the Prophet says, "in the last days," that is, in the times of the Messiah, "that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it." The Prophet declares that the mountain on which the Temple was built—that is, either Mount Moriah itself or the Mount of Zion, of which Moriah was considered a part—should one day tower above all the high places of the earth; the loftiest of the mountains shall only serve, as it were, for the foundations for Jerusalem to rest on. He beheld the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, and blending with the earthly Jerusalem, so that the glory of the heavenly was communicated to the earthly. The kingdom of Messiah, which should take its rise in Jeru-

salem, being once set up in the world, the peoples of the earth should flow into the gathering of the heathen into the Church, presented as if they were all journeying to Zion, exhorting and urging one another to receive the new revelation, which God should send from thence, for "out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." "The law of God and the word of the Lord shall begin from Jerusalem, as from a fountain, and shall flow through the whole world, water of life, to all who approached with faith."

And what will be the effect of this? It will unite the nations in the bonds of peace and harmony. They who have hitherto walked in their own ways, and followed selfishly their own interests, shall acknowledge the great Messiah as their King. His Spirit shall convince them of their sin and sin, and His reign shall be a reign of peace and peace. "He shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Not only was there peace in the world when Christ was born,

effect of the Gospel, wherever it is truly received, is to produce unity and concord among men ; and it cannot be denied that Christianity has, on the whole, greatly influenced the conduct of nations, and softened their former cruelty.

But more than this, "it is the uniform doctrine of the prophets, that, after every opposing enemy of the kingdom of God shall have been subdued, it will be exalted to a glorified condition, in which the peace, whereby its members have been inwardly blessed, shall also outwardly prevail in the whole conduct of the people, nay, even in the irrational part of the creation ; and all discord which originated with the fall of man, and all destruction, shall cease." It is to this period that this prophecy in its highest sense refers.

Thus Isaiah refreshes the souls of the faithful with a vision of a coming dispensation of holiness and peace ; and having finished the quotation from the old prophecy, he calls on the people to walk worthy of their glorious future : "O house of Jacob, come and let us walk in the light of the Lord," that is, according to the will of Him Who had just revealed His gracious purpose for them.

It was high time, indeed, that they should begin to turn to the Lord, and walk in His way, and

The Prophet then proceeds to enumerate all the high things, on which that day should fall, coupling them, it will be observed, in pairs. First he specifies all things lofty in nature, "upon all the cedars of Lebanon, which are high and lifted up, and upon all the oaks of Bashan; upon all the high mountains, and upon all the hills that are lifted up." Then he mentions all that was great and glorious among the works of man, his forts, and ships, and articles of curiosity; "upon every high town, and upon every fenced wall; upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures." The storm of God's judgment will dash to the ground all that is grand and noble in nature and in art, and frail man too will perish in his pride: "The loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of man shall be made low; and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day."

"And the idols He shall utterly abolish," or rather, as it is in the margin, "the idols shall utterly pass away:" they were really nothing, and they shall pass into nothing; their images, their names, and their memories shall perish (Zech. xii. 2). And their worshippers, flying from before their Judge, will be glad to hurl them away into any

corner, to be hidden with the moles and the bats, while they themselves will seek to find refuge in the rocks and caves, "for fear of the Lord and for the glory of His Majesty, when He ariseth to shake terribly the earth."

If then, so the Prophet concludes, everything that is great in man shall be brought low, and if he is himself so frail that his life hangs on a mere breath, over which he himself has no power, who will venture to trust in him? "Cease ye from man," leave off putting any confidence in him, "in whose nostril is a breath; for at what is he to be esteemed?" The worth of man, regarded in himself, and apart from God, is really nothing.

This is the great lesson of this chapter—the nothingness of man in the presence of the great God. How strange it is that frail and feeble man should be proud, or should venture to trust in himself or in his fellow-man! He has nothing worth having that he has not received. Whatever is great and good in him is God's gift; everything else will one day be destroyed. And yet how readily do men blind their eyes to the truth, and please themselves with reflecting on what they are, or fancy they are, or on what they have, or on what they have done. With one it is high birth,

with another it is wealth, with another large possessions, with another reputation in the world, with others cleverness, or learning, or skill, or personal appearance; how easy it is for men to find some excuse for indulging high thoughts of themselves and contemptuous thoughts of others. But of all the thoughts that men can indulge, these are the most vain and untrue; and they who take pleasure in them are preparing for themselves a most terrible revulsion. For not only will this outer world, which ministers to men's pride, their houses and lands, their pomps and luxuries, and their costly array, be swallowed up in the great fire of the last day; but they themselves shall be brought down and humbled, those haughty looks and proud words and thoughts will be changed into thoughts of bitter self-reproach and accents of despair. How will men curse their former pride, when they find themselves standing in their nakedness and destitution before the throne of the great God, and perceive what they really are—so different from what in their blind folly they imagined themselves to be. May God's Holy Spirit open our eyes, and teach us not only that humility is the way to greatness, and that pride goeth before a fall, but that even now humility is truth and pride a lie. So shall we

learn to cease from man, and especially from themselves, knowing and acknowledging themselves to be really worthless, nothing to be accounted

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah*

It was not without a special purpose that at the close of the second chapter the Prophet rebuked the people earnestly against trusting in man. (He goes on immediately to say) the Lord was on the point of visiting them with judgment by taking away their means of support, their staff of bread and water; He would remove also all the men of authority and thus the whole stay of order and well-being in the land. The most terrible confusion would follow, but the reckless would have any authority, so great would be the distraction, that a man who was but able to clothe himself decently was asked to undertake the government. “Judah (he says) is ruined, and Judah is fallen, their tongues and their doings are as a snare, to provoke the eyes of His glory, to look at them, he seems to add; they are as worthless as Sodom; they forget and des

eternal rule, that it is well for the righteous and evil for the wicked; their leaders mislead them, their princes oppress them. Therefore God would contend with their rulers, and call them to account for treading down His vineyard, and grinding the faces of His poor. Look again at these women, he says, with their haughty gait and wanton looks, with their jewels, and their head-gear, and their fine dresses: the Lord would take them all away. Instead of the scent which they carried with them, there should be the smell of corruption; instead of the fair girdle, a rope round the body to lead them away as slaves; baldness instead of the embroidered hair; a frock of sackcloth instead of the wide mantle, and burning instead of beauty—the brand which is stamped on slaves. Losing their husbands in war, they would sink into the deepest misery, and women would go in search of husbands instead of men seeking for wives. Jerusalem, bereft of her sons and daughters, shall sit on the bare ground, weary and desolate.

But after the fire of judgment shall come the happy time of which the Prophet had spoken in the beginning of the second chapter; in that day the Branch of the Lord shall appear in all His glory, and the faithful remnant of His people shall

be blessed. Thus, in the Lesson now the Prophet returns to the point from which he started at the commencement of the Lesson, when he sets forth in a quotation from some older Prophet the exaltation of Zion "on that day," that is, after the punishment of the godly, "the Branch of the Lord shall be fruitful and glorious," or rather, shall be for the glory, "and the fruit of the earth shall be abundant and comely," shall be for pride and glory, "for them that are escaped of Israel, the remnant, that is, that has escaped the sword, and been saved from destruction. "The Fruit of the Lord" and "the Branch of the Lord" are evidently one and the same Person, the coming Messiah, the King of the future, the coming Messiah, "the Branch" or sprout "of the Lord," which the Lord had planted in the earth, which He would cause to spring up as the glory and glory of His people. He was also "the Fruit of the earth," the special and most excellent which the land of Israel would produce. In a reference here, we can scarcely doubt the Lord's double origin: He would come, on the one hand, from the Lord; on the other hand, from the earth; just as, in the well-known passage

Christ's temporal birth in Bethlehem and His everlasting procession from the Father are set side by side (Micah v. 2).

“And it shall come to pass, that he that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem.” The remnant whom the Divine Redeemer shall bless and adorn and glorify shall become God's covenant people, the true Zion, the Church of the future, and their chief characteristic will be that they shall be holy. Whereas before, in Jerusalem, the righteous and the ungodly were mingled together, in the new kingdom those only shall have part who represent in their lives the holiness of the Head, according to the command, “Be ye holy, for I am holy.” This is the constant doctrine of the prophets. “Thy people shall be all righteous,” says Isaiah (lx. 21); and Jeremiah and Ezekiel promise that in the days of the Messiah God would give them a heart of flesh instead of the heart of stone (Jer. xxxi. 33; Ezek. xxxvi. 20). It is further said of this holy people, this remnant of grace, that they are written among the living in Jerusalem, or, in the language of the New Testament, their names are in the Book of

Life. To enter the name of any one in that book, is to appoint him to life ; to blot out his name, is to appoint him to death. This is the most glorious thing that can be said of them, that they are members of the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem ; as the Psalm says, " Of Zion it shall be said, this and that man were born there ; they shall count when He writeth up the nation, that this man was born there " (Ps. lxxxvii. 5, 6)

This happy condition of the chosen remnant shall be " when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by the spirit of judgment and by the word of burning," that is, after His judgments have fallen upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem. His Spirit has sifted and purged away the poison of their women and the blood-guiltiness of their men. Then, God's blessing shall rest upon the remnant. " And the Lord shall create upon the dwelling-place of Mount Zion, and upon the assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and a shining of a flaming fire by night." Just as the Lord guided and protected the Israelites in the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night, which either moved

them like a pillar or floated over them as a roof, so He promises to be present with His Church and with every portion of it, to enlighten, protect, and guide it. "For upon all the glory shall be a defence," or rather a canopy; Zion, that is, the Church, shall be all glory, as her inhabitants are all holiness; and over all the glory the presence of God shall be spread like a canopy, shading yet enlightening, defending yet adorning it.

And the Church, thus protected by the Divine presence, will be a safe retreat from all dangers and troubles: "It shall be a tabernacle for a shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain." Afflictions and troubles can no more injure those who have taken refuge in her, than the heat and rain can injure him who is under the shelter of a thick tent.

This prophecy of the Church as a refuge in trouble must be joined on, as was said above, with the prophecy of the Church established on the top of the mountains and drawing the nations into it. This mountain of Zion, roofed over with a cloud by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night, is none other than the mountain of the Lord's House which was to be exalted above the

mountains, and to which all the nations
and this Jerusalem, so holy within and
without, is no other than the place from
word of the Lord should go forth in
world. Taken together, they complete
of the Church of Christ, the home of t
throughout the world, overshadowed ever
gracious presence. Into that sacred pr
have been admitted; as the Apostle says
come unto Mount Zion, and unto the
living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, a
innumerable company of angels, to th
assembly and church of the firstborn
written in heaven, and to God the Ju
and to the spirits of just men made perfe
Jesus the mediator of the new covenan
the blood of sprinkling." The Church
dwelling-place; and there, where He c
may find refuge from the trials and d
ments of the world. The Jews of old h
refuge in the Temple at Jerusalem.
devout among them loved to hide thems
the outer world, and to be soothed and
by the special presence of God there v
The spiritual temple of God's Church is
more than the visible Temple was to t

There we may turn away from the world, and delight ourselves in the thought of the love of God and the grace of Christ, and the communion of the Holy Ghost; there in that Holy Mountain the angels dwell, and the saints departed are our companions, and the cloud of the Divine glory rests upon it. It is not merely that we have, each one of us, as individuals, access to God through Jesus Christ, but we belong to a society spread throughout the world, which is especially the society of God's favoured ones, His own family and people, whom He has gathered to Himself, and whom He has united to each other by the common inheritance of His electing love, and the presence of the same indwelling Spirit. We shut ourselves out from much comfort and strength if we refuse to let our minds dwell on this communion with the Holy Church throughout the world, which is our privilege as Christians. We belong to that everlasting city, in which God has fixed His abode, and where we are fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God. What fellowship can be more glorious, more satisfying than this? We have but to close our eyes to the world, and kneel down in prayer, and we are at once in the immediate presence of God and in the society of

saints and angels ; we are uniting our
all that is great and good and glorious
visible world. We need not therefore
world for comfort, nor stay ourselves
of sight. We have a blessed home
Church, which we may realise by faith
which at all times we may fly for refuge
pray to God to enlighten the eyes of
standing, that we may know what is
His calling, and what the riches of the
inheritance in the saints, and, know
rejoice therein !

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT.

MORNING LESSON.—*Isaiah v.*

THE parable of the vineyard which had disappointed its owner is here given in the form of a song, which the Lord, Whom the Prophet calls his well-beloved, condescended to sing. We may imagine the Prophet standing in some public place and calling to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, “Come now, I will sing of my well-beloved, a song of my beloved touching His vineyard.” The song is as follows :—

“ My beloved hath a vineyard
 In a very fruitful hill :
 And He planted it, and gathered out the
 stones thereof,
 And planted it with the choicest vine :
 And built a tower in the midst of it,
 And also made a wine-press therein :
 And He looked that it should bring forth
 grapes,
 And it brought forth wild grapes.”

Thus Almighty God sets forth His care for His

people and their ill return. And to the side His dignity, He condescends to them, and ask their judgment on the conduct of them. Was it possible, He asks, for I have done more for His vineyard than He has done? Why then had it so failed to answer to His care? He pauses as it were for their answer. When by their silence they admitted the truth of His expostulation, He proceeds to pass His judgment upon them. "Let Me show you then what I will do with My vineyard. Take away its stones, and it shall be eaten down: break down its wall, and it shall be trodden down. And I will plant it with thorns, and it shall not be pruned nor digged; and I will let it grow up in thorns and thistles; and I will command the clouds to rain no rain upon it."

It was scarcely necessary, after this, to explain the true meaning of the parable; but the author thinks fit to add: "The vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel, and the pleasant plant: and He looked for fruit, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry"—the cry of the oppressed. The parable applies to the whole house of Israel, and especially to Judah, with whom the Lord was more immediately concerned.

There would seem to be a meaning also in the several parts of the parable. The rich mountain was Canaan, flowing with milk and honey; the digging of the vineyard and clearing it of stones was the driving out of its former cruel and heathen inhabitants; the tower which He built, partly for ornament and partly for defence, was "Jerusalem as the royal city with Zion the royal fortress"; "the wine-press was the Temple, where, according to Psalm xxxvi. 8, the wine of heavenly pleasures flows in streams, and from which the thirst of the soul may be quenched"; the removal of the hedge and the treading down of the vineyard were the capture and destruction of the city.

The Prophet then goes on to instance the several kinds of sin for which God's judgments would fall on His people, the various sad fruits of which He complained, and on which, one after the other, he pronounces "Woe" six times. He begins by denouncing their covetousness and avarice as the root of all evil. By oppression and wrong they endeavoured to absorb all the houses and lands in the country, till they should be left alone, and none other settled in the land. Such grasping was the more blameworthy because the law provided strictly for an equal distribution of the

land, and for the return of any that was alienated to the family to whom it belonged in the fiftieth year. But the Prophet hears the Lord sounding in his ears, and that, as a fitting punishment, the houses, for which they risked their souls, should remain empty, and the land should be desolate. So great should be the scarcity, that an acre of eight acres should produce but one bushel, and a vine should yield but one-third less than eight gallons of wine, and a fig-tree would yield but one-tenth part of the fruit, an ephah being the tenth part of an omer.

The second Woe is directed against intemperance and luxury—against those who were up early in the morning that they might drink strong drink, and continued till night, when it inflamed them. But in all their festivities and revelry they forgot God; they had no eye for the work of God, or for the day of His hand. Therefore, as they lived without thought of judgment, judgment should come upon them suddenly; they should go in to the grave without knowing it; their rich and luxurious should starve, and the riotous multitude should be dried up with thirst. Hell—that is, the world—would open her mouth and

wild revelry, as ~~the~~ earth swallowed up Dathan and his ~~company~~; so that their pomp, and multitude, and noise, and he that rejoiced, would go down into it. Hades opens, and high and low sink into it. The mean man is brought down, and the mighty man is humbled, and the eyes of the lofty are humbled. That which exalted itself to heaven shall be brought down to hell, and then the Lord of Hosts will be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and the waste places of the fat ones shall the strangers eat. "The consequence of their surfeiting in eating and drinking will be, that hell shall swallow them up, and their land shall become a wilderness for cattle to graze in, and strangers shall eat its produce."

The third great offence which the Prophet denounces is presumptuous defiance of God's judgments. "Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart-rope!" Like brute beasts they were harnessed to sin, and therefore to the punishment of sin, which they went on dragging further and further, in utter ignorance of the waggon behind them. They would not believe that the day of the Lord

would come; they called out in defiance, "O Lord, our God, Him make speed and hasten His work, that we may see it; and let the counsel of the Lord prosper, that Israel draw near and come, that we may see it."

They scorned the Prophets of the Lord, who spoke of the Holy One of Israel, and His judgments; they took up the name of the Lord from the Prophet's mouth, and so they separated God and the Prophets together.

The fourth Woe is directed against those who confounded the distinction between good and evil, by giving false names to actions: "Woe to them that say, Good and good evil, that put darkness for light, that put bitter for sweet, that put sweet for bitter." Sin is essentially bitter; but these men refused to admit either its darkness or its bitterness.

The Prophet next denounces those who were themselves too wise to need instruction, and preferring their own reasonings to the revelation of God, "who were wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight."

His last denunciation is for those who were noted and renowned for their wisdom and confidence, and who judged unjustly and tyrannically, in order that they might have the means

fyng their love of drink. "Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink; which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him." "Therefore"—on account of these terrible crimes, because they had cast away the law of the Lord and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel—*therefore* God denounces most terrible vengeance upon them: as stubble and hay shrink up before the flaming fire, so their root and blossom shall be quickly seized by the fire of the Divine judgment, the root inwardly destroyed as by rottenness, the blossom flying away like dust and ashes,—“therefore is the anger of the Lord kindled against His people, and He hath stretched forth His hand against them, and hath smitten them; and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets.” If in these words the Prophet is looking back to the past, the reference may be to the earthquake in the time of Uzziah (Amos i. 1; Zech. xiv. 5); but it is more probably a future judgment that he sees, and then it may be supposed that he points to the terrible calamities which Judah suffered in the time of Ahaz from Syria and Israel (2 Chron. xxviii. 5, 6). But for

all this, as the Prophet foresees, the Lord would not turn aside, as it was to do, when He was satisfied; His still remain stretched out over Judah strike again.

