

IX.

Jesus Christ our Example of Suffering.

DECEMBER 9, 1855.

IN the presence of Jesus Christ, who now feeds us with His body and blood, and who feeds us continually by faith, I have at heart to say a few words to those who suffer. I am sure, though my audience is small, my words will fall upon soil well prepared to receive them. We all suffer. Those who suffer the most are not always those who appear to suffer the most. There are sorrows known to God and unknown to men; but however that may be, all who feel—all who reflect—all who believe—well know what suffering is.

There is something in pain very contrary to our nature, and to which it is most difficult to get accustomed, for it seems to us that we ought always to be happy. This sentiment is quite legitimate, and honours the goodness of our Creator. It is perfectly true that we ought to be perfectly free from sorrow and always full of joy; but sin has spoiled this order, and now what was contrary to our nature is become natural; and it enters into the plan of God, into our constant habits, and into our eternal interests, that we should suffer in divers manners. You know how Job collects and classes the principal sorrows of life: the loss of property, the loss of those dear to us, and the loss of health, which he has reserved for the last. This is rather the order of Satan, who understands well the art of temptation. If at this moment the hearts of us all here present were opened, what sorrows should we not have to recount to God!

Well, my dear friends, I should have nothing to say to console you, if I did not take it from the Word of God. There is no consolation in nature; it explains nothing, it comprehends nothing, it hopes nothing, it expects nothing, and even its hope and expectation are empty. But I have much to say to you in contemplating the cross of Jesus Christ, around which we are assembled to celebrate the memory of His sacrifice. We are purified from our sins by His blood—mark well my words—purified from our sins by His blood,—redeemed by His bitter sacrifice, our sins being atoned for by His cross, and that in the simplest sense of the word “atoned,” a sense the most popular and at the same time the most profound; for Jesus Christ, the victim of propitiation, has reconciled us to God by His death; this is the groundwork of the gospel, and the heart of it, and without this the gospel is valueless and impotent. But under the shadow of the cross the aspect of suffering changes altogether, and changes in proportion to our faith. Jesus Christ has appeared in the world, and how did He appear? as a joyful man? no, as a man of sorrows. That is a prodigy, a thing extraordinary and contrary to order—the Son of God appearing upon earth, and appearing not only in suffering, but suffering such as it is impossible for man to conceive. The cross of Jesus Christ is the centre of all suffering; it absorbs all suffering; there is not one form of suffering which does not naturally flow from it; there is not one which the cross of Jesus Christ does not explain. My dear friends, when we recollect that Jesus Christ suffered for us; when we consider that all we suffer is a feature of resemblance with our Saviour, and that from the extent of His sufferings the more we suffer the more we resemble Him,—is it not true that this modifies our afflictions? The thought that Jesus Christ suffered affliction before we did; that it could not be spared

Him,—is it not at the same time enlivening and sweet? And who can be so cast down that he cannot be comforted by the thought—This is like my Saviour; it is a feature of resemblance to Him? Now I know that I belong to Him—that He calls me, and that I begin to enter into the views of God and to understand His ways. I unite my cross to His cross, and my sufferings to His sufferings. It is for this reason that St. Paul says, “Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brethren. Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” He would have us “conformed to the image of his Son,” and the context shows that it is especially in a conformity of sufferings. One idea which is powerful to support us under afflictions is, that suffering formed an essential part of the life of Jesus Christ, and necessarily implies therefore a resemblance to Him.

And here is another idea. Why did Jesus Christ suffer? To atone for sin: and so suffering appears the natural consequence of sin. We cannot endure the sorrows Jesus Christ endured; but we shall be happy, in a feeling of justice and chastisement, to bear our part. “Why should a living man complain of the punishment of his sins?” This passage of St Peter, “Arm yourselves likewise with the same mind; for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin,” shows us that to be enabled to renounce sin we must suffer. Sin and suffering must be confronted in us, and suffering must be employed to destroy sin, not to expiate it, that is done by the sufferings of Jesus Christ only—but that we may learn that sin and suffering are inseparable, as happiness and holiness are inseparable, from the deliverance from sin. Thus the conviction that sorrow is the fruit of sin is calculated to support us, because it makes us consider suffering as a plain and natural path, which ought not and could not be avoided.

And, in short, why did Jesus Christ suffer to atone for sin? To save us, and to make us partakers of eternal glory by His love. This is the sentiment that predominates in the Saviour's sufferings; and our sorrow must not be the sorrow of selfishness, which would draw our attention to ourselves only, but of love, which turns it first towards God to glorify Him, and then towards our fellow-creatures to do them good. There is a fund of love and of the power of love in Christian sorrow, derived from the example which a Christian under affliction can give of the patience with which God enables him to bear it. What a sweet and heavenly thought, that we can be useful to our fellow-creatures, and especially to our brethren, by our sufferings! And what can make our sufferings more like those of Jesus Christ? This is the idea that St. Paul expresses when he says in a passage that I like to quote: “I fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the Church.” I do not enter into the explanation of this verse, which offers some difficulties. St. Paul was far from thinking of suffering as an atonement for sin, but he unites his sufferings to those of his Saviour, and because He has suffered to save us, Paul also suffers for the example of his fellow-men, as he writes to Timothy: “In doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee.”

This is what supports the Christian in tribulation: Jesus Christ suffered; the more I suffer, the more I resemble Him. Suffering is a privilege. Jesus Christ suffered for sin. Sorrow is a necessary and a salutary consequence of sin. Jesus Christ suffered to save, and I ought to suffer to do good to men, and to lead souls captive to the obedience of the cross. Let all those who suffer endeavour

to shake off self, to throw aside a selfish sorrow without faith, without love, and consequently without consolation, and to enter fully into the love of Christ, that their sorrow also may be like a cross planted in the earth, under the shadow of which all those that surround them may take shelter, not to receive eternal life, but to learn the way that leads to it, to the glory of God. To Him be glory for ever and ever! Let us rejoice in Him, and be well assured that by the power of faith and love there is no sorrow that ought not to be peacefully and joyfully supported, and made to subserve to the glory of God, to the good of mankind, and to our own eternal consolation; so that in heaven we shall consider it a great privilege to have suffered much under the cross of Jesus! Amen.