

THE MULTITUDE AGAINST GOD'S

TRUTH AND PEOPLE

The Word of God has been called precious in our hearing this morning. It is truly so. It is more so than we know at our first acquaintance. We discover its value when we wake fully to the actual state of things. Life without it is under a shadow that nothing can dispel. Many people live without discovering the shadow, like rats in a dungeon, but it is there all the same. All knowledge lacks its true interest and interpretation, apart from the meaning imparted to it by the revelation contained in the Bible. We can never read it without getting some guidance if we read it with our eyes open. Guidance is always needful in the darkness that now prevails. Let us take what we get as it comes.

Our three readings are alike in one important particular this morning. They contradict the vox populi legend. They show us the mass of people against God, and not on the side of God; and only a very few acceptable with Him. We have Elijah on the summit of Carmel, single-handed against 800 sustained clergy and the great body of the people. We are so accustomed to that as having been a fact that we are liable to miss the lesson. We think of Elijah as a strong-minded and inspired servant of God, and we think not wrongly: but we are apt to leave out the other side supplied by James (v. 17), that—

“He was a man subject to like passions as we are.”

Had we been there to see him, we should have seen a man who lived by breathing and eating as we do: a man with eyes, nose, mouth, hair, and a form like ourselves: a man who knew the fatigue of conflict with opposition, and the stress of disappointed hopes: for what does he say under the juniper tree?

“It is enough: now, O, Lord, take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers.”

Here we have him, then—one human being against a multitude—the multitude strong in each other's countenance and encouragement, but all wrong: the one man in the right and divinely endorsed by the blinding flash from heaven, consuming the sacrifice and licking up the drenching water that had been poured upon it.

In our second reading (about 300 years afterwards) we have the same situation in the case of another prophet. We have Jeremiah in the midst of a turbulent assembly in which brazen-faced women took a prominent part. The assembly were of one mind in the wrong way, and Jeremiah alone maintained the will of God in their midst. There are more details in this case, and we have a complete picture of patriotic character, on which it may be profitable to dwell for a little.

Jeremiah had for a good while predicted the downfall of Jerusalem. He said Nebuchadnezzar would come and overthrow the land. The popular prophets opposed his prophecies, and said there would be peace. When Nebuchadnezzar came and settled down with a powerful army before Jerusalem, Jeremiah said to the people,

“Where are now your prophets that said Nebuchadnezzar would not come?”

Now that Nebuchadnezzar was come, Jeremiah was instructed to recommend a most unnatural measure of safety. God commanded him to tell the people to go out to Nebuchadnezzar, saying that every one who did so would save his life, while all that remained amongst the defenders of the place would perish. The faithful in the city took the course recommended, but the bulk remained behind the walls and assisted in the defence of the city. The king was evidently impressed with the fulfilment of Jeremiah's words so far, and sent to him for advice. Jeremiah advised him to go out to the king of Babylon, assuring him, by the Word of the Lord, that if he did so it would be well with him and with Jerusalem, but that if he did not, the city would be taken and destroyed by fire. God was bringing his long-threatened judgment on the land, but offered them this way of escape, which in its essence was an opportunity of honouring Him by faith and obedience. Zedekiah hesitated, he said—

“I am afraid of the people.”

This is a dangerous principle of action. On the whole he preferred to try natural means of escape. He sent an appeal to Egypt whose king sent an army of relief. Hearing of this, Nebuchadnezzar broke up the siege and marched south to meet Pharaoh. The inhabitants then breathed freely again, and thought after all Jeremiah was mistaken. Fresh messages arrived from God, that Nebuchadnezzar would certainly return and that God's purpose against Jerusalem was so fixed that even if the defenders succeeded in repelling the besiegers, and wounding every man of them, the wounded men would rise in the trenches and advance to the assault and carry the place. There was another opportunity for faith, and escape, of which doubtless some would avail themselves. Among others, Jeremiah himself tried to get away into the open country, but was recognised and arrested as he was passing out of the gate of Benjamin; brought before the rulers of the city and cast into prison—the worst kind of prison they could put him in—a dungeon without sanitary comfort—a pit of which the floor was mud and mire deep enough to allow of Jeremiah sinking in it up to the arm-pits.

