

The Incarnation and the Atonement.

BY THE RIGHT REV. C. J. ELLICOTT, D.D., BISHOP OF GLOUCESTER.

'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.'—1 Tim. i. 15.

THESE few, but most blessed and comprehensive words, set forth two holy mysteries, the Incarnation, and (may we not presume to say?) the highest of its transcendent purposes—to save sinners, and to rescue from the power of the Evil One and from the kingdom of Antichrist the erring and disobedient children of men. These are the two blessed and closely-united truths that the text brings home to us—that Jesus Christ came, yea, to use the more precise language of St. John, is come, in the flesh, and has so come that He might save those into whose condition of flesh and blood He, the eternal Son of God, vouchsafed to enter and to dwell.

And first as to the Incarnation. Here we may, at the very outset, humbly and thankfully rejoice that during the last half-century this vital and fundamental truth has been dwelt upon with increasing earnestness and reverence. It has been felt, and rightly felt, that if this truth can be embraced by the soul, fully and firmly, then all the circumstances of the Lord's life here on earth, including His Resurrection and Ascension, become to the meditative spirit what they truly are, the natural sequels and consequences of the Word having become flesh, and of the very and eternal God having entered into the sinless conditions of human existence. Hence it is that the Apostle St. John makes this doctrine of the Incarnation the very test and touchstone of our being of God or not of God. 'Every spirit,' he says, 'that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come, in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that confesseth not Jesus, is not of God'; nay, more, as the apostle goes on to say, is verily of Antichrist, and has cast in his lot with the enemies of God.

That such a doctrine has now taken a firmer hold of believing hearts is one of the more cheering signs of the anxious days in which we are living. We are at last reverting to the primary belief of the early Christian Church, that God is among us, blessing and visiting the children of men. Not a God outside the world, or, as for ages has been the prevailing conception of God since the days of Augustine, transcendently above

it, but a God within the world, immanent and abiding. To the early writers of Christianity the Incarnation was not a new principle in the development of the world. Firmly believing in the immanence of God in the world which He had vouchsafed to create, and equally believing in Christ, not merely speculatively, but in deepest and most heartfelt reality as very and eternal God, to them it seemed no strange thing that the indwelling God should at length reveal Himself to the world, and even enter it under the conditions and in consonance with the laws of human existence and development.

Such was the Incarnation to those early thinkers. But, though in many respects there is a strange and spiritual resemblance between those early days of Christianity and our own, it still cannot be said that it is thus with us all at the present time. To the great majority of Christians the Incarnation seems to be a stupendous miracle, unrelated to the antecedent condition of things, and in a certain sense, as it has been spoken of, a break in the moral order of God's government of the world, something hard to be realized, something transcending all human powers adequately to understand.

Is it not so? Are there not many who feel that the Incarnation must always be to them something that by God's mercy they may believe on the authority of the Church, but still something which they can never, never realize, something they can never hope to make a working principle in the religious development of Christian life? How the babe lying in the manger could be the Word, the maker of the heavens and the earth, does seem so far to transcend all possibilities of explanation, or of intelligent thought, that it must be left as a truth to be believed by the mind, but not taken up into and embraced by the heart. In such feelings there is much that is natural, nay, even in a certain sense excusable. Even in the early ages of the Church it was long before the mystery of Immanuel and the true Personality of the Saviour of the world was set forth in the plainness and clearness of the creed. In that

great creed—that creed so often harshly denounced—the substance of the great Councils of the Church in reference to the Incarnation is set forth with such clearness of language and lucidity of statement, that I do not hesitate to say this—that no sober-minded Christian will fail to obtain in that creed such a conception of the Incarnation of our Lord and Master as will go far to remove the difficulty of practically realizing the Incarnation, and of taking to heart the blessed union of the Divine and the human in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is here, in the union of two natures so radically different as the human and the Divine, that the difficulties connected with the Incarnation will ever be found to exist. It was so in the early ages of the Church, and it is so now. That two natures could exist in their perfection in one blessed person, without blending, or without involving the conception of two persons mysteriously united in the one Lord Jesus Christ, appeared unthinkable to many of the disciplined and subtle minds of those early days; and, if thought about at all, it is regarded as so unthinkable now, that it may be dismissed without further consideration. But can these things be thus dismissed without the deepest danger to the soul? Is it not certain that the result will be, and must be, as now, alas! finds an illustration with many of the forward thinkers of our own times, plain and undisguised disbelief in the fact of the Incarnation and in the truth of the gospel narrative, and with that disbelief all the ruinous consequences that will infallibly follow? If it be felt that the Incarnation cannot be maintained, and that Christ was not born as Scripture declares that He was born, and that the Word did not become flesh, then all that depends upon the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Redemption, and the whole future hope, not only of the Church, but of the world, pass away with that on which they ultimately depended, and the kingdom of Christ becomes an illusion and a dream.

It is thus of the deepest moment, especially in these anxious days, that our faith in the Incarnation should be distinct and unwavering. We must unhesitatingly believe that our Lord and God did enter into our nature along its wonted pathway, and subject to all its limitations, but so entering, remained, nevertheless, from the first moment onward of the human life. He vouchsafed to live, very and eternal God, His outward glory

laid aside but His attributes unchanged. The life of Jesus was thus, to use the expression of a great Christian thinker, always God-human.

