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SERMON XCII.

CONVERSION.

(PREACHED ON THE FEAST OF THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL.)

ACTS ix. 6.

“And he, trembling and astonished, said, LORD, what wilt THOU have me to do?”

THE conversion of St. Paul in some respects resembles, in some differs from, what from time to time takes place among Christians. It differs from them in that it was St. Paul's first call; it called him from the sinfulness of his state by nature, not *re-called* him from sin into which he had fallen from a state of grace; it called him to be made “a member of CHRIST, a child of GOD, an inheritor of heaven,” not re-called him to return as an erring child to seek anew by repentance his forfeited inheritance; called him to be a partaker of the gifts and blessings of Baptism, not re-called him by virtue of that Baptism to seek again with tears its wasted gifts; brought him for the first time within his LORD'S fold, not brought him back as a straying and lost sheep. Yet in so far as it was a call from GOD, (though the feelings with which our calls must be received are very different,) the call is the same, and our duties the same. In some sort, it is an image of what should take place in all: for in its widest sense “conversion” is a turning towards GOD: and if, by His mercy, we have been preserved from being turned altogether away from HIM, yet can none of us say, that we have been, or are turned to HIM, as fully as we might be. It is well if the full purpose of our heart be to HIM, if we keep back nothing from HIM, labour to fix our unstedfastness on HIM, have no bye-ends, are not seeking, half-consciously, our satisfaction or our reward in any thing out of HIM; still we are at best, but unstedfast, seeking to be steadied in HIM, distracted, seeking to be knit into one in HIM, detained and lingering amid this life's joys, or comforts, or ease, and seeking to be quickened in our path to HIM, with manifold ends which it is our duty to accomplish, and seeking that all our ends shall have no end but HIM. “Who can say I have kept my heart clean, I am pure from sin?” Conversion, then, in its widest sense, is a course of being conformed to GOD, a learning to have HIM more simply in our minds, to be turned wholly to HIM, solely to HIM, never part from HIM, follow HIM, even our Sun of Righteousness, wherever His pathway is; in the morning, noon, evening of our life; in His bright shining, or when HE hideth His face; opening our hearts to HIM, to have their warmth, their health, their life, from HIM. And since this were Heaven itself, and we have not yet, at the best, “attained, nor are yet perfected,” we all, in this sense, ever need conversion; we have ever some weaknesses, from which to seek to be freed, infirmities of which to be healed, bands and chains woven round us by past sins, from which to long to be loosed.

But, besides this, Conversion may be taken in a narrower sense, for the first turning of the soul to GOD after it has been estranged from HIM. This, had we been faithful, we should never have needed. In Holy Baptism, we were all made children of GOD, and we never need have left our FATHER'S house; members of CHRIST, and His life,

into Whom we were then engrafted, would have flowed more fully into us, according to our needs, filling us according to our capacities, hallowing our childhood, strengthening our youth, controlling us in the perils of opening manhood, mastering each wayward thought, subduing each rising appetite, if we would: it was pledged to us, had we been willing to receive it; had we admitted it, it had flowed on equably and gently through us, and we had never needed that sharp, though wholesome remedy, whereby the way must be again reopened to it, when once we have closed it. We were made inheritors of heaven; we need never have stood in fear and alarm, lest we had forfeited it, nor have "sought it carefully with tears;" we might have ever looked on humbly to it, not as our right, but as His Who purchased it for us, and made it ours, and has given us the earnest of it, and gave us, day by day, the forgiveness of the trespasses we prayed for, that we might not forfeit it. This is the happy lot of those, who, though more or less slowly, but still stedfastly on the whole, grow on in their Baptismal grace; with their falls, the giddinesses and forgetfulness of childhood, yet never interposing¹ any such grievous sin, as should check the influx of that life in them, supported by prayer, strengthened by Confirmation, admitted into closer communion in the Holy Eucharist, they are, line by line, and feature by feature, unobserved, insensibly, because unceasingly, "changed," the Apostle says, "into the same image, from glory to glory, as by the LORD, the SPIRIT." These need no marked change, because the change we all need is ever going on, unmarked, within them. And many more might these blessed cases be, would parents but realize more the blessings pledged in Baptism; that their children have been redeemed out of the evil world, and need not be conformed to it; that they have been received under the protection of the saving Name, and may dwell there in safety "under the shadow of the ALMIGHTY;" that weak, frail, wayward, self-willed, as, through the unsubdued remains of their old nature, they appear and are, they have still lodged within them a hidden strength, mightier than the world, and Satan, and the powers of darkness, even His strength Who "hath overcome the world," and trampled upon Satan; that HE can and will triumph in these His young soldiers, if they are taught even now to fight; that HE, by His childhood, has sanctified their childish age; that out of the mouths of such as them HE hath perfected praise; that of such as these is the kingdom of heaven.

