

CHAPTER VII.

THE PURIFICATION OF THE VIRGIN AND THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

(St. Luke ii. 21-38.)

FOREMOST amongst those who, wondering, had heard what the shepherds told, was she whom most it concerned, who laid it up deepest in her heart, and brought to it treasured stores of memory. It was the Mother of Jesus. These many months, all connected with this Child could never have been far away from her thoughts. And now that He was hers yet not hers - belonged, yet did not seem to belong, to her - He would be the more dear to her Mother-heart for what made Him so near, and yet parted Him so far from her. And upon all His history seemed to lie such wondrous light, that she could only see the path behind, so far as she had trodden it; while upon that on which she was to move, was such dazzling brightness, that she could scarce look upon the present, and dared not gaze towards the future.

At the very outset of this history, and increasingly in its course, the question meets us, how, if the Angelic message to the Virgin was a reality, and her motherhood so supernatural, she could have been apparently so ignorant of what was to come - nay, so often have even misunderstood it? Strange, that she should have 'pondered in her heart' the shepherd's account; stranger, that afterwards she should have wondered at His lingering in the Temple among Israel's teachers; strangest, that, at the very first of His miracles, a mother's fond pride should have so harshly broken in upon the Divine melody of His work, by striking a keynote so different from that, to which His life had been set; or that afterwards, in the height of his activity, loving fears, if not doubts, should have prompted her to interrupt, what evidently she had not as yet comprehended in the fulness of its meaning.

Might we not rather have expected, that the Virgin-Mother from the inception of this Child's life would have understood, that He was truly the Son of God? The question, like so many others, requires only to be clearly stated, to find its emphatic answer. For, had it been so His history, His human life, of which every step is of such importance to mankind, would not have been possible. Apart from all thoughts of the deeper necessity, both as regarded His Mission and all the salvation of the world, of a true human development of gradual consciousness and personal life, Christ could not, in any true sense, have been subject to His Parents, if they had fully understood that He was Divine; nor could He, in that case, have been watched, as He 'grew in wisdom and in favour with God and men.' Such knowledge would have broken the bond of His Humanity to ours, by severing that which bound Him as a child to His mother. We could not have become His brethren, had He not been truly the Virgin's Son. The mystery of the Incarnation would have been needless and fruitless, had His humanity not been subject to all its right and ordinary conditions. And, applying the same principle more widely, we can thus, in some measure, understand why the mystery of His Divinity had to be kept while He was on earth. Had it been otherwise, the thought of His Divinity would have proved so all-absorbing, as to render impossible that of His Humanity, with all its lessons. The Son of God Most High, Whom they worshipped, could never have been the loving Man, with Whom they could hold such close converse. The bond which bound the Master to His disciples - the Son of Man to humanity - would have been dissolved; His teaching as a Man, the Incarnation, and the Tabernacling among men, in place of the former Old Testament Revelation from heaven, would have become wholly impossible. In short, one, and that the distinctive New Testament, element in our salvation would have been taken away. At the beginning of His life He would have anticipated the lessons of its end - nay, not those of His Death only, but of His Resurrection and Ascension, and of the coming of the Holy Ghost.

In all this we have only been taking the subjective, not the objective, view of the question; considered the earthward, not the heavenward, aspect of His life. The latter, though very real, lies beyond our present horizon. Not so the question as to the development of the Virgin-Mother's spiritual knowledge. Assuming her to have occupied, in the fullest sense, the standpoint of Jewish Messianic expectancy, and remembering, also, that she was so 'highly favoured' of God, still, there was not as yet anything, nor could there be for many years, to lead her beyond what might be called the utmost height of Jewish belief. On the contrary, there was much connected with His true Humanity to keep her back. For narrow as, to our retrospective thinking, the boundary-line seems between Jewish belief and that in the hypostatic union of the two Natures, the

passage from the one to the other represented such tremendous mental revolution, as to imply direct Divine teaching. An illustrative instance will prove this better than argument. We read, in a commentary on the opening words of Gen. xv. 18, that when God made the covenant with Abram, He 'revealed to him both this *Olam* (dispensation) and the *Olam* to come,' which latter expression is correctly explained as referring to the days of the Messiah. Jewish tradition, therefore, here asserts exactly what Jesus stated in these words: 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad.' Yet we know what storm of indignation the enunciation of it called forth among the Jews!

