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Fenton John Anthony Hort
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I

THE PROBATION OF THE JEWS BY THE LIGHT

Emmanuel College Chapel, First Sunday in Advent, 1877.

“THEN Jesus said unto them, Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth. While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light. These things spake Jesus, and departed, and did hide himself from them.”—*John* xii. 35 f.

THE Advent messages of to-day, which speak to us from Collect, Epistle, and Gospel, and from the prophetic lessons of Isaiah, find a meeting-point and explanation in the strangely impressive record from St. John's Gospel which chanced to be our second lesson for this afternoon. No one surely can listen to the march of those measured verses without feeling their tremendous power. But the impression becomes at once deepened and diversified, if we set ourselves to spell out a little of their meaning; and especially if, as a first step, we observe where they stand in the order of the Gospel. The next chapter, the thirteenth, begins the second part of St. John's

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narrative, the record of the words and deeds accompanying our Lord's departure out of the world that He might return to the Father, belonging therefore partly to the last evening, night, and day of His earthly life, partly to His manifestations of Himself to the unsealed eyes of disciples after His resurrection. The record of His ministry, in the strict sense of the word, thus ends with the twelfth chapter, and our lesson of to-day closes the story with a single significant scene, and the words which were needed to bring out its force.

For some time back the signs of the approaching crisis had been thickening. The unbelief of the Jews, who refused to recognize their own King, had turned from suspicion to hatred. The raising of Lazarus had quickened hatred with alarm, and brought about a definite purpose of murder. Any lurking hesitation was removed, when the shouts of the multitude were heard welcoming the entry of Jesus of Nazareth into the city, and the blinded Pharisees cried, "Behold, the world is gone away after him." Then St. John passes to the last event of the ministry, which it is needful for his purpose to tell. Among the crowds who had come up, like Jesus Himself, to worship at the national festival, were certain Greeks, men who had adopted the Jewish faith and law, but were of alien race and traditions. These Greeks found their way to Philip and expressed a desire to see Jesus. Philip spoke of the request to his townsman and brother apostle, Andrew, and they together came and made it known to the Lord. The Lord's answer showed at once that He recognized

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this unobtrusive incident of quiet progress and encouragement as the definitive sign that the end was now indeed nigh at hand. His own personal ministry, as fixed in God's counsel, was to be a ministry to Jews. The Jews as a body had been rejecting it, and now Gentiles were seeking to receive it, and thereby marking that the Jewish rejection was no longer tendency only, but well-nigh a deliberate decision. Two opposing visions therefore rose up before His soul at once: the woeful doom of Israel, the glorious reception of the gospel by the nations of the world. And these two visions of mankind were reflected in two corresponding visions of Himself and His appointed destiny. His rejection by Israel must be consummated by His death at the hands of Israel, and that death of His would be the source of His world-wide triumph, the beginning of a new ministry, which should go on multiplying from age to age.

"The hour is come," He said, "that the Son of man should be glorified." Then He went on to declare the law of glorification which prevails wherever God is King. It is only by falling into the ground and dying that the corn of wheat can bear much fruit. A true Son of Man must regard his soul or earthly life as that seed corn. He must be willing to cast it into the ground when God commands, knowing that God will raise it into a life eternal. No true servant or disciple has a right to shrink from this destiny. "If any man," He said, "serve Me, let him follow Me." Yet this clear faith did not render the soul of that perfect Son of Man inaccessible to the

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troublings of ordinary human fears. "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour." Yet as soon as the conflict came, the will sided with the faith. In a moment the second word was spoken. "But for this cause came I into this hour." And so the prayer of trouble rose up into the prayer of victorious faith, "Father, glorify thy name." By Him no outward sign that the prayer had been heard was needed: for Him the inward witness sufficed. But to the true yet imperfect faith of disciples a reassuring voice out of heaven was vouchsafed, a voice to them, an inarticulate thunder to others. The momentary strife in His soul was over, and all that was personal henceforth sunk in the thought of the powers contending for possession of the human race, and the deliverance of the captives which His death should accomplish. "Now is there a judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out: and I, if I be lifted up out of the earth, will draw all men unto myself." The world was about to judge Him, and in so doing would judge itself. The usurping ruler of this world, the inspirer of its cruel and jealous intents, was about to cast Him out, and in so doing would cast himself out: while He, the true King, thus cast out of the earth by the world and its ruler, would thereby be lifted up out of the earth by an exaltation of which His uplifting on the Cross would be a visible sign, and by that uplifting He should draw all men upwards to His own high estate.

The multitude had desired a Christ after their

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own magnified likeness, a softened and corrected Herod, and such they had expected the Nazarene whom they had escorted over the Mount of Olives to show Himself. To men filled with these expectations His present language about a Son of Man was very baffling. They could not in their thoughts bring the Christ and the Son of Man together. They began to feel that they had made a mistake in their choice. "Who," they asked, "who is this Son of man?" Then came the words of the text, words prophetic of doom, yet not pronouncing doom; words rather of tender expostulation, implying that there was yet a pause within which all things were possible before the decisive hour should strike, though even now it was about to strike; words swelling at the last to a note of bright and cheerful encouragement: "Yet a little while the light is in you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness overtake you: and he that walketh in the darkness knoweth not whither he goeth. While ye have the light, believe on the light, that ye may become sons of light."

