

"Christ Hidden from the World"
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1 "The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not." John i. 5.

2 OF all the thoughts which rise in the mind when contemplating the sojourn of our Lord
3 Jesus Christ upon earth [Note 1], none perhaps is more affecting and subduing than the
4 obscurity which attended it. I do not mean His obscure condition, in the sense of its
5 being humble; but the obscurity in which He was shrouded, and the secrecy which He
6 observed. This characteristic of His first Advent is referred to very frequently in
7 Scripture, as in the text, "The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness
8 comprehended it not;" and is in contrast with what is foretold about His second Advent.
9 Then "every eye shall see Him;" which implies that all shall recognize Him; whereas,
10 when He came for the first time, though many saw Him, few indeed discerned Him. It
11 had been prophesied, "When we shall see Him there is no beauty that we should desire
12 Him;" and at the very end of his ministry, He said to one of His twelve chosen friends,
13 "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?" [Isai. liii. 2.
14 John xiv. 9.]

15 I propose to set before you one or two thoughts which arise from this very solemn
16 circumstance, and which may, through God's blessing, be profitable.

17 1. And first, let us review some of the circumstances which marked His sojourn when on
18 earth.

19 His condescension in coming down from heaven, in leaving His Father's glory and
20 taking flesh, is so far beyond power of words or thought, that one might consider at first
21 sight that it mattered little whether He came as a prince or a beggar. And yet after all,
22 it is much more wonderful that He came in low estate, for this reason; because it might
23 have been thought beforehand, that, though He condescended to come on earth, yet
24 He would not submit to be overlooked and despised: now the rich are not despised by
25 the world, and the poor are. If He had come as a great prince or noble, the world without
26 knowing a whit more that He was God, yet would at least have looked up to Him and
27 honoured Him, as being a prince; but when He came in a low estate, He took upon him
28 one additional humiliation, *contempt*,—being contemned, scorned, rudely passed by,
29 roughly profaned by His creatures.

30 What were the actual circumstances of His coming? His Mother is a poor woman; she
31 comes to Bethlehem to be taxed, travelling, when her choice would have been to
32 remain at home. She finds there is no room in the inn; she is obliged to betake herself to
33 a stable; she brings forth her firstborn Son, and lays Him in a manger. That little babe,
34 so born, so placed, is none other than the Creator of heaven and earth, the Eternal Son
35 of God.

36 Well; He was born of a poor woman, laid in a manger, brought up to a lowly trade, that
37 of a carpenter; and when He began to preach the Gospel He had not a place to lay His
38 head: lastly, He was put to death, to an infamous and odious death, the death which
39 criminals then suffered.

40 For the three last years of His life, He preached the Gospel, I say, as we read in
41 Scripture; but He did not begin to do so till He was thirty years old. For the first thirty
42 years of His life, He seems to have lived, just as a poor man would live now. Day after
43 day, season after season, winter and summer, one year and then another, passed on,
44 as might happen to any of us. He passed from being a babe in arms to being a child,
45 and then He became a boy, and so He grew up "like a tender plant," increasing in
46 wisdom and stature; and then He seems to have followed the trade of Joseph, His
47 reputed father; going on in an ordinary way without any great occurrence, till He was
48 thirty years old. How very wonderful is all this! that He should live here, doing nothing
49 great, so long; living here, as if for the sake of living; not preaching, or collecting
50 disciples, or apparently in any way furthering the cause which brought Him down from
51 heaven. Doubtless there were deep and wise reasons in God's counsels for His going
52 on so long in obscurity; I only mean, that we do not know them.

53 And it is remarkable that those who were about Him, seem to have treated Him as one
54 of their equals. His brethren, that is, His near relations, His cousins, did not believe in
55 him. And it is very observable, too, that when He began to preach and a multitude
56 collected, we are told, "When His friends heard of it they went out to lay hold on Him; for
57 they said, He is beside himself." [Mark iii. 21.] They treated Him as we might be
58 disposed, and rightly, to treat any ordinary person now, who began to preach in the
59 streets. I say "rightly," because such persons generally preach a *new* Gospel, and
60 therefore must be wrong. Also, they preach without being sent, and against authority; all
61 which is wrong too. Accordingly we are often tempted to say that such people are
62 "beside themselves," or mad, and not unjustly. It is often charitable to say so, for it is
63 better to be mad than to be disobedient. Well, what we should say of such persons, this
64 is what our Lord's friends said of Him. They had lived so long with Him, and yet did not
65 know Him; did not understand what He was. They saw nothing to mark a difference
66 between Him and them. He was dressed as others, He ate and drank as others, He
67 came in and went out, and spoke, and walked, and slept, as others. He was in all
68 respects a man, except that He did not sin; and this great difference the many would not
69 detect, because none of us understands those who are much better than himself: so
70 that Christ, the sinless Son of God, might be living close to us, and we not discover it.

