

LECTURE I

“And He led them out as far as to Bethany; and He lifted up His hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.”—
LUKE xxiv. 50, 51.

THE Resurrection of our Lord was not the completion of His glory. His glorification indeed then began. He then burst for ever those bonds of the finite and the temporal within which, in carrying out the work of the world's redemption, He had previously, for three-and-thirty years, confined Himself. He received that “spiritual body,” and entered upon that state of existence in “spirit,” in which alone it was possible for Him perfectly to reconcile and to unite the material and the spiritual—man and nature upon the one hand and God upon the other. He reached a stage in the development of God's great plan of salvation for His creatures, at which He could penetrate all things with the influences of the Spirit. From that moment He could rule His people, not by the exercise of outward authority alone, but by inwardly assimilating them to Himself. From that moment He was in a position

to present His "many brethren" along with Him, amidst the sanctities of a new creation and in eternal submission to the Father, to Him who, alike in the natural and in the spiritual world, must be "all in all."¹ When Jesus rose from the dead, the kingdom of God was no longer future, a thing of promise and of hope. It was no longer merely "at hand." Though not in all the extent of its dominion, it was present; it was come. But inasmuch as He in whom the kingdom was summed up was still in the midst of disciples who had not been transfigured into a perfect likeness with Himself, and who could not therefore behold Him in His unclouded majesty; as He had still to take His place amongst those who were unable to comprehend all the excellency of His power, it was necessary for Him to restrain, in some degree and for a time, the full manifestation of what He was. In order to satisfy them as to the identity of His person He needed to speak and walk and eat with them; while they again needed to hear Him, to see Him with their eyes, and to handle Him with their hands.² For their sakes, not for His own, He had to pause before entering on that culminating stage of His development to which the voice of prophecy pointed, and for which creation waited.

Forty days therefore passed during which the Risen Lord appeared again and again to His disciples, "speaking unto them the things concerning the kingdom of God";³ instructing, strengthening, comforting them, pointing out to them both the duties and the trials that

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 28.

² 1 John i. 1.

³ Acts i. 3.

were before them, and making them "polished shafts" in His quiver. Then His personal presence could be dispensed with. It was to be replaced by that of One who should train them with a more powerful discipline; and He might "ascend to His Father and their Father, to His God and their God."

On what Jesus was during these forty days, the same, yet not the same, as He had been before His crucifixion, it is unnecessary to dwell.¹ It may be enough to remember that the statements of Scripture leave no room for the conception of a body becoming more and more spiritualised and glorified during forty days. Besides which, that period is too short for the accomplishment of such a process. The analogies of nature teach us to understand either a gradual development extending over ages of unknown length, or a change effected in a moment; but not one where the shortness of the time is altogether incommensurable with the greatness of the result. The language of St. Paul, too, when that Apostle speaks of the change to be made on believers alive at the last day, establishes the same conclusion: "Behold, I show you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."²

Whatever, therefore, our Lord was during the forty

¹ The author has treated of this book on *The Resurrection of our Lord*.—LECT. I.

² 1 Cor. xv. 51, 52.

days which separated His Resurrection from His Ascension, He was at least essentially the same; and if at any instant of that time He appeared to be in no respect different from what He had been while He tabernacled in the flesh, it was because He willed it. As on the Mount of Transfiguration, immediately before entering on the last and most trying scenes of His Passion, He showed Himself in the glory originally belonging to Him, so during the forty days He occasionally laid aside His glory, and assumed a humiliation which was no longer the chief characteristic of His state. In Himself He was as much prepared to "leave the world and go to the Father" on the Resurrection morning as He was on the day of His Ascension.

These considerations, it may be remarked in passing, throw light upon the special object which our Lord seems to have had in view in thus making Himself manifest to His disciples during the forty days. It was less to give them a general training for their future work than to convey to them a full assurance that He had risen from the dead, and that He was the very same Redeemer from whom they had long been learning what they were to teach and do. Conviction upon this point was what they especially required. Had they beheld Him only in His glorified condition, they might have separated the present from the past. They might have thought of Him as an altogether new revelation of God; and they might have lost sight of the very essence of the Christian system—the necessity of suffering and self-sacrifice as the preparation for its

rewards.¹ On all points of the Christian faith indeed, even on the full meaning and force of the Ascension, the Spirit afterwards given by their Lord was to be their trainer.² But as the fact of the Resurrection lay at the bottom of the training, it was necessary to bring it home to them with all the power which sensible demonstration could afford. Not to undergo any gradual development Himself, but to bind together in His own Person, in indissoluble union, the thoughts of suffering and glory, of humiliation and exaltation, did Jesus tarry with His disciples for a time after His Resurrection.

The question has been often asked by theologians whether our Lord did not return to His Father immediately after His Resurrection from the grave, and whether each of His subsequent appearances upon earth was not a new descent from heaven. What we call the Ascension would then become not His first but His public, formal, and final departure from the world. The question thus raised cannot be properly answered without an examination of the Scriptural meaning of the word "heaven"; for the conception commonly entertained of heaven seems to be different from that of Scripture. Yet nothing further need be said upon the point just now. No result of the inquiry would affect the main question with which we have to do. The Ascension of our Lord would still remain substantially the same, in the fact of its occurrence, in the views of His work with which it is associated, and in the lessons which it conveys.

¹ Comp. Luke xxiv. 26, where read "the Christ," not "Christ."

² John xvi. 13, 14.

I. The first thing to be considered is the fact. The details of the Ascension are not given either by St. Matthew or St. John, while St. Mark makes only a brief allusion to it in those closing verses of his Gospel, the genuineness of which is a matter of dispute.¹ We owe our knowledge of the particulars wholly to St. Luke, who, alike in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, has related them with the same clearness and circumstantiality as distinguish the other portions of his narrative. That Evangelist closes his Gospel with the words, "And He led them out until they were over against Bethany; and He lifted up His hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, blessing God."² To a similar effect, the same Evangelist speaks in the Acts of the Apostles, "And when He had said these things, as they were looking, He was taken up; and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they were looking steadfastly into heaven as He went, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye looking into heaven? This Jesus, which was received up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye beheld Him going into heaven."³ The testimony of St. Luke, however, does not stand alone. We know the belief of the early

¹ Mark xvi. 19.

² Luke xxiv. 50-53.

³ Acts i. 9-11; see Noto A.

Christian Church from sources in all probability even earlier than the Gospels. Thus it is that St. Paul says, in his Epistle to the Philippians, "Wherefore also God highly exalted Him," an exaltation spoken of in direct contrast to that emptying of Himself and taking upon Him the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of men described immediately before;¹ thus that in the same epistle he speaks of "heaven, from whence also we wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ;"² and thus that, enumerating in his first Epistle to Timothy six leading particulars of the "great mystery of godliness," he mentions as the last, still applicable to Him who had been manifested in flesh, "received up in glory."³ Other not less explicit passages from his writings might easily be quoted.⁴ St. Peter also adds his testimony to the fact, when he refers to "Jesus Christ, who is on the right hand of God, having gone into heaven; angels and principalities and powers being made subject unto Him";⁵ while the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews with no less distinctness says, "But we behold Him who hath been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour"; and again, "Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."⁶ Even the Gospels which omit any narrative of the Ascension imply it, as when the

¹ Phil. ii. 6-9.

² Phil. iii. 20.

³ 1 Tim. iii. 16.

⁴ For example, Eph. iv. 8-10.

⁵ 1 Pet. iii. 22; comp. Acts ii. 33.

⁶ Heb. ii. 9; xii. 2.

first Gospel quotes the words of Jesus to the high-priest, "Henceforth (*ἀπ' ἄρτι*) ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven";¹ or as when the fourth tells us how He said, "What then if ye should behold the Son of man ascending where He was before?"² and makes such frequent reference to the declaration of our Lord that He was "going to the Father."³ In several of his apocalyptic visions also, St. John beholds the exalted "Son of man" encompassed by the splendour of His heavenly abode.⁴

Passages such as these take for granted the Ascension of our Lord with the same quiet and deliberate conviction as the ordinary events of His earthly history; and it is impossible to explain them in any other than their literal and historical acceptation. They cannot be understood to express only the spiritual and ideal nature of the Christian faith. More than this was certainly intended by their writers. Nowhere do we meet with more specific statements as to any fact of the Redeemer's life. The evidence is thus abundantly sufficient to show both what the first authorised and authoritative proclaimers of Christianity believed, and that their belief was formed under circumstances in the highest degree calculated to illustrate its reasonableness and to lend it weight. If we refuse to credit them we must base our refusal either on the incredibility of

¹ Matt. xxvi. 64.

² John vi. 62.

³ John xiv. 28; xvi. 5, 10, 17, 28.

