

"The Spiritual Presence of Christ in the Church"
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"A little while, and ye shall not see Me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see Me, because I go to the Father." John xvi. 16.

1 VERY opposite lessons are drawn in different parts of Scripture from the doctrine of
2 Christ's leaving the world and returning to His Father; lessons so opposite the one to the
3 other, that at first sight a reader might even find a difficulty in reconciling them together.
4 In an earlier season of His ministry, our Lord intimates that when He was removed, His
5 disciples should sorrow,—that then was to be the special time for humiliation. "Can the
6 children of the Bride-chamber mourn," He asks, "as long as the Bridegroom is with
7 them? but the days will come, when the Bridegroom shall be taken from them,
8 and *then* shall they fast." [Matt. ix. 15.] Yet in the words following the text, spoken by
9 Him when He was going away, He says; "I will see you again, and your heart shall
10 rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you." And He says shortly before it, "It is
11 expedient for you that I go away." And again: "I will not leave you comfortless, I will
12 come to you. Yet a little while, and the world seeth Me no more: but ye see Me." Thus
13 Christ's going to the Father is at once a source of sorrow, because it involves His
14 absence; and of joy, because it involves His presence. And out of the doctrine of His
15 resurrection and ascension, spring those Christian paradoxes, often spoken of in
16 Scripture, that we are sorrowing, yet always rejoicing; as having nothing, yet possessing
17 all things.

18 This, indeed, is our state at present; we have lost Christ and we have found Him; we
19 see Him not, yet we discern Him. We embrace His feet, yet He says, "Touch Me not."
20 How is this? it is thus: we have lost the sensible and conscious perception of Him; we
21 cannot look on Him, hear Him, converse with Him, follow Him from place to place; but
22 we enjoy the spiritual, immaterial, inward, mental, real sight and possession of Him; a
23 possession more real and more present than that which the Apostles had in the days of
24 His flesh, *because* it is spiritual, *because* it is invisible. We know that the closer any
25 object of this world comes to us, the less we can contemplate it and comprehend it.
26 Christ has come so close to us in the Christian Church (if I may so speak), that we
27 cannot gaze on Him or discern Him. He enters into us, He claims and takes possession
28 of His purchased inheritance; He does not present Himself to us, but He takes us to
29 Him. He makes us His members. Our faces are, as it were, turned from Him; we see
30 Him not, and know not of His presence, except by faith, because He is over us and
31 within us. And thus we may at the same time lament because we are not conscious of
32 His presence, as the Apostles enjoyed it before His death; and may rejoice because we
33 know we do possess it even more than they, according to the text, "whom having not
34 seen (that is, with the bodily eyes) ye love; in whom, though now ye see Him not, yet
35 believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: receiving the end of your
36 faith, even the salvation of your souls." [1 Pet. i. 8, 9.]

37 Concerning this great and mysterious gift, the presence of Christ, invisible to sense,
38 apprehended by faith, which seems to be spoken of in the text, and is suggested by this
39 season of the year, I purpose now to say some few words.

