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ART. V.—THE "BENEDICITE."

THIS old canticle, which appears in the Book of Common Prayer, and is occasionally "said or sung" instead of the *Te Deum* at morning service, is one of the least understood, and perhaps one of the least valued, portions of our Liturgy. And this is not to be wondered at; for it breathes an odour of times strangely different from our own, and of a Christian culture in some respects greatly unlike that of the Western world. It is taken from the Apocrypha, and appears to be Greek, probably Alexandrine, in origin, and, like the history of Susanna and the history of Bel and the Dragon, is an uncanonical addition to the third chapter of the Book of Daniel. The title "Benedicite, Omnia Opera," is given to it because in the Latin version it begins with these words. It is also called "The Song of the Three Children," from being sung, it is said, by Ananias, Mishael, and Azarias in "the burning fiery furnace" into which they were cast, by order of Nebuchadnezzar, for their steadfast adherence to the Lord their God.

The exact date of its composition is as uncertain as the exact date of the Septuagint itself, but it is probably not much older than the Septuagint; and it is contained in that version, as well as in the version of Theodotion, besides being found in the old Latin and the Vulgate.

The *Benedicite* was sung as a hymn in the later Jewish Church, and from their liturgies was adopted into the Christian worship in public devotion from very early times. St. Augustine tells us it was used in his time on the solemn festivals of the Church. Athanasius directs virgins to use it in their private devotions. Cyprian quotes it as part of the Word of God, as does Ruffinus, who severely inveighs against St. Jerome for doubting its Divine authority. The fourth Council of Toledo (A.D. 633) says it was used in the Church all over the world, and therefore orders it to be sung by the clergy of Spain and Gallicia every Lord's Day and on the festivals of the martyrs, under pain of excommunication; and Chrysostom, who lived more than two centuries before this Council, makes the same observation, and testifies that it was sung in all places throughout the world, and predicts that it will continue to be sung in future generations.

So it has come down to us; but we too often regard it more as a literary curiosity than as an appropriate expression of praise to the Almighty Creator. It is indeed conceived in the loftiest style of poetry, and no cultured intellect can be insensible to its merits as an artistic composition; but we must not forget that for us its chief merit consists in its uncom-

promising protest against idolatry, and its noble vindication of the simplicity of the true religion. It is the practical comment of a grateful heart on the thought, so finely expressed by Tennyson :

For so the whole round world is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God ;

or, as Bacon has it: "According to the allegory of the poets . . . the highest link of Nature's chain must needs be tied to the foot of Jupiter's chair." This was what commended the *Benedicite* to Charles Kingsley, for whom the old canticle had a special charm, and who loved again and again to call attention to it on these grounds as "the very crown and flower of the Old Testament." If the song was so intended—namely, as a witness against idolatry, and as a testimony in favour of true religion—it is indeed, as Dean Stanley pointed out, a fruitful and inspiring thought that this supreme denial of the gods of Babylon, the gods of sun and moon and earth and sea, was expressed not by a mere contradiction, but by a positive appeal to all that is beautiful and holy and great in Nature and man to join in the perpetual praise and exaltation of the Supreme Source of all beauty, strength and power. "O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord : praise Him and magnify Him for ever."

It has been remarked that the canticle is a paraphrastic explanation of Psa. cxlviii., "and is so like it in words and sense," says Wheatley, "that whosoever despiseth this reproacheth that part of the canonical writings." In the psalm, which exhibits the wide compass as well as the nationality of the Hebrew worship, all creation is summoned to unite in the praise of the Creator: "Praise ye the Lord. Praise ye Him all His angels. Praise Him sun and moon. Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons and all deeps: fire and hail, snow and vapours, stormy wind fulfilling His word; mountains and all hills, fruitful trees and all cedars, beasts and all cattle . . . kings of the earth and all people, both young men and maidens, old men and children; let them praise the name of the Lord." And these are the sentiments set forth with wider expansion in the "Song of the Three Children." Wordsworth speaks of "two voices":

One is of the sea,
One of the mountains;

but here are a hundred voices, from earth and from heaven, all joined together, "as the sound of many waters," in one sublime and far-reaching diapason of praise to God.

We greatly admire this magnificent hymn, which has come to us surrounded with such venerable associations, and is so

penetrated with rich poetic and religious meaning. As we read it we are borne back in spirit to freer and more inspiring thought, and a purity of religious feeling that belong only to the ante-Nicene days of the Church. Then dogma was fresh and vital; a large and animated courage and a deep impassioned earnestness ruled the hearts of men; the sharp lines of the Christian creeds were not drawn; God and man were not antagonized; the Incarnation had not dwindled to a theory; and everywhere men saw the workings of the Divine mind.