⁴ Rev. i. 13; v. 11-13; vi. 9-17; xiv. 1-5

the events themselves, or on the assertion that they who have witnessed to them were so much under the influence of prepossession and prejudice as to believe that they saw what they did not see, and heard what they did not hear. Neither of these points can be discussed now. The first of them really resolves itself into the incredibility of everything miraculous. The second takes for granted, what nothing but profound ignorance can assume, that the ascensions of Elijah¹ and of our Lord stand essentially on the same footing, and that they bear a similar relation to the systems of faith to which they respectively belong. At present it is enough to say that, so far as the direct evidence of the men of our Lord's generation on any point can satisfy us, the witnesses to His Ascension could have had no better opportunities than they enjoyed, could not have been more capable of profiting by them, could not have spoken more clearly than they have done, and could, by neither word nor deed, have given more conclusive evidence as to their own convictions. So far as evidence handed down from a remote past can carry conviction with it, that evidence is here.

We are not, however, without evidence of a still more convincing kind; for the sacred writers do more than presuppose our Lord's Ascension as a fact. In the passages quoted, and in many others, they regard it as one without which the Christian Church could not have come into existence; and than which no fact

¹ See Strauss, *Leben Jesu*, and Schenkel, *Bibel-Lexikon*, under the word "Himmelfahrt."

of Christianity had a stronger hold upon the gratitude and joy and hope and exaltation of the Christian mind. No one, indeed, will deny that at the very time when the Gospels were penned (and the remark is the more undeniable the farther we bring down that date), the Ascension of our Lord stood side by side with His Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection as a constituent element of Christian belief. In the light of the Higher Criticism such testimony is of peculiar value. It is not that of one or two witnesses who might be credulous or mistaken. It is that of communities, of widespread bodies of men, whose life had been changed by what they had felt compelled to receive as facts, and to whom the conviction that a particular event had really happened proved no principle slumbering in their breasts, but one pervading their whole being and making it what it was. As nothing could persuade us, so nothing could have persuaded them, to enter upon a new, and in most respects far more trying life than that previously led by them, except a deliberate assurance that the events upon which their faith rested could be thoroughly relied on.

Why, indeed, should we show more hesitation about accepting the Ascension than any other great fact of the life of our Lord, such as His Incarnation or Resurrection? It is not in itself more wonderful than these. It implies no greater exercise of Divine power, and no greater departure from the laws by which nature and humanity are governed. It is even less difficult to conceive that the already glorified body of the Redeemer should have

been taken up to heaven in the sight of the disciples than that the Second Person of the Godhead should have come into the world as a child ; or that, after having died on Calvary, He should have burst the bonds of death, and risen on the third morning from the grave without having seen corruption. An Ascension, or something of a similar nature, is indeed necessary to the verisimilitude of the life of Jesus as a whole ; although not in the sense that His early followers might naturally imagine it, as they strove to fashion for their Master a closing scene worthy of all that had preceded. Even had imagination thus played its part in their account of their Lord's Ascension, it would but tend to show how thoroughly they were convinced of His Resurrection ; for no thought of an Ascension could have entered into their minds had they not been persuaded that He had risen from the dead.

There is still another and a deeper sense in which the Ascension has always been demanded by believers. Without it we should have introduced into Christian history a problem of a kind altogether insoluble, and the existence of which could not fail to prevent its other truths from producing their legitimate effect upon us. If the Lord of the Church, if He in whom her life and hope are gathered up, had, after His Resurrection, been again compelled to submit to the sentence of mortality, that strength of Christian faith which springs from its being rooted in a heavenly world would disappear. How then could men either have believed in the past, or believe now, that Jesus was indeed the

Only Begotten of the Father, the Giver and the Prince of Life—life Divine, spiritual, unchangeable, and everlasting? Could He have bestowed that life and yet Himself have died? Could He have taken victory from the grave, and yet have lain in it for centuries—earth returned to earth, dust to dust, and ashes to ashes? Could He have said, “He that believeth on Me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on Me shall never die,”¹ and yet be at this moment held fast under the dominion of death? The conception is impossible. Besides which, if the Lord Jesus did again die, where and under what circumstances did His death take place? Was it in the city or the country, amid the crowded haunts of men or in some distant solitude? Was He alone or surrounded by His friends? What was the last message sent by Him to His disciples? or what the last prayer He offered to His Father in heaven? To none of these questions can a reply be given; and an event so much more incomprehensible than (if we admit the Resurrection) the Resurrection itself—the death, in some ordinary way, of One who had been so preternaturally recalled from the grave, has no word spoken regarding it, and no ray of light thrown upon the darkness in which it is involved.

Here indeed lies the main weight of the evidence for the Ascension of our Lord. It follows from His Resurrection. It is inseparably connected with it. It is a corollary dependent upon it. We cannot indeed deduce

¹ John xi. 25, 26.

from the earlier event the precise circumstances attending the later. But that in the Resurrection the Ascension is implicitly involved will be granted by every one who, whether in a spirit of faith or unbelief, reflects upon the subject. If there be sufficient proof that Jesus rose from the grave the unbeliever has no interest in denying the Ascension; and, on the other hand, the believer has no need to ask more in order to satisfy himself that the Ascension really happened. From the very nature of the case he must conclude that, if our Lord rose from the dead, and that in a glorified condition, He could neither have continued to live as an inhabitant of this earth nor have again died. In one way or another He must have passed into the spiritual and eternal world, and must have returned to His God and Father.¹ Any difficulties connected with the evidence may be ascribed to our imperfect knowledge of the circumstances; and the reality of the fact itself may be accepted without hesitation.

What has now been said is, to a large extent at least, recognised by the most recent modern inquiry. Keim admits that "the Ascension of Jesus follows from all the facts of His career"; and, although he regards it as "not in a strict sense demonstrable," and distinguishes between "a general belief in the exaltation of Jesus and the materialistic description given of it in the New Testament," he can only sum up His discussion in the words, "The modern Christian consciousness is

¹ Comp. Martensen, *Dogmatik*, *Das Leben Jesu*, 4th edition, p. § 173; and especially Neander, 785, etc.

mature enough to dispense with these pictures, and without seeing to believe with the earliest accounts themselves that the sphere of the departing Jesus was from the very hour of death the higher world of God.”¹ Weiss, who deals in the freest manner with the details of the Ascension given by the Evangelists, is not less explicit: “As certainly,” he says, “as Jesus rose in the body, *i.e.* in a glorified body, so certainly was He raised to heaven in that body which was destined for the heavenly life, and the Apostles thought of Him as continuing to inhabit that glorified body in heaven (Colossians ii. 9; Philippians iii. 21). In this sense the corporeal Ascension of Jesus is of course produced by His Resurrection, and with this it stands and falls. To him who believes in a resurrection, as Scripture understands it, and who, taking the Resurrection of Jesus as a pledge thereof, believes in a real and therefore corporeal state of existence beyond the grave, to him there is nothing in the Ascension of Jesus to heaven which could be shown to be contrary to the divinely-appointed laws for the government of this world.”²

With admissions of this kind we may be satisfied. Once grant that the grave is not the termination of our being, but that there is a “higher world of God” in which the departed lives, and both the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, when looked at in their true light, become matter for an intelligent rather than an un-

¹ *Jesus of Nazareth*, vi. pp. 365, 366, 382.

² *The Life of Christ*, translated by M. G. Hope, iii. 409.

reasoning faith. The materialistic details may be abandoned by those who think that the proof is not sufficient, and the mere fact may be enough, that He who came forth a living person from the tomb in the garden ascended in due season to His Father in heaven, and that He is now with Him. Let this much, moreover, be allowed, and the details will soon cease to be a difficulty. Returning in thought to the time when the event took place, we shall see in the Risen Saviour the marks of One who is preparing for His departure. The strangely intermittent character of His visits and the nature of the instructions He delivers will awaken the suspicion that ere long we shall be left without Him. At His call we shall accompany Him towards Bethany with a vague presentiment of what is to happen. He has vanished suddenly before now : to a final parting a slow and gradual disappearance will be more suitable. He has laid His hands before now on the heads of children and blessed them : there will be nothing unnatural in His lifting up His hands and blessing us. The upward movement will then begin : we shall direct our gaze to heaven with astonishment and awe as He ascends : a cloud will receive Him out of our sight : we shall worship Him, and return to Jerusalem with great joy. No one, in short, who accepts the fact will long hesitate as to the details.

Two difficulties are still urged to which it is desirable to advert. They are stated with his usual clearness and emphasis by Strauss.

