

CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

THOUGHTS

ON

THE APOSTOLIC COMMISSION

(*MATTHEW* xxviii. 18-20)

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PREFACE.

THE last words of our Lord, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, are invested with a special interest. They are most memorable, when we consider the occasion on which they were uttered, and the calm majesty with which the Saviour, rejected of men, declares Himself the Light of the world and the Lord of all ages ; when we think of the commentary which is written on these words in the Book of Acts and in the history of the last eighteen centuries ; of the solemn and touching manner in which they are brought before us as a living reality in every baptism ; of the power which they have exerted in constraining the Church to go forth with the Gospel message, and when we remember the precious and all-comprehensive promise they contain of the Lord's presence with His Church, until the Church shall be "for ever with the Lord."

These words of our Saviour contain also a brief summary of Christian doctrine, a concise epitome of

Church truth. The *centre* is the Person of Christ; the *foundation* is the revelation of God, as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Here we see the spiritual character of the Church, as the Light and Teacher of the Nations. Here we are reminded of the new obedience of the Gospel, as distinguished from the dispensation of the Law. The Apostolic Commission points out the relation of the Church to the world,—her character and her mission; while it contains all needful encouragement and consolation, both in the declaration of Christ's omnipotence, on which it rests, and in the promise of His Presence with His people throughout the dispensation.

In the following pages I have endeavoured to view the words of the ascending Saviour in the light of the other Scriptures,—the preparatory light of the Old Testament and the Pentecostal light of the Gospels and Epistles.

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“And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. So ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.”—MATTHEW xxviii. 18-20.

CHAPTER I.

The Omnipotence of the Risen Saviour.

“All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth.”

MATT. xxviii. 18.

NONE but Jesus could have uttered these words, and Jesus only after His death and resurrection. It is true that in the days of His humiliation He had said, “All things are delivered unto Me of My Father,”¹ and again, that “the Father had given Him power over all flesh.”² It is true, that during the years of His obedience on earth He lived in the full consciousness of the glory which He had before the world was, and knew that the Father had given all things into His hands.³ But it was only after He had accomplished His decease at Jerusalem that by His resurrection He was declared to be the Son of God with power.⁴ It was after His death on the cross that the Father highly exalted Him, and that, as the Son of man, He was invested with the omnipotent government of the whole world.

“All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth.” Thus spake our risen Lord, the man Christ Jesus, the only Mediator between God and man, our

¹ Matt. xi. 27. ² John xvii. 2. ³ John xiii. 3. ⁴ Rom. i. 4.

royal High Priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him.¹ Thus spake the incarnate Son of God, the appointed Heir of all things, crowned with glory after His obedience unto death. Thus spake He *on earth* before His ascension, to announce His spiritual presence and reign, during the times of His bodily absence; to announce His royal prerogative on earth until the times of the restitution of all things,² when He shall establish His kingdom, and rule over all nations.³

His words are full of divine mystery; they possess heavenly massiveness and grandeur, and yet are they full of peace, consolation, and hope to every Christ-loving heart. The Lord announces His omnipotence; but when He says, "All power is given unto Me," He reminds us that His power is the gift and reward of His Father after His obedience and death of love. He speaks in the tone of absolute sovereignty and authority, as Jehovah commanded Israel to observe all His precepts and statutes (*Deuteronomy passim*); but listening to the command and promise of a risen Saviour, we feel that His yoke is easy and His burden light, and that in the revelation of the triune Name, He gives all-sufficient strength for service and victory. And when finally He assures us of His omnipresence, we are revived by the same fragrance, which in His name Immanuel is our delight and encouragement.

¹ Heb. viii. 1; 1 Peter iii. 22.

² Acts iii. 21.

³ Comp. Dan. vii. 13, 14.

With peaceful joy we listen to the words of our Divine Lord.

