

INTRODUCTION.

ST PAUL was in Rome: not, as he had once hoped, on a friendly visit of encouragement to the Roman Christians, resting with them for a few weeks before he passed on to preach to new cities of the further West; not in the midst of his missionary career, but at its close. His active work was practically done: a brief interval of release might permit him to turn eastwards once again; but to all intents and purposes his career was ended. He was a prisoner in Rome.

St Paul in Rome:

To know what had brought him there, and to comprehend his special mission, of which this was in truth no unfitting climax, we must pass in brief review the beginnings of the Christian story.

the climax of his mission.

1. Our Lord's earthly life began and ended among a people the most exclusive and the most hated of all the races under the universal Roman rule. But it was a people who had an unparalleled past to look back upon, and who through centuries of oppression had cherished an undying hope of sovereignty over all other races in the world. Our Lord's life was essentially a Jewish life in its outward conditions. In every vital point He conformed to the traditions of Judaism. Scarcely ever did He set foot outside the narrow limits of the Holy Land, the area of which was not much larger than that of the county of Yorkshire or the principality of Wales. With hardly an exception He confined His teaching and His miracles to Jews. He was not sent, He said, but unto the lost sheep of the house of

1. Our Lord's ministry limited to Jews.

Israel. It is true that He gave hints of a larger mission, of founding a universal kingdom, of becoming in His own person the centre of the human race. But the exclusive character of His personal ministry stood in sharp contrast to those wider hopes and prophecies. He incessantly claimed for His teaching that it was the filling out and perfecting of the sacred lessons of the lawgivers and prophets of the past. He seemed content to identify Himself with Hebrew interests and Hebrew aspirations. So it was from first to last. He was born into a Jewish family, of royal lineage, though in humble circumstances; and it was as a Jewish pretender that the Romans nailed Him to a cross.

2. The early Church begins with the same limitation.

2. The little brotherhood which was formed in Jerusalem to carry on His work after His Ascension was as strictly limited in the sphere of its efforts as He Himself had been. It was composed entirely of Jews, who in no way cut themselves off from the national unity, and who were zealous worshippers in the national temple. It was a kind of Reformation movement within the Jewish Church. It sought for converts only among Jews, and it probably retained its members for the most part at the national centre in the expectation of the speedy return of Jesus as the recognized national Messiah, who should break the Roman power and rule a conquered world from the throne of David in Jerusalem.

A popular movement,

We cannot say how long this lasted: perhaps about five years. But we know that during this period—a long one in the childhood of a new society—the Apostles and the other brethren enjoyed the esteem and good will of all except the governing class in Jerusalem, and that their numbers grew with astonishing rapidity. The movement was characteristically a popular one. While the Sadducaic high-priestly party dreaded it, and opposed it when they dared, the leader of the Pharisees openly befriended it, and ‘a great multitude of the priests’ (who must be distinguished from their aristocratic rulers) ‘became obedient to the faith’ (Acts vi. 7). This statement indicates the high-water mark of the movement in

its earliest stage. It shews too that there was as yet no breach at all with Judaism, and that the specifically Christian gatherings for exhortation, prayers and eucharists were not regarded as displacing or discrediting the divinely sanctioned sacrificial worship of the temple.

3. But the Apostles had received a wider commission, although hitherto they had strictly adhered to the order of the Lord's command by 'beginning at Jerusalem.' A crisis came at last. A storm suddenly broke upon their prosperous calm: a storm which seemed in a moment to wreck the whole structure which they had been building, and to dash their fair hope of the national conversion in irretrievable ruin.

