

## LECTURE I.

EARLY CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM IN FOREIGN  
COUNTRIES

PREVIOUS TO ITS INTRODUCTION INTO GREAT BRITAIN.

THE subject chosen for the present course of lectures is Early Christian Symbolism, with special reference to its manifestations in Great Britain and Ireland. It is necessary at the commencement to define the exact meaning of the terms employed in the title. The word early has reference to the period of Christian art to be dealt with, and includes the space of five hundred years between the seventh and twelfth centuries. It will be seen, subsequently, that the amount of material for arriving at the history of Christian art in this country before the seventh century is very small indeed; and therefore our knowledge of the subject in the preceding period is derived almost entirely from foreign sources. I have fixed the year 1200 as the final limit of our investigation as regards time, because, in the thirteenth century an entire change took place in Christian art, which then ceased to be Byzantine in character and became mediæval; or, in other words, Northern influence began to predominate over Eastern. Symbolism may be defined as a means of conveying ideas and facts to the mind by representations, which are, in the first instance, merely pictorial, but by frequent repetition gradually assume certain stereotyped forms. It is, in fact, a conventional system whereby pictures of historical scenes or natural objects are made use of to express something beyond what appears to the eye; and set in motion a train of thought, leading the mind on to contemplate those abstract ideas that are associated directly, or otherwise, with the thing portrayed. For instance, the scene which shows Noah in the Ark, is pic-

torially merely a man in a boat ; but symbolically is intended to teach the doctrine that, as God saved Noah from destruction in the waters of the flood, so will Christ deliver those who believe in Him from spiritual danger. Not only are the representations of events which actually took place, found in Christian art, but scenes from the mystical or supernatural portions of the Bible, such as the Apocalypse, are also of frequent occurrence. The subjects adopted for the purpose of Christian symbolism may be classified, either according to the nature of the event or thing by which the idea is suggested, or according to the book or tradition whence the knowledge of the event having taken place is derived. All symbolism in the first instance results from the contemplation of the surrounding universe ; but with the development of abstract methods of thought, and the accumulation of ideas which results from the existence of literature, we obtain fresh sources of inspiration.

We have, then, the following classification of subjects, according to nature of the outward forms, suggesting the idea involved in the symbolism.

(1.) Historical Scenes, that is to say, events which are recorded as having actually taken place in this world, and are used as having a secondary meaning ; as, for example, the Sacrifice of Isaac, which typifies the Crucifixion of our Lord.

(2.) Parables, or supposed events, which are already used in a secondary sense and, therefore, are allegorical in literature before being adopted in art, such as the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins.

(3.) Mystical or Supernatural Scenes, connected with another world, such as the Dream of Ezekiel, or the Last Judgment.

(4.) Representations of Religious Rites and Ceremonies ; the Church, and its officers.

(5.) Subjects symbolical of the Moral and Spiritual Life ; such as the Soul, Death, the Christian Life, the Conflict between Good and Evil, the contrasts between Virtues and Vices, Deeds of Goodness and Deadly Sins.

(6.) Subjects suggested by the properties of the Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral World ; such as the habits and qualities of birds, beasts, fishes, and minerals, which can be applied in a spiritual sense to Christian doctrines.

(7.) Subjects connected with the Universe and the operations of Nature—such as the Seasons, the Months, the Signs of the Zodiac, and the Sun, Moon, Stars, Earth, Wind, Rivers, etc., personified.

(8.) Human pursuits and occupations capable of being applied figuratively to the teaching of Christianity; as the trade of a fisherman, which is compared in the New Testament to that of a preacher of the Gospel.

(9.) Representations of inanimate objects occupying a prominent position in some historical scene, or associated with a particular idea; as, for example, the Cross and the Keys of St. Peter.

(10.) Monograms or symbols founded on combinations of letters.

The other method of classification to be considered, is where the subjects are arranged according to the sources in literature or tradition whence they are obtained, as follows :

(1.) Subjects founded on Pagan history, science or mythology, and adapted to Christian purposes; as, for instance, the Story of Orpheus applied to Christ.

(2.) Scriptural subjects, which are chiefly the Three Persons of the Trinity; Heaven and the Angels; Hell, the Devil and his Angels; scenes and persons described in the Old Testament typical of those in the New; and scenes and persons from the New Testament, specially chosen as having reference to the leading doctrines of Christianity.

