

SERMON VI

THE INCARNATION

And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to men.—LUKE 2:13, 14.

THERE are two memorable occasions, in time past, on which the angels are represented as joining in chorus to praise God in relation to our world. The first was when the corner-stone of the fabric of the universe was laid, and its foundations were fastened. Then "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." The other was at the birth of a Saviour; which is referred to in our text. And we are informed by the sure word of prophecy, that at the overthrow of the spiritual Babylon, and at the marriage of the Lamb, there will be another grand chorus, when a voice coming out of the throne shall say, "Praise our God, all ye his servants, and all ye that fear him, both small and great." "And I heard," says John, "as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him, for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready."

It is exceedingly gratifying to be introduced to some acquaintance with the celestial inhabitants, and to find that they are possessed of feelings very much like our own; except, that they are exempt from all sin and imperfection. It cannot but be very interesting to know, that the angels have a kind and tender feeling towards the children of God; and that they are employed as guardians to watch over them, and as helpers to deliver them from evils which would otherwise overwhelm them. It is wisely ordered, that in their common ministry to the heirs of salvation, the angels act without being seen, and

render the most important services to the people of God, without their knowledge. For the visible presence of these holy beings would so overawe us, that we should through fear be unfitted for the common duties of life. For a long period, the visits of angels had scarcely been known in the Church; but when the Son of God was about to be manifested, the angel of the Lord appeared, first, to Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, when he was wide awake, ministering in the temple, and afterwards to Mary, and to Joseph, her espoused husband. But on the memorable night of the birth of Christ, it pleased God to send his angel, probably Gabriel, to announce the joyful event, to a company of shepherds, who were remaining in the fields near Bethlehem, with their flocks, by night. "Suddenly, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid." It is not in human nature to look on the face of an angel and not be afraid. Conscious guilt abashes us in the presence of beings so holy and so far superior to us. But these benevolent messengers of God when they appear, do commonly, in the kindest and gentlest manner, allay the fears of those to whom they are sent. In this case, the angel said to the frightened shepherds, "Fear not, for behold I bring unto you glad tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people. For unto you is born, this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you, ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Though but one angel appeared at first, to the shepherds, yet he was not alone. This was not an event to be made known by a solitary messenger: it was one which commanded the attention and interested the feelings of all the inhabitants of heaven; and they were filled with gladness at the prospect of such a mighty Deliverer appearing among men. Now "suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, and good will to men."

The first thing in this divine anthem which demands our attention is, the disposition manifested by these celestial beings. The sentiments of their song are precisely such as we should expect from holy angels:

and though the words sung by them, in concert, were few, yet they contain a complete expression of a disposition perfectly holy. They first ascribe all glory to God. This, undoubtedly, is the very essence of a heavenly temper. Whatever tends to the glory of God, will be delightful to the feelings of holy angels. To promote this object, they are ready for every service which may be required of them; and whether it be of an exalted nature, or an humble ministry to sinful men, they are equally prompt in their obedience; for the love of God is the predominant and absorbing passion of their minds. But where there exists supreme love to God, there will be found benevolence to his creatures. The angels rejoice in the birth of a Saviour, because this will restore peace to the earth. The existence of war among the offspring of the same parents, and partakers of the same nature, is itself an awful evidence, that ours is a fallen race. The number of men destroyed in war cannot be calculated; and much of the time and wealth of nations is expended in preparing for and carrying on this most inhuman employment. But the angels considered the birth of a Saviour as connected with permanent and ultimate peace. Let the kingdom of Christ be once fully established in the world, and wars will cease, every where: for whence come wars and fightings? come they not of men's lusts? The spirit of the Gospel is peace—the tendency of the Gospel is to lead men to convert their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. The heathen had in their pantheon, gods who delighted in war; but our King is THE PRINCE OF PEACE, and the holy angels rejoice in the prospect of peace on earth. And they cherish a hearty good will to men; and because the Gospel breathes such a temper, they rejoiced at its introduction, and now daily rejoice at the conversion of every soul, rescued from the guilt and defilement of sin, and from the dominion of Satan. "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God, over one sinner that repenteth."

