

The Life of Christ

The Beginning of the Kingdom¹

By Lyman Abbott

Jesus compares his kingdom to a grain of mustard-seed, which is itself the least of seeds, but when it is grown becomes the greatest of herbs. In the theme suggested for to-day we see this least of seeds before it is planted and has begun to grow. This is the spring which has since become the river of God, this the germinant beginning of that Christianity which has since overspread two continents and is gradually permeating a third with its transforming power.

The reader of "Marcella" will recall that remarkable chapter in her experience in which she is brought to the consciousness that humanity cannot save itself:

"Nobody could live in hospital, nobody could go among the poor, nobody could share the thoughts and hopes of people, like Edward Hallin and his sister, without understanding that it is still here in the world—this grace 'that sustaineth'—however variously interpreted; still living and working as it worked of old among the little Galilean towns, in Jerusalem, in Corinth. To Edward Hallin it did not mean the same, perhaps, as it meant to the hard-worked clergymen she knew, or to Mrs. Jervis. But to all it meant the motive power of life—something subduing, transforming, delivering—something that to-night she envied with a passion and a yearning that amazed herself."

It is the revelation of this grace, as "something subduing, transforming, delivering," which constitutes the secret of Christianity. John the Baptist was not a prophet of this grace. He was a prophet of the Law. When a delegation from the Sanhedrim came to inquire if he was the Messiah whom Hebrew prophets had foretold, and who would subdue, transform, deliver, he answered, No! He was not even a prophet of that Messiah. He was only a Voice crying in the wilderness, and bidding men prepare for him. When the people, their consciences touched by John the Baptist's fearless denunciation of their sins, asked for a remedy, he could suggest none except that they should be generous and just and humane. He had a passion of righteousness, but no message of help or hope to a people who, vaguely desiring or eagerly craving it, yet could not achieve it.

To him came his cousin to be baptized. John had known Jesus before; but it had never occurred to him that this Jesus was the Messiah. "A prophet is not without honor save in his own country." In the hour of baptism the truth was flashed upon him. Whether the Holy Spirit took on the form of a dove and descended, or a dove descended and was accepted by John as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit descended as a dove descends, the figure being in the Evangelist's record, not in any outward and visible sign, and whether the voice from heaven spake audibly or only to the soul of John the Baptist, it is not very material to discuss; enough to say that the spiritual nature and power of the Helper and Saviour of men were now for the first time perceived by the Hebrew prophet, and no sooner perceived than declared. He knew how eagerly the Jewish people were looking for this revealer of grace, this bringer of power. He knew how all eyes and hearts would turn to him. There is a pathos in his declarations, "His shoe-latchet I am not worthy to unloose," and "He must increase, but I must decrease." This is a realization never easy to be borne, perhaps least easy to be borne by one who is conscious of his own divine mission. But John seems not to have hesitated for a day, but straightway to have sent his own followers to the new Master whose glory was so soon to dim his own.

Two circumstances must have made this course of John the more difficult. The spirit and method of Jesus differed radically from his own. John possessed the Hebrew spirit. He was a Puritan before the days of Puritanism. His method of meeting temptation was to flee from it. He

shunned the haunts of men; lived in the wilderness; protested against social corruption by withdrawing altogether from society. But this was not Christ's method. He went into society; joined not only in its religious ceremonials but in its social life. He looked without protest on the children dancing in the market-place; ate not only with the scrupulous and orderly, but with the publicans and sinners, and began his ministry, when he left the preacher from the wilderness, by attending a wedding-feast, whose festivities far transcended those usual in our time, and by adding to them a generous and unexpected contribution to the wine when the stock was exhausted. It would have been strange if this did not puzzle John, for it has puzzled some modern Christians who might be supposed to have understood better than did John the principles and spirit of Jesus, but who have, nevertheless, either frankly deprecated this act of their Master, or less frankly attempted to explain it away.¹

Partly, perhaps, because of this diversity in method and spirit, John's faith in Jesus seems to have been very far from a clear and positive conviction. It is true that he pointed his own disciples to Jesus as "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." But he never followed Jesus himself. He continued a separate ministry, baptizing not as a symbol of allegiance to Jesus as the Messiah, but only as a pledge of repentance from sin. And when later he was imprisoned by Herod in the Castle of Machærus, his perplexity at the course of Jesus so grew that he sent two of his disciples to inquire whether his cousin were really the Messiah. He seemed to say, "I know you cannot be a false pretender; I know you too well for that. But have I been mistaken in thinking you the Messiah?" So evident, indeed, is this later perplexity of John that Strauss, who seems to think that Bible characters have an immunity from the contradictions and perplexities which beset ordinary mortals, supposes that John's testimony to Jesus must have been invented at a later date and attributed to John for controversial purposes.

