

THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

SERMONS

BY THE

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OF L'ÉGLISE DE L'ÉTOILE, PARIS.

WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

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XVII.

ELIJAH'S VISION.

“And the Lord said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave.”—1 KINGS xix. 11-13.

ONE of the most striking proofs of the deplorable ignorance in which our age live concerning the Holy Scriptures is the lightness with which it judges the God of the Old Testament. I do not speak only of the disparaging criticism which, since the last century, has attacked the sublimest scenes of the Bible, and without so much as seeking to understand their hidden meaning, has found in them matter for the meanest raillery; I speak also of another science which aims at being more real, more serious, and I am struck with the prejudices to which it yields. For instance, because the Scriptures, with inflexible truth, with holy candour, retrace the many failings, artifices, and falls of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, of all the Jewish heroes whom national pride, had it dictated this book, would certainly not have portrayed in such dark colours, it does not hesitate to charge with their faults and crimes the God they adore, without inquiring if He sanctions them, without considering that He condemns them, and that their authors, without one exception, are brought under the painful and severe discipline of trial and repentance. Again, because Jehovah, in His providential plans towards humanity, makes of Israel His instrument for a time, because He places His chosen people under the yoke of a theocracy, and consequently of a code of laws which, like all other civil and political laws, are to be sanctioned by force, it sees in Jehovah the God of vengeance, it ascribes to Him the same intolerance, the same hatred, the same evil passions which mingled in Israel's accomplishment of its Divine mission; and it forgets that, even then, beneath the veil of theocracy, His true nature, that is, His universal justice, His love, and His mercy, shines forth in a thousand passages of the Old Testament, that many parts breathe a truly evangelical tenderness and compassion, and that while listening to some fragments of the prophetic writings, we might believe ourselves already sitting at the feet of Jesus Christ. What! because this God of Israel, revealing Himself in His Son, has shed over us the fulness of His light, shall we despise the Divine rays which illumined the old dispensation? Shall the brightness of the noonday sun make us forget the splendours of the dawn? No; under the shadows with which He still surrounds Himself, we worship the God of Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David,

who, for us, is and ever will be the God of Jesus Christ.

This thought has been suggested to me by the narrative from which my text is taken, and I am not afraid to affirm that, as we meditate upon it and apprehend its true signification, we shall see in it a sublime presentiment of that supreme revelation of the Gospel by which God manifests Himself to us in His true character. This narrative is drawn from the history of Elijah. Elijah is the true type of the heroes of theocracy. At a period of degradation, abjection, and universal idolatry, he is beset by the thought of God's glory; this passion consumes him, he knows no other. He longs to re-establish the reign of Jehovah, and in this mission nothing will stop him, no ties of flesh and blood. Like John the Baptist, who, nine centuries later, will inherit his name and office, he dwells in the desert. Thence he comes forth to appear in the palace of Ahab, the bearer of the Divine warnings, and his voice is startling like the noise of thunder. The judgments of God accompany his words, and so great is his power that the whole nation hangs upon his lips; he defies the priests of Baal, unmasks their deceit, and causes them to be put to death without mercy. Then might he indeed believe that the reign of the Lord is come, for the people sound His praise, and during a whole day the hills of Carmel re-echo with the cry of the multitude: "The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!"

But, oh, sorrow! after the enthusiasm of a day things take their usual course; Ahab is still Ahab, Jezebel is still Jezebel, and the crowd, exalted for a moment by the fervour of the prophets, falls back with insatiable ardour into the turpitudes of a bloody and voluptuous worship. Then Elijah, like all other enthusiastic souls, passes from one extreme to the other; discouragement seizes upon him; his faith falters; God escapes him; he finds the ways of the Lord incomprehensible; he is angry because God forgets His cause. How easy it would be for Him to interfere, to smite those who despise Him, and thus complete the work of destruction begun on Mount Carmel! But no: heaven is deaf, God is silent, Jezebel is as powerful as ever, and the prophet's life is threatened. In despair Elijah flies; his soul is weary of life; he will go and bury himself in the wilderness. He directs his steps southward, far, very far, from that land of Judah where he has struggled in vain; far, very far, from that ungrateful and frivolous nation. He reaches Horeb, he wants that boundless waste, those rugged and lonely heights, that wild and dreary prospect which agrees with the state of his soul. There he will die, and when the voice of God, who follows him even in his retreat, is heard, saying, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" he replies by a bitter complaint, he reproaches the Almighty with having forsaken His cause and left His servant alone in this terrible conflict to which He Himself had called him.