71 2. I say that Christ, the sinless Son of God, might be living now in the world as our next
72 door neighbour, and perhaps we not find it out. And this is a thought that should be
73 dwelt on. I do not mean to say that there are not a number of persons, who we could be
74 sure were not Christ; of course, no persons who lead bad and irreligious lives. But there
75 are a number of persons who are in no sense irreligious, or open to serious blame, who
76 are very much like each other at first sight, yet in God's eyes are very different. I mean
77 the great mass of what are called respectable men, who vary very much: some are
78 merely decent and outwardly correct persons, and have no great sense of religion, do

79 not deny themselves, have no ardent love of God, but love the world; and, whereas their
80 interest lies in being regular and orderly, or they have no strong passions, or have early
81 got into the way of being regular, and their habits are formed accordingly, they are what
82 they are, decent and correct, but very little more. But there are others who look just the
83 same to the world, who in their hearts are very different; they make no great show, they
84 go on in the same quiet ordinary way as the others, but really they are training to be
85 saints in Heaven. They do all they can to change themselves, to become like God, to
86 obey God, to discipline themselves, to renounce the world; but they do it in secret, both
87 because God tells them so to do, and because they do not like it to be known.
88 Moreover, there are a number of others between these two with more or less of
89 worldliness and more or less of faith. Yet they all look about the same, to common eyes,
90 because true religion is a hidden life in the heart; and though it cannot exist without
91 deeds, yet these are for the most part secret deeds, secret charities, secret prayers,
92 secret self-denials, secret struggles, secret victories.

93 Of course in proportion as persons are brought out into public life, they will be seen and
94 scrutinized, and (in a certain sense) known more; but I am talking of the ordinary
95 condition of people in private life, such as our Saviour was for thirty years; and these
96 look very like each other. And there are so many of them, that unless we get very near
97 them, we cannot see any distinction between one and another; we have no means to do
98 so, and it is no business of ours. And yet, though we have no right to judge others, but
99 must leave this to God, it is very certain that a really holy man, a true saint, though he
100 looks like other men, still has a sort of secret power in him to attract others to him who
101 are like-minded, and to influence all who have any thing in them like him. And thus it
102 often becomes a test, whether we are like-minded with the Saints of God, whether they
103 have influence over us. And though we have no means of knowing at the time who are
104 God's own Saints, yet after all is over we have; and then on looking back on what is
105 past, perhaps after they are dead and gone, if we knew them, we may ask ourselves
106 what power they had over us, whether they attracted us, influenced us, humbled us,
107 whether they made our hearts burn within us. Alas! too often we shall find that we were
108 close to them for a long time, had means of knowing them, and knew them not; and that
109 is a heavy condemnation on us, indeed. Now this was singularly exemplified in our
110 Saviour's history, by how much He was so very holy. The holier a man is, the less he is
111 understood by men of the world. All who have any spark of living faith will understand
112 him in a measure, and the holier he is, they will, for the most part, be attracted the more;
113 but those who serve the world will be blind to him, or scorn and dislike him, the holier he
114 is. This, I say, happened to our Lord. He was All-holy, but "the light shined in darkness,
115 and the darkness comprehended it not." His near relations did not believe in Him. And if
116 this was really so, and for the reason I have said, it surely becomes a question whether
117 we should have understood Him better than they: whether though he had been our next
118 door neighbour, or one of our family, we should have distinguished Him from any one
119 else, who was correct and quiet in his deportment; or rather, whether we should not,
120 though we respected Him, (alas, what a word! what language towards the Most High
121 God!) yet even if we went as far as this, whether we should not have thought Him
122 strange, eccentric, extravagant, and fanciful. Much less should we have detected any
123 sparks of that glory which He had with the Father before the world was, and which was

124 merely hidden not quenched by His earthly tabernacle. This, truly, is a very awful
125 thought; because if He were near us for any long time, and we did not see any thing
126 wonderful in Him, we might take it as a clear proof that we were not His, for "His sheep
127 know His voice, and follow Him;" we might take it as a clear proof that we should not
128 know Him, or admire His greatness, or adore His glory, or love His excellency, if we
129 were admitted to His presence in heaven.