Such were the possibilities of that moment. We all know how sadly they failed to become facts. St. John, who had seen the whole tragedy unroll itself, and whose heart had been torn by the crimes and by the miseries of his own people, concludes his narrative with a single sentence expressing the external ending of that scene, expressing also the inward fact of spiritual history, of which the catastrophe of that tragedy was the necessary fruit: "These things spake Jesus, and departed, and was hidden from them." He went His way; they theirs.

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For a while the light had been among them, and they had found some pleasure in its radiance and warmth. But when it came to search out the dark places of their hearts and make serious claims on their allegiance, they decided that they could welcome it no more; and so it dwelt no longer among them, but became hidden from their sight.

To these few words of history St. John appends some thoughts of his own, first on the unbelief of the Jews, and then on a divine purpose behind their unbelief—both foreshadowed in the great prophetic book of glad tidings. He thus at once sounds the lowest depths of the curse that had fallen on Israel, and teaches us not to forget that all these things belong to the encompassing mystery of Providence, and can only be understood in the light of the mind and character of Him whose will *is* Providence. If we desire more explicit language, we shall find it in those chapters of the Epistle to the Romans in which St. Paul faces boldly this same fatal unbelief of Israel, and its seeming contradiction to the promises of God; quotes freely some of the same and other like startling words of the Old Testament; and then lays it down broadly, as the result of his whole survey, that God hath concluded them all under unbelief that He might have mercy upon all.

Nothing of this is said by St. John, though it is difficult to believe that the remembrance of words spoken by Christ Himself (such, for instance, as those about the results of His lifting up out of the earth) was not presenting to his mind a similar vision when he pointed thus fearlessly to the original

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counsel of God. But in the closing paragraph of this chapter and lesson he takes care in another way that his record of the ministry of the Saviour shall not end with the burden of condemnation, by sub-joining yet more words of our Lord which carry on in a calmer strain the teaching of the former verses. Here too there is mention of light and darkness, of belief and rejection, and therefore also of judgment. But there is also clear statement of the purpose of Christ's coming into the world: "I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth in me should not abide in the darkness." "I came not that I might judge the world, but that I might save the world." And along with these declarations about His own work, Christ at the beginning and the end declares Himself once more, as He had often done before, to be the true image of the Father: "He that believeth on me, believeth not on me but on him that sent me; and he that beholdeth me, beholdeth him that sent me." "What things I speak, as the Father hath said unto me so I speak." And thus the last message of His ministry is its perfect conformity with the Supreme Will, and the certainty with which we may conclude from the prevailing character of His ministry to the prevailing character of the Will that is over all. Men had to do not with a sovereign enforcing his behests, but with a Father, the source of life bestowing life on the only conditions on which reasonable and free creatures could receive it. The perfectly obedient Son could say, "I know that his commandment is eternal life."

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The review of the contents of this lesson (brief though it be, considering the range of subjects included in the lesson) has left but little time for drawing out the special force of its Advent teaching. Yet it is equally true that Advent thoughts have been accompanying us all along. The whole lesson is the story of a great probation and its close. To some the mention of a probation is in itself an offence. A holy and wise theologian of recent times was accustomed to set up the idea of divine education against that of divine probation. It is perhaps well that some should be found to take up this extreme position, since so much harm has been done to theology by setting forth probation as a complete account of God's moral dealings with man. But I cannot see that there is any contradiction between the two ideas; and unless we acknowledge probation as part of God's education of His children, it seems to me that we throw away a large part of human experience, as well as do violence to much clear teaching of Scripture. Although there is a continuity in all our lives, they are also broken into various stages with different opportunities and responsibilities, and few indeed can bring home to themselves the solemn charge with which they are entrusted from hour to hour, who do not recognize themselves as called to account from time to time by God above for the faithfulness with which they have executed their stewardship. The duties which He lays upon them are appointed for their own benefit as well as the benefit of His other creatures; but they cannot live the true human life if they emulate

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the unconscious growth of beings without wills, and count it an unworthy thing to fulfil commandments, though they be the commandments of the life-giving God.

If the lesson of to-day reminds us of the most memorable instance of a probation, and of the condemnation pronounced on unprofitable servants, it likewise brings vividly before us the often forgotten truth that divine judgment, whatever else it may be, is a light, and invested with all the beneficent properties of light. Our common ways are at best but ways of twilight, of light and darkness mingled. When Christ comes among men, when His words and acts are felt as a forceful presence, there arises a dividing between the light and the darkness, and this is judgment. God's judgments without are the necessary proclamations of His discerning and judging mind, made necessary by our neglect to judge ourselves within. We are loth to believe that our twilight is not all light, or what will do as well; and so we walk on still in darkness, or what is much the same as darkness. Our lives of confused and indolent acquiescence are exactly described in our Lord's words about him who "knoweth not whither he goeth." In this condition we have no definite and sedulously followed purpose. Nay, even from hour to hour we are the victims of endless delusion. In our twilight we think we see many things; but we see nothing as it really is.

Let us then welcome the call to judgment, in whatever accent it comes, for it means a call to choose and follow the light. Let us welcome the

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call to choose and follow the light, for it means a call to recognize and follow Him who gave Himself for us. The Light of lights for us is not a diffused luminousness, but a living Saviour on whom we can set our hearts in loving trust. Such a Light, so believed in, will mould us by degrees into its own likeness, making us not only obedient servants of Light, but sons of Light, ever drawing truth and goodness together from the Father of lights in whom they are essentially one, ever transmitting to our fellowmen whatever truth and goodness we may have been enabled to receive from that heavenly fountain.