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ST. JOHN IX.: A FORESHADOWING OF CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM.

Through many tribulations we must enter into the Kingdom of God. —Acts xiv. 22.

St. John records very few of the miracles of Jesus Christ, partly no doubt because those which are narrated in the synoptic Gospels would, in his time, be as familiar to the Church as they are now. But another reason may be discerned. The miracles which St. John does record are full of significance, and serve in a special way to bring out the truth of that great principle on which his Gospel is founded, namely that Christ is God, or, as this Evangelist expresses it—the Word is God. The Gospel of St. John is a continuous proof that Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh, that He is the Word or revelation of God to man.

In this revelation the miracles recorded by St. John hold an important place. They are manifestations of the creative power of God. They reveal Jesus Christ as God the Creator. For this reason miracles are throughout this Gospel invariably called signs. They are signs of the Godhead.

This special characteristic is discernible in the first miracle at the marriage feast in Cana, and in the miracle of feeding the five thousand, and in the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

It is the meaning also of the miracle recorded in the ninth chapter of the Gospel. Jesus Christ teaches expressly that the healing of the blind man was "in order that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (ch. ix. 3) just as He teaches that the sickness of Lazarus was "not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified thereby" (ch. xi. 4). See also chap. ii. 11.

But the glory of God in Christ was not only manifested

in the cure of the blind man as an act of Divine power. It was manifested also in the significance of the whole incident, occurring as it does in a strongly marked crisis in the ministry of Christ, and in His relations with Judaism. It is an incident which, taken in connexion with the preceding narrative and with the "Shepherd" parables which follow, is not only typical of the foundation of the Church, but in a true sense is the foundation and beginning of the Church; while the blind beggar, who received the gift of sight, was also in a real sense the first Christian martyr and confessor, and the first example of individual Christian experience.

That it was a marked crisis in the ministry of Christ on earth is made clear by the closing passage of the eighth chapter. Jesus had been preaching in the temple publicly for the last time to His nation. Of those who listened "many believed on Him" (*v.* 30), others less definitely "believed Him" (*v.* 31); and how uninstructed and weak their belief was is shown by the words which follow, and their readiness to quarrel with the teaching of Christ (*vv.* 33 *foll.*). The scene ended with a clear assertion by Christ of His Divine nature, and by a violent rejection of that claim by His own people; "they took up stones to cast at Him" (*v.* 59).

This decisive act gives a character to all that follows: "Jesus went out of the temple" (*v.* 59). It was the parting of Christ from Judaism. For in Judaism there was no room for the true Christ.

The portrait drawn by the Evangelist of the blind beggar in the ninth chapter is one of the most remarkable and vivid in the Bible. The circumstances of the case are in many ways unique; the questions which it raises are of great interest; and the light which it throws on our Lord's way of dealing with the souls of men is very suggestive and consoling.

The man "blind from his birth," like the man "lame from his mother's womb" (Acts iii. 2), was probably seated at one of the temple gates. Possibly Jesus had often passed him, for the hour was not yet come for his healing. Now Jesus "saw him"; and there was something in His look which drew the attention of His disciples. They asked their Master a question, which was perhaps often mooted in the rabbinical schools: "Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" It was a question which suggested the thought that suffering must be the result of sin, possibly even prænatal sin. The answer of Jesus dispels that theory once and for ever by these simple words: "Neither did this man sin nor his parents." Never again can it be assumed that human suffering is always or necessarily the result of sin.

But in truth a much more interesting and practical question is raised and largely solved by this sign; namely, what is the secret of infirmity and suffering for the individual Christian? It is a wonderful revelation, which we must accept in faith on the word of Christ, that the ultimate and final cause of this man's life-long physical infirmity was for the glory of God. There was destined to be through him, and as a direct consequence of his visitation, a marvellous manifestation of Divine power; and a further trial of endurance on his part,—experience of a different form of suffering,—was destined to have further results of infinite value to the Church of Christ.

This then was the key of explanation to those years of blindness, and inability to see the sun, and the beauty of created things, and the faces of friends.

Is there not some consolation here for those lifelong sufferers who seem to be hindered and baffled in their work, and aspirations to do some great thing for the cause of Christ, who *seem* to be hindered and made comparatively useless, but who know not that their affliction is for the

glory of God, that the works of God should be made manifest in them?

Another noticeable preliminary point is that this man gives no sign of that faith which in the synoptic Gospels appears to be a necessary condition of a miracle. The synoptic miracles are wrought for the deepening of faith, this miracle is a sign of the glory of God; and the individual human interest of it lies in the awakening and growth of the man's dormant faith. He had not heard of Jesus as a Divine Saviour, or as the Christ. To him He is simply "the man called Jesus." He makes no appeal as Bartimæus and others did to the compassion of the Healer passing by.[1] The great gift comes unexpectedly and unsought. We are not even told in this instance that Jesus was "moved with compassion."

But although, as we have seen, Jesus does not appear to have exacted the condition of faith before working His miracle, when He had anointed the eyes of the blind man with clay, he bids him go and wash in the Pool of Siloam, and the man obeyed. Something in the word or act of Jesus inspired faith. And faith met with its reward. "He came seeing."

At this point, in a synoptic Gospel, the account of the miracle might have closed. With St. John the deeper interest and instructiveness of it begin, in the study of character which follows, in the description of the intensified conflict between Christ and Judaism, and its relation to Christian martyrdom.

