

CHAPTER IV.

THE ANNUNCIATION OF JESUS THE MESSIAH, AND THE BIRTH OF HIS FORERUNNER.

(St. Matt. i.; St. Luke i. 26-80.)

FROM the Temple to Nazareth! It seems indeed most fitting that the Evangelic story should have taken its beginning within the Sanctuary, and at the time of sacrifice. Despite its outward veneration for them, the Temple, its services, and specially its sacrifices, were, by an inward logical necessity, fast becoming a superfluity for Rabbinism. But the new development, passing over the intruded elements, which were, after all, of rationalistic origin, connected its beginning directly with the Old Testament dispensation - its sacrifices, priesthood, and promises. In the Sanctuary, in connection with sacrifice, and through the priesthood - such was significantly the beginning of the era of fulfillment. And so the great religious reformation of Israel under Samuel had also begun in the Tabernacle, which had so long been in the background. But if, even in this Temple-beginning, and in the communication to, and selection of an idiot 'priest,' there was marked divergence from the Rabbinic ideal, that difference widens into the sharpest contrast, as we pass from the Forerunner to the Messiah, from the Temple to Galilee, from the 'idiot' priest to the humble, unlettered family of Nazareth. It is necessary here to recall our general impression of Rabbinism: its conception of God, and of the highest good and ultimate object of all things, as concentrated in learned study, pursued in Academies; and then to think of the unmitigated contempt with which they were wont to speak of Galilee, and of the Galileans, whose very *patois* was an offence; of the utter abhorrence with which they regarded the unlettered country-people, in order to realise, how such an household as that of Joseph and Mary would be regarded by the leaders of Israel. A Messianic announcement, not the result of learned investigation, nor connected with the Academies, but in the Sanctuary, to a 'rustic' priest; an Elijah unable to untie the intellectual or ecclesiastical knots, of whose mission, indeed, this formed no part at all; and a Messiah, the offspring of a Virgin in Galilee betrothed to a humble workman - assuredly, such a picture of the fulfillment of Israel's hope could never have been conceived by contemporary Judaism. There was in such a Messiah absolutely nothing - past, present, or possible; intellectually, religiously, or even nationally - to attract, but all to repel. And so we can, at the very outset of this history, understand the infinite contrast which it embodied - with all the difficulties to its reception, even to those who became disciples, as at almost every step of its progress they were, with ever fresh surprise, recalled from all that they had formerly thought, to that which was so entirely new and strange.

And yet, just as Zacharias may be described as the representative of the good and the true in the Priesthood at that time, so the family of Nazareth as a typical Israelitish household. We feel, that the scantiness of particulars here supplied by the Gospels, was intended to prevent the human interest from overshadowing the grand central Fact, to which alone attention was to be directed. For, the design of the Gospels was manifestly not to furnish a biography of Jesus the Messiah, but, in organic connection with the Old Testament, to tell the history of the long-promised establishment of the Kingdom of God upon earth. Yet what scanty details we possess of the 'Holy Family' and its surroundings may here find a place.

The highlands which form the central portion of Palestine are broken by the wide, rich plain of Jezreel, which severs Gailee from the rest of the land. This was always the great battle-field of Israel. Appropriately, it is shut in as between mountain-walls. That along the north of the plain is formed by the mountains of Lower Galilee, cleft about the middle by a valley that widens, till, after an hour's journey, we stand within an enclosure which seems almost one of Nature's own sanctuaries. As in an amphitheatre, fifteen hill-tops rise around. That to the west is the highest - about 500 feet. On its lower slopes nestles a little town, its narrow streets ranged like terraces. This is Nazareth, probably the ancient Sarid (or En-Sarid), which, in the time of Joshua, marked the northern boundary of Zebulun.

Climbing this steep hill, fragrant with aromatic plants, and bright with rich-coloured flowers, a view almost unsurpassed opens before us. For, the Galilee of the time of Jesus was not only of the richest fertility, cultivated to the utmost, and thickly covered with populous towns and villages, but the centre of every known industry, and the busy road of the world's commerce. Northward the eye would sweep over a rich plain; rest here and there on white towns, glittering in the sunlight; then quickly travel over the romantic hills and glens which form the scenes of Solomon's Song, till, passing beyond Safed (the Tsephath of the Rabbis - the 'city set