The words are majestic and gracious, they are also comprehensive in their simplicity and brevity. Here is the mystery of the mediatorial kingdom—Christ, the God-man,¹ Lord of heaven and earth, to the glory of the Father. Here is a summary of divine revelation and Christian truth—The name of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Here is the description of Christian life and service—Observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. Here learn the character, history, and mission of the Church—To evangelize all nations, and to build up the faithful in the knowledge and obedience of God. And here is the hope and prospect of Christ's people—The Master's presence with us until the end of the age,² and His return to fulfil all things.

So brief and weighty is the style of the heavenly sanctuary, so great things has Christ expressed in few words, that we and our children may remember them easily, repeat them frequently, and meditate on them with grateful hearts. It is true of this Scripture what Martin Luther said, that in the Bible every flower is a garden, and every tree a forest.

All the commandments and promises of Christ have their root and source in His adorable Person. He gives what He commands; He is what He gives.

¹ This expression does not occur in Scripture; yet, as Stier remarks, is almost literally contained in this passage, as well as in Col. ii. 9.

² "Until the end of the world,"—I shall be with you always *till* that time, and shall never be absent from you *after* it.—*Greg. Naz.*

Hence in all His epistles to the Churches, He first reveals Himself, and the manifestation of His Person is the foundation on which His commands and counsels rest, as well as the fountain of all strength and renewal.¹ Here also the Lord first reveals Himself, and then gives His commission.

It is as the risen Saviour that Jesus speaks.

I love to think of that mysterious moment, very early in the morning, when the Father raised up His holy child Jesus from the grave. No human eye witnessed it. Again the blessed feet of Jesus touched His blood-redeemed earth, and He went forth to appear unto His brethren, and to declare unto them anew the name of the Father. Perfect was His peace, unspeakable the calmness of His repose, infinite His joy, invincible His strength, triumphant His thanksgiving. His was a new blessedness; for ended are now the fears, the sorrows, the sufferings of David, the Son of Jesse; henceforth He will only sing the praise of God in the midst of the Church.² The yesterday of His humiliation and the cross is past; the steep ascent on the rugged path of obedience is finished; His conflict with the powers of darkness is ended; that small moment—infinite in its depth of agony, and longer than all thousands of years—that small moment when the Father hid from Him His countenance, it is past. Christ descended into the lowest depth, and the light of His love to God and man came forth only with greater brilliancy and

¹ Rev. ii., iii.

² Psa. xxii. 22.

sweeter radiancy. He saved the lost sheep; He tasted the bitterness of death; He bound the jailer hand and foot; He triumphed over principalities and powers. All is finished, all is gained. Sin and death, the grave and hell, lie behind Him. He died unto sin once; He liveth unto God for evermore. The Father is glorified, the Church is purchased; earth is redeemed, even heaven is transfigured—and He Himself is exalted, the Head, the Heir of all things.

This is, indeed, not merely the first day of the week, but the beginning of the Day; for beautiful as was the light of the first creation, beautiful as was the light in which the first Adam, created in the Divine image, beheld the glory of God, and worshipped in love and humility, its duration was brief, and soon it was succeeded by the night of sin, sorrow, and death. But the day which began on the Resurrection morn is endless, and its light is eternal and invincible. Our Sun of Righteousness can never set. He is Light of light, and God of God. Out of the night of weeping, into which the Holy One entered in His infinite and free love, is born a joy of morning which can never end. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who of His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and that fadeth not away!" The true light now shineth; the darkness is past. We have entered on the day which the Lord hath made: let us rejoice and be glad in it.

During forty days Christ appeared unto His disciples. He revealed Himself unto them, the same Jesus who was crucified, full of grace and truth, love and sympathy, power and majesty. As true man He spake, He reasoned, He opened to them the Scriptures;¹ they touched His sacred body;² He ate with them.³ But while they beheld His true humanity, they also beheld the glory of the only begotten of the Father; they learned to call Him Lord and God with deeper humility and awe;⁴ they adored Him as the Son of God,⁵ the Prince of peace,⁶ the Shepherd of the flock.⁷

Jesus taught them the mystery of the cross and the glory. He prepared them for the descent of the Holy Ghost, and for the intermediate period of testimony and suffering before His second coming.

