

THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

SERMONS

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VI.

THE CHRISTIAN'S SOLITUDE.

“Ye shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me.”—JOHN
xvi. 32.

THERE are two kinds of solitude: the outward and the inward. When no one sees, touches, or hears us, we say that we are alone; but this is not always true loneliness. He does not feel alone, the fisherman who spends night after night upon the waters of the vast ocean; if he hears no sound save the monotonous roar of the winds and waves, if no human voice strikes his ear, he thinks of his family comfortably sheltered, of his children sleeping peacefully; it is for them he toils, love for them fills his heart; he is not lonely. He does not feel alone, the soldier who watches, ready armed, during the silent hours of night, in some remote outpost; for he feels that upon him rest the honour of his standard and the safety of his comrades. She does not feel alone, the needlewoman, who, in her attic, by the light of her small lamp, plies her untiring needle with a feverish hand, for the work she hopes to finish before the dawn will procure tomorrow's bread for those she loves. No, they who love and feel themselves loved are never alone.

On the other hand, one may be surrounded by the noisiest and busiest multitude, and yet in the midst of the throng feel more solitary than in a wilderness. There are beings whose contact awakens no chord of sympathy in our soul; their hand presses ours, but that indifferent grasp touches no secret spring in our heart; we meet their looks, but though they may be animated by a smile of politeness, no sincere or profound affection shines in them. We have all felt at certain times this inward loneliness in the midst of the crowd; there have been days when, returning from the quiet churchyard where we have buried a part of our heart and life, the noise and bustle of the world have seemed to us empty, glacial, and derisive. We may be sure that all have experienced this shudder of the heart which feels itself alone; it sometimes passes over the most worldly and most dissipated souls, over those which are wholly given to vanity; and if we could look into the intimate life of one of those apparently frivolous beings who seem to be utterly absorbed by passing events, we would often discover there a coldness of heart, a moral solitude which would appal us.

Of these two solitudes, the one visible, the other invisible, I need not say which is the hardest to bear. The solitude of the heart is the most terrible of all solitudes. To feel lost in this vast universe, knowing full well that we have none to love us, none to take the least interest in our welfare, can you conceive of a more wretched condition than this? We must admit, however, that there is a class of people who would submit with a very

good grace indeed to this state of things. To be alone is not a misfortune for the selfish. On the contrary, a solitary greatness is singularly attractive for them. To have nothing in common with others, to climb a summit which is inaccessible to men, to sit there in their pride, is a most enticing destiny. Doubtless, such men will get on more rapidly in the world than their fellows, no ties of affection will retard their progress. They will resolutely pursue their end, be it wealth or fame, crushing under their feet both rivals and friends, setting aside gratitude as well as hate, in a word, whatever impedes their course, whatever threatens to delay them for one moment. Like the surgeon who performs the most horrible operations without a shudder, they will at any cost and by all possible means make their way here below, and if they succeed the world will say of them, "What great men!" Great, indeed? Ah! this greatness is truly the greatness of egotism, the greatness of Satan!

But the Gospel brings before us, in Jesus Christ, a greatness of another order. His is a greatness which does not trample sympathy under foot; on the contrary, it claims it, it needs it. Behold the scene of Gethsemane; see the Son of Man returning thrice to His disciples and requesting them to watch with Him. Ah! how mean is the solitary pride of the egotist in comparison with that greatness! Well, it is precisely because Jesus was Love itself that His words have a more profound and a more sorrowful significance: "Ye shall leave Me alone." We shall, in the first place, seek the causes of Christ's loneliness; secondly, we shall consider what are the consolations He finds in it, and which He sums up in the words, "I am not alone; the Father is with Me."

