

THE SIGN IMMANUEL.

“And they shall call His name Immanuel.”—MATT. i. 23.

TWICE this wonderful word occurs in Holy Scripture: once in the Old Testament prophecy, and once in the New Testament fulfilment; once in Isaiah and once in St. Matthew. On this glad day we have to do only with the fulfilment. But there is one thing connected with the prophecy that will give us our keynote. When it pleased Jehovah to encourage King Ahaz by his servant the prophet—at the time that the King was in sore distress about the invasion of his enemies—He bade him ask any sign “either in the depth or in the height.” The hypocritical king would not tempt God by choosing a sign for himself. Then the Lord gave him the sign of the birth of a son of a virgin: a sign that was to him both encouragement and warning. Who that child, the typical Immanuel, was we need not ask. Suffice that the profound meaning of the sign was for the distant future. This day tells us its unfathomable meaning.

We shall best understand our text if we remember that the name Immanuel is still a sign: it is, so to speak, quoted by the evangelist as such. There are two names on the page: Jesus and Immanuel. The

former was the literal name of our Holy Child. Immanuel was a name He never bore. There it stands : not as a name to denominate Him, but in the sense of a symbol, or sign or token deeply to be studied. The Spirit takes that, as everything else, and reveals it to us. May it be so this day!

I.

The name Immanuel is a sign to us of the unsearchable mystery of the meaning of our Lord's birth, which we this day celebrate. God is with us—that is the meaning of Immanuel—as the Son of God begotten and born in our common human nature : so that He is in one Person true God and perfect man for ever.

Now the entire Old Testament, in all its prophecies and types, from the first prediction of the Seed of the woman down to the last of the Angel coming to His temple in Malachi, was one great sign given to mankind that this event would in the fulness of time take place. We understand now what that great sign given in a thousand forms signified. But our text suggests certain special signs given by the prophet Isaiah, and dear to our Christmas thoughts. The early part of his book has a cluster of references to the beginning of Jesus Christ, the middle of it to His death and resurrection, the end of it to the final triumph of His kingdom. The early history of the Redeemer occupies three conspicuous little batches of prediction. The first is that of our text : which interprets the first recorded gospel, "It, the Seed of

the woman, shall bruise thy head." A virgin should conceive by the Holy Ghost and bear a son, and call His name Immanuel: the mother of our Lord in her secret heart pondered the amazing secret that that Holy Thing which was born of her was the Son of God, and she in her soul "called Him Immanuel," though in our text the phrase is altered and it is "we" or "they" who call Him "God with us." You remember that she asked for a sign, "How shall these things be?" and the sign was "the Holy Ghost shall come upon thee." That sign she knew and never from that moment doubted. John the Baptist might doubt, but she doubted not. The second is the ninth chapter of Isaiah, where the child Immanuel is announced more clearly: "Unto us a Son is born, unto us a Child is given:" from "the height" the Former, and from the depth the Latter; but both in one. The third is in the eleventh chapter, where the figures change: "the Stem of Jesse" and "the Branch": the Rod of Jesse in His godhead, the Branch in His humanity. And the Spirit of the Lord is shown to rest upon Him in all that His human nature needed for His full and perfect development. The fulness of time has brought the explanation of the Sign. In Christ God is manifest in the flesh. St. Paul changes the word sign into a word of similar meaning: "Confessedly great is the mystery of godliness, who was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached on in the world, received up into glory." We this day celebrate the great accomplishment: the sign is explained, the mystery is revealed.

But it is a mystery unfathomable still. The sign

is explained, but it is so contrary to human notions that none understand it but by the Holy Ghost. The celebration of this day is not to expound or clear up the mystery, but to adore it and accept it, and, like Mary, ponder it in our heart. We must not speak against our sign because we cannot comprehend it. We cannot comprehend the union of our soul with our body: a sign that God gives to every one of us to denote our origin with His image stamped upon us. Christians receive the sign and bow down before it, that is before God in the mystery of their own nature. Let me remind you once more of the wonderful words of the prophecy. "Seek it," said Jehovah—the sign namely—"in the heights above or in the depths below." God gives it to us from both: from the infinite height of the eternal Godhead He gives us His Son; and from the depths of our nature He gives us a Son of our own. The sign and the thing signified are given by Himself: "The Lord Himself will give you a sign." All we have to do is to accept it from both. We must not seek it, but study it there. Without one single thought of curiosity or attempt to understand it, we must bow down before it. Our Christianity depends upon this. Be thankful, brethren, from the depth of your hearts that you are among those who keep Christmas as the celebration of the one Person of Christ who is God and man.