Thus it was, that every event connected with the Messianic manifestation of Jesus would come to the Virgin-Mother as a fresh discovery and a new surprise. Each event, as it took place, stood isolated in her mind; not as part of a whole which she would anticipate, nor as only one link in a chain; but as something quite by itself. She knew the beginning, and she knew the end; but she knew not the path which led from the one to the other; and each step in it was a new revelation. Hence it was, that she so carefully treasured in her heart every new fact, piecing each to the other, till she could read from it the great mystery that He, Whom Incarnate she had borne, was, indeed, the Son of the living God. And as it was natural, so it was well that it should be so. For, thus only could she truly, because self-unconsciously, as a Jewish woman and mother, fulfil all the requirements of the Law, alike as regarded herself and her Child

The first of these was Circumcision, representing voluntary subjection to the conditions of the Law, and acceptance of the obligations, but also of the privileges, of the Covenant between God and Abraham and his seed. Any attempt to show the deep significance of such a rite in the case of Jesus, could only weaken the impression which the fact itself conveys. The ceremony took place, as in all ordinary circumstances, on the eighth day, when the Child received the Angel-given name *Jeshua* (Jesus). Two other legal ordinances still remained to be observed. The firstborn son of every household was, according to the Law, to be 'redeemed' of the priest at the price of five shekels of the Sanctuary. Rabbinic casuistry here added many needless, and even repulsive, details. The following, however, are of practical interest. The earliest period of presentation was thirty-one days after birth so as to make the legal month quite complete. The child must have been the firstborn of his mother (according to some writers, of his father also); neither father nor mother must be of Levitic descent; and the child must be free from all such bodily blemishes as would have disqualified him for the priesthood - or, as it was expressed: 'the firstborn for the priesthood.' It was a thing much dreaded, that the child should die before his redemption; but if his father died in the interval, the child had to redeem himself when of age. As the Rabbinic law expressly states, that the shekels were to be of 'Tyrian weight,' the value of the 'redemption money' would amount to about ten or twelve shillings. The redemption could be made from any priest, and attendance in the Temple was not requisite. It was otherwise with the 'purification' of the mother. The Rabbinic law fixed this at forty-one days after the birth of a son, and eighty-one after that of a daughter, so as to make the Biblical terms quite complete. But it might take place any time later - notably, when attendance on any of the great feasts brought a family to Jerusalem. Thus, we read of cases when a mother would offer several sacrifices of purification at the same time. But, indeed, the woman was not required to be personally present at all, when her offering was presented, or, rather (as we shall see), provided for - say, by the representatives of the laity, who daily took part in the services for the various districts from which they came. This also is specially provided for in the Talmud. But mothers who were within convenient distance of the Temple, and especially the more earnest among them, would naturally attend personally in the Temple; and in such cases, when practicable, the redemption of the firstborn, and the purification of his mother, would be combined. Such was undoubtedly the case with the Virgin-Mother and her Son.

For this twofold purpose the Holy Family went up to the Temple, when the prescribed days were completed. The ceremony at the redemption of a firstborn son was, no doubt, more simple than that at present in use. It consisted of the formal presentation of the child to the priest, accompanied by two short 'benedictions,' the one for the law of redemption money was paid. Most solemn, as in such a place, and remembering its symbolic significance as the expression of God's claim over each family in Israel, must this rite have been.

As regards the rite at the purification of the mother, the scantiness of information has led to serious misstatements. Any comparison with our modern 'churcing' of women is inapplicable, since the latter consists of thanksgiving, and the former primarily of a sin-offering for the Levitical defilement symbolically attaching to the beginning of life, and a burnt-offering, that marked the restoration of communion with God. Besides, as already stated, the sacrifice for purification might be brought in the absence of the mother. Similar mistakes prevail as to the rubric. It is not case, as generally stated, that the woman was sprinkled with blood, and then pronounced clean by the priest, or that prayers were offered on the occasion. The service simply consisted of the statutory sacrifice. This was what, in ecclesiastical language, was termed an offering *oleh veyored*, that is, 'ascending and descending,' according to the means of the offerer. The sin-offering was, in all cases, a turtle-dove or a young pigeon. But, while the more wealthy brought a lamb for a burnt-offering the poor might substitute for it a turtle-dove, or a young pigeon. The rubric directed that the neck of the sin-offering was to be broken, but the head not wholly severed; that some of the blood should be sprinkled at the south-western angle of the altar, below the red line, which ran round the middle of the altar, and that the rest should be poured out at the base of the altar. The whole of the flesh belonged to the priests, and had to be eaten within the enclosure of the Sanctuary. The rubric for the burnt-offering of a turtle-dove or a young pigeon was somewhat more intricate. The substitution of the latter for a young lamb was expressly designated 'the poor's offering.' And rightly so, since, while a lamb would probably cost about three shillings, the average value of a pair of turtle-doves, for both the sin-and burnt-offering, would be about eightpence, and on one occasion fell so low as twopence. The Temple-price of the meat-and drink-offerings was fixed once a month; and special officials instructed the intending offerers, and provided them with what was needed. There was also a special 'superintendent of turtle-doves and pigeons,' required for certain purifications, and the holder of that office is mentioned with praise in the Mishnah. Much, indeed, depended upon his uprightness. For, at any rate as regarded those who brought the poor's offering, the purchasers of pigeons or turtle-doves would, as a rule, have to deal with him. In the Court of the Women there were thirteen trumpet-shaped chests for pecuniary contributions, called 'trumpets.' Into the third of these they who brought the poor's offering, like the Virgin-Mother, were to drop the price of the sacrifices which were needed for their purification. As we infer, the superintending priest must have been stationed here, alike to inform the offerer of the price of the turtle-doves, and to see that all was in order. For, the offerer of the poor's offering would not require to deal directly with the sacrificing priest. At a certain time in the day this third chest was opened, and half of its contents applied to burnt, the other half to sin-offerings. Thus sacrifices were provided for a corresponding number of those who were to be purified, without either shaming the poor, needlessly disclosing the character of impurity, or causing unnecessary bustle and work. Though this mode of procedure could, of course, not be obligatory, it would, no doubt, be that generally followed.

