

CHRIST AND THE PROFITEERS.

THE cleansing of the temple by Our Lord described by all four evangelists presents many problems, exegetical, moral and historical. Some reject the whole story as a fabrication, laughing at the idea that the money-changers and other traders in the temple would have so meekly borne the insult with hardly a protest. And of those who accept the story at its face value many are in difficulties because St. John puts it at the beginning of Our Lord's ministry while the other three Gospels put it at the end, that is, just before the Passion. Hence it is said that either St. John or the other evangelists have changed the chronological order, some saying the former, others the latter. Finally, there are still others who say that both St. John and the other evangelists are right, because there were two cleansings of the temple, one at the beginning, the other at the end of our Lord's public life. But many raise strong objections to this on account of what they call its extreme unlikelihood.

It is not our intention here to discuss this exegetical problem, or to give the arguments for and against a double or a single cleansing of the temple. Our purpose is simply to present certain historical data which throw light on the circumstances contemporary with the life of Christ, especially in relation to his attitude towards the buyers and sellers in the temple. These historical data will enable everyone to solve the problem for himself, not only with regard to the genuineness of the incident but also with regard to the likelihood of a repetition of the incident.

One of the recurring stumbling blocks in every form of religion, true or false, is the connexion of religion with the question of wealth. Not all are per-

Blackfriars

sueded of the truth that we cannot serve God and Mammon, in spite of the verdict of history. It is here also that the enemies of religion always find their chief weapon for its destruction. The difficulty, of course, has its roots in human nature. For every reasonable form of religion demands public worship, and public worship demands places of worship and recognised officials of religion, call them priests, ministers or what you will. Hence the practice of setting aside certain places and certain men for the public worship of the divinity is practically universal. These men and places are given a sacred character; that is, they are separated from the ordinary course of human affairs. The consequence is that there generally falls on the devotees of religion the task of supporting both the place and the official of the worship. And as, in course of time, the place of worship grows in splendour owing to the devotion of the faithful in their desire to dedicate the best to their god, so it not infrequently happens that the religious official tends to increase in wealth, sometimes innocently, sometimes through imposition on the faithful. Avarice is said to be one of the great vices to which religious officials are prone.

Generally the tenets of any well organised religion lay down strict rules for the support of temple and priest by the faithful. Of this the Hebrew law is an example, and the Law of Moses had a divine sanction. Thus the worshipper in the temple was bidden not to appear before the Lord empty-handed, and there was a precise set of laws ordaining what sacrifices, tithes and oblations he should offer. Further, it was exactly defined how these offerings were to be allotted, some to be burnt wholly on the altar of sacrifice, others to be partially burnt and partially distributed to the priests and ministers for their livelihood, and so forth. Besides the offerings in kind there was a capitation tax of half a shekel in money to be paid yearly by every male

Christ and the Profiteers

Jew of age. This was the temple tribute imposed for the upkeep of the building and support of the ministers to which reference is made in the gospel (Matt. xvii).

The half shekel was a coin equivalent to two pence of that time, and as a penny was considered to be equal to the value of a day's wage for a labourer, we may estimate the half shekel as equivalent in purchasing power to ten shillings of our coinage. This was not a mere voluntary offering, and any omission of payment was liable to be followed by the seizure of one's goods in reparation. As it was a sacred tax, the priests demanded that it should be paid in sacred money, that is, in coinage of Jewish issue. Now this was a law which caused much labour and exchange. In the first place there was no unified coinage in circulation in the Palestine of Christ. Trade was carried on by means of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Persian, and Phoenician coinage as well as by the money issued under the Macchabean dynasty of the previous centuries. Further, at the feast of the Pasch, which was the appointed time for the payment of the tax. Jerusalem was a gathering place for foreign Jews from every quarter of the Roman Empire. Indeed, Josephus tries our credulity by saying that in the time of Nero nearly three million people had collected in the Holy City for the Pasch.¹ However that may be, the foreign pilgrims would arrive laden with purses of foreign money which it would be sometimes necessary, sometimes desirable, to change into the coinage current in Palestine. Hence one of the sights of the land during the few weeks preceding the feast of the Pasch was the appearance of the Jewish money-changers with their stalls up and down the country. As the feast drew near and the people began to flock towards Jerusalem, the stalls were transferred to the Holy City in the wake of the pilgrims.

¹ *War*, VI, 9, 3.

Blackfriars

Now we are not to suppose that the office of money-changer (banker, we should call him nowadays) was any more of a benevolent institution than it is now. There was a rate of exchange, and a pretty high one. According to some, the Jewish changer charged seven per cent. ; others say it reached as much as fourteen per cent., or about three shillings in the pound. Supposing two million persons paid the tax, the bankers' profit in the latter case would amount to about £17,000 even of the currency of that time, which was worth ten times our modern currency. And doubtless there were many other pickings, such as exchanging money on a larger scale for foreign pilgrims. They, like the modern pilgrims at Lourdes or Rome, would require to lay out much money in the needs of worship. There were sacrifices to be offered, meat and drink offerings to be made, things to be bought for the people at home; and doubtless many of them would prefer to bargain with money that was in common use in the city. Hence the feast of the Pasch in Jerusalem would have been a money-changer's paradise.