II.

This sign is a token to us that in all the future history of the incarnate Son of God we must never

forget that He is always and everywhere—whatever strange scenes He has to pass through and whatever difficult things we may read—no other than Immanuel, God with us.

On this day we must think particularly of the history of His earliest days. The evangelist is about to enter on the narrative of the infancy, in which the Holy Child will be traced through all the stages of His first appearance as a child of the human race. We see Him born of a human mother just like any other child of man, and then being taken to the temple and presented to God as a child of Abraham who needed, after the national rite, to be cleansed and accepted of God. How important, therefore, that this sign “from above” should be introduced by the evangelist who deals most humanly with the Saviour’s infancy. Before a word is said of His birth, and in the very midst of the announcement of His coming, St. Matthew singles out the wonderful sign given to Ahab: “He shall be called Immanuel, God with us.” It may be well to mark how all the evangelists introduce the Saviour as God at the outset of their narratives. St. Mark does not touch the infancy of our Lord; but begins at once with the “Gospel of the Son of God.” Not that he undervalued the infancy and childhood; but, supposing that known, he enters at once on what is of the greater importance, “the Gospel of Immanuel, the Son of God with us.” So St. John absolutely omits the human origin of the Christ. While the two evangelists exhibit Him in the bosom of the Virgin, His mother, he ascends to the Son in “the bosom of the Father.” And this last evangelist,

who depicts, if possible, more clearly than any other the human infirmities of the "Word who became flesh," tells us that "we beheld His glory, glory as of an only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." And what do we gather from all this? That we must see the mystical sign of the Divinity stamped upon the Child of humanity. We cannot indeed give up the Child. We want Him to sanctify infancy and childhood. But He could not sanctify infancy unless He were the Son of God revealed in it. He might sanctify His own childhood if He had merely overshadowed it as the Spirit overshadowed His mother. But in order that He might be the life-giving Spirit to all the children of men He must be Himself the sinless and immortal Son of God from the very springs of His being. The same holds good of His later life and entire history upon earth. The sign that sheds its heavenly lustre on the first page of the Gospel must shed its lustre on every corner of the narrative down to the final darkness of the cross. It is the general preface of all that is to follow. Wherever we see the Man of Sorrows, and however acquainted with grief He appears, we must remember that he is still the Son of God, in Whom the Father is well pleased. During the long interval before His showing to Israel, nearly thirty years, He grows up not only "before Him," but in Him with a meaning that cannot apply to any other. "God was with Him" we read again and again, as it might be said of any among us; but if we think so, we remember the Immanuel and we feel the difference. Any other pious youth in Israel might

have said, "I must be in My Father's business;" but when we see Him and hear Him in the temple we recall, as Mary did, the Immanuel sign, and then we understand the true force of that infinite "Must." Especially when we see the Lord at the banks of the Jordan, we find it necessary for our faith to remember the sign. He who was tempted of the adversary was not tempted in the sense that fallen man is tempted, nor as one that might possibly fall into sin. He was tested and tried to the uttermost "as without sin" or the possibility of sin: this we are reminded of by the Immanuel sign. So in all His sorrows and tribulations, in public and in secret, whether from the hand of man or from the will of God, whether from visible or invisible foes, throughout the whole of His career of grief down to the final "My God, My God," He is always and everywhere the Son of God and the object of infinite love. It may be hard for us to understand this, and indeed impossible for us to sound the depths of a human sorrow endured by a Divine Person. But this is the trial and the glory of our faith. We must read the four Gospels in the light of our sign. All our Lord's teaching we must receive from Immanuel. All our Lord's humiliation is the humiliation of Immanuel, all His wonderful works are the wonderful works of God with us. And therefore His extreme sorrow and expiatory sufferings on the cross are the passion of the Lord who purchased the church with His blood, of that Lord of glory Whom the princes of this world crucified.