We do not sufficiently enter into the sorrow of the disciples. They had lost Christ according to the flesh. The human friendship which existed between the Lord Jesus and them—the earthly sweetness of this relationship—was gone for ever. The days of human companionship, bright and fragrant as childhood, were over. That sharp sword which pierced the heart of Mary, when on the cross she lost Jesus as her Child, went through the disciples' souls likewise. As He said to Mary Magdalene, so He said to them *all*, "Touch Me not." Henceforth they were to know Christ no longer according to the flesh. But

¹ Luke xxvii. 27.

² John xx. 27.

³ Luke xxvii. 43.

⁴ John xx. 28.

⁵ John xx. 19.

⁶ John xx. 17.

⁷ John xxi. 16.

they were to know Him more truly and fully; they were to enter into more real fellowship with the Lord of Glory, the risen and glorified head of the Church, the Lord who is the Spirit,¹ and in that fellowship to realise that His love and tenderness had remained as deep and sweet as in the days of His earthly ministry.

The forty days after His resurrection were the gentle transition, during which the blessed Master, in His infinite wisdom and grace, prepared the disciples for the future, with its new light and spiritual power.

He did not dwell with them, but He appeared unto them. The high priests and the rulers of Jerusalem could take no cognisance of these meetings between the risen Lord and His disciples. To them He was dead; He was non-existent. "The world seeth Me no more." Symbolic fact! Jesus still meets His believing disciples. There is a congregation with which no earthly jurisdiction can interfere, and which no earthly philosophy can discover. Jesus still teaches, blesses, guides, and rules His servants; but the world seeth Him no more, because it cannot receive the Spirit of Truth. The world knows not the Father,² nor the Son,³ nor the Spirit.⁴

A new life began to dawn in the hearts of the disciples. Old things had passed away. The mists of darkness and doubt were disappearing. They began to understand the Scriptures. They beheld the glory of Christ. Their hearts were established.

¹ 2 Cor. iii. 17.

² John xvii. 27.

³ 1 John iii. 2.

⁴ John xiv. 17, 22.

Waiting for fuller light and greater power, looking forward to Pentecost, they carried about with them in this mysterious interval between the Resurrection and the Ascension a wonderful and blessed secret; they possessed a knowledge, a peace, and a dignity, of which the world had no conception. The secret was—Jesus lives! the peace—He is our Lord; the dignity—He calls us His brethren, and His God and Father is our God and Father. And yet even this was only a preparation for the full manifestation of the mystery—the union of Christ and the Church, which is His body.

Five hundred disciples were thus linked together, and formed a fraternity such as earth had never beheld before. The knowledge of Jesus, the risen Saviour, separated them from the world, and bound them one to another in strong and tender fellowship. They knew and followed the Lord of Glory, whom the princes of this world rejected. The centre of their circle, the magnet which attracted their hearts, the source of their new life and hope, was the blessed Master, in whom they had believed in the days of His flesh, whom their faith had well-nigh lost during the awful hours of His sufferings and death; but who had, according to His promise, returned to them, to be theirs for evermore. They belonged now to Him in a fuller and more exclusive sense. His death had separated them also from the world, from the flesh, from the hopes and thoughts of the first Adam. A man rejected by Israel, and crucified by Jews and

Gentiles, but acknowledged and exalted by the Father, was their Lord and King. They expected from Him all guidance and command, all blessings and gifts, all promises and rewards; it was therefore in an other-worldly, heavenly region that henceforth they were to move.

They did not know as yet the mystery of the Church. The Holy Ghost had not yet descended. Only dimly could they as yet understand the mystical union between Christ, the risen Head, and the Church, which is His body.

