

WE HAVE AN ALTAR.*

“We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.”—HEB. xiii. 10.

TO take such a text as this for the dedication service of a place of worship is like challenging controversy. The little sentence standing here first is itself a touchstone by which to test the various theories and forms of public worship which are current. They all stand or fall, are tenable or untenable, are evangelical or unevangelical, according to the interpretation they put on this verse. But it is impossible to use this remarkable phrase to advantage if it is taken alone. Like many of the pithy sentences which have been made the watchwords of opposing factions, it loses much of its controversial interest if examined in its context. Let us receive it with the light that it gives and receives in the paragraph to which it belongs. We shall find that, whatever others may say, and however they may err by a too literal or a too spiritual interpretation, we can find in it much to direct and encourage us in the public worship which we this day begin in this place.

I.

There is a general interpretation of the words, that

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seems to express the solemn pathos of the writer's meaning, and at any rate will pave the way for other uses. This epistle was intended to warn Hebrew Christians against going back to Judaism, and to reconcile them to give up their sacred temple and all its associations. Now it was very hard to persuade men who had like their forefathers of many generations served God through an elaborate service of altar sacrifice, which brought Him very near to them and them very near to Him, to give up ceremonial worship entirely. It was like asking them to go forth from their city and temple into a naked wilderness again without anything to moderate to them the awful spirituality of God. That was what the Christian religion seemed to require. The New Master had said: "The hour cometh when neither on this mountain nor yet in Jerusalem shall men worship God. God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." The Hebrew Christians had been accustomed for ages to the thought of approaching heaven at an altar: that is, through a medium of sacrifice offered where God visibly accepted it. That was the great point: whether tabernacle or temple or neither, there was the altar. But they had also been educated to the accessories of a system of worship which made a thousand matters symbolical of heavenly realities. It was exceedingly hard to strip their minds of these associations. Any man accustomed from infancy to the sacrificial and ritual system, with all its beauty, its appeal to the imagination, and the assurance it gave to faith and hope, would find the Christian system exceedingly cold and hard, and be

disposed to retort on St. Paul the word "beggarly elements."

Throughout the epistle one great design had been uppermost: to show that all parts of the old economy were done away by being transfigured in Christ. The law was on the mount of transfiguration summed up in "Hear Him!" The ritual was glorified in the heavenly Holiest. But the apostle feels a tender sympathy with his brethren. He was not always and at all points as "strong" as he seemed. He clung still with lingering love to the past, and there were secret tender associations which blended with his desire of policy to "become a Jew with the Jew." Hence, you see, he returns in the last chapter to the theme. All had been accomplished and settled in the earlier treatment: in fact exhaustively discussed. But it seems as if he would say a parting word of encouragement to his brethren, and to us who in every age want similar helps. "We have, fellow Christians, an altar. We have a perfect system of mediation: including a temple, high priest, outer court, holiest, and all the concomitants of a confident approach to God. Although you enter buildings which are not after the old pattern, and have few symbols; although you never saw your high priest, and all is purely and only spiritual, yet we have an altar and all that the altar means."

II.

But thus we evidently come to the more specific idea in the altar. Why have we in Christ a mediator, and in the Christian system a mediation, better than

the ancient temple, though altogether spiritual? Because the cross of Jesus was the altar on which the Great Sin-Offering to sanctify the people was offered: His blood being carried into the Holiest, there to be sprinkled on the mercy seat for the removal of the people's guilt. We have that altar, that cross, as the foundation, the sure foundation of all our hope, for time and for eternity. But it is not here, it is risen: its virtue is in heaven.

There are many things in the context which would be very impressive to the Hebrew Christians, whether more or less unfaithful, who clung to the old ritual. They would be reminded, not so much of the ordinary offerings for sin and the thank-offerings, which priests and people might partake of when the blood was obtained and the fat was burnt, as of that special sin-offering once in the year which was dealt with in a manner quite peculiar. There were indeed many sin-offerings for personal faults, and for national faults, which were at irregular times slain before the door of the tabernacle, and their blood carried within and sprinkled seven times towards the curtain; after which the bodies were carried out in a clean place and wholly consumed as accursed. Nothing was eaten that belonged to these offerings for sin. But the apostle has evidently in view, and so would his readers, the great sin-offering of the day of atonement. As the theme is here dealt with you will see that the greater Anti-type does not in every particular agree with the type. But a high and holy decorum prevents the writer's explaining himself fully. The great sin-offering was burnt without the camp: with this

corresponds the awful truth that Christ was made a curse for us ; His being hanged on a tree "outside the camp" or "the gate" answered to the burning. The blood was carried into the holiest : Christ carries His own blood there, and comes no more out. He has obtained eternal redemption ; and we have the virtue of this altar for ever. The Hebrew would be warned. Those who serve the sanctuary cannot partake of this Christian Sacrifice ; because on their principle it could not be partaken of, and also it allows no continuation on earth. And he would be led to ponder the strange fact that the same victim was accursed without the camp in its death, and yet its life was worthy to be sprinkled on the altar of gold within the veil.

