

Malachi,

II.

(The second of a series of three addresses given in Westminster Abbey by the Rt. Rev. H. E. RYLE, D.D., C.V.O., Dean of Westminster.)

Malachi ii. 10-iii. 12.

THIS central portion of the book Malachi contains several very obscure passages. But without lingering over them the reader has no difficulty in discerning the three principal subjects with which the prophet is concerned. These are (1) social impurity (ii. 10-16); (2) the coming of Divine Judgment (ii. 17-iii. 6); and (3) the call to Repentance (iii. 7-12).

I. The subject of the first section is one of painful social interest. It had apparently become quite common for a Jew (and the Priests here set an evil example) to divorce his Jewish wife with the object of contracting a marriage with the daughter of an alien race and an idolatrous religion, but socially, officially, or commercially well connected: "he hath profaned the holiness of the Lord which he loveth, and hath married the daughter of a strange god" (ver. 16). Against this mean and heartless conduct towards innocent women the prophet directs a stream of hot indignation. "The LORD," he says, "hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth against whom thou hast dealt treacherously . . . she is thy companion and the wife of thy covenant. Take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For I hate putting away, saith the LORD the God of Israel . . . take heed to your spirit that ye deal not treacherously" (vv. 14, 15, 16). This is the last of a series of wrongdoings which the prophet enumerates to account for the fact that the people failed to perceive and realize God's love towards them. They preferred the gratification of their selfish, social aims and undisciplined passions to the fulfilment of his pure Will. Could they look to inherit His coveted blessing while they openly profaned His holy covenant?

The lesson for us is surely this, that *true religion is incompatible with faithlessness to the marriage tie.*

The sanctity of marriage lies at the root of family peace and social order. Where there is no respect for the marriage tie, there

the foundations of morality are broken up : there the honour of womanhood is degraded. Marriages which are made in frivolity and thoughtlessness are wont to be annulled with levity. Unfaithfulness to the marriage tie is the denial of obligations to our fellow-creatures and to God. The religion of an adulterer and a fornicator is hypocrisy. It may impose upon the world ; it is hateful in God's sight.

When Jesus Christ was on earth, the Jews practised the grossest laxity of divorce. The Scribes and Pharisees sanctioned divorce for causes of the most trifling character. Our Lord Himself upheld the strictest line. If severed at all, the tie of marriage could only be severed for adultery : divorce should not be permitted except for that extreme cause (cf. Matt. v. 32).

The violation of chastity, involved in that wanton levity of divorce which has been flagrantly frequent in the United States, and has grown with ominous rapidity among ourselves, and particularly among members of the theatrical profession, is a type of sin which outrages the honour of sex. It does violence to the safeguards of society ; it is the outcome of animal selfishness ; it is the violation of charity ; it is the ignoring of the one Fatherhood of God. " Have we not all one father ? hath not one God created us ? " says the Prophet (ii. 10), as he thinks of our oneness in the family of God, and of the claims of human brotherhood and sisterhood. God has created us soul as well as body. Man is not as the brute beasts. Husband and wife are united by a union that is spiritual more truly than bodily. " Until death us do part " is the solemn pledge given at the altar ; and its observance is the only basis of the happiness and the sanctity of home life. The strict law of Christ may in some cases seem to press with austerity. It is better that there should be hardship in a few exceptional cases than that the opportunity of cruelty, desertion and sensuality should universally be allowed. If marriages were more often contracted in the spirit of prayer and forethought, and less often arranged in giddy excitement or with frivolous and base motives, the records of the Divorce Court would not so continually offend us with scandalous tales of licentiousness, misery, and despair.

2. The second lesson of our passage is that which is furnished by the most distinctive message of the book : *God's Day of Judgement is a people's moral discipline.* The prophet is not predicting a universal

overthrow. He is speaking to his own countrymen, and in particular to the priests. Men were saying scoffingly, "Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord," and, "Where is the God of judgement?" if He were just, He would not thus permit the wicked, namely the foes of Israel, to prosper (ii. 17). They would suddenly find that the Lord God has come among them; that His Messenger has heralded His coming; and that the Temple itself has been the scene of His manifestation (iii. 1). How the prophet's words were fulfilled, we cannot say with any degree of certainty. The prophetic vision, as it scans the future, often seems to foreshorten events that were separated by long intervals. The arrival of Ezra may have been "a Messenger" to "prepare the way," in one age; in another, the ministry of John the Baptist, as our Lord expressly testified (Matt. xi. 10). Think of the overthrow and pollution of the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes! Think of the extirpation of a corrupt High Priesthood by the Maccabee Princes! These were terrific judgements that profoundly affected the life and worship of the Jewish people. They burnt away the corrupt element which had brought their country into misery and their faith to the brink of destruction.