When a man aims at serving truth or justice here below, he must expect to be left alone, sooner or later. He will, perhaps, meet with sympathy on certain days, but it will not be in the hottest of the fight nor in his greatest need. Truth has always been despised at its origin; it has ever been a subject of shame and suffering for its first apostles. This fact, which is confirmed by universal experience, has been especially realised as regards religious truth. Religious truth, by the very fact that it is holy, clashes with all our instincts, unveils all our miseries, brings to light whatever is most hideous and guilty in our hearts; it humbles and wounds our pride, and it may therefore expect to see all the human passions allied against it to the end of time. There are hours when its triumph seems certain, but, as the heart of man is always the same, amongst the apparent worshippers who surround it, we are soon made aware of the fact that the same hostile inclinations, the same repugnance, the same hatred of its authority, still exist towards it. No wonder, then, that when I read the history of all those who have been the witnesses of eternal justice upon earth, I see them all, at certain times, solitary, misunderstood, and despised. He was alone, Moses,

when in Egypt; during forty years he mourned in the midst of his enslaved brethren; he was alone when he led them through the wilderness towards their glorious destinies. He was alone, Elijah, in the days of Ahab and Jezebel, when in his sorrow he exclaimed, "The children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant; they have slain Thy prophets; and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life." He was alone, Isaiah, when, in the bitterness of his heart, he said, "Who hath believed our report?" He was alone, John the Baptist, in his dungeon; alone when, in the darkness of a fatal night, an executioner cut off his head for the amusement of the king's revels. He was alone, St. Paul, when, in his prison at Rome, he wrote these heartrending words on his last page, "All have forsaken me!" Yes, in after time, no doubt, men have raised magnificent tombs to the memory of those great prophets of truth, they have surrounded their names with a halo of glory, they have boastfully affirmed that they accepted their heritage; but in the day of trial these heroes had been left alone.

Now, picture to yourselves, no longer sinful men such as Moses, Elijah, or Paul; picture to yourselves the Holy One and the Just, He whose name is Truth, and beforehand you may be sure that He will be solitary in the midst of men. He is alone when He seeks the glory of God in the midst of the nation that forget Him, when He proclaims His spiritual law in the midst of a pharisaical nation, when He denounces iniquity and hypocrisy in the midst of a multitude whom the priests and scribes hold under subjection, He is alone in the midst of His enemies — alone, alas! in the midst of His disciples themselves, for they cannot comprehend His Divine mission, they never fully understand His instructions, their dreams are all of their Master's earthly glory, and their wholly human sympathy would turn Him from the painful path and the bloody sacrifice for which He has come. He is alone; He who needs so much love is reduced to ask, and to ask in vain, for a little sympathy on the part of His apostles; in the supreme hour, in the hour when His human nature falters, in the hour of His bloody sweat, not a word of encouragement does He hear, and His dying looks fall upon His disciples fleeing in the midst of a crowd whose fearful cries of irony and malediction rise to His very cross!

Such was the loneliness of Christ. Now, what happens to the Chief must of necessity happen to His disciples. He is the head, we are the body. If we are truly His, if we follow in His footsteps, if we live His life, if like Him we seek the glory of God, we may expect to be treated as He was. Christians, do not be surprised if this painful trial comes to you; do not be surprised if you often feel alone upon earth.

Here, however, I must warn you of a danger; I must point out to you a wrong path in which too many souls have wandered.

There is a solitude in which we may find ourselves confined, but of

which we alone have been the authors. We may shut ourselves up in our own ideas, in a narrow intellectual horizon, in an eccentric character; we may surround ourselves with indifference, pride, or selfishness, raise between ourselves and our fellows a wall of separation, and then bewail our solitude. Excessive grief may lead to this temptation. Under the plea that we suffer woes which none can understand, we may take refuge in a selfish sorrow, think only of our distress, and forget that we have brethren. Does this loneliness resemble that of Jesus Christ? God forbid that we should entertain such a thought! The loneliness of Christ was due to the fact that He sought the glory of God; that which I condemn is due, on the contrary, to the fact that we seek our own satisfaction; between the two there is consequently a great gulf. Let us beware lest we confound them; let us especially beware lest, in the name of the Gospel, we justify an isolation which may simply be the result of the faults of our character, of our asperity, of our odd temper, or of our pride.