But though their understanding was not yet fully enlightened, and the day of Pentecost not yet fulfilled,—in true and vital faith, in heaven-born and lively hope, in fervent and adoring love, they belonged to Jesus. The Lord had appointed them a mountain in Galilee where He would meet them. He had spoken of this before His death, and the angels recalled it to the memory of the disciples after Christ's resurrection. Thus, according to the Master's word, the disciples met, led by the eleven apostles, chosen by the Lord as the elder brethren and guides of the future Church. No stranger, no enemy, no unbeliever, can disturb them or intrude into this hallowed circle. Was it that the angels of God encamped round about them, and that the Father thus surrounded them with bright and strong, but unseen walls and gates? Or was it that the glory of the risen Saviour insulated them, according to a spiritual law, from all whose hearts had not yet been touched by divine grace?

He appeared, and they worshipped. Some among them doubted; for the heart of man is slow to believe. But the Lord, like Joseph to his astonished brethren, went near, and then declared His divine majesty and infinite power.¹

All power is given unto Him in heaven and earth. Once, in the days of His flesh, He was taken up into an exceeding high mountain, and all the kingdoms of the world were shown unto Him, and the glory of them. And the tempter said, "All these things will I give unto Thee." But Jesus, the holy Child of God, meek and lowly in heart, in the spirit of obedience said, "Get thee hence, Satan, for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve."

Given to Him by the Father. Once—only a few weeks ago—all things were taken from Him. Who

¹ The following remarks on the passage are from Andrews' *Life of Our Lord*:—"This meeting, having been appointed by the Lord before His death, and recalled to the memory of the disciples by the angels, must be looked upon as the chiefest and most significant of all His manifestations. There can be little doubt that it was identical with that mentioned by Paul, 1 Cor. xv. 6—'After that He was seen of above five hundred brethren at once.' Although Matthew speaks only of the eleven disciples as present at the mountain, yet his silence respecting others would not exclude them, as in his introduction to the Sermon on the Mount he speaks only of the disciples as His auditors, although great multitudes beside were present. That he should mention only the eleven is wholly consistent with his general purpose, and with the peculiarities of his Gospel. But in his own brief account there is a hint that others were there beside the eleven. . . . Upon this occasion, the words seem to have been spoken which are recorded by Matthew, xxviii. 18-20, and Mark, xvi. 15-18."

was ever as poor as Jesus when He lived on earth? "Foxes have holes, and fowls of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head." But what was left Him when they nailed Him to the cross? His nation rejected Him; His beloved Jerusalem cast Him out; His disciples forsook Him; men took His very garments from Him. Nothing was His but the cross and the crown of thorns. He laid down His life. And one thing He had dearer than life—that where He had garnered up His heart, His Father's love, the assurance of His favour, the light of His countenance, behold the Father withdrew from Him the sense of His love. Christ had nothing on the cross but weakness, suffering, and the burden of our sin.

And therefore it is that God hath highly exalted Him, and given unto Him all power in heaven and in earth. For unto which of the angels said He at any time, "Sit thou at My right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool?" To whom, but to the incarnate Son Jesus, doth He say, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever; a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Thy kingdom." "Thou hast loved righteousness and hated iniquity; therefore God, even Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows."

Angels worship and obey Him now as the Lamb of God. The angels marvelled and rejoiced when the Word was made flesh. On the eve of Christ's nativity, they descended to the plains of Bethlehem,

and sang, "Glory to God in the highest; peace on earth, good-will among men, in whom He is well pleased."

Throughout His whole earthly life angels were with Him. As it is theirs to guard helpless infants and to watch at the morning gates of childhood, with what astonishment would angels, always beholding the face of God in heaven, see the reflection of His image in the child Jesus? Did they witness with awe and grief the subtle assault of Satan in paradise, and the fall of man, created in God's image, with what unspeakable interest did they behold Jesus tested by the adversary in the wilderness, and with what alacrity and loving zeal did they minister unto Him, and refresh His weary and exhausted humanity after His victory over the foe. And as they always saw Jesus, the Lord always beheld them. Unto Nathanael He spoke of the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man. When sinners drew near unto Him, and repented, He saw the angels rejoicing over the sheep that was lost and found. When He teaches His disciples to pray, He reminds them of the obedience and blessedness of the angels, who do the will of our Father in heaven. When He opens to His disciples the mysteries of the kingdom, He always speaks of the angels, who will come with Him in glory, and execute His commandments and judgments. When He speaks of little children, and when He speaks of the death of Lazarus, He reveals to us the ministry of angels. In that last