And not parents only, but sponsors have their duty; and it is sad, that persons so often vow in the names of the little ones, who forget the vow made in their own. One cannot think without awe, how persons, in the children's names, renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil, in GOD'S holy presence, and thereby bear witness that they have themselves renounced them, while yet they obey the lusts of the flesh, which they renounced; or how others think that their duty to these their god-children, or children in GOD, is over as soon as they leave the sacred font, as though they could be fathers and mothers, and that in GOD, one moment, strangers ever after, whereas the Church solemnly warns them of lasting duties. It is sad also, that well-disposed persons should so shrink from the office of God-parents, which is a charitable work to the poor little ones, who are thus brought to CHRIST, received in His arms, and for whom, if they can do no more, they can yet daily pray. Were parents and sponsors more faithful, we might hope that the children of our church might grow up more as they were made, children of GOD.

But these, as things now are, are the happy few! Most of us, it is to be feared, have stained, some more, some less, our baptismal robe, and must wash it with the tears of penitence; most of us have turned aside from the path, and so have had to be turned

into it again; have turned away from GOD, and so needed to be “converted,” or turned to GOD; and of most we must fear, that if they be not conscious of having turned into the path again, they are not yet in it. For too truly, “wide is the gate, and broad is the way, which leadeth unto destruction, and many there be that go in thereat;” many there are, who leave the narrow path of life; few, in proportion, who seem, having left it, to recover it. So that it has been said,¹ that more readily may we find such as have persevered in the right way, than, who having left it, have by a solid conversion turned back into it. Yet here also is a difference. Some, who leave it, leave it altogether by gross and flagrant sin, such that they can have no doubt whom they are serving, and on what path they are; some are drawn aside, step by step, from it, never thinking to have left it altogether, trying, as it were, to keep one foot on it, even while they are conscious that they are halting with the other; looking back wistfully to it; doing things which may keep them in it, looking back to GOD, even while straying, more or less deeply, amid the vanities of the world. And as the fall is different, so is the restoration of those whom GOD, in His infinite mercy, restores. Some HE strikes to the earth, like St. Paul, at one blow, that they lie there speechless, terrified, confounded; some HE leads gently back, so that one can scarcely speak of any one conversion, as there was scarcely any complete estrangement; but GOD seems to have lifted them up from where they lay, first on their knees and the palms of their hands; then to stand trembling; then HE strengtheneth them, and saith, “Peace; be strong, yea be strong,” and they are strengthened, and can say, “Let my LORD speak, for THOU hast strengthened me.” So then, there is no one rule of GOD’S dealings, nor is it safe to lay down, as some have done, that persons must know the day and hour of their conversion;—this were to prescribe to GOD to bring back all, whom HE does bring back, in the same way;—yet what they say is so far true of most, that if they are not conscious of having been turned to GOD, more or less gradually and deeply, they have need to be converted still.