We see here, what the temper of heaven is, and what we pray for, when we say, "thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven." The spirit manifested by this great multitude of angels, and which pervades and actuates the whole innumerable company of angels, is the very spirit

which should be predominant among men. They should all rejoice in the glory of God, and should breathe peace and good will to men. What a blessed change will it be, when all men, or the most of men, shall be actuated by this spirit! Perhaps we cannot spend our time better, than by contemplating the connection between the birth of a Saviour, and the glory of God, and also the happiness of men.

God is glorified by every thing which makes his glorious attributes more fully known. As he is absolutely and infinitely perfect, nothing can be added to his essential perfection; but by means of his creatures, his attributes may be exhibited; and so far as this is done, God is said to be glorified. And reason and Scripture unite in teaching, that this is the object at which God aims in all his works and dispensations. There can be no higher or nobler object. And rational creatures should make this the supreme object of pursuit also, and should glorify God in every way possible, and with all their powers. How do the heavens declare the glory of God? evidently by showing forth his power, wisdom and goodness. Thus also the earth is said to be full of the glory of God, because his attributes, already mentioned, are conspicuously displayed in every animal and in every vegetable; in the productions of the earth, in the clouds, the rain, the sea, the vines, the fountains of water, in the light, the air, the vicissitude of day and night, in the varying seasons, in seed time, and harvest—in fact, every thing upon earth furnishes evidence of the wisdom and goodness of the Creator. But in the Gospel, God has given a richer and fuller display of his attributes, than in the creation. Here his wisdom is very conspicuous, in the incarnation. The child that was now born, was not a common child—was not a mere human being, but though a perfect man, was the SON OF GOD. In this birth "the Word was made flesh;" "God was made manifest in the flesh." Here we have what may be called the depths of divine wisdom;—Deity united in personal subsistence with humanity; so that, the same who is the Son of God, is also the son of man—God-man; but still so united, that the perfections of deity are not communicated to the human soul, nor the properties of the human soul transferred to the divine nature. By this wise and wonderful constitution of the

person of Christ, a foundation is laid for the salvation of sinners, in consistency with the truth and justice of God. Many suppose, that God can save the sinner by a mere act of sovereign power. As to mere power, he could, but where would be his justice? Where would be the honour of his law? To save sinners without an atonement, would be giving such an exhibition of his character, as would encourage his creatures to sin; or at least, remove all terror from the prospect of doing evil. His opposition to sin would not, in that case, be manifest; and so the holiness of his character would be obscured. The difficult problem to be solved was, how God could be just, and yet justify the ungodly. It is only by a person constituted as that of Jesus Christ is, that justice and mercy can be reconciled in the salvation of a sinner. That which is requisite is to satisfy the law and justice of God. Supposing the Ruler of the universe willing to accept of a substitute—a thing which God has made known in the revelation which he has given—here is one perfectly qualified to do and suffer all that is requisite for the honour of God, and for the salvation of the sinner. Though wisdom is gloriously illustrated in the incarnation; love and mercy are not less conspicuous. Indeed, we must consider LOVE as the first mover in this stupendous plan of salvation. Wisdom and power are exerted to open a way in which divine mercy may have a vent. Mercy cannot be exercised at the expense of justice. It is necessary, therefore, that the plan contain a provision for the complete satisfaction of justice. That which would have been pronounced impossible by any creature, however exalted, has been accomplished by the wisdom of God. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" But, as was intimated, the whole contrivance was to make a way for the exercise of love and mercy. In the birth of a Saviour, we have the brightest manifestation of the free love of God, of which we can possibly conceive. "God so loved the world as to give his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us." "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God." "God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us." "As Christ also hath loved us and given

himself for us." "That ye may be able to comprehend with all saints, what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge." "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. But God commendeth his love to us, in that while we were yet enemies, Christ died for us."