1. It is said that a tangible or palpable body is not

adapted to a superterrestrial abode.¹ But the word "tangible" may be used in two different senses, and we may deny its applicability in one sense to our Lord's risen body, while we admit it in another. It may mean either subject to be touched apart altogether from the will of him whose body is spoken of, or capable of being touched according to his will, and in such manner as he may choose. In the first of these senses it has no application to the body of the Risen Lord. There is no reason to think that at the moment when Jesus ascended to heaven His body possessed those properties of matter to which the word "tangible" belongs. The contrary would rather seem to have been the case. Our Lord's body was obviously not tangible in the ordinary sense when, on the day of His Resurrection, He twice appeared suddenly in the midst of His disciples in the upper room at Jerusalem, though the doors were shut. Or, if it be said that it must have been tangible, when St. Thomas was on one of these occasions instructed to put his fingers and his hand into the wounds inflicted on the cross, it is sufficient to reply that, just as the body taken as a whole could be recognised though changed, so the marks of its sufferings might remain, though changed in the same direction and to the same extent as the whole body. We are apt to forget that the wounds were a part of the body, and that if the body was recognisable, though not tangible in the sense of the objector, the same thing

¹ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, English Translation, iii. 384. Comp. Schonkol, *B. Lexikon*, "Himmelfahrt."

may be said of the wounds. Besides this, there is much in the narrative of this particular appearance of the Risen Lord leading to the belief that the conviction ultimately forced upon the doubting Apostle was dependent, not merely upon the sight presented to him, but upon his own preparation for it. The week previous to that appearance had not been lost upon him : he had been passing through a process of education during that time. When, too, our Lord speaks of his faith, He does not say, "Because thou hast seen My wounds," but "Because thou hast seen *Me*, thou hast believed"; and under the words addressed to him, "Be not faithless but *believing*," and "Thou hast *believed*," we are certainly not to think of a faith now first formed but, as so often in St. John, of a faith purified, strengthened, and deepened.¹ All this leads to the conclusion that, in the same way as Jesus had said to Mary Magdalene a week before, "Touch Me not, for I am not yet ascended to My Father," and had thus implied that, when known in the power of His Ascension, He might be touched, so the sensible proof offered to Thomas would be different from that given of the presence of any ordinary material object, and would be largely dependent for its efficacy on the Apostle's own state of mind. In itself the glorified condition of the body of our Lord, as that of One who had been made "a quickening Spirit," may have even been invisible to

¹ For a fuller exposition of these points and of this whole passage, reference may be made to the *Commentary on St. John* by Miligan and Moulton, published by Messrs. T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh.

the merely human eye, as it was, without doubt, intangible to the merely human hand. But it does not follow that it would be equally invisible or intangible to the eye or the hand of one who had been prepared by a spiritualising process for its perception. It would rather appear that our Lord designed expressly to distinguish between the tangibility of His own body and that of ordinary matter; and any objection, therefore, resting on the supposition that by tangibility the same thing is meant in both cases, rests upon preconceptions of the objector and not upon the facts presented to him.

This conclusion is confirmed by the consideration that with His body as the perfected instrument of His will, our Lord was wont to "show," or rather "manifest" Himself to His disciples only when He was pleased to do so; for the word "manifest," so often employed in connexion with His appearances after His Resurrection, expresses more than the word "show." It means at one time to bring out of the invisible into the visible, at another to reveal to man in a particular condition of his being what in a previous condition he would have been unable to take note of.¹ An entirely new state of things is thus presupposed, not only in the bodily condition of Jesus, but in the mental attitude of believers, when we speak of the body of the Risen Lord as "manifested"; and in that state the common qualities of material objects cannot be thought of as either exhibited or perceived. Something of a similar kind

¹ Comp. Col. iii. 4 (where it is opposed to *κέρυπται*); John ii. 11 xxi. 1; 1 John iii. 2.

holds good with regard to the bodies of Christians in the future world. When the Apostle Paul gives particulars of their resurrection, he tells us that, on their rising again at the last day, each of them shall possess "a spiritual body";¹ and by this he means neither that their bodies shall wholly evaporate into spirit, nor that they shall lose the marks by which upon earth they were distinguished from one another. He means rather that, when raised from their graves or changed, their bodies shall be what they are not now, a full and appropriate expression and organ of their spiritual life, still indeed retaining their individuality, but independent of the limitations by which in our terrestrial state matter is confined. Unless, therefore, the words of the Apostle, "a spiritual body," have no meaning, and some distinct and intelligible meaning they must have had to him who used them, they settle the question. Such a body, being the framework in and by which the Spirit works, must be conformed to the Spirit which rules in all its members. It must interpose no obstacle to the accomplishment of the Spirit's aim. It must rather obey its every impulse, and must accompany it in its every flight.

A body of this kind, however, must be widely different from our present bodies, and language applicable to them may be unsuitable to it. If our Lord in His superterrestrial estate has a body,—and one of the fundamental conceptions of humanity as well as the spirit and aim of the Christian system are overthrown if He has not,—this body must be in one way or another

¹ 1 Cor. xv. 44.

adapted to the sphere in which He is now living. The question, in the form in which it has been raised, is thus not as to any inconsistency between the qualities of body as we know it, and a heavenly sphere of existence. It really raises a further question, whether the conditions of our terrestrial being are so unchangeable as absolutely to preclude all thought of a future different from the present, or whether it is possible to accept any such revelation of a bodily not less than a spiritual immortality as must form a part of every just conception of our Christian hope. Who shall venture to say that we may not thus look forward to the future? And this the more when we consider that, in doing so, the probabilities of the case are on the side of change. If the future life is either to be in harmony with the "increasing purpose" of God, or an object of our desire, we must think of the body of man as there entirely different from what it is here; and any denial of the possibility of its being so, while personal identity is preserved, would be tantamount to an assertion that at death we return to the dust for ever. Thus then it was with the body of our Lord. Either He does not still live, or if He does live, His body is not subject to the same tests as those applicable to it when He was on earth; and, with the same body which He possesses in heaven, He might and naturally would ascend from Olivet.

2. A second difficulty is urged—that to speak of our Lord's Ascension into heaven is to imply that heaven is a locality circumscribed by definite boundaries, and that of such a heavenly locality we can form no con-

ception.¹ When Jesus goes to heaven, it is said, He goes to God, and God is everywhere.² He, therefore, who is to be ever with God can be confined to no particular spot, and there is no such place as heaven to which He may ascend. The difficulty springs from too materialistic a view of those expressions which the poverty of human thought and language compels us to employ. It is unnecessary, in thinking of heaven, to confine ourselves to the thought of any particular locality. We have no need to imagine to ourselves a region either higher than the blue sky or situated in the centre of those millions of starry orbs which move around us in silent majesty. Nor have we to pass onward into that interminable space which, as we must suppose, stretches beyond the limits of all created things, in order that there at last we may enter into the abodes of everlasting bliss. If such conceptions appear to be demanded by some expressions of the Word of God, they are at variance with others as well as with its general drift and meaning. In the New Testament, in particular, heaven is contrasted with earth, less as one *place* than as one *state* is contrasted with another. When we say "Our Father which art in heaven" we cannot mean that the Father to whom we pray dwells only in some distant region of the universe. He must be also by our side, in this world as well as beyond it; and the thought of His nearness to us is one of the conditions of effectual prayer. By these words, "in heaven," therefore, we simply mean that the

¹ Strauss, u. s. iii. 386.

² Comp. Psalm cxxxix. 7-10.

Father to whom we pray is in a region purer, loftier, and brighter than ours. We are upon earth, bowed down under its weaknesses, beset by its temptations, stained by its sins, afflicted by its sorrows, hampered by its limitations. He is "in heaven," free from weaknesses, temptations, sins, sorrows, and limitations of every kind, full of infinite pity and unchanging love. The conception is the same as that embodied in the words, "Heavenly Father," so often used by Jesus in circumstances with which the thought of place has no connexion, and which take us into an entirely different circle of ideas: "Your Heavenly Father feedeth them"; "Your Heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things;" "Every plant which my Heavenly Father planted not, shall be rooted up."¹ The same use of the words "heaven" and "heavenly" is peculiarly marked in the writings of St. John and in the Epistle to the Hebrews. "And no man," Jesus says to Nicodemus, "hath ascended into heaven, but He that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, which is in heaven."² In speaking thus our Lord cannot mean to say that He was both in earth and in heaven, as two different *localities*, at one time. He was before the eyes of Nicodemus when He spoke. He was there not only in His Divinity but in the limitations of the humanity which He had assumed; and it was in the nature of things impossible that He could be elsewhere at the same instant. In using the words "in heaven,"

¹ Matt. vi. 26-32; xv. 13.