It is none the less true, however, that the most loving, the most gentle, the most charitable Christian must expect, if he would be like his Master, to share the loneliness of Jesus. On the day when he has taken the firm determination of following the Lord, a separation of thoughts and affections has taken place between the world and himself, and he has been left alone. How can the Christian seek the glory of God and not feel isolated in the midst of a world in which this glory is despised? How can he live for eternity and not feel isolated in the midst of a world whose preoccupations all bear upon the things which are visible, earthly, and transitory? How can he love that which is holy and not feel isolated in the midst of so many hearts which sin carries away and satisfies? How can he labour towards the progress of the reign of God and not feel isolated in the midst of the multitude who seek nought but their own advancement, their own glory, or their own fortune? This inward loneliness is, therefore, promised us, and we find it even in the very bosom of the Church, for even there we are not always sure of meeting with sympathy; there also we encounter worldliness, coldness of heart, narrow-mindedness, or indifference. Alas! the scene of Gethsemane has its counterpart in every age; the faithful Christian who suffers to the end for his Master often turns in vain towards his sleeping brethren, and finding none who understand him, he is forced to re-echo these words of Jesus, "Could ye not watch with Me one hour?"

This inevitable loneliness brings with it many temptations to which I would draw your attention. First of all, a temptation to doubt. To be alone to believe in a truth, to be alone to proclaim it, is a fearful trial for our weakness. Need I say that this trial is peculiar to the Christian in this age, in the midst of the present generation? There are times and countries in which the Christian truths form part, as it were, of the general beliefs, in

which whoever accepts them is sure of universal approval; such is not our condition. God calls us to maintain with courage and resolution truths which are ignored and misconstrued by the majority of those who surround us. No wonder then if, when we feel ourselves alone in the midst of that multitude which eagerly presses around us, there are moments when a secret voice whispers in our ear, "Art thou sure that thou hast truth on thy side?" To this intellectual temptation is added a temptation to coldness of heart. The heart lives on sympathy. Nothing is more pleasant to it than the affections which others share. Its powers of love, its life, are multiplied thereby. But to be alone to love an unseen God, to appeal to a sympathy which yields no response, what a subject of sorrow! At such times the heart is in danger of retiring within itself and of wearing itself out in melancholy. And, in truth, this twofold trial of the intellect and of the heart cannot fail to exercise a fatal influence upon our life. That we may act we must be understood. The thought that we have spectators and witnesses redoubles our natural energy. The most inconceivable labours have been accomplished by men who had united their efforts. This marvellous influence of sympathy which is so visible in our race, is felt in our assemblies where it increases tenfold the force of the preacher's words; it is felt in all our works. It is this power which has often awakened genius, or at least stimulated faculties which in solitude would have wasted away. Nothing, therefore, is better calculated to paralyse our powers than to feel alone, than to pursue an end which no one else aims at attaining with us.

Such are some of the features of the loneliness which the Christian must expect to experience, by the very reason that he follows his Master, and that, with Him, he seeks the glory and the reign of God. What then will this solitude be if to this general trial be added particular trials, if sickness and death desolate our hearth and render our loneliness still more complete? What will it be if to it be added that painful discordance of temper, that cruel shattering of all our affections of which we are so often the innocent victims? Alas! some of my hearers perhaps recognise in this their own history, and however happy we may be, the future is always so uncertain that none can tell whether we will not all one day find it to be ours. That is why we have need of consolation, and I am eager to enter upon the second part of my subject, "I am not alone, my Father is with Me." That was Christ's consolation; it must also be ours.

"I am not alone, My Father is with Me." In this lies the strength of Jesus. What are all the desertions of earth compared to communion with God? His Father is with Him; henceforth He may be left alone by men, He enjoys the society of God. He may be rejected by men, He has God for His refuge. He may be misjudged by men, He has the Divine approbation. He may be hated of men, but these delightful words continually ring in His

ears, "Thou art My well-beloved Son; in Thee I am well pleased." The Father is with Him. Ah! He should always have felt this precious communion, for He has sought, He has loved, He has accomplished nought but the Father's will; but can we forget that there has been in His career an awful and mysterious day in which the Father Himself has failed Him? can we forget that upon the cross the Son, rejected and cursed by earth, has felt heaven close upon Him? can we forget that, forsaken by all those He had loved here below, He was forced to turn towards heaven a look of anguish, and to utter these heartrending words, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Forget this! But it were forgetting at what price we have been redeemed, it were passing with closed eyes beside that abyss of infinite mercy on whose brink the Church with the angels bend, seeking in vain to search its depths!