on a hill'), the view is bounded by that giant of the far-off mountain-chain, snow-tipped Hermon. Westward stretched a like scene of beauty and wealth - a land not lonely, but wedded; not desolate, but teeming with life; while, on the edge of the horizon, lay purple Carmel; beyond it a fringe of silver sand, and then the dazzling sheen of the Great Sea. In the farthest distance, white sails, like wings outspread towards the ends of the world; nearer, busy ports; then, centres of industry; and close by, travelled roads, all bright in the pure Eastern air and rich glow of the sun. But if you turned eastwards, the eye would soon be arrested by the wooded height of Tabor, yet not before attention had been riveted by the long, narrow string of fantastic caravans, and curiosity roused by the motley figures, of all nationalities and in all costumes, busy binding the East to the West by that line of commerce that passed along the route winding around Tabor. And when, weary with the gaze, you looked once more down on little Nazareth nestling on the breast of the mountain, the eye would rest on a scene of tranquil, homely beauty. Just outside the town, in the north-west, bubbled the spring or well, the trysting-spot of townspeople, and welcome resting-place of travellers. Beyond it stretched lines of houses, each with its flat roof standing out distinctly against the clear sky; watered, terraced gardens, gnarled wide-spreading figtrees, graceful feathery palms, scented oranges, silvery olive-trees, thick hedges, rich pasture-land, then the bounding hills to the south; and beyond, the seemingly unbounded expanse of the wide plain of Esdraelon!

And yet, withdrawn from the world as, in its enclosure of mountains, Nazareth might seem, we must not think of it as a lonely village which only faint echoes reached of what roused the land beyond. With reverence be it said: such a place might have suited the training of the contemplative hermit, not the upbringing of Him Whose sympathies were to be with every clime and race. Nor would such an abode have furnished what (with all due acknowledgment of the supernatural) we mark as a constant, because a rationally necessary, element in Scripture history: that of inward preparedness in which the higher and the Divine afterwards find their ready points of contact.

Nor was it otherwise in Nazareth. The two great interests which stirred the land, the two great factors in the religious future of Israel, constantly met in the retirement of Nazareth. The great caravan-route which led from Acco on the sea to Damascus divided at its commencement into three roads: the most northern passing through Cæsarea Philippi; the Upper Galilean; and the Lower Galilean. The latter, the ancient *Via Maris* led through Nazareth, and thence either by Cana, or else along the northern shoulder of Mount Tabor, to the Lake of Gennesaret - each of these roads soon uniting with the Upper Galilean. Hence, although the stream of commerce between Acco and the East was divided into three channels, yet, as one of these passed through Nazareth, the quiet little town was not a stagnant pool of rustic seclusion. Men of all nations, busy with another life than that of Israel, would appear in the streets of Nazareth; and through them thoughts, associations, and hopes connected with the great outside world be stirred. But, on the other hand, Nazareth was also one of the great centers of Jewish Temple-life. It has already been indicated that the Priesthood was divided into twenty-four 'courses,' which, in turn, ministered in the Temple. The Priests of the 'course' which was to be on duty always gathered in certain towns, whence they went up in company to Jerusalem, while those of their number who were unable to go spent the week in fasting and prayer. Now Nazareth was one of these Priest-centres, and although it may well have been, that comparatively few in distant Galilee conformed to the Priestly regulations - some must have assembled there in preparation for the sacred functions, or appeared in its Synagogue. Even the fact, so well known to all, of this living connection between Nazareth and the Temple, must have wakened peculiar feelings. Thus, to take the wider view, a double symbolic significance attached to Nazareth, since through it passed alike those who carried on the traffic of the world, and those who ministered in the Temple.

We may take it, that the people of Nazareth were like those of other little towns similarly circumstanced: with all the peculiarities of the impulsive, straight-spoken, hot-blooded, brave, intensely national Galileans; with the deeper feelings and almost instinctive habits of thought and life, which were the outcome of long centuries of Old Testament training; but also with the petty interest and jealousies of such places, and with all the ceremonialism and punctilious self-assertion of Orientals. The cast of Judaism prevalent in Nazareth would, of course, be the same as in Galilee generally. We know, that there were marked divergences from the observances in that stronghold of Rabbinism, Judæa - indicating greater simplicity and freedom from the constant intrusion of traditional ordinances. The home-life would be all the purer, that the veil of wedded life as

not so coarsely lifted as in Judæa, nor its sacred secrecy interfered with by an Argus-eyed legislation. The purity of betrothal in Galilee was less likely to be sullied, and weddings were more simple than in Judæa - without the dubious institution of groomsmen, or 'friends of the bridegroom' whose office must not unfrequently have degenerated into utter coarseness. The bride was chosen, not as in Judæa, where money was too often the motive, but as in Jerusalem, with chief regard to 'a fair degree;' and widows were (as in Jerusalem) more tenderly cared for, as we gather even from the fact, that they had a life-right of residence in their husband's house.