The Jews of Alexandria had been widened by contact with Greek philosophy and culture. They had striven to present their faith in a dress which would make it less deterrent to the Gentile mind. If we cannot say for certain that St Stephen was an Alexandrian, we know at any rate that he was a representative of the Hellenistic element in the Church at Jerusalem. A large study of the Old Testament scriptures had prepared him to see in the teaching of Christ a wider purpose than others saw. He felt that the Christian Church could not always remain shut up within the walls of Jerusalem, or even limited to Jewish believers. What he said to suggest innovation and to arouse opposition we do not know. We only know that the points on which he was condemned were false charges, not unlike some which had been brought against the Lord Himself. He was accused of disloyalty to Moses and the temple—the sacred law and the divine sanctuary. His defence was drawn from the very writings which he was charged with discrediting. But it was not heard to the end. He was pleading a cause already condemned; and the two great political parties were at one in stamping out the heresy of the universality of the Gospel. For it is important to note the change in the Pharisaic party. Convinced that after all the new movement was fatal to their narrow traditionalism, they and the common people, whose accepted leaders they had always been, swung

loyal to
Judaism.

3. A crisis
brought
on

by St
Stephen's
wider
teaching.

What he
was said
to have
said.

The politi-
cal parties
unite to
condemn
him.

round into deadly opposition. The witnesses, who by the law must needs cast the first stones at the condemned, threw off their upper garments at the feet of a young disciple of Gamaliel.

Persecution scatters the Church,

which is thus involved in the consequences of the wider teaching, without being asked to sanction it.

The murder of St Stephen was followed by a general persecution, and in a few days the Apostles were the only Christians left in Jerusalem. We may fairly doubt whether the Church as a whole would have been prepared to sanction St Stephen's line of teaching. Had they been called to pronounce upon it, they might perhaps have censured it as rash and premature, if not indeed essentially unsound. But they were never asked the question. They were at once involved in the consequences of what he had taught, with no opportunity of disclaiming it. Providence had pushed them forward a step, and there was no possibility of a return.

4. The beginnings of extension to the Gentiles. Not Philip,

4. The scattered believers carried their message with them; and they soon found themselves proclaiming it to a widening circle of hearers. St Philip preaches to the unorthodox and half-heathen Samaritans; later he baptises an Ethiopian, no Jew, though a God-fearing man. St Peter himself formally declares to a Roman centurion at Caesarea that now at length he is learning the meaning of the old saying of his Jewish Bible, that 'God is no respecter of persons'. At Antioch a Church springs up, which consists largely of Gentile converts.

but Saul, is to be the successor of Stephen.

But we must go back to Jerusalem to get a sight of the man on whom St Stephen's prophetic mantle has fallen. He was with him when he was taken up, and a double portion of his spirit is to rest upon him. The fiery enthusiasm of the persecuting Saul, the most conspicuous disciple of the greatest Pharisee of the age, was a terrible proof that Christianity had forfeited the esteem and favour of her earliest years in Jerusalem. The tide of persecution was stemmed indeed by his conversion to the persecuted side: but for some time his own life was in constant danger, and he retired into obscurity. He came out of his retirement as the Apostle, not of a Christianized Judaism, but of St Stephen's wider Gospel for the world.

Alike by birth and training he was peculiarly fitted to be the champion of such a cause. A Jew, born in a Greek city, and possessed of the Roman franchise, he was in his own person the meeting-point of three civilisations. In a unique sense he was the heir of all the world's past. The intense devotion of the Hebrew, with his convictions of sin and righteousness and judgment to come; the flexible Greek language, ready now to interpret the East to the West; the strong Roman force of centralisation, which had made wars to cease and had bidden the world to be at one:—in each of these great world-factors he had, and realised that he had, his portion: each of them indeed was a factor in the making of his personality and his career. With all that the proudest Jew could boast, he had the entry into the larger world of Greek culture, and withal a Roman's interest in the universal empire. He was a man to be claimed by a great purpose, if such a purpose there were to claim him. His Judaism could never have enabled him to enter on the fulness of his inheritance. Christianity found him 'a chosen vessel', and developed his capacity to the utmost.

The freer atmosphere of the semi-Gentile Church in Antioch marked out that great commercial centre as a fitting sphere for his earliest work. From it he was sent on a mission to Cyprus and Asia Minor, in the course of which, whilst always starting in the Jewish synagogue, he found himself perpetually drawn on to preach his larger Gospel to the Gentiles. Thus along the line of his route new centres of Gentile Christianity were founded,—Churches in which baptism practically took the place of circumcision, and Jews and Gentiles were associated on equal terms. At Antioch, on his return, the news of this was gladly welcomed: 'a door of faith' had been opened to the Gentiles, and they were pressing into the kingdom of God.