We can now, in imagination, follow the Virgin-Mother in the Temple. Her child had been given up to the Lord, and received back from Him. She had entered the Court of the Women, probably by the 'Gate of the Women,' on the north side, and deposited the price of her sacrifices in Trumpet No. 3, which was close to the raised dais or gallery where the women worshipped, apart from the men. And now the sound of the organ, which announced throughout the vast Temple-buildings that the incense was about to be kindled on the Golden Altar, summoned those who were to be purified. The chief of the ministrant lay-representatives of Israel on duty (the so-called 'station-men') ranged those, who presented themselves before the Lord as offerers of special sacrifices, within the wickets on either side the great Nicanor Gate, at the top of the fifteen steps which led up from the Court of the Women to that of Israel. It was, as if they were to be brought nearest to the Sanctuary; as if theirs were to be specially the 'prayers' that rose in the cloud of incense from the Golden Altar; as if for them specially the sacrifices were laid on the Altar of Burnt-offering; as if theirs was a larger share of the benediction which, spoken by the lips of the priests, seemed like Jehovah's answer to the prayers of the people; theirs especially the expression of joy symbolised in the drink-offering, and the hymn of praise whose *Tris-Hagion* filled the Temple. From where they stood they could see it all, share in it, rejoice in it. And now the general service was over, and only those remained who brought special sacrifices, or who lingered near them that had such, or whose loved abode was

ever in the Temple. The purification-service, with such unspoken prayer and praise as would be the outcome of a grateful heart, was soon ended, and they who had shared in it were Levitically clean. Now all stain was removed, and, as the Law put it, they might again partake of sacred offerings.

And in such sacred offering, better than any of which priest's family had ever partaken, was the Virgin-Mother immediately to share. It has been observed, that by the side of every humiliation connected with the Humanity of the Messiah, the glory of His Divinity was also made to shine forth. The coincidences are manifestly undesigned on the part of the Evangelic writers, and hence all the more striking. Thus, if he was born of the humble Maiden of Nazareth, an Angel announced His birth; if the Infant-Saviour was cradled in a manger, the shining host of heaven hymned His Advent. And so afterwards - if He hungered and was tempted in the wilderness, Angels ministered to Him, even as an Angel strengthened Him in the agony of the garden. If He submitted to baptism, the Voice and vision from heaven attested His Sonship; if enemies threatened. He could miraculously pass through them; if the Jews assailed, there was the Voice of God to glorify Him; if He was nailed to the cross, the sun crape his brightness, and earth quaked; if He was laid in the tomb, Angels kept its watches, and heralded His rising. And so, when now the Mother of Jesus, in her humbleness, could only bring the 'poor's offering,' the witness to the greatness of Him Whom she had borne was not wanting. A 'eucharistic offering' - so to speak - was brought, the record of which is the more precious that Rabbinic writings make no allusion to the existence of the party, whose representatives we here meet. Yet they were the true outcome of the spirit of the Old Testament, and, as such, at this time, the special recipients of the 'Spirit' of the Old Testament.

