XIX.

THE VIRGIN'S LAMP:

"Watch therefore; for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh."—Matt. xxv: 13.

"Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps." We have no startling prediction to make, my brethren, of the nearness of the Lord's return. But it is surely always becoming that we should trim the lamp which the Master has put into our hand, with which to watch out the unknown interval of his absence, and to watch in his triumphant advent to the earth. The "beaten oil" of the sanctuary which we are wont to commend so highly, you remember, was "for the light to cause the lamps to burn continually." The sanctuary has disappeared, and the seven-branched golden candlestick is no more. But "Ye are the temple of God," and Christ is in you "the hope of glory"; and, with all our preaching of faith and charity, we must not forget sometimes to trim the lamp of hope, to feed it with the promises and prophecies which the Spirit has appointed to this end.

And, therefore, let us attend, while the text shall open to us these two thoughts:

I. The event of Christ's second personal coming is most distinctly revealed.

We are not called to watch for a merely possible or remotely probable occurrence. Never are we admonished that we know not whether our Lord shall come, though we are admonished that we know not the hour of his coming. On the contrary, the Scriptures are crowded with statements of the certainty, of the literalness, of the visibility, and of the personality of his return to the earth. And lest there should be any mistake, reiteration comes in to enforce assertion, and emphasis to enforce reiteration. "This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." "The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout." It must be evident, from these texts, that inspiration anticipated the denials, refinings, and misconceptions from which this doctrine should suffer, and so provided against them. For a bare repetition of these texts furnishes the best possible answer to all the various theories of a figurative or spiritual advent.

"The destruction of Jerusalem was the coming of Christ," says one. "When Titus descended upon the doomed city, with the shout of his Ro-
scending Lord, and to exult in his glorious appearing, 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.”

End

XX.

THE PEACE OF GOD.

“And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them which were nigh.” — Eph. ii. 17.

THINK not I am come to send peace on earth. I came not to send peace, but a sword,” says Jesus. And how can we reconcile the words with those now before us? Evidently by remembering that he brings peace by the sword; conversion comes through conviction, healing through wounding, the peace of God through the word of God, which is “quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of the soul and spirit.” When Christ crucified is preached, and we see how he was wounded for our transgressions, it must bring contrition if the Spirit applies the word, and we shall be pricked in the heart as they were on the day of Pentecost. But the risen Christ appears preaching peace to those who have been convicted and slain by his word and his cross. And to such let our text speak to-day.
man legions, then was the promise fulfilled."—
"The Lord himself shall descend," repeats the
word of God. "The occurrence of death is
Christ's coming to receive his people," says
another.—"This same Jesus shall so come," reiterates the Holy Scripture. "The diffusion of the
gospel, and the gradual transformation which it
effects in human civilization, is the coming of the
Redeemer," says another.—"The Lord himself
shall descend," still resounds the word. All this
is plain, and yet, alas! that the Master has need
again to convince his servants of his continued
personality; that they have so diffused him into
history, so confounded him with death, so dissipated him into a vague and shadowy presence that
we can almost hear him saying to them, as of old
he did to his disciples when they mistook him for
an apparition: "Behold my hands and my feet,
that it is I myself." Jesus has not lost his identity,
or so merged it with history, or with providence,
or with death, that we must look in these things
for his coming. "I will come again," he says.
"Behold I come quickly." And this "I," which
is the sacred seal of personality, "that by which
one knows and is to be known throughout eternity,"
he has never lent or transferred to another,—
except only to the Holy Spirit, who is one and
equal with himself. He did come, invisibly and

spiritually, in the advent of the Comforter. But
his visible, bodily return still remained as an un-
fulfilled promise. And on the last page of Reve-
lution we hear him speaking: "I, Jesus, have sent
mine angel to testify unto you these things in the
churches. . . . Surely I come quickly. Amen."

Still farther is the real and personal return of
Christ enforced by the explicit descriptions of the
event given in the Scriptures. It is not simply
the same Jesus,—no substitute, no commissioned
messenger, no typical event,—but he "shall so
come in like manner" as he went. He went up
visibly, from eager eyes that recognized him as
the veritable Lord; from outstretched hands that
had handled him as the Word of life, and as he
was parted from them "a cloud received him out
of their sight." And so shall he return, visibly,
personally, gloriously. "Behold he cometh with
clouds, and every eye shall see him, and they also
that pierced him."