Once more, in connexion with the coming of Jesus Christ, which had been heralded by the Baptist (Matt. xi. 10; Mark i. 2; Luke i. 76, vii. 27), God visited His people. Remember how, ere another generation had passed away, the Roman soldiers had destroyed the City and Temple of Jerusalem. The old worship passed away in the smoke and flame of that day of the LORD. The refiner's fire had consumed the elements of base alloy (iii. 2).

The prophet in our passage sees nothing in sharp outlines. He sees the figure of a Forerunner; he sees a Messenger of warning and reproof. He sees Jehovah coming in a judgement of irresistible power. It is a process which he likens to that of the fuller's wholesale purging and renovation, or to that of the metal-refiner's fire, consuming the dross and purifying the silver. Behind and through the clouds of disaster, he sees expanding a blue sky of restoration and happiness.

The history of nations is an avenue of neglected warnings. Sufferings and catastrophes have a purpose of moral purification which at the time a people fails to discern. "The Day of the Lord may come upon a nation; His Messenger may have heralded the coming, and not been heeded. Men who have not looked for God, will

not have seen Him. They never recognize His Forerunner who never look for His coming. In the education of the world, suffering has served as a bitter discipline. Individuals and nations have alike found it hard to realize that the price of a needed social purification is paid in coin of acute humiliation.

The list of evils, for which the Jewish prophet announces (cf. iii. 5) that judgement must be exacted, has in every age proclaimed the moral decay of a people. There is "the sorcerer," the charlatan who fattens on the timidity of the weak and the credulity of the ignorant : his popularity betrays the bankruptcy of the common faith and the fashionable rejection of the simple and less sensational reliance on the goodness of an Almighty and Heavenly Father. There is the "adulterer," who in an age of unhealthy excitement personifies the defiance of Divine Law and human institution, and the selfish surrender to the impulses of sensual passion. There is the "false swearer," who in unsettled days reaps a plentiful harvest of ill-gotten gain by a system, in which truth is only spoken in business circles when it is convenient or remunerative. There is the "oppressor." In the general hurry to get rich the cause of the poor wage-earner is forgotten. Payment by sweating flourishes, if not openly, yet, at least more flagrantly, in stealth. The destitute are down-trodden by more fortunate rivals. The cause of the defenceless woman and the little children is overlooked by the winners in the race for pleasure and power.

Such are some of the invariable features of corruption when a people leaves out the thought of God. Yet God is infinite in mercy.

"I, the LORD, change not ; therefore ye, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" (iii. 6). He will visit them ; He will purify them ; He will be to them as a consuming fire against sin and impurity. But He will not destroy His people. There is Divine Love in the discipline of the darkest days.

The passage closes with the call to repentance, which Jehovah addresses to the people. And the lesson it conveys is the familiar one that *Repentance in fact brings a blessing in fact.*

The tithes and offerings which the Jewish people were bound by their religion to bring to the Temple at Jerusalem were the test and pledge of spiritual sincerity. Where there is no conviction of the love and goodness of God, there will be little readiness to make any sacrifice for His cause. Contributions may be trifling in amount ;

but their cessation or reduction affords significant evidence of mental attitude. A man without true religion will take the first occasion for cutting down his payments for spiritual or charitable objects. His charity has been done to be seen of men, not to help forward the cause of the kingdom of God.

What right had the Jews to expect the signs of Divine blessing for which they longed, material prosperity, abundant crops, and the overthrow of their enemies, if on their side they failed to satisfy the simplest test of their real loyalty to God? Let them return to God, not in word and profession only, and they will find He has never failed to be present to them, and is plenteous in goodness and mercy. "Prove me now herewith saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (iii. 10). How easily nations and Churches fall short of their responsibilities in the comfortable days of peace and the easy times of prosperity! Sacred duties are forgotten, the solemn eternal issues of life and death are thrust on one side as an inconvenient subject. In the ordinary estimate of human affairs, the readiness to give furnishes a rough criterion of confidence. Men will nowhere pay, where they no longer trust. Payment is the simplest expression of personal interest and personal sacrifice. The worth of repentance, as the prophet would have his countrymen remember, must be tested by something more than phrases. In the Jewish Church, the man who declined to make his offering, practically renounced his membership. Let him return unto God! let him lay down his offering once more at the altar! let him begin again to make the little yearly surrender, out of his earnings, in thankful acknowledgment of God's fatherly love! It is only the man who tries to make aright his offering to God, that will learn the full extent of God's goodness to himself. Fully to realize God's love you must have begun to take your share in the spirit of self-surrender, of which Church payments are a faint symbol, and the cross of Christ the eternal ideal.

"And all nations shall call you happy: for ye shall be a delightful-land, saith the LORD of hosts" (iii. 12).

(To be concluded.)