In the remaining verses the Prophet whence the punishment should come any neighbouring nation, but from off, from Assyria. The Lord will ensign on some lofty mountain to su armies to battle; or He will hiss to keeper of bees, to bring the swarms and then, behold, they will come swiftly. Notwithstanding their long one is exhausted, not one stumbles; not by the way for sleep; not a girdle nor a shoe-latchet broken. Their arms to be perfect as they approach near; their are sharpened, all their bows bent; their hoofs are strong as flint; their chariots the whirlwind. How irresistible is their onslaught in battle! their war-cry roaring of young lions in the fulness strength: they roar and lay hold of the carry it away safely, and none shall And what is far worse, and shows the

terposition against Judah, "it thunders in the heaven on him who looks upward for help, like the roaring of the sea." Above or below there is no help or comfort. "And when one again turns the eye towards the earth, the light is darkened in thick gloom."

The history of the private sins and punishment of the Jews, as set forth in this chapter, deeply concerns ourselves. Surely it may be said of us that the good Lord has done for us all that He could have done, that He has neglected no possible cultivation of our souls. And having taken so much care, He has a right to expect abundant fruit. We know what that fruit is which He demands—the fruit of the Spirit; and we know also that if we are unfaithful He will undo all that He has done for us and leave us to ourselves. What a terrible hour will that be for any Christian soul when the merciful God gives him up and forsakes him! But so long as life lasts, such need not be the lot of any. The Holy Spirit is always ready to sanctify our hearts, so that we may bring forth the fruits of holiness. Only let us yield ourselves to His gracious working; then His hand will be stretched out, not to strike, but to heal; then will He watch over us with unsleep-

ing care, and cause us to be fruitful trees of righteousness, trees of His own planting, in His glorious and everlasting vineyard.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah xi. to*

THIS Lesson belongs to a long prophetic chapter which, beginning at the fifth verse of chapter, seems to have been a single outburst of the Prophet. It was intended to comfort the remnant of Judah in their fear of Assyria. The words of the prophecy (x. 5) give the key to the whole. The Assyrian was but a rod in the Lord's hand for the execution of His will. God sent him to plunder and subdue the nations with whom He was wroth; but he in his pride was not satisfied to be a dependent instrument; he deemed himself a free agent; he boasted that he was a king of kings, that the various nations which had fallen before him, that he had taken Samaria the capital of Israel as he had taken Damascus the capital of Syria, that his gods of Samaria had not been able to stand before his power, how could Judah expect to stand before him? the Prophet declares that the Lord would

solent arrogance ; the axe or the staff could no power against him who wielded them. Assyrians might seem to themselves to be and strong, but a treacherous sickness would me them ; the fire of God's wrath would oy them as a mass of thorns ; and the ant of God's people would return to their helper ; they would no longer stay themselves on him that smote them, that is, upon the rians, whose help Ahaz had invoked against combination of Syria and Israel, but on the l of Hosts, the Holy One of Israel. There- since the punishment of the Assyrians was ain, the Prophet encouraged Judah not to be d of them, although, like the Egyptians of they might lift up the taskmaster's rod over n. For yet a little while, and the heavy wrath God would fall upon Assyria, and He would ig His scourge over him, as over Midian and rpt in former times.

The Prophet then goes on to describe the rapid ech of the Assyrian army against Jerusalem ; n after town falls before them ; the inhabitants terror-stricken, and fly in hopeless confusion. length they reach Jerusalem ; the Temple is in ht, and, secure of victory, they shake their hand

in their pride against the mountain of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem. But suddenly they fall by the hand of God, and not of man. The army of Assyria stands up against Mount Zion, like Lebanon with its forest of cedar; but it is hewn down by the axe of the Mighty One, and its pride humbled for ever. "Behold, the Lord of Hosts lops the boughs with terror; the tall trees are cut down, the lofty trees are felled; He cuts down the thickets with the axe, and Lebanon falls by the hand of the Mighty One."

And now observe what follows upon this description of the Lord hewing down the army of Sennacherib. The Prophet makes no mention of the relief thus brought to Jerusalem and her inhabitants; he passes by Hezekiah and the hope of peace and prosperity and improvement which he might now begin to encourage; he looks forward to a time when the house of David should have fallen into obscurity, but when a happy and glorious time should come for Israel under the reign of the Messiah: "There shall come forth a sprout from the cut-down trunk of Jesse, and a sucker shall bud forth from among his roots."

There are passages in the Prophets which speak of the perpetuity of David's throne (2 Sam. vii. 13),

but there are other places, such as this passage of Isaiah, which represent it as stripped of all temporal rule and grandeur. Now, it is certain that after the seventy years' exile David's line was not restored. There was great respect felt for and shown to Zerubbabel, but he was not set on the throne. ~~The crowns~~ which Zechariah was directed to make, were to be placed, not on the head of Zerubbabel, but on the head of Joshua, the son of Josedech, the high priest; the sovereignty was to be with him: "He shall bear the glory, and shall sit to rule upon his throne" (Zech. vi. 10—13). These two contrary things, the fall of David's throne and its establishment for ever, were to be fulfilled in Christ, according to the announcement of the angel, "The Lord shall give unto Him the throne of His father David; and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of His kingdom there shall be no end."

It is of this kingdom of the Messiah and its happy calm that the Prophet draws a picture in this Lesson. The stem of Jesse would be prostrate; but from its stump would come forth a sucker, which should become a tree and be covered with fruit. The Lord Jehovah would acknowledge Him and consecrate Him for His work with His Spirit

—that Spirit which, inwardly, is a Spirit of wisdom and understanding, in its outward manifestation, is a Spirit of counsel and might, a Spirit to execute with firm resolve, and then resolutely to carry out, and, in regard to religious purpose and end, is a Spirit of knowledge, that is, of knowledge of God, of love, and of fear. This expected King, the Son of Jesse, will stand for an ensign of the peace of the Gentiles will seek Him, He will be the center and point of the world's hopes, the true center of the government. Righteousness, equity, wisdom, and strict faithfulness, will mark His administration. He will not be dependent, like a human monarch, upon the evidence of His senses; He will not judge after the sight of His eyes, nor rely upon the hearing of His ears; He will rely upon the infallibility of a perfect moral insight. Beneath the shadow of His throne all that is by nature proud, and evil among the sons of men, shall have the habits of tenderness, humility, and love. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion, and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them." The reign of moral and spiritual graces, of innocence, of simplicity, shall succeed to the reign of physical and brutish

The old sources of moral danger will become harmless through His protecting presence and blessing. "The sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice den ;" and in the end, "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."

Such is the glowing picture which the Prophet draws of the kingdom of the Messiah, which was to spread throughout the world, and convert men to its sway. But observe, once more, whence it was to spring. This great King, Who was to rule over the house of David for ever, was at first but a tender plant, a root out of a dry ground ; it was a shoot from a hewn-down stump, which would grow up into a mighty tree, and become an ensign for the nations. And so it was. Born in lowliness and poverty, His life and death corresponded with that beginning. He was despised and rejected of men, and there was no beauty in Him that they should desire Him. That tender, helpless Babe lying in the manger, that Man of Sorrows, that suffering servant of God hanging on the Cross, was destined to become the King of the world, the Almighty Ruler of the hearts and lives of men. In him, pre-eminently, God's strength was made

perfect in weakness. Dry and cold and barren was the ground of human nature from which He sprang ; but the fruit of the tender plant which grew up from thence is the redemption and deliverance of the world. And hence it has been a law of His kingdom that lowly beginnings lead to great results. It was for this reason that Christ “ sprang up as a shoot out of a worn-out root, as a tender plant from a dry ground, in order that He might raise the fallen and strengthen the weak, that He might plant, and train up, and water, and carefully tend, and bring to perfection, the frail and tender plant of heavenly virtues in our stony and barren hearts.” In each one of us it is God’s will that our weakness should be made strong by His might. Let us lay the foundation deep in humility and self-distrust, and our spiritual building shall rise to heaven.

The lesson, then, of this picture of Christ’s blessed and glorious kingdom is a lesson of hope and trust. Look upon that tender shoot which issued from the decayed stock of Jesse ; look on Him in the cradle and in the grave, and then think of the mighty, glorious, triumphant work which He has accomplished. Think of the root of Jesse which has become the ensign to the people.

Think of that kingdom of grace and power, which has come also to you, and rejoice in the thought that through His strength, however weak, or feeble, or defiled you may be in yourself, you may become strong, and gain the victory over your enemies. His triumph is a pledge, as well as the cause, of yours. He will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground. He will turn the hard rock into a standing water, and the flint-stone into a springing well. If you will claim your portion in Him, His strength will be made perfect even in your weakness. The path along which you have to travel may be full of difficulty, it may be overclouded by the shadows of past sin and of present weakness, yet, if you will look up to Christ, He will be to you the source of life and peace and holiness; He will strengthen you in your struggles against sin; He will guide you amid the ensnaring cares and occupations of this troublesome world; and, as the hour of your departure draweth near, He will cheer you with an ever-brightening hope of His everlasting love.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah* xxiv.

THE group of eleven chapters, from the thirteenth to the twenty-third, contain a collection of utterances, each of which is called a "burden," and denounces God's judgment on some heathen nation. Then follows another group, of four chapters, in which the Prophet sums up the particular judgments in one general denunciation on the world at large, and breaks forth into a song of praise and thanksgiving for the salvation which shall be vouchsafed in the time of the Messiah.

In the chapter before us, the Prophet describes the desolation that shall come on the whole world at the last; it is a desolation which shall bring all to the same condition, high and low, priests and prophets, rich and poor; it takes in not only the land of Israel but the whole earth, for so the word "land" in the third verse should be translated. The earth has become like a faded plant, withered up by the heat; it has become profaned and defiled through the wickedness of those who dwell in it; its inhabitants have "transgressed the laws," the law written in their hearts, "set at naught the ordinances, broken the everlasting covenant:" therefore the fire of the Divine anger burns up the earth,

and it is withered, and the inhabitants vanish away, until there are only a few left. All sources of joy and gladness are destroyed; wine and music have disappeared; and even if there was anything left which might give enjoyment, the tastes of the men themselves turn it into bitterness. "The city of confusion," that is, not any particular city, but the central city of the world, in which the world's power and the world's pleasures are concentrated, "is broken to pieces;" the vineyards, one of the special natural sources of joy, are destroyed; the sun of joy is set; what remains of the city is desolation; this is all that is left: in the whole circuit of the earth there is only a small remnant to be found, no more than there are of olives or grapes after the great gathering has taken place.

This mention of the remnant makes the Prophet interrupt for a moment his lamentation. He hears them in their dispersion breaking forth in songs of praise; they cry aloud from the sea, that is, from the west; they praise the Lord in the fires, that is, in the land of lights, or the sun-rising. From east and west the summons goes forth to praise the Lord, the God of Israel. And the appeal is not made in vain. "From the uttermost part of the earth we have heard songs, honour to the righteous;" that is,

either to the Righteous One, or to the righteous man, whose faith has endured the fire of God's judgments.

But the Prophet returns immediately to the sufferings which will have to be endured before these songs will break forth; and he cannot look on those sufferings without sharing them himself. "Then I said," that is, he said when in a state of ecstasy, when the vision of the great judgment was present to him, "My leanness, my leanness," or rather "consumption or ruin to me, ruin to me! I must perish, woe to me! Robbers rob, and, robbing, they rob as robbers. Pitiful fear, pitfall and fall are upon them, O inhabitants of the land!" There is a similarity of sound in the words which the Prophet here heaps upon one another, which it has been attempted to reproduce in the above translation. The Prophet sees a band of treacherous, bloodthirsty men preying upon their fellows and on their goods, terrifying them in order that they may fall into the snare.

But these human persecutors are really God's instruments; it is His wrath which is over them and under them; and there is no more possibility of escape than from the Deluge.

The coming judgment is also described as an

earthquake, with the same alliteration as before :
“The earth rending is rent asunder; the earth bursting is burst in pieces; the earth tottering totters; the earth reeling reeleth like a drunken man; it flutters like a tent; its transgression is heavy upon it; and it falls and rises not again.” There is here a kind of ascending climax. “The earth first of all receives rents, then gaping wide it bursts asunder, and finally sways to and fro once more and falls. It is no longer possible for it to keep upright. Its wickedness presses it down like a burden, so that it now reels like a drunken man, or a tent, until it falls never to rise again.”

“And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall punish the host of the high ones that are on high, and the kings of the earth upon the earth. And they shall be gathered together, as prisoners are gathered in the pit, and shall be shut up in the prison, and after many days shall they be visited.” This passage may have reference entirely to the punishment of earthly powers who are opposed to God, and the sense in that case will be that, “though the kings of the earth may exult for many days in their worldly pride, and in their proud opposition to God and to His truth; and though, in fond hope of fancied security, they may

ask with the scoffers, in the language of scorn and defiance, 'Where is the promise of His coming?' yet, after a time of long and merciful forbearance on His part, the Lord will come and punish all His adversaries. After many days they will be visited; and however they may flatter themselves with hopes of escape, the Day of Doom will certainly come, and He will punish the host of the high ones, and thrust them down into the pit of destruction." But another and deeper explanation has been given. "The host of the high ones," or rather the host of the high place, is supposed to mean the angelic host, especially the angels of nations and kingdoms. "There is a rabbinical saying to the effect that God never destroys a nation without having first of all destroyed its prince, that is, the angel, who by whatever means he first obtained possession of the nation, whether by the will of God or against His will, has exerted an ungodly influence upon it. Just as, according to the scriptural view, both good and evil angels attach themselves to particular men, so do angels contend for the rule over nations and kingdoms, either to guide them in the way of God, or to lead them astray from God; and therefore the judgment upon the nations which the Prophet here foretells will be judgment upon angels also. The

kingdom of spirits has its own history running parallel to the destinies of man." When it is said that the angels are thrust down into prison, it must refer to the abyss of Hades, where they are reserved in chains of darkness unto the judgment of the great Day (2 Peter ii. 4; Jude 6). "What St. John in the Book of Revelation describes in detail (Rev. xx. 1—3 and xxi.), the Prophet here sees condensed into one fact, namely, the enthroning of Jehovah and His people in the new Jerusalem, at which the silvery white moon turns red, and the glowing sun turns pale; the two great lights of heaven becoming, according to a Jewish expression, 'like a lamp at noonday' in the presence of such glory."

What a terrible picture have we in this Lesson of the desolation and misery that will come upon the earth in the last days—a picture which agrees with our Lord's own account, when He says "There shall be great tribulation, such as was not from the beginning of the world to this time;" "nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes in divers places;" "there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars, and upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity: the sea and the waves

roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth; and the powers of heaven shall be shaken." All hope and peace and joy shall cease; the earth itself will be under a curse on account of the sin of man; it will be made waste and empty, and at length burnt up, and utterly destroyed before the creation of the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

But in the midst of this judgment and desolation, a remnant shall be saved, who shall lift up their voices and praise God for the salvation He has vouchsafed to them. From the east and west there will arise a chorus of thanksgiving from those who shall survive the destruction of the world, and shall be permitted to enter through the gates into the heavenly Jerusalem. For the last verse of the chapter suggests a very different picture from that which was presented in the earlier part: we are lifted up from the sin and confusion and misery of earth, from the conflagration and convulsion which will precede the end of all things, to the calm and peaceful heaven, where the great King sits upon His glorious throne, with His saints and angels round Him.

Terrible things are coming on the earth, times

of tribulation and of sifting and judgment; but in the end there will be peace—peace to those who have endeavoured to walk with God, and who have fled for refuge to the hope that is set before them.

Whether we shall see with our own eyes the troubles that shall precede the final judgment, or whether we shall not rise from our graves until the final judgment itself—however that may be, we certainly may have our portion in the peace and glory which shall follow, if we will. Let us only watch and pray, and strive to keep ourselves pure, and then, when the judgment comes, in whatever form it may fall on us, we may look up and lift up our heads, because our redemption draweth near, our complete redemption in soul and body, and we shall be permitted to enter into the glorious eternal liberty of the sons of God in heaven, where the Lord of Hosts reigns before His ancients gloriously.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT.

MORNING LESSON.—*Isaiah xxv.*

HERE we have the Church's song of praise for the salvation which God has wrought for her, and the overthrow of her oppressors. In its fulness it belongs to the end of the present dispensation, when the kingdoms of the world shall have passed away, and Christ's throne shall be established, and His people shall rejoice and sing for their complete deliverance.

When God's judgments on the earth are accomplished, and the Church finds herself safe and free, then, looking back and exulting in her deliverance, she will burst forth and say, "O Lord, Thou art my God; I will exalt Thee, I will praise Thy name: for Thou hast done wonderful things; counsels of old, faithfulness, truth." God has fulfilled His ancient purposes towards His Church, and manifested thereby His truth and faithfulness. He has destroyed the power of the world, her cities and palaces; and this destruction has been followed by the conversion of the heathen. "Therefore a

strong people glorify Thee, the city of terrible nations fear Thee." What is this but an anticipation of the vision of St. John in the Revelation, where they who have overcome the beast—that is, the power of the world arrayed against God—are represented as standing upon the sea of glass, having harps of gold? As the children of Israel, standing on the shore of the Red Sea, which had swallowed up their foes, sang their song of triumph, so these victorious ones, whom St. John saw, "sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvellous are Thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are Thy ways, Thou King of saints. Who shall not fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? for Thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before Thee; for Thy judgments are made manifest" (Rev. xv. 3, 4).