In due time, Nebuchadnezzar, having headed off the Egyptians returns to Jerusalem and resumes the siege. Jeremiah's word is again proved true, and he is taken up out of the pit and put in a more comfortable prison. The siege ends as Jeremiah foretold. The city is taken and burnt to the ground. There are multitudes of slain and multitudes of captives, and trouble of the sorest kind for all concerned. In the settlement made by one of Nebuchadnezzar's captains, the poorest of the people are put under a provincial governor and Jeremiah is left with them to bewail the sorrows of the land.

“How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people! . . . She weepeth sore in the night and her tears are on her cheeks; among all her lovers, she hath none to comfort her. The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn feasts: all her gates are desolate . . . her adversaries are the chief; her enemies do prosper, for the Lord hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions.”

But trouble had not yet touched the lowest bottom. There might have been respite and recovery had the survivors accepted the new order of things and loyally served the king of Babylon. Instead of this, the hand of the assassin upset everything. A member of the royal family, who had fled to a neighbouring country, hearing of a Jewish governor having been placed over Judah, evidently thought he might open the way for his own elevation by getting rid of the said governor. So Ishmael, son of Nethaniah, slew Gedaliah, son of Ahikam. On this, a panic naturally seized the people. They imagined that Nebuchadnezzar, on hearing of

the murder of his lieutenant, would be sure to return and wreak vengeance on the miserable remnant of the people that had been left in his charge. Their plan, therefore, was to get away and go down to Egypt, which had shown friendship to them, and which they reckoned would be sure to give them a friendly welcome and a safe asylum from the distractions of war. But before carrying out their plan, they thought they would consult Jeremiah whose words had so signally come to pass. They therefore applied to him, telling him of their ideas, but professing their willingness to be guided entirely by what commands he might receive from the Lord. Jeremiah submitted the matter to God, and in ten days he received an answer, whereupon arose a controversy in which was exemplified that curious perversity which, with the most surface show of reason, contends for an outrageous conclusion.

The message was that they were not to go down to Egypt, but to stay where they were. To this, the whole assembly demurred. They were bent on going down to Egypt.

“There,” said they, “we shall see no war nor hear the sound of the trumpet nor have hunger of bread.”

It was natural for them to take this view. But then there was this plain other side: they had the divine assurance:

“If ye will still abide in this land, then I will build you and not pull you down: and I will plant you and not pluck you up . . . But if ye say, We will not dwell in this land, neither obey the voice of the Lord our God . . . then it shall come to pass that the sword that ye feared shall overtake you in the land of Egypt, and the famine whereof ye were afraid, shall follow close after you there in Egypt and there ye shall die.”

It was a case of natural fear against divine assurance: a case of faith versus unbelief, in which, as usual with Israel, the scale went heavily down in favour of unbelief, alias worldly wisdom. The whole congregation marched to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them.

When they came to the Egyptian frontier, at Tahpanhes, there was another message from the Lord of the most interesting character. Jeremiah was commanded to take large stones and bury them in the presence of the Jews under the brick-work at the entrance of Pharaoh's palace at Tahpanhes: and to say,

“Behold I will send and take Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon my servant, and I will set his throne upon these stones that I have hid, and he shall spread his royal pavilion over them.”

Tahpanhes has lately been recovered through the excavations of Mr. Petrie. Pharaoh's palace has been found, and under the paved work about the entrance has been found stones which there seems every reason to believe are the very stones that were buried there by Jeremiah. What Jeremiah said, duly came to pass. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Egypt, encamping at Tahpanhes, and no doubt fixing headquarters on the very spot where the hidden stones lay under the ground.

But before the event came to pass, Jeremiah received a further message to the people—a sort of last appeal, leading to the controversy already referred to. The people had scattered and settled down quietly in various parts of Egypt and appeared to be getting on. As regards the idolatry and other wickednesses which had brought such calamities on them, though for a

moment they had desisted, they had now returned to their old ways under the shadow of Egypt's protection. They were "*burning incense unto other gods in the land of Egypt*" (Jer. 44:8). The message that came to them pointed to the desolation that had come upon their own land in fulfilment of the threatenings of the prophets.

