III.

BEHOLD HE COMETH!

It is such a momentous event, — the coming of the Son of man in the clouds of heaven, — and the contemplation of it so overpowers the imagination, that we can easily understand why, in this age so averse to the supernatural, attempts to explain away its literalness should multiply on every hand. But, as though anticipating these evasions and refinings of latter-day philosophy, the Holy Ghost has guarded this great hope of the Church by the utmost accuracy of definition (Acts i. 11). “This same Jesus who is taken up from you” fixes the corporeal identity of the coming Lord with Him whom we have known of the wounded hands and pierced feet; and “shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into Heaven” determines His literal, visible, and bodily return to earth. So, also, with the Thessalonian prediction (I Thess. iv. 16). In the words, “The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout,” there is a kind of underscoring of Holy Writ, that we may be particularly reminded that it is no spiritual apparition of Christ for which we look, but “His own august personal presence.”

And yet His parousia, of which the Scripture so constantly speaks, is said to signify His presence; and therefore elaborate volumes have been written to prove that “the coming — parousia — of the Son of man” means His abiding invisible dwelling in the Church through the Holy Spirit. “Presence” the word undoubtedly means, but not omnipresence. The everywhereness of Christ in the person of the Comforter is the peculiar blessing of this dispensation. In this sense He can say to every member of His mystical body, the Church, in every place on earth and at every moment of time: “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.” It was in order to give place for this world-wide, or rather Church-wide, indwelling that it was expedient for our Lord to go away; that so the Paraclete might come to abide with His people perpetually. But this everywhere-presence of Christ by the Holy Ghost is never once spoken of in Scripture as His parousia. This term applies only to His bodily and visible presence, a being with us, which can only be effected by a corporeal return to us. Therefore is His advent comprehensively called His parousia, or coming; it is that “for which we look,” and which “every eye shall see,” and not that which has already come to pass spiritually, and which, therefore, no eye can see.
The second coming of Christ is the axis of a true eschatology; that in which all its doctrines and all its hopes stand together. Rightly are some insisting on what they name a Christo-centric theology; only let them consistently apply their principle to the doctrine of last things, making all our ultimate hopes and attainments to concentrate in the coming Christ. Then shall we cease to hear in orthodox dogmatics that “sanctification ends at death,” when the New Testament everywhere binds its consummation to the second advent of Christ; then, also, except in liberal theology, may we no longer listen to the affirmation that resurrection is attained for each one separately in an instant, in the shutting of an eye, at the last breath of the body, when Scripture declares that “we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump” (1 Cor. xv. 51, 52). Any doctrine of the resurrection dissociated from the advent must be false,—false because eccentric, and without relation to the axis of redemption, the parousia. No atonement apart from the cross; no resurrection apart from the coming! The morning star of the Church is the glorious appearing; but this star, at least, has satellites,—the resurrection, the rapture, the glory,—and not one of these will be visible “until the day dawn, and the day star arise.”

What deep questions suggest themselves as soon as we begin to meditate on this theme! How can it be, if His coming is personal and bodily, that “every eye shall see Him”? Will His parousia be prolonged, or, as some hold, will it elapse in a moment, “as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west,” leaving the great world to wonder what has become of the saints? In other words, will He be visible to His Church alone at His parousia, manifesting Himself unto them, but not to the world until a later epiphany, when He shall appear in glory with His saints? Already there has been too much of dogmatizing on these points; therefore we prefer to leave them for the day to reveal.