Let us not judge the prophet rashly; even in his despair I recognise the

zeal which consumes him; his temptation is that of all noble souls, of souls that thirst for righteousness and holiness. Would to God there were many believers like him, notwithstanding his momentary deviation from the path of duty!

The indifferent will be at a loss to understand this revolt of Elijah; as they have no elevated ideal, as the coming of the kingdom of God finds them wholly unconcerned, as the cause of justice and truth has never inflamed their hearts, they easily fall in with the habits of the world, and persuade themselves that it cannot be changed; for them, wisdom consists in taking men as they are, and moderation is, in their opinion, the wisest and safest philosophy. Why aim at reforming the world, why raise against oneself a storm of prejudice and passion when one might live in unbroken peace and quiet? All that the indifferent cannot comprehend is styled by them fanaticism, and such men as Elijah, at whatever period they appear, are fools in their sight. But the man who ardently desires the triumph of truth, who suffers to see the name of God despised, His glory brought low, and justice trodden under foot, will recognise his own history in this narrative, and the expression of his own sorrows in the lamentations of the prophet. Thus, methinks, must the Christians of the first ages have been tempted when, after having, with the whole of the primitive Church, awaited the immediate return of Christ and His glorious appearing, they saw truth persecuted and rejected, reduced to win souls laboriously one by one, to plead its cause before kings and emperors, when they saw the Church growing with difficulty, and forced to submit to the conditions of all human institutions, having, like them, its imperfections, its infirmities, its failings, and counting, in times of persecution, its apostates by thousands. Thus also must our fathers have been tempted in the days that followed the Reformation, when after their dreams of the free and serious religion, of conscience freed from the human yoke, and of the grand future which the Gospel alone could have given their country, they saw their churches levelled to the ground, their homes destroyed, their Bibles torn, and themselves, like malefactors, driven forth as exiles. Who can tell how many were the anxious hearts which these noble martyrs turned towards the God who seemed to have deserted His cause? Who will tell their agonising prayers, their murmurs, their bitter lamentings? Thus, too, are still tempted those who, having looked for the triumph of the Gospel, for the extension of the Church, for Christian unity around the Master's Cross, for one of those grand religious revivals which save souls and redeem the world, are forced to see what we see: in presence of an indifferent and scoffing society, the Church divided and weakened, insensible and passionless, and the progress of God's kingdom dependent, apparently at least, upon wholly outward chances, upon wholly human causes. In presence of such a specta-

cle their faith is shaken, their hearts are troubled, and, like Elijah, they doubt God's power to act and interfere; like Elijah, they overlook the sublime traces of His intervention in the past, and if to these general causes of disquiet be added some special trial, some lasting injustice of which they are the victims, some cruel and inexplicable blow, it is enough to wring from the firmest a cry of anguish or murmur, or, it may even be, to drive them to despair.

Christians who have known these temptations, let me tell you that, terrible though they be, the sorrows they bring are noble sorrows! Ah! it were far worse indeed to become indifferent to what is going on around you, to feel at ease in a world where God is treated as a stranger, to look with a cold heart upon all the injustice, suffering, turpitude that meet you at every step, to accept this life and this world such as sin has made them. Happy those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, says the Gospel. Yes, to suffer like Elijah, like John the Baptist, like Paul, is after all the best and noblest lot upon earth, for only on this condition may we hope to be comforted of God.

And God spake to Elijah, saying, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." The prophet obeys. Standing on the summit of Horeb, whence his eye embraces the whole expanse of earth and sky, he waits, for the Lord has promised to appear to him and commune with him.

He looks, and behold on the horizon clouds of dust appear; it is the desert wind rising swift, impetuous as in the East, and soon the sky is covered by a dark and livid veil. The long and dismal blasts of the tempest are followed by terrific peals of thunder; the trees writhe in agony and are torn from the ground; even the rocks tremble, the sands of the desert, gathered into moving hills, roll like the waves of an angry sea. The storm passes . . . but the Lord was not in the wind.