Whatever might be the effect of this on the Hebrews it must have a gracious influence on us. "We have an altar" is, being interpreted, "We have the virtue of the atoning sacrifice which was presented for us on earth, where God laid on Christ our iniquities, and man's contempt and hatred did its part by hanging Him on a cross of infamy ; and which is still presented in heaven, where it has been brought into the sanctuary, and is ever pleaded for His people." We look back on the atoning work of Jesus and regard it as a fact in religious history which never loses its present reality and saving value. It is true that the cross is gone ; the ignominy of our Lord's death is abolished ; the symbol of shame has become the symbol of highest dignity. We cannot say "We have the cross" in the same sense that we can say "We have an altar." The cross is not carried to heaven. But the altar is.

The mercy seat was, in the ancient economy, the altar corresponding within the veil to the altar of sacrifice without. Now our Lord is at this moment standing by the mercy seat, the throne of grace, and pleading the virtue of His sacrifice. He is Himself our propitiation. He hath once for all and for ever sanctified all who are His by the sprinkling of His blood. Therefore the church as such can sing with confidence the praises of the atoning oblation : its members are now God's people as the Jews anciently were.

But in the new temple each one has the altar and its benefit. Go to the book of Leviticus and you will see that the sin-offering was for individuals, though only for such as sinned by infirmity or mistake. Here, therefore, the New Testament really surpasses the Old Testament type : our text abounds with surprises of this kind. But it does not directly refer to this, which, however, is of the utmost importance to us and must be remembered here. Before our Lord entered on His High-priestly function in heaven He tarried for a while to show how individual it was in its application. He does not bear the names of the tribes on His breastplate now ; but each of our names is individually on His lips. We have an altar of mediation and sacrifice : let us draw nigh in faith. We have an altar for our individual sin. Let us confess our transgression and expect a personal pardon and the peace that follows. Do not carry about your guilt. Come for a full forgiveness to-day, and it shall most certainly be given you. St. Paul never speaks of an altar intended for the individual ; but it is obvious that it

must be so. He once spoke of sharing Christ's crucifixion, and of the atoning death as suffered for himself personally. Fellow sinners, whatever the ancient altar was to the individual, as sending the peace of assured pardon into his soul, our altar may be. And more! Whatever sin you have committed the Lord in heaven will forgive, if in sincerity you offer Him first the sacrifices of a broken and a contrite heart. There is no altar for penitence apart from propitiation: they are one. Let me urge you to claim your personal privilege whatever your guilt may be! Our writer might have said: "We have an altar whereof they have no right to eat who have sinned wilfully and serve the tabernacle." For, after all, there was in that case a dreadful uncertainty, notwithstanding its elaborate provisions. But our altar is for every possible offence that may be remembered before it with sorrow. The sin unpardonable is excepted simply because it is never repented of and brought to it.

III.

Once more, the text says much about eating and meats, which therefore we must needs include in our interpretation of the altar that "we have." In the ancient economy, as in all the sacrificial worship of the world, the altar became a table, where the God represented by the priests fed with the worshippers, the feast being the flesh of the sacrifices. The offerings which were partaken of by the offerers were the annual passover for the people, and the peace-offerings brought by the individuals. The flesh was supposed to be presented to God first on

the altar, and then the offerer and the reconciled God ate together in token of amity and peace. But it was the distinctive feature of the sin offering that it was not eaten : it was sin and nothing but sin, and was burnt without the camp. Now the writer glories in the Christian sacrifice, because the Lord Jesus, cast without the camp, was at the same time the Passover and Peace-Offering which was the food of the people sanctified by His blood. On this paradox the apostle specially dwells : the strangest thing that the new covenant imported into the types of the old. Jesus was the common Antitype of all the types at once ; and whilst they were to think of Him as a curse, and as made the very embodiment of man's sin, they must regard Him also as the food and nourishment of their souls. Boldly the apostle tells them that their own meats did not profit them : these never really had of themselves profited, and certainly not since the Lord had been offered for them and to them.

Without any controversy it is our privilege to live by our sacrifice. The atonement of Christ combines eternally the two meanings : a sacrifice for removal of condemnation and a sacrifice for the bestowment of life. We eat our offering by faith and have the twofold benefit : the knowledge that God is reconciled, and the nourishment of our new life. And here with regard to these blessings we may drop the figure. We receive Christ into our souls by faith, and that continually, as the inward assurance of our salvation from sin and of our life in Him.