It will then manifestly appear that the Lord has protected His Church from age to age, in all her distresses. He has been "a strength" (*lit.*, stronghold or fortress) "to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, shelter from the storm, and shade from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones was as a storm against the wall," sounding against it and bursting upon it, without being able to wash it away. As the Lord can

subdue the glaring heat in a dry place, that is, in the parching wilderness—as the heat, however intense, gives way when He spreads out a cloud for a covering—so has He brought down the noise of the strangers, the tumult of the wild hordes that stormed against His people. “And the branch,” or rather the song of triumph, “of the terrible ones,” which “passed over the world like a scorching heat,” has been brought low. The Church remembers how in all her course, let her condition have been ever so low, and the rage of her enemies, temporal and spiritual, ever so fierce, the Lord has been ever a defence and refuge; not only has He overthrown her foes in the end, but even in the time of trouble her faith in Him has given her peace and hope; the cloud of His presence has been her protection and her comfort when the fiery heat of persecution was beating down upon her.

Hitherto the Prophet has addressed Almighty God Himself; the first verses of the chapter are a hymn of praise put into the mouth of the Church, in which she adores the truth and faithfulness of God, and the protection which He has ever afforded her. Now the Prophet sees a vision of the Church herself in her glory and blessedness. As our

Saviour promised that many should come from the east and west, and should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, so the Prophet declares that the Lord of Hosts shall prepare in that mountain—that is, on Mount Zion, the seat of God's presence and the home of the Church—"for all nations a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees," that is, wine which has been thoroughly fermented and kept a long time, and hence both strong and clear, "of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined."

This is a prophecy of that "marriage supper of the Lamb" to which the faithful will be admitted hereafter—that fulness of blessedness in perfect communion with God, which is so often set forth in Scripture under the figure of a feast. And it is to be "unto all people." The nations of the world will not only submit themselves to the Lord, but they shall be admitted to share the blessedness of His Church; they shall be satisfied with the good things of His house, and be made to drink of His pleasures as out of the river.

"And He will destroy" (*lit.*, swallow up) "in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil which is spread over all nations."

“The face,” that is, the surface, “of the covering,” is the veil itself, as lying on the earth. The reference is to the ignorance and unbelief which were spread like a veil or covering over all the world. “The figure is a highly poetical one. As on a mountain in the early morning, the sun rising on the eastern hills swallows up the mists and clouds and reveals all the beauties of the landscape to the eye of the benighted traveller, so, in the mountain of the Lord’s house, the Sun of righteousness will by the brightness of His presence swallow up the clouds of darkness and error in which the nations were sitting, and unfold all the glorious landscape of truth and love revealed in the word of God.”

And not only will He swallow up the veil of ignorance and sin which is spread over the earth, but in the end He will swallow up that which is the consequence of sin, namely, death. By the glorious resurrection of the Last Day, death will be swallowed up into victory; its dominion will be completely broken; there will be no more death, neither will there be any more sorrow; the Lord will wipe away the tears from every face, and all reproach and shame will be removed for ever. In that day, when Christ will appear as the Conqueror of sin

and death, and as the Saviour of His people both in body and soul, with what holy joy and exultation will they welcome Him! "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us; this is the Lord; we have waited for Him, we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation." They may have had long to wait for Him; there may have been much sorrow and confusion and distress; but the time will come at last when every tear shall be dried and the last enemy destroyed, and all sin and sorrow at an end; when they that have waited long shall wait no longer, but every desire shall be fulfilled, and the redeemed shall find themselves in the eternal presence of Him Who has been their hope and portion. Then will they rejoice and shout for joy at being permitted with their own eyes to see the salvation of God.

In these last words the Prophet has again thrown himself forward, as it were, into the time of the end, and caught the echo of the joyful exclamation with which the Church of the redeemed rejoices in the presence of her Redeemer. Now he goes back for a moment to speak of the different end which awaits the enemies of His people: "In this mountain shall the hand of the Lord rest," the hand of the Lord shall descend on Mount Zion in mercy,

but on His enemies in vengeance, "and Moab shall be trodden down under Him." Moab is here named as the representative of the enemies of God. And it is said that he shall be trodden down as, when the sheaves have been threshed; the straw is trodden down in the dunghill. He may stretch forth his hands to extricate himself, as the swimmer spreads forth his hands to swim, but to no purpose. The Lord will bring down his pride in spite of the artifices, that is, the skilful and cunning movement, of his hands. It is thought by some that Almighty God is spoken of as He that shall spread forth His hands; in which case we must understand the meaning of the passage to be that He will execute His judgments upon His enemies with as great ease as the swimmer spreads forth his hands to swim. "They will be weak as water, and unable to resist Him, as water yields to the impulse of the swimmer's hands." Then He will abase their pride, and overthrow not their open violence only, but their secret wiles and artifices, and destroy all the strongholds of their power.

This Lesson takes us beyond this present world to the eternal shore where the Church rejoices in her complete deliverance—"sorrow vanquished, labour ended, Jordan past." But who are they

who shall take part in this song of praise, and shall be permitted to sit down at the marriage supper of the Lamb? They are they who have made God their refuge, and chosen Him for their portion during life; who have waited and longed for Him, detaching themselves in heart and affection from the world, and living in the things out of sight. They are they who are watching and looking for Christ, knowing that He will come, and desiring His coming, and anxious only to be ready when He comes. These are they who, when the voice from heaven proclaims, "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh," will welcome the joyful sound, and shall enter with Him to the marriage. "Blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching. . . . He shall gird Himself, and make them sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them. And if He shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants!"

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah* xxvi.

IN contrast with the shattered power of the world and the overthrow of its strongholds, foretold in

the close of the preceding chapter (xxv. 12), God's people rejoice in the heavenly Jerusalem and say, "We have a strong city: salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks." The walls of Jerusalem are "not dead stones, but ever-living and never-exhausted salvation." The salvation wrought in Christ is the defence and strength of the Church.

The gates of the heavenly city are thrown open to all in Christ, but they are thrown open in order that a righteous, truth-loving nation may enter in; just as in the Psalm (cxviii. 19, 20) the gates of the Temple are called "the gates of righteousness," because righteousness is the condition which God requires of His worshippers. Not only is it said of the future kingdom of glory that "there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth," but even here, in the kingdom of grace, whosoever would dwell in God's tabernacle, that is, draw near to Him and live in His presence, must "live an uncorrupt life, and do the thing that is right, and speak the truth from his heart" (Ps. xv. 1, 2). The safety, however, of the inhabitant of Zion does not depend on his own righteousness, but on his trust in God—"A heart firmly established God will keep in perfect peace:"

and why? "Because its trust is in Him." No heart can be firmly established and raised above fear, unless it leans upon and is supported by God (see Ps. cxii. 7, 8).

Therefore the cry goes forth, "Trust ye in the Lord for ever," lean upon Him with all your might; "for in Jah Jehovah is an everlasting rock." The combination "Jah Jehovah" is only met with here and in chapter xii. 2: it is the proper name of God the Redeemer in the most emphatic form. "Who is God but Jehovah? and who is a rock save our God?" The Lord has already proved Himself to be such a rock, for all those who opposed or oppressed His people He has cast down: "The oppression of those who have been hitherto oppressed is trodden down." At the same time, while the ungodly know not at what they stumble, "the path of the righteous is level:" He leads them in a straight, that is, a smooth and level path (Ps. cxliii. 10), where there is no fear of stumbling.

The Church is next represented as looking back on her past troubles—not, apparently, as yet from heaven, but from the peace and joy in which all her trials shall issue, before the final consummation—and remembering how she longed for the

manifestation of God's righteous judgment, which had since taken place: "We waited for Thee," she says, "in the way of Thy judgments; the desire of our soul was for Thy name and for Thy remembrance."

Then, identifying himself with the Church, the Prophet goes on, "With my soul I desired Thee in the night" (the night of affliction); "yea, with my spirit within me, I sought Thee:" he longed for the dawning of the morning, in the hope that God's manifestation of Himself in judgment might bring men to the knowledge of what was right. "Let favour be showed," that is, if favour be showed, "to the wicked," he says, "yet will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness he will deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the Lord." He despises the riches of God's goodness, and has no eye for His judgments on sin, so long as he himself is spared. The hand of the Lord has already been lifted up to protect His people and to put down His enemies, but he (the wicked) would not heed it; therefore he shall be made to feel it: "They shall see, and be ashamed for their envy at the people," or rather, "they shall see, while they are ashamed, the zeal for the people," that is, God's

jealous love for His people ; “ yea, the fire shall devour Thy enemies.”

The destruction of the adversaries will be the peace of God's people. The Lord shall establish peace for them ; and their hope that that peace will abide rests upon the fact that their happy condition is entirely God's work ; all their efforts were fruitless until God interposed : “ Lord, Thou wilt ordain peace for us ; for Thou also hast wrought all our works in us,” or rather “ for us ;” it was His doing, not theirs. They had, indeed, been subject to other lords, who had worked their will with them, but, by the help of the Lord, they were now set free, and enabled to honour and praise His holy name. Those other lords had now entirely disappeared : “ Dead men do not live, shadows do not rise again :” they had passed into the other world ; there was no possibility of their returning again to oppress God's people : “ thus had God visited and destroyed them, and made all their memory to perish.” His own people, on the other hand, had become great and numerous. “ Thou hast increased the nation, O Lord ; Thou hast increased the nation ; Thou art glorified ; Thou hast extended all the borders of the land.” This was done in answer to their prayer. As they

looked back on the past they remember how in times of trouble and chastisement they waited on God, and poured out their secret supplications unto Him. Many and many a time they had been like a travailing woman, writhing and crying out in pain, yet full of expectation ; but their hopes had been deceived, it was as if they brought forth wind : “ They brought no deliverance to the land, and the inhabitants of the world did not come to the light ;” there were no new-born children to re-people the desolate earth.

But a time of revival would come : “ Thy dead men shall live ; my dead bodies shall arise.” It is the voice of the Church, exulting in the thought of the great resurrection which should precede the final state of glory. Hence she cries out with joy, “ Awake and rejoice, ye inmates of the dust ; for thy dew is like dew on herbs ; earth shall cast out the dead.” “ As the dew quickens the vegetation which lies parched and dead, so the life-giving power of God shall quicken those who have been long dead.” Another explanation is sometimes given of this passage : “ Thy dead is the dew of lights,” that is, dew born out of the fulness of light, “ and the earth will bring shades to the day,” that is, will bring forth again the dead that

have sunken into it. "The dew from the glory of God falls like a heavenly seed into the bosom of the earth; and in consequence of this, the earth gives out from itself the shades which have hitherto been held fast beneath the ground, so that they appear alive again on the surface of the earth."

In the remaining verses of the chapter the Prophet speaks as a prophet, with a special word of counsel to those to whom his message was immediately addressed. He bids God's people continue for a little time in solitude and prayer, until the judgment of wrath shall have passed away. "Come, my people, enter thou into thy chamber, and shut thy door about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast." It is as if he said, "Hide thyself by faith and repentance in the secret chambers of religious meditation; wait there patiently for awhile, like those who flee from a storm; the time of thy tribulation will only be as it were for a moment, and then the indignation of the proud oppressors will have passed away, and they will be summoned to judgment." As Noah, whom God shut into the ark, was hidden there while the water-floods of the Divine judg-

ment were poured out, so God's people were to shut themselves in the secret chamber of prayer, for the trouble would last but a little while, and the time would come when God would take vengeance on their foes. "Behold, the Lord cometh out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity." "When God does not manifest Himself, He may be said to abide in His own place; when He manifests His power, or wisdom, or justice, He is said to go forth out of His place, that is, out of His hidness. Again, since the nature of God is goodness, it is proper and natural to Him to have mercy and to spare. In this way the 'place' of God is His mercy. When, then, He turns from the sweetness of pity to the rigour of justice, and on account of man's sins shows Himself severe, He goeth forth out of His place." So here it is said that God will leave His throne of mercy and visit the iniquities of men, and especially their blood-guiltiness; for the innocent blood which has been shed upon the earth is exposed to view and cries for vengeance.

"In that day," the great Day of Doom, "the Lord, with His sore, and great, and strong sword, shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even

leviathan that crooked serpent; and He shall slay the dragon that is in the sea." This verse, which properly belongs to the chapter before us, seems to intimate that God's judgment in the great day will fall, not on men only, but on Satan and his evil angels, as indeed St. John expressly declares in the Revelation: "The devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (xx. 10).

Thus we hear in this chapter the song of the Church in the last days: on the one hand looking back on God's past dealings with her when He kept her in peace in the midst of outward trouble, and made her way plain before her, and in the end delivered her from her enemies; and, on the other hand, looking forward to the final day of joy and triumph which shall come with the resurrection. Through many sorrows and disappointments the Lord hath brought her safely, because she trusted in Him.

In anticipation of the overwhelming trouble which awaits the Church in the end, and in the presence of such lesser trials as God appoints for us now, what have we to do but to find refuge in

God, closing our eyes and ears as much as possible to the storms around us, hiding ourselves in God, praying to Him continually, and staying ourselves upon the thought of His love and faithfulness, assured that we are resting upon a rock that can never fail us?

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah* xxviii. 5—19.

THIS LESSON is intimately connected with the earlier verses of the chapter from which it is taken. The main purpose of the Prophet would seem to be to reprove the drunkenness and perverseness of the false prophets and other rulers of Judah; but he begins his discourse with a denunciation of the people of Samaria for their pride and sensuality, inveighing strongly against the recklessness which, while the kingdom was plainly hurrying to its fall, drowned all thought in giddy revelry. “Woe to the crown of pride of the drunkards of Ephraim,” the crown of which the intoxicated Ephraimites were proud, “and to the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is upon the head of the fat valley of those who are overcome with wine!” The allusion is to Samaria, which was built, like a royal diadem, upon a beautiful

swelling hill in the centre of a rich valley, shut in by a circle of still loftier mountains. The Prophet pronounces woe upon the proud and sensual inhabitants of Samaria. The flower of which they had been so proud was already beginning to fade: already the Lord had a strong and mighty one in readiness, viz., Shalmaneser, King of Assyria, who, like a devastating tempest, would hurl Samaria to the ground, and trample upon its proud crown, and the splendid flower should vanish, swallowed greedily like an early fig.

But the day when this should happen should not be a day of utter unmixed calamity. The threat of destruction to the people of Samaria is followed by a promise to the remnant; and the Prophet looks forward to the time when, after the perishable things in which they gloried had been swept away, the Lord Himself should be "to the residue of His people a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty," when injustice and cowardly submission should cease, for the Lord would be to the judges the spirit of justice, and their true strength to the noble warriors that "turn the battle to the gate," that is, either turn back the attacks of the enemy when he has already reached the gate, or drive him back to his own gate. The day was

coming when the Lord would be to His people not only their glory and crown, but their wisdom and strength.

The Prophet has no sooner delivered this glorious prophecy than he turns to the rulers of Judah, and declares that they were no better than the men of Ephraim. "They also," he says, "have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way;" even those who ought to be the most sober and temperate, the priests and the prophets, drink and are drunken, even in the midst of their prophesyings and their judgments: "they reel when seeing visions, they stagger when passing judgments." Let any one go into their assemblies, and they will find everything around bearing witness to their revelry and drunkenness.

The Prophet then seems to himself to hear the voice of those whom he had been condemning interrupting him and sneering at him for the simplicity of the style of his discourses. These false prophets probably adopted an inflated and incoherent style of address themselves, and they made it a matter of rebuke to Isaiah that his style was so plain and simple, adapted only for children, not for grown-up men. The subjects too of his

addresses were ordinary and commonplace, and his rebukes were repeated so often as to become intolerable. They asked him, therefore, whether he took them for children just weaned, or thought that they needed the instruction that he gave them, "precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little and there a little," imitating at the same time the concise style of the Prophet and his frequent repetitions. He was always finding something to correct, and when he corrected it, it was always in the same simple, downright way, as if he were dealing with children.

The Prophet retorts on them their contemptuous mockery with great severity. Let them mimic his words, and scoff at him as they pleased, God would visit them with an appropriate punishment. It would be as they said; they should be taught by stammering words and a strange tongue: "With stammering lips and another tongue will He speak to this people," that is, with the strange language of the Assyrians, whom He would bring up against them.

The Lord had taught them the true way of finding rest and refreshing after all their troubles, namely, by trusting and waiting upon Him; but

they would not choose to listen ; instead of remaining still, they were anxious to renew the war with Assyria, or to procure the help of Egypt. Their policy was the very opposite of being still and waiting upon God. Therefore God would give back to them their insolent mockery, as it were with the thunder of punishment. "The word of the Lord, which they regarded as an endless series of trivial commands, would be turned in their case into an endless series of painful sufferings. To those who thought themselves so free and lived so free, it would become a stone on which they would stumble, and be broken, a net in which they would be snared, a trap in which they would be taken."

Then the Prophet turns directly to the great men of Judah, and bids them listen to what the Lord would say to them : "Hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem." They boasted that they had made a league with death and Hades, and that they should be safe, even when the judgments of God deluged the land. Their self-confidence was grounded on a secret alliance which they proposed to make with Egypt as a defence against Assyria. What the Prophet makes them say here, they do not say exactly in this form ; but this is the sub-

of what they have in their thoughts assted to the Searcher of hearts. The Egyptian e on which they trusted was really a lie and od. And He Who could read their hearts ealed their hearts to them : at the same hat He opposed to their false grounds of y the true refuge in the foundation-stone the Lord had laid in Zion, on which whoso ad hold would be safe, but on which the eaving would be broken in pieces.

Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I y in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried ' (or rather a stone of trial or proving, which show what men's dispositions really were), cious corner-stone, a sure foundation." This tion was laid in Zion ; for, evil as were the of Jerusalem, God would not forget His t promise to David. From thence the new m of David should take its rise, and there, ingly, its foundation should be laid. There : no doubt that Christ is the foundation- here spoken of, for St. Paul expressly cites ssage, in connection with chap. viii. 14, and it to Christ (Rom. ix. 33).

e that believeth shall not make haste," that ll not fly in terror, shall not be confounded ;

he shall be safe, and shall know that he is safe, resting on this foundation ; he shall not look out for other help, nor be ashamed to look on this. But as regards the unbelievers, the false prophets and their adherents, the Lord will proceed according to strict justice ; He will take justice as the line, and righteousness as the plummet : He will make justice and righteousness alone the rule of His dealings ; the hailstone and the storm will smite their refuge of lies and carry it away, their covenant with death and Hades, in which they trusted, will be disannulled, and the overflowing scourge of the Assyrian army, which they had despised, will tread them down.

We have some insight in this chapter into the manner in which Isaiah was received by his contemporaries. They scoffed at the plainness of the messages which he delivered. Priest and Prophet, though they were given up to divination, claimed to speak and act in God's name, and would not listen for a moment to the words of the true Prophet. But the Prophet delivered his message just the same, whether they would hear, or whether they would forbear. However wicked and corrupt the mass of the people might be, and however scornful their self-chosen guides, there was a rem-

nant who were still faithful, and for whom a refuge was provided, the coming Messiah, the true Seed of David, in Whom the kingdom of David should endure, and for Whose sake it had continued so long. This refuge was like a select corner-stone, valuable in itself, and affording a sure foundation to the building that was built upon it. But it was a stone which would test and prove men's characters, a stone by which some would fall, while others would be built upon it.

The best commentary on this promise is to be found in the Epistle of St. Peter, where, speaking of Christ, he says, "To Whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Wherefore also it is contained in the Scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner-stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on Him shall not be confounded" (1 Pet. ii. 4—6). Christ is the one Foundation on which we must be built. It is not only that we must build on Him, but we must ourselves be built on Him; and it is only by faith, that is, by a real trust in Him, that we can be living stones in the spiritual building of

which He is the Corner-Stone. It is only by going out of ourselves and leaning on Christ and obeying Him, that we can offer to God spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to Him through Jesus Christ. Faith is the living link which unites us to Christ, through Whom alone we can bring forth the fruits of the Spirit.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT.

MORNING LESSON.—*Isaiah* xxx. to ver. 27.

ONE of the ways in which the false prophets and rulers of Jerusalem endeavoured to mislead the people, in opposition to the true Prophet of the Lord, was by inducing them to look to Egypt for help. The proposal had at first been kept secret, but it seems now to have been begun to be carried out, when the Prophet breaks out into this condemnation of it: "Woe to the rebellious children, saith the Lord, that take counsel, but not of Me; and that cover with a covering" (that is, weave a web, or make an alliance), "but not of My Spirit, that they may add sin to sin." They had already travelled down into Egypt, and the Prophet sees their ambassadors on their way, first at Zoan (Tanis) in Lower Egypt, and afterwards at Hanes (Anysis) in Upper Egypt, the two capitals of the country; and he foretells plainly that their application would be useless: Egypt could not profit them, "nor be an help nor profit, but a shame and also a reproach."

At this point the Prophet interrupts the course of his prophecy to introduce a special message concerning Egypt, which God had given him, and which He afterwards commanded him to write on a table by itself, that it might be public and durable. "The burden of the beasts of the south" (*lit.*, the burden or prophetic oracle of behemoth of the south). Behemoth, or the hippopotamus, with its huge, unwieldy bulk, is the emblem of Egypt, great and rich, and unwilling to exert itself for others. Thither, through all the horrors of the desert, the ambassadors of Judah carried their rich gifts. Through the same desert through which God had led their fathers, when He brought them out of Egypt, "the great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought" (Deut. viii. 13), the foolish emissaries of Judah toiled, with their riches on the shoulders of young asses and their treasures on the bunches of camels, to a people who could not profit them. For the Egyptians help in vain, and to no purpose. They would never keep the promises they had made; therefore, says Almighty God, "I have named this"—that is, Egypt—"Rahab, they sit still." Rahab, which is a poetical name for Egypt (Isaiah li. 9; Ps.

lxxxvii. 4, lxxxix. 11), signifies pride, violence, boastfulness, and the meaning of the name which Almighty God here gives to Egypt would seem to be that, proud and boastful as Egypt was, it would do nothing, only sit still.

This oracle the Prophet was commanded to write on a table, that is, on some durable material, that when time had proved the truth of his words it might be found recorded as a witness for ever.

It was necessary that this worthlessness of the help of Egypt should be set before the eyes of the people, "for" (not "that," as in the English version) "this is a rebellious people," says the Prophet, "lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord." They could not bear to hear the truth. The prophets must either prophesy to them smooth and flattering things, or else not speak at all. They did not desire to be instructed, only soothed and flattered. The prophets must turn aside from their present path, and take another course, if they expected them to attend; they must cease from making mention any more of "the Holy One of Israel," of Whose name they were tired of hearing. "Wherefore," the Prophet goes on to say, "thus saith the Holy One of Israel, Because ye despise this word," that is, the

prophetic word which warned them against setting their trust in Egypt, "and trust in oppression and perverseness," in violent and crooked ways, in a deceitful policy and in cruel exactions, to enable them to carry out that policy; "therefore this iniquity shall be to you as a breach ready to fall, swelling out in a high wall, whose breaking cometh suddenly in an instant." Just as the broken and overhanging part of a high wall becomes gradually more and more unsafe, and leans forward, until suddenly it breaks down the whole wall in utter ruin, so would the sin and tyranny of the governors at length bring ruin to the state. "And He shall break it as the breaking of a potter's vessel that is broken in pieces; He shall not spare: so that there shall not be found in the bursting of it a shred to take fire from the hearth, or to take water withal out of the pit." Like such a shattered earthen vessel would Judah be at the captivity, scattered hither and thither, because she was bent on delivering herself, instead of waiting upon God.

"For thus saith the Lord God, the God of Israel, In returning," that is, in turning from their self-chosen ways, "and in rest, shall ye be saved; in quietness and confidence," in stillness

and trust, which, renouncing all self-help, leaves God to act alone, "shall be your strength; but they would not. They said, No; for we will flee upon horses, therefore shall ye flee; and we will ride upon the swift" (*i.e.*, upon a race-horse), "therefore shall they that pursue you be swift." War was almost the only purpose for which horses were used among the Israelites, and it was to Egypt mainly that they looked for the supply of them; therefore this desire for cavalry was connected with the Egyptian alliance. Their ambition was to ride swiftly to the battle on war-horses; wherefore God declares that they should ride swiftly, but it should be away from the enemy, not in pursuit of them, and they should not escape. One, or at the most five, of the enemy would be able to put to flight a whole thousand of the men of Judah. They would fall before their enemies, until the nation, which had hitherto resembled a thick forest, should be left alone in the land, as a solitary beacon on the mountain top.

"Therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you;" "*therefore*," because it is His will that His people should be reduced to a small number before He ceases from His vengeance—therefore He delays His mercy and re-

moves Himself far away out of their sight. He intends to have mercy on them, but He delays; and blessed are they who meet *His* waiting with their own waiting. For such there is comfort in store; they shall dwell in Zion; their mourning shall cease: God will prove Himself very gracious to them, when in repentance and humiliation they call upon Him; as soon as He hears He will answer them. And even in the deepest trouble, when God gives them the bread of affliction and the water of affliction, He will no longer hide Himself from them, or keep them without instruction: they shall have faithful teachers, who shall follow them with faithful words of counsel and direct them in the right way, and the abomination of idolatry, which had taken God's place among them, would now be acknowledged to be abomination, and cast away. How blessed shall be this time of repentance and reconciliation! Even the ground shall give large increase; not only the labours of men, but of the animals also, shall receive a rich reward. The Lord will send rain upon the seed sown, and it shall produce luxuriant crops of nutritious corn; there will be abundance of flocks in large pastures; the cattle that work the land shall eat "clean provender,"

a kind of salted mash, carefully prepared, such as before was only given occasionally ; and the mountains as well as the valleys shall abound with water.

And if the lower world becomes thus glorious, how much more the higher ! The moonlight shall be like the sunlight, and the sunlight equal to that of seven days. “ The brightest, sunniest days shall alternate with the most brilliant moonlight nights.” All this shall happen in the days of the great slaughter, when the towers fall, when all that is great and lofty on earth shall be destroyed ; and the kingdom of the Redeemer shall be established, and nature itself shall participate in the blessings of His rule, and so the way shall be prepared for that eternal glory in which everything shall be swallowed up.

Thus the discourse which began with woe ends in words of hope and blessing : the woe is for those who trust in themselves, the blessing for those who wait patiently on the Lord, who are still and trust in Him. This calm, hushed, confiding temper is especially acceptable to God. “ Trust in the Lord and do good, so shalt thou dwell in the land and enjoy safety ; ” or, as we may take the words in a Christian sense, so shalt thou

maintain the place which God has given thee in His holy Church, and enjoy all its privileges and blessings. God will look lovingly upon thee, and comfort thy heart; He will listen to thy every prayer, yea, while thou art yet speaking He will hear. Though He may visit thee with sorrow and affliction, yet will He vouchsafe His own presence in the midst of them, and thou shalt hear the secret whisper of His Spirit teaching thee the way in which thou shouldest go, and enabling thee more and more to cast aside all sin and evil. He will make thee to feel that the sufferings of this present life are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed when not only the outward creation shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption, but thou shalt receive thy perfect redemption both in body and soul.

Such shall be the blessedness of those who trust in God, and yield themselves simply and cheerfully to do and suffer His will. In returning and rest shall they be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be their strength.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah xxxii.*

AFTER the glorious picture of the happy time immediately preceding the final judgment, which is drawn in the 30th chapter, the Prophet returns, in the next chapter, to that which was apparently his immediate practical purpose, namely, the exposing the folly of the Egyptian alliance. He shows how foolish and how unnecessary it was—foolish, in that Almighty God would frustrate it, and unnecessary, in that He Himself was ready to help them. And then he calls on the people to return in penitence to Him from Whom they had deeply departed; so would the Assyrian fall by the might of One higher than man, even the Lord, Who has His scorching furnace in Jerusalem for the destruction of her enemies.

In our present Lesson the Prophet passes on to the condition of prosperity which shall follow upon the deliverance. The power of Assyria is destroyed and a new era has begun for Judah—an era of which righteous government shall be the first characteristic. “Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment.” Hitherto the rulers of Jerusalem have been unjust and tyrannical, forgetful of God and

oppressive to men ; now they shall rule according to right, and be to the people the defence which they were intended to be ; each one of them shall be as “ a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest ; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.” The king and princes of Judah would protect and refresh the nation, surmounting them like colossal walls of rock.

Another characteristic of this happy time will be that the obstinate resistance to the truth which now prevailed would be removed : “ The eyes of them that see shall no more be dim, and the ears of them that hear shall hearken.” The people shall be delivered from the judgment of hardened hearts : “ The heart of the rash shall understand knowledge,” shall perceive, that is, the true value of things, and discern what is really good and profitable ; “ and the tongue of the stammerers shall be ready to speak plainly,” shall be able, that is, to express themselves with clearness and elegance. Men shall know and speak the truth, and speak it distinctly and forcibly.

A third blessing will be, that the present confusion of thought and speech, with regard to men’s character and position, would come to an end :

Nobility of birth and wealth will give way to
bility of character." "The vile person," the
dish, good-for-nothing man, "shall be no more
led liberal," or noble; "nor the churl said to
bountiful," or rather, the crafty called a gentle-
n. For such men are unworthy of titles of
mour. The fool is really he that speaks follies
l does iniquity, sinning as well against the
rd as against his poor neighbour, making empty
soul of the hungry and causing the drink of
s thirsty to fail. The crafty man, too, is one
o uses evil instruments to carry out his wicked
sires, destroying the poor with lying words, and
t, even when the needy says that which is
ht and well-founded. The truly noble man, on
s other hand, will not only think noble thoughts,
s on such noble thoughts he will stand, and by
m he will rise and prevail in the end.

While describing the amendment that should
e place in the good time that was coming, the
phet has in these last verses passed judgment,
the way, on the iniquity and perverseness of
s men of Jerusalem at that time; now he goes
to censure the voluptuousness and self-security
the women, as he had on a former occasion
uked their vanity and love of display (iii.

10—26). “The Prophet has uttered many a woe on Jerusalem, which was now bringing itself to the verge of destruction; but, notwithstanding the fact that women are by nature more delicate and more easily affected than men, he had as yet made no impression on the women of Jerusalem; he now, therefore, turns to them, and foretels a terrible undeceiving of their careless ease, while he holds out to them the ease secured by God, which can only be realised on the ruins of the former.” First, he declares to them the destruction of their false security: “Rise up, ye women that are at ease,” ye reckless ones; “hear my voice, ye careless” (confident) “daughters; give ear unto my speech.” “Many days and years shall ye be troubled;” or, as the passage may be rendered, “some days over a year, and then ye shall be troubled,” and there shall be no grapes nor fruit to gather. The spring harvest of corn is supposed to be over when the devastation begins. “Tremble, ye women that are at ease; be troubled, ye careless ones; strip you and make you bare, and gird sackcloth upon your loins.” They shall smite upon their breasts for the loss of their harvests and their beloved fields, upon which, yea, upon all the houses of joy of the joyous city, nothing but weeds

and briars grow ; the palaces shall be forsaken ; the city, once so full of bustle, shall be left desolate ; the forts (*lit.*, Ophel, the stronghold on the southern slope of the Temple - mountain) and towers shall be for dens and caves, where wild asses find their delight and flocks their pasture.

Thus the Prophet declares that Jerusalem, with its strong towers and its pleasant palaces, would be laid in ruins, and that in the course of a year. And so would it continue for an unlimited time, until a spiritual reformation take place, "until the destruction of the false rest be followed by the realisation of the true." The Prophet had just said that the forts and towers should be for dens "for ever ;" but there would be a limit to that "for ever." The time would come when the Spirit would be poured out in its fulness upon Jerusalem, and then the most blessed results would follow : the wilderness would become a fruitful garden, and that which had hitherto been regarded as a fruitful garden would be changed into something so far more glorious, that its former state would seem to have been like a forest, in which everything grew wild. The whole land, desert and fruitful field alike, would become the abode of justice and righteousness, and the produce and fruit of this

righteousness would be peace. God's people would dwell in a peaceful habitation, and in secure dwellings and in quiet resting-places.

But before this happy picture can be realised, before this calm peace can be established, heavy judgments must fall; the hail must come and beat down the forest, which is an emblem of Assyria (see chap. x. 34); and the holy city itself must be brought low. There must come a time of deep humiliation for Jerusalem before she can attain to peace and happiness.

As the Prophet dwells in thought upon this intervening judgment, he breaks out into a congratulation on those who shall survive it, and shall see the happy time beyond: "Blessed are they that sow beside all waters," that is, wherever they please, beside all fertilising streams, "and send out the feet of the ox and the ass," that is, allow them to roam at freedom.

Thus the Prophet returns for a moment to the contemplation of the days of joy which shall be at the end of this present dispensation, and which shall immediately usher in the glories of heaven. It will be a time of righteousness and a time of peace; even inanimate nature will share in the blessedness of the time; and all will be, because

the Spirit will be poured out abundantly from on high, and take full possession of the hearts and souls of men.

That Spirit has, indeed, been poured upon us. This present dispensation is the very dispensation of the Spirit; but the blessed effects which should follow the presence of the Spirit do not manifest themselves so fully as they should. The times in which we live are not in any adequate degree times of righteousness or times of peace; they are not times of peace because they are not times of righteousness: "For the work of righteousness is peace; and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever." The wars and disputings, the inward divisions and jealousies which mar the peace of the Church, are the effect of the corruption and wickedness of her members. Christians are not led by the Spirit, nor do they yield themselves to His sway; or else, as He would lead them in the path of righteousness, so, now and at all times, the path of righteousness would be the path of peace. There would be peace within and peace without. Even now, however, in the midst of the divisions which break the unity of the Church, there may be inward peace in the hearts of individual Christians, who are careful to follow

the guidance of the Spirit. He will shed His own blessed gift of peace into the souls of those, whose only care is to give themselves up to Him, to do and to be what He would make them. Distraction and disquiet must be the consequence of our following our own ways; the true secret of peace lies in forgetting ourselves and yielding ourselves in all things to the will of God.

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah xxxiii.* 2—23.

THE Woe with which this chapter opens was plainly directed against Assyria. The prophecy belongs to the time when the Assyrian army had entered Judæa, and not only laid waste the land, but threatened Jerusalem. “Woe to thee that spoilest, and thou wast not spoiled; and dealest treacherously, and they dealt not treacherously with thee! when thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled; and when thou shalt make an end to deal treacherously, they shall deal treacherously with thee.”

In the meantime, before the appointed hour of punishment came, God’s people had recourse to prayer. “O Lord, be gracious unto us: we have waited for Thee” (comp. 2 Kings xix. 15—19); “be Thou their arm every morning.” “*Their arm,*”

the arm or defence of Thy people as well as my own: the people placed themselves day by day under God's protection, and begged Him to be their "salvation in time of trouble."