5. We could hardly have expected that the Christians of Jerusalem, now again returned to their home, would view the matter with the same complacency. The sacred city with its memories of the past, the solemn ritual of the temple, the holy

language of the scriptures and the prayers of the synagogue all spoke to them of the peculiar privileges and the exceptional destiny of the Hebrew people. Was all this to go for nothing? Were outside Gentiles, strangers to the covenant with Moses, to rise at a bound to equal heights of privilege with the circumcised people of God?

His dismay was natural.

We are apt to pass too harsh a judgment on the main body of the Jewish believers, because we do not readily understand the dismay which filled their minds at the proposed inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian society, the nucleus of the Messianic kingdom, with no stipulation whatever of conformity to Jewish institutions. Day by day, as the Jewish believer went to his temple-prayers, it was his proud right to pass the barrier which separated Jew from Gentile in the house of God. What was this intolerable confusion which was breaking down the divinely constituted middle-wall of partition between them? His dearest hope, which the words of Christ had only seemed for a moment to defer, was the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. What had become of that, if the new society was to include the Gentile on the same footing as the Jew? Was not Christ emphatically and by His very name the Messiah of the Jewish nation? Could any be a good Christian, unless he were first a good Jew?

The rendering 'Christ' disguises from us the Jewish 'Messiah'.

It is essential to an understanding of St Paul's special mission, and of the whole view of Christianity which he was led to take during the progress of that mission, that we should appreciate this problem as it presented itself to the mind of the Jew who had believed in Christ. The very fact that throughout the Apostolic writings the Greek translation *Χριστός* takes the place of the Hebrew 'Messiah' disguises from us the deep significance which every mention of the name must have had for the Palestinian Christian. The Syriac versions of the New Testament, in which the old word naturally comes back again, help us to recover this special point of view. How strangely—to take a few passages at random¹—do these words

¹ 1 Cor. viii 11, ix 12, xii 27.

sound to us: 'him who is weak, for whom the Messiah died'; 'the Gospel of the Messiah'; 'ye are the body of the Messiah'. Yet nothing less than this could St Paul's words have meant to every Jew that heard them.

Again, St Paul's own championship of Gentile liberty is so prominent in his writings, that we are tempted to overlook those passages which shew how keenly he himself realised the pathos of the situation. A Hebrew of purest Hebrew blood, a Pharisee as his father was before him, he saw to his bitter sorrow, what every Jewish Christian must have seen, that his doctrine of Gentile freedom was erecting a fresh barrier against the conversion of the Jewish nation: that the very universality of the Gospel was issuing in the self-exclusion of the Jew. The mental anguish which he suffered is witnessed to by the three great chapters of the Epistle to the Romans (ix—xi), in which he struggles towards a solution of the problem. 'A disobedient and gainsaying people' it is, as the prophet had foretold. And yet the gifts and the calling of God are never revoked; 'God hath not cast off His people, whom He foreknew'. The future must contain somewhere the justification of the present: then, though it cannot be now, 'all Israel shall be saved'. It is the largeness of his hope that steadies him. His work is not for the souls of men so much as for the Purpose of God in Christ. The individual counts but little in comparison. The wider issues are always before him. Not Jews and Gentiles merely, but Jew and Gentile, are the objects of his solicitude. Not the rescue of some out of the ruin of all is the hope with which the Gospel has inspired him, but the summing up of all persons and all things in Christ.

St Paul's own sense of the situation.

The largeness of hope which sustained him.