² John iii. 13. Westcott and Hort omit the last clause.

therefore, our Lord could only mean that the true essence of His being belonged not to a material but a spiritual world, a world it may be of unclouded majesty but especially, as shown by the context in which the words occur, of that love which is the very ground and fundamental element of the Divine existence. The words "which is in heaven" point to no locality, but to the state or condition of being to which our Lord belonged. Other words of Jesus in the same discourse lead to a similar conclusion: "If I told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things?"¹ The "earthly" things here spoken of cannot mean things relating to the material earth, or to the course of human history, for no such things had been taught by Him who came down out of heaven. The "heavenly" things, in like manner, cannot mean things relating to a local heaven, for no part either of the remaining discourse with Nicodemus or of our Lord's other discourses contained in the fourth Gospel is occupied with that thought. The "earthly things" are the truths, the home of which, so to speak, is earth, and which were known before God gave His final and complete revelation of Himself. The "heavenly things" are those upon which Jesus immediately proceeds to dwell, including His revelation of Himself and, in Himself, of the Father, now for the first time given in fulness to the world. It is in perfect harmony with this that, throughout the Gospel and Epistles of St. John, the life of union with Christ or the Divine

¹ John iii. 12.

life in the soul is always regarded as life in its most absolute sense, life not merely future but present, unchangeable, and everlasting.¹ So also in the Apocalypse the New Jerusalem, the ideal picture of the true Church in a present world, comes down "out of heaven from God."²

The same mode of thought marks the Epistle to the Hebrews. When we read that our great High-priest has been "made higher than the heavens,"³ the meaning obviously is, not that He has passed through or been made higher than the sky, but that He has been exalted far above all the material creation; and that, freed from every restraint, He has gone into the immediate presence of that God and Father who is everywhere and in all things.⁴ When, too, we read of a "heavenly calling,"⁵ the context shows that we are to understand neither a calling from heaven nor to heaven, but one essentially spiritual in its nature, and in contrast with the calling of Israel by Moses, the representative of an outward and carnal economy. A similar remark applies to the "heavenly things," mentioned in the same Epistle,⁶ which are in contrast not with earth as a locality but with the tabernacle as a material building. They are the spiritual, the Divine, ideas which an embodiment in form may symbolise but cannot adequately express. Finally, when we are told that the heroes of

¹ John xi. 25, 26, xvii. 3; 1 John ii. 17, 24, iii. 14. *des Heb. Briefes*, i. 349; compare also Keil, *Heb. Brief*, pp. 210, 266.

² Rev. xxi. 10.

³ Heb. vii. 26.

⁴ Compare Riehm, *Lehrbegriff*

⁵ Heb. iii. 1.

⁶ Heb. viii. 5; ix. 23.

the ancient faith desired "a better country, that is an heavenly,"¹ it seems as if the writer had in view not so much a region beyond the grave as the spiritual blessings of the better covenant.²

In the light of passages such as these there is reason to conclude that, according to the conception of the sacred writers, "heaven" is a state rather than a place.³ The thought of locality may, no doubt, be involved in it, but it is not the main thought. "Heaven lies about us" even now, and that not only "in our infancy," but in our manhood and age. Ideally we are in it when we experience, with an immediateness unknown to us in our common lives, the presence of God as a Father, and when we open our hearts to the full manifestations of His grace. It is one of the "many abiding places" of that "Father's house"⁴ which is not to be regarded as a home in a distant land alone, but is to be found in the universe around us when that universe is beheld in the light of the Father's love. In the meantime "earth" and "heaven" are in Scripture contrasted with one another; but the contrast will be removed, and then the one will become, not less than the other, a place for the perfect manifestation of God; in other words, earth will be a heaven. Even now there is a true sense in which "God, being rich in mercy, for His

¹ Heb. xi. 16; comp. Westcott *in loc.*

² Comp. verses 39, 40.

³ It has yet to be shown in this lecture that the same remark applies to the expression "Sitting

at the right hand of God." Of the difference between what is here said and the Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ's glorified body it ought not to be necessary to speak.

⁴ John xiv. 2.

great love wherewith He loved us . . . hath made us to sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”¹ Even now “our citizenship is in heaven,” and what we wait for is not removal from one limited locality to another, but “the fashioning anew of our body of humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of Christ’s glory, according to the working whereby He is able to subject all things unto Himself.”²

When, therefore, we speak of our Lord’s Ascension into heaven we have to think less of a transition from one locality than of a transition from one condition to another. A change of locality is indeed implied, but it need not be to a circumscribed habitation like that of earth; it may be only to a boundless spiritual region above us and encompassing us on every side. The real meaning of the Ascension is that, in that closing act of His history upon earth, our Lord withdrew from a world of limitations and darkness and sorrows to that higher existence where “in the presence of God there is fulness of joy, and where at His right hand there are pleasures for evermore.”³

If these things be so it will be seen that the question alluded to in a previous part of this lecture, as to the precise point of time when Jesus returned to His Father, loses its importance. No sooner did He shake off the bonds of earth, and take His place in the higher spiritual world to which He was ever afterwards to belong, than He may be said to have ascended into heaven. When for a special purpose He again appeared to His

¹ Eph. ii. 4-6.

² Phil. iii. 20, 21.

³ Ps. xvi. 11.

disciples as they had known Him during His earthly ministry, He may be said to have descended out of heaven. Wherever He was in that glorified condition which began at His Resurrection, there heaven in its Scripture sense also was ; and His very presence with the Father was the rendering of His account. No words needed to be uttered either by the Father or by Him. From the first moment of His entrance into heaven, its inhabitants beheld in Him the Captain of salvation, who had accomplished His appointed work, and in whom the Father was well pleased.

II. We have spoken of the Ascension of our Lord as a fact of actual occurrence, assuring us that, when He passed out of the sight of His Apostles on the Mount of Olives, it was to enter a new sphere of spiritual existence, where He was to live and where He still lives for ever. To consider the most important purpose of that life, and the manner in which it is accomplished, both in heaven and upon earth, is the main object of these lectures. But, before entering upon this, one or two aspects of the Ascension itself demand attention.

1. It was the completion of all that was involved in the Incarnation. There is no need to dwell upon the fact that, when our Lord ascended into heaven, He did so in His human as well as in His Divine nature ; or that, in laying aside the garment of "flesh" in which He had been clothed, He did not lay aside the humanity which He had assumed. That Incarnation constitutes the basis of the Christian faith, the foundation of the whole Christian system, in its bearing both upon time

and upon eternity. The assumption of that human nature which was involved in it was not to come to an end when Jesus died on Calvary, or when He rose from the dead. Whenever He spoke to His disciples of His going away it was the same "I" then before them who was to go; the same "I" who would afterwards remember them and dwell with them, and at last come for them again. The thought could not by possibility enter into their minds that after His departure He was to be a different being, to be no longer the human Master and Friend and Brother whom they had honoured and loved and clung to during the days of His flesh. His words could convey but one impression to their minds, that even after His exaltation and glorification He would be still what He was then. This indeed was the impression which they did convey. When St. Paul breaks forth into his triumphant strain of joy for the blessings of redemption, he speaks of Christ Jesus who died and rose again as at the right hand of God, and also making intercession for us;¹ and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews declares that the High-priest in heaven who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities is the same Jesus who had been "in all points tempted like as we are."² So clear and explicit indeed is the language of Scripture upon this point that no one who accepts the fact of the Ascension will deny that, if our Lord is now in the heavenly world at all, He is there not as God only, but as man.

Without further delay, therefore, we may proceed

¹ Romans viii. 34.

² Heb. iv. 14, 15.

to ask, What is the relation between the two stupendous events, the one at the beginning and the other at the close of the earthly life of Jesus—His Incarnation and His Ascension? The answer is, that the latter completes what was aimed at by the former, and was even to a certain extent involved in it. For the object of the Incarnation was not simply to make it possible for the Eternal Son to labour and suffer and die. Had no more than this been necessary for the accomplishment of His work, it would be difficult to understand why His human nature should not have been a merely temporary possession, and after having been united to His Divine nature during the days of His humiliation, been laid aside at His exaltation. His mission, upon this view, was executed when He bowed His head and gave up the ghost. The great sacrifice had been offered. The way to the Father had been opened up. Why should the Conqueror retain what in this case could only have been the memorial of His low estate? Why should He not divest Himself of the garments in which He had borne the burden and heat of the day? and, Why should He not return to every particular of that condition in which before He became poor He had been rich?

But we are not led to think that the sole or even the great object of the Incarnation was to prepare our Lord as a victim for the sacrifice. Scripture everywhere implies that, necessary as was His suffering of death to procure the pardon of sin, and precious as are its fruits, it was only a step towards the attainment of

a still higher end—an end contemplated from the beginning, corresponding more closely to the nature of God Himself, and alone able to satisfy our need. That end was to bring us into a state of perfect union with the Father of our spirits, and so to introduce into our weak human nature the strength of the Divine nature, that not in name only, or outwardly, or by a figure, but in truth, inwardly, and in reality, we might receive the right to become children of God.¹ The Incarnation by itself could not have effected this, because it could only bring the Eternal Son into “the flesh,” and flesh is a barrier to that free communication of the Spirit by which alone we can be united to Him who is Spirit.² The Incarnation could only identify the Redeemer with the essential elements of humanity. It could not spiritualise that bodily organisation which is no less a part of the true being of man than his intellectual and moral gifts. It could not provide for the unity of his nature as a whole without failing to be a genuine Incarnation. The Resurrection and Ascension needed to follow, that the “quickenings Spirit” of Jesus, thus set free, might enter into our spirits, and make us sharers of its victory. Up to that point in His history, the Son “had been learning obedience by the things which He suffered.”³ He had been effecting an actual identification of Himself with every weakness and temptation and sorrow of our

¹ John i. 12. The word τέκνα here used deserves attention, not “sons,” which we may become by adoption, but “children,” im-

plying actual (though spiritual) paternity.