While the prayer is still going forth, the Prophet sees the answer (Isa. lxx. 24), viz., the panic in the Assyrian camp. "At the voice of the tumult," or rather, perhaps, at the sound of a noise, "the people fled; at the lifting up of Thyself the nations were scattered;" as Almighty God Himself said of Sennacherib, "I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and shall return to his own land." The voice of the Lord, like thunder, frightens the Assyrian army, and they fly; and their booty is swept away, as when a swarm of locusts gather on a field, and devour it up. "The inhabitants of Jerusalem swarm in the enemy's camp like locusts; they are all in motion, and carry off what they can."

The consequence of this overthrow of the enemy is that the Lord is exalted. For He not only dwells on high, and worketh what He will among the children of men, but He "hath filled Zion with judgment and righteousness." This great deliverance will establish a new state of things in Jerusalem: "There will be security of thy times, a

rich store of salvation, of wisdom and knowledge ; the fear of the Lord will be her treasure." Jerusalem would now become a holy city, and her stability would consist, not in her bulwarks or her wealth, but in the knowledge and fear of the Lord.

Having thus in a few verses drawn a lively picture of the deliverance which God would work for His people, and the happy consequences which would follow thereon, the Prophet returns to describe the condition of things actually present before his eyes, and weeps, as it were, with his weeping people: "Behold, their valiant ones" (the rulers of Judah) "cry without; the ambassadors of peace weep bitterly." The messengers of Hezekiah carried to Sennacherib the amount of tribute which he demanded as the condition of peace; but, in contempt of his agreement, he demanded no less than the surrender of the city. The ambassadors returned in great distress, crying aloud in the midst of the streets (comp. 2 Kings xviii. 37). It was as in the time of Deborah and Barak, the highways were unoccupied; men were afraid to walk about openly. Not only were the ambassadors of Judah treated with insult, but the land was laid waste and the fields trodden down; the fruitful

plain of Sharon had become like a desert : “ The autumnal aspect of Lebanon with its faded foliage, and of Bashan and Carmel with their fallen leaves, looked as if they were ashamed and grieved for the calamities of the land.”

But man’s extremity is God’s opportunity. The iniquity of Assyria would at length be full, and then should be the hour of Israel’s deliverance. Like David in the Psalm (xii. 5), the Prophet hears the Lord Himself speak : “ Now will I rise, saith the Lord ”—*now*, as if after long silence and much forbearance—*now*, at length, “ I will rise ; now will I be exalted ; now will I lift up Myself.” God will rise from His throne, and show Himself in all His greatness to the enemies of His people : their plans and projects shall be as dry stubble, which shall be burnt up with fire, the fire of their own creation. “ Ye shall conceive chaff ” (rather, “ dry grass ”); “ ye shall bring forth stubble : your breath,” your own breath, the breath of your own nostrils, snorting out as it were with wrath against Me, “ is the fire that will devour you.” “ And the people ” (*lit.*, “ and peoples ”) “ shall be as the burning of lime ; as thorns cut up they shall be burned in the fire.” In Palestine it is said that even in the present day “ the low matted

thorn-bushes are cut up with hooks and mattocks, and gathered into bundles to be burned in the lime-kilns." "It is a curious fidelity to real life, that when the thorns are meant to be merely destroyed, they are never *cut up*, but set on fire where they grow. They are only cut up for the lime-kiln." The figure is intended to set forth the completeness of the destruction which God will work.

The Prophet's threatening is not for Assyria only, but for his own countrymen also. For Jerusalem is deserving of punishment, and the Prophet hears their cry of terror as they see the devouring fire draw near to them. "Hear, ye heathen that are far off, what I have done; and you also, My own people that are near, acknowledge My might." The sinners in Jerusalem might well be struck with awe at God's sudden judgments on the Assyrians; He had shown what He could do, when the fire of His wrath burst forth; and they inquired in their alarm, "Who among us can abide with devouring fire? Who among us can abide with everlasting burnings?" The Prophet answers the question by taking up the words of the Psalmist (xv., xxiv): "He that walketh righteously and speaketh uprightly; he that de-

diseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood," that is, of hatred and revenge, "and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil"—such a one has no reason to fear the wrath of God; "he shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks"—he shall all be shut in within the impregnable walls of a castle upon a rock; "bread shall be given him; and waters shall be sure."

Deeply humbled as the King of Judah had been, and terrible as were the sufferings of the land, laid waste by the enemy, the people should one day behold their king in his glory and the whole land restored, and restored to them again, as far as the eye could reach. In their happiness they will recall the former time of trouble and anxiety; they will ask, indignantly, "Where is the scribe?"—where is he that had the management of the tribute? "Where is the receiver?" (marg., weigher), who tested the weight of the gold and silver offered to him. "Where is he that counted the towers?" made mention of the defences of the city which were to be attacked. What has become of all those proud enemies of Jerusalem? The fierce, insolent people, with their barbaric, unintelligible language

—they shall see them no more, they shall vanish as utterly as the Egyptians at the Red Sea, of whom Moses said to the children of Israel: “Ye shall see them again no more for ever.” But their eyes shall see their king restored and glorified; and they shall see Jerusalem rejoicing in its solemn feasts, peaceful and safe, no longer like a wandering tent, but a permanent dwelling-place. They shall have the Lord, too, for their glorious Ruler, a better protection than broad rivers or trenches. He is their place of rivers and of streams stretched out wide. Neither rowing vessel nor stately trireme shall be able to penetrate to them and assault them. Other cities might boast of such defences, Zion needs them not; for the Lord is everything to her—her Judge, her Lawgiver, her King: He will save her. Though Zion be now like a ship shattered by the tempest, the sport of the waves, with broken shrouds and showing no flag, it will be different then; the invader will be repulsed and spoiled, even the lame shall share the booty: there is not one among the inhabitants of Jerusalem who shall not be strong, and their guilt will be taken away. “A people humbled by punishment, penitent, and therefore pardoned, shall dwell in Jerusalem. The strength

of Israel and all its salvation rests upon the forgiveness of its sins."

What a sad picture is drawn in this chapter of the condition of Jerusalem and of the whole land at the time of the Assyrian invasion—the land spoiled and desolate, the people in alarm and distress! In their distress they had recourse to prayer, the king and the faithful that remained, and the Lord heard them. He promised to rise up and come forth from His place for the overthrow of their enemies; they should be burned up before Him like crackling thorns, and the reign of peace and justice should be established in Jerusalem. But God's judgments on His enemies are a ground for fear also to the hypocritical and unfaithful among His own people. He is no respecter of persons. Those that sin against Him, whether in Jerusalem or elsewhere, whether within or without the Church, He will visit. That terrible cry, therefore, of the sinners in Zion may well cause a chill of fear to run through our hearts, "Who among us can abide with devouring fire? Who among us can abide with everlasting burnings?" They are the anticipation, as it were, of those still more terrible words of the Apostle, "The fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers,

and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone" (Rev. xxi. 8).

Blessed be God, however, for giving us such plain warning who they are on whom His wrath will fall, as well as for revealing to us Him through Whom we may escape the sins which He condemns. We need not be among the terrified sinners and hypocrites, but among the rejoicing faithful in Zion, if we will. In the Church we have our portion in Christ, Who is the Lord our Righteousness, and Who will impart His blessed gift of righteousness to all who trust in Him. Let us sincerely cast away our sins and cling to Christ, and we shall not only escape the future judgment, but we shall be permitted to see the King in His beauty in the land which is very far off, and we shall enter through the gates into the eternal Zion.

CHRISTMAS DAY.

MORNING LESSON.—*Isaiah ix. to ver. 8.*

THE prophecy or section to which this Lesson belongs properly begins at the fifth verse of the preceding chapter. It has been called "the consolation of Immanuel in the coming darkness," because in the midst of the troubles the Prophet refreshes himself with the thought of the birth of the great Deliverer.

The Prophet begins by reproving the men of Jerusalem because they despised the feeble waters of Shiloah, which was the emblem of the sovereignty of the house of David on Mount Zion, just as "the Nile with its monsters was the type of cruel Egypt, and the Euphrates with its frequent devastating floods was the type of the rapidly-increasing empire of Assyria." The people of Jerusalem scorned their humble home government, and took delight in Rezin and Remaliah's son, the confederate Kings of Syria and Israel; therefore the Lord threatens that He will bring the flood of the Euphrates on the land, so that the water shall reach to the neck,

that is, the King of Assyria with his mighty host, whose outstretched wings shall cover the whole land, "even Thy holy land, Thou glorious and longed-for Immanuel."

At the mention of His name, the Prophet bursts forth into exultation over the nations of the world who will be overthrown by Him; let them rage as they will, their efforts will be in vain. But they who would partake of the deliverance which the Lord destined for His people, must separate themselves from the ungodly mass, and must look to Jehovah alone for protection; especially he warns them against having recourse, in their perplexities and helplessness, to soothsayers and necromancers. He bids them turn from these vanities to the law and to the testimony, and he warns them that, if they do not heed his counsel, heavy gloom awaits them: "They shall pass through the land, sore bestead and hungry, they shall fret themselves and curse their king and their God, and they shall look up" (to heaven), "and they shall look unto the earth, and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish, and they shall be driven to trouble."

But the darkness would not be total. A light should dawn on the world, the light of Immanuel, of which the Prophet goes on to speak in this

morning's Lesson. "For," he says, "there shall no more be darkness where there was distress:" the places which God once humbled He will one day bring to honour; "in the former time He brought into disgrace the land of Zabulon, and the land of Naphthali, and in the latter He brought to honour the way of the sea beyond Jordan, the border" (or circuit) "of Galilee." The territories of Naphthali and Zabulon answer very nearly to the Galilee of later times, and therefore correspond with the countries specified in the parallel clause, "the way of the sea," that is, the country on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, "beyond Jordan," or the country on the east of Jordan; "the border of the Gentile," that is, the northern border land of Palestine. The country immediately around the Sea of Galilee, especially to the north and east, suffered greatly in the Syrian and Assyrian invasions. But here the Prophet declares that these should be the very people on whom the morning of the coming glory should first break, and St. Matthew tells us that his words were fulfilled when our Saviour preached in Galilee, and made it especially the scene of His earthly ministry (iv. 23): "The people which walketh in darkness have seen a great light; and they who dwell in the land of the

shadow of death, on them hath the light shined." The inhabitants of Galilee were in a special condition of moral and political degradation, languishing in spiritual darkness and bodily distress, when suddenly through the darkness the light shone. The great Light of the world came to dwell among them, and tell them of deliverance and hope.

The Prophet thus throws himself forward to the times of the great Deliverer, and sees the final remnant of Israel changed into a large company and full of joy, and he bursts forth into praise and thanksgiving: "Thou hast increased the nation; Thou hast increased its joy" (see the reading given in the margin); and their joy is a holy joy, for it is a joy before God; as the Prophet goes on to say, "They joy before Thee according to the joy of harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil." "It is a joy over blessings received, as the figure of the harvest suggests; and a joy over evil averted, as the figure of dividing the spoil presupposes." "For the yoke of their burden, and the staff laid upon their shoulder, the rod of their oppressor, Thou didst break, as Thou didst in the day of" (the overthrow of) "Midian." The words "burden" and "oppressor" recall to us the Egyptian bondage; but as the whole of Israel was then

delivered, and only a small remnant will participate in the final redemption, the Prophet compares it to the day of Midian, when Gideon broke their seven years' dominion, not with a great army, but with a handful of resolute warriors strong in the Lord.

The deliverance will be complete; "for every greave of the greaved warrior in the battle-tumult, and the garments rolled in blood, are for burning, fuel for the fire." If even the greaves and garments of the warriors are to be burned, much more shall their weapons of war, and the warriors themselves be destroyed.

Now we come to the great Deliverer Himself. God's people under the Gospel shall rejoice because they are delivered, and because their deliverance is complete; but the true cause of their deliverance, and therefore of their joy, is the birth of the Deliverer. "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government is upon His shoulder: and His name is called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." The Child Whose birth is thus announced is the same Whom the Prophet foretold in the seventh chapter, the Son of the Virgin, but instead of the short name Emmanuel, the Prophet gives Him a new name, which ex-

presses more fully His infinite greatness and majesty.

“His name is called Wonderful.” As the angel who announced the birth of Samson, when asked by Manoah what was his name, answered, “Why askest thou after my name? it is wonderful” (Judges xiii. 18, marg.), meaning that his nature was wonderful, and incomprehensible to man; so here the heaven-born Child is called Wonderful, because He Himself is far beyond human conception or hope. Not only is this or that wonderful in Him, but He is throughout wonderful, a wonder of Divine love and power.

The second name given Him is Counsellor, because, by virtue of the spirit of counsel which rests upon Him (Isa. xi. 2), He is able to impart counsel to His people. He watches over them, and provides in all things for their good (Ps. xxxii. 8, marg.).

He is also the Mighty God, the same to Whom it is said (chap. x. 21) that the remnant of Israel shall return with penitence; “the everlasting Father,” the Father of the everlasting age, or of eternity, the Author and Giver of eternal life to all His children, and “the Prince of Peace,” His great object being to exalt His government into an everlasting rule of peace.

“Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end.” His reign shall not pass away like that of mortal kings, who succeed others, to be succeeded in their turn, but it shall endure “from henceforth even for ever.”

“The zeal of the Lord of Hosts shall perform this.” It is the jealous love of the Lord of Hosts for His people that shall cause Him to provide for His people this true King. God had promised to David, “Thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee” (2 Sam. vii. 16). Three centuries had verified the promise. Isaiah here specifies another mode of its fulfilment. It was no longer to be from father to son, but was to abide for ever in one individual, Who was to be born of human seed. It is of Him that the Prophet gives that wonderful prophecy of lowliness and divinity which we have read in to-day’s lesson, and which was this day fulfilled in the birth of Christ.

On this day the Child was born, the Son was given, Who was to be the King of new and restored Israel, the true Heir of David’s throne, the Light of the world, the Redeemer of His people, and the joy of the redeemed. On this day the Mighty God entered Himself on the work of our salvation, by

appearing on earth in the form of a little child. And to announce and symbolise His coming, not only did a bright light flash from heaven in the darkness of the night, but an angel appeared declaring that unto us, and to all people, was born that day a Saviour which was Christ the Lord. For us was He born, to us was He given—not to His mother only, but to each one of us. Each one of us has a direct, intimate, personal interest in His birth. He would never have been born except to do a mighty work for us, a work which we could never do for ourselves, nor could any other do for us, namely, to deliver us from our spiritual enemies, and to break the power of sin.

And now we are called to rejoice in Him, to rejoice in the greatness of our Deliverer, and in the greatness of the deliverance which He has wrought. Our joy must be a holy joy, a joy before the Lord; a thankful joy, like the joy of harvest, which rejoices over the light and peace and holiness which Christ has brought with Him; and it must be a triumphant joy, like the joy of conquerors dividing the spoil, which exults in the complete destruction of the enemies that had rule over us, and in the recovery of ourselves and all our powers of mind and body out of their hands. But over and above

all we must rejoice in the love of God, the one source and fountain from which all these blessings flow. It is the zeal, the glowing love of God Himself, Who has raised up this mighty salvation for us in the house of His servant David. Our chief joy to-day, therefore, the joy which gathers into itself all other joys, is, that "God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, to the end that all who believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah* vii. 10—17.

THE historical circumstances connected with this prophecy are related by the Prophet himself in the early part of this chapter. Ahaz, king of Judah, was in great alarm in consequence of the confederacy of Syria and Israel. He had already been twice defeated (2 Chron. xxviii. 5, 6), and now the allies threatened him with a combined invasion. They had already carried their plans so far as to fix upon a king to take the place of Ahaz, viz., the son of Tabeal, an officer probably in the Syrian or Ephraimitish army. The news of this projected invasion filled the heart of the king and his people with consternation. "Jerusalem itself was in the

condition described in the first chapter, like a besieged city, in the midst of enemies plundering and burning on every side, so that it was quite natural, from a human point of view, that the court and people should tremble like aspen leaves."

It was at this moment of terror that Isaiah was sent to the king with a Divine message. Ahaz had gone outside the fortifications of the city to the pool of Gihon, perhaps with the view of taking measures to prevent the water of the pool from falling into the hands of the enemy when the siege commenced. Hither Isaiah was directed to go with his son Shear-jashub ("Remnant shall return") to meet him. He bade the king "take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be faint-hearted:" the enemies which so much disturbed him were but two ends of worn-out smoking firebrands: "they would burn and light no more, though their smoke might make the eyes smart still." Each might hope to retain its own capital, but could not expect more; Damascus was the head of Samaria and of Samaria only, and Rezin was head of Damascus (not of Jerusalem), and within threescore and five years Ephraim would be broken, so that it should be no more a people. Samaria again was head only of Ephraim, and Pekah son of Remaliah was the head of Samaria. "And you,"

added Isaiah, addressing Ahaz and his people, "if you do not believe, but make flesh your arm, shall also cease to exist;" implying doubtless, on the other hand, that if they did believe, they should be established.

Here we may conceive that the Prophet paused for a moment, to allow the king an opportunity of expressing his thankful trust in God. But Ahaz was silent—silent, probably, because his mind was made up to seek another and more hopeful source of strength. "The invisible help of Jehovah and the remote prospect of the fall of Ephraim were not enough for him; his trust was in Assyria, with whose help he would have a far greater superiority over the kingdom of Israel, than Israel had over the kingdom of Judah with the help of Damascene Syria. Nevertheless the grace of God did not give up the unhappy son of David for lost."