Such a home was that to which Joseph was about to bring the maiden, to whom he had been betrothed. Whatever view may be taken of the genealogies in the Gospels according to St. Matthew and St. Luke - whether they be regarded as those of Joseph and of Mary, or, which seems the more likely, as those of Joseph only, marking his natural and his legal descent from David, or vice versâ - there can be no question, that both Joseph and Mary were of the royal lineage of David. Most probably the two were nearly related, while Mary could also claim kinship with the Priesthood, being, no doubt on her mother's side, a 'blood-relative' of Elisabeth, the Priest-wife of Zacharias. Even this seems to imply, that Mary's family must shortly before have held higher rank, for only with such did custom sanction any alliance on the part of Priests. But at the time of their betrothal, alike Joseph and Mary were extremely poor, as appears - not indeed from his being a carpenter, since a trade was regarded as almost a religious duty - but from the offering at the presentation of Jesus in the Temple. Accordingly, their betrothal must have been of the simplest, and the dowry settled the smallest possible. Whichever of the two modes of betrothal may have been adopted: in the presence of witnesses - either by solemn word of mouth, in due prescribed formality, with the added pledge of a piece of money, however small, or of money's worth for use; or else by writing (the so-called *Shitre Erusin*) - there would be no sumptuous feast to follow; and the ceremony would conclude with some such benediction as that afterwards in use: 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the World, Who hath sanctified us by His Commandments, and enjoined us about incest, and forbidden the betrothed, but allowed us those wedded by *Chuppah* (the marriage-baldachino) and betrothal. Blessed art Thou, Who sanctifiest Israel by *Chuppah* and betrothal' - the whole being perhaps concluded by a benediction over the statutory cup of wine, which was tasted in turn by the betrothed. From that moment Mary was the betrothed wife of Joseph; their relationship as sacred, as if they had already been wedded. Any breach of it would be treated as adultery; nor could the band be dissolved except, as after marriage, by regular divorce. Yet months might intervene between the betrothal and marriage.

Five months of Elisabeth's sacred retirement had passed, when a strange messenger brought its first tidings to her kinswoman in far-off Galilee. It was not in the solemn grandeur of the Temple, between the golden altar of incense and the seven-branched candlesticks that the Angel Gabriel now appeared, but in the privacy of a humble home at Nazareth. The greatest honor bestowed on man was to come amidst circumstances of deepest human lowliness, as if the more clearly to mark the exclusively Divine character of what was to happen. And, although the awe of the Supernatural must unconsciously have fallen upon her, it was not so much the sudden appearance of the mysterious stranger in her retirement that startled the maiden, as the words of his greeting, implying unthought blessing. The 'Peace to thee' was, indeed, the well-known salutation, while the words, 'The Lord is with thee' might waken the remembrance of the Angelic call, to great deliverance in the past. But this designation of 'highly favored' came upon her with bewildering surprise, perhaps not so much from its contrast to the humbleness of her estate, as from the self-conscious humility of her heart. And it was intended so, for of all feelings this would now most become her. Accordingly, it is this story of special 'favour' or grace, which the Angel traces in rapid outline, from the conception of the Virgin-Mother to the distinctive, Divinely-given Name, symbolic of the meaning of His coming; His absolute greatness; His acknowledgment as the Son of God; and the fulfillment in Him of the great Davidic hope, with its never-ceasing royalty, and its never-ending, boundless Kingdom.

In all this, however marvellous, there could be nothing strange to those who cherished in their hearts Israel's great hope, not merely as an article of abstract belief, but as matter of certain fact - least of all to the maiden of the lineage of David, betrothed to him of the house and lineage of David. So long as the hand of prophetic blessing rested on the house of David, and before its finger had pointed to the individual who 'found

favor' in the highest sense, the consciousness of possibilities, which scarce dared shape themselves into definite thoughts, must at times have stirred nameless feelings - perhaps the more often in circumstances of outward depression and humility, such as those of the 'Holy Family.' Nor was there anything strange even in the naming of the yet unconceived Child. It sounds like a saying current among the people of old, this of the Rabbis, concerning the six whose names were given before their birth: Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Solomon, Josiah, and 'the Name of the Messiah, Whom may the Holy One, blessed be His Name, bring quickly in our days!' But as for the deeper meaning of the name Jesus, which, like an unopened bud, enclosed the flower of His Passion, that was mercifully yet the unthought-of secret of that sword, which should pierce the soul of the Virgin-Mother, and which only His future history would lay open to her and to others.