Let me dwell for a moment on the former. When the offerer brought his offering of peace and thanks-

giving, he confessed his sin and sacrificed for it; but ate of his sacrifice in token that God accepted him. Now the Christian penitent always eats of his altar. He never presents the sacrifice of Christ without the glad assurance that his person has been graciously reconciled to God, and his sins are taken away by it. This is the Spirit's testimony; for we must drop the figure, retaining it only to point this inference, that if the ancient penitent was sent away comforted by the knowledge that God was reconciled to him and ate with him—perfectly assured without any lingering doubt—may we not expect the same? "I will come in to him and sup with him!" What does that mean but that "I will not come knocking at the door as His Judge any longer, but be one with him, feasting with him on our common sacrifice, Myself."

Let me dwell on the latter for a moment too. This is a meaning which the ancient economy hardly knew. All along we have seen the very pith of the passage to be that the Christian reality not only surpasses the ancient Jewish type, but in many respects departs from it. Christian fulfilment is not slavishly bound to Old Testament prophecy. We do not find that the food of the ancient altars is spoken of as giving life to the offerers; that is, a new life. That was a hidden secret: as the meaning of the blood was more fully brought out, so also the meaning of the flesh. But, wonderful to say, our Lord declares that the blood of His sacrifice is to be drunk as well as the flesh eaten. Who does not feel that here we have a new and glorious fact? We have a new life in Christ and

from Him : not merely through Him, not merely a life of respite or pardon, but the very flesh and blood and self of the Redeemer. "We are members of His body."

Here we cannot but think of the Lord's table. Not indeed that the altar of my text is to be interpreted as having that reference, as many have thought. Such an allusion would have been out of keeping with New Testament phraseology, which never uses this word for the sacramental table. The writer might be supposed to use the word in a very general and loose way : "all the altar we have is the plain table on which we present ever again in emblem and thankful commemoration our Lord's sacrifice." In this sense the word has been retained. But we have already shown that the altar means something else, the cross of Christ : which, however, is commemorated in the Lord's Supper specially and specifically. And more than commemorated. As surely as we approach the table, He, standing there at what is to Him an altar, gives us the bread and wine to be the symbols of our peace and the pledges of the present and constant nourishment of our new life. Outwardly He gives us the food of the body, inwardly and spiritually the food of our souls.

IV.

And now we proceed to another stage in the meaning of our text. We have an altar on which to present our oblations and offerings. It is true that the apostle seems to change the figure, introducing the Priest through Whom we offer

rather than the altar on which we present. But the fact is that the two are one. Jesus is the sacrifice which He Himself presents on the cross as His altar. But it is not the style of Scripture to speak of our offerings as presented on the cross; and therefore the language is changed. Before we adopt the phrase of the text we may take pleasure in the thought that we present our poor oblations on the same altar that our Lord has sanctified for ever by laying Himself on it. He has left it so to speak vacant for us; and this is the sublime peculiarity of the Christian economy that we are one with Christ in this as is in every other respect: on the altar that He lay on we also lie. How does it endear the thought of the Christian sacrifice; how blessed is it to feel this identity with Him in His oblation! Who would not delight to place himself there! We must however be faithful to our text; and speak indirectly only of the altar and directly of the High Priest through Whom we present what we are and have.

And what is it we present? Here again we feel as if the text only implies what our hearts would desire to hear more fully expressed. Contemplating the sacrifice of Himself for us on the part of Christ, what is it that we all instinctively desire to offer but our very selves! This is the only Easter offering we have for Him when He comes from the sepulchre. Love for love: all that a man hath will he give for his benefactor when he once knows Who that great Benefactor is. We have an altar, brethren, on which to lay ourselves: approaching with humble boldness to present our gift, even as

we approached with humble boldness to ask for pardon. The one as much needs boldness as the other. What a daring act it is to offer such a heart, to present a soul so defiled with sin, to ask God to accept a creature so vile! But He who received on the altar His Son will for His sake receive whatever is laid on it by Him. Let us pray our Lord to take our individual soul and lay it with His own hand on His own altar!

However, the apostle does not say this, because he still keeps to the typical service: in which a man did not present himself, that being the prerogative of a better temple. He says the same in another way, by alluding to the ancient thank-offerings which were always received by God at the hands of the worshippers. As everything is changed here, the animal and vegetable offerings of gratitude become the fruit of the lips, or, as the prophet Hosea says, the calves of the lips. The voice of a Christian man or a Christian congregation is the grandest oblation. It is the very representative and expression of the internal life: the voice is the man, his glory is his tongue. The utterance of the whole life is to be given to God through Christ: in confession of His name, which is the profession of faith; to His name, which is thanksgiving; and for His name, which is preaching to others. Let me ask you, brethren, who have in this service used our common altar for all its other purposes, to use it also for this. This day use the tongue to pledge its future service, and let your religion be this firm confession, this constant thankfulness and this earnest preaching.