If from John the Baptist we turn to his disciples, their faith seems to have been neither clearer nor stronger than his. They go to see Jesus; they are impressed by his personality; but they do not appear to entertain at all the idea that he is the Messiah; nor do they attach themselves to him and become his followers until a considerably later period. They remain with him a little while—how long we cannot tell—and then return to their Galilean home and their fishing, where some months later Jesus finds them and calls them to follow him.

John believes Jesus to be the Messiah; but does not follow him. John's disciples go to confer with him, and are impressed by his personality; but they do not follow him. And Jesus himself, turning his back on the ministry of John at the river Jordan, and stopping his own ministry, which is already beginning to be accompanied by more converts than that of his predecessor, goes off to Galilee to enjoy himself and add to the enjoyment of others at a wedding-feast, while his first *pseudo* followers leave both John and Jesus and return to their fishing.

This is a strange beginning for a religious life which is to overspread and conquer the world. But Jesus is not in haste. He will leave Peter and Andrew and James and John time to think over what they have seen and heard. The kingdom of God is a growth; and growth is a gradual process from small beginnings.



A thousand miles of mighty wood,
Where thunder-storms stride fire-shod;
A thousand plants at every rod,
A stately tree at every rood;
Ten thousand leaves to every tree,
And each a miracle to me,—
Yet there be men who doubt of God!

—Joaquin Miller.

¹ Bible Study Union Lesson No. 6. International Lessons Nos. 8 and 9. John i., 19-51—ii., 1-11.

¹ By the invention of the two-wine theory, which has no standing with modern scholars, and is refuted, if additional refutation were necessary, by the substantially unanimous testimony of all who are familiar with the life and customs of the East.

Books and Authors

Recent Verse—II.

Miss Louise Imogen Guiney touches strings of very diverse tones in "A Roadside Harp."¹ One detects faint melodies here and there that bespeak a greater compass of learning and observation than one is prepared for after an average experience with contemporaneous writers of verse. She sounds true in the classic atmosphere; she responds sensitively to the inspiration of a Madonna by Domenico Ghirlandajo; she can hear the lilt of brotherly love in dear old Izaak Walton; the music of seventeenth-century lyrics is not lost on her; she exults in a sterner theme in the battle-virtues of Sherman; she has seen how the sunlit masts of Salem ships look from the mainland, and hits them off with a perfect phrase; and the smaller, infinite world of squirrels and flowers and moths and their like are heard and noted by her. To see so many and such different things and rhyme them without offense is no small achievement. The few ballads with which "A Roadside Harp" begins are quite dramatic. Their rhythm and ring are apt to remain with the reader throughout the succeeding lyrics, to a degree which perhaps suggests monotony; and this faint marring impression is strengthened by the marginal titles, in small italics, which leave the different poems so near each other and so unseparated by typographical buoys as frequently to require an effort to distinguish between beginnings and endings. As to binding, it is a relief to find that the publishers have foregone the excessively "chaste" and light-tinted covers—now so generally adopted as the garb of lyric collections, and which one can scarcely hope to keep immaculate—without sacrificing any pretty quality of suggestion.

Mr. Richard Watson Gilder's fifth volume of poems begins with "The Great Remembrance,"² the longest and most elaborate one of this collection, which is named from it. These initial verses were read before the last Reunion of the Grand Army of the Potomac, and have for their theme the great war-struggle of a generation ago, whose tragedies, thunderous pictures, unutterable horrors, and deathless heroisms offer fine inspiration to a singer who has in a more or less definable way assumed the attitude of laureate to our Republic. A noticeable number of the other poems are what might be called "topical," dealing as they do with concrete personalities and æsthetic events; thus, Paderewski's magic is the subject of some graceful lines headed "How Paderewski Plays;" while St. Gaudens, the sculptor, Eleanore Duse, the actress, Rubinstein, and the vanished "White City" at Chicago are not without their tributes. We find among these latest verses of Mr. Gilder's but few nature-pictures, and little of the impressionist realism that is determining the efforts of most writers of his tastes. A satisfactory exception to this rule of absence is in the twelve lines called "On the Bay," in which he hits off very happily the rather unearthly fascination of the evening view from a New York ferry. To the reviewer's mind the most positive beauty in Mr. Gilder's work is its grace, and the small division given up to "A Book of Songs" is the most attractive work in this delicately bound volume.