The attitude of the Church towards this sublime event is the all-important consideration. That should be one of joyful hope, and not of dread expectation. We cannot think that true and watchful believers will share in that advent wail which is so graphically pictured in the Revelation (Rev. i. 7): “All the tribes of the land shall mourn over Him,” indeed, they who pierced Him reading their condemnation in His wounds and smiting on their breasts; but they who own those wounds as the credentials of their peace with God will lift up their heads and rejoice, saying: “Lo, this is our God; we have waited
for Him and He will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation." (Is. xxv. 9). Eagerly do we summon parable and poetry to picture the exultant scene as we gather it from Scripture. One who stands among us, as the venerable Simon of our generation, "just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel," has, in a recent utterance, made the advent scene so real by the use of a historical incident, that we are constrained herewith to reproduce the picture entire:

"When those that upheld the banner of truth had almost lost heart, and Protestantism seemed failing, John Knox accepted the invitation from the true-hearted ones, and left Geneva for Scotland. When he landed, quick as lightning the news spread abroad. The cry arose everywhere, 'John Knox has come!' Edinburgh came rushing into the streets; the old and the young, the lordly and the low, were seen mingling together in delighted expectation. All business, all common pursuits, were forsaken. The priests and friars abandoned their altars and their masses and looked out alarmed, or were seen standing by themselves, shunned like lepers. Studious men were roused from their books; mothers set down their infants and ran to inquire what had come to pass. Travelers suddenly mounted and sped into the country with the tidings, 'John Knox has come.' At every cottage door the inmates stood and clustered, wondering, as horseman after horseman cried, 'Knox has come.' Barks departing from the harbor bore up to each other at sea to tell the news. Shepherds heard the tidings as they watched their flocks upon the hills. The warders in the castle challenged the sound of quick feet approaching, and the challenge was answered, 'John Knox has come!' The whole land was moved; the whole country was stirred with a new inspiration, and the hearts of enemies withered." Oh, if that was the effect of the sudden presence of a man like ourselves,—a man whom we will rejoice to meet in the kingdom, but only a man,—what will the land feel, what will earth feel, when the news comes, "The Son of man! The Son of man! His sign has been seen in the heaven! O wise virgins, with what joy will you go out to meet Him!"

Some admonish us not to take too literally the words, "And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold the Bridegroom cometh!" since, sudden as the advent surprise will be, it cannot really be in the night for all the world, as one side of the
globe is dark and the other light at the same moment. True; and yet how perfectly our Lord's picture of His coming answers to this fact, since it brings into the same instantaneous photograph a day-scene, and a night-scene, and a twilit-scene: "I tell you in that night there shall be two men in one bed," — the midnight surprise; "the one shall be taken and the other shall be left." "Two women shall be grinding together," — the twilight surprise; "the one shall be taken and the other left." "Then shall two be in the field," — the mid-day surprise; "the one shall be taken and the other left" (Matt. xxiv. 40; Luke xvii. 34-36). It would seem thus as though the lightning-flash of His parsania would encircle the world in an instant. Realistic in the highest degree is the picture: no halt in the hurried march of our humanity for furnishing the armor for the grand review; no pause in life's drama for shifting the scenery before the final act is introduced! Instant transition of the Church from busy toil and tired sleep into the beatific vision and the awakening immortality, and as instant a lapse of the ungodly from the day of grace into the day of doom. The event will evidently be utterly unexpected except for the faithful few who have kept their watch.

Morally, or rather dispensationally, Christ's coming will be in the night. For such, according to Scripture, is the whole period of our Lord's absence. When He was yet with His Church He said: "I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day: the night cometh." It was His presence that made the day, — "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John ix. 5), — and His removal that would bring the night. Hence we find Paul saying, — in the time of the Lord's absence and in view of His return, — "The night is far spent; the day is at hand" (Rom. xiii. 12). Here is an exact inversion of the order from that of Christ, suggesting that it is the absence or the presence of our Lord which determines the question. "They that sleep, sleep in the night" (I Thess. v. 6). The words are true dispensationally as well as literally. So long as "they that sleep in Jesus" are still in their graves, the world's morning will not have come: "And they that are drunken are drunken in the night." So long as the riot of unrestrained sin goes on over all the earth, and the mass of humanity is held in the mad intoxication of the god of this world, the day-dawn will not yet be visible. But what an exquisite parable there is for us — an enacted parable — in that story of Christ's walking on Tiberias! He has "gone up unto the mountain apart to pray;" and the