With this the consecration of religion is not ex-

hausted. This is the sacrifice of word, and there is added the sacrifice of act. "To do good and to distribute good forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well pleased:" charity in act and gift is precisely what is meant. And observe every word here. With these God is "well pleased:" as He was with the sacrifice of His Son, "a sweet-smelling savour." And the man who offers them is like that Beloved Son, one in whom the Lord is well pleased. As they fill up the life, leaving nothing out, the whole being is thus offered in a temple. This is the sublime meaning of the text, that our existence is a perpetual oblation. The ancient Jews visited the temple very occasionally, presenting their gifts. To "dwell" there was object of unavailing desire to David. But it has become a privilege to all Christian people, who live and move and have their being in the Christian temple, where every influence is sanctity and every inspiration is love. Let us this day come afresh to the great altar of consecration, and not let its solemnities cease without having renewed our oblation of all that we have and are to the divine service in Christ.

V.

We have thus approached the altar under four related aspects. But we shall not complete our view of the cross as our altar, nor shall we satisfy the apostle's exposition here, unless we include the affecting reference to the sacrifice of all earthly things that this altar demands. It is customary to say that the meaning is, "Let us give up Judaism,

bearing His reproach, and gladly suffer the contumely and contempt that all apostates receive." But if we examine the words carefully we shall see or rather we shall feel that there was a far wider meaning in his thoughts.

Surely, they here signify no less than that all who partake of the benefit of the Saviour's cross must share its reproach with Him. Nothing is more constantly inculcated than the necessity of sharing in the Lord's self-sacrifice, that is, our bearing the cross, and with the cross on our shoulders leaving this present evil world. Two words are used to signify the cross besides the cross itself: "My yoke," meaning positive submission to Him; "His reproach," the enmity of the world. But the word "cross" effectually unites these. One who partakes of the benefit of the Lord's passion must enter into its fellowship. This, like much already spoken of, is new: fellowship with the sacrifices there was before; but hardly such as to betoken this. Yet it is a most fundamental principle in the Gospel that we must bear the Lord's cross and die with Him and be crucified with Him: must be crucified, that is, to the world and to the sin of our own nature. Let us ask ourselves if we are remembering the severity of our religion and offering up to Christ all our sins and passions and worldly attachments. "We have an altar:" and on that altar we ought to sacrifice all that is in us of sin and self and the world. Let us transfer to it what the apostle says concerning the cross, which of course is a word and an idea that never enters the temple. We share the sacrifice of Christ by dying to sin with Him, as

we have seen : He is our sin-offering. He presents our sinful flesh on His altar, that it may perish there, though old ritual made no provision for that : shall we say, let it be burnt without the camp ? And on the same altar we lay everything in this world that our soul delights in for time and for eternity. Let us make the sacrifice !

But, remembering the eleventh chapter, we must find yet another meaning. Our religion is not in its essence here : "we have no continuing city." Christianity is an imperfect system. We know that we have no continuing life ; let us remember also that we have no continuing church on earth. Christ our Head has gone without the camp, beyond the gates of time, and is waiting for us all in a new Jerusalem not of this world. There are three Jerusalems : one the ancient ; one that which is the spiritual Zion where we live and worship ; and one yet to be revealed. Let us enter into the spirit of this injunction, or rather of this description of our religious estate and character. We have an altar in the highest and final sense within the veil : in our inmost hearts we want to be worshippers before that. It is good to be here, but better to be there. That is the meaning of the final suggestion in this epistle : we should desire to leave these lower services. It was good for the Hebrews to forsake the Levitical altars for the Christian ; it will be good for the Christians to forsake the present Christian altar for the Christian altar that is to be revealed. Alas, what a mistake they are guilty of who think the present economy so desirable and so perfect. The more perfect we can make our temple economy here

the better; but at the best it will be exceedingly faulty and unworthy, do all we can. The Lord is preparing a city for us; and, because of its perfection, and of the invisible temple in it, He is not ashamed to be called our God. Let us not hang so much on our worldly ordinances: as they are the realities of which the Jewish were pattern, so they themselves are only patterns of things real and future in the heavens. Meanwhile, let us make the best use possible of the services around our present altar. Let us rest in its perfection as a medium of approach; let us constantly realize its virtue as the altar of the Sin-offering; let us eat from it our Paschal Lamb, and live by His flesh who died for the world's life; let us present on it ourselves and our all evermore; and let us serve at it as priests with their eyes waiting till the veil again opens and they enter the true Holiest to leave it no more for ever!