To consider then the circumstances of St. Paul’s conversion as an outline of our own:

“He fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying to him.” It is, accordingly, mostly amid terror and amazement that men are restored to GOD. GOD has impressed a law on the natural world also, that healthful cure can, for the most part, only take place through bitterness and suffering. The cures of our bodies picture to us the cures of our souls. The process may be more or less painful, but bitterness is mixed in all. Those, who have felt it, say that the restoration of suspended life is far more suffering than apparent death; restored circulation has pain; every touch of our body, whereby health is given back, has pain; well-nigh every healing medicine is bitter or revolting to our taste; and, by this universal law, GOD would reconcile us to those merciful bitteresses, whereby HE corrects our vitiated love for the destructive sweetnesss of this world, cures our sickly tastes and appetites, teaching us to find no sweetness but in HIM, prepares us beforehand to look to them as healthful, and find therein our health. Yes! sorrow, sickness, suffering, loss, bereavement, bring with them precious hours; the world is withdrawn from us, or we from it; we are bound down to our sick beds, and cannot follow after it; or we have lost it, and cannot regain it; or it is clad in sorrow to us, and appears to us, as it truly in itself is, one void, incapable of satisfying us, because that, which in it, whether in GOD, or

¹ S. Ambrose, de Pœnit. ii. 10. “I have found more easily those who have retained innocence than who have performed penitence befittingly.” De. Ob. Valent. § 14. “Many fall into errors, few amend them.”

with HIM, or without HIM, did fill our souls, is gone: we may not wait for these hours to turn to GOD; but we should watch for them, and treasure them, when they are brought to us; GOD blinds us like Saul, to the world, that like Saul's HE may open our eyes to HIM; HE strikes us down, that HE may raise us up; HE shuts us out from the world, that being alone, we may, like him, pray, ("behold, he prayeth!") and like him, "know His will, and hear the words of His mouth." Yes! they are precious sacred hours; not simply to be endured or past through, much less to be past in feverish tossings or fretful-ness, but rather in reviewing our past lives, looking what sins GOD would thus "bring to our remembrance," what is the course in which HE has thus suddenly checked us, what HE would "have us to do?" We should not be eager to escape sorrow, but only, through sorrow, to escape death. They who are more advanced than we, tell us that GOD's most precious looks on them, were when His face was in "kind austereness clad;" not one pang would they escape; sweet was their chastisement then; sweet its memory afterward; and we all, such as we are, have probably found that the most healthful seasons of our lives have been those of our severest suffering, "Whom the LORD loveth HE chasteneth." "Let the Just One smite me," says the Psalmist, "it is loving-kindness;"² his wounds are love, tender and loving in proportion to their severity.

But pain of body, and sorrow of heart, have their end; if not sooner, yet in the grave: terror of soul has of necessity no end. Time, if it does no more, reconciles to sorrow, but not to fear; man can endure the past, because it is past; the present, because it must end: but fear for the future, when the future is eternity, has no end. Yet was it through fear that GOD brought St. Paul to HIMSELF; "and he trembling and astonished said;" nay so wrapt up in this fear and awe did the Heavenly Voice leave him, that for three days and three nights he neither ate, nor drank, but prayed; in fear HE struck him to the ground; in fear and blindness, though with hope, HE raised him; nor did HE give him the full relief until that long vigil was closed, night following day, and day night, for three long days and nights, with one burning thought for the past, that he had been "a persecutor and blasphemer" of HIM, Who was his LORD and GOD, one comfort for the future, that HE, whom HE had learned thus late to own as his LORD, had something in store for him to do. And so is it with us; fear, exceeding fear of Hell is one of the most usual ways in which GOD brings us back to HIMSELF; it needs not that others have warned us of it; children may hear of it, as it should seem, when man intends it not to reach them; but GOD brings it home to their tender consciences: judgment to come is

² "Yet, LORD, in memory's fondest place
I shrine those seasons sad,
When, looking up, I saw Thy Face
In kind austereness clad.