"The Lord spake again unto Ahaz, saying, Ask thee a sign of the Lord thy God." He condescends even to call Himself the God of Ahaz. "Possibly the holy love with which the expression 'thy God' burned, might kindle a flame in his hard heart, or possibly he might think of the covenant promise and the covenant duties, which the words 'thy God' recalled to his mind. From this his God he was

to ask a sign:" he was to ask it, either going deep down to Hades, or going high up to the height. Ahaz answered, with half mocking reverence, that he would not tempt the Lord. He had set his heart on the Assyrian alliance, and had already in all probability despatched messengers to Tiglath-pileser (2 Kings xvi. 7; 2 Chron. xxviii. 16), and he would not be diverted from his purpose. He makes no difficulty about God's power to work whatever miracle He pleased; but he hypocritically pretends that it was not for him to put His power to the proof. Isaiah was vexed at Ahaz's refusal, and answered sternly, addressing Ahaz and the other members of the royal family that were present, "O house of David, Is it a small thing for you to weary me," to weary me and other such like prophets and ministers of the Lord, "but will you weary my God also?" "*My God*" he says, no longer "*thine*," as before. It was a light matter to try men's patience, compared with the way in which they tried God's. Therefore he adds, "The Lord Himself will give you a sign"—a sign which, though in itself full of consolation, had towards Ahaz its aspect of threatening: "Behold, the Virgin is with child, and beareth a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel."

Who is intended by the Virgin is not expressly said; but it would seem that the Prophet's eye was fixed, in the first instance, on a child that was to be born shortly. Some persons think that it is a child of the Prophet's that is here intended, the child Maher-shalal-hash-baz, whose birth is recorded in the next chapter (viii. 3), and of whom the Lord said, "Before the child shall have knowledge to cry, My father, and my mother, the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be taken away before the king of Assyria." Others again think that the person in the Prophet's mind was a young woman lately taken into the harem of Ahaz—Abijah, the mother of Hezekiah. "Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know" (or rather, at the time when he knows) "to refuse the evil, and choose the good;" that is, when he has come to years of discretion. Butter (thick sour milk) and honey would be the only food found in the land by the time the infant had become a youth. Instead of a land of cornfields and vineyards, Palestine would supply only milk and honey, the food of the desert. For before the child of the Virgin had reached the time of youth, two events would have happened which would have caused this desolation—those events being, first,

the devastation of Israel, and afterwards the devastation of Judah itself, by the Assyrians. These two events are described in the two next verses, the latter of which, though not included in this evening's Lesson, would seem to be intimately connected with it. "For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings," or, as some interpret it, "the land will be desolate, of whose two kings thou art afraid." The hopes of Ahaz were probably raised by this promise of the desolation of Israel, but the Prophet's next words assured him that a like fate awaited himself and his kingdom: "The Lord shall bring upon thee, and upon thy people, and upon thy father's house, days that have not come, from the day that Ephraim departed from Judah; even the king of Assyria." The very king whose aid Ahaz was now invoking against Israel, would bring such trouble on the royal house and people of Judah as had not befallen them since the calamitous day of the falling away of the ten tribes. Ahaz became tributary to Tiglath-pileser, King of Assyria, and "Tiglath-pileser came unto him, and distressed him" (2 Chron. xxviii. 20), and in the succeeding reign the Assyrians committed such

ravages in Judah as to bring it to the very brink of destruction.

Thus the primary and partial fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy is to be found in the desolation, first of Israel and afterwards of Judah, by the Assyrians. The land would be devastated as with a razor; the vineyards and cornfields would be destroyed, and the inhabitants would be reduced to live on butter and honey.

But whatever may have been the immediate reference of the Prophet's words, we are taught by the Evangelist to see their true fulfilment in the birth of Christ. If it is true of the prophecies generally that "their language is too large for the special event, and the terms too magnificent," such is especially the case here, for the prophecy of the birth of One Who was to be "God with us" could not have been truly fulfilled in any mere child of man. He for Whose birth we give thanks to-day—He and He Alone is truly "Immanuel, God with us."

This morning's Lesson led us to think especially of the salvation brought to us by the birth of Christ; this evening's Lesson sets before us more particularly the greatness of Him Who has come to be our Saviour. It is God Himself Who has come to

save us; and this not merely by appearing among us for a time, and manifesting His love and power in our behalf, but by taking our very nature upon Himself and being made man. Oh, wonderful thought! The more we think of what God is, His infinite greatness and glory, the more wonderful does it seem that He Who made the worlds, Who is everywhere, and before and beyond all time, should be born as a little child, and laid in a manger, or carried in human arms. But the more we think of it, the more fitting also does it appear that, if God's purpose was to renew and elevate our fallen nature, it should be by bringing into it His own Godhead, and exhibiting to us the Divine perfections in the life and conversation of a true man. But above all, the more we think of it, the more loving and gracious does it seem, that the Great God should condescend to unite Himself so closely to His own creatures, in order that they might be exalted and blessed.

And the Great God has not only come near, in this most gracious and wonderful way, to the whole race of man, but He comes, if only we truly desire Him, to each one of us, to be born, as it were, and to dwell in our hearts. Each one of our hearts may be the cradle where He will love to rest; and,

dwelling with and in us, He will change and restore us after His own blessed image. Let us pray earnestly that He may be indeed "God with us," driving far away all evil thoughts that are at variance with His holiness, and filling us with all pure and lowly and reverential and loving thoughts, such as befit His very presence !

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS.

MORNING LESSON.—*Isaiah xxxv.*

FULLY to appreciate the sweet yet lofty picture which the Prophet here draws of the future Church, it seems necessary to look at it in contrast with the opposite picture, in the preceding chapter, of the overthrow of the kingdom of the world. Under the name of Edom, the hereditary enemy of God's people, and not without particular reference to Edom itself, the Prophet describes the judgments that will come upon the world in the Last Day, the day of the Lord's vengeance on the enemies of His Church. The literal fulfilment of the Prophet's words is to be seen in the present desolation of the land of Edom. As Isaiah foretold, it "swarms with snakes, and its deserts, mountain heights, and barren table lands are only inhabited by wild crows and eagles, and great flocks of birds. But the ultimate fulfilment is still in the future, and will eventually fall upon the abodes of the enemies of Christ and His Church."

In the Lesson before us the Prophet looks beyond this destruction of the people of the world to the period of calm delight and refreshment which the Church will enjoy at last, when her time of persecution is over. The dwelling-place of the Church, hitherto a wilderness, will be changed into a fruitful field. "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad" (there is no necessity to add "for them," as in the English Version); "and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose"; that is, the narcissus or the crocus, probably the former, which was so celebrated for its fragrance. The barren sandy desert is clothed with flowers, and rejoices even with joy and singing. As majestic Lebanon excels among the forests, and fruitful Carmel among the hills, and lovely Sharon among the plains, so one and all "share, as it were, their splendour with the desert, that all may be clothed alike in festal dress." And why is it that they shall thus rejoice? Because "they shall see the glory of the Lord and the excellency of our God." It is the presence and manifestation of God Himself in the Person of His Son, Who is the brightness of His glory and the express image of His essential Being, which shall be the source of exultation to

the Church. Their God Himself shall come to them, and they shall rejoice.

Therefore, in the prospect of this glorious manifestation, the Prophet bids the afflicted Church revive: "Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees." The people of God are to encourage one another by pointing to the approaching revelation of the glory of the Lord (see 1 Thess. iv. 18). "Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not; behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; He will come and save you." The first and immediate purpose of His coming is vengeance, but its real and ultimate object is the salvation of His people.

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing." Doubtless these words will be literally fulfilled; all bodily imperfections and infirmities will cease when the power of Satan is broken, and Christ comes to be glorified in His saints. When there is no more sin, then there will be no more sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain. Beauty and vigour and glory will take the place of outward defects,

and of all weakness and affliction. And the words will be true also in a spiritual sense : the inward eye and ear will be opened to recognise and rejoice in the things of God. Even such passages as, "Waters shall break out in the wilderness, and streams in the desert," are not to be regarded as mere poetical figures, for "in the last times, the era of redemption, nature itself will share in the glory which proceeds from the manifested God to His redeemed."

"The parched ground shall become a pool." The word translated "parched ground" means rather that tremulous glow hanging over the horizon in the desert—"desert-shine," as it has been called—which gives it the appearance of water. The mirage will become a real lake, "and the thirsty land springs of water." In the dry places, where the jackal (not the dragon, as in the English Version) had her lair and suckled her young, there green grass shall grow up even into reeds and rushes, so that, as is expressly said in chap. xliii. 20, the wild beasts of the desert praise the Lord.

From this renewed and peaceful earth the redeemed of the Lord will pass to the heavenly Zion ; and the Prophet, in the concluding verses of the chapter, relates their triumphal march.

“An highway shall be there,” he says, “and a way, and it shall be called, The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it.” The same promise is repeated in many places: “Jerusalem shall be holy,” we read in Joel, “and there shall no stranger pass through her any more.” “There shall in no wise enter into it,” says St. John in the Revelation, “anything that defileth.” In this heavenly progress none will take part but those who shall be admitted through the gates into the city, having washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For them, and them alone, is this way appointed; and for them it is so plain and easy to be discerned, that any wayfaring man—any man, that is, who is called to walk that way—even though he were a fool in the eyes of the world, could not possibly go astray.

And as it cannot be lost by those who tread it, so is it out of the reach of danger. “No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there.” God’s redeemed ones will encounter none but themselves in their upward path, none but those who, like themselves, have come out of captivity and tribulation, but for whom the ransom has been paid, and they have been set free. One and all, they

shall "come to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads: they shall obtain"—they shall lay fast hold of—"joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

A prelude of this joyful ascension of the redeemed to heaven was the joy of the caravans of Jewish pilgrims in their yearly journey to Jerusalem to keep the feasts, as well as the joy with which the captive exiles returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. The calm, confiding, thankful tone of many of the songs of degrees (Ps. cxx.—cxxxii.), which were supposed to have been designed for the use of the pilgrims, seems naturally to suggest the thought that their happy progress to the earthly Zion may be regarded as a type and rehearsal of that more glorious progress spoken of in this chapter.

But if even the earthly Jerusalem was a type of heaven, and the yearly journeying of the faithful Israelites will have their true realisation in the future glorious ascension of the people of God, much more may we see an anticipation of the perfect fulfilment of the bright picture drawn in this Lesson in the coming and spiritual presence of Christ in His Church on earth. The conversion of heathen lands to Christ, the inward and

outward peace which in many cases the Gospel has brought with it, the fruits of holiness, the beautiful flowers of devotion, which have sprung up in many hearts, where Satan once held sway,—what are these but, as it were, the blossoming of the desert and the gushing forth of streams of living water from the dry and sandy plain? Is it not also the special glory of the Church, even in its militant state, that Christ dwells in it, and that therein the light of the knowledge of the glory of God is manifested to us in the face of Jesus Christ?

The announcement, too, here made, that miracles of bodily healing should mark the coming of the Redeemer, seems to be almost expressly referred to by our Lord Himself, where, in answer to the question of the Baptist, “Art Thou He that should come, or look we for another?” He said, “Go and show John again the things which ye do hear and see; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, and the deaf hear.” And the prophecy is being fulfilled also in the Church in a spiritual sense: the blind have their eyes opened to see things as they really are; the deaf listen to the voice of God; the lame are enabled even to run in the way of God’s commandments; and the

dumb are brought to lowly confession and joyful praise. The promise, too, of holiness is in its measure, and in the beginning, made good to the Church on earth, though it is not yet what it will be hereafter, "a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but holy and without blemish." Even here, though the ungodly and the hypocrite appear to belong to her, they are not really of her; they partake outwardly of her gifts, but they do not receive their power and virtue. Even here Christ's faithful servants are safe from their spiritual foes: they may tread upon the lion and adder, the young lion and the dragon they may tread under their feet. Above all, even here, though Christ's visible presence is withheld, they believe that He is with them, and in that faith they rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory, receiving the end of their faith, even the salvation of their souls.

And the way along which God conducts His Church is emphatically "the way of holiness"; it is the way which Christ Himself trod, and in which His saints have followed Him. A bright and glorious track have they left behind them for our guidance and comfort. If we sincerely desire to walk in that track, and not to choose a way for

ourselves, Christ Himself will be our guide ; He will take us by the right hand, and keep us from straying ; He will cause us to walk in His way safely, and our feet shall not stumble. Our pathway even now shall gleam with the sunshine of His love, and in the end we shall find that it is indeed the right way, the way everlasting, the way which leads to heaven.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah xxxviii.*

IT is plain from this history that Hezekiah's dangerous sickness would have proved fatal, but for his earnest entreaties. There is no condition expressed in the Divine message, because, as has been truly said, God desired to draw it from him by a voluntary act.

The prospect of immediate death so alarmed and saddened the good king, that he turned his face to the wall, retired into himself and to God, and prayed earnestly that the sentence might be suspended. "Remember this, O Lord, I pray, that I have walked before Thee in truth," that is, without wavering and hypocrisy, "and with a perfect heart, and have done that which was good in Thy sight ; and Hezekiah wept sore." It

seemed to him a dreadful thing to be cut off in the prime of his life (in his 39th year), without an heir to his throne, and while the country was so unsettled.

What his special thoughts at this time were, in the prospect of death, we learn from his own words in the writing which he made after his recovery, and which is preserved in this same chapter of Isaiah. In that writing we find him ascribing to himself the most lively grief at the time when he thought his end at hand :

“I said, in the quietness of my days, I will go to
the gates of Hades ;

I am deprived of the residue of my years.

I said, I shall not see the Lord, the Lord, in
the land of the living ;

I, being with the inhabitants of the regions of
the dead, shall behold man no more.

My home is broken up, and removed from me
as a shepherd's hut.

I rolled (or wound) up, like a weaver, my life ;
He would cut me off from the roll.

From day unto night Thou makest an end of
me.”

The cold hand of death upon him quite un-
nerved him, and he was overwhelmed with fear,

when it was suddenly brought home to him, in the midst of the quiet course of his hitherto healthy life, that he must die, and forfeit as a punishment the remainder of his years ; that he should never again see God as He revealed Himself in the land of the living ; that he must soon be with the dead, beyond the sight of men ; and that the body which he had inhabited would be removed away like a tent. He felt that God was about to cut the threads of his life, so in thought he cut them himself ; he rolled up his life as a weaver rolls up a finished piece of clothing, for God was about to put an end to him from day to night, that is, in the shortest possible time.

Full of despair, and distracted with pain, there was nothing for him but to groan, and look to God for help :

“ I stilled my soul ” (Ps. cxxxi. 2) “ till the morning : like a lion

So He broke in pieces all my bones.

From day unto night Thou makest an end of me.

Like a swallow, a crane, so did I murmur ;

I mourned like a dove.

Mine eyes pined for the height.

O Lord, I am oppressed ; undertake for me ”

(answer for me, and help me).

In the night-time he would set himself to bear the anguish of his sickness until the morning; but when the morning came, it brought no relief. The violence of his pain crushed him like a lion, and forced him to moan, and cry out, that before the day passed it would be over with him. His sickness pressed upon him like a cruel creditor; and all that he could do was to place himself in God's hands and beg Him to answer for him.

Probably Hezekiah here describes the thoughts and feelings which he had, before the Prophet came to him with the message from God. The manifestly-increasing severity of his disorder may have already filled him with alarm, and almost taken away the hope of recovery, when Isaiah's words confirmed his worst fears. Then he prayed more earnestly, and the Lord had compassion on his anguish and heard his prayer. Isaiah had scarcely quitted the precincts of the palace, when the word of the Lord came to him again, and he was bidden to return to Hezekiah with the cheering announcement, as it is given somewhat more fully in the Book of Kings, "Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears; behold, I will heal thee, on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of

the Lord. And I will add unto thy days fifteen years; and I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for Mine own sake and for My servant David's sake." At the same time Isaiah ordered a plaister of figs to be applied to the boil; and when the king, relieved in mind and body, asked for a sign that the Lord would heal him, and that he should go up to the house of the Lord, the Prophet declared that the shadow should go back ten degrees on the sun-dial or steps of Ahaz. It is supposed that this dial was not a plate, but a series of steps so constructed that "the shadow (perhaps of some column or obelisk on the top) fell on a greater or smaller number of them, according as the sun was high or low." In answer to the Prophet's earnest prayer, the sign was granted, and "the sun returned ten degrees" (or steps), "by which degrees it had gone down."

The king recovered at once, and in three days was able to appear in the Temple to thank God for his recovery. Perhaps the writing given in this chapter may have been a special Psalm of thanksgiving, composed for the occasion. The first part of it, that which relates to his despair and anguish during his sickness, we have considered already;

but presently his tone changes, and he recounts how the Lord had heard his prayer, and given him life. He asks how he should ever thank Him for having promised to help him, and then fulfilling His promise :

“ What shall I say? He hath both promised me, and carried it out :

I would fain go softly all my years, upon ” (or on account of) “ the trouble of my soul.

O Lord, by these things ” (*i.e.*, by the gracious acts and words of God) “ men live ; in these things is the life of my spirit.

So wilt Thou recover me, and make me to live.”

As the Word of God is the source of life to men, so he ventured to hope that God’s dealings with him would in like manner tend to his true restoration.

“ Behold, bitterness becomes salvation to me, yea, I say, bitterness ;

And Thou, Thou hast delivered my soul in love out ” (*lit.*, Thou hast loved my soul out, drawn her lovingly out) “ of the pit of destruction ;

For Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back.”

His great trouble had turned to good, to salvation ; it was indeed, like all other chastisements, bitter at the time, but it was a chastisement of love, and therefore truly a blessing in disguise ; God had forgiven his sin and saved his soul. Then, at last, rejoicing in the preservation of his life, he promises to thank God for it as long as he lives :

“ For Hades does not praise Thee ; death does not celebrate Thee ;

They that go down into the pit do not hope for Thy truth.

The living, the living, he praises Thee, as I do this day ;

The father to the children makes known Thy truth.

The Lord is ready to save me ;

Therefore we will sing my songs to the stringed instruments all the days of our life

In the house of the Lord.”