It is a substantial small volume of a hundred and fifty pages that Margaret Sangster has called "On the Road Home."³ The title is a good one. A very homely spirit of rest and sunshiny peace binds together the many verses in this collection. They do not require an effort in the reading; they rather invite the repose of soul that is afforded by the companionship of good women, and the ever-sweet virtues and affections of fathers and mothers and wives and children. Mrs. Sangster's simple and sincere utterances are very well worth reading, nor is there any pretension on their part which tempts one to judge them by standards of art which might make them seem

pale and over-mild. Our mothers and sisters and sweet-hearts are surely an audience whose tastes are to be considered sometimes even apart from our sophisticated reviewers. "On the Road Home" contains many ingeniously and sweetly expressed thoughts that will be pleasant to the first-named folks. Mrs. Sangster seizes on a congenial theme suggested here and there in the household circle—a little boy whose card castles she unwittingly demolished, and who makes a mighty effort to hold back his instinctive wrath—and with a few gentle, skillful strokes shows the largeness of these little fireside episodes. Many of the verses have a strong devotional tone, and one chapter of them is headed "Looking Upward." The pretty book is made especially attractive by several delicately engraved pictures.

The versatile and gifted Dr. S. Weir Mitchell—novelist, poet, critic, and famous physician—puts Pegasus through a variety of paces in the two books of verse "The Mother and Other Poems" and "Francis Drake."⁴ The latter is a tragedy in blank verse, while in the first-named volume the themes range from the title poem, in which the mystery of Life and of Time is unfolded parable-wise, to an account of "The Wreck of the Emmeline," in New England sailor dialect. In "Francis Drake" the lines tell the story of the conspiracy against the Elizabethan admiral on his voyage to Patagonian waters; the villain of the play, Doughty, is not villainous enough to be very interesting. To be sure, he is Drake's old friend, and in the face of the fact sells himself to Lord Burleigh to upset the expedition, which, so far, is good enough; but he displays various uncomfortable redeeming qualities when detected and apprehended by the iron-handed admiral, and is beheaded in the most respectable style on the shores of the New World. It is scarcely necessary to say, the author being known, that some of the lines are finely turned; but, as a whole, the story, which suffers from being cast in such an ambitious mold, does not show the dramatic fire and powerful action of, for instance, Mrs. Rives-Chanler's "Athelwold." Of the varied poems in "The Mother," we like much best the sonnets, and especially the beautiful one to "Venice," and the "Lincoln."

A very pleasing volume appears with the modest title "Such as They Are,"⁵ containing the joint productions in verse of Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mary Thatcher Higginson. The initials on the title-page show the first half to be Colonel Higginson's work, while the remainder are from his wife's pen. Of the former, the "Ode to a Butterfly" became the reviewer's favorite in short order. It is delightfully true in fancy and in phrase, and is quite as delicate as a butterfly ode should be. In far different measure, the tragic Arabian ballad "Rabiah's Defense" is effectively fierce and heroic and strong. Mrs. Higginson's "The Anchored Dories" and "The Test" are other verses that one especially cares for in the collection. The book is a handsome one, particularly as to its delicate "half-tone" illustrations, of which there are quite a number.

"El Nuevo Mundo"⁶ is, being interpreted, "The New World," and if it is no small subject for an epic poem, Mr. Louis James Block's conception of the form in which that subject should be treated is larger still. The four chapters of rhymed lines, divided into sixteen-verse cantos, are aimed to explain the original divine purpose in the development of human life from the Old World to the New, the singling out of the man whose faith should create the Western Hemisphere, the deed, and state of completion of the Creator's effort to bring forth this "mighty miracle of liberty." Some of Mr. Block's metaphors are striking, many of his thoughts are large and noble, and perhaps it is too much to expect the achievement of unwavering intelligibility and of symmetry in the task which has not daunted him.

As the name, "Lotus Life,"⁷ and the ornamentations of the cover suggest, Miss Lucy Cleveland's book of verses deals largely with subjects which have been called to mind by her sojourn in Nile-land—the first division being given

¹ Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston, Mass.

² The Century Company, New York.

³ Harper & Brothers, New York.

⁴ Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston.

⁵ Roberts Brothers, Boston.

⁶ Charles H. Kerr & Co., Chicago.

⁷ G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York.