At first the reality of the cure is questioned, just as in the case of the lame man at the beautiful gate of the temple, cured by the apostles, the recognition was gradual (ἐπεγίνωσκον, Acts iii. 10); so here there was at first a doubt, which is removed by the man's avowal. Instantly he is questioned by his neighbours: "How were thine eyes

[1] Matt. ix. 27, xx. 30.

opened?" It is observable that in his answer he does not go a hair's breadth beyond the fact. With admirable clearness he answers the question so far as he can. But he makes no inference; expresses no wonder, or even gratitude. He speaks of his Healer merely as "the man that is called Jesus"; and where He is he knows not.

And now an incident occurs which indicates the immense influence of the Pharisees, and their hostility to Jesus. "The man who was called Jesus" was to them a great deal more than He was to the man healed of his blindness. He was One who had made the awful claim to be the Christ or Messiah of the Jews. Moreover He had denounced with great severity the religious teaching of the Pharisees. Consequently in their bitter hostility the Pharisees threatened with expulsion from the synagogue any one who should acknowledge Jesus to be the Christ (*v.* 22).

The cured blind man was a dangerous witness to the claim of Jesus to be the Son of God. And so when he is brought before those prejudiced and hostile judges, and has told his wonderful story with even greater simplicity and directness (*v.* 15), he is confronted with men who, to use a phrase of modern controversy, employed authority to stifle truth. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know that this man is a sinner."

Up to this time the man did not make, or at least give utterance to, any inferences.[1] But the opposition is a good thing for him. It made him bold. He still rested on his experience, and held firmly to what he knew. And so he answered the inquisitors: "Whether He be a sinner I know not; one thing I know, that whereas I was blind now I see" (*v.* 25). And then when further pressed he turns upon his adversaries with the taunt: "Why, herein is the marvel

[1] It is noticeable that the name "Christ" is not mentioned either by the man or his parents. There is a union of straightforwardness and caution in both, which is characteristic of a true portrait.

that ye"—the teachers of Israel—"know not whence He is, and yet He hath opened mine eyes" (*v.* 30). Then he is led on to a deeper inference still—He must be from God: "Since the world began it was never heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing" (*vv.* 32, 33).

The only answer to this was the answer of the persecutor in every age—the answer of unreasoning hate and defeated argument: "Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out" (*v.* 34).

It was a terrible sentence. For "an excommunicated man was like one dead. He was not allowed to study with others, no intercourse was to be held with him, he was not even to be shown the road. He might indeed buy the necessaries of life, but it was forbidden to eat or drink with such an one."[1]

We must remember too that this man was miserably poor. He had lived upon alms. Now no one could come near him. He would be treated as a leper. He was ruined, just at the moment too when the brightness of life seemed to have dawned upon him. He may well have been in despair.

Then it was, in his extremity and loneliness, that Jesus found him. Through persecution he had been led to the knowledge of Christ. And so he was prepared for the revelation of Jesus; "He it is that speaketh with thee" (*v.* 37).

It is a story of conversion, or, shall we say, of conviction? which has no exact parallel in the Bible. On one other occasion only, during His ministry on earth, did Jesus openly and unreservedly declare Himself to be the Christ.[2]

[1] Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, ii. 184.

[2] The declaration of Messiahship as understood by His judges (Matt. xxvi. 64) stands in a different relation, and is not parallel to the two instances given above.

He gave to the woman of Samaria and to this disciple alone the answer which He denied to the Jews, who asked Him: "If Thou art the Christ, tell us plainly."[1] And for this reason. The Christ of the popular imagination was not the true Christ, to whom the works of Jesus bore witness (see chap. x. 24). To the Jews, therefore, the declaration, "I that speak unto you am He," would have been misleading. Not so to this new disciple, or to the Samaritan woman. So far as their conception of the Christ went it was a true conception. And each is a striking instance of the way in which the works of Christ do testify of Him.

In the case which we are considering, the man's religious life and his faith in Christ were founded on the knowledge of the wonderful work which had been wrought in him. It was a twofold work—a work of healing, and a work of conversion; each divine, and each a work of creative power. Therefore He who wrought it must be God. And so those long dreary years of blindness did not only prove an inestimable blessing to this man's soul, but through that suffering and loss of the fair light of heaven he was privileged to be an instrument for the manifestation of the glory of God.

There is a sense in which this man was the first Christian—the first follower of Christ who had wholly severed his connexion with Judaism, whose religious life was now centred on Christ alone, whose faith was grounded on a direct revelation by the witness of Christ Himself to his soul.

And in a twofold sense he was the first martyr or witness for Christ, first, unconsciously through his years of blindness; secondly, consciously by his testimony before the Pharisees, and by suffering the terrible sentence of excommunication. And as he was doubly a martyr or confessor

[1] St. John x. 24.

of Christ, his story gives a twofold example and encouragement. It will help the Christian disciple in every age to endure bravely and patiently whatever suffering he may be called upon to bear, knowing that in some way Christ may be manifested even in His disciple's sufferings. And, again, it will encourage the Christian to be bold in the confession of faith, even at the risk of unpopularity and alienation of friends. In that moment of isolation and despair Christ will *find* His own disciple, and will manifest Himself in the power and tenderness of the Son of God.

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