The 'parents' of Jesus had brought Him into the Temple for presentation and redemption, when they were met by one, whose venerable figure must have been well known in the city and the Sanctuary. Simeon combined the three characteristics of Old Testament piety: '*Justice*,' as regarded his relation and bearing to God and man; '*fear of God*,' in opposition to the boastful self-righteousness of Pharisaism; and, above all, '*longing expectancy*' of the near fulfilment of the great promises, and that in their *spiritual* import as 'the Consolation of Israel.' The Holy Spirit was upon him; and by that same Spirit the gracious Divine answer to his heart's longing had been communicated him. And now it was as had been promised him. Coming 'in the Spirit' into the Temple, just as His parents were bringing the Infant Jesus, he took Him into his arms, and burst into rapt thanksgiving. Now, indeed, had God fulfilled His word. He was not to see death, till he had seen the Lord's Christ. Now did his Lord 'dismiss' him 'in peace' - release him in blessed comfort from work and watch - since he had actually seen that salvation, so long preparing for a waiting weary world: a glorious light, Whose rising would light up heathen darkness, and be the outshining glory around Israel's mission. With this Infant in his arms, it was as if he stood on the mountain-height of prophetic vision, and watched the golden beams of sunrise far away over the isles of the Gentiles, and then gathering their full glow over his own beloved land and people. There was nothing Judiac - quite the contrary: only what was of the Old Testament - in what he first said.

But his unexpected appearance, the more unexpected deed and words, and that most unexpected form in which what was said of the Infant Christ was presented to their minds, filled the hearts of His parents with wonderment. And it was, as if their silent wonderment had been an unspoken question, to which the answer now came in words of blessing from the aged watcher. Mystic they seemed, yet prophetic. But now it was the personal, or rather the Judaic, aspect which, in broken utterances, was set before the Virgin-Mother - as if the whole history of the Christ upon earth were passing in rapid vision before Simeon. That Infant, now again in the Virgin-Mother's arms: It was to be a stone of decision; a foundation and corner-stone, for fall or for uprising; a sign spoken against; the sword of deep personal sorrow would pierce the Mother's heart; and so to the terrible end, when the veil of externalism which had so long covered the hearts of Israel's leaders would be rent, and the deep evil of their thoughts laid bare. Such, as regarded Israel, was the history of Jesus, from His Baptism to the Cross; and such is still the history of Jesus, as ever present to the heart of the believing, loving Church.

Nor was Simeon's the only hymn of praise on that day. A special interest attaches to her who, coming that very moment, responded in praise to God for the pledge she saw of the near redemption. A kind of mystery seems to invest this Anna (*Channah*). A widow, whose early desolateness had been followed by a long life of

solitary mourning; one of those in whose home the tribal genealogy had been preserved. We infer from this, and from the fact that it was that of a tribe which had *not* returned to Palestine, that hers was a family of some distinction. Curiously enough, the tribe of Asher alone is celebrated in tradition for the beauty of its women, and their fitness to be wedded to High-Priest or King.

But Anna had better claim to distinction than family-descent, or long, faithful memory of brief home-joys. These many years she had spent in the Sanctuary, and spent in fasting and prayer - yet not of that self-righteous, self-satisfied kind which was of the essence of popular religion. Nor, as to the Pharisees around, was it the Synagogue which was her constant and loved resort; but the Temple, with its symbolic and unspoken worship, which Rabbinic self-assertion and rationalism were rapidly superseding, and for whose services, indeed, Rabbinism could find no real basis. Nor yet were 'fasting and prayer' to her the all-in-all of religion, sufficient in themselves; sufficient also before God. Deepest in her soul was longing waiting for the 'redemption' promised, and now surely nigh. To her widowed heart the great hope of Israel appeared not so much, as to Simeon, in the light of 'consolation,' as rather in that of 'redemption.' The seemingly hopeless exile of her own tribe, the political state of Judæa, the condition - social, moral, and religious - of her own Jerusalem: all kindled in her, as in those who were like-minded, deep, earnest longing for the time of promised 'redemption.' No place so suited to such an one as the Temple, with its services, the only thing free, pure, undefiled, and pointing forward and upward; no occupation so befitting as 'fasting and prayer.' And, blessed be God, there were others, perhaps many such, in Jerusalem. Though Rabbinic tradition ignored them, they were the salt which preserved the mass from festering corruption. To her as the representative, the example, friend, and adviser of such, was it granted as prophetess to recognise Him, Whose Advent had been the burden of Simeon's praise. And, day by day, to those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem, would she speak of Him Whom her eyes had seen, though it must be in whispers and with bated breath. For they were in the city of Herod, and the stronghold of Pharisaism.