² John iii. 6; iv. 24.

³ Heb. v. 8.

present lot. He had even borne our sins in His own body on the tree, and had accepted that death which is the wages of sin. Then, still as man, He rose victorious over sin and death; and, still as man, ascended to the Father that, with our nature spiritualised and glorified, He might pass into the sphere where nothing but the Father's will is done, and where the Father's immediate presence is the fountain of perpetual joy.

Even in the creation of man, therefore, the Ascension of our Lord, and not merely His Incarnation, must have been part of the Divine Counsel. Our first parents, though in an estate of innocence, could not perfectly fulfil the idea of human nature. It may be true, as the Church seems always to have held, that "besides the seeds of natural virtue and religion sown in their minds, they were endowed with certain gifts and powers supernatural infused by the Spirit of God; and that in these their perfection consisted."¹ Yet, although they possessed these "gifts and powers supernatural," it could only be as gifts. They had not been made a part of their nature in the intimate sense in which, as we have yet to see, they have been made ours in the glorified Redeemer. The ultimate idea of human nature had not yet been fulfilled, and the consequence was, that when assailed by temptation our first parents fell. They had not received that "indissoluble life" which no power of the enemy can touch. Satan had not been trodden down. The Spirit of a victorious

¹ Bull's *Works*, Oxford, 1837, takes an opposite view, *Sermons*, vol. ii. p. 82. Archer Butler 1st series, p. 325.

Redeemer had not taken full possession of their spirits. For these results a "new birth,"¹ a "new creation,"² was needed—a birth and a creation to be reached only when the Spirit of One at once Divine and human was made their spirit, the human giving the connecting point, the Divine the ruling power. In other words, they could be reached only when our Lord was glorified.

It is important to dwell upon this point because, in the revived interest which has been taken in modern times in the great doctrine of the Incarnation, it may be doubted whether full justice has been done to that of the Ascension. In Christian truth, as taught and applied by the Apostles, the latter is always connected with the former by the closest bonds; and, even when not stated in express terms, it always underlies their thoughts. It is not enough to say that the Incarnation is the keystone of the Christian system. In a certain sense, indeed, it is so, for it is the foundation of Christian history. But, *taken by itself*, it is not the centre of Christian doctrine or the mainspring of Christian life. When St. Paul speaks of the Redeemer, it is seldom in any other light than as One who has not only assumed humanity, but in whom humanity has been glorified.³ When he describes "the exceeding greatness of God's power to us-ward who believe," he has in his mind a power not exhibited only in the earthly life of the Redeemer, but "the strength of that might which God wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and made Him to sit at His right hand in the

¹ John iii. 8.

² Eph. ii. 10.

³ Phil. ii. 7-9.

heavenly places.”¹ And, when he sums up the doctrine which he had preached to the Corinthians in its two main branches, one of which is that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,” he is careful, in mentioning the other, to change the tense in which he sets it forth, so that we may rest on the thought not only of the past but of the present, who “hath been raised (not ‘was raised’) on the third day according to the Scriptures.”² Nor is it otherwise with St. John. His ideas of “life” and “light” as applied to Jesus are those of eternal life and unfading light;³ and his main conception of the Lord who guides the fortunes of the Church is expressed by him in the words which he bids us hear from the Son of man Himself: “I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore.”⁴ A similar line of thought runs throughout the whole New Testament. Christ is not merely the Incarnate Son; He is in His human nature exalted and glorified. When we would regard Him either as the foundation or as the life of the Church, we cannot separate the Ascension and the Incarnation. As the Ascension necessarily presupposes the Incarnation, so without the Ascension the Incarnation is incomplete. In the teaching of Scripture the two events are complementary to one another. Our conception of the Christ, therefore, ought to be the same. Unless it be so, there is no small danger that,

¹ Eph. i. 20.

² 1 Cor. xv. 4.

³ Compare the contrasted de-

scription of the Baptist in John v. 35.

⁴ Rev. i. 18.

notwithstanding the immense advance lately made by theology, from the manner in which, after having long devoted itself too exclusively to man and his salvation, it has turned to Christ,¹ a most important part of the gain may be lost sight of. Occupying itself with the Incarnation alone, theology and along with it religion will be deprived of its most essential characteristic. It will fail to dwell amidst those superearthy realities which it is the object of the New Testament to make our daily food; and, though man and the world may still be elevated, they will not be pervaded by the light and the spirit of heaven.² The Ascension must thus be combined with the Incarnation if we would understand the process by which the Almighty designs to realise His final purpose with regard to humanity.³ In the Incarnate and Ascended Lord, we have all that the human heart expects with unquenchable instinct and undying hope. Seated on the throne of that heavenly world which is above us and around us on every side is One in whom the human nature has been closely and indissolubly united with the Divine; and from that time onward humanity is filled with its loftiest potencies and most glorious prospects. At the Ascension the goal of humanity is reached.

How elevating and stimulating is the thought! Even in fallen man we often see much that reminds us of his high original,—intellectual powers which seem

¹ Comp. Rev. J. B. Illingworth in *Lux Mundi*, 3d ed. p. 133.

² Comp. Hare, *Mission of the Comforter*, Sermon I.

³ Comp. Godet *On Luke* xxv. 50-53.

to penetrate into the deepest secrets of the universe, wisdom before which the future unfolds itself as before the prophet's eye, the heart that throbs with generous and self-denying love, the saintliness of character that commands our admiration or our awe. Yet when we endeavour to extend these blessings how much cause have we often to despond! Every effort made by us seems to be in vain. We fail; others fail. We see that even Jesus failed; and we listen with melancholy sympathy to the pathetic words of the beloved disciple when he brings to an end his account of his Master's struggle: "But though He had done so many signs before them, yet they believed not on Him."¹ In the Ascended Lord all weakness passes away; all that limits the universal diffusion of His Spirit is removed; and human nature glorified with the glory of the Divine may become the portion of every child of Adam. In that nature the Lord Jesus Christ has ascended to His Father. We who are partakers of it are His "brethren."² And as He ascends before our eyes, we behold the pledge of perfect and everlasting communion established between God and man.

2. The Ascension of our Lord was His entrance into the reward prepared for Him after the accomplishment of His work. We are not, indeed, to imagine that even amidst the pains and sorrows of earth our Lord had no reward. Never at one single point of the *via dolorosa* trodden by Him from the manger to the cross did the joyful confidence desert Him that, in the obedience of perfect sonship, He was doing the Father's will; and

¹ John xii. 37.

² John xx. 17.

never did He lose sight of the glorious results He was to secure. Thoughts like these were always present to His mind, and even in themselves they were a reward for the sufferings He endured. He saw in them of the travail of His soul, and He was satisfied. More than once, when hours of thickest darkness gathered round Him, He spoke of "My peace"¹ and, "My joy."² And when He reflected on the wisdom of the Divine Counsels, so inscrutable by man, we are told that He "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit."³ The mystery of His sorrow is familiar to us; we think too little of the mystery of His joy.

But this joy was not His sole encouragement. He looked forward to another and a higher joy. "For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, despising the shame."⁴ He spoke of the "Son of man coming in His kingdom,"⁵ of "the new fruit of the vine"⁶ that He would then drink with His disciples, of the "regeneration"⁷ that was to mark the close of the present state of things; and, when He referred to the future in parables, it was under such joyful figures as those of a banquet or a marriage feast.⁸ More particularly this reward seems to be presented to us in the New Testament under three points of view, all of which are immediately connected with the condition of the Ascended Lord. It was reward,—in relation to Himself, to the members of His body, and to His enemies.

¹ John xiv. 27.

² John xvii. 13.

³ Luke x. 21. ⁴ Heb. xii. 2.

⁵ Matt. xvi. 28. ⁶ Mark xiv. 25.

⁷ Matt. xix. 28.

⁸ Luke xiii. 29; Matt. xxii. 2.

(1.) In relation to Himself, our Lord was to be "glorified," that is, He was not only to be crowned with glory, but with glory seen and acknowledged by the world. Under this point of view His reward is especially spoken of in the fourth Gospel; and the passages relating to it, when looked at in the light of their context, are so remarkable that they ought to be examined. They are mainly these. When Andrew and Peter told Jesus of the Greeks who would see Him, He answered them, "The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified," and He ended with the prayer, "Father, glorify Thy name." When at the Last Supper Judas had gone out, our Lord immediately exclaimed, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; and God shall glorify Him in Himself, and straightway shall He glorify Him." Finally, our Lord thus pours forth the longings of His heart in His High-priestly prayer, "Father, the hour is come; glorify Thy Son, that the Son also may glorify Thee;" "I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine Own Self, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was:" "The glory which Thou hast given unto Me I have given unto them, that they may be one, even as we are one:" "Father, that which Thou hast given Me, I will that where I am, they also may be with Me; that they may behold My glory which Thou hast given Me; for Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world." ¹

¹ John xii. 23, 28; xiii. 31, 32; xvii. 1, 4, 5, 22, 24.