All this, if heeded and pondered, is calculated
to keep us from the error so especially prevalent
in these times,—the error of spiritualizing the
substance and reality out of Christ's promises.
Reason always allegorizes the grand realities of
Scripture when it touches them; but the heart is
a rigid literalist. Its affections are never content
with shadows, or semblances, or substitutes. If
the Church had always kept her bridal love for her absent Lord, she would never have admitted even the suggestion of an impersonal advent. It must be suspected that only a fondness for this present world, and an indifference to the glorious hope of the Church, could ever have begotten such a thought. What we dread, or dislike to believe, we easily dissipate into vagueness and unreality. The unbelieving, to whom Christ’s coming means only judgment and terror, would naturally wish to forget it, and explain away its reality. But what of her of whom the apostle wrote, “I have espoused you unto one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ”? Will the bride with the letter from her betrothed husband in her hand, saying, “Surely I come quickly,” admit the suggestion that he means simply that he will send some mysterious stranger to bring her to himself, or forward some kindly provisions for rendering her comfortable and contented with his absence, so that she shall be less inclined to “love his appearing,” and to look for it?

“Unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.” He shall come to save from the world those whom he is now saving in the world; to complete their redemption, to present them “faulless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,” and to usher in the marriage of the Lamb. He shall come to right all wrong, to consummate all good; to remove the curse from our groaning earth; to wipe away all tears from off all faces; to silence pain, and to swallow up death in victory. No promise is more constantly repeated, as none is more sacred than this. If Christians shall cease to wait for their returning Lord, creation groaning and travailing together in pain will not. If those whom he has redeemed with his precious blood do not rejoice with singing at every sign of his approach then “let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof. Let the field be joyful, and all that is therein: then let all the trees of the wood rejoice before the Lord: for he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth.”

Personal coming?—“If I know not that God is a person, I know not that I am a person,” said a great theologian. We may say likewise: If I am not sure of Christ’s personal return, I am not sure of my personal vision of his face. If I am not certain that he shall “appear in glory,” I am not certain that I shall “appear with him in glory.” His identity at the advent with the man of Nazareth, the man of Calvary, the man of Olivet, is the pledge of my own identity at that day. All reality, recognition, reunion, remembrance, and
fellowship in the resurrection state seem to me to be involved in the question whether he who shall come is the same Jesus, or only some shadowy substitute, or some veiled and providential manifestation of his presence. "Blessed," therefore, "be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The personality that survived the grave has survived all the intervening centuries unchanged and unchangeable. And when his appearing shall be ushered in, it will be that of the man Christ Jesus, the same holy face, the same pierced hands, the same gracious voice, as at the first. This, then, is the doctrine to which the Scriptures commit your faith. You may believe in Christ coming in temporal judgment, coming in the crises of history, coming in the triumphs of Christianity, coming in the article of death; but do you believe and confess "Jesus Christ coming in the flesh," 1 in that veritable body of flesh and bones which he carried up into heaven? This was the confession of apostles and martyrs and reformers; and this is the creed that needs to be emphasized anew in

1 John 1: 7. So Lange and Alford translate ἐσχάτον, — the same word as in Rev. 1: 8, "which is, which was, and which is to come, the Almighty."
secret in order to train his Church in watchfulness and hope and vigilant expectation. For have you never reflected that the union of a certainty and an uncertainty constitutes the very strongest motive to activity? The sight of the firm, rocky shore gives hope and courage to the drifting mariner; but the unknown shoals and the unsounded depths lying between make him exceedingly careful in guiding his course, lest he be wrecked. What is known inspires confidence; what is unknown begets circumspection. If the date of Christ’s return were as certain as the fact of it, the expectant watchfulness and carefulness, which he enjoined upon his disciples in view of the event, could hardly have been maintained. Had he told them, for example, that he would certainly come back, and that his coming would be exactly two thousand years from his ascension, how impossible it would have been for his Church to keep her lamp trimmed and burning, in perpetual anticipation of his return, and her loins girded about in diligent occupying till he should come! Wisely did he join with the declared certainty of his advent, the explicit uncertainty as to its time, that so the returning Bridegroom “might live in our faith and hope, remote yet near, pledged to no moment, possible at any; worshipped not with the consternation of a near, or the indifference of a distant certainty, but with the anxious vigilance that awaits a contingency ever at hand.”