40 Now observe what the promise is, in the text and the verses following—a new era was
41 to commence, or what is called in Scripture "a day of the Lord." We know how much is
42 said in Scripture about the awfulness and graciousness of a *day* of the Lord, which
43 seems to be some special time of visitation, grace, judgment, restoration,
44 righteousness, and glory. Much is said concerning days of the Lord in the Old
45 Testament. In the beginning we read of those august days, seven in number, each
46 perfect, perfect all together, in which all things were created, finished, blessed,
47 acknowledged, approved by Almighty God. And all things will end with a day greater
48 still, which will open with the coming of Christ from heaven, and the judgment; this is
49 especially the Day of the Lord, and will introduce an eternity of blessedness in God's
50 presence for all believers. And another special day predicted and fulfilled, is that long
51 season which precedes and prepares for the day of heaven, viz. the Day of the
52 Christian Church, the Day of the gospel, the Day of grace. This is a day much spoken of
53 in the Prophets, and it is the day of which our Saviour speaks in the passage before us.
54 Observe how solemn, how high a day it is: this is His account of it, "I will see you again,
55 and your heart shall rejoice; your joy no man taketh from you. And in that Day ye shall
56 ask Me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My
57 Name, He will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in My name; ask, and ye shall
58 receive, that your joy may be full ... At that Day ye shall ask in my Name, and I say not
59 unto you, that I will pray the Father for you, for the Father Himself loveth you, because
60 ye have loved Me, and have believed that I came out from God. I came forth from the
61 Father, and am come into the world; again I leave the world, and go to the Father." The
62 Day, then, that dawned upon the Church at the Resurrection, and beamed forth in full
63 splendour at the Ascension, that Day which has no setting, which will be, not ended, but
64 absorbed in Christ's glorious appearance from heaven to destroy sin and death; that
65 Day in which we now are, is described in these words of Christ as a state of special
66 Divine manifestation, of special introduction into the presence of God. By Christ, says
67 the Apostle, "we have the access by faith into this grace wherein we stand." He "hath
68 raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus."
69 "Your life is hid with Christ in God." "Our conversation is in heaven, from whence also
70 we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ." "God, who commanded the light to
71 shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the
72 glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." "As many as have been baptized into Christ
73 have put on Christ." And our Lord says; "I will love him, and will manifest Myself to
74 him ... We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him." Thus we Christians
75 stand in the courts of God Most High, and, in one sense, see His face; for He who once
76 was on earth, has now departed from this visible scene of things in a mysterious,
77 twofold way, both to His Father and into our hearts, thus making the Creator and His
78 creatures one; according to His own words, "I will not leave you comfortless: I will come
79 to you. Yet a little while, and the world seeth Me no more; but ye see Me: because I live,
80 ye shall live also. At that Day ye shall know that I am in the Father, and ye in Me, and I

81 in you." [Rom. v. 2. Eph. ii. 6. Col. iii. 3. Phil. iii. 20. 2 Cor. iv. 6. Gal. iii. 27. John xiv. 21-
82 23, 18-20.]

83 Now, in behalf of this mystery, I observe:—

84 First, that Christ really is with us now, whatever be the mode of it. This He says
85 expressly Himself; "Lo, I *am with you* alway, even unto the end of the world." He even
86 says, "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of
87 them." [Matt. xxviii. 20; xviii. 20.] And in a passage already quoted more than once, "I
88 will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you." Christ's presence, then, is promised
89 to us still, though He is on the right hand of the Father. You will say, "Yes; He is present
90 as God." Nay, I answer; more than this, He is the Christ, and the Christ is promised, and
91 Christ is man as well as God. This surely is plain even from the words of the text. He
92 said He was going away. Did He go away as God or as man? "A little while, and ye shall
93 not see Me;" this was on His death. He went away as man, He died as man; if, then, He
94 promises to come again, surely He must mean that He would return as man, in the only
95 sense, that is, in which He could return. As God He is ever present, never was
96 otherwise than present, never went away; when His body died on the Cross and was
97 buried, when His soul departed to the place of spirits, still He was with His disciples in
98 His Divine ubiquity. The separation of soul and body could not touch His impassible
99 everlasting Godhead. When then He says He should go away, and come again and
100 abide for ever, He is speaking, not merely of His omnipresent Divine nature, but of His
101 human nature. As being Christ, He says that He, the Incarnate Mediator, shall be with
102 His Church for ever.

103 But again: you may be led to explain His declaration thus; "He *has* come again, but in
104 His Spirit; that is, His Spirit has come instead of Him; and when it is said that He is with
105 us, this only means that His Spirit is with us." No one, doubtless, can deny this most
106 gracious and consolatory truth, that the Holy Ghost is come; but why has He come? to
107 supply Christ's absence, or to accomplish His presence? Surely to make Him present.
108 Let us not for a moment suppose that God the Holy Ghost comes in such sense that
109 God the Son remains away. No; He has not so come that Christ does not come, but
110 rather He comes that Christ may come in His coming. Through the Holy Ghost we have
111 communion with Father and Son. "In Christ we are builded together," says St. Paul, "for
112 an habitation of God through the Spirit." "Ye are the temple of God, and the Spirit of
113 God dwelleth in you." "Strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man, that
114 Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith." The Holy Spirit causes, faith welcomes, the
115 indwelling of Christ in the heart. Thus the Spirit does not take the place of Christ in the
116 soul, but secures that place to Christ. St. Paul insists much on this presence of Christ in
117 those who have His Spirit. "Know ye not," he says, "that your bodies are the members
118 of Christ?" "By one Spirit are we all baptized into one Body ... ye are the body of Christ,
119 and members in particular." "Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in
120 you, except ye be reprobates?" "Christ in you, the hope of glory." And St. John: "He that
121 hath the Son, hath Life; and he that hath not the Son of God, hath not Life." And our
122 Lord Himself, "Abide in Me and I in you: I am the Vine, ye are the branches. He that
123 abideth in Me, and I in Him, the same bringeth forth much fruit." The Holy Spirit, then,