Let us put these passages together, and look at them in their connexion with the position of Jesus when He uttered them, and we shall learn the true nature of the "glorifying" and the "glory" of which they speak. No mere material glory is alluded to, no mere outward blessedness, no mere homage of angels or of men; it is in another direction altogether that we must seek their meaning.

Before our Lord came into the world His glory had been that of Divine Sonship. He had been "the effulgence of the Father's glory";¹ and, as the essence of the Divine character is love, He had been the expression, the impersonation of that love. From eternity He had been the Father's delight, rejoicing always before Him; and with no disturbing element to cloud their blessed fellowship, the ages of the ages had passed away, love ever flowing forth from the Father to the Son, and returning from the Son to the Father, nothing within, above, around, except the glorious and, as soon as there were eyes to see them, the visible harmonies of love. That time came to an end. Man was created and fell; and, in order to redeem him, the Eternal Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. Where was the glory of the Divine Son then? It was there—more, it may be said, than ever there; for the work of the Son upon earth was the highest conceivable manifestation of the love of God. But the glory, though there, was hidden in the lowliness and humiliations of a suffering life. Men could not believe that the Son of Mary, "the Man of

¹ Heb. i. 3.

sorrows and acquainted with grief," was the beloved Son of the Father in whom He was well pleased. They rejected Him, and thinking that they were doing service to God they nailed Him to the cross.¹ A third and last stage in the history of Jesus followed. He who had been crucified in weakness, was raised by the power of God, ascended to the right hand of the Majesty on high, and sent down the gift of His Holy Spirit to complete the redemption of the world. That was the rolling back of the clouds which had interrupted the vision of Christ's glory upon earth. He was not something different then from what He had previously been. As human, not less than Divine, He was essentially the same—the revelation of the love of God. But now He was seen by human eyes to be so, as "before the world was" He had been seen by the Father. The thought of His Incarnation, of His humiliation, of His tears and agonies and cries, of His death and burial, no longer dimmed His glory; and this lesson was proclaimed as one of the eternal verities, that not earthly power or greatness, but love and self-sacrifice, are the highest expression of what God is, and true glory.

When, therefore, our Lord prays, "Father, glorify Thy Son, that the Son also may glorify Thee," we are not to think chiefly of outward glory. There may be, doubtless there will be, such. Outward glory surrounded Jesus and the two Old Testament saints on the Mount of Transfiguration. The Shechinah, which was the manifestation of the Divine glory in the Tabernacle, shed

¹ Comp. John xvi. 2.

a brilliant light over the Most Holy place. And it is not possible for us to think of "the glory to be revealed" except as accompanied by light and splendour. Yet, whatever outward glory may surround our Lord, what He speaks of as His reward is mainly inward. It is the glory of Divine Sonship. It is the glory of the most intimate union and communion with that God who is the sum and the substance of all being in its holiest and happiest estate. It is the fellowship with God of One who is not only the coequal and coeternal Word, but who is also Man. And, finally, it is this glory manifested to the eyes of all, the veil being withdrawn which had hitherto obscured or concealed the Son's unity of relation to the Father, in order that that glory of the Father Himself, which is the end of all existence, and which can be seen only in the Son, may shine forth in the sight of His creatures. Thus the exalted Redeemer vindicates the ways of God to man; and, as no loftier task can be imagined, so there can be no greater reward than to be owned, alike of God and man, as successful in accomplishing it. This is our Lord's reward when it is viewed as "glory." The Son glorified the Father, and the Father glorifies His Son.

(2.) In relation to the members of His body, our Lord was to be the fulness, the *pleroma*, of all Divine blessing to His people. This aspect of His reward is often spoken of in the New Testament, and especially in St. Paul's Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians. In the first of these Epistles we read, as part of a description of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we

are "blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Him"; that it was the good pleasure of the Father, "in the dispensation of the fulness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things upon the earth;" and that "He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him to be Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all."¹ In like manner, although still more directly, in the Epistle to the Colossians, which, as distinguished from the Ephesian Epistle, is occupied with the glory of the Head rather than of the members of the Body, we are told that Christ is "the Head of the body, the Church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the pre-eminence. For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in Him should all the fulness dwell; and through Him to reconcile all things unto Himself, whether things upon the earth or things in the heavens;" and again, that "in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily;" and that "in Him we are made full, who is the Head of all principality and power."² In passages such as these, the context distinctly shows that it is not the pre-incarnate, but the Risen and Ascended Lord of whom the Apostle speaks. No doubt, in immediate connexion with some of them, the glorious attributes of the pre-incarnate Son are described, and we are taken back to a time before the foundation of the world, that we may behold in Him "the image of the invisible God, the

¹ Eph. i. 3, 10, 22, 23.

² Col. i. 18-20; ii. 9, 10.

firstborn of all creation, in whom all things were created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through Him and unto Him; and He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.”¹ But in the words to which special reference has been made, St. Paul passes beyond the thought of the pre-incarnate Christ to the thought of Him as He is now in heaven. He speaks of Him as one who has both died and risen again, not only as the firstborn “of all creation” but as the firstborn “from the dead,” and of His seat in the “heavenly places”; while in another part of his Epistle to the Ephesians he expressly mentions His Ascension, “Now, this that He ascended, what is it but that He also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things,” after which the Apostle proceeds to enlarge upon the gifts bestowed by the Ascended Lord, and the end to be attained by them.²

These passages present us with a very striking picture of the reward now enjoyed by Him who on earth had been humbled even unto death. He has received far more than outward glory or material recompense for His previous pain. From eternity the grand Original in whom the Almighty had beheld and planned the universe of created things, and “without whom,” to use the similar language of St. John, “was not anything made

¹ Col. i. 15-17.

² Eph. iv. 9-16.

that hath been made : that which hath been made was life in Him,"¹ He, in His human as well as His Divine nature, has been, is now, and will ever be, the centre not only of the natural but of the redeemed creation. In Him, as in one great fountain-head, are stored up those waters of Divine grace that, throughout the ages, are to flow forth in every direction, and to fertilise every department of the life both of men and nature, so that they may produce, instead of bitter fruits, the sweet fruits of righteousness and peace and joy. From Him and through Him alone are to come all holy thoughts, all heavenly aspirations, and all just works, everything that makes life desirable, lends brightness to existence, and fills us with the hope of immortality. Nor is He presented to us in these passages as if He were only some abstract idea of the Godhead, some hardly comprehensible conception of a purely spiritual Being filling all space and time, to which in our hours of need we are to flee, but as a living personality whose possession of irresistible power is associated with human affections and human sympathies, as the Divine Man who can be touched with a feeling of our infirmities, and can enter into all our varying emotions whether of sorrow or gladness. In Him as such dwells the fulness of all perfection, of the very perfection after which, by the law of their existence, man and nature strive. The full store of heavenly gifts has been placed at His disposal ; and when the glory of " God the Father " is consummated in the happiness of everything created by Him, it will be

¹ John i. 3, R. V. margin.

in the name of Jesus that every knee shall bow ; and Him will every tongue confess.¹ Our Lord, in short, was exalted, not to be separated for ever from a world which crucified Him, from a world with the weaknesses and sorrows and sins of which He was once in contact, but that He may apply to it His ample and free forgiveness, together with the inexhaustible resources of His power.

As this too was the purpose of the Almighty, so also has it been fulfilled in the whole history of the Christian Church. On its larger scale that history has been summed up in the Revelation of St. John under the light of the manifestation of the Ascended Lord. In her aims and teaching and labours and prayers the Church of Christ has acknowledged but one source of illumination and quickening and guidance—even Christ. She may not always have been true to the source of her strength, but in no land or century has she owned any other principle or declared that she was dependent on any other helper. In the darkest as well as the brightest, in the most ignorant as well as the most enlightened periods of the past, her one symbol has been the Cross. Everything around her may have changed ; in this she has not changed. In her most mistaken or faithless moods she has rested upon this rock, and has desired to do honour to her One Head. When we turn to private Christian life, it has not been otherwise. The faith that has removed mountains, the hope that has lightened suffering, the love that has run

¹ Phil. ii. 10, 11. For force of the verb "confess" see Lightfoot *in loc.*

like a golden thread through the otherwise dark web of human wrongs, have all been confessed by those who have exhibited them to be the gift of Christ. In Christ each believer has lived. Out of His fulness each would say that he had received his patience in affliction, his meekness under provocation, his spirit of toil amidst discouragement, his readiness to sacrifice himself amidst misinterpretation and thanklessness, his heavenly-mindedness under the pressure of the outward world. In Christ each has died. One voice alone reaches us from the depths of every Christian heart, "To me to live is Christ"; "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of Christ."¹ The same feelings animate the Christian's heart when he looks forward to the future. His Ascended Lord is to him the model of all excellence, the ideal of all perfection: His highest aim is so to live by Him that he may be like Him. Is not all this a great reward, and one in the very spirit of the Redeemer's mission?