He looks again, and before his troubled gaze the horizon seems to move; the rocks totter, the earth is rent, the mountain staggers as if seized with sudden giddiness. It is an earthquake which opens yawning chasms waiting to swallow up their prey; for a few moments nature is abandoned to this fearful convulsion . . . but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

Elijah looks once more, and behold a strange light illumines earth and sky; fire from heaven has set the desert in a blaze. The reddish flame of the conflagration, shining amidst the darkness of the storm, spreads swift as lightning; it runs, it winds around the mountain-sides, it kindles the dried grass and the uprooted trees. It is an all-invading flood of fire, whose burning waves whirling rise towards the gloomy vault of heaven. Terrified, Elijah starts back . . . but the Lord was not in the fire.

The tempest, the earthquake, the fire, were not these what Elijah had asked when, weary and discouraged, he had upbraided God for His inaction

and His incomprehensible silence? Had he not said to the Almighty, as it were: "Awake! take Thy cause in hand, scatter Thine enemies like the sands of the desert, crush them in Thy fury, consume them like chaff?" And now he has witnessed that irresistible and formidable power, alike in the storm that swept everything away with its blasting breath, in the earth shaken to its foundations, and in the fire consuming what the hurricane had left standing. He has seen it, he has trembled, and yet the Lord was not there. Where then is He, and by what sign will Elijah be able to discern His presence? The prophet will soon know.

The terrible vision of the hurricane has passed. . . . The storm has ceased. After the convulsions of nature there is a profound calm; the fearful glare of the lightning is followed by the pure and fresh light of day. The sky has become visible once more, the Eastern sky, with its clear and deep azure; nature seems to revive more beautiful, more serene than before, and from the depths of the valleys rises a soft and gentle murmur, the harmonious sound of nature awaking to new life under the influence of the Divine breath. It reaches the summit of Horeb, the cave in which Elijah has taken refuge; the prophet comes forth from his retreat. An inexpressible emotion, an ineffable sense of peace, freshness, and joy seizes his terror-stricken soul. Neither the roar of the tempest nor the convulsions of nature had impressed him to such a degree. In this still small voice he recognises the presence of God, and covering his face with his mantle, he bows down and adores.

Was I mistaken when I said that in this Old Testament scene there is a sublime presentiment of the supreme revelation which God, through the Gospel, was to give humanity? This God, whose presence Elijah was unable to discern save in the manifestations of His justice and wrath, this God of vengeance, so long as He smites and chastens, has not spoken His last word. "He maketh His angels spirits, His ministers a flaming fire," but nevertheless He is not in the tempest that overthrows nor in the fire that consumes, and if the law of Sinai, if the theocracy of Israel have revealed His holiness and justice, the day will come when He will reveal to the world that His name is Love.

Elijah does not yet understand the true and profound significance of this vision, and in what follows God explains it only in part. He tells him to resume his journey and seek out Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha, who are all three to be the instruments of His vengeance in chastising Ahab, Jezebel, and the idolatrous nation. Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha, these are the storm, the earthquake, and the fire which the Lord will send when He will think it fit. Thus God will interfere, the day of His anger will certainly dawn; but Elijah must know that vengeance will not be His last word. In these terrible interventions God will manifest only one side of His nature, and His true revelation of Himself is still to come.

This revelation, we have seen it. . . . What are those glad tidings symbolised by the still small voice the prophet heard? Hearken, and through the stillness of the first Christmas night you will hear the angels' song descending from heaven upon the plains of Bethlehem: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men." Draw near to the cradle in which the majesty of God is disarmed, behold this little child, born amongst the poorest of the poor; no splendour surrounds Him; there is nought in Him to repel or terrify; everything is simple and unpretending, and yet in Him is the true revelation of the God of heaven and earth; from this lowly manger will come forth the salvation of the world. He whose birth caused so little stir will grow as a tender plant, to use the words of the prophet; no outward pomp will He display, nothing that might recall the fearful majesty of the God of vengeance whom Elijah invoked. Instead of the iron sceptre of which Israel dreamed, He will bear a reed; instead of the conqueror's diadem He will wear a crown of thorns; His voice will not be menacing like that of the storm and thunder, it will tell of pardon, peace, salvation. To all the sorrows of earth He will say: "Come unto Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart." Nought but prayers will He have for His foes, nought but blessings for His murderers. He will be reviled, loaded with insults and ignominy, nailed upon a cursed tree; but in this excess of humiliation He will reveal to the world an unknown greatness, that of triumphant love, of a charity that shrinks not from sacrifice. A majesty beyond compare will surround His bleeding brow, and in this disarmed victim mankind will acknowledge its King. What neither force, nor terror, nor violence could have done, His cross will accomplish . . . consciences will be troubled, hearts will be stirred, the Church will be established, a new humanity will rise to begin the reign of God upon earth; it will march on with faith, love, and hope for its motto, it will subdue the nations; after eighteen centuries it will preach the glad tidings of salvation on all points of the globe, until the glad day dawns, when, in the pacified world, there will be but one flock and one Shepherd. In presence of this wondrous triumph of redeeming love, oh! let us bow our heads, and, like Elijah, adore, for truly the Lord is here.