Thus, on the supposition of the readiness of her believing heart, and her entire self-unconsciousness, it would have been only the glorious announcement of the impending event, which would absorb her thinking - with nothing strange about it, or that needed further light, than the *how* of her own connection with it. And the words, which she spake, were not of trembling doubt, that required to lean on the staff of a 'sign,' but rather those of enquiry, for the further guidance of a willing self-surrender. The Angel had pointed her opened eyes to the shining path: that was not strange; only, that *She* should walk in it, seemed so. And now the Angel still further unfolded it in words which, however little she may have understood their full meaning, had again nothing strange about them, save once more that she should be thus 'favoured;' words which, even to her understanding, must have carried yet further thoughts of Divine *favour*, and so deepened her humility. For, the idea of the activity of the Holy Ghost in all great events was quite familiar to Israel at the time, even though the Individuation of the Holy Ghost may not have been fully apprehended. Only, that they expected such influences to rest exclusively upon those who were either mighty, or rich, or wise. And of this twofold manifestation of miraculous 'favour' - that she, and as a Virgin, should be its subject - Gabriel, 'the might of God,' gave this unasked sign, in what had happened to her kinswoman Elisabeth.

The sign was at the same time a direction. The first, but also the ever-deepening desire in the heart of Mary, when the Angel left her, must have been to be away from Nazareth, and for the relief of opening her heart to a woman, in all things like-minded, who perhaps might speak blessed words to her. And to such an one the Angel himself seemed to have directed her. It is only what we would have expected, that 'with haste' she should have resorted to her kinswoman, without loss of time, and before she would speak to her betrothed of what even in wedded life is the first secret whispered.

It could have been no ordinary welcome that would greet the Virgin-Mother, on entering the house of her kinswoman. Elisabeth must have learnt from her husband the destiny of their son, and hence the near Advent of the Messiah. But she could not have known either *when*, or of *whom* He would be born. When, by a sign not quite strange to Jewish expectancy, she recognised in her near kinswoman the Mother of her Lord, her salutation was that of a mother to a mother - the mother of the 'preparer' to the mother of Him for Whom he would prepare. To be more precise: the words which, filled with the Holy Ghost, she spake, were the mother's utterance, to the mother, of the homage which her unborn babe offered to his Lord; while the answering hymn of Mary was the offering of that homage unto God. It was the antiphonal morning-psalmody of the Messianic day as it broke, of which the words were still all of the old dispensation, but their music of the new; the keynote being that of 'favour,' 'grace,' struck by the Angel in his first salutation: 'favour' to the Virgin; 'favour,' eternal 'favour' to all His humble and poor ones; and 'favour' to Israel, stretching in golden line from the calling of Abraham to the glorious future that now opened. Not one of these fundamental ideas but lay strictly within the range of the Old Testament; and yet all of them now lay beyond it, bathed in the golden light of the new day. Miraculous it all is, and professes to be; not indeed in the connection of these events, which succeed each other with psychological truthfulness; nor yet in their language, which is of the times and the circumstances; but in the underlying facts. And for these there can be no other evidence than the Life, the Death, and the Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. If He was such, and if He really rose from the dead, then, with all soberness and solemnity, such inception of His appearance seems almost a logical necessity. But of this whole narrative it may be said, that such inception of the Messianic appearance, such announcement of it, and such manner of His

Coming, could never have been invented by contemporary Judaism; indeed, ran directly counter to all its preconceptions.