(3.) Apocryphal subjects, derived from the uncanonical books of Scripture, such as the story of Susanna and the Elders, and the Harrowing of Hell; being generally only an amplification of the Bible narrative, filling in the details which are there omitted.

(4.) Subjects from the Lives of Saints, which, however, are rare in early Christian art.

(5.) Subjects founded on mediæval science, applied in a spiritual sense; as, for example, in the Bestiaries.

Systems of symbolism have existed in the most remote ages, long before the dawn of Christianity; as is shown by the fact that the phonetic alphabets of the Phœnicians, Greeks, and Romans were originally developed out of the primitive picture-writing or hieroglyphics of the Egyptians. Christian symbolism will consequently be found in its earlier stages to contain some

of the elements of the pagan symbolism which preceded it. As centuries rolled on, Christian nations progressed in civilisation, and their ideas on spiritual matters underwent various modifications, so that the symbolism, which was the outcome of these ideas, changed also. In studying development, whether it be of plants or animals, or of ideas, no fact is more curious than the way in which archaic types survive, side by side with those which are the growth of yesterday. Thus some symbols have become extinct; others so profoundly modified as to be scarcely recognisable; whilst not a few remain to the present day absolutely unchanged in any respect from what they were a thousand years ago. For instance, the conventional representation of Adam and Eve is the same now as it was in the third century; whereas that of the Crucifixion has been materially altered. The reason of this is that, in the former case, no change of belief is involved, but in the latter new ways of considering the subject were introduced from time to time. At different periods of the Church's history, special portions of Scripture seem to have fired the imagination more than others, and particular dogmas were singled out to occupy a more prominent position; the result being at once apparent in the system of symbolism.

Survivals of archaic forms are due, not only to the more stable nature of particular doctrines, but also to the stereotyped modes of thought found in many of the nations who have embraced Christianity. This is specially noticeable in comparing the East with the West, for, although the Roman Church adapted its system of symbolism to suit new modes of thought, the religious pictures of the Greek Church are the same at the present day as those of the earliest times. Other survivals are owing to particular portions of the Christian Church having become isolated; as was the case with the Celtic Church during the Saxon invasion. Christian symbols may then be divided into three classes, namely:—

(1.) Those which have survived the destructive effects of time, and are in use in this country at the present time to express their original meaning.

(2.) Those which, although they have ceased to be used in this country, are to be found still in use abroad.

(3.) Those which have ceased to be used both in this country and elsewhere.

This latter class may again be subdivided into—

- (a.) Those whose meaning is known either by inscriptions, or by written accounts, or by tradition.
- (b.) Those whose meaning is quite unknown.

The scientific methods of archæology are applied to deciphering the meaning of Christian symbolic representations in the following manner. With regard to symbols belonging to the first class no investigation is necessary, as the original signification is still retained. The meaning of symbols belonging to the second class is ascertained by comparison with those still in use in other countries. Symbols belonging to the third class, which have gone out of use everywhere, must be arranged, and then compared with those whose meaning is known by inscriptions or history. There will, probably, always remain a large residue whose signification is entirely lost, and with regard to these, when the archæologist has classified and arranged them, his work is done. By this process the known is separated from the unknown, and should fresh discoveries be the means of explaining one symbol of a class, then all those which have been arranged with it will be understood as well; but, until new light is thrown upon some of them, we must be content to admit the limits of our knowledge, which is indeed the first step towards further progress. A great deal of harm has been done to archæology, and much discredit has been justly thrown on this pursuit, in consequence of the system of guesswork which has often taken the place of more scientific methods; and by the dislike of authorities on the subject to acknowledge, frankly, their inability to give explanations.

And in this matter the public must take no small share of the blame, for an explanation of some kind, although known to be grossly improbable, is always expected, and is preferred to the admission of ignorance. If the same careful methods that are applied to other branches of scientific research were used by the archæologist, equally valuable discoveries would be the result, but as long as a system of guesswork prevails there can be no hope of progress.

In some symbolic representations, the group of figures in the

scene may be so dramatically arranged, and may correspond so exactly in every particular with the description given in the Bible of some striking incident, that the interpretation is not difficult. It must not, however, be forgotten that a confusion may arise from the partial resemblance of different scenes: as for example, the Transfiguration and Ascension of Christ.

