

SCALE HOW "MEDITATIONS."

Dominus Illuminatio Mea.

No. 10.

CONVERSATION WITH NICODEMUS.

(*St. John ii., 23–iii., 1–15.*)

(v. 23.) "Many believed . . . beholding His signs." It would seem as if we were told of only one or two incidents of this period in Jerusalem. "Many signs" may have been wrought. We are told only of the cleansing of the temple. This adhesion of "many" now at the very beginning of His ministry should have been cheering to Christ.

(v. 24.) But "Jesus did not trust Himself unto them." This seems to imply a popular demonstration in favour of the new teacher. Perhaps, as later, they wished to seize Him and make Him their king.

(v. 25.) "For that He knew all men." It is not necessary to suppose that this knowledge was different in kind from the insight into character with which all wise and simple people are endowed. It was unnecessary for Christ to enquire of this one and that as to the characters of the people with whom He came in contact, and probably it is so with ourselves in proportion as we preserve the single eye. When we are "deceived" in others, and complain that our trust is "betrayed," we may commonly trace our failure in insight to vanity, openness to flattery, an easy-going habit which is of the nature of sloth, or some other failure in simple and earnest living on our own part. These "many" believers were perhaps too like many who crowd our churches now. People who believe in the sense that they have no intellectual doubts of Christianity, but who do not apprehend the nature and the power of that spiritual kingdom wherein the whole nature of the Christian is brought into the obedience of Christ. We may believe it was the intentions of these men and not themselves which our Lord distrusted. Of the relations of all mankind to Christ it is true that He—

"Knows all, yet loves us better than He knows."

(Chap. iii.) Thus early in His ministry our Lord brings us face to face with the great question of conversion. The anxious question of the hour amongst people of every degree of faith and unfaith is "What think ye of Christ?" The controversy turns upon the possibility of recorded miracles, the inspiration and veracity of the Scriptures. But the real question at issue is—does any power lie in Christ capable of changing the nature, habits, aspirations of a man, of even the worst man in the street? If Christianity can do this, it is indeed a lever with an arm of force enough to move the world. If it cannot, then men are right in saying, as they do say, that Christianity is effete. But it is as well that we should all recognise what the real issue is, and that it does not turn solely upon ancient documents, however sacred.

(v. 1, 2.) Here we have one of those brief, graphic introductions by which we come to know a man, with whom we meet in the gospel narrative, better than our neighbour whom we

see every day. Nicodemus was a Pharisee of that sect whose observances we have learned to despise [sic], but whose sanctity was held in reverence by the Jews. He was a ruler, that is, a member of the Sanhedrin, the council of or parliament of seventy, empowered to settle all matters connected with Jewish polity and religion, a Convocation invested with unlimited power so long as they did not come into collision with the Roman Government. "He came to Jesus." Our Lord's action in the Temple had, we have seen, occasioned much disturbance of mind among the rulers. Possibly a special meeting had been called to investigate the matter. Nicodemus, with a sincerity which we admire, is not content to decide on hearsay; he will see Jesus Himself; but, alas, He [sic] comes by night. He has not the courage of his convictions, he does not choose to compromise himself in the eyes of the people. He would know the truth, but would not willingly give the sanction of his name to this new and uncredited teaching.

(v. 2.) "Rabbi, we know that Thou art a teacher come from God." Here we have a further instance of candour. "No man," he allows, "can do those signs which Thou doest except God be with him." Again we wonder what the signs were which were done in Jerusalem at this time; they appear to have been numerous and convincing. "We know" is significant. Is it that the beginning of the ministry was a day of grace for the Sanhedrin itself, that Nicodemus spoke of his body? If so, the mournful interest of a lost opportunity attaches even to the Pharisees.

(v. 3.) "Jesus answered." As usual, our Lord fills up the hiatus between the spoken word and the unspoken thought. What is your intention? What do you propose to do? Are you perhaps come to prepare the way for the Messiah? Such questions as these, hovering round the restoration of the temporal kingdom of Judea, our Lord would seem to read and answer. This kingdom is in the mind of Nicodemus. Christ replies, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." Nicodemus looked for a kingdom that came with observation, with royal state and much observance. Christ goes straight to the heart of his error and tells him that for such as he there will be nothing at all to see: that in order to see this vision, a man must go through an extraordinary metamorphosis which can be described only as being "born again."

(v. 4.) Nicodemus asks the question which, as we have seen, is the crucial question of our own day. "Is it possible?" Can a man again become an infant of days? or, as we should ask to-day, can a man change that which he is by heredity, by confirmed habit, by environment, and turn himself round and become someone other than he is? Is it, indeed, possible? Our Lord reiterates His reply, but with a difference.

(v. 5.) He indicates the power by which this thing can come to pass. The man must be born of water and of the Spirit. The idea of water would be familiar to Nicodemus. It was customary for the disciples of philosophers to undergo a washing which was the sign of their discipleship, but this baptism of which Christ speaks was not only with water but with Spirit and with power. The outer profession was necessary, especially necessary to such as Nicodemus, who came by night; and with it came the power of the new life in the Spirit. A man must be born of water and of the Spirit to *enter* into the Kingdom of God. He must be continuously vivified by the Spirit to make progress in the kingdom when once he has entered.

(v. 6.) "That which is born of the flesh," etc. Our Lord appears to read the struggle going on in the mind of Nicodemus. "What is this that he saith; born of the Spirit? I know not what He saith." The religion of this ruler was of a practical kind, concerned with rites and ceremonies, things that a man could see; this new doctrine of a spiritual birth must have been strangely

baffling and irritating. Our Lord considerably increases his confusion by unfolding the great principle which is the stumbling-block of scientific men to-day. The laws which govern matter apply only to matter. The things of the spirit must be spiritually discerned. When a scientific man says, "I can perceive nothing in the laws of Nature which should lead me to the apprehension of the spiritual power you name God," our Lord's answer to such an one is definite and to the point. Before he can see the Kingdom of God he must go through that radical change described as conversion or being "born again." There is no bridge, no easier way, for a man of philosophic mind like Nicodemus, or for the man of scientific training.

(v. 7.) "Marvel not." This is not a subject for curious investigation, but for supreme conviction. To-day we begin to see dimly the meaning of the mystery, and to understand that God has made us so that there is an express provision in our physical structure for this marvel of being "born again." We know that a great idea seizes hold of a man, has power to modify the tissues of the material organ by means of which he thinks, has power to alter the whole course of his life. Many a man can put his finger on the moment of his inception of that idea which made him a poet, a painter, a philanthropist.

(v. 15.) In proportion to the greatness of the idea and to the vividness of its presentation is its transforming power, and our Lord closes His talk with Nicodemus by presenting to him that master thought which should have power to subdue the hearts of all mankind—the idea of Christ lifted up upon the cross, as presented to the soul of each man with overpowering and all-subduing force by the intimate Spirit of our God—"I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me." The reason why any soul of man is not subdued before the love of Christ is that the idea has never been presented at all, or that the presentation has been poor and inadequate. This, of the possibility of a new birth for every soul of man, however ignorant, however degraded, is to be held by Christian people, not in the region of intellectual calm, but as a passionate conviction of the heart. In proportion as we hold this creed will be the intensity and the success of all our philanthropic efforts, missionary or other. Nicodemus went out but, we gather, not converted. We read of him again,¹ but the passage is supposed to be interpolated. The last record² is in character with the man. He brings spices wherewith to honour the body of the dead Christ after another has already come forward to beg the body for burial. It is his way of saying "Rabbi" at last as he said it at first.

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¹ S. John vii., 50.

² S. John xix., 39.