6. The feeling, then, which rose in the minds of the Christian portion of the Jewish people on hearing of the proposed indiscriminate admission of Gentiles into the Church of Christ might have found its expression in the cry, 'The Jewish Messiah for the Jews!' Gentiles might indeed be allowed a place in the kingdom of God. The old prophets had foretold as much

6. The conflict and its issue.

The extreme view

as this. Nor was it contrary to the established practice of later Judaism, after it had been forced into contact with the Greek world. The Gentile who submitted to circumcision and other recognised conditions might share the privileges of the chosen people. But admission on any lower terms amounted to a revolution; the very proposition was a revolt against divinely sanctioned institutions.

not taken
by the
Apostles.

We are not to suppose that the Apostles themselves, or even the majority of the Jewish believers, took so extreme a view: the conference at Jerusalem is a proof that they did not. But even they may well have been perplexed at the swiftness with which a change was coming over the whole face of the movement in consequence of St Paul's missionary action: and they must have perceived that this change would be deeply obnoxious in particular to those earnest Pharisees whom they had led to believe in Jesus as the nation's Messiah.

The con-
flict at
Antioch.

Some of the more ardent of these found their way to Antioch, where they proclaimed to the Gentile believers: 'Except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved'. Happily St Paul was there to champion the Gentile cause. We need but sketch the main features of the struggle that ensued.

The con-
ference at
Jerusa-
lem.

A conference with the Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem was the first step. Here after much discussion St Peter rises and recalls the occasion on which he himself had been divinely guided to action like St Paul's. Then comes the narrative of facts from the missionaries themselves. Finally St James formulates the decision which is reached, 'to lay on them no other burden' than certain simple precepts, which must of necessity be observed if there were to be any fellowship at all between Jewish and Gentile believers.

The
danger
averted
for the
moment
only.

So the first battle was fought and won. The Divine attestation given to St Paul's work among the Gentiles was a proof that God had opened to them also the door of faith. They were pressing in: who could withstand God by trying to shut the door? But when the novelty of the wonder wore

away, the old questionings revived, and it seemed as though the Church must be split into two divisions—Jewish and Gentile Christians.

To St Paul's view such a partition was fatal to the very mission of Christianity, which was to be the healer of the world's divisions. The best years of his life were accordingly devoted to reconciliation. Two great epistles witness to this endeavour: the Epistle to the Galatians, in which he mightily defends Gentile liberty; and the Epistle to the Romans, in which, writing to the central city of the world, the seat of its empire and the symbol of its outward unity, he holds an even balance between Jew and Gentile, and claims them both as necessary to the Purpose of God.

One practical method of reconciliation was much in his thoughts. Poverty had oppressed the believers in Judaea. Here was a rare chance for Gentile liberality to shew that St Paul was right in saying that Jew and Gentile were one man in Christ. Hence the stress which he laid on the collection of alms, 'the ministry unto the saints' (2 Cor. ix 1). The alms collected, he himself must journey to Jerusalem to present them in person. He knows that he does so at the risk of his life: but if he dies, he dies in the cause for which he has lived. His one anxiety is lest by any means his mission to Jerusalem should fail of its end; and he bids the Roman Christians wrestle in prayer, not only that his life may be spared, but also that 'the ministry which he has for Jerusalem', or, to use an earlier phrase, 'the offering of the Gentiles', may be 'acceptable to the saints' (Rom. xv 16, 31).

His journey was successful from this point of view; but it led to an attack upon him by the unbelieving Jews, and a long imprisonment in Caesarea followed. Yet even this, disastrous as it seemed, furthered the cause of peace and unity within the Christian Church. St Paul was removed from the scene of conflict. Bitter feelings against his person naturally subsided when he was in prison for his Master's sake. His teachings and his letters gained in importance and authority. Before he

Two con-
troversial
epistles.

Gentile
liberality
to meet
Jewish
poverty.

St Paul's
arrest and
imprison-
ment

close the controversy.

was taken to his trial at Rome the controversy was practically dead. Gentile liberty had cost him his freedom, but it was an accomplished fact. He was 'the prisoner of Jesus Christ on behalf of the Gentiles'; but his cause had triumphed, and the equal position of privilege of the Gentile converts was never again to be seriously challenged.

