

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ISAIAH.

ISAIAH LIII. 2.

For he grew up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground.—R.V.

1. *He grew.*—The tense is the perfect of prophetic certitude; all has been finished 'before the foundation of the world' in the Divine counsels.

2. *Before him.*—He grew up 'before him,' before the face of Jehovah Himself. We picture some sequestered nook, remote from the din and clamour of the crowd; and we think of a childhood spent amid the quiet, sweet, balmy influences of a human home, with nature around, the child cast into the fellowship of lowly people and simple scenes, and growing up under the eye of God Himself.

3. *A tender plant, a root out of a dry ground.*—Men expected a 'plant of renown,' fairer and statelier than all the trees in the garden of God, with boughs lifted cedar-like in majesty; instead, there is a suckling, a sprout from the root of a tree that had been cut down, with nothing fair or magnificent about it. It owes nothing to the soil in which it grows. The ground is dry, an arid waste without moisture; the plant is a tender one; and in that unpropitious soil, whence no sweet juices can be drawn, it grows up stunted, dwarfed, unattractive. That is the figure.

Some time ago, as I travelled through one of the Welsh mining valleys, my eye fell upon three or four trees that were growing out of the very midst of a hill of coal waste. It was a most unlikely place in which to see a tree growing at all, and I marvelled at the vitality that could exist amid such surroundings. But I also noticed that it was a very precarious and poverty-stricken existence these trees on the coal heap were leading. Compared with the trees that were growing in the green and fertile fields near by, they were poor and sickly-looking specimens. It is hopeless to expect a strong, vigorous, beautiful plant to spring out of a 'dry ground.'¹

The meaning is missed in the lines:

Fair as a beauteous, tender flower
Amid the desert grows,
So, slighted by a rebel race,
The Heavenly Saviour rose.

Not *that*; not a beauteous, tender flower, growing fair in some desert spot, lending desolation a charm; but a tender

sapling growing in unfriendly soil, far away from 'the scent of waters,' sickly, dwarfed, without beauty. The idea is more nearly caught in the other lines:

Like a tender plant that's growing
Where no waters, kindly flowing,
No kind rains, refresh the ground,
Drooping, dying, ye shall view Him,
See no charm to draw you to Him,
There no beauty shall be found.²

I.

THE SOIL.

In this moving chapter the prophet, by the Spirit, speaks of Christ. And this is one feature about the Christ which he notices—His unexpectedness, His unaccountableness, His miraculousness. He grew up before Him as a 'root out of a dry ground.' There was nothing in the soil out of which He grew to account for Jesus.

An Italian nobleman during the stern reign of Napoleon underwent a long imprisonment. He had drunk deep of the cold rationalism of the eighteenth century and went to prison an atheist. As he paced his little court he noticed one day a slight disturbance of its hard clay floor. Then in a few days a glistening point pushed itself up through the clay and the mortar. As these rough impediments were got over, the hard sheath opened out and a delicate plant shot up into the air. The prisoner watched from day to day with deep interest the growth of the little plant, the expanding of leaves that had been daintily folded in their protecting case, the issuing of a carefully covered bud which opened out, petal after petal, into a lovely flower with provision in its calyx for the infinite renewal of the plant's life. And through the teaching of this 'lily of the field,' the atheist left his prison a believer in his Father's wisdom and his Father's love.³

1. There is nothing in the *Surroundings* of Jesus to account for Him. You cannot explain His greatness on the ground of early advantages, for He had none. The Jews were surprised. 'Whence hath this man these things?' they asked. 'Is not this the carpenter?' 'How knoweth this man letters,' they asked on another occasion, 'having never learned?' They thought of our Lord's home, they thought of His education, they thought of Nazareth, they thought of those years in the workshop; and then they thought of

² J. Culross, *The Man of Sorrows*, 78.

³ F. R. Wynne, *The Literature of the Second Century*, 92.

¹ J. D. Jones, *The Hope of the Gospel*, 1.

His words of grace, His deeds of power, and His life of absolute holiness, and it left them utterly and hopelessly bewildered. There was nothing in His upbringing and surroundings to account for Him. As far as His environment was concerned, He grew up as a 'root out of a dry ground.'