Again, let us dwell for a moment on the thought that this reward in its fullest extent belongs to One not less human than Divine—our Brother! We know what Jesus was when upon earth. But whatever men beheld in Him then they may still behold in Him, though in indefinitely increased measure, and with means of easier application to their wants. If, as the Lamb that had been slain, He bears upon His Person the marks of Calvary, He bears also in His heart the memories of Cana of Galilee, of Simon's house, of the spot outside

¹ Comp. an eloquent passage in Dale *On Ephesians*, p. 96.

the little town of Bethany where Mary wept beside her brother's grave and He wept with her. He is "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever"—the same, that is, while other teachers are removed by death; but not the same, in so far as He can now do for us what He could not do on earth, and can secure for us a triumph which could not be ours had He not first realised it in Himself.

(3.) In relation to His enemies our Lord was to be their Conqueror and Judge. As He looked forward to the future He often spoke of the "kingdom" upon which He was ere long to enter. When He shadowed forth in parables the nature of His work and His future glory He was wont to employ the figure of a king;¹ and He accepted the homage of the penitent thief in his prayer to be remembered when He should "come in His kingdom."² He held out to His followers the hope of eating and drinking "at His table in His kingdom";³ and at the sounding of the seventh angel in the Apocalypse there "followed great voices in heaven, and they said, The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever."⁴ We lose the full force of such passages by substituting our own ideas of a king and of a kingdom for those of the Jews in our Lord's day. We think of exaltation in earthly dignity, of a brilliant court, of crowds of attendants, of wealth, luxury, and splendour. These conceptions were not indeed strange

¹ Matt. xviii. 23, xxii. 11; Luke xiv. 31.

² Luke xxiii. 42.

³ Luke xxii. 30.

⁴ Rev. xi. 15.

to the mind of a Jew when Jesus was upon earth, but they were not the prominent ones which he connected with the term king. To him a king was more especially the representative of two ideas, victory over enemies and judgment.

When wearied with the rule of the judges it was partly in the first of these lights that Israel cried out for a king, that "he might go before them and fight their battles."¹ Thus also the Hope of Israel is often celebrated in the Psalms, "Yet I have set my King upon my holy hill of Sion. Ask of me, and I will give Thee the nations for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel;"² "I speak the things which I have made touching the King. Gird Thy sword upon Thy thigh, O Mighty One, Thy glory and Thy majesty. Thine arrows are sharp; the peoples fall under Thee; they are in the hearts of the King's enemies;"³ "He shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth. They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before Him; and His enemies shall lick the dust."⁴ To such passages we may also add the favourite designation of the Almighty by the Jews—the Lord of Sabaoth, the Lord of hosts.

But in the eyes of Israel a great king was not only a victorious conqueror, he was also a judge of men. Again, it was partly in this aspect that Israel desired a king.

¹ 1 Sam. viii. 20.

² Ps. ii. 6, 8, 9.

³ Ps. xlv. 1, 3, 5.

⁴ Ps. lxxii. 8, 9.

"Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations."¹ In the Psalms also this kingly prerogative of judgment is associated in the closest manner with that of victory over foes. Immediately following one of the descriptions of the "king" already quoted we read, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of equity is the sceptre of Thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated wickedness: therefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows."² So also elsewhere. The combination of inflicting disaster upon enemies and executing judgment for the poor and needy often meets us in the same Psalm, and strikingly illustrates the ideas of Israel upon this point: "The King's strength also loveth judgment."³

When, in the light of these passages, we turn to our Lord's reward in the aspect in which we are now considering it, we are met, in the first place, by the assurance that it is victory. Victory, indeed, presupposes war; but war is the characteristic of the present Christian dispensation. That dispensation is not one of rest. It is one of struggle, a struggle with evil, carried on no doubt by the instrumentality of the Church, but in which the Head of the Church shares, and for which He supplies the needful strength—"Rule Thou in the midst of Thine enemies."⁴ In this aspect it is particularly set before us in the Apocalypse, where the Captain of Salvation rides forth at the head of His armies, arrayed in a garment sprinkled with blood and

¹ 1 Sam. viii. 5.

² Ps. xlv. 6, 7.

³ Ps. xcix. 4.

⁴ Ps. cx. 2.

with a sharp sword proceeding out of His mouth.¹ In the same aspect also we read of His kingdom, in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, that a time is coming when He shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power.² The kingdom here alluded to by the Apostle is no kingdom of mere honour and glory. It is rather one in which our Lord contends with His foes until He makes them His footstool, and which, therefore, He naturally lays down when there are no more foes to overcome. Such has been the history of the whole Christian age. "The light has shined in the darkness, and the darkness overcame it not."³ The struggle of our Lord with "the Jews" during the days of His flesh, described in the fourth Gospel, has never ceased to be a struggle upon the wider area of the world.

Our Lord's kingdom, however, is one of victory as well as war. Many indeed, when they look back upon the past, may be of opinion that it has been marked by defeat rather than victory. Why, they may ask, unless it were so, should not all opposition have been long since overcome? Yet in the same sense the issue of our Lord's own struggle upon earth may seem to have been defeat. He was rejected and despised and persecuted, sentenced by the tribunals of His own land to death, and nailed to the cross where He bowed His head and died. Was not that defeat? It was really victory. St. John brings it before us under the aspect

¹ Rev. xix. 13, 15.

² 1 Cor. xv. 24.

³ John i. 5.

of "glory," of a "lifting up on high out of the earth," of a life willingly surrendered which no man could have taken from Him, of a corn of wheat sown in the ground, not to perish, but to spring up in fresh and more abundant forms of loveliness.¹ All that was victory.² It has not been otherwise since then. Amidst all its struggles Christian truth has never lost its spirit of confidence and hope. It has never failed to meet its opponents in controversy, or to maintain its testimony, though called to face discouragements of every kind. It has subdued one form of evil after another; it has redressed many of the most terrible grievances under which men have suffered; and it has secured the homage of the most civilised and advancing nations of the globe, entering into their laws, elevating the tone of their society, enriching them in every department of their public and private life.

The objection may indeed be urged that this has not been accomplished by Christian truth spoken in simple purity; but that in successive ages that truth has been accommodated by worldly prudence to the temper of the day, and that therefore it has not been the same Christ, the same truth, that has prevailed. But this is the very glory of the Christian system, that, while remaining essentially the same, it has in every age been able to present itself in a form the power of which the age was compelled to acknowledge, and that as each age closed it entered with weapons at least in some degree new upon a new career. Its hidden force lay

¹ John x. 18; xii. 24, 28, 32.

² Comp. 1 John v. 4.

in the fact that it had been made manifest in a personality, a life—the personality, the life of the Lord of glory. Life changes while remaining the same, and the better it adapts itself to its environment while retaining its fundamental principles, the more powerful does it prove itself to be. All that we have to ask of any particular period is whether the aspect of Christian truth then presented to the world was a legitimate deduction from the life of Christ, and suited to the wants of the men then living? If it was so, then, however different in different ages its accidents or its mould, the truth itself may have preserved its unity. It may have changed only as the Life from which it came would, had it continued to be on earth, have changed and have been seen to change in the same successive epochs. It may have changed only to such an extent, and in such a way, as life, if really life and not death, changes. It may have changed no further than to show that it embodied throughout the ages a power of growth adapted to the growth of man, while yet in its inner nature it was one—one in origin, in aim, and in effect. This has actually been the case with Christian truth; and it has been so because, however often supposed to be a dogma, it never was in reality a dogma. It was always a life, the life of the Living Lord. Therein lay its secret, and to that its success was due. We are, therefore, entitled to maintain that whatever its changing forms, or the changing thoughts with which it has been associated, Christian truth has been always essentially one, and that its conquests in every separate

age go to swell the record of the victories of its one victorious Head.¹

The "kingdom," however, which our Lord has received as His reward does not lie only in war and victory. When we recall the ideas already spoken of as connected in the Jewish mind with a king and a kingdom we see, in the second place, that the reward lies also in judgment. Nor is that judgment which Jesus exercises confined to one great day at the end of the present dispensation. He judges now. When He stood before the tribunal of the High Priest He said, "Henceforth (that is, from this moment onwards)² ye shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."³ When He is described in the first Apocalyptic vision as the glorified "Son of man," the marks of His appearance, with almost no exception, indicate judgment.⁴ And when He sets before His disciples that heavenly work which, after His departure, was to be carried on through the instrumentality of His Church, a main part of that work is judgment: "The Advocate shall convict the world of judgment, because the Prince of this world hath been judged."⁵ This judgment is not necessarily eternal condemnation. Properly speaking, it is that protest for wisdom against folly, and for righteousness against unrighteousness, which may either find an approving answer from "the world," or rouse it to a more determined rebellion against God. It is a vin-

¹ Comp. Canon Holland in *Luce Mandi*, p. 34.