7. The occasion of the Epistle to the Ephesians,

7. Thus St Paul had been strangely brought to the place where he had so often longed to find himself. At last he was in Rome: a prisoner indeed, but free to teach and free to write. And from his seclusion came three epistles—to the Philippians, to the Colossians, and 'to the Ephesians'.

A non-controversial exposition of positive truth:

The circumcision question was dead. Other questions were being raised; and to these the Epistle to the Colossians in particular is controversially addressed. This done, his mind is free for one supreme exposition, non-controversial, positive, fundamental, of the great doctrine of his life—that doctrine into which he had been advancing year by year under the discipline of his unique circumstances—the doctrine of the unity of mankind in Christ and of the purpose of God for the world through the Church.

the issue of his history and of his immediate circumstances.

The foregoing sketch has enabled us in some measure to see how St Paul was specially trained by the providence that ruled his life to be the exponent of a teaching which transcends all other declarations of the purpose of God for man. The best years of his Apostolic labour had been expended in the effort to preserve in unity the two conflicting elements of the Christian Church. And now, when signal success has crowned his labours, we find him in confinement at the great centre of the world's activity writing to expound to the Gentile Christians of Asia Minor what is his final conception of the meaning and aim of the Christian revelation. He is a prisoner indeed, but not in a dungeon: he is in his own hired lodging. He is not crushed by bodily suffering. He can think and teach and write. Only he cannot go away. At Rome he is on a kind of watch-tower, like a lonely sentinel with a wide field of view

but forced to abide at his post. His mind is free, and ranges over the world—past, present and future. With a large liberty of thought he commences his great argument ‘before the foundation of the world’, and carries it on to ‘the fulness of the times’, embracing in its compass ‘all things in heaven and on the earth’.

8. If the writer’s history and circumstances help us to understand the meaning of his epistle, so too will a consideration of the readers for whom it was intended. But here we meet with a difficulty at the very outset. The words ‘in Ephesus’ (i 1) are absent from some of our oldest and best MSS., and several of the Greek Fathers make it clear that they did not find them in all copies. Indeed it is almost certain that they do not come from St Paul himself¹.

8. The readers of the epistle.

Omission of the words ‘in Ephesus’

There are good reasons for believing that the epistle was intended as a circular letter, an encyclical, to go the round of many Churches in Asia Minor. We have parallels to this in 1 St Peter and the Apocalypse, in both of which however the Churches in question are mentioned by their names.

A circular letter.

The capital of the Roman province of Asia was Ephesus. To Ephesus such a letter would naturally go first of all: and when in later times a title was sought for it, to correspond with the titles of other epistles, no name would offer itself so readily and so reasonably as the name of Ephesus. Accordingly the title ‘TO THE EPHESIANS’ was prefixed to it. And if, as seems not improbable, the opening sentence contained a space into which the name of each Church in turn might be read—‘to the saints which are * * * and the faithful in Christ Jesus’—it was certain that in many copies the words ‘in Ephesus’ would come to be filled in.

Naturally goes first to Ephesus.

Hence its title.

The internal evidence of the epistle itself is in harmony with the view that it was not specially intended for the Ephesian Church. For in more than one place the Apostle appears to be writing to Christians whom he has never seen, of whose faith he knew only by report, and who in turn knew of his

The readers in large part unknown to St Paul.

¹ See the detached note on ἐν Ἐφέσῳ.

teachings only through the medium of his disciples (i 15, iii 2, iv 21).

St Paul's special relation to Ephesus.

Moreover the encyclical nature of the epistle removes what would otherwise be a most serious objection to its authenticity. If we read the notices of St Paul's relations with Ephesus, as they are given by St Luke in the Acts, we observe that for a long while he appears to have been specially checked in his efforts to reach and to settle in that important centre. At one time 'he was forbidden by the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia' (xvi 6). Other work must take precedence. Not only were the Galatian Churches founded first, but also the European Churches—Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth. Then on his way back from Corinth he touches at the city of his desire, but only to hurry away, though with a promise to return, if God so will (xviii 21). At last he comes to remain, and he makes it a centre, so that 'all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord' (xix 10). As he tells the Ephesian elders at Miletus, when he believes that he is saying his last words to them, 'For three years night and day I ceased not to warn every one of you with tears' (xx 31).