Suffer me, brethren, to urge on you the perpetual remembrance of the lesson thus taught. In these

days when the "Life of Jesus" is so current, and there is such a tendency to make the Lord a man like ourselves, under the plea of doing justice to His human example, it is of great importance that we remember the sign. This Christmas lesson is of supreme significance; in fact, there is nothing that can be conceived more important than that we should carry our sign Immanuel and stamp it upon the entire history of Jesus. Our salvation depends upon it. We are more in need of a Saviour than of an example. The Lord has indeed shown us what is perfection in His own heavenly character. But the glory and the value of His redeeming work does not lie there. "He shall save His people from their sins:" not Himself but His people. And none can save us from our sins but God Himself. There is not a single doctrine connected with our salvation on earth or in heaven, in time or in eternity, which does not demand the Godhead of our Saviour. And of this the sign Immanuel is a continued token and an abiding remembrance for ever.

III.

We must enlarge our view. The glorious sign of the day meant nothing less than this: that in the incarnation of Jesus God and man are reconciled. The word signifies "God with us," as the exact opposite of God against us; and therefore is the sign from heaven to man on earth that the world is a redeemed world. Hence we understand the angel's interpretation of the Immanuel sign: "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, goodwill

among men." Here the central word gives the sense : Christ is the incarnate Peace on earth. The incarnation is the pledge and sign that man is redeemed. "God," sang one of the human singers, continuing the strain of the angelic choir, "hath visited and redeemed His people."

It might be said that this is only a prophecy of what this Child would do when grown to man's estate. The sign given to Ahab was of the future ; and of the uncertain future. And so the birth of Jesus might be regarded as a pledge and earnest of what this "child was set for;" and of what when His locks were grown this Samson would accomplish for us : in other words that the sign was a prophecy. Now this indeed it was. "Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world." Every saying concerning Christ from Paradise onward was a simple and pure prediction of what would come to pass : and this one was. The Immanuel sign was the calm and clear prophecy of the reconciliation between God and mankind which this innocent Child, having become the Man of Sorrows, would achieve. How dread a perspective of events is wrapped up in this prophecy ! This sign, our Immanuel sign, was taken into the arms of Simeon. And what did he say ? It shall be "spoken against : " a faint word for an infinite meaning. Both the Virgin and her Immanuel would endure the contradiction of sinners. But He would be smitten with the Almighty's sword unsheathed against His Fellow, His Immanuel ! The sword would pierce her also, but only for her own salvation. It would pierce Him for the redemption of all men. In other

words: "This Man, this Infant become Man, will be for Peace." The right understanding of this word peace, or reconciliation, will give us the right understanding of Immanuel. God is with us, reconciled with us, as a race, through the blood of the cross. The sign Immanuel was a constant token to the Redeemer Himself, which in His human thoughts He well understood, that He must die for the sins of mankind. Thus you see that Christmas Day and Good Friday are closely linked. And Immanuel is the sign that links them. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself" is the exact interpretation of our symbol; for at the cross the Mediator removed the wall of partition between God and the children of men.

All this is true. But it is not all the truth. We must not understand that the Immanuel name was only a prophecy. When the Son of God took our flesh, He did not take it that he might make a great attempt to save us. His incarnation was the proof that "God had visited and redeemed His people." It is true that He must needs die for us; but He had really been the Lamb slain "from the foundation of the world." And the very fact that the Lord took our nature showed that our nature was saved. Hence the angels sang the accomplishment, not as in the future only, but as already a fact. Now here is the sign of it all. But what is the value of this? Were there no benefit in the consideration, it would be enough to say that it is true; we see however that it is demanded by the dignity of our Saviour. He comes as Immanuel to accomplish a work that God would not undertake without

certainty of accomplishment. But it may be said again : What matters it providing the end is answered ? What is the difference between the Saviour's coming to go on and vanquish our foes, and His coming to effect a salvation already accomplished ? It is simply this : that the virtue of the atonement comes with the Lord from heaven, and was not obtained at the cost of His agony and death. We must rejoice in the freeness and fulness and glory of the redemption that was settled in heaven before it was wrought out upon earth. The Christmas sign really marks a peculiar strain of Christian theology. Our Lord was sent by the love of the Father and by His own love to accomplish a salvation that could not be hindered. He brought the great Christmas gift of the Father's love with Him : it had not to be extorted at the cross. It must be sealed to us amidst atoning sorrows ; there was a necessity that the oblation should be presented before the universe openly ; but the great transaction had already taken place in heaven. The real atonement had been offered and accepted there. God was in Christ from the incarnation reconciling the world to Himself : Himself He had reconciled before the Christ appeared.