But if Jesus has known this terrible desertion, it was that *we* might never know it. When by faith we are united with Him, when we accept His redeeming work, we obtain the right of returning to God and of calling Him by the name of Father; then we are permitted in our turn to repeat these words, "I am no longer alone, the Father is with me." In this lies the strength and consolation of the Christian. Then also all the temptations which are inseparable from solitude disappear in presence of that supreme consolation.

You are alone, and you doubt, perhaps; for, as we have said, to be the solitary witness of a despised truth is a terrible trial for our weakness. Who are you that you should oppose your thought to the thoughts of the multitude, that you should believe what others deny? Well in this painful anxiety I see but one refuge, and it is this thought, "The Father is with me." Yes, always rely upon the word of God, and you shall stand firm, and you shall speak without weakness. Ah! true, if you were called to defend your own thoughts, the waves of doubt would soon sweep them away; but when you have God on your side, nothing should silence you, nothing should stop you. Do you not see that in this consisted the power of God's prophets in every age? (for God has ever had His prophets). When they were called to protest against some prevailing evil, what would they have done if they had had no other refuge, no other support, than what unbelief is pleased to call their natural genius? Think you that they would have found strength enough in themselves to resist the whole world and to be alone of their opinion? They felt that God was with them, and therefore they spoke. Neither Moses, nor Elijah, nor Paul drew from their own character that super-human energy which made of them giants in the moral order; they tell us so themselves. It is God who calls them, God who sends them, God who says to them, "I will speak with thy mouth." And now these lips will never close again; to the taunts and maledictions of men they will answer, "God

is with us.” See also how this thought preserved them from bitterness, and how they were enabled to wait patiently until the Almighty should vindicate His right. Men speak today of a new virtue which they call supreme contempt, this contempt which one of our modern thinkers thus defines: “A keen and rapturous delight which man relishes for himself alone and which is self-sufficient.” It is in this contempt, they say, that the wise must seek their refuge when the truths they defend are despised here below. Ah! those who know the God of the Gospel will not accept this refuge. If the world rejects them they will seek a shelter, not in supreme contempt, but in the boundless love of the Father; and instead of serving the cause of truth with the mean passions of criticism, they will endeavour to love and enlighten those who reject and misjudge them. Let us bless God that He whose name is Truth did not, in the hour of His death, retire within the contempt of our so-called sages, and that on the cross He pronounced this sublime prayer for the very multitude who cursed and reviled Him, “Father, forgive them!” Like Him let us seek a refuge in communion with the Father, and if the world rejects us, we shall find sufficient strength there to serve the cause of truth without weakness and without bitterness, even to the end.

Let us now consider the temptations to which the heart is exposed. There is the coldness, the alarming languor which is produced by loneliness. But here again the believer may look for the most sublime compensations. If the love of man fails him, do you think that the love of God is not sufficiently unlimited to fill his heart? Is not God the very source of love? Do you think that the spring is in danger of being dried up? Do you think that God will allow a heart which the world abandons to remain empty, withered, and dry? Is it not written that whoever will have forsaken all things for His name’s sake, shall receive already here below a hundredfold, and in the world to come, everlasting life? Do you think that those lives which are the most desolate, but in which God manifests His presence, do not possess a richer treasure of love than those which the world adorns with its factitious splendours? Are the affections of the world, so lavish of high-sounding yet often deceitful effusions, to be compared with the infinite love with which God fills the heart which gives itself fully to Him? Is it being alone to have God in one’s soul and to feel this soul, till then possessed by guilty passions or unworthy frivolities, becoming the sanctuary of Him who is love itself? I have seen lives growing more and more desolate on the side of earth, but at the same time growing richer and richer on the side of heaven; the more the world forsook them, the more did love gush forth in their loneliness. They seemed to say to all the delusions of life, to all its joys, to all its promises, as they vanished in the distance, “You will leave me alone, but I am not alone, for the Father is with me.”