If the reader knows the East and its ways of conducting business, he can imagine the noisy haggling and bargaining that must have taken place around the money-changers' stalls. If, further, he be familiar with modern places of pilgrimage there will be no need to remind him how the traders who live on the pilgrims bring their wares nearer and nearer until they penetrate almost into the sanctuary itself. It is in human nature. Therefore we are not to be surprised when we find the money-changers setting up their stalls in the very precincts of the temple, that is in the courtyard upon which the main gates of the temple opened and from which one entered the courts surrounding the altar. Of course it was done on the pretence that it was for the convenience of the worshippers.

Christ and the Profiteers

Had this been all it would have been more than enough ; but there was another abuse which must have turned the sacred place into a veritable pandemonium. Once the pilgrim had escaped from the clutches of the banker with the remnants of his money, he was ready to set about the performance of the duties he owed to the temple, his tax to be paid, sacrifices and oblations to be bought and offered, in particular the paschal lamb to be chosen, bought and offered to the priests to be sacrificially slain. It was easier to buy your sacrificial offerings on the spot than to bring them from a distance ; but, of course, it would be dearer. Then, as now, it was found that the price tends to mount very high when a thing is wanted for religious purposes. Then, as now, advantage was taken of a man's religious fervour which makes him disinclined to haggle when it is a question of giving something to God.

If a worshipper brought his sacrificial offerings with him from home or bought them in the city, it was necessary to get them passed as unblemished and fit for sacrifice according to the laws regulating sacrifices. For this there were specially appointed and qualified ministers in the temple. Many a man was deceived by the dealer into buying an animal that was afterwards rejected by the official examiner ! Perhaps it was to avoid this pitfall that a market of already certified animals had been set up near the temple, and in course of time within the temple enclosure. There was opportunity here for a little speculation and profit on the part of the ministers of the temple. Certainly they would never have allowed secular persons to set up a cattle market on temple property in this manner.

Imagine, then, the scene that greeted the devout worshipper as he entered the Court of the Gentiles—sheep, oxen and pigeons herded together, while the haggling of buyers and sellers mingled with the cries of the animals and the chink of money at the stalls of

Blackfriars

the money-changers. Perhaps there was some attempt by the authorities at fixing the prices of the victims, but the Jewish writings utter complaints against the injustice practised in the selling of the animals. One instance is given of the price of pigeons reaching as much as fifteen shillings a pair, on the plea, we suppose, of a scarcity in the market. Popular outcry and the intervention of authority brought the price down the same evening to fourpence; and even that is outrageous when measured in modern currency, fourpence being equivalent to about the price of four days' work of a labourer. Here, as always, it was the poor who suffered; for according to the law those could offer pigeons who were unable to purchase a dearer victim. Thus Our Lady offered a pair of doves at her purification, though the proper sacrifice was a lamb and a dove.

Bitter complaints are made from time to time against the great high-priestly families for their extortions and avarice. It was these who controlled the temple. The Talmud records the curse of one ancient Rabbi against the high-priestly families, 'their sons the treasurers, their sons-in-law the assistant-treasurers, their servants who beat the people with sticks.'² Some idea of the enormous wealth they controlled may be gathered from the fact that when Crassus, the contemporary of Julius Caesar, spoiled the temple treasury he carried off coin to the value of £2,500,000. And with rich Jews of the Dispersion continually bestowing gifts on the temple their wealth was ever on the increase. But among these families, that of the High Priest Annas comes in for special execration because of its rapine and avarice. On one occasion the people rose up and broke up a market under their control, which seems likely to have been the temple cattle-market spoken of

² *Jesus the Messiah*, Edersheim, Vol. I. p. 372.

Christ and the Profiteers

above. All this serves to show that there was a good deal of strong feeling among the people of the time.

It will be remembered that the family of Annas was in such power at the time of Our Lord's death that He was led off first from Gethsemane to Annas, though the supreme High Priest at the time was Caiaphas. But it was all in the family, for Caiaphas was son-in-law to Annas.