We see, therefore, what is the true signification of this sublime vision, we know what means the "still small voice" which fills the soul of Elijah with a thrill of holy joy, we know that God is love. And now let us endeavour to draw from this scene some of the lessons it is destined to teach us.

In the first place, let us learn not to judge the Lord. As we have already said, the delays of God surprise us, and we often find His silence inexplicable. Why does He not interfere? we ask. Why does He allow His cause to be opposed, attacked, and apparently defeated? Why does He allow evil to prosper and triumph? And though our lips avow it not, our irritated and impatient heart calls for His intervention, His judgment, and perhaps His

wrath! His wrath! . . . ah! when Elijah called it down upon the rebellious nation, he knew not what *we* now know; he had not seen the Holy One and the Just expiring upon the Cross; he had not seen the love which is mightier than hate conquering hearts and establishing the reign of God on the earth. His wrath! . . . ah! what could we answer should it reach us first? Do we deserve it less than those who provoke our displeasure? When we take into account all the mercies we have received, the light which has illumined our life, the patience which has borne with us so long, the deliverances which have been wrought on our behalf; when in opposition to the wondrous story of the Divine mercies we place that of our rebellions, of our ingratitude, of our baseness, of our secret faults, or, it may be, of our crimes, can we, nay, dare we still invoke the God of' vengeance? Let us rather rejoice that the hour of judgment has not yet come; let us rejoice that a time is still left us for repentance and salvation. Let us remember that the wrath of man, worketh not the righteousness of God, and that we may triumph over evil, let us imitate Divine Providence, which, though able to subdue all things by force, chooses rather to conquer by love.

I next find in my text a deeply-comforting thought. Is there a man who, having vainly looked for Divine intervention in the history of humanity at large and in his own personal history, has not sometimes felt the shudder of doubt pass over his soul? Who, in times like those, has not longed to ask God His secret, the secret of those strange and mysterious ways which bewildered him? Well; this secret is revealed in the vision of Elijah—this secret is love. Love is the final and supreme explanation of all God's dealings with humanity; love, not wrath; love, not vengeance, whatever our hearts may sometimes think to the contrary. Nevertheless, it must be rightly understood that, if in love alone God gives mankind a full revelation of Himself, it is He also who sends the wind, the earthquake, and the all-consuming fire. Let us beware lest, because we believe in the Gospel, we render the arm of the Lord powerless, and make of our God a soft and effeminate being, suited to the spirit of the present generation. No, for us also the Lord reigneth; for us He will ever be the centre of history, the Ruler of all the convulsions that shake the world. And are there not certain pages of the world's history in which His intervention becomes visible, so to speak, and in which, like Belshazzar during his feast at Babylon, we discern a mysterious hand tracing the death-warrant of the powers of evil? When Nineveh and Babylon fall, when those gigantic empires crumble, do we not see the intervention of God there? When murderous Jerusalem is trodden under foot by the Gentiles, when the plough tears the ground on which stood its magnificent Temple, when exiled Israel is dispersed throughout the world to be the constant wonder of history by its unique and extraordinary destiny, do we not see in this the fulfilment of the awful words: "His

