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*THE LIFE OF CHRIST ACCORDING TO ST.
MARK.¹*

XVII. ATTEMPTS TO SILENCE JESUS, III. 20-35.

UP to this point St. Mark's brief notes give the impression of uninterrupted success; hindrances had indeed arisen, but they had been quietly and effectively overcome; and they had been chiefly due to His reputation as a healer and His extraordinary popularity. But these had neither bewildered nor intoxicated Him, and He had persevered in His true work as a spiritual leader and teacher. Almost from the outset, however, He had been influenced by the opposition of the Pharisees. Left to Himself He would rather have preached a positive righteousness than have denounced the Pharisaic traditions; but the hostility of the scribes led him to emphasize the incompatibility of the doctrine of salvation by ceremonies with the truths of the Kingdom. As St. Mark continues his story, it is clear that the work of Jesus was more and more shaped by the forces that resisted Him, so that He comes to be not so much a leader as a champion of righteousness involved in a mortal struggle with evil.

Some time since we left the Pharisees discussing with the Herodians how Jesus' violation of the sanctity of the Sabbath might be used to ruin Him. They had expected the people to be as shocked as they were themselves, but His commanding influence remained unshaken, so that He could only have been arrested by a military force; and the

¹ These studies do not profess to be an adequate historical and doctrinal account of Christ, but are an attempt to set forth the impression which St. Mark's account of our Lord would make on a reader whose only source of information was the Second Gospel, and who knew nothing of Christian dogmatics.

Herodian officials were not likely to take much trouble or run any risks for the sake of the Pharisees or the Sabbath. Some other means had to be found of dealing with Jesus. The following paragraphs describe the efforts of the Pharisees.

They seem to have had recourse in the first instance to the family of Jesus. The family in the ancient East as in modern France exercised considerable authority over its members; and the family meant more than mother and father and children. There would be uncles and cousins from whom the widowed Mary and her sons would be expected to seek counsel, and to whom they owed a certain deference. To these heads of the family would come the Pharisees with stories of the way in which Jesus was disgracing Himself and His family by flagrant defiance of the Law. His friends would find it hard to believe such tales; they would reply that till He left home His life had been exemplary and devout. When they were convinced by overwhelming evidence, they would agree with the scribes that there could be only one explanation of such behaviour on the part of so good a man—Jesus had gone mad. Primitive people regard madness as a sign of inspiration; a somewhat more advanced society converts the proposition, and sees in inspiration a symptom of mental aberration. Finally His friends thought they had a decisive proof of insanity when they heard that He was so occupied with the crowds of patients and disciples that He neglected to take food. So the friends of Jesus set out to take charge of Him, and protect Him from the consequences of His madness. It is not clear whether St. Mark leaves us to assume that they failed, and that Mary and her sons afterwards made a second separate attempt to lay hold of Jesus; or whether the action of Mary was the only effort of the family to effect their purpose. To those who have no pre-

judices in favour of the Law, it is difficult to understand how any one could ever have thought Jesus mad; in the narrative He appears throughout as sane, sober, and serene.

Meanwhile the scribes were busy on their own account; they pervaded the crowds, and whispered a suggestion of insanity in an uglier form. The local clergy, to use a modern term, had called to their aid some ecclesiastics from the capital, scribes from Jerusalem. These experts were told that Jesus claimed to be inspired by the Spirit of God.

"Doubtless," said they, "He is possessed by a spirit, but it is an unclean spirit, a devil. He has made a compact with Beelzebub, the Prince of the Devils, to overthrow the Law, and that he may do so, Beelzebub allows him to cast out devils, so that he may seem to be a benevolent prophet of God, and be able to pervert the minds of men."

These charges were repeated to Jesus, and He called His accusers to Him.

"How," said He, "can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand; and if a household be divided against itself, that household cannot stand; and if Satan makes war upon himself, he cannot stand. No one can go into a strong man's house and spoil his goods without first binding the strong man."

The devil would surely have found some better way of aiding a heretic propaganda than by bringing shame and confusion and defeat on his subordinate demons.

When Jesus turned His thoughts to the moral aspect of their conduct He was moved to indignation, as when the scribes rejected His appeal for a humane interpretation of the rules for the Sabbath. Now their slander was not only

foolish but wicked. In their zeal for what they considered orthodoxy they had committed the unpardonable sin; because Jesus differed from them on details of external observance they had declared that the divine was devilish, and that the Holy Spirit which had descended upon Him from heaven was Beelzebub, the foulest of demons from the lowest hell. All other sins and blasphemies might be forgiven but this sin could not be pardoned; it was an eternal sin, and indeed it has never yet been stamped out; it cannot be forgiven, because the sinners who are guilty of it think that they are just men who need no repentance.

When Jesus had confounded these scribes, He had to meet another and even more distressing attempt to silence Him. These episodes suggest in a curious remote fashion the successive deputations to Coriolanus, perhaps because here also the last effort to move Jesus from His purpose was made by His mother. She was probably instigated and directed by the Pharisees, for we seem to see here also the same malignant ingenuity that charged Him with being possessed by a devil. Surely His mother, left to herself, would have tried to see her son in private; as it was, the incident was planned to be much more dramatic. He was sitting teaching surrounded by a crowded audience, and His mother and brothers sent Him a message to come to them. To her He was still the lad who was to be amenable to her authority, and her attitude was that of an offended parent to an erring son. The message was brought to Him. Obedience would only have led to a painful scene, and with His usual prompt decisiveness, He quietly put the interruption on one side, and went on with His teaching. The aphorism with which He replied to the message was a justification as well as a refusal, not a mere expedient for the special occasion, but the statement of a

permanent principle; He looked round on the circle of disciples and said :

“Behold my mother and my brother: whosoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

W. H. BENNETT.