124 vouchsafes to come to us, that by His coming Christ may come to us, not carnally or
125 visibly, but may enter into us. And thus He is both present and absent; absent in that He
126 has left the earth, present in that He has not left the faithful soul; or, as He says Himself,
127 "The *world* seeth Me no more, but ye see Me." [Eph. ii. 22. 1 Cor. iii. 16. Eph. iii. 17. 1
128 Cor. vi. 15; xii. 13, 27. 2 Cor. xiii. 5. Col. i. 27. 1 John v. 12. John xv. 4, 5; xiv. 19.]

129 You will say, How can He be present to the Christian and in the Church, yet not be on
130 earth, but on the right hand of God? I answer, that the Christian Church is made up of
131 faithful *souls*, and how can any of us say where the soul is, simply and really? The soul
132 indeed acts through the body, and perceives through the body; but where is it? or what
133 has it to do with place? or why should it be a thing incredible that the power of the Spirit
134 should so visit the soul as to open upon it a Divine manifestation, which yet it perceives
135 not, because its present perceptions are only through the body? Who shall limit the
136 power of the gracious Spirit of God? How know we, for instance, but that He makes
137 Christ present with us, by making us present with Christ? As the earth goes round the
138 sun, yet the sun is said to move, so our souls, in fact, may be taken up to Christ, when
139 He is said to come to us. But no need to insist on one mode in which the mystery may
140 be conceived, when ten thousand ways are possible with God, of which we know
141 nothing. Scripture says enough to show us that influences may be exerted upon the
142 soul so marvellous, that we cannot decide whether the soul remains in the body or not,
143 while subjected to them. St. Paul, speaking of himself, says, "Whether in the body, I
144 cannot tell, or whether out of the body, I cannot tell; God knoweth: ... caught up to the
145 third heaven." And he repeats his statement: "I knew such a man," meaning himself,
146 "whether in the body I cannot tell, or out of the body I cannot tell, God knoweth: how that
147 he was caught up into Paradise, and heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful for
148 a man to utter." St. Paul was brought into Paradise, yet his body remained where it was;
149 and whether his soul was separated from it, was a question which he could not decide.
150 How can we pretend to decide what the Holy Spirit may or may not do towards faithful
151 souls now, and whether He does not manifest Christ to and in them, by bringing them to
152 Christ? Again; consider Satan's power in showing our Lord all the kingdoms of the world
153 "in a *moment of time*;" may not the Almighty Spirit much more do with us, what the evil
154 one did with our Lord? May He not in less than a moment bring our souls into God's
155 presence, while our bodies are on earth?

156 And again; while we know so little about our own souls, on the other hand, we are
157 utterly ignorant of the state in which our Blessed Lord exists at present, and the relation
158 of this visible world to Him; or whether it may not be possible for Him, in some
159 mysterious way, to come to us, though He is set down on the right hand of God. Did He
160 not, after His resurrection, come into a room, of which the doors were shut, yet suffer
161 Himself to be handled, to prove that He was not a spirit? Certainly then, though He is
162 clothed in our nature, and is perfect man, yet His glorified body is not confined by those
163 laws under which our mortal bodies lie.