² Not "hereafter" as in A. V.

³ Matt. xxvi. 64.

⁴ Rev. i. 13-17.

⁵ John xvi. 11.

dication of the Divine Justice. Herein lies its glory. Justice! judgment! There is nothing nobler in the universe of being or of thought. They may not always, at first sight, attract us like the mercy of which we say that it is "twice blessed." But, except on a foundation laid in them, there can be no mercy.

Hatred of sin, and zeal, and fear
Lead up the holy hill ;
Track them till Charity appear
A self-denial still.

They are the upholders of that law the majesty of which is not less to be seen in the spiritual than in the natural world. As principles of action they penetrate beneath outward appearances, and deal with the realities not the shows of things. To them the poor and weak are as precious as the rich and powerful, and with solemn joy they raise the worthy poor man out of the dust, and lift up the needy from the dunghill, that they may set him with princes, even with the princes of God's people.¹ Justice and judgment! let us bow before them with reverence, let us pay to them the loftiest tribute of admiration which the tongue can speak. They are the foundation of all moral order and, therefore, of all happiness. Upon them rests the highest conception which the human mind is capable of forming, that of the government of God.

These attributes of a righteous rule also our Lord did not exercise only when He was on earth, He has continued to exercise them through the instrumentality

¹ Ps. cxiii. 7, 8.

of His Church. She, too, has judged the world. In the darkest ages we turn to her as the deliverer of the oppressed; and, if she sometimes went beyond her commission, put her foot upon the neck of kings, and made licentious and cruel barons beg as suppliants at her gates, it is only fair to bear in mind that in the eyes of eternal righteousness these men for the most part deserved their fate. It would be well for the Church of our own day if she would return to more of that sternness, and be less tolerant of the worldliness and gross sins of society, especially high society, than she is. In a sinful world sternness is a necessary element of Christian truth; and in the history of the past there have been no struggles for human progress so worthy of admiration, and no sacrifices for the suffering so great, as those of the unflinching champions of righteousness. Our Lord's reward is to be the Judge of men; and the members of His body deny Him His reward when they, in His stead, are afraid to judge righteous judgment.

Finally, we ought not upon this point to forget how intimate is the connexion between our Lord's humanity in His state of glory and the judgment part of His reward. "God hath given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is a (not 'the') Son of man."¹ Because He has been in the same position, has fought the same battles, and endured the same trials as those standing at His bar; because He entirely knows them, and they by the instinct of a common

¹ John v. 27.

nature know that He knows them, His judgment finds an echo in their hearts as no simply divine judgment would. Is it a sentence of condemnation? They are speechless,¹ and judgment, by awakening the conscience, becomes judgment, instead of a mere verdict of irresistible power against which we can rebel. Or is it a sentence of pardon? Then that that pardon should be pronounced by One who, in human love and pity, has followed every false winding of their hearts and yet forgives, fills them, even in their forgiven state, with remorse and shame and humility and tender longing to draw still nearer Him.

When thou seest thy Judge
The sight of Him will kindle in thy heart
All tender, gracious, reverential thoughts.
Thou wilt be sick with love, and yearn for Him,
And feel as though thou couldst but pity Him.
There is a pleading in His gracious eyes
Will pierce thee to the quick and trouble thee,
And thou wilt hate and loathe thyself; for though
Now sinless, thou wilt feel that thou hast sinned
As never thou didst feel; and wilt desire
To slink away, and hide thee from His sight.
And yet thou wilt have a longing eye to dwell
Within the beauty of His countenance.

Such then is the reward of the Risen and glorified Lord. His own glory is acknowledged; He is the fulness of Divine blessing to His people; He is the Conqueror and Judge of every hostile power.

One thing still remained to be done. It concerned

¹ Matt. xxii. 12.

the proprieties of the case that into this reward, into the possession of this kingdom, our Lord should be solemnly inaugurated. The sovereign of a great nation may exercise every royal prerogative from the date of his succession to the kingdom. But his people cannot be satisfied until he is crowned with every demonstration by which they may either give utterance to their feelings or have their feelings deepened. In a relation similar to this the Ascension of Jesus stands to His Resurrection. Between His absolute authority and right to rule there was probably, on the two occasions, little or no difference. What He was at the Ascension He was also on the Resurrection morning, and we have already rejected the idea that, during the forty days, there was development either of His body or His Spirit. Yet the Ascension was not without a supreme importance of its own. It was the enthronement of the great King, when the words of the Psalmist were fulfilled, "I have set My King upon My holy hill of Zion"; "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; yea, lift them up, ye everlasting doors: and the King of glory shall come in."¹

This, however, is not all that may be said. Not only did it concern the proprieties of the case that there should be an enthronement or coronation of our Lord; it was also suitable that it should take place in the particular form of Ascension from the earth. A coronation *upon* the earth might have confined men's thoughts of Him *to* the earth. They might have honoured Him as a

¹ Ps. ii. 6; xxiv. 9.

human being like themselves, though higher, holier, and more powerful. It was of the utmost consequence to teach them that His earthly condition was to come to an end, and that a new era in His history was to be the beginning of a new experience in theirs. Not His enthronement alone, therefore, but that enthronement in the particular form in which it was effected, was essential to the teaching of this lesson. His upward movement from earth to heaven in the sight of His disciples showed where the real sphere of His existence was thenceforth to be.

A third aspect of the Ascension of our Lord has still to be noticed.

3. It was His entrance upon a new sphere of exertion for the good of man. Into the particulars of this we shall inquire hereafter. In the meantime it is enough to say that we are not to think of the glorified life to which our Lord ascended as a life of rest. Neither at the Resurrection nor the Ascension was His work completed. It is going on now, and it will continue to go on until, so far at least as the present dispensation is concerned, it closes with His manifestation in the glory of the Father, and the kingdom of the earth becomes, not by right only, but in reality, His kingdom.

No doubt Christ's life in the heavenly world is described, both in the Old and in the New Testaments, as a "sitting" at the right hand of God.¹ But we must be careful how we interpret such expressions.

¹ Ps. cx. 1; Heb. i. 3, viii. 1, x. 12, xii. 2; Rev. iii. 21.

“All local association must be excluded from them.”¹ They refer to honour and dignity, not locality. Were we compelled to think that sitting, as an attitude, was chiefly in view it would be difficult to resist the conclusion that that attitude must be perpetual; for the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, not that Jesus “sat down,” but that He “hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God”; and the tense thus used indicates permanence. To entertain such an idea is impossible. Not only so. It is worthy of notice that the ordinary Scriptural representation of the position of the glorified Redeemer is either standing or some other attitude which invites to the thought of His being engaged in work.

Thus the dying Stephen “being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.’”² Thus when, in the first vision of the Apocalypse, the beloved disciple beheld the Head and King of His Church, it was as one “girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle.”³ And the girdle was worn in this manner by priests when they were engaged in active service. In the Epistle to the Church at Ephesus, too, our Lord describes Himself, not as He that sitteth, but as “He that walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.”⁴ In like manner St. Paul, describing

¹ Westcott on Hebrews, i. 3.

² Rev. i. 13.

³ Acts vii. 55, 56.

⁴ Rev. ii. 1.

the assistance given him when placed before the hostile tribunals of the world, exclaimed, "At my first defence no man took my part. . . . But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me";¹ while in his visions, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, commissions or encouragements are so given him that it is hardly possible to think of the Person giving them as sitting. Sitting at the right hand of God, therefore, is not an attitude of the glorified Lord, nor does it imply rest in His exalted state. It is consistent with the idea of constant uninterrupted activity, and in such active exertions the whole revelation of the New Testament tells us that our Lord is now engaged.

We have considered the fact of the Ascension together with one or two aspects of the great event. It may be well to remember, before bringing this Lecture to a close, that in the Ascension the Church of Christ has always rejoiced with a joy unspeakable and glorified. Though too little before her thoughts in later times, her services bear constant and striking witness to the influence which she felt that it ought to exercise upon the faith, the life, and the hope of her members. No festival of her sacred year has had its details arranged with a more profound sense of its importance or with more loving care. She has beheld in it a ladder uniting heaven and earth. Even when she has paused in adoring wonder at the lowly life of Jesus of Nazareth, she has raised her loudest songs of praise to Jesus glorified; and she has listened to Him as if He were

¹ 2 Tim. iv. 16, 17.

still addressing her in the words in which He addressed Nathanael, "Thou shalt see greater things than these: Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Thou shalt see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." ¹

¹ John i. 50, 51. For a very striking description of the feelings of the Church as they appear in the festival of the Ascension, see Liddon, *Univ. Sermons*, 1st series, p. 283.