IV.

Now let us turn our thoughts to another view of our sign. Immanuel is, indeed, God with the world ; and Christmas Day reminds us of a universal benefit. But we must not forget that this name is here placed in the middle between two references to the name of Jesus. Of this name it was said in a sense

not true of Immanuel: "His name shall be called Jesus." Now Jesus means Saviour, with two meanings: one for the world and one for His people. The angels, however, take the theme of His Saviourship for the whole world: "the glad tidings for all people of great joy." St. Matthew makes emphatic the single angel's announcement of a salvation for His own people. And we must in harmony with this limit the meaning of Immanuel.

It is a most blessed truth that this sign has a direct personal meaning. The name is a token to us that he who is saved by Jesus is one with God through Immanuel. Our Lord is Immanuel as God in man, not as God joined to a personal man. But as the consequence of His not being a personal and individual man united to God, we may individually have the privilege of having the Godhead joined to our own persons. Not that we are one by one united with God directly: it is only as receiving Him into our nature through faith. This is the most glorious privilege of the Christian covenant. It was this which our Lord brought to us by the incarnation. "To them that receive Him He gives power to become sons of God," through union with Himself. He was not a man joined to God: He was and He is the Son of God in the flesh. We being united to Him—bone of His bone, flesh of His flesh—become partakers of the Divine nature; and each one of us may rejoice to believe that in Him "God is with me, joined to me," that "I am a man in Christ, and a man in God." It is true that this is a lesson taught rather in the later New Testament. But it is not forgotten at the outset. St. John, who

gives us His Christmas lesson of the eternal birth of the Son, goes on to say that the Word was made flesh that "as many as received Him might have power to become the sons or the children of God." There stands the sign in the very beginning of the Gospel that God is with us in order that He may be in us individually. This is what our faith must read in it. The sign is, indeed, like every sign, just what our faith makes it. To a strong and courageous and living faith it means that, in virtue of the new covenant with man, God in Christ unites himself to every believer.

But how can we turn this to Christmas account? We must ask ourselves the question whether we have our "part in Him," as was said of David. Has our Christmas Day come to us? Have we had the Son of God formed in our nature and born in us as the secret of our regeneration? That is our question for the day. Let us turn it into a prayer. Be sure of this, that by this token, our sign Immanuel, He who was born of the Virgin by taking our nature in her, is willing to be born in us by entering our soul and making it new. St. Paul says that he "travailed in birth until Christ was formed again" in the Galatians. Jesus has long been travailing to be born in you. No tongue can tell how gladly He would become the new life of your soul. But in this matter Christmas Day really becomes the Pentecost. It is by His Spirit that He is born in us. The indwelling of Christ is the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. He is even now the life-giving Spirit. Then come for your Christmas gift, and bring your Christmas offering. Offer

your poor heart, and He will accept it. Ask Him to give Himself to you. And be sure that He was not more glad to come as a Saviour into the world, which had long waited for Him, than He will be to be born in your heart as your Life.

V.

But, after all, Christmas is not so entirely a personal matter. The joy is for all His people, who are made up of many individuals: that is for the church of those who are one with Him. And our sign is to the Church of Christ: a token to them that Jesus, Immanuel, is God in the midst of us.