In addition to the systems of symbolism already described, there is the purely arbitrary one, where a particular geometrical shape or graphical picture of some object is taken to represent an idea which has no connection with the thing itself, as for instance, the Greek letter  $\pi$ , which is used by mathematicians to express the ratio of the diameter of a circle to its circumference. Once the meaning of any of these arbitrary symbols is lost, there is no conceivable method of scientific comparison by which it can be recovered.

Any attempt at explaining mediæval symbolism from a nineteenth century point of view is certain to end in failure. All ideas which are the result of modern culture must be laid aside, and an endeavour must be made to imbue ourselves thoroughly with the spirit of the thinker of the Middle Ages, and try and see things as he saw them, remembering that political and religious changes have entirely altered the cast of the national mind, and that advances of knowledge have completely revolutionised science and art. For instance, everyone is now familiar with the appearance of foreign animals, from having seen either the beasts themselves in menageries, or illustrations of the various species in books on natural history. These sources of information were, however, quite unknown in the Middle Ages; and it is not, therefore, surprising to find the imagination supplying the place of actual knowledge in the wonderful stories told of lions, tigers, elephants and all kinds of fabulous beasts, or to observe the grotesque shapes they assume in ancient illuminations and sculpture. The mediæval naturalist did not dissect and classify animals scientifically, but he seems to have paid attention chiefly to such of their real or supposed habits and qualities, as would enable him to make religious capital out of the subject by appending morals to the description of each, in order to convey some spiritual lesson to the mind of the reader. Before the Reformation, science did not exist in the modern ac-

ception of the word, and all learning was turned into a religious channel.

The only possible way of understanding early Christian symbolism is to study mediæval literature, and by searching the contemporary manuscripts, find out what was the conventional method of treating particular scenes, and what the actual ideas were of the artists who drew them. The rudeness of the execution of some of the early Christian sculptures has proved a stumbling-block to many enquirers, who have misinterpreted the meaning of the subjects represented entirely, by not making sufficient allowance for the want of art-training existing in remote places and times. These sculptures, like the designs on ancient British coins, were copied from well-executed classic models, and are quite unintelligible until placed side by side with the originals, when the meaning is at once apparent. Many errors have arisen from the custom, common in remote districts far away from the centres of learning, of portraying figure-subjects in the dress of the day; in consequence of which, Scripture scenes have been sometimes mistaken for representations of contemporary events. The most usual dress for Scripture characters is, however, long flowing drapery, probably copied originally from the Roman costume, and handed down by means of miniatures in manuscripts from one century to another. It cannot be too clearly pointed out, that the system of early Christian symbolism was a general one, and dealt either with scenes from the Bible, which were intended to inculcate some vital truth, or with emblems typical of some special virtue which the Christian should possess, or vice that he should avoid, and not with the doings of public personages or private individuals, however celebrated. Portraits of some of the French emperors are found as frontispieces to MS. Bibles; and occasionally miniatures of Saints occur, as, for example, St. Jerome starting on his journey to revise the Scriptures, or St. Benedict promulgating his rule. These are rare exceptions, and the representation of a purely secular or historical event, having no connection with the Church, is probably not to be found on any Christian monument, or in any MS. of a religious book.

In order to understand the early Christian symbolism of Great Britain, it will be necessary to take a brief survey of the chief

sources whence the materials for the study of Christian art, generally, are obtained. These are as follows:—

- A.D. 50 to 400.—Paintings in the decoration of the walls and roofs of sepulchral chambers in the Catacombs at Rome. Sepulchral tablets ornamented with Christian symbols from the Catacombs. Sculptured sarcophagi from the Catacombs. Objects found in the Catacombs, such as gilded glass vessels, lamps, &c.
- A.D. 400 to 700.—Paintings and mosaics in the decoration of the walls, roofs, and floors of ecclesiastical buildings in Italy and the East. Sculptured sarcophagi from the early basilicas at Rome, Ravenna, Milan, Marseilles, Arles, and elsewhere. Carved ivories, chiefly diptyches, caskets, etc. Miniatures in Greek and Syriac MSS., coins, engraved gems, etc. Holy oil-vessels.
- A.D. 700 to 1050.—Paintings and mosaics in the decoration of the walls, roofs, and floors of ecclesiastical buildings in Italy and the East. Pre-Norman sculptured crosses in Great Britain. Miniatures in Greek, Carlovingian, Lombardic, and Celtic MSS. Carved ivories. Belt clasps from Burgundian graves.
- A.D. 1050 to 1200.—Decorative features of ecclesiastical buildings in Europe, such as paintings and mosaics on walls and roofs; mosaic, marble, tile or other pavements; doors ornamented with metal-work or wood-carving; stained glass windows; sculptured architectural details of columns, capitals, arches, etc. Ecclesiastical fittings of churches, such as altars, pulpits, fonts, screens, etc. Ecclesiastical furniture and utensils, such as shrines, croziers, vestments, chalices, crucifixes, etc. Miniatures in English, French, German, Spanish, and other MSS. Carved ivories. Sepulchral monuments.

