

Jesus in the Midst.

John 20: 19-23.

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It is always deeply affecting to examine the closing chapters of the gospels, to ponder the sufferings, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Nothing tends more to draw out our affection, and bow our hearts in adoration before Him. He loved us and gave Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour, putting away, in that supreme moment, all our sins righteously from before God. John 20 shows Him as risen. Death could not hold Him in its grasp. His work was done, death was annulled, God was glorified — the answer for Him being resurrection on the third day with a view to glory at the Father's right hand.

After giving us the details of His rising, the Spirit presents us in John's Gospel with four striking and instructive pictures; first we have Him strewing Himself again to the then believing Jewish remnant in the person of Mary, leading their hearts away from earthly hopes into relationship with Himself to the Father in the place to which he was going; secondly we see Him manifesting Himself to the assembled disciples, picturing the christian assembly as gathered around Himself; thirdly, He makes Himself known to Thomas, removing all his doubts, in token of what He will yet do for Thomas's nation in a day yet to come; and finally at the sea of Tiberias, in the remarkable draught of fishes, a millennial picture is furnished of the ingathering of the Gentile nations for blessing.

It is the second of these pictures that I desire to draw attention to at this time. "Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut, where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and said unto them — Peace be unto you" (ver. 19). Here we have set forth in a remarkable manner the Christian assembly. But let not the reader misunderstand. However strikingly the assembled disciples, with the Lord in their midst, speak to us of the church, they were not the church of God at that time. The church had no existence as such, until Jesus was glorified and the Holy Ghost descended on the day of Pentecost. And even then the saved had no knowledge of it. Not until the apostle Paul was raised up, as one born out of due time, was the mystery of God unfolded. Therefore though these disciples in John 20 became the church of God, indeed its first members, they were not yet this in the day of which we speak. Still their position and privilege, especially the presence of the Lord in the midst, foreshadowed it in a very expressive way.

The Spirit is careful to tell us that it was the first day of the week when Jesus thus came and stood in the midst. The Lord thus puts His sanction, as it were, upon the assembly of His saints on that day. And what day more suitable? Of old it was the seventh day — the Sabbath — that was set apart for the worship of God. Let some suppose that the difference is but slight, but verbal, between the seventh day and the first. The difference is fundamentally important. The seventh day came in as the end of man's week of work; it was made an integral part of the law of Sinai, with solemn consequences attached to the breach of it. But the first of the week does not speak to us of man's work at all, but of a totally new order of things, brought in by God, founded upon the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. It speaks to us of flesh set aside as worthless, of redemption accomplished, of righteousness completed, of a new creation, where all things are of God. Hence Christians meet together on that day with triumph in their souls, to remember the Lord and to show forth His death, in the breaking of bread until He come.

It is quite the fashion to confound the two days, as if they were substantially the same, but the difference is immense. The one is Judaism and the other is Christianity. Alas! the return to Judaism with its worldly elements and feast days and sabbaths came in very early. One has only to read the Epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians to see how earnestly the apostle resisted the working of this leaven. But as the heavenly calling faded more and more from the minds of men, bearing the Lord's name, and the sense of divine grace too, Judaism made rapid strides, with the result that, to the mass, even in this day, the Christianity of the scriptures sounds strange doctrine in their ears.

Well, the Lord thus came into the midst of His own, on the first day of the week, the very day of His resurrection. If the Acts of the apostles and the Epistles be studied, it will be seen that this became the formal meeting-day of the assembly of God, whatever other opportunities they may have had of meeting together for mutual edification and blessing. In Acts 20: 7 we read, "Upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, etc." This was the custom. They were not together to hear Paul, even though he was to leave them finally on the morrow, but to break bread. This scripture is even more forcible when rightly read: "When we came together." It was thus not a merely local custom at Troas, but the understood habit of the church of God in that day. It was on this day then that the Lord took His place in the midst of His own. What joy to them! Can we wonder that we read, "Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord." Is not His blessed presence heaven to our souls? What would the glory itself be apart from Christ? Suppose it were possible for us to be introduced even there and find no Christ, would it satisfy our hearts? Nay, better a hovel with Christ, than the very glory itself without Him. The renewed heart finds delight in Christ alone; our souls thrive in His blessed presence.