Yet this epistle has no salutations of individuals.

To judge by the other letters of St Paul, we should expect to find a letter to the Ephesians unusually full of personal details, reminiscences of his long labours, warnings as to special dangers, kindly greetings to individuals by name. We are struck by the very opposite of all this. No epistle is so general, so little addressed to the peculiar needs of one Church more than another. As for personal references and greetings, there are none. Even Timothy's name is not joined with St Paul's at the outset, as it is in the Epistle to the Colossians, written at the same time and carried by the same messenger: not one proper name is found in the rest of the epistle, except that of Tychicus its bearer. 'Peace to the brethren', is its close; 'grace be with all that love our Lord'.

The inconsistency disappears, if

The apparent inconsistency disappears the moment we strike out the words 'in Ephesus'. No one Church is addressed: the letter will go the round of the Churches with the broad lessons

which all alike need: Tychicus will read in the name from this is a place to place, will explain St Paul's own circumstances, and circular letter. will convey by word of mouth his messages to individuals.

Thus the local and occasional element is eliminated: and The elimination of the local element results in a wider view. in this we seem to have a further explanation of that wider view of the Church and the world, which we have in part accounted for already by the consideration of the stage in the Apostle's career to which this epistle belongs, and by the special significance of his central position in Rome.

The following is an analysis of the epistle:

Analysis.

- i 1, 2. Opening salutation.
- i 3—14. A Doxology, expanded into
 - (a) a description of the Mystery of God's will: election (4), adoption (5), redemption (7), wisdom (8), consummation (10);
 - (b) a statement that Jew and Gentile alike are the portion of God (11—14).
- i 15—ii 10. A Prayer for Wisdom, expanded into a description of God's power, as shewn
 - (a) in raising and exalting Christ (19—23),
 - (b) in raising and exalting us in Christ, whether Gentiles or Jews (ii 1—10).
- ii 10—22. The Gentile was an alien (11, 12); but is now one man with the Jew (13—18); a fellow-citizen (19), and part of God's house (20—22).
- iii 1—13. Return to the Prayer for Wisdom; but first
 - (a) a fresh description of the Mystery (2—6),
 - (b) and of St Paul's relation to its proclamation (7—13).
- iii 14—21. The Prayer in full (14—19), with a Doxology (20, 21).
- iv 1—16. God's calling involves a unity of life (1—6), to which diversity of gifts is intended to lead (7—14)—the unity in diversity of the Body (15, 16).
- iv 17—24. The old life contrasted with the new.
- iv 25—v 5. Precepts of the new life.
- v 6—21. The old darkness and folly: the new light and wisdom.

- v 22—vi 9. Duties interpreted by relation to Christ:
 wives and husbands (22—33);
 children and parents (vi 1—4);
 slaves and masters (5—9).
- vi 10—20. The spiritual warrior clad in God's armour.
- vi 21—24. Closing words.

The present interest of the Epistle to the Ephesians.

The topic of the Epistle to the Ephesians is of pre-eminent interest in the present day. At no former period has there been so widespread a recognition in all departments of human life of the need of combination and cooperation: and never, perhaps, has more anxious thought been expended on the problem of the ultimate destiny of mankind. Whilst it is true that everywhere and always questions have been asked about the future, yet it is not too much to say that we, who have begun to feel after the truth of a corporate life as higher than an individual life, are more eager than any past generation has been to learn, and perhaps are more capable of learning, what is the goal for which Man as a whole is making, or, in other words, what is God's Purpose for the Human Race.

The Apostolic message is for all time.

Among the perpetual marvels of the Apostolic writings is the fact that they contain answers to enquiries which have long waited to be made: that, while the form of the written record remains the same for all ages, its interpretation grows in clearness as each age asks its own questions in its own way.