"I would not miss one sigh or tear,
Heart-pang, or throbbing brow;
Sweet was the chastisement severe,
And sweet its memory now,

"Yes! let the fragrant scars abide,
Grace-tokens in Thy stead,
Faint shadows of the spear-pierced Side,
And thorn-encompassed Head."

LYRA APOSTOLICA. No. 23. "Affliction."

preached, and they, whom we should least expect, or have least deemed it needful for them, tremble; but GOD “seeth not as man sees;” “the wind bloweth where it listeth;” the SPIRIT descendeth as “a SPIRIT of burning,” where HE wills; HE checks the waywardness of early childhood and boyhood, as well as recalls the wanderings of elder years, by fear of Hell; those around know not, or learn, as it seems, by accident, what is working within; but day after day HE brings before them the fear of Judgment, and whether in that Judgment they shall stand or fall; HE brings before them endless misery, years after years still the same, so that they wish they had never been born; others, of elder years, night after night, HE has terrified with the visions of Hell, so that they have feared to lie down to sleep for its exceeding terror; others HE has kept waking day and night, with Hell ever plain before their eyes, as any object of sense to us, giving them, as it seems, unearthly strength to endure unearthly suffering; others HE has kept, year after year, upright, performing their duty to HIM and to man, but hopeless of their salvation; HE has written it on the wall, in the midst of gaiety and dissipation, as in Belshazzar’s feast, so that the memory of that fearful hour should live on in the soul for ever.³ HE has traced it on the pages of a book, so that it took the place of all other words, brought hidden sins to light, and was never forgotten.⁴ And in less extreme cases, HE, by some loss, or sudden stunning blow, brings before men all their sins in one fearful array, sins which they had forgotten, or which they had persuaded themselves were not sins, so that they ask, “Can such as I be saved?” and they wander about “trembling and astonished,” in doubt of their lives, craving only to be other than they are, but not knowing how, and bewildered as to past and future, in darkness, with one feeble gleam of hope, that GOD Who has so touched them, will restore them; or HE plants the terrors deeper than human comfort, so that when man would minister to, or allay them, he cannot. In so many and more solemn ways does HE show how terrible a thing sin is; how “fearful” it is “to fall into the hands of the living GOD;” that persons must, in this life, often be “saved as by fire,” “saved with fear,” by those who minister to them “pulling them out of the fire:” “saved as by fire,” burning out their sin, that they themselves perish not in the fire everlasting. So awfully does HE, by His own immediate dealings, show the use which HE makes of strong mental suffering, and warn us to treat tenderly, but reverently, those whose consciences HE is visiting, and melting their dross with His terrors.

The Gospel is good tidings of peace, but to those whom GOD has kept in the narrow path, or has humbled, or amid suffering, not to supersede it; repentance without faith and love, were the remorse of Judas, or of devils; faith and love without repentance, the portion of innocence which never fell; for fallen and recovering sinners both are mingled together; faith and repentance were the conditions of our Baptism; faith and repentance are to continue with us to the end; “I will sing,” saith the Psalmist, “of mercy and judgment; unto THEE, O LORD, will I sing “Mercy and judgment, terror and loving-kindness, severity and tenderness, wounding and healing, slaying and making alive, slaying us to ourselves, that we may live to GOD, make up the Gospel; the great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; the

³ The above are facts known to the writer.

⁴ The ghostly word, full plainly seen,

Did never from his lips depart:

But he hath said —

It brought full many a sin to light

Out of the bottom of his heart.—PETER BELL P. 3, beg.

earthquake shook; the fire consumed, ere the still small voice came; the hills of man's pride were to be made low, his rough ways softened and broken down, his crooked ways made straight by the preaching of repentance, to prepare for the coming of the LORD; fear and love make up a sinner's feelings to HIM Who is a merciful REDEEMER, and a Righteous Judge; and since our love is not perfected in this life, or only at its very close,—else should we have no sin, if we wholly loved,—a loving fear or a fearing love is our highest portion, unless, at the end, HE take away our fear by His own assurance of His Love.