The presence of Jesus in the midst of His saints is as real today, though He is glorified in heaven. We still have His word, "Where two or three are gathered together in (unto) My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18: 20). What a resource in a day of feebleness and failure! He has not changed towards His own. Though we look back, with humbled and bowed hearts, upon some eighteen hundred years of deepest failure, He is as true as ever to those who in simplicity of faith look up to Him. What a comfort! Whatever else we have not, we have Christ. Is He enough? Is it gift, wealth or influence, that we seek, or is it really Christ? I often think that the Lord had in view such a day as this when He spoke of two or three. There were no twos or threes in the first days of the church; all that believed were together. Men speaking perverse things had not arisen, nor had grievous wolves come into the flock to scatter and devour. But how changed is the condition of things now! Yet His word holds good to the very end. "Where two or three are gathered together unto My name, there am I in the midst of them."

What all our souls need, is a deeper realisation of His presence, It would correct many things that we have to groan over before Him. Would saints arrive late on the first day of the week if there was a just sense that the Lord is there? To whom are we gathered? Whom do we go to meet? Dare I keep Him waiting Who deigns to come into the midst of His gathered saints? Further, when together, what holy calm would prevail if His presence were duly realised! Nothing like haste or eagerness, and certainly no display of flesh would grieve us if all hearts realised sufficiently the simple, yet vital, fact that the Lord is there. It would enter into everything, affecting our dress, our words, our whole behaviour. The Lord give us to exercise our hearts before Him.

Observe the place of separation of these disciples. They were shut in; the world — the murderous, Christ-rejecting world — was shut out. True there were special circumstances at that moment, but the principle abides. What has the church to do with the world? Where do we read of all the parish joining with the saints in "public worship?" Indeed, where is such an idea as "public worship" (or what is meant by the term) to be found in the word of God? We are called to bear testimony to the world, we

are to preach the gospel to it, and warn men to flee from the wrath to come; but worship with the world! Far be the thought. In John 13: 1 we read of "His own which were in the world." If we belong to the circle called "His own," of necessity we do not belong to the other "the world." The two are distinct and opposite in nature and character.

The Lord's first words to His disciples were, "Peace be unto you." How precious after the work which He had accomplished! He had just returned from the battle, the enemy was overthrown, the work was done, divine justice was satisfied. Therefore He returns to those for whom He suffered, and announces the grand and blessed result. Not only so, but "when he had so said, he showed unto them his hands and his side." As if to say, "See how peace was made." He made it by the blood of His cross. Nought else would have availed.

When John saw the Lamb in glory, it was "a Lamb as it had been slain." The marks of Calvary will never be effaced from His holy person, though it is not true to say as Wesley, "Five bleeding wounds He bears." Whenever we gaze upon Him there (and shall we ever take our eyes off Him?), our hearts will be reminded of what it cost Him to redeem us to God.

But we have more in John 20. "Then said Jesus to them again, "Peace be unto *you*; as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." Is this needless repetition? Nay, there is no such thing in scripture. The Lord is giving a commission in this verse, and in connection with it, says the second time, "Peace." He would have His own serve Him with the enjoyment of "peace" in their souls. How can one serve Him truly otherwise? What inward holy calm it gives to have the settled assurance that peace has been made and that it is ours; and further to have His peace keeping the heart and mind! The circumstances of service and testimony are often discouraging, and there is at times a tendency to give up; but His word comes in, "Peace be unto you," and the heart rests and is sustained.

The commission is blessed, yet solemn. As really as the Father sent the Son, the Son has sent His own unto the world. What a position for us! Taken out of the world, given to the Son, then sent into it to act for Him. The Son was here to make God known, and to bear witness to the truth; the same place is ours in measure. In reality it is a privilege to be allowed to spend a few years here before being taken to heaven. When first He called us to the knowledge of Himself, His purpose was to place us in the Father's house; and He could have done it there and then had it suited Him. But He has chosen to leave us here for a season, but it is to act for Him. We cannot bear testimony in heaven. All such service must be rendered here, and the more difficult and trying it is — the more suffering and reproach it brings — the more will it draw forth His approval and reward in the day that is at hand.

"And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost." This passage may present serious difficulty to some. It was not yet the gift of the Holy Ghost as a divine person to dwell within them — for that they must wait until Jesus was glorified. We read in Acts 1: 5, "ye shall be baptised with the Holy Ghost not many days hence," words uttered subsequently to those before us. To understand the Lord's action aright, we must go back to a similar one in Genesis 2. There we have the Lord God first forming the man's body of the dust of the ground, then breathing into his nostrils the breath of life. In this, man is distinguished from the beast. Here the Lord, risen from the dead, after having accomplished redemption, breathes His own risen life by the Holy Ghost into His beloved disciples. They were unquestionably converted men before; the Lord gives them now to participate with Himself in life more abundantly. It is of the utmost moment to seize that the life which is ours in Christ, is a risen life. What has judgment to do with it? What has law to say to it? It is victorious, and beyond the reach of the enemy. The difference between the Spirit as life, and His personal indwelling may be seen in Romans 8. In vers. 1-11 it is not so much His personal presence as

that He is the Spirit of life, instilling Himself into all our thoughts and ways, and giving character to the life that we now live below; in vers. 12-27 He is viewed rather as a distinct person dwelling within, bearing witness with our spirit, sympathising with us in our groans and sorrows, and Himself making intercession for us according to God.