This is the faith handed down to us unchanged and unchangeable through ages of controversy, and only seen to be the brighter and the clearer as each controversy passed away.

If it be said that such a faith may be intellectually admitted, but can never be realized and taken up into the soul, my answer at once is, read the blessed gospel story and see if this God-human life does not reveal itself with the utmost clearness in numberless incidents, if each nature does not so reveal itself to the meditative reader that we may often presume to say “here in this passing incident my dear Lord stands before me in all his most blessed sympathizing humanity; here, again, in these heart-searching words, here, in this act, I feel and see in all His majesty, the very and eternal Son, and I bow down and say with St. Thomas, “my Lord and my God.”” This simple, but most real and persuasive mode of proving the truth of the Incarnation does not appeal simply to the intellect, but to the innermost convictions of the soul. In many and many an incident, and many a passage in the gospel life of our Lord, we may almost believe that the narrative was written as it was written that the truth of the Incarnation might be brought home to the reader, and that the God-man might stand before him in all His eternal reality.

I will give one out of the many illustrations that might be brought forward to substantiate what I have said, and the one that I will now mention has in it this interest, that it was alluded to in the famous letter of Leo the Great on the Incarnation of our Lord that was read at the Council of Chalcedon,—a letter, I may say in passing, that for clearness of statement and precision of language has scarcely an equal in the whole literature of controversy.

The illustration of the patent presence of two natures in our blessed Lord which I have chosen is from the scene at the grave of Lazarus. True human tears of deepest sympathy, the evangelist tells us, fell from the Divine eyes as the dear Lord was moving towards the tomb; but while those tears were falling the Eternal Father heard the inward voice of the Eternal Son, and when the tomb was reached, the words of Omnipotence were spoken, and from the chambers of the grave the

dead man came forth. In that most blessed scene the whole mystery of the Incarnation and of the two natures of our Lord seems brought home to the soul. The God-man seems to stand revealed to us: His holy cheeks still wet with human tears, while the loud voice is calling 'Lazarus, come forth.'

And this is but one out of numberless instances in which the holy mystery of the Incarnation, and of the union of the two natures, the human and the Divine, can be brought home to the devout reader of the gospel history. Such verifications of the blessed doctrine, undesignedly emerging as it were from the simple details of the inspired narrative, will ever be found to carry with them a conviction of the truth and reality of the Incarnation to the very heart and soul of the believer,—which no seeming difficulties in the doctrine will succeed in weakening, no counter-arguments will ultimately shake.

If finally we add to this some consideration of the Divine purpose of the Incarnation, all that has been said receives still fuller confirmation. Our text tells us that the Divine purpose of our Lord's coming into the world was to save sinners. The Nicene creed reiterates the same declaration. 'For us men and for our salvation' the Eternal Son

laid aside His glory and came down from Heaven. It was for us and for our salvation He came down, and was incarnate; for us and for our salvation that He was born as we are born, suffered, albeit in a greater and more transcendent intensity, as we suffer, died as we die. Other purposes in the boundless counsels of Omnipotence may be involved in the Incarnation; but into these mysteries we presume not to enter. The truth, the revealed truth, on which we dwell is that Christ was incarnate, and thus incarnate that we might be saved, be conformed to his image, and, at the last, clothed with a body like unto His glorious body, be with Him for evermore. When we dwell on this purpose and all that it involves, does not this question seem forced upon us, How could all this holy future have become thinkable to the mind of man if Christ had not thus come down to us, if mortal men had not thus seen the image to which we are hereafter to be conformed, and human witnesses had not beheld His glory, though seen amid the lowly circumstances of earth, and had not thus been enabled to form some dim conception of the glory of the future?

The more we dwell on the purpose—the salvation of mankind—the firmer will be our hold on the truth and reality of the Incarnation.

The Expository Times Guild of Bible Study.

THE subjects of study chosen for session 1897-98 are, in the Old Testament, the Book of Judges, and in the New, the Epistle to the Philippians. The Book of Judges presents difficult problems for the student of the history and literature of the Old Testament, but what a table it spreads for the preacher! And as for the Philippians, is it not Bishop Lightfoot who says that it stands to the Epistle to the Galatians as the building itself stands to the buttresses that support it?

The conditions of membership in THE EXPOSITORY TIMES Guild of Bible Study are simple. Whoever undertakes to study (that is to say, not merely to read, but more or less carefully, and with the aid of some commentary or a concordance at least, to study), either the Book of Judges or the Epistle to the Philippians, or both, between the months of November 1897 and July 1898, and sends

name (in full with degrees, and saying whether Rev., Mr., Mrs., or Miss) and address to the Editor of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES at Kinneff, Bervie, Scotland, is thereby enrolled in the membership of the Guild. There is no fee or other obligation.

A concordance is an excellent aid to Bible study. Bishop Westcott says *he* knows no better, and wants no other. Messrs. T. & T. Clark have recently published a new concordance to the Greek New Testament by Moulton and Geden. It is likely to supersede every other, and be unsuperseded for many a year. That for Philippians, if we can use the Greek, would do very well. But there are now two excellent commentaries on Philippians that work upon the Greek text. They are Bishop Lightfoot's (Macmillan, 12s.) and Professor Vincent's (T. & T. Clark, 8s. 6d.). The latter is just out. It seems