What was the meaning of the word to the ancient Israel but a remembrancer that, as a privilege peculiarly their own, Jehovah was their God. So when the Lord gave them a sign that He would interpose to save His people, a child was born who bore the name Immanuel: to remind them of a truth they were always in danger of forgetting. That was their glory, their happiness, their strength; their own dignity and their distinction from the nations around. In fact, the whole of the history of the ancient people from the time of their national Christmas, when God gave them His Jehovah-name first, was one perpetual comment on this truth and one perpetual remembrancer of it. While they remembered it they were happy and safe. When they forgot it they were a prey to their enemies. The everlasting exhortation was "Sanctify the Lord of Hosts Himself, and He will be your sanctuary." We are apt to forget the wonderful privileges of this ancient people, to have the Lord their God in their

midst : Immanuel was their sign in every age, and when it was given to Ahaz it was only the remembrancer of an old and blessed truth. But the sign given to Ahaz takes a new form. "A Virgin shall conceive and bear a son ; and she shall call His name Immanuel." There was to be a future revelation of a new name in the midst of a new people ; and our Christmas commemoration tells us what that new revelation of "God with us" should mean.

Since the incarnation, God is in the midst of us in the person of the Son through the Holy Spirit. The God who dwells among us, as in a tabernacle, is Jesus our Incarnate Lord. But what difference does this make ? Is it not enough, as many say, that God is in His church : can we worship a deified man ? We need not ask the question to-day. Suffice that now Immanuel is the name of Him who dwells among men. We do not give up anything that the Deists hold. Deity is with us in their sense : only He is now the Triune God, revealed in the glorious mystery that was hidden from the ages and the generations. We have our God among us in the Person of our Saviour and Friend, the Man Christ Jesus. I cannot pause to describe all the difference which His revelation in human nature makes. It is enough to say that there is now a full revelation of the true God, and that the true God cannot be worshipped without the difference being understood by His true worshippers. Suffice that we adore our God as an incarnate human Lord. All blessings come to us through Him. We do not adore an abstract or distant or

unthinkable Being ; but One whom we invest with human attributes. It might be said that men who reject the Trinity really do this ; in a kind of unconscious idolatry. Those who protest against our worship, and insist that we are invading the unity of God, in spite of themselves do what we do but without our justification. But we know Whom we worship ; and the Redeemer in our midst by His Spirit only brings the great God nearer to us without diminishing His greatness. The tenderness of Jesus takes away the awful sternness of the absolute God ; He brings Him near to us in the only way we are capable of conceiving a being higher than ourselves ; and, if we study our high privilege out, we shall not fail to find what a difference it makes that God in the midst of us is Jesus Christ, Man, Immanuel.

Thus I have endeavoured to explain the wonderful sign which the Old Testament gave to the New, which the prophet gave to the evangelist, and which the Holy Spirit gives to us on this festival. What multitudes are this day considering the sign under what variety of aspects ! Most of them, however, regard the Infant alone ; and it seems almost treason against the majesty of the day to think of any other than the Babe of Bethlehem. Let us too pay our homage to the Child. But let us pay it as those did who came from the East with their gifts. What was it that made them bring to Bethlehem their gold and frankincense and myrrh ? Did they bring them to a mere human babe ? Assuredly not. They were taught by the Spirit to see in that New-born One the Eternal Son of God. They indeed said that they were come to

Him " who was born King of the Jews." But we doubt not that they saw in the Child Jesus more than the King of the Jews. At any rate, if they did not, we do; and pay our Christmas homage to the Infant of days who is at the same time Immanuel, God with us : to Whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be glory for ever!

STEWARDSHIP : FOR THE LORD.*



“ And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness ; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.

“ He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much : and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.”—LUKE xvi. 9-10.

THESE two sayings of our Lord place our use of this world's goods under different aspects. One makes us stewards administering what is another's property and responsible for the discharge of a trust. The other makes us masters for a season of what earthly substance we have, to turn it to our own account and reap our own advantage from it. The one recommends to us the wisdom of strict fidelity in stewardship pure and simple ; the other recommends to us the wisdom of extracting all the good we can for ourselves from what passes through our hands. In merely human relations it is hard to reconcile these two ideas. A steward, wise for his lord, is not wise also for himself so far as he may win his lord's confidence and attain to higher trust ; he cannot, however, at one and the same time seek his master's interest and his own. But, in our relations to Him who is Lord of all, the two ideas are perfectly blended and eternally one. Their combination is the true philosophy of Christian

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