"Ye have seen all the evil that I have brought upon Jerusalem and upon all the cities of Judah: behold, this day they are a desolation and no man dwelleth therein. Because of their wickedness which they have committed to provoke me to anger in that they went to burn incense and to serve other gods . . . I sent unto you all my servants the prophets, saying, Oh do not this abominable thing that I hate. But they hearkened not nor inclined their ear to turn from their wickedness. Wherefore my fury and mine anger was poured forth and was kindled on the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem and they are wasted and desolate, as at this day. Therefore now, thus saith the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, wherefore commit ye this great evil against your souls . . . burning incense in the land of Egypt whither ye be gone to dwell? Have ye forgotten the wickedness of your fathers and the wickedness of the kings of Judah and the wickedness of their wives and your own wickedness and the wickedness of your wives? They are not humbled even unto this day neither have they feared nor walked in my law."

Nothing could be more forcible or more touching than such an appeal, but how was it received? Not at all in a favourable manner. Jeremiah having apparently convened the people for the purpose of delivering the message, of which these are only quotations, the people at its conclusion said,

"We will not hearken unto thee. We will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth, to burn incense unto the Queen of Heaven and to pour out drink offerings unto her, as we have done, we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, for then had we plenty of victuals and were well and saw no evil. But since we left off to burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and to pour out drink offerings unto her, we have wanted all things and have been consumed by the sword and by the famine."

What could Jeremiah say in response to such a piece of sophistry, but meekly recite the facts as he did, —viz., that the plenty that they had before Jerusalem's destruction was not the result of their idolatry, but the consequence of God's long-suffering; and that the trouble they had been in since, was not the effect of their momentary abandonment of idolatry, but of their prolonged indulgence in it during former years. However, his words had no effect. The facts on the face of them could be twisted into harmony with their contention. We often see this ingenious perversity. There is always room for stumbling if people are not sincere in their quest for truth. Truth itself becomes a snare to such.

Fearful was the divine rejoinder in this case:

"Hear the word of the Lord all Judah that dwell in the land of Egypt. Behold I have sworn by My great name, saith the Lord, that My name shall no more be named in the mouth of any man of Judah in all the land of Egypt. Behold, I will watch over them for evil and not for good: and all the men of Judah that are in the land of Egypt shall be consumed by the sword

and by the famine until there be an end of them, yet a small number that escape . . . shall know whose word shall stand, Mine or theirs.”

This ended Jeremiah’s work with them, so far as we have any record. Tradition says he was shortly afterwards murdered by the rebels. God allowed His messengers thus to be prevailed against because of the recompense reserved. The victory is theirs at the last in the most triumphant form. What we have to note is that till that time arrive, it is not the fortune of divine truth to be popular or to have multitude on its side. The time is near for God to show His hand: but it has not yet come, and therefore we have to submit to the experience that has been common from the beginning. The multitude are leagued against the Truth, under influential leadership. It is not possible that they can be brought to listen. Shall we grow weary of the hopeless battle? If we were aiming at a present result, we should not be the brethren of the prophets. We are aiming only at what they aimed at. We are aiming to be faithful to the Truth in our day and generation, and to achieve a place at the last among the chosen of God. Therefore we cannot be discouraged by a whole lifetime of a whole world’s opposition. To be on God’s side is to be on the winning side, however unpromising the appearances may be for the time being. We are on His side in being on the side of His Word. We have His own cheery rallying cry to trust to:

“They shall know whose word shall stand, Mine or theirs.”

This was of local application at the time, but it applies wherever God has spoken. The men of Judah living at Tahpanhes, Migdol, and Noph in Egypt found out how bottomless was their sophisticated expectation (that the practice of idolatry would secure their peace in Egypt) when Nebuchadnezzar’s army descended like a storm on the country, and spread terror and desolation before them. And so it will be with all who place themselves in antagonism to the revealed will of God. They may nurse their prosperities and congratulate themselves on the peace they are permitted to enjoy for the time being: but God’s Word will come to pass and root them out of the land of the living when His salvation will fill the earth with glory. Whenever we hear men glorying against the Truth in any way—whether it be patronising, agnostic or the blaspheming atheist, or the inebriate sectarian—let us call to mind God’s last words to the men of Judah:

“They shall know whose word shall stand, Mine or theirs.”

We know how such an issue must end. Every voice that is raised against the Word of God is certain to be hushed in the silence of the dust at last: And as certain it is that the Word of God and all who obey it will be triumphantly established in all the earth in the long-promised and endless coming day of joy.

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