2. Jesus derived nothing from His *Nationality*; it was no general recommendation to His teaching that He was of the seed of Abraham. Why, to this day, to many minds, it is almost shameful to mention that our Saviour was a Jew. Though certainly the Jew is of an honourable race, ancient and venerable, as having been chosen by God of old, yet among the sons of men the name of Jew has not yet lost the opprobrium which long ages of cruel oppression and superstitious hate have cast upon it. There was no nation, immediately after the time of our Saviour, that the Romans ardently hated except the Jews. The Romans were peculiarly tolerant of all religions and customs; by conquest their empire had absorbed men of all languages and creeds, and they usually left them undisturbed: but the Jewish faith was too peculiar and intolerant to escape derision and hatred. After the siege of Jerusalem by Titus, the Jews were hunted down, and the connexion of Christianity with Judaism, so far from being an advantage to it, became a serious hindrance to its growth. Christianity was confounded with Judaism, and made to share the political obloquy of the Jewish nation as well as its own reproach. Had our Saviour been born in Greece, there is no doubt that as a religious teacher He would have commanded far more attention than as coming forward from Jerusalem or Nazareth. He owed nothing to His Jewish birth, for if anything good could have come out of Israel in former days, behold into what a state it had fallen,—it was dead politically, religiously, and mentally!

3. There is nothing even in the *Human Race* to explain Jesus. The race has produced great teachers and leaders like Confucius, and Buddha, and Mahomet, and Plato, and Socrates. But the fact that the race produced Confucius, and Buddha, and Mahomet, and Socrates, and Plato, and Dante, and Shakespeare does not make it a whit easier to understand how it could produce Jesus. For in the matter of wisdom and truth, a whole universe separates Jesus from the best and wisest of other teachers. There are falsities mixed up with their wisdom, but the wisdom of Jesus is

all pure gold. We outgrow their teaching. The teaching of Jesus, after nineteen centuries, remains our wonder and our inspiration. Others guess at truth. Jesus talks about the eternities in the calm and assured accents of full and perfect knowledge.

'A root out of a dry ground.' Some miles from Cairo, right in the desert, standing absolutely by itself, is a large palm tree, known locally as 'The Lone Palm Tree.' It is about four miles from the river Nile, and no one knows how it lives or whence it derives the moisture necessary for its sustenance. Visitors go to see it and discuss the mystery of its existence. Not less arid and barren than the desert of Sahara was the world of humanity from which miraculously sprang the Messiah, deriving His being, His powers, His mission from the hidden springs of Deity.

II.

THE PLANT.

The marvel of Christ's Person becomes all the more marvellous when we consider the conditions of His time and the circumstances out of which He sprang. The nature of the growth is always in accordance with the nature of the soil. You cannot expect a harvest from seed that falls on the rocky ground. If things grow at all out of dry and hard ground, they are bound to be feeble and sickly growths. But Jesus was no feeble and sickly growth. He was the 'chiefest among ten thousand,' and the 'altogether lovely.' He was like the cedar of Lebanon for strength, like the lily of the valley for fragrance and purity, like the rose of Sharon for glory. By universal consent He was the best and noblest, and the highest and holiest of mankind. And yet He grew up as a root out of a dry ground. There was nothing in His circumstances or surroundings to account for Him or explain Him. He is as surprising, as inexplicable, as miraculous, as would be, let us say, a crop of flowers springing up out of the asphalt paving of our public streets.