It may perhaps surprise us that one like Hezekiah should be so much afraid to die, and should cling to life with an earnestness so different from St. Paul's “ desire to depart.” But it must be remembered that the saints of the old dispensation were much more in the dark than we are with

regard to the condition of the departed. They could but guess at it, and put together what seemed to be indications of a life of happiness beyond the grave; they could but inquire and search diligently what the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it taught them to use words which implied that there was another and better life beyond the present, where good and evil would no longer strive together, but where God would be all in all. They did not know what we know, that "*Blessed* are the dead which die in the Lord;" neither had they such sure and certain hope as we have of the resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. It was not until the Sun of Righteousness arose that the mists of the long previous night were dispelled, and life and immortality were brought to light.

Besides this, Hezekiah seems to have regarded his early decease as a special punishment for his sins; and no doubt this persuasion mixed itself up with, and added terror to, his anticipations of the future.

And further, Hezekiah's desire to continue in life was manifestly connected with his desire to praise God. He knew that death would cut him off from that which was his chief comfort on earth,

the public service of God's House ; and he knew not what he would have in exchange—how the loss would be more than made up to him ; therefore he shrank from death as debarring him from that which he felt to be the highest employment and joy of life.

Thus there were two special reasons, first, the fear of God's displeasure for his sins ; and, secondly, the loss of the public worship of God's House, which caused Hezekiah to shrink from the prospect of death. And corresponding with these were two promises he made, when his life was prolonged : the vow of continual sorrow, " I will go softly all my years on account of the bitterness of my soul ; " and the vow of solemn thanksgiving, " The living, the living, he praises Thee, as I do this day . . . therefore will we sing my songs to the stringed instruments all the days of our life in the house of the Lord."

We, at this time, just at the close of the year, are in a somewhat parallel situation with king Hezekiah. The old year, which is departing, is like the voice of God, " Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live ; " the new year, so soon, please God, to open upon us, is like the same voice, revoking for a time the terrible sentence,

and giving us reason to hope that we shall not yet go down to the gates of the grave. In these circumstances, what can we do better than follow Hezekiah's example, and resolve, on the one hand, to go softly all our days for the bitterness of our soul, that is, remember our sins and seek to become every day more deeply humbled and ashamed for them ; and on the other, to praise the Lord all the days of our life in the house of the Lord ? If, as is likely, we desire to live on, let us enter on the new year with shame and sorrow for the past, and with an earnest determination to show forth by increased devotion our thankfulness to God for His continued and undeserved mercy !

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah* xl.

THE stirring words with which this chapter commences, "Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God," may be regarded as a keynote to the whole remainder of *Isaiah's* prophecy. We are to think of the Prophet, now advanced in age, living in retirement, probably in one of the schools of the prophets, looking out sadly on the people of the land, steeped in sin and idolatry, and foresee-

ing the punishment which would fall on them ; but, at the same time, comforted himself and comforting others with the blessed hope of a happy time beyond. We are to think of him as not only mourning over the present and its results, but contemplating those results as if they were already present, throwing himself forward to the time of the captivity, and living, as it were, with the exiles in Babylon, and unfolding to them the blessed prospect which God set before him, the prospect not only of deliverance from Babylon, but of redemption from sin and Satan by the coming of the Messiah.

God's special message to the remnant of His people, pining away in the land of their captivity, was a message of comfort. He charged His servants the prophets to go to them with words of consolation : " Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God. Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare" (her hard service) " is ended, her iniquity is pardoned ; that she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." The condition of Judah in Babylon was like that of a soldier forced to endure, against his will, the hardships of war ; but now her time of service was come to an end, the justice of God

was satisfied ; she had suffered double for all her sins, which does not mean that she had suffered twice as much as in strict justice her sins deserved, but that the compassion of God so regarded it. "The turning - point from wrath to love had arrived ; the wrath had gone forth in double measure ; with what intensity, therefore, would the love break forth, which had been so long restrained !"

What, then, is the special message of comfort which the Prophet had to deliver ? It is that he hears the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." The Lord Himself was coming to deliver His people ; and the Prophet hears, as it were, the voice of the herald proclaiming His approach, and summoning the people into the desert to make ready the way before Him. If the Jews in Babylon desired that God should come to deliver them, they must prepare for His coming ; the self-righteous must become humble, the dishonest must become just and true, and the arrogant must be subdued. Then, when the way is ready, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and not Israel only, but the whole human race, shall see the salvation of God.

But the summons which the Prophet heard had reference also to a far greater deliverance than that of the Israelites from Babylon. He sees the Lord coming in the Person of the Incarnate Son, to set men free from the power of sin ; and he hears the cry of the great forerunner in the desert, bidding men repent and prepare for His coming. If it behoved the Jews in Babylon to prepare and discipline themselves, in order that they might be ready for the earthly deliverance which God was about to bring to them, much more must men be prepared, by sincere repentance and steadfast striving against sin, for the coming of Him Who was to take their sins away ; much more must they remove all obstacles out of Christ's way, and put down all pride and injustice and self-sufficiency, if they desired that He would bring them salvation and reveal to them His glory.

Presently the Prophet hears another voice, the purpose of which would seem to be to confirm the former promise of deliverance, on the ground that, while all created things are frail and perishable, the Word of God will stand for ever. As the grass of the field withereth and its flower fadeth, because the breath of the Lord has blown upon it, so men wither and fade away, but the Word of

the Lord rises up without fading and endures for ever. God's people, therefore, may rest upon His promise: their enemies are but flesh, they must perish; but God's Word is sure and cannot fail.

And now for a moment the Lord is supposed to have already come, and to be present once more in the midst of Zion, and the Prophet calls on Zion to get up, as it were, on some high mountain, and proclaim to the remaining cities of Judah the presence of their God. Jerusalem is to become an evangelist, and to lift up her voice with strength, and say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! What a call is there here to the Church, to whom Christ has revealed Himself, to publish the glad tidings of His advent to those whom the Gospel has not yet reached!

But the Prophet does not continue to contemplate the Lord as already come; he goes back to speak of Him again in terms of prophecy. "The Lord will surely come," he says, and when He comes it will be as a Mighty One; "His arm will rule for Him; behold His reward is with Him, and His work" (his retribution) "is before Him." He will punish His enemies, but reward and suc-

cour the faithful ; to them He will be a kind and tender Shepherd, carrying the young in His bosom and gently leading those that are giving suck.

But Who is He, Whose coming to redeem His people the Prophet here foretels ? What kind of God is He ? He is the Almighty Creator and Governor of the world, with Whom nothing, and least of all an idol, can be compared ; but in Whom Israel, and especially the faithful among them, are invited to trust.

To set forth the incomparable greatness of God, the Prophet asks, “ Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure” (*lit.*, the third of an ephah), “ and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance ? ” “ How very little can a man hold in the hollow of his hand ! how very small is the space which a man’s span can cover ! how little is contained in the third part of an ephah ! and how very trifling is the quantity you can weigh in scales ! But what the Lord measures with the hollow of His hand or with His span is no less than the waters beneath and the heaven above : He carries a measure in which there is room for all the dust of which the earth consists,

and a scale in which He has weighed the great colossal mountains."

The Prophet asks again, "Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being His counsellor has taught Him? With whom took He counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of judgment, and taught Him knowledge, and showed to Him the way of understanding?" The Lord is not only Almighty, but All-wise, and needeth no instruction from another. He is, moreover, the great Ruler of the world; to Whom, however, all the nations of the world are no more a burden than a drop of water hanging on a bucket is to the man who carries it, or the weight of a balance is increased by a grain of sand lying upon it. He taketh up the isles like a grain of dust; or, perhaps, He removes them like dust which flies away with the wind. All the cedars of Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor all its cattle for burnt-offerings, if men desired to offer a sacrifice worthy of His greatness. All nations before Him are as nothing; and they are counted of Him less than nothing and vanity.

God being thus incomparably great and mighty, what image can man set by His side as His resemblance? More especially, what idol can be

compared with Him, which is nothing in itself, only what the maker chooses that it should be? One man, for example, who can afford a metal image, covers it with plates of gold and fastens it with silver chains; another, who is poor, is satisfied with an idol of wood, which he takes care to make of such form and weight as to prevent its falling over with every shake. Is it possible—such seems to be the Prophet's meaning—that ye can trust in such vanities? Have you no knowledge of the truth as to the foundation of the earth? He, the great God, has the vault of heaven for His throne, and from His seat on high the inhabitants are as grasshoppers; He has spread out the blue sky like a thin, transparent garment, and stretched it out like a tent to dwell in. He brings the great ones of the earth to nought, and will not suffer them to establish themselves. A single withering breath lays them at rest: in His anger He blows on them, and they are carried away like the light dry stubble. “To whom then will ye liken Me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One.”

Another proof of the greatness of God the Prophet alleges, namely, the number and order of the heavenly host. “It is He Who bringeth out

the army of stars upon the plane of heaven, as a general leads his army upon the field of battle," and calleth them by their names; and when He calls, not one remains behind or fails to appear.

But besides those of the captivity who needed to be warned against idolatry, there were some who desired deliverance and looked to God for it, but thought that He was turned from them and did not take account of their affliction; and to them the Prophet now addresses himself: "Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord and my judgment is passed over from my God?" And then he shows them how ungrounded was their despondency. "Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of His understanding." Jehovah, the God of Israel, is an eternal God, always the same; He was the Creator of the earth from one end to the other: "Babylon, therefore, was not beyond the range of His vision or the domain of His power. Israel had already passed through a long history, and He had presided over it; He had not now so lost His power as to have left His people to themselves. He does not grow faint, like a man who

neglects to take necessary nourishment, nor does He become weary, like one who has exhausted his power by over-exertion. If He had not redeemed His people until then, it was because, in His unsearchable understanding, He knew exactly the right time at which to interpose in their behalf."

For not only was the Lord strong in Himself, but He would strengthen them in their weakness: "He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might He increaseth strength." Let those desponding ones only trust in Him, and they need not despair. Even young men in the bloom of life must yield to the want of food, or to over-exertion: outward obstacles will make them fall; but they that wait on the Lord are ever gaining fresh strength; they are ever rising higher and higher, like eagles; "running does not tire them, nor do they become faint by going ever farther and farther." "Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk but not faint."

A most precious promise truly for us to meditate upon and comfort ourselves with at the close of a

year. Past weaknesses and backslidings press sadly upon us at this time, and almost tempt us to doubt God's power and willingness to help us. But here, in His tender, forgiving love, He assures us that He is ever the same, our unchangeable, Almighty Father; and He sends us forth afresh with words of cheering hope. Trusting to ourselves we must needs be weak. But let us only look to the Lord and lean on Him, and we shall renew our strength; we shall go from strength to strength; our whole course will be a continual rising higher and higher, until, in His good time, we appear before our God in Zion. He Who knows our wants meets us at this time with that promise, which of all others is most welcome—strength to repair the failures of the past and to overcome the dangers of the future. May He enable us thoroughly to lay hold of, and bravely to wield, the strength which He offers.

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS.

MORNING LESSON.—*Isaiah* xlii.

It is thought that this prophecy of the servant of the Lord is specially introduced in contrast with the great conqueror from the East (Cyrus), who had been described in the previous chapter as having been raised up by God for the destruction of Babylon, the overthrow of idolatry, and the deliverance of His people. In this chapter Almighty God holds up before the eyes of the Church His true Servant, the Antitype of Cyrus, Who should perform fully and entirely what Cyrus had effected only in a limited sphere and in an imperfect manner. He, the Servant of the Lord, the Beloved and Elect One, upheld by God, and endowed with the fulness of His Spirit, shall establish right upon the whole earth. Hitherto it had been the special privilege of the Jews that they had been in possession of the law and commandments of God (cf. Deut. iv. 5—8; Ps. cxlvii. 19, 20); but now this knowledge of right, that is, of true religion

as regards God and man, should be extended to the whole world.

But the manner in which the Servant of the Lord would fulfil His mission of bringing judgment to the Gentiles forms a contrast to the method of that earthly conqueror, of whom it is said (chap. xli. 25), "He cometh upon princes as upon mortar, and as the potter treadeth clay." The Servant of the Lord "is meek and gentle; He will not cry, nor lift up" (His voice), "nor cause His voice to be heard in the street." He will not seek to effect His purpose by popular excitement; He will be composed and retiring, conscious of the truth of His cause, leaving His words to do their work, instead of resenting and resisting opposition (cf. St. Matt. xii. 14—21). "A bruised, half-broken reed He does not break, and the smoking flax, a glimmering, feebly-burning wick, He does not put out:" *i.e.*, the weary and heavy-laden, whether by sin or other sorrow, He will not crush by severity, nor suffer to pine away through neglect. He will bind up the broken reed, and cherish the flickering flame: He will not only not destroy the life that is dying out, He will actually preserve it. "He brings forth judgment with truth," that is, according unto truth, in a true manner. By every

other method righteousness would be established in appearance and outwardly only ; but by His gentleness and quietness He will cause God's will to be known in such a way as that it shall be truly known. " He will not fail nor be discouraged " (*lit.*, be broken), " till He have set judgment in the earth, and the isles shall wait for His law." His zeal shall not be extinguished, nor will anything break His strength, till He have secured for righteousness a firm standing on the earth, and until the isles shall have believed His instruction.

Hitherto, Almighty God has spoken *of* His Servant, now He speaks *to* Him, and promises that through His infinite power He should fully accomplish the work to which He was appointed ; He should both fulfil God's covenant with Israel, and be the Light of the Gentile world. So great is this work, of bringing back a sinful world to God, that He heaps together tokens of His power, in order to strengthen men's faith. It is He, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Author of all being and of all life, Who says to His Servant, " I, the Lord, have created thee in righteousness, and held thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the

prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison-house." God has called His Servant in righteousness, that is, in strict accordance with His holy will, which is a will of love; and in furtherance of that loving will, He has taken Him by the hand, and guided Him, and appointed Him for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles. He is not only the Mediator of the covenant, but the covenant itself, because all the privileges of the new covenant between Israel and God are fulfilled in Him (Isa. liv. 10, lxi. 8; Jerem. xxxi. 31—34; Ezek. xvi. 60, &c.) So is He also in His own Person the Light which illumines the heathen world: He opens the eyes of the blind, that is, of those who know not the need of salvation; He delivers those who are spiritually bound; He is the Redeemer of all who desire redemption.

The Lord pledges His name and honour that this work of His Servant shall be carried into effect: "I am the Lord; that is My Name: and My glory will I not give to another, neither My praise to graven images." "Behold, the former things are come to pass," that is, either the promises made to the fathers, or the former predictions of the Prophet, or, as some think, God's pur-

poses with regard to Cyrus, which are looked back upon as already accomplished. The fulfilment of these former things is a pledge that the new things which He now foretold, the restoration of His people, and the conversion of the heathen, would be fulfilled in like manner.

In anticipation of these new things, the Prophet summons the whole world to join in a new song. He calls on all the nations, even to the very ends of the earth, all those that go down to the sea, all the islands and coast-lands and their inhabitants, the desert and its villages, all the inhabitants of the rocky cities, to praise and bless God for His victory over His enemies, the enemies of His people.

“The Lord shall go forth as a mighty man, He shall stir up jealousy like a man of war ; He shall cry, yea, roar ; He shall prevail against His enemies,” that is, in the first instance, the Chaldeans, who held Israel in captivity ; but the words look on to the conversion of the heathen, and the triumphal march of the Gospel throughout the world.

Almighty God speaks of Himself as having borne long enough with the oppressors of His people ; He had kept silence for a long time, and forcibly restrained Himself from breaking forth for the

redemption of the captives. He had been like a woman in travail; but now He would breathe forth and pant (not, as in the English Version, "break forth and devour"), and His breath would turn mountains and hills into ruins, scorch up the herbage, change streams into islands, and dry up the lakes: that is to say, He would turn the strange land, into which Israel had been led captive, into a desert, and remove all hindrances to their return. Blind as they were, He would deliver them in a way which they understood not; He would light up the darkness of their misery, and clear away all dangers and obstacles. The deliverance which He would work for them would prove the folly of those who trusted in idols; and so the redemption of His people would thus lead the way to the conversion of the heathen.

Or, giving a more spiritual interpretation to the prophecy, Almighty God seems to say that He had long enough suffered the nations of the world to walk in their own ways; now He would go forth to the overthrow of sin and the power of evil. His eager longing for the salvation of the world He condescends to liken to the desire of a travailing woman for deliverance. He would draw the nations to Himself, leading those who were blind and deaf

by paths which they knew not, making darkness light to them, and crooked things straight; these things would He do unto them and not forsake them.

But as they were the blind and deaf whom the Lord promised to restore, and the blind and deaf through their own fault, He calls on them to rouse themselves from their obstinacy and wilfulness: "Hear, ye deaf; and look, ye blind, that ye may see. Who is blind, but My servant" Israel? "or deaf, as My messenger that I sent?" whom I designed to be the medium of blessing to the nations. "Who is blind as he that is perfect," or, rather, he that is God's favoured friend, "and blind as the Lord's servant? Seeing many things, but thou observest not; opening the ears, but he heareth not." The Jews were admitted to the privilege of seeing God's mighty works and hearing His gracious words; but in heart and mind they were blind and deaf, more blind and deaf than those to whom those privileges were not given.

"The Lord was pleased for His righteousness' sake; He magnified the law and made it honourable," that is, He was pleased for His righteousness' sake to make the law which He gave His people great and glorious. But in spite of God's

love and care for them, how miserable was the condition to which they were reduced ! They were a people robbed and spoiled, snared in holes and hidden in prison-houses ; they were for a prey, and none delivered ; for a spoil, and none said, Bestow ! no one thought of demanding back the booty, or that the captive should be set free.