That justice is an essential attribute of God reason teaches; and the same is prominently held forth in the Sacred Scriptures. Even in those passages where he reveals his name, as "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, keeping mercy for thousands," it is declared, "that he will in no wise clear the guilty." It is unnecessary further to explain how this attribute is gloriously illustrated in the advent of Christ and the plan of salvation: for we have seen already, that the great obstacle which stood in the way of the sinner's salvation, was the inexorable demands of justice, which could not be set aside without satisfaction. And it has already been shown, that the wisdom of the plan consisted in its being so contrived as fully to satisfy the claims of justice, by satisfying the law, by the mediation of a competent substitute, or surety. And that this is not an imaginary device, of man's invention, but God's revealed scheme of mercy, will be evident from the citation of a few passages of Scripture. "For he who knew no sin was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending forth his Son, for sin—condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us." "But when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law." "For it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them." "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." "As by the disobedience of one many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous."

The truth and faithfulness of God are also rendered most manifest by the birth of a Saviour. For thousands of years, prediction after prediction had been given, as proofs to support the faith of the people of God, that a Messiah, a Prophet, a Priest, like unto Melchisedek, and a King on mount Zion, should be revealed. The time of his arrival had been specified, in several remarkable prophecies, and the fulness of time was come. According to every human prospect, indeed, there seemed little probability of the exact fulfilment of those predictions. The Jewish nation had fallen under the Roman yoke, and the family of David were scattered and impoverished. But God is at no loss to accomplish his purposes, and fulfil his own predictions. When Israel was in Egypt, in bondage, the time of the promise drew nigh, but what appearance of a fulfilment? Yet on the very day on which the four hundred and thirty years of afflictions predicted to Abraham, were expired, on that very day, the whole nation marched out of the land of their bondage. So when Daniel's seventy weeks were coming to an end, the Son of David is born. A holy virgin of the family and lineage of David, accompanied by her espoused husband, is by the Providence of God, brought from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And see how God overrules the hearts of kings to accomplish his purposes. Augustus Cæsar must make a decree requiring every family to repair to its own city, in order to be registered. And here Joseph and Mary, in their deep poverty, are found obeying the imperial edict; and thus, God's word was fulfilled in regard to Bethlehem. "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah; yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be Ruler in Israel." But the prophecies not only designated the Messiah by the place of his birth and his descent from the family of David, but as one who was to be born of a virgin. "Behold," says Isaiah, "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Such a thing as this was never known from the foundation of the world; but it was literally fulfilled in the case of our Saviour. The evangelist Matthew informs us, "that the birth of Christ was on this wise. When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband being a just man,

and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted, is, God with us." Thus God was glorified by the birth of this child, because by this event, the truth and faithfulness of God were clearly manifested. That the birth of Christ was indicative of good will to men needs no further proof, for we have shown that the origin of the whole plan of salvation was love, and good will is only another name for love. If God loved our world, it cannot be disputed that he exercised good will toward men. And that the tendency of the gospel is to bring about universal peace among men, was stated in the beginning of our discourse; but it may be proper and consistent with Scripture usage to give a more extended meaning to the word peace. This is a term, which when used by Christ and his apostles, is rich in import. It is one of those words which are commonly used in benedictions. As when Jesus says, "My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you." "These things have I spoken unto you that ye might have peace." "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace." So Paul's usual salutation runs, "Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ." And he speaks of "the peace of God which passeth all understanding." Taking this word in the most comprehensive sense, it will include three important blessings. First, peace with God; in order to which, his wrath must be appeased by the blood of Christ. This is nothing else than that perfect reconciliation which is spoken of in Scripture. It is the result of our pardon and justification. "Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Peace with God also includes the slaying of the natural enmity of the human heart, and filling it with love. The second blessing included under this word is, peace of

conscience, and tranquillity and harmony in the exercise of the desires and affections of the mind. Sin has produced direful disorder in the exercise of the human powers. Grace restores peace and harmony; and the conscience of the sinner, though it may sleep, though it may be seared, yet never enjoys a solid peace, until sprinkled with the blood of atonement. This is the only balm which can remove the pain of a wounded spirit. The third blessing is peace with our fellow men. Christians must, from the nature of the doctrines which they believe, and from the dispositions with which they are inspired, be men of peace. Their rule is, as far as in them lies, to live peaceably with all men. And they are ever found to be peace-makers. Nothing more is necessary to produce universal peace, than the general prevalence of the gospel.