To “cease to do evil,” and to “learn to do well,” is the whole of repentance, but such repentance is not learnt without sorrow, sorrow, heart-searching in proportion to the sin. “GOD,” it has been said,⁵ “willeth to save sinners, but HE willeth to save them as sinners. If HE saved them by a simple change of heart, without any repentance for their past life, HE would save them as innocent. HE wills that they should feel ‘that it is an evil thing and bitter to have forsaken the LORD thy GOD.’ HE wills that they should enter into His Justice, and that, as HE hates and punishes sin, they should hate and punish it in themselves.” GOD HIMSELF, in His miraculous conversion of His chosen vessel St. Paul, kept him three days and three nights without relief; during that long space of fixed sorrow and humiliation, intenser than we have ever felt, HE allowed not his mind to be ministered to by man; how much more may we be content to bear sorrow and fear, who, wherein we have sinned, have sinned against the light, not of the law only, but of the Gospel; not against the light shining around us, but against the light, lightened within us; not against a revelation made without us, but grieving the good Spirit of GOD placed within us; not wasted only the temple of GOD without us,—although that also, by our ill example, by joining in, or, it may be, enticing to sin,—but defiling that within us; not amid weakness, but neglecting the strength, in Baptism imparted to us; not in ignorance, but against knowledge! Well then may we be content to “sit alone and keep silence, and put our mouth in the dust, if so be there may be hope!”

Sorrow then and aching of heart, brought upon us by GOD, are mostly the means by which GOD brings back His prodigal children; sorrow or fear without us to grow into a godly fear and dread within us. We cannot make ourselves fear; we are not to work up ourselves, as though we could; we cannot hate our sin of ourselves; our sorrow and hatred of it HE will give us, if we lie where HE has placed us; a deeper hatred, as we, profiting by His grace, are more removed from it, become more unlike it, and more like HIM.

And as we cannot make ourselves sorrow, so we should beware how of ourselves we cease to sorrow, or use the promises of the Gospel to heal our pain rather than our sickness. St. Paul lay there where he was stricken, until GOD said to him, “Arise;” nay, strange as it seems, though his sins were wholly blotted out. in Baptism, and he made a new creature, he yet retained the sorrow and humiliation for them. “To me, who am less than the least of all saints, because I persecuted the Church of GOD, was this grace given.” Repentance has less of fear, as it works its fruit and we become other men; yet must it continue still; we are, all we have been; corruption has not yet put on incorruption; we still bear about us the scars, and lines, and weaknesses, and defilements of our former sins; they leave their traces on our very countenances, much more on our hearts; we must appeal before our Judge, “to receive the things done in the body, whether good or bad;” our very hope that HE will by His precious Blood blot them out then,

⁵ Nicole, *Essais de Morale*, t. ix. p. 122, sur l’Evangile du iv. Dimanche de l’Avent.

depends upon our washing them with our tears now; we must never think to have done with them, until HE have ratified in His Own Person the absolving sentence which HE pronounces over us through His Church, and says, “Thy sins be forgiven thee.” Till then, our prayer must be, “wash me thoroughly from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin;” “LORD, if THOU wilt, THOU canst make me clean;” in longing hope of those precious words, “I will, be thou clean.” We must never in this life think we have done with our sins, if we would not have them appear against us; if they burst not forth and consume us, as we deserve, it is only because GOD’S mercy, for His SON’S sake, permits contrition to quench the flames of Hell. It is a fearful thing to see how people, on an imagined conversion, contrive to forget what they have been, or remember it only to thank GOD that they are not now such: it may be awful to ourselves to think, how often we ourselves forget what we have been, and therewith our penitence; how our elastic spirits buoy us up, and we forget, amid the duties or distractions of this life, our place in the dust, or to demean ourselves as those who should be there.