In reading this old Greek canticle we are often reminded of the poet Wordsworth. The spirit of his poetry harmonizes well with the spirit of the canticle. And the words of the ancient poet, "O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord!" recall familiar verses of the modern poet whose master vision was of God in Nature. It is Wordsworth's central doctrine—and we read him in vain unless we understand it—that Nature is not lifeless, but that every varied movement of her vast tides is a separate thought of God, the Preserver as well as the Creator; that His power is in her, and that through all her processes the Eternal is ever making Himself known. Perhaps the most characteristic and prevailing principle of his poetry, like that of the old Greek theology, is the doctrine of the immanence of God, as distinct from all legal and mechanical views of God's relation to His universe. Carried too far, the doctrine might indeed become pantheistic, and so defective on its ethical side; but ignored altogether, our conception of the Deity would necessarily be that of a great Mechanician who had constructed a universe from which He had withdrawn Himself to some distant heaven, or of an ingenious Artificer who had made a huge lifeless machine, the crank of which He kept perpetually turning from afar. That was the conception of Western orthodoxy, but it is one that we, in these sympathetic days, are rapidly getting away from, and the doctrine of the immanence of God is again taking its true place as the central and controlling doctrine of our system, and is colouring all our thought.

In Wordsworth we see everywhere the Divine Presence—"The Soul of all the worlds"—guiding, controlling, modifying, actively overruling all earthly life and all the forces of Nature:

The Being that is in the clouds and air,
That is in the green leaves and among the groves,
Maintains a deep and reverential care
For the unoffending creatures whom He loves.

And he sings how he has felt in Nature :

A Presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts ; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean, and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man ;
 A motion and a spirit that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things.

Nature, as the Greeks taught long ago, is not to be regarded as a mere mathematical puzzle, whose mystery is solved when we talk about laws and forces; it is a τὸ ζῶον, a living organism, through which God by His Spirit manifests Himself to man as a vital Principle and all-sustaining Force. It is the same Spirit which gives to the myriad forms of vegetable life their wonderful variety and beauty, and to animal life its manifold power and strength, binding all orders of terrestrial beings together by making them partakers of the one life which quickens and sustains all things. This is the teaching of Wordsworth, and this is the teaching of the *Benedicite*.

In our day there is a growing reverence for Nature as a manifestation of Divine thought, and therefore a growing sympathy with the spirit of this great hymn, and to Wordsworth must be ascribed much of this sympathy and reverence. A prophet of God, he saw the light of the Eternal's countenance shining clear upon the face of Nature, and he showed it unto men. He taught them to recognise a Divineness in Nature which they had not seen, or had seen but dimly, before.

The outward shows of sky and earth,
 Of hill and valley he has viewed ;

but

Impulses of deeper birth
 Have come to him in solitude ;

and these he has revealed to us in his own "bright, solemn, and serene" way. And if earnest and reverent men are perplexed with doubts and questionings to-day, it is only in virtue of their growing sense of the greatness and nearness of God, not from any irreverent wish to detract from His glory, much less to dethrone Him as the Ruler of the universe. The cry of the age is for "more life and fuller." We want to feel the heart-throbs of God in all His universe, to have, as Christ had, fellowship with rocks and trees and birds and flowers, and know, as He knew, that to one all-pervading life "the whole creation" witnesses, and to

One God, one law, one element,
 And one far-off Divine event,

it "moves." The "flower in the crannied wall" is a "vision of Him who reigns" as truly as

The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills, and the plains.

And this is the teaching of the Bible. "The invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead."

The *Benedicite* is in wonderful harmony with the scientific spirit of our generation. Each new student of the mysteries of Nature brings us more and more marvellous revelations of her greatness. We know more—much more—about God in Nature, His power, His wisdom, and His beneficence, than our fathers did, and therefore we can say more intelligently than they: "O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord, praise Him and magnify Him for ever!" May we unite with Nature and her works in ascribing praise to God! "O that men would praise the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men!" "All Thy works shall praise Thee, O Lord, and Thy saints shall bless Thee!"¹

WILLIAM COWAN.



ART. VI.—THE DIOCESE OF LONDON: THE WEST AND THE CITY.²

WHAT might not a Diocese like London achieve for the kingdom of God and for English Christianity, if it were wholly united, wholly coherent, vital in every part, and properly equipped! In London is the centre of every movement, political, commercial, philanthropic and religious. The influence of London is felt to the extremities not only of the kingdom, but of the empire. The responsibility of working in London is overwhelming.

¹ The uncanonical absurdity of singing this glorious pæan of praise during Advent and Lent is merely owing to a slip of the compilers of the First Prayer-Book of Edward VI. They thought there should be an alternative to the *Te Deum* for these seasons, and directed the use of the *Benedicite*. When, however, three years after, they produced the perfected Prayer-Book (the Second of Edward VI., A.D. 1552) they had discovered their mistake, and realized that the *Benedicite* was reserved for the most jubilant and joyful occasions in the Early Church, and they therefore omitted this direction. The Tractarians, in their zeal for the First Prayer-Book, resumed this mistake, which had been corrected during the previous 300 years, and had been in force less than three years. It has now become a point of honour to commit this solecism every Sunday in Advent and Lent, and the unhappy *Benedicite* is dressed up in all kinds of gloomy chants in the vain hope of making its wild jubilation suitable to these solemn seasons.

² I make no apology for putting this statement of facts in a more permanent and accessible form than the reports of the Church Congress.