night, too, He beheld the legions of angels which the Father could send Him. But He wished to be made lower than the angels; and there appeared an angel—O never-to-be-forgotten ministry!—to strengthen Him in Gethsemane. What a bond of thrilling tenderness is between Christ, the exalted Son of man, and the angels. In Christ they behold the glory of God, and through the incarnation and death of the Lord Jesus they also have been brought nearer unto the Father, and have received a deeper knowledge and a greater love.

All power is given unto Him in heaven. He, who descended, is the same that ascended far above all heavens, that He might fill all things.¹ He is far above all principalities and powers, and might and dominion.² So it pleased the Father, according to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Himself. This is the revealed mystery of Divine love, that the incarnate Son of God, that the crucified Jesus, should be the Lord of all; that in Him the Father's glory should be manifested, and that in Him all things should be reconciled in heaven and in earth. The Son of man is on the throne of God; He who was born of the Virgin Mary, who took upon Him the form of a servant, who by Himself purged our sins, who is at the right hand of the Father.

Jesus has all power in heaven, in order that the Church on earth should constantly and stedfastly look away from all that is human and temporal, and

¹ Eph. iv. 9, 10.

² Eph. i. 21.

know of no other mediation, strength, guidance, and comfort, but the power and love, the wisdom and faithfulness of her one only Master and Head. He is high, to be visible and accessible to the least of His disciples in the lowliest valley of his weakness and ignorance. From His heavenly throne, and from no lower source, descends the gift of the Spirit in various manifestations; no Church, whatever may be its boasted antiquity or spirituality, is to direct the poor and needy, the dry and thirsty, to herself as the dispenser of the Holy Ghost and of His gifts. On the heavenly throne, and nowhere else, is the Priest by whom we draw near and are accepted worshippers. Looking unto Him, we are holy brethren, and partakers of the heavenly calling.

Behold Him, the Son of man, seated at the right hand of the Father. And in His majestic rest and peaceful dignity behold the perfect assurance of our acceptance and of our blessedness. He sat down on the right hand of God, because He had offered Himself a sacrifice for sins, because by one offering He has perfected them that are sanctified. He is in heaven itself, in the presence of God, *for us*,¹ our Lord, our Advocate with the Father, the royal and eternal High Priest. We are at Salem, in peace.

Behold Jesus in heaven, and remember that in Him divine omnipotence is united with the tender sympathy of perfect humanity. He was made like unto His brethren in all things, that He might be a merciful

¹ Heb. ix. 24.

and faithful High Priest, touched with the feeling of our infirmities, able to succour them that are tempted; so that we can come with confidence unto the throne of grace, and pour out our hearts before Him, who is not merely our Lord, but our Elder Brother.

Behold Jesus in heaven, to bless His people. His intercession is all-prevailing. The Father Himself loveth us, according to the merciful assurance of Him who, as the true Mediator, always reveals and magnifies the Father. But it is in and through Christ, that the love of the Father rests on believers. And it is through Him that all divine gifts descend. The blessings which He has purchased with His death are dispensed by the exalted Saviour. Our great High Priest sends down from heaven the power of His atonement, purging our consciences from dead works, and sanctifying us unto obedience and newness of life. *In Christ we behold the Father, from Christ we receive the Spirit.*

“ God filial pleased to condescend,
And be our all-sufficient Friend,
And though exalted to His throne,
The dear relation still to own,
And send the boundless source of grace,
The Spirit, to supply His place.”¹

Behold Jesus in heaven, and seek the things which are above. In Him are all spiritual blessings in heavenly places. From Him descend all healthful influences, all spiritual gifts, all quickening and re-

¹ Bishop Ken.