Yet the sorrow is not to end in itself; St. Paul had to arise and do GOD’S bidding; and we must arise, and with him ask, ‘LORD, what wilt THOU have me to do?’ “and with him we must do it; keeping back nothing when we ask, and shrinking from nothing which is laid upon us. Such was St. Paul’s conversion; he freely offered up all, and took all; all he had been, he gave up; what he was not, he, in GOD’S hand, became; he was a ravening wolf, he became a lamb; the persecutor, he became persecuted; he who “persecuted from city to city,” from city to city bore the tidings of the Gospel; he who “shut up the saints in prison,” himself became “the prisoner of JESUS CHRIST;” yea, all they “heard” of him was this “only, that he who persecuted us in times past, now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed;” he who “beat in every synagogue them who believed in CHRIST,” was “in stripes above measure;” he who stood by, when “the blood of” the LORD’S “martyr Stephen was shed,” himself shed his blood for the brethren. So was he in all things, and that exceedingly, transformed into the opposite of what he was before.

And this is the most hopeful sign of a real healthful change wrought in us, when we become in life other than we were before; if we, like him, become blinded to the world, and see only in the world HIM, Who was crucified for us, and “with HIM “are ourselves “crucified to the world; “if for ambitious, we become lowly; for proud, humble; for angry, meek; for impatient, patient; for self-indulgent, self-denying; for covetous, liberal. Zeal even for our LORD is not so happy a sign, of our being indeed His, as the conquest of evil habits, besetting sins, dispositions which were ingrained in us; then may we indeed hope that HE will blot out our sins, when we feel his gracious touch, slowly it may be, but gradually, unloosening their hold upon us; then may we hope that HE will trace again in us His Holy Likeness, wherein we were re-created, when we feel His Spirit, not only “lifting up our minds to high and heavenly things,” but “mortifying the works of the flesh and our earthly members.” It is not whether the work be accomplished in us; this we dare not hope in life;—enough if our chains fall off altogether with this our sinful flesh wherewith we sinned;—but it is, whether it be in all things begun in us, whether we be yielding all our members, one by one, to righteousness, as, before, too many to unrighteousness; whether we be keeping back any right hand or right foot, which causeth us to offend, or whether we are seeking, like little children, to be “led by the hand,” whither HE would have us go.

Nor, again, are we to hope to have all our way plain before us, or to see His face

equally clearly, as when HE first by His merciful severity checked our wayward course, and recalled us to ourselves and to HIM. By merciful interpositions, if we heed them, HE sets us, from time to time, in a right course, but then HE leaves us to the ordinary channels of His grace, and the guidance, which HE has provided in His Church. Even to St. Paul HE declared not at once, all HE had in store for him; HE let him know only Who HIMSELF was, and then let him be guided in an ordinary way to His Church, filling him with, the HOLY GHOST through the Sacrament of Baptism. His further purposes HE yet kept back; "I will show him," HE saith, "how great things he must suffer for My Name's sake." Even to him HE gradually revealed HIMSELF, in visions in the temple, when he was caught up into the third heaven, when HE bade him go to the Gentiles, or told him that he must bear witness for HIM at Rome; meantime HE was less visibly present with him, leaving him to obey that first call, and proving what was in his heart, whether he would fully obey or no. And even, after HE had received him as His own, and given him his commission to preach the Gospel, HE seems to have led him at this time into Arabia, there, in three years' solitude and silent waiting upon HIMSELF, tempering his zeal into patience and obedience, and moulding "this chosen vessel to bear His Name before the Gentiles, and kings, and people of Israel."

So should it be with us. Humility, retirement, obedience, fear, are the best accompaniments of penitence; first, to school and discipline self, and then await His further guidance, under the shadow of His Church, what further task HE has in store for us. It is sad in how many ways men out-run or fall short of these gracious calls, through self-willed activity or sloth. One sort hears them, starts, feels to the quick, is content with having felt, and there remains; others mistake the stirrings within them for calls to act on other sinners, their own restlessness for GOD'S summons to be doing; and so, scarce reformed themselves, they set themselves, as it may be, to reform the Church, blame her, because they themselves failed to profit by her ministry, or, instead of edifying the Church by the silent witness of their renewed lives, divide it by taking upon themselves a ministry to which they were not called, in some new or old schism.