blood be on us and on our children?” When Rome itself, whose fall had been foretold four centuries beforehand by St. John, the Seer of the Apocalypse, is invaded by the barbarians; when its conquerors, Attila and Genseric, obedient to their mysterious destiny, call themselves the scourge of God; when, on leaving their native shores, they give the pilot this order: “Direct thy sail whither blows the wind of Divine vengeance,” can we refuse to acknowledge the action of an avenging Providence? and should we forget to recognise it, would not the smoking ruins which marked their passage everywhere proclaim it loudly in our stead? Finally, when in modern history we see all the powers which have opposed and rejected Christianity becoming the prey of ruin and death, whilst civilisation, progress, respect for conscience, true liberty exist only beneath the shadow of the Cross and in the nations whose life the Gospel has pervaded, when everything shows us, as the President of a noble republic whose sons are not ashamed to invoke the name of the living God once nobly confessed, when everything shows us that justice exalts a people whilst sin is the ruin of nations, we were blind indeed if we denied the reality of God’s action even in the darkest days of history, if we refused to acknowledge that, as in Elijah’s vision, it is He who lets loose the tempest and the all-destroying fire. Yes, God reigneth, we must affirm it, we must proclaim it boldly, in presence of a civilisation that prides itself on its material progress and professes a scornful indifference, an insulting disdain for the realities of the invisible world; we must remind society that it cannot with impunity banish God from its midst, and that if the place He should occupy remains vacant, it will be filled by the powers of darkness. We must remind it that His justice slumbereth not, and that, to chastise the nations that forget Him, He has only to give them up for a day to the evil passions which ferment in their depths, to the rising tide of materialism to which He alone can say, “Thou shalt go no further.” We must remind it that the moral corruption openly displayed by the higher classes is stirring up in the lower regions a blaze of hatred and savage passions whose explosion would produce a moral tempest compared with which the storm witnessed by Elijah in Horeb were a mere child’s play. We must remind it that God is holy, that He will not be mocked, and that, for individuals as well as for nations, His judgment is the surest of realities.

Yes, God reigns in history; but if we believe in His sovereign action, how often also do we fail to discover the traces of His steps? How often does the spectacle of the world appear to us as a labyrinth in which we wander hopelessly? And in His very judgments, how much there is that we cannot understand. Alas! in the storm which the breath of His justice raises I see the innocent smitten with the guilty, I see the child atoning for the sins of the father, I see the consequences of an iniquitous action falling upon

several generations; I see a mysterious fatality crushing individuals and nations, I see success attending certain clever strokes of policy whilst good causes are left to perish, so that, although I know that these various events, even those which confound me, are directed by God, yet I feel with as much certainty that God does not reveal Himself fully in them. Ah! then it is that the vision Elijah beheld brings a truly Divine and cheering light to my soul, for if it shows me that God sends the evils which are destined to chastise the world, it teaches me at the same time that His chastisements do not reveal His true nature; it teaches me that the secret of His ways is to be sought elsewhere, that it lies wholly in that love which history teaches not, but which God reveals in silence to the pardoned soul that believes in His word, that hearkens to His voice, and consents to be taught of Him.

Accept these consolations, ye afflicted souls. You are perhaps groaning today beneath the weight of trial; it seems to you as though God had directed all His power against you, and you have realised in your lives all the awful sides of the prophet's vision. The blast of affliction has swept all your hopes away, your happiness has fled in an hour of anguish, and your heart is passing through what Scripture calls the furnace of sorrow. You have been told to seek God in these trials, but your heart has shuddered, and, like Elijah, you are waiting still. . . . Ah! you are right, for if these afflictions have been permitted of God, they will not fully reveal His will and His true purpose. Have faith! The day is approaching when you will hear the still small voice which struck the prophet's ear, that secret voice of the Lord which alone can appease the rebellious soul and fill it with unutterable consolation. You will hear it, and then you will know that love was at the root of all these dispensations, that love alone can explain your sufferings; you will know this, and bowing your head and veiling your face, with Elijah you will say, "Truly the Lord is here."

When Elijah had beheld this vision on Mount Horeb, he heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus." Return; a fitting word for him who in the hour of danger had deserted his post and his mission. Return on thy way to the wilderness. On that way which he ought never to have taken, for God had not called him there. Return to those before whom thou art to be My witness. Return where hate, scorn, persecution await thee. Return, for if I have strengthened thy faith and raised thy drooping heart by the revelation of Myself on the holy mountain, it is not that thy spirit may dwell there in endless ecstasy, but that thou mayest go back into the world stronger and more faithful than before, to serve Me amongst those who forget their God and are hastening on to perdition.

Let us listen to this command of the Lord, and let it be our strength. We have come here, it may be, discouraged and sorrowful like Elijah; like him

we have learned once again the secret of the Divine ways; but more favoured than the prophet, we have beheld the love which Jesus has revealed to the world, and which is for us the supreme explanation of all the dispensations of Providence towards us. Let us therefore, like the Lord's servant, return to the post of duty; let us return to those wandering souls, to that frivolous and unbelieving world before which God wills that we should be His witnesses; let us return with humility, courage, and fidelity; let us return with a renewed faith, a brighter hope, a stronger and more persevering love; let us return, and let the world understand when it hears our words, when it sees our works, that we too have ascended the holy hill and heard the voice of the Lord.