164 But further; whether it is difficult to conceive or no, Scripture actually gives us at least
165 one instance of His appearing after His ascension, as if to satisfy us that his presence is
166 possible, though it be mysterious. We all know that He has often vouchsafed to appear

167 to His saints in *visions*. Thus He appeared to St. John, as related in the Book of
168 Revelation; and to St. Paul, when he was at Corinth, at Jerusalem several times, and in
169 the ship. *These* appearances were not an actual presence of Christ, as we may
170 conjecture, but impressions divinely made, and shadows cast upon the mind. And in the
171 same way we may explain His appearing to St. Stephen. When that blessed Martyr
172 said, "Behold I see the heavens open, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of
173 God," we may suppose he did not see this great sight really, but only had a vision of it.
174 These, I repeat, may be *visions*; but what shall we say to Christ's appearance to St.
175 Paul on his conversion, while he was on the way to Damascus? For then the Lord Jesus
176 plainly was seen and heard by him close at hand. "He fell to the earth, and heard a
177 voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me? And he said, Who art
178 Thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest." [Acts ix. 4, 5.] How
179 was this? We do not know. Can a body be in two places at once? I do not say so; I only
180 say, Here is a mystery. By way of contrast with this *real sight* of the Lord, we are
181 presently told that to Ananias the Lord appeared "in a *vision*." And hence, moreover,
182 when Ananias came to Saul, he said that God had chosen him that *he* should "see that
183 Just One, and *hear* the voice of His mouth." [Acts xxii. 14.] And hence, too, he says
184 himself in his Epistle to the Corinthians, "Am I not an Apostle? am I not free? have I
185 not *seen* Jesus Christ our Lord?" [1 Cor. ix. 1.] Would he have said this, if he had had
186 but a vision of Him? Had he not many more visions of Him, not one only? And again,
187 after mentioning our Lord's appearance to St. Peter, the Eleven, and five hundred
188 brethren at once, and St. James, he adds, "last of all, He was seen of me also, as of
189 one born out of due time." [1 Cor. xv. 8.] That is, he speaks of his having been favoured
190 with a sight of Christ in as real, true, and literal a sense, as that in which the other
191 Apostles had seen Him. St. Paul then saw Him, and heard Him speak, who was on the
192 right hand of God. And this literal sight seems to have been, for some unknown reason,
193 necessary for the office of an Apostle; for, in accordance with St. Paul's words, just now
194 cited, St. Peter says, when an Apostle was to be chosen in the place of Judas, "Of
195 these men which have companied with us ... from the baptism of John unto that same
196 day when He was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of
197 His resurrection." And again, to Cornelius, "Him God raised up the third day, and
198 showed Him openly, not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God,
199 even to us." [Acts i. 21, 22; x. 40, 41.] If St. Paul saw only a vision of Christ, and not
200 Christ "verily and indeed," in that case he was not a witness of His resurrection. But if
201 he *did* see Him, it is possible for Christ to be present with *us* also, as with him.

202 Once more: it may be said that "St. Paul was *conscious* of the presence of Christ on his
203 conversion, and that he actually *saw* the sights and *heard* the sounds of Paradise, but
204 that we see and hear nothing. We, then, are not in Christ's presence, else we should be
205 conscious of it." Now, with a view of meeting this objection, let us turn to the account of
206 His appearances to His disciples after the Resurrection, which are most important, first,
207 as showing that such an unconscious communion with Christ is possible; next, that it is
208 likely to be the sort of communion now granted to us, from the circumstance that in that
209 period of forty days after the Resurrection, He began to be in that relation towards His
210 Church, in which He is still, and probably intended to intimate to us thereby what His
211 presence with us is now.