And this solemn duty of watchfulness is still further enforced by startling declarations of immeditateness joined with those of chronological uncertainty. With the “Ye know neither the day nor the hour” is blended the “Behold, I come quickly;” with the “In such an hour as ye think not” is mingled the “Behold, the Judge standeth before the door.” There are no contradictions; no retractions in later Scriptures of what has been declared in earlier; no emendations or modifications. But, taken altogether, the advent texts constitute a most marvellous blending of checks and incentives,—checks upon the presumption that would fix the time of the Lord’s return, with incentives to alert and eager looking for the event of that return. And these admonitions must be apprehended in their mutual relations and received with an unquestioning faith, and neither a cold unbelief nor a calculating exegesis must be allowed to disorder the delicate mechanism of motives which they constitute. For here emerges a theoretical difficulty, which we must note in passing. “If the apostles lived in the constant expectation of the Lord’s return, they entertained a mistaken hope,” says the skeptic, “and there-

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1 Archer Butler.
before they were not inspired." The Christian interpreter, taking alarm at this objection, has sometimes been ready to defend the apostles by attempting to show that they did not really cherish such expectation. For us, we are bold to say that they maintained the expectation, and were not mistaken, and were inspired. They did but simply cherish the watchful anticipation which the Master had enjoined upon them, and teach it to their disciples. They give proof of their inspiration by prolonging and reiterating the doctrine they had received from him, of the certainty, the unknown date, and the ever-impending nearness of this great event. Paul but echoes the words of Jesus when he writes to Titus of "looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;" and the Thessalonian Christians showed their true spiritual kinship with Christ's immediate disciples, in that Paul could write to them commendingly that they had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven."

And if we study the New Testament as a whole, we find that the impression which it makes upon the mind is consistent and unvarying respecting this point. It seems to have been ordained and shaped so as to keep the Church in a state of constant and kindled expectancy. The same peculiarity which marks Old Testament prophecy characterizes that of the New Testament,—the absence of perspective in its pictures of future events. Near and distant horizons are so blended in the outlining of the Spirit that they seem to be equally close to us, and are only separated by the fulfilments of history. We hear Jesus, in his great discourse upon the end, thus constantly bringing together the immediate and the remote. He blends predictions of the end of the Jewish age and the end of the Christian age without distinguishing them; descriptions of the destruction of Jerusalem are mingled mysteriously with those of the judgment, of which it is a type. He says that "this generation shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled;" and in saying so he employs a word that not only can be applied to those then living, but he expanded to the scattered but indestructible Jewish race, which is to remain till his return. He declares that the gospel must first be preached among all nations before the end can come. And within a narrower interpretation so it was preached in the apostles' own time.¹ And now we behold the prophecy sweeping out into its larger and world-wide fulfilment. Thus it is all through the discourse,—the figurative pointing onward to the literal, the type

¹ Col. 1: 23.
to the reality, the briefer period to the longer. “A little while and ye shall not see me, and again a little while and ye shall see me,” says the Lord; and the perplexed question of his disciples, “What is this that he saith, a little while?” has never since ceased to be asked and repeated. The words had their fulfilment in the resurrection of Christ, after his three days’ absence in the grave. Glorious prophecy and epitome was this of that other coming back, after the unknown days of the Church’s bereavement and widowhood while the Bridegroom should be absent. But the epitome is not the whole. For after Christ is risen, and gone into heaven, the Spirit takes up the words once more, and in the Epistle to the Hebrews repeats them to us: “For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.” Thus each promise leads forward to another; mountain peak of fulfilling prophecy looks onward to mountain peak; the vision is perpetually lifted up, the steps are constantly beckoned on. We know not how soon the “little while” shall be completed, but at every turn in the fulfilling prophecy we can say, “Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.” If the Church of the whole apostolic age continued watching; if for three hundred years onward this watching was prolonged, and believers lived under the perpetual inspiration of this great hope,—were they disappointed? Surely not. Those who implicitly believe and faithfully obey the Lord cannot be disappointed; but the Lord, we fear, is sadly and painfully disappointed with us if we have put out our lamps, and taken up the unfaithful servant’s creed, “My Lord delayeth his coming.”