Three months had passed since the Virgin-Mother entered the home of her kinswoman. And now she must return to Nazareth. Soon Elisabeth's neighbours and kinsfolk would gather with sympathetic joy around a home which, as they thought, had experienced unexpected mercy – little thinking, how wide-reaching its consequences would be. But the Virgin-Mother must not be exposed to the publicity of such meetings. However conscious of what had led to her condition, it must have been as the first sharp pang of the sword which was to pierce her soul, when she told it all to her betrothed. For, however deep his trust in her whom he had chosen for wife, only a direct Divine communication could have chased all questioning from his heart, and given him that assurance, which was needful in the future history of the Messiah. Brief as, with exquisite delicacy, the narrative is, we can read in the 'thoughts' of Joseph the anxious contending of feelings, the scarcely established, and yet delayed, resolve to 'put her away,' which could only be done by regular divorce; this one determination only standing out clearly, that, if it must be, her letter of divorce shall be handed to her privately, only in the presence of two witnesses. The humble *Tsaddiq* of Nazareth would not willingly have brought the blush to any face, least of all would he make of her 'a public exhibition of shame.' It was a relief that he could legally divorce her either publicly or privately, whether from change of feeling, or because he had found just cause for it, but hesitated to make it known, either from regard for his own character, or because he had not sufficient *legal* evidence of the charge. He would follow, all unconscious of it, the truer manly feeling of R. Eliezar, R. Jochanan, and R. Zera, according to which a man would not like to put his wife to shame before a Court of Justice, rather than the opposite sentence of R. Meir.

The assurance, which Joseph could scarcely dare to hope for, was miraculously conveyed to him in a dream-vision. All would now be clear; even the terms in which he was addressed ('thou son of David'), so utterly unusual in ordinary circumstances, would prepare him for the Angel's message. The naming of the unborn Messiah would accord with popular notions; the symbolism of such a name was deeply rooted in Jewish belief; while the explanation of *Jehoshua* or *Jeshua* (*Jesus*), as He who would save His people (primarily, as he would understand it, Israel) from their sins, described at least one generally expected aspect of His Mission, although Joseph may not have known that it was the basis of all the rest. And perhaps it was not without deeper meaning and insight into His character, that the Angel laid stress on this very element in His communication to Joseph, and not to Mary.

The fact that such an announcement came to Him in a *dream*, would dispose Joseph all the more readily to receive it. 'A good dream' was one of the three things popularly regarded as marks of God's favour; and so general was the belief in their significance, as to have passed into this popular saying: 'If any one sleeps seven days without dreaming (or rather, remembering his dream for interpretation), call him wicked' (as being unremembered of God). Thus Divinely set at rest, Joseph could no longer hesitate. The highest duty towards the Virgin-Mother and the unborn Jesus demanded an immediate marriage, which would afford not only outward, but moral protection to both.

Viewing events, not as isolated, but as links welded in the golden chain of the history of the Kingdom of God, 'all this' - not only the birth of Jesus from a Virgin, nor even His symbolic Name with its import, but also the unrestful questioning of Joseph, - 'happened' in fulfilment of what had been prefigured. The promise of a Virginborn son as a sign of the firmness of God's covenant of old with David and his house; the now unfolded meaning of the former symbolic name *Immanuel*; even the unbelief of Ahaz, with its counterpart in the questioning of Joseph - 'all this' could now be clearly read in the light of the breaking day. Never had the house of David sunk morally lower than when, in the words of Ahaz, it seemed to renounce the very foundation of its claim to continuance; never had the fortunes of the house of David fallen lower, than when a Herod sat on its throne, and its lineal representative was a humble village carpenter, from whose heart doubts of the Virgin-Mother had to be Divinely chased. And never, not even when God gave to the doubts of Moses this as the sign of Israel's future deliverance, that in that mountain they should worship - had unbelief been answered by more strange evidence. But as, nevertheless, the stability of the Davidic house was ensured by the future advent of *Immanuel* - and with such certainty, that before even such a child could discern between choice of good and

evil, the land would be freed of its dangers; so now all that was then prefigured was to become literally true, and Israel to be saved from its real danger by the Advent of Jesus, Immanuel. And so it had all been intended. The golden cup of prophecy which Isaiah had placed empty on the Holy Table, waiting for the time of the end, was now full filled, up to its brim, with the new wine of the Kingdom.

