

Scale How "Meditations."

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*Dominus Illuminatio Mea.*

No. 11.

(*S. John iii., 8–17.*)

CONVERSATION WITH NICODEMUS.

(*Continued.*)

24th April, 1898.

We passed last time from our Lord's saying, "Marvel not," to His prediction of that greatest event of the world's history—the lifting up of the Son of man—that marvel which should do away with other marvels and make the regeneration of the thief upon the cross a simple and natural event.

(v. 8.) "The wind bloweth where it listeth." The "wind" and the "spirit" are identical in the Greek and are translatable by the same word. We might say "the spirit bloweth," "is born of the Spirit"; or "the wind bloweth," "is born of the Wind." But the change of word falls in better with our English idiom. Our Lord in His talk with Nicodemus goes straight to the *crux* of modern, as it was of ancient, thought. The religious formalist, like Nicodemus, and the devotee of natural science, two widely differing orders of mind, have ever found it unreasonable and impossible to believe and receive that which they do not perceive. They do not recognise in themselves, or in each other, spiritual beings expressed, so to say, in forms of flesh. Therefore they cannot receive it that the Spirit of God is in constant, most intimate, communication with man. They cannot away with the necessity for the speaking voice, the seeing eye, the hand of flesh; and this saying of Christ's remains a dark saying.

"Where it listeth"—a poetic expression with the force of, free as the wind, as Shakespeare has it, "a chartered libertine." But the little knowledge we have of the laws which govern the course of the winds makes the figure all the more beautiful and appropriate. So of the Spirit, here and there, from unexpected quarters, to unlikely persons, ever moving, ever freshening, quickening, vivifying, goes the Spirit of God, and there is a joyous rustle when He comes among the leaves of the soul, and a voice of praise or prayer or thanksgiving, or an energising of the soul, as of branches in a storm, which is purifying and strengthening. But these are all secret things whose outer signs are only to be discerned by those who understand.

(v. 9.) No wonder Nicodemus said "How can these things be?" No word of Christ's has brought him any illumination as yet, and it is noticeable that our Lord makes no attempt to bring His teaching to the level of that formalism to which the Pharisee was accustomed. On the contrary, Nicodemus is chidden for his spiritual density. "Art thou the teacher of Israel and understandest not?" Prophets had spoken as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. Mighty men, strong in the Spirit, had arisen to deliver Israel. Nicodemus must, no doubt, have taught of these things; why did he not understand?

(v. 11.) "We speak that we do know." "Ye receive not our witness." Here, for the first time, we have the division, the Church and the world, we and ye—the Church as yet so small,

hardly half-a-dozen persons; the world—all the rest—so multitudinous. But the distinguishing sign remains. The Church still knows those things which are spiritually discerned. The world, however sensible and excellent in other respects, still calls the things of the Spirit, foolishness.

(v. 12, 13, 14.) “Earthly things”; “heavenly things.” Our Lord opens up such a vista in this and the following verse as S. Paul gives us when he tells us how he was caught up into the seventh heaven and saw things not lawful for man to utter. Not “lawful,” not expedient, that is, because we are not yet able to understand. The love, the wisdom, the tenderness, the lowliness of our God, are baffling to the human understanding, and only He who descended from and ascended to, and, while he was with us on the earth, still dwelt in, heavenly places where the fruits of the Spirit abound—only He knows the measure of the unsearchable riches of God.

(v. 15.) Our Lord closes the talk with Nicodemus by indicating that Event which should reveal to men, as never before, the amazing love of God.

(v. 16–21.) It is considered that these verses contain the Evangelist’s commentary upon this midnight dialogue. He follows out the thought to which Christ appears to have led Nicodemus up, that is, that it was the love of the Father more, if possible, than the love of the Son, that was manifested in the Cross; because, to give the “only begotten Son” appeals to every parent and every person, who has known what it is to love, as the supreme sacrifice, greater, if we may say so, than the death upon the Cross. A certain school of theology has in the past tended to obscure the Evangelist’s teaching on this point. But any creed which tends to magnify the love of the Son for sinful men as beyond that of the Father is hardly the creed of Him who came to reveal the Father.

“Believeth on Him.” When we “believe in” each other it is truly that we recognise each other, know each other for better, for worse, and, because we recognise, place implicit confidence in one another. It is only by observation, meditation, and happy, intuitive sympathy that we know one another in this way. Most men and women we still see “as trees walking”; it is only in the few that we “believe.” It is such belief as this, intensified by every thought of Him who is “altogether lovely” until it becomes the master thought of all our thinking, the moving spring of all our being, which issues in that constant and joyous commerce between the spirit of man and the Spirit of God which is eternal life, now, at the present moment, and reaches forward to those “heavenly things” which it is not lawful for man to utter.

(v. 17.) There is no thought of terror in the mission of the “Son.” He comes to save the world; but even so, a natural, incidental, judgment is going on. Of their own accord men judge themselves, and range themselves into the sheep and the goats. To see the best and choose the worse, this is to judge oneself, this is to love the darkness: and people of irreproachable lives may conceivably prefer the darkness, for there is no middle state. That which is not light is darkness, and that shaking of the shoulder and repudiating of Christianity as an effete religion, which is common amongst us to-day, what is it but a rejection of that Light, able to make manifest the evil—pride, selfishness, sloth—in lives whose goodness passes current in the world. For those who come to the Light there is no judgment; the tendency of their lives is revealed by the Light; they sin, but they sorrow for it; and dread above all things the withdrawal of the Light by which they live. So, too, when they “do the truth” there is no elation, none of that self-magnification which is of the nature of sin, because they come to the Light that their works may be made manifest that they have been *wrought in God*. They do not covet the praise of well-doing, but the far more joyful promotion of being co-workers with the Highest, through

whom He condescends to work.