A consideration of all these details throws great light on the circumstances leading up to the passion and death of Our Lord. By His preaching he had come into conflict with the Pharisees. But when He came to Jerusalem and began actions such as the cleansing of the temple, He fell foul of the great priestly families which were the chief support of the Sadducean party. Well might St. Luke say in the Acts that the Sadducees, priests though they might be, believed neither in angels, spirits or a future life. They were gross materialists, like all money-lovers. As Josephus says so pointedly, 'the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them.'³ Indeed high priests, such as those of the family of Annas, were little more than ecclesiastical financiers. There was some point, then, in Our Lord's condemnation: 'You have turned my house into a den of thieves.' And the high-priests saw the point and did not want it laboured too much in the presence of the crowd, who had long suffered at the hands of the thieves.

As we have seen, the populace was none too patient with its ecclesiastical superiors in the ranks of the high priesthood. 'They had not the populace obsequious to them.' Nor is it likely that the people looked with favour on the lackeys of the high priests among the sellers of sacrificial victims and the money-changers,

³ *Antiquities*, XIII, 10, 6.

Blackfriars

who certainly would be under the control of the temple authorities. For, if it had pleased the high priests to abolish the law demanding the payment of the tribute in sacred coin, then the money-changers would have lost a great source of gain. Therefore, even from a human point of view, Our Lord had the crowd with Him in his attack on the profiteers. Indeed, at the cleansing of the temple He only did what the people did for themselves a few years later, when they raided and destroyed the Market of the sons of Annas because of its extortionate profiteering. And though the Gospels say nothing of any volunteers from the mob on the occasion of Christ's cleansing of the temple, yet that can easily be left to the imagination. From what we have seen it is easy to understand why there was little show of opposition at the moment on the part of traders and high priests. As for the lower priests then performing their ministrations in the temple, they were mostly peasants up from the country, and we can well imagine on which side their sympathies would be. None of the excess profit would find its way into their pockets. On the contrary, we have it on the authority of Josephus that the high priests even robbed the lower priests of their due share of the revenues, and some of them even died of starvation. A special sinner in this respect, he says, was the high priest Ananias, or Annas, who robbed the lower priests by violence. Of him he says, 'he increased in glory every day, and this to a great degree . . . for he was a great procurer of money. He therefore cultivated the friendship of Albinus (the Procurator of Judea) by making him presents.'⁴ We cannot help wondering whether bribery is not the best explanation of Pilate's unwilling condemnation of Our Lord. An enormous bribe would be a cheap way of getting rid

⁴ *Antiquities*, XX, 9. 2.

Christ and the Profiteers

of Him, for the whole position of the high priests evidently depended on His destruction. So conscious were they of the strong feeling of the populace against them and in favour of anyone who attacked their greedy injustice that they had to resort to secrecy and disgraceful methods in order to get Our Lord into their power; for 'they feared the people,' as St. Luke tells us.

Naturally they stood alone in defence of their ill-gotten gains. The Pharisees could hardly take sides in this matter with the high-priestly section of the Sadduceean party. Indeed the Rabbis are loudest in their denunciations of the evil. 'Go hence, ye sons of Levi! Ye defile the temple of the Lord,' says the Talmud. The lower priesthood had everything to gain from the overthrow of the power of the high priests. The ordinary lay-folk were the chief sufferers from the abuse. Besides, there must have been in every one of these classes great numbers of devout and God-fearing men to whom this desecration of the temple was a crying scandal. Remember that St. Luke tells us that many Pharisees, 'a multitude of priests,' and thousands of ordinary Jews accepted the faith at the preaching of the Apostles after the Resurrection. We must not take too seriously the favourite theme of preachers that the same people who cried 'Hosanna' on Palm Sunday shouted 'Crucify' on Good Friday. The crowd at Jerusalem during the Pasch amounted to more than a million people, and no one can manipulate a mob of a million. Those alone in the pay of the high priests would have filled the public squares. Thousands must have been in ignorance of what was afoot in the process against Jesus.

All contemporary evidence, therefore, bears out the truth of the Gospel story of the cleansing of the temple, and in the face of this evidence we personally should be ready to defend the likelihood that it hap-

Blackfriars

pened twice or even thrice during the ministry of Our Lord if the Gospels contained a three-fold account of the incident. Christ had nearly everyone in sympathy with Him in His attack on that materialistic and money-grubbing priesthood, which was worshipping Mammon even in the sanctuary of the most high God.

REGINALD GINNS, O.P.

THE RICH FOOL

St. Luke, xii, 16-20.

A H, ONE there was who thought within his heart,
‘What shall I do, my barns are all too small
A room wherein to store my goods apart?
This will I do : destroy them one and all,
And build them greater, safely then to hold
My grain and fruits in plenty, so shall be
Rich competence assured when I am old,
And to my soul will I speak secretly :
Thou hast much goods laid up for many a year,
Eat, drink, and make good cheer, take thy repose,
O Soul, for whose but thine shall these things be?’—
When swift upon his boast, death hovered near,
God said, ‘Thou Fool! Whose shall they be—who
knows?’
This night do they require thy soul of thee!’

EDWIN ESSEX, O.P.