Owing to their geographical position, the central and western regions of South Africa are almost constantly deprived of rain. They contain no flowing streams, and very little water in the wells. The soil is a soft and light-coloured sand, which reflects the sunlight with a glaring intensity. No fresh breeze cools the air; no passing cloud veils the scorching sky. We should naturally have supposed that regions so scantily supplied with one of the first necessities of life could be nothing else than waste and lifeless deserts; and yet, strange to say, they are distinguished for their comparatively abundant vegetation, and their immense development of animal life. The evil produced by want of rain has been counteracted by the admirable foresight of the

Creator, in providing these arid lands with plants suited to their trying circumstances. The vegetation is eminently local and special. Nothing like it is seen elsewhere on the face of the earth. Nearly all the plants have tuberous roots, buried far beneath the ground, beyond the scorching effects of the sun, and are composed of succulent tissue, filled with a deliciously cool and refreshing fluid. They have also thick fleshy leaves, with pores capable of imbibing and retaining moisture from a very dry atmosphere and soil; so that if a leaf be broken during the greatest drought, it shows abundant circulating sap. Nothing can look more unlike the situations in which they are found than these succulent roots, full of fluid when the surrounding soil is dry as dust, and the enveloping air seems utterly destitute of moisture; replete with nourishment and life when all within the horizon is desolation and death. They seem to have a special vitality in themselves; and, unlike all other plants, to be independent of circumstances. Such roots are also found in the deserts of Arabia; and it was doubtless one of them that suggested to the prophet the beautiful and expressive emblem of the text, 'He shall grow up before him as a root out of a dry ground.'¹

1. Christ created the gospel by His work; He preaches the gospel by His words; He is the gospel Himself. His Person is intrinsically superior to all the doctrines which He proclaims, and all the blessings which He confers. His individuality takes precedence of everything else. He is the Way; for no man cometh to the Father but by Him. He is the Truth; for the truth that it frees and sanctifies the soul is 'the truth as it is in Jesus.' He is the Life; for he that believeth in Him, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and to know Him is life everlasting. He of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption; and the believer is said to 'put on Christ,' and not merely His salvation, to be made 'a partaker of Christ,' and not merely of His gifts, whether of grace or glory. In short, there are numerous passages in the New Testament which declare Christ *to be personally* what, in the ordinary language of life, we should say that He had done and taught and communicated.

2. All the individual life of the Christian, with its blossoms of holiness and its fruits of righteousness; all the Christian life of society, with its things that are pure, and honest, and lovely, and of good report, is but a development and a manifestation of the life of Christ in the heart and in the world; a growth and unfolding of the power, the beauty, and the sweetness that are hid in the

¹ H. Macmillan, *Bible Teachings in Nature*, 210.

root of Jesse. And it is assuredly the most precious, as it is the most distinguishing, feature of the Christian religion, that it places the foundation of eternal life in living relations with a living person, rather than in the profession of a creed or the practice of a duty; that under it the believer is 'not a man who maintains the doctrine of the Trinity, or who holds justification by faith, but the man who has come to Christ, and is rooted and built up in Him.'

3. Among the problems which most occupy the minds of men to-day are problems which have to do with the work and Person of Jesus Christ. From whatever point of view we regard Him, this much we have to concede, that He is a spiritual force of the first magnitude, that He has produced results so vast and far-reaching as almost to defy computation, that He stands out from the page of history unique and incalculable. And such effects as these imply a cause sufficient to produce them. There must have been in Christ, or behind Christ, some power capable of doing the work. When we compare the Jesus of our Gospels, the work He did and the estimate in which He was held by His contemporaries, with the Christ of history, and the position which He holds to-day, there is nothing unreasonable in the assumption of the Incarnation, that He was God manifest in the flesh. No one can doubt that this is an assumption sufficient to account for the facts. The only question is whether any lesser assumption—any one involving fewer demands upon our faith—can do the same.²

What, then, shall we say of Jesus? There is only one thing that can be said of Him. He is not the product of the race. He is the gift of God. Start from purely human considerations, and Jesus remains as big a problem and as hopeless and insoluble a riddle as a root out of a dry ground. But my difficulties vanish, and I can understand Jesus when, with the Holy Church, I say that Jesus does not represent so much the ascent of man, as the descent of God; not so much the climbing of the human into the Divine, as the condescension of the Divine to the human; that His birth was not a mere birth, but an Incarnation; that Jesus is not simply Son of Mary, but Immanuel, God with us. 'I say,' said Browning, and I say it with him:

I say, the acknowledgement of God in Christ
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it.³

² W. B. Selbie, *The Servant of God*, 30.

³ J. D. Jones, *The Hope of the Gospel*, 13.