The Master has set us upon the look-out; and all his commands and promises, as well as all fulfilling prophecy, conspire to keep us there. We remember sailing over a beautiful lake in Switzerland, journeying to the village that lay at its opposite end. Again and again, as the encircling hills shut in about us, the further shore seemed certainly close at hand, and our destination nearly reached. But, rounding a projecting point, the aspect would change, the mountains would part once more, and another broad expanse of water would lie stretched out before us. Thus, by a singular peculiarity of the landscape, the journey’s end seemed always imminent, and yet constantly receding. It was striking to observe how this feature of the journey affected the voyagers. Not a passenger was found at the ship’s stern gazing backward. Every one was on the look-out. All eyes were bent forward in eager expectation, till at last the destined harbor was reached. Now all the commands and promises
of Christ put us on the outlook; every great juncture of fulfilling history sets us on the watch to discern whether the day-dawn is not approaching, whether the eternal hills are not closing in to bring the end of the age. The impulse which is inspired to watch, to expect, to be ready to disembark, however vain it may seem to men, has the authority of God's word, and the admonitions of all the history of the Church, for its support. And, more than this, while none can know the day or the hour of the advent, we carry with us a chart of the Church's history to tell us approximately where in our stormy and perilous voyage we are. The Apocalypse is like the sealed orders given to an admiral, which he is not to open till on the sea. Its weird, mysterious pages contain the whole map and delineation of the Church's career from the ascension to the return of the Lord; but it was left to time to break the seals of this book and to discover its meaning. This it has been doing; and as, corresponding to this chart, headland after headland of prophetic history has been descried, these have been recognized by the students who have been searching diligently what and what manner of time the Spirit did signify in penning this prophecy; and, though they have read no announcement of day or hour upon them, they have found them displaying the same cautionary

signal with which the Church started. "Behold, I come as a thief; blessed is he that watcheth and keepeth his garments." It is a warning startling enough to indicate, that, though we know not how near the end of the age we may be, yet we are nearing it.

"Let your loins be girded about and your lights burning," therefore. There is enough of certainty in this subject to feed the lamp of our faith; and enough of uncertainty to make us very careful and solicitous, lest when the Bridegroom comes we be found among the foolish virgins, saying, "Our lamps are gone out."

The chief point is, that this hope have a living and abiding place in our affections and our thoughts. "Thought," says a Christian father, "is the sleepless lamp of the soul." It is a lamp, indeed, that burns with varying brightness,—flaming up in moments of intense study and utterance, and dying down in sleep till there is only the pale glimmer that remains in dreams. But it is a lamp that is never really quenched; for, however profound the slumber, it only requires a word to wake us and to bring all our mental powers into instant activity. Thus must it be with the holy lamp of watchfulness,—always trimmed and burning, but not of necessity shining always in full strength.
That is to say, we need not be every moment thinking of Christ's return, talking of it and preaching it. There should be ever in our hearts the calm certainty and the sober hope that keep us ready for this event at any moment. But this hope should rather minister to us than be ministered to by us. Instead of perpetually dwelling on it and reiterating it, we should be lighted by it in our busy toil of gathering the guests for the marriage-feast, and doing the work which our absent Lord has committed to us. Ready always to give to every man that asketh a reason for the hope that is in us, we should yet show the value of our lamp by the holy service into which it guides our feet, and the diligent piety which it makes visible in our lives.

Little can men believe that such an expectation as this can have any very practical effect upon the life. The current opinion is that an accomplished event must exert more influence over us than an unaccomplished; that faith must affect us more powerfully than hope, experience than expectation. But God's thoughts are not always our thoughts. He has made this hope of Christ's return the supreme incentive to service and consecration. Are we exhorted to patience? This is the motive. "Be ye also patient; establish your heart; for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh." Would we be inspired to diligence, we hear the Master saying to us, "Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me to give to every man according as his work shall be." Would we discover the secret of purity, we find it written that "Every one that hath this hope in him purifieth himself even as he is pure." Are we encouraged to endure trial? This is the motive, that we "may be found unto praise and glory and honor at the appearing of Jesus Christ." Are we exhorted to abide in constant communion with Christ? It is "that when he shall appear we may have confidence and not be ashamed before him at his coming."

And thus it is written in scores of texts. All our service and worship and comfort are keyed to this divine hope. The command is, "Occupy till I come;" to observe the Lord's Supper "till he come;" "Hold fast till I come;" and "judge nothing until the Lord come."

Up, therefore, Christian! Trim your lamp; let its beams shine forth to meet and mingle with the first advancing rays of the bright and morning star. And let its light meantime show you the way to every path of self-denial, to every work of faithful service and testimony, and to every avenue of holiness and purity of life. Thus, with girded loins, with busy hands, with uplifted eyes and with radiant faces, may you be ready to meet your de-