It will be noticed that almost all the sources enumerated in the above list are connected either with the rites of religion or burial; and that at different periods the materials for the study of Christian art have to be sought in a new geographical area,



and on a special set of objects. There are various causes which have co-operated to produce this result. During the era of the persecution of the Christian Church by the Roman emperors, between the years A.D. 64 and A.D. 303, religious art is entirely confined to the underground cemeteries which were purposely made inaccessible by means of concealed entrances and other precautionary measures.

The open use of Christian symbols elsewhere, would doubtless have been speedily followed by a martyr's death.

In the year 312 peace was restored to the Church, and Christianity thenceforward became the religion of the state, so that, there being no further need for secrecy, basilicas soon sprang up in all directions. The most appropriate method of decorating the large masses of wall-surface and the domed roofs of these early churches was either with frescoes or mosaic; the latter being chosen in preference during the 500 years between the fourth and ninth centuries. Most of the sculptured sarcophagi belong to 200 years (A.D. 350 to 550), during which the burials took place in the cemeteries round the suburban basilicas, above ground, before the time of intramural interments. The reason that sculptured sarcophagi were not employed to any great extent before the middle of the fourth century is, that during the time of persecution, the moving of such heavy masses of stone would have attracted attention to the entrances of the Catacombs, which it was desirable from motives of safety to conceal. The art of the sculptor was also a dangerous one for a Christian to pursue, as he was forbidden by the Church to make pagan idols, and his refusal to do so would compel him to confess his faith at the risk of his life. The use of sculptured sarcophagi ceased when other forms of sepulchral monuments were introduced.

From the eighth to the eleventh centuries, the mosaic decorations of churches still is the chief form in which Christian art exhibited itself in Italy; but by this time the religion had spread over a far larger area than was the case previously, and the examples of early symbolism in Great Britain must be sought in the Celtic and Saxon MSS. and sculptured stones, as it was on these that the highest skill of the workman was lavished. The ecclesiastical buildings were then of the

plainest description, and have almost all been destroyed. During this period the same kind of contest was going on in Great Britain between Christianity and paganism as was the case in Rome during the first three centuries. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Danish and Saxon wars ceased, and after the Norman Conquest the Church became firmly established. As it grew rich its buildings became more important, and, consequently, the materials for studying the history of Christian art are much more numerous than before. Sculpture became a leading feature in the decoration of churches, wall-paintings were largely used, and encaustic tile pavements, and stained glass windows, introduced for the first time. Ecclesiastical vestments, and all objects appertaining to the church were ornamented with Christian symbols and figure-subjects. The MSS. are also more numerous, and illustrated by a greater number of miniatures. At this time, however, symbolism ceases to be found to any great extent on sepulchral monuments, which consist either of recumbent effigies or slabs with plain crosses upon them. The large doors of some of the churches and Cathedrals abroad ornamented with symbolic sculptures and metal-work, belong to this period.

Ivory carvings with Christian subjects are found from the fourth century onwards, and will be referred to hereafter.

Having now reviewed the sources whence the materials for the study of early Christian symbolism are obtained, and having considered the changes which have taken place during each successive century in the localities where they are to be sought, and the structures or objects on which they are found, the next point to be dealt with is the quality of the art exhibited. That of the paintings in the Catacombs and on the earlier sculptured sarcophagi during the first four centuries, is debased Roman or classical art. The result of Greek art reacting upon Roman art, when the seat of government was removed to Constantinople, in A.D. 328, was to produce the Byzantine style which is seen in the mosaics of the Italian basilicas, and has survived to the present day in the paintings of the Greek Church.

From the time of Charlemagne, A.D. 742, when the Northern nations were incorporated in Christendom, Teutonic and Lombardic art began to react upon Byzantine art, the result being