The Lord's words which follow should be carefully weighed, "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." How grievously misunderstood and even perverted these few words have been! The claim has long been that they confer authority on a priestly class to absolve their fellows from the eternal consequences of their sins. But let it be distinctly understood that there is no such thing as a priestly class in Christianity. There was in Israel, but redemption was not then accomplished, and the people of God could not go into His presence within the sanctuary for themselves. But is this the state of things since the death and resurrection of Christ? Surely not; else, what has the blessed One accomplished? The veil is rent, all who believe are constituted priests of God — a holy priesthood — all may draw near on the ground of the blood once shed. Moreover we have a great High Priest in the presence of God for us. Thus the assertion of a priestly class now is a denial of Christianity, and puts souls under bondage, in darkness, and at a distance from God. We cannot speak or write too strongly as to all this in the present day. Masses who profess Christ's name are giving themselves up to this and worse: preferring bondage, darkness and distance, to the liberty wherewith Christ makes free and the blessed nearness to God in the light which is the true and inalienable portion of all who believe.

Had the Lord intended any sort of official privilege or authority we should at least read "when *the apostles* were assembled." There might then have been a *show* of warrant for the assumption, but the Lord is wiser than men. He well knew of the boast of apostolic succession, and would leave no loophole for such a figment in the verse before us. Hence we read not "when the apostles," but "when the disciples were assembled," which latter term includes all who believe, whether apostles or otherwise. And it may be remarked, in passing, that the title "apostle" does not occur at all in John's Gospel.

Doubtless there are many who are sure what the verse does not mean, who could not tell what it *does* mean if taxed about it. Let us weigh the matter carefully in the Lord's presence. The assembled disciples with Jesus in the midst we have already seen to be a picture of the Christian assembly. Here, therefore, we have Him giving to them authority of an administrative character for the exercise of reception or discipline within their own limits. His words in this place have substantially the same meaning as those in Matt. 16 and 18. In the former chapter He addresses Peter on the basis of his glorious confession of Himself as the Christ, the Son of the living God, on which rock His church should be built, and says, "I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (chap. 16: 19). This has no reference to eternal consequences. The Lord does not speak of the keys of heaven, as if Peter or any of his pretended successors were to have power to exclude souls from heavenly blessing at will; but He speaks of an earthly administration which we find the apostle duly exercising in the Acts. At Pentecost he opened the kingdom to the Jews, and three thousand entered; in the house of Cornelius he opened it to Gentiles, and many availed themselves through grace. This was also loosing, as, on the other hand, the cases of Ananias and Simon furnish solemn examples of binding.

But there is nothing said of successional power, unless the Lord's word in Matt. 18 be so viewed. There the Lord speaks of the assembly, a gathered company who can be told of a brother's fault, and says, "Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and

whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." This is immediately connected with His own presence in the midst of the two or three gathered together unto His Name (vers. 18-20). Consequently, the only form in which the authority granted to Peter is handed down is that which the Lord has undoubtedly granted to His gathered saints, however few and feeble. Therefore when a person is received from the world, the assembly "remits" or "looses." If one is put away from amongst the saints, the assembly "retains" or "binds," and this on the authority of His word, and His presence in the midst. The Epistles to the Corinthians furnish us with an illustration. In the first letter, the apostle calls upon the assembly to put away from among themselves the wicked person.*

The man was put forth, his sin being bound upon him. The discipline succeeded, hence we find Paul writing later, "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment which [was inflicted] of the many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive and comfort [him], lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow" (1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2: 6, 7). In receiving him back the assembly administratively remitted his sins. The assembly is responsible to guard the Lord's honour. If evil intrudes itself, it is bound to deal with it when known, in the fear of the Lord, or it forfeits all claim to be regarded as God's church. There are three things, however, which should be borne in mind on such solemn occasions; (1) the honour of the Lord, (2) the purity of the assembly, and (3) the blessing of the offender. If the first be lost sight of, all that is done, however right in itself, is on very low ground; if the second, the consciences of all lose the moral profit which should be reaped from the sorrowful circumstances, and if the third be not kept in view, our hearts are apt to become hard and careless with regard to those of the Lord's own who are beguiled of the enemy.

Truly to be in the assembly of God is an inestimable privilege; but solemn responsibilities attach to the place. The Lord enable us all to understand them better.

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