Meanwhile the long-looked-for event had taken place in the home of Zacharias. No domestic solemnity so important or so joyous as that in which, by circumcision, the child had, as it were, laid upon it the yoke of the Law, with all of duty and privilege which this implied. Even the circumstance, that it took place at early morning might indicate this. It was, so tradition has it, as if the father had acted sacrificially as High-Priest, offering his child to God in gratitude and love; and it symbolised this deeper moral truth, that man must by his own act complete what God had first instituted. To Zacharias and Elisabeth the rite would have even more than this significance, as administered to the child of their old age, so miraculously given, and who was connected with such a future. Besides, the legend which associates circumcision with Elijah, as the restorer of this rite in the apostate period of the Kings of Israel, was probably in circulation at the time. We can scarcely be mistaken in supposing, that then, as now, a benediction was spoken before circumcision, and that the ceremony closed with the usual grace over the cup of wine, when the child received his name in a prayer that probably did not much differ from this at present in use: 'Our God, and the God of our fathers, raise up this child to his father and mother, and let his name be called in Israel Zacharias, the son of Zacharias. Let his father rejoice in the issue of his loins, and his mother in the fruit of her womb, as it is written in Prov. xxiii. 25, and as it is said in Ezek. xvi. 6, and again in Ps. cv. 8, and Gen. xxi. 4;' the passages being, of course, quoted in full. The prayer closed with the hope that the child might grow up, and successfully, 'attain to the Torah, the marriagebaldachino, and good works.'

Of all this Zacharias was, though a deeply interested, yet a deaf and dumb witness. This only had he noticed, that, in the benediction in which the child's name was inserted, the mother had interrupted the prayer. Without explaining her reason, she insisted that his name should not be that of his aged father, as in the peculiar circumstances might have been expected, but John (*Jochanan*). A reference to the father only deepened the general astonishment, when he also gave the same name. But this was not the sole cause for marvel. For, forthwith the tongue of the dumb was loosed, and he, who could not utter the name of the child, now burst into praise of the name of the Lord. His last words had been those of unbelief, his first were those of praise; his last words had been a question of doubt, his first were a hymn of assurance. Strictly Hebrew in its cast, and closely following Old Testament prophecy, it is remarkable - and yet almost natural - that this hymn of the Priest closely follows, and, if the expression be allowable, spiritualises a great part of the most ancient Jewish prayer: the so-called Eighteen Benedictions; rather perhaps, that it transforms the expectancy of that prayer into praise of its realisation. And if we bear in mind, that a great portion of these prayers was said by the Priests before the lot was cast for incensing, or by the people in the time of incensing, it almost seems as if, during the long period of his enforced solitude, the aged Priest had meditated on, and learned to understand, what so often he had repeated. Opening with the common form of benediction, his hymn struck, one by one, the deepest chords of that prayer, specially this the most significant of all (the fifteenth Eulogy), 'Speedily make to shoot forth the Branch of David, Thy servant, and exalt Thou his horn by Thy salvation, for in Thy salvation we trust all the day long. Blessed art Thou, Jehovah! Who causeth to spring forth the Horn of Salvation' (literally, to branch forth). This analogy between the hymn of Zacharias and the prayers of Israel will best appear from the benedictions with which these eulogies closed. For, when thus examined, their leading thoughts will be found to be as follows: God as the *Shield of Abraham*; He that raises the dead, and *causes salvation to shoot forth*; the Holy One; Who graciously *giveth knowledge*; Who taketh pleasure in *repentance*; Who multiplieth *forgiveness*; Who *redeemeth Israel*; Who *healeth their* (spiritual) *diseases*; Who *blesseth the years*; Who *gathereth the outcasts of His people*; Who loveth *righteousness and judgment*; Who is the *abode and stay of the righteous*; Who *buildeth Jerusalem*; Who causeth the *Horn of Salvation* to shoot forth; Who *heareth prayer*; Who *bringeth back His Shekinah to Zion*; God the *Gracious One*, to Whom praise is due; Who *blesseth His people Israel with peace*.

It was all most fitting. The question of unbelief had struck the Priest dumb, for most truly unbelief cannot speak; and the answer of faith restored to him speech, for most truly does faith loosen the tongue. The first evidence of his dumbness had been, that his tongue refused to speak the benediction to the people; and the first evidence of his restored power was, that he spoke the benediction of God in a rapturous burst of praise and thanksgiving. The sign of the unbelieving Priest standing before the awe-struck people, vainly essaying to make himself understood by signs, was most fitting; most fitting also that, when 'they made signs' to him, the believing father should burst in their hearing into a prophetic hymn.

But far and wide, as these marvellous tidings spread throughout the hill-country of Judæa, fear fell on all - the fear also of a nameless hope. The silence of a long-clouded day had been broken, and the light which had suddenly riven its gloom, laid itself on their hearts in expectancy: 'What then shall this Child be? For the Hand of the Lord also was with Him!'