We may bring this discourse to a close by a few reflections:

1. It is delightful to the pious mind to know, that although there are so few in this world who engage sincerely in the worship of their Creator; and although by most his authority is despised, and his law trodden under foot; yet there is a world, peopled by an innumerable company of beings far more exalted than man, where all, without exception, esteem it their highest honour and greatest felicity to be constantly employed in the high praises of God, and in executing his commands. It is probable, that while multitudes are employed in ascribing praise and glory to God, others are sent as messengers to declare the will of God, and as ministering servants, to minister unto, and exercise a guardianship over, the people of God, and that, in both these services, they take their turns; so that all enjoy the high privilege of joining in the grand concert of praise around the throne; and all in their turn are required to execute the divine will as angels or messengers.

2. How pleasing is the thought that these celestial beings are lovers of men, and take a lively interest in all our concerns; especially, that they are deeply interested in all that relates to the salvation of God's

elect, and cheerfully condescend to attend on such to guard them from evil, and to help them in ways unknown to us.

3. But the service which angels can render to us is small, compared with the work of redemption wrought by the Son of God. What measure can be assigned to the gratitude due for the birth of a Saviour? And although this glorious event occurred above eighteen centuries since; yet its importance is not in the least diminished. The blessed effects of the incarnation are as great now, as they ever were. Christ, who was born in Bethlehem, is as mighty to save now, as when he died: his precious blood shall never lose its power. And we may have as free access to the Redeemer now, as his immediate disciples had. Faith does not require a visible Saviour for its object; but the blessing is rather on those who have not seen, and yet believed.

4. Let us endeavour to imbibe the Spirit which animated this multitude of the heavenly host, and make it our constant aim to give glory to God in the highest, to seek the peace of the world, and to exercise good-will to men. Let us remember, that we are not our own, but bought with a price, and that we should, therefore, glorify God with our bodies and spirits, which are his. Whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we should glorify God; and should let our light so shine, that others seeing our good works, should be led to glorify our Father in heaven.

Let us remember, that time is short; that our opportunities of glorifying God in this world will soon be past. Work then while it is called today, for the night cometh on apace when no man can work.

5. The lively remembrance of the Saviour's birth should not be confined to any certain day in the year, but should call forth our gratitude and praise, every day. We read nothing in the New Testament of setting apart one particular day for the celebration of this great event. The minds of the apostles and primitive disciples, were so imbued with the spirit of the gospel, that they appear to have

disregarded those external circumstances and associations, which have since so greatly occupied the thoughts of men. We never find the apostles, when at Jerusalem, visiting holy places, or seeking after relics. No allusion to any such thing is found in the pages of the New Testament. And yet, if we had been informed of the precise time of our Saviour's birth, there would be no harm in paying attention to this anniversary, without superstition. But the day of the year in which Christ was born, is utterly uncertain; and never can be ascertained without divine revelation.

SERMON VII

CHRIST'S GIFT OF HIMSELF FOR OUR REDEMPTION

Who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity.—TITUS 2:14.

THAT Jesus Christ is the person here spoken of, is perfectly evident: but what the true character of Jesus Christ is, is a point disputed, and one of unspeakable importance. No greater difference of opinion can exist, than whether our Saviour is a mere man, or the mighty God. As we embrace the one or the other of these opinions, our whole system of doctrines will be modified. Accordingly, it is found, that all who deny the deity of Christ, reject all the fundamental truths of the Christian religion. The divinity of Christ being a fundamental doctrine, we find the proofs of it every where scattered through the Scriptures.

In the context we have a proof of the doctrine of the most convincing kind. In the verse preceding our text, the apostle Paul, under the