212 Now observe what was the nature of His presence in the Church after His Resurrection.
213 It was this, that He came and went as He pleased; that material substances, such as
214 the fastened doors, were no impediments to His coming; and that when He was present
215 His disciples did not, as a matter of course, know Him. St. Mark says He appeared to
216 the two disciples who were going into the country, to Emmaus, "*in another form*." St.
217 Luke, who gives the account more at length, says, that while He talked with them their
218 heart burned within them. And it is worth remarking, that the two disciples do not seem
219 to have been conscious of this at the time, but on looking back, they recollected that
220 as *having* been, which did not strike them while it *was*. "*Did* not," they say, "*did* not our
221 heart burn within us, while He talked with us by the way, and while He opened to us the
222 Scriptures?" But at the time, their hearts seem to have been holden (if we may use the
223 expression) as well as their eyes. They were receiving impressions, but could
224 not *realize* to themselves that they were receiving them; afterwards, however, they
225 became aware of what had been. Let us observe, too, *when* it was that their eyes were
226 opened; here we are suddenly introduced to the highest and most solemn Ordinance of
227 the Gospel, for it was when He consecrated and brake the Bread that their eyes were
228 opened. There is evidently a stress laid on this, for presently St. Luke sums up his
229 account of the gracious occurrence with an allusion to it in particular; "They told what
230 things were done in the way, and how He was known of them in breaking of bread." For
231 so it was ordained, that Christ should not be both seen and known at once; first He was
232 seen, then He was known. Only by faith is He known to be present; He is not
233 recognized by sight. When He opened His disciples' eyes, He at once vanished. He
234 removed His visible presence, and left but a memorial of Himself. He vanished from
235 sight that He might be present in a sacrament; and in order to connect His visible
236 presence with His presence invisible, He for one instant manifested Himself to their
237 open eyes; manifested Himself, if I may so speak, while He passed from His hiding-
238 place of sight without knowledge, to that of knowledge without sight.

239 Or again: consider the account of His appearing to St. Mary Magdalene. While she
240 stood at the sepulchre weeping He appeared, but she knew Him not. When He revealed
241 Himself, He did not, indeed, at once vanish away, but He would not let her touch Him;
242 as if, in another way, to show that His presence in His new kingdom was not to be one
243 of sense. The two disciples were not allowed to see Him after recognizing Him, St. Mary
244 Magdalene was not allowed to *touch* Him. But afterwards, St. Thomas was allowed both
245 to see and touch; he had the full evidence of sense: but observe what our Lord says to
246 him, "Thomas, because thou hast seen Me, thou hast believed; blessed are they that
247 have not seen, and yet have believed." Faith is better than sight or touch.

248 Let so much suffice, by way of suggesting thoughts upon this most Solemn and
249 elevating subject. Christ has promised He will be with us to the end,—with us, not only
250 as He is in the unity of the Father and the Son, not in the Omnipresence of the Divine
251 Nature, but personally, as the Christ, as God and man; not present with us locally and
252 sensibly, but still really, in our hearts and to our faith. And it is by the Holy Ghost that
253 this gracious communion is effected. How He effects it we know not; in what precisely it
254 consists we know not. We see Him not; but we are to believe that we possess Him,—
255 that we have been brought under the virtue of His healing hand, of His life-giving breath,

256 of the manna flowing from His lips, and of the blood issuing from His side. And
257 hereafter, on looking back, we shall be conscious that we have been thus favoured.
258 Such is the Day of the Lord in which we find ourselves, as if in fulfilment of the words of
259 the prophet, "The Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with Thee. And it shall
260 come to pass in that Day, that the light shall not be clear, nor dark: but it shall be one
261 day which shall be known to the Lord, not day, nor night: but it shall come to pass, that
262 at evening time it shall be light." [Zech. xiv. 5-7.] Nay, even before the end comes,
263 Christians, on looking back on years past, will feel, at least in a degree, that Christ has
264 been with them, though they knew it not, only believed it, at the time. They will even
265 recollect then the burning of their hearts. Nay, though they seemed not even to believe
266 any thing at the time, yet afterwards, if they have come to Him in sincerity, they will
267 experience a sort of heavenly fragrance and savour of immortality, when they least
268 expect it, rising upon their minds, as if in token that God has been with them, and
269 investing all that has taken place, which before seemed to them but earthly, with beams
270 of glory. And this is true, in one sense, of all the rites and ordinances of the Church, of
271 all providences that happen to us; that, on looking back on them, though they seemed
272 without meaning at the time, elicited no strong feeling, or were even painful and
273 distasteful, yet if we come to them and submit to them in faith, they are afterwards
274 transfigured, and we feel that it has been good for us to be there; and we have a
275 testimony, as a reward of our obedience, that Christ has fulfilled His promise, and, as
276 He said, is here through the Spirit, though He be with the Father.

277 May He enable us to make full trial of His bounty, and to obtain a full measure of
278 blessing. "There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy
279 place of the tabernacles of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be
280 moved: God shall help her and that right early ... Be still, and know that I am God; I will
281 be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. The Lord of hosts is with
282 us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." [Ps. xlvii. 4, 5, 10, 11.]

Easter