It is a great grace if, after having neglected, much more if, after having profaned our baptismal privileges, GOD calls us anew, and awakens us to our condition. It seems, from men's manifold failures, a yet rarer grace, so to profit by this His first grace as HE meant it. Satan, if he cannot altogether withhold us, besets us on every side and at every period, and would hold us back or turn us out of the way; he would use even the very energy which GOD infuses, to hurry us beyond the bounds prescribed by GOD; he would make us contemplate that energy and rest therein, instead of pressing onward in it; he would set us on tasks too difficult for our new-born strength, in order to weary us of any task; he would deter us from setting about any, for fear we should not be able to persevere, and so should disgrace our profession; he would make us trust in our own strength, or mistrust GOD'S; would substitute a more subtle temptation for those whereby we fell, or draw us insensibly back into the old snares; he would use, whatever our temper be, our security or our timidity, our energy or our listlessness: sternness and fixedness of purpose he would corrupt into pride of heart; softness into undue yielding; our very thankfulness to GOD into forgetfulness what HE "has" yet "for us to do" in our own souls. Unhappily rare as even seeming conversions are, one must fear lest, abiding conversions, which continue to the end, are far rarer; and that too many who "endure" not merely "for a while," still yield but a blighted and withered harvest.

All have need of all patience, prayer, watchfulness, self-examination, self-discipline; but if they need it, whose house is whole, how much more such as most of us, who have “allowed” ours “to be broken through;” if they, whose armour is bright, and who have been “men of war from their youth,” how much more they who have but lately put it on? No! step by step, in penitent humility, must our way be, if we would not miss it, and our endless rest.

My brethren, though we may deceive ourselves every way, and so in this also, I would hope your attendance here on this holy day, while the world is pursuing its round of listlessness and forgetfulness, implies that you have been either kept in the narrow way, or have been brought back into it, or are earnestly seeking by penitence to re-enter it, or persevere in it. Yet though there may to many be one marked turning-point in life, from which they began to live more stedfastly to GOD, yet is not our task therewith ended; rather it began therewith. Unless we sorely grieve GOD’S HOLY SPIRIT, HE gives us mostly many culls; we hear them more or less distinctly, according as we obeyed the first or no: they come in various forms; by voices within us or without; in sermons, or some Scripture text which GOD brings home to us; by the warnings of friends, the reproofs of elders, the taunts of equals; by the example of the good, or some shock from the sins of the bad; the chance reproach which we know better than they who used it how well we deserve, or praise, which we know too well we do not deserve; by change of outward circumstances, which break through our course of life, and set us, as it were, to start afresh; by removal from old associates, or giving of new friends, or by unwonted solitude; by terror of death in ourselves, or the sudden death of those like ourselves, or unlooked-for deliverance; by fears of hell or hopes of heaven; by some guidance, which leads us to observe more some ordinance of the Church or increase self-discipline; by our Confirmation, our first Communion, or opportunity of more frequent Communion: sometimes by joy and success, more often by sickness, and weariness, and sorrow, and failure, and disappointment; sometimes by putting us upon doing some single act of duty, sometimes by showing us the character of some single sin; by some general secret stirring of our hearts to what is good; by joy in some accomplished duty, or in trial surmounted, or by humiliation and remorse at our defeat; by indistinct misgivings, or plainer forebodings of the tendency of something wrong in us; by opportunity of practising more, largely some grace which HE has kept alive in us (as kindness or almsgiving), or of getting the better, in some more signal instance, of our natural inclinations or a besetting sin; by some chance word, as it seems, recalling to us happier and purer days, reminding us what we once were, or showing us what we are; by some gradual quickening, bearing us onward silently we know not how or whither, or by striking us to earth, with St. Paul, by some stunning bewildering blow; by such as these, and ten thousand other ways, suited to our various characters, GOD, for the most part, again and again, calls us onward and sets us in some new way. And we shall, too likely, be amazed and confounded when we know how many such calls we have had and have disregarded. We need not, as some unhappily do, wait for them; we are encompassed by them, if we would take heed to them; we need but faithful, watchful, hearts to take heed to them and detain them, that they leave us not without a blessing. Our LORD meets us in the way in another and another form; and if we listen to His voice, “our hearts” will “burn within us,” and “our eyes” be no longer “holden,” and though His “vanish from our sight,” it will not be without some token of His Presence. None can bear witness to us of these His visits here,