O that ye would consider this, says the Prophet, for then ye would perceive that your miserable condition is only the deserved punishment of God. “ Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers ? Did not the Lord, He against Whom we have sinned ? for they would not walk in His ways, neither were they obedient unto His law. Therefore He hath poured upon him the fury of His anger, and the strength of battle ; and it hath set him on fire round about, yet he knew not ; and it burned him, yet he laid it not to heart.” “ The Prophet foresees God’s wrath kindled and burning up the city and temple of Jerusalem ; but the people laid it not to heart, and did not repent. This is true even to this day. The Jews do not yet lay to heart the truth of the Divine assertion, that not the Roman armies, but the fire of the Lord’s wrath, burnt up Jerusalem for rejecting Christ.”

The great promise of this chapter is that Christ should bring forth judgment unto the Gentiles, that is, that He should spread the knowledge of God, of His truth and holiness, throughout the world. This is the gracious purpose for which God in His mercy raised Him up, and which in His mighty power He will enable Him to fulfil. This is the purpose for which as at this time Christ came into the world, and for which we especially are bound to give thanks, namely, to be a light to the Gentiles as well as for a covenant to Israel.

But mark how this purpose was to be carried out—not by might or earthly conquest, nor by the stirring of popular excitement, but by the quiet influence of a life of holiness, by patience and long-suffering, by invitation, not by compulsion. Christ conquered by gentleness and love, by satisfying the secret desires of men's hearts and healing their miseries. And in the same way must His kingdom be advanced in the world, so far as it is truly advanced, viz., by the force of truth and holiness ; for Christ will rule over a willing people, who are drawn to Him by the sweetness of His love and the beauty of His goodness, rather than by fear. Let us remember this in our dealings with others : be we tender, gentle, and forbearing,

in remembrance of Him Who did not strive nor cry, Who would not break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax.

FIRST EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah* xliii.

THE previous chapter closed with a stirring reproof to Israel for its insensibility alike to God's mercies and His judgments. God had taught them His law, but they had not obeyed it; He had poured out His wrath upon them, but they had not laid it to heart. Now, suddenly, bitter reproach is changed into consolation; and the suddenness of the change shows that it is entirely due to God's free mercy. Israel itself has done nothing to deserve His gracious interposition. "But now, thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and He that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not; for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name: thou art Mine." The Lord had created Jacob; He had formed them into a nation in Egypt; He had redeemed them from the house of bondage; He had called them by their name, and separated them to be His own peculiar people (Exod. xix. 5); they were His. Therefore they need not fear; His past

mercies were a sure pledge of future favours ; even in the most overwhelming dangers He would protect them : “ When thou passest through the water I will be with thee, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee ; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.” He Who had driven back the waters of the Red Sea and of the Jordan before His people, and had brought them out of the iron furnace of Egypt, would enable them at all times to go through fire and water, and would bring them out into a wealthy place.

“ For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour ; I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee. Since thou wast precious in My sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee ” (or rather, Because thou art dear in My eyes, highly esteemed, and I loved thee) ; “ therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life.” The conquest of Egypt and the neighbouring kingdoms by the Persians is here referred to ; they are considered as a ransom given to Persia in return for the release of the Jews.

Another reason is then given why Israel should not fear, namely, because God would completely restore them from their dispersion. “ Fear not,

for I am with thee ; I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west ; I will say to the north, Give up ; and to the south, Keep not back ; bring My sons from far, and My daughters from the ends of the earth ; even every one that is called by My Name ; for I have created him for My glory. I have formed him ; yea, I have made him." Israel would be scattered in all directions (see chap. xi. 11, 12), but from all quarters they should be restored. The language of the Prophet takes in another and more glorious restoration than that from Babylon, and tells how the children of God that are scattered abroad shall be gathered together in Christ, His whole dispersed flock, Gentiles as well as Jews (St. John x. 11, xi. 52 ; Acts ii. 39). And all for His free love and mercy's sake, because He had created, moulded, perfected them as a people for His glory.

Almighty God here ceases to pour out His promises of protection to Israel, and calls on them to bear witness that He had been indeed a true God to them, very different from what the idols of the heathen were to their worshippers. "Bring forth the blind people that have eyes, and the deaf that have ears." This is the description given of Israel in the previous chapter (ver. 18, 19), as

having eyes and ears without seeing or hearing. Wilfully blind and deaf as they were, Almighty God desires that they be summoned to hear what He had to say. The heathen also were to be gathered to the place of trial: "Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled," to hear what evidence the Lord would adduce in His own behalf. "Who among them can declare this?" Who among the gods of the heathen can proclaim such a thing as this? that is, anything like the announcement which Almighty God had just made of the restoration of Israel. "If they can do so, let them show us former things," that is, former things which they had foretold, and which had come to pass; "let them bring forth their witnesses, and be justified; or let them hear and say, It is truth;" let them hearken to the prophecies of the God of Israel, and confess that they have come true, and that therefore the God of Israel alone is God.

But as such an appeal to the idols to testify for themselves, or to the worshippers to bear witness for them, would be useless, Almighty God Himself calls His witnesses, namely, His Own people, to prove that His prophecies had been fulfilled. "Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord, and" (ye

are) "My servant whom I have chosen ;" the whole history of My dealings with you proves that I am He, the only God, without beginning and without end ; therefore there could have been no God before Me, nor can there be after Me. The existence of any such being is a contradiction and an impossibility. "I, even I, am Jehovah ; and beside Me there is no Saviour. I have proclaimed and brought salvation, I have showed salvation at a time when there was no strange god among you, to whom the honour could have been assigned. This ye must yourselves confess ; ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord, that I am God. Yea, from this time forth, I am He, He Who alone displays Divine power ; and there is none that can deliver out of My hand. I will work, and who shall let it ?"

As further proof of what He was in Himself and in His dealings with Israel, Almighty God goes on to speak of the destruction of the Chaldean power in punishment for their treatment of Israel. "Thus saith the Lord your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel : For your sake I have sent" (the agents of My power, Cyrus and the Medes) "to Babylon, and have brought down all their nobles" (or rather, have hurled them down as fugitives, that is, into a rapid flight), "and the Chaldeans, whose cry is in

the ships" (rather, into the ships of their rejoicing, which had been the objects of their pride and boasting). The inhabitants of Babylon took refuge in their ships; and by their overthrow God proved Himself to be the Holy One of Israel, their Creator and King.

But He would not only destroy Babylon; He would deliver and restore His people. For their sakes He would work a new thing, which should eclipse all His former wonders. He Who once made a way in the sea for His people, a path in the mighty waters, when the chariot and horse, the army and the power, lay down together but never rose, flickered away and were extinguished like a wick; He has a still greater deliverance in store, and He bids His people not think of the older things in comparison with the new; He would have them look forward rather than backward. "Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it?" Shall ye not, that is, assuredly ye will, experience it. And what is it? "I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert,"—a glorious promise, which was doubtless intended in the first instance to refer to the return from Babylon to Jerusalem, but the language of which is "too large for the

special event." It looks on to the redemption of the Church from the bondage of Satan, and its joyous and triumphant progress through the wilderness of this world to heaven. "And the benefits of this miracle of Divine grace reach to the animal world as well, so that their joyful cries are an unconscious praise of Jehovah. Here, as in several other places (xi. 6—8, xxx. 23, 24, xxxv. 7), the Prophet has not only a sympathising heart for the woes of the human race, but also an open ear for the sighs of all creation. He knows that when the sufferings of the people of God shall be brought to an end, the sufferings of creation will also terminate." "The beast of the field shall honour Me, the dragons" (jackals) "and the owls" (ostriches); "because I give waters in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert, to give drink to My people, My chosen. This people have I found for Myself; they shall show forth My praise."

Israel would have abundant cause to praise and glorify God, but it would be entirely for His acts of grace towards them; they would have nothing of their own to celebrate, as Almighty God goes on to complain: "Thou hast not called upon Me, O Jacob." There is emphasis on *Me*, as if Israel could call on other gods, but not on the Lord.

“Thou hast been weary of Me, O Israel; thou hast not brought Me the small cattle of thy burnt offerings, neither hast thou honoured Me with sacrifices; thou hast brought Me no sweet cane” (which was used for the holy anointing oil, or for incense) “with money, neither hast thou filled Me with the fat of thy sacrifices.” And yet God had not burdened them with costly offerings: “I have not caused thee to serve with an offering, nor wearied thee with incense; but thou hast made Me to serve with thy sins, thou hast wearied Me with thine iniquities.” “The sin of Israel pressed upon Him as a burden does upon a servant,” but His love urged Him to bear the burden, and not only to bear it, but to blot it out. “I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for Mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.” Forgiveness has its foundation entirely in God’s free grace; He blots out our sins for His own sake, for His own love and mercy’s sake. “The debt stands written in God’s book. Justice has entered it, and love blots it out; but, as we know from the actual fulfilment, not without shedding of blood.”

The Lord then calls on Israel to say whether the case was not as He represented it. Could he bring forward any merit of his own as a ground of accept-

ance? "Put Me in remembrance; let us plead together; declare thou, that thou mayest be justified." But Israel has nothing to suggest. "Thy first father" (either Adam or Abraham) "sinned, and thy teachers" (the prophets and priests) "have transgressed against Me." Even the best and most godly among them were stained with sin; what, then, was the condition of the great bulk of the people? "Therefore," says God, "I have profaned" (that is, ruthlessly carried into captivity) "the princes of the sanctuary," the spiritual as distinct from the temporal rulers, "and have given Jacob to the curse, and Israel to reproaches." "The whole nation which bore the honoured names of Jacob and Israel was given up to the curse and blasphemies of the nations of the world."

The deliverance from Babylon, like the Exodus, is a type of our redemption from the power of Satan; and the figure under which the return of the Jews is here spoken of, as a passage through the wilderness, fitly symbolises the present condition of Christ's redeemed. Their path is through the wilderness, but it is a wilderness where waters continually flow from the rock to comfort and refresh them. Their whole life is a continual deliverance, becoming ever more and more complete; a con-

tinual progress from sin to holiness, from the power of Satan to the entire subjugation of soul and spirit to the will of Christ. Planted by God's free mercy in the way of salvation, outside the gates of the city of bondage, it is God's will that they should ever advance, daily increasing the distance between themselves and the dark prison-house from which they have been set free, and daily becoming more and more meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. To strengthen them for this daily progress, this daily conquest over sin and growth in grace, they have the promise of God's continual presence and almighty help. "Thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and He that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not, for I have redeemed thee; I have called thee by thy name, thou art Mine; fear not, for I am with thee." He will not forsake those whom He has chosen. Having loved them once, He will love them unto the end; having begun a good work in them, He will carry it on until the day of Jesus Christ. Sin shall not have dominion over them; for they are not under the law, but under grace. Oh, that we could fully realise what our true calling is, and what power is given us to fulfil it!

SECOND EVENING LESSON.—*Isaiah* xliv.

ONCE more Almighty God breaks forth into words of promise. As before (chap. xliii. 1), after dwelling for a little while on the dark picture of their punishment, He suddenly changes the scene and pours in light and consolation. Instead of Israel's being given up to a curse and reproaches, the Spirit shall be poured upon him, and the nations of the world shall be eager to do Him honour. Israel is the chosen servant of the Lord, formed and trained by Him; therefore he need not fear. "I will pour water on him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground. I will pour My Spirit upon thy seed, and My blessing upon thy offspring; and they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water-courses." Not only should they be restored to their own land, but all earthly and spiritual blessings shall be poured abundantly upon them. No longer shall they be like withered plants in a barren soil, but they shall spring up in the green grass like willows by the water-brooks. "Before the Babylonish captivity the willow was always associated with feelings of joyful prosperity;" and as such it is introduced here.

So great will be the contrast to their former con-

dition, that the heathen who had before reproached them will count it the highest honour to be reckoned among them. "One man shall say, I am the Lord's; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord," that is, he shall write with his hand, "To the Lord," meaning that he desired to belong to the Lord, and to Him Alone, "and surname himself by the name of Israel." Thus the name of Israel shall become a name of honour among the heathen.

After these words of gracious promise, Almighty God re-asserts His claim as the Redeemer and King of Israel, to be the Only true God, and exposes the folly of those who worship idols instead of Him: "I am the First," before all history, "and I am the Last," to the end of the ages; "and beside Me there is no God." This is specially proved by His power of predicting future events: "Who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set it in order for Me, since I appointed the ancient people?" or rather, Who preaches and proclaims as I do? Let him make it known and show it to Me, since I founded the people of ancient time. The prophecies of the Lord look back to the earliest time of the world's history; and He challenges the idols and their

worshippers to allege a series of predictions similar to those which He has uttered from the beginning: "And the things that are coming, and shall come, let them make them known." They could not answer the challenge; therefore God's people might be convinced that He was the only God. "Fear ye not, neither be afraid; have I not told thee from that time and have declared it? Ye are ever My witnesses." It is thought that there is an allusion here to the great catastrophe coming upon the nations, of which Cyrus was the instrument. "Israel would have nothing to fear, since its God, Who was no dumb idol, had foretold all this, and that indeed long ago, as they themselves must bear witness." "Is there a God beside Me? There is no Rock: I know not any."

Then follows a vehement exposure of the vanity of idols and the infatuation of those who trust in them. The makers of graven images can be nothing but vanity, seeing that their "delectable things," their favourites, the false gods which are the objects of their delight, are utterly worthless. The idols bear witness by their blindness and ignorance that they are profitless, and that they who worship them should be ashamed. Those worshippers are numbered among men, and ought to know, therefore,

that they are made by God; but instead of this, they are makers of gods themselves. They are so foolish and infatuated, that though they have eyes and hearts, they have not understanding enough to say: "I have burned part of it in the fire; yea, I have baked bread upon the coals thereof; I have roasted flesh and eaten it; and shall I make the residue thereof an abomination? shall I fall down to the stock of a tree?" "He feedeth on ashes," that is, on things easily scattered, and worthless; and he who makes such things the objects of his striving, is led astray by a heart overpowered by delusion; he is so entirely self-deceived, that he does not think of saving his soul, nor say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

"Remember these, O Jacob and Israel," remember, that is, that idolatry is a lie: "thou art My servant," formed by Me in order to serve Me, and bound therefore to reverence Me and Me Alone: do not forget Me, for thou art not forgotten of Me, and not only art thou not forgotten, but "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and as a cloud, thy sins: return unto Me; for I have redeemed thee." Israel had again and again sinned against God; this very captivity from which they are here supposed to be suffering, was the conse-

quence of their sin; their sin had interposed between them and their God, and hidden His face from them. But here He promises that He would forgive them all; He will clear them all away, as when His wind sweeps away the clouds and restores the blue sky.

And then follows the answer of the Church, calling upon all creation to join with her in her song of thanksgiving: "Sing, O ye heavens; for the Lord hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth; break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein; for the Lord hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified Himself in Israel." All creation is to rejoice—the heavens on high, and "the depths of the earth beneath, that is, not Hades, which would be opposed to the prevailing view of the Old Testament, but the interior of the earth, with its caves and pits and deep abysses; and the mountains and woods, which rise up from the earth towards heaven; all are to unite in the exultation of the redeemed; for the redemption that is being accomplished in man will extend its effects in all directions, even to the utmost limits of the natural world."

The chapter closes with a special prophecy of the deliverance which God had prepared for His people,

and of Cyrus as the instrument of that deliverance. "Thus saith the Lord, thy Redeemer, and He that formed thee from the womb, I the Lord am He that accomplisheth all things," so that there is nothing which is not to be traced to His power and wisdom. It was He Alone Who stretched out the heavens, and Who by Himself made the earth into a wide plain; Who bringeth to nought the signs of their divine mission which the false prophets adduce by fraud; Who exposeth the soothsayers as mad, and proves the folly of their wise men (with special reference to the soothsayers and wise men of Babylon); and Who, on the other hand, realises and fulfils the words of His own prophets. It was He, again, Who saith to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited, and to the cities of Judah, Ye shall be built; Who saith to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers, in allusion to the drying up of the Euphrates by Cyrus, to make a passage for his army into Babylon; and lastly, Who saith to Cyrus, "My Shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid."

This is the passage which is said by Josephus to have induced Cyrus to send back the Jews to their

own land. Certainly it is very remarkable that the name and acts of Cyrus should be thus expressly declared more than 150 years before their fulfilment; but besides the wonderful proof thus afforded of the Divine omniscience, we are specially reminded hereby of God's overruling providence in the affairs of men, seeing that all the victories and successes of the great Cyrus are seen to have been ordered by God with a view to the accomplishment of His own purpose in the restoration of His people.

It would seem also that we may recognise in Cyrus, heathen though he was, a type of Christ. The names by which he is designated—"My Shepherd, who shall perform all My pleasure," and, in the beginning of the next chapter "My Anointed, whose right hand I have holden"—point to Him Who is emphatically the Good Shepherd, the Messiah or Anointed One, Who came into the world to do the will of His Father. This prophecy, therefore, of Cyrus turns our thoughts, not so much to the deliverance which Christ has brought to us, as to Himself as our Deliverer. In His eternal counsels God raised Him up to be the Restorer of our race: through the early ages of the world He prepared the way for Him, and at length in the fulness of time He sent Him to set the captives free, and to lead

them forth in the paths of righteousness for His Name's sake. In and through Him all the blessings vouchsafed by God to His ancient people are bestowed in more abundant measure upon us; in Him we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of our sin; in Him the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, so that we may be as trees planted by the water side, whose leaf shall not wither.

If, therefore, the Israelites were bidden to call on heaven and earth to join with them in thanking God for His mercy to them, much more should we rejoice in Him Who has delivered us—not, indeed, like Cyrus, by earthly prowess and might, but by humiliation, suffering, and death; much more does it behove us to give thanks to Him Who was slain, and has redeemed us to God by His blood out of every kindred and tongue, and people and nation, and so anticipate on earth that which shall be our unceasing song of praise in heaven. “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing!”

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