Finally, against discouragement, that greatest temptation of solitude, nothing is more powerful than the thought that the Father is with us. That fearful sense of nothingness which paralyses all our efforts when we labour in solitude, the Christian knows nothing of, for he has always an invisible witness of his life, and he is able to say with the prophet, "My judgment is with the Lord, and my work with my God." Yes, his work, however insignificant, hidden and obscure it may be, were it but a prayer, a sigh, or a tear which seems lost. What deep encouragement lies in such a thought. To feel that everything in life has its special destination and value, to feel that whether we succeed or whether we fail we have none the less served the true Master, is not this what explains the indomitable perseverance of all who have entered upon this path? "The Father is with me;" consequently, what I do for Him is not one of those short-lived works that hang upon the thousand chances on which the success of all human things depends. If I am alone, this work will not perish with me, I have added my stone to an eternal edifice which is to be continued throughout all ages; nought that I have done has been useless, nought has been lost, for it is the work of God. Therefore, though I should be called like the Forerunner to end my career in a dungeon in which my last thoughts, my last words, would appear to be for ever buried, though death should reach me there without allowing me to leave a supreme farewell to the world, still would I say, "I am not alone, the Father is with me." Though I should be called to pine away through many a long year upon a bed of pain, with nothing living save my heart, unable to act save by prayer, though forgetful and wearied-out friendship should cease to open my door, and though none would be near to witness my dying agonies, still would I say, "No, neither my prayers nor my sufferings have been lost; I am not alone, the Father is with me." Such is the Christian's consolation. These are not mere hypotheses, mere pictures drawn from imagination; I relate simply what has been seen, what is seen wherever the Christian faith has fully possessed the heart.

If there be any here who know not this consolation of the Christian, and who do not wish to know it, to them I will say, You are afraid of becoming Christians, because when you become such, you feel that you will be alone and solitary, even in the midst of the world to which you are attached by so many ties. Do you think you will be less lonely for having refused to quit this world when God called you to do so? What then is life if not a sacrifice which goes on increasing day by day? How many afflictions in the past and in the future, how many separations still in reserve? Where are those on whom your heart relied but yesterday; where will they be tomorrow, those on whom your heart relies today? Death comes, reaping here and reaping there unremittingly; and those only who have never loved are spared the sorrow of seeing their solitude increase year by year. Moreover,

apart from the desolation caused by death, do you not sometimes feel terrified by the sight of the solitude within which selfishness and indifference have confined themselves, even in the midst of the din of the world? and is not this isolation far more awful than that produced by death?

Sooner or later, then, you will be alone to live, alone to drag on your weary existence, which will have become a burden to you, because those who will surround you will have no more need of you. Do you not see, as Bossuet said, those successors who spring into life, who advance, who push you aside, so to speak, and who seem to say, "Draw back; now is our turn?" A day will come, and it has perhaps already dawned, when you shall be alone to live. That is not all; you shall be alone to die. What, in that supreme hour, will all the praise, approbation, or most sincere affection of men avail you? Arrived at this narrow passage, you will have to cross it alone. Have you thought of this? have you prepared for that moment? And if death were all! But death is a way that leads to the just Judge. Your conscience warns you, and the Divine Word assures you of this. You will be alone to appear before the tribunal of God. Alone! and all the delusions of men, all their flatteries, all their false counsels, will vanish like a fleeting cloud. Alone! without an advocate, without a friend to plead your cause. Alone with your past life, with your rebellions, your ingratitude, your secret miseries, and your hidden crimes, which will all appear in the formidable light of the eternal day. Alone! And why? God had offered you His pardon and His love, but you have scorned and despised them. Ah! if your soul is precious to you, in the name of your eternal future, in the name of your salvation, in the name of the Gospel I preach unto you, in the name of the blood of Christ shed for you, accept today the love which God offers you, for it is a fearful thing indeed to fall into the hands of the living God.

Do you now understand what it is to have God on one's side, to possess that love from which nothing—no, not even death—can separate us? That portion of the Christian is ours; it is yours also if you will accept it. On the mysterious threshold of eternity we may say, "I am not alone, the Father is with Me." We may say it in loneliness, in sorrow, in the most miserable situation; with these words we may welcome the King of Terrors. Why should you not say so too? Then my feeble words would not have been uttered in vain, and though you had entered this sanctuary with an empty and forlorn heart, you will bear away with you that beautiful promise, "I will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."