but our own consciences; they are mostly GOD'S hidden words to ourselves; plain to us, if we have ears to hear, but not heard by others, for whom they are not meant. The world around mostly hears not of it; they see not the star which shines to us, and by shining bids us follow; they "hear," at most, "the sound of the voice," but not the words, or they "see the light," but not HIM whom the light shrouded; when they see the outward circumstances of pain or grief, they know not what they are to us, and mostly underrate them, and would be surprised at the effect which they wrought in us. Well is it for us, if we be so placed that they hinder it not, or GOD give us strength not to heed their hindrances; if they, like Festus, account us not "mad" for our change of life, or GOD give us firmness to answer, that ours are the "words," and the choice of "truth and soberness!" But the voice is or may be distinct for us; and we must hear it once again, in thankfulness or in terror, at the Judgment Day.

We must hear wisdom crying to us now, "Turn ye at my reproof; behold I will pour out MY SPIRIT unto you; I will make known My words unto you," or we must hear her then in that awful hour, "laughing at our calamity, and mocking when our fear cometh." We have all much need to hearken; enough that it is our compassionate SAVIOUR'S voice calling to us invisibly from heaven: HE sets us in some new way, not that we should loiter or stand still in it, but that we should walk and grow in it; if HE humble us, that we seek out fresh acts of humility; if HE stir us in one case to self-denying almsgiving, that we seek out fresh occasions, by simplifying our habits and expenses; if at one time HE put into our hearts penitential thoughts, that we labour to make our life one penitence, all our actions "meet for repentance." The first acts that HE puts within us to do, are not the ripened fruit, but the blossom, which by perseverance is to be matured, an earnest and sample of what HE would have done by us, not its perfecting; a rude essay, to be wrought out when we are less unformed, and acceptable as wrought in HIM, and a token of our will to serve him; it is saying, "LORD, What wilt THOU have me to do?" not "a finishing of the course," or having "fought the good fight;" it is a hopeful childhood of our faith, not its seasoned manhood.

Even the best of us, such as we now are, have too much of the world, in some form or other clinging to us, we have all too much need ever to strike into some new way to amend our doings, increase our contrition for the past, our watchfulness for the future. God is continually bestowing on us new love, new mercy, new forgiveness, new quickening grace; and by these gracious gifts is asking of us new returns and degrees of love, new repentance, new life; if HE seem to call us not, we have the more need to pray Him to unseal our dull ear, that we may hear His call, or even by some sore affliction call more loudly to us, that even "dead" as we are, we may "hear His Voice, and" hearing, "live." As year by year rolls round, these gracious calls are either being exhausted, if we regard them not, or they are preparing for that last blissful call, when, in the hour of death HE shall call nearest to His side those who obeyed His earliest calls, yet shall not shut out us, who, if we at first neglected or refused to work in our FATHER'S vineyard, afterwards, "repented and went;" that blissful call, which, it may be, with the memory of so many neglected calls, we shall scarce believe will belong to us; but to us also it shall be said, "Arise, be of good comfort, HE calleth thee;" to us also HE shall say at the awful day, "Come, ye blessed of MY FATHER, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

May HE give us all grace so to "hear His Voice and follow HIM" now, that our

past neglect of His many, manifold calls and recalls, turn not to our condemnation, and “in the hour of death and Day of Judgment” may HE “deliver us.”