130 3. And here we are brought to another most serious thought, which I will touch upon.
131 We are very apt to wish we had been born in the days of Christ, and in this way we
132 excuse our misconduct, when conscience reproaches us. We say, that had we had the
133 advantage of being with Christ, we should have had stronger motives, stronger
134 restraints against sin. I answer, that so far from our sinful habits being reformed by the
135 presence of Christ, the chance is, that those same habits would have hindered us from
136 recognizing Him. We should not have known He was present; and if He had even told
137 us who He was, we should not have believed Him. Nay, had we seen His miracles
138 (incredible as it may seem), even they would not have made any lasting impression on
139 us. Without going into this subject, consider only the possibility of Christ being close to
140 us, even though He did no miracle, and our not knowing it; yet I believe this literally
141 would have been the case with most men. But enough on this subject. What I am
142 coming to is this: I wish you to observe what a fearful light this casts upon our prospects
143 in the next world. We think heaven must be a place of happiness to us, if we do but get
144 there; but the great probability is, if we can judge by what goes on here below, that a
145 bad man, if brought to heaven, would not know He was in heaven;—I do not go to the
146 further question, whether, on the contrary, the very fact of his being in heaven with all
147 his unholiness upon him, would not be a literal torment to him, and light up the fires of
148 hell within him. This indeed would be a most dreadful way of finding out where he was.
149 But let us suppose a lighter case: let us suppose he could remain in heaven unblasted,
150 yet it would seem that at least he would not know that he was there. He would see
151 nothing wonderful there. Could men come nearer to God than when they seized Him,
152 struck Him, spit on Him, hurried Him along, stripped him, stretched out His limbs upon
153 the cross, nailed Him to it, raised it up, stood gazing on Him, jeered Him, gave Him
154 vinegar, looked close whether He was dead, and then pierced Him with a spear? O
155 dreadful thought, that the nearest approaches man has made to God upon earth have
156 been in blasphemy! Whether of the two came closer to Him, St. Thomas, who was
157 allowed to reach forth his hand and reverently touch His wounds, and St. John, who
158 rested on His bosom, or the brutal soldiers who profaned Him limb by limb, and tortured
159 Him nerve by nerve? His Blessed Mother, indeed, came closer still to Him; and we, if we
160 be true believers, still closer, who have Him really, though spiritually, within us; but this
161 is another, an inward sort of approach. Of those who approached Him externally, they
162 came nearest, who knew nothing about it. So it is with sinners: they would walk close to
163 the throne of God; they would stupidly gaze at it; they would touch it; they would meddle
164 with the holiest things; they would go on intruding and prying, not meaning any thing
165 wrong by it, but with a sort of brute curiosity, till the avenging lightnings destroyed
166 them;—all because they have no *senses* to guide them in the matter. Our bodily senses
167 tell us of the approach of good or evil on earth. By sound, by scent, by feeling we know
168 what is happening to us. We know when we are exposing ourselves to the weather,

169 when we are exerting ourselves too much. We have warnings, and feel we must not
170 neglect them. Now, sinners have no spiritual senses; they can presage nothing; they do
171 not know what is going to happen the next moment to them. So they go fearlessly
172 further and further among precipices, till on a sudden they fall, or are smitten and
173 perish. Miserable beings! and this is what sin does for immortal souls; that they should
174 be like the cattle which are slaughtered at the shambles, yet touch and smell the very
175 weapons which are to destroy them!

176 4. But you may say, how does this concern us? Christ is not here; we cannot thus or in
177 any less way insult His Majesty. Are we so sure of this? Certainly we cannot commit
178 such open blasphemy; but it is another matter whether we cannot commit as great. For
179 often sins are greater which are less startling; insults more bitter, which are not so loud;
180 and evils deeper, which are more subtle. Do we not recollect a very awful passage?
181 "Whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but
182 whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him." [Matt. xii. 32.]
183 Now, I am not deciding whether or not this denunciation can be fulfilled in the case of
184 Christians now, though when we recollect that we *are* at present under the ministration
185 of that very Spirit of whom our Saviour speaks, this is a very serious question; but I
186 quote it to show that there may be sins greater even than insult and injury offered to
187 Christ's Person, though we should think that impossible, and though they could not be
188 so flagrant or open. With this thought let it be considered:—

189 First, that Christ is still on earth. He said expressly that He would come again. The Holy
190 Ghost's coming is so really His coming, that we might as well say that He was not here
191 in the days of His flesh, when He was visibly in this world, as deny that He is here now,
192 when He is here by His Divine Spirit. This indeed is a mystery, how God the Son and
193 God the Holy Ghost, two Persons, can be one, how He can be in the Spirit and the
194 Spirit in Him; but so it is.

195 Next, if He is still on earth, yet is not visible (which cannot be denied), it is plain that He
196 keeps Himself still in the condition which He chose in the days of His flesh. I mean, He
197 is a hidden Saviour, and may be approached (unless we are careful) without due
198 reverence and fear. I say, wherever He is (for that is a further question), still He is here,
199 and again He is secret; and whatever be the tokens of His Presence, still they must be
200 of a nature to admit of persons doubting where it is; and if they will argue, and be
201 sharpwitted and subtle, they may perplex themselves and others, as the Jews did even
202 in the days of His flesh, till He seems to them nowhere present on earth now. And when
203 they come to think him far away, of course they *feel* it to be impossible so to insult Him
204 as the Jews did of old; and if nevertheless He *is* here, they *are* perchance approaching
205 and insulting Him, though they so feel. And this was just the case of the Jews, for they
206 too were ignorant what they were doing. It is probable, then, that we can now commit at
207 least as great blasphemy towards Him as the Jews did first, because we are under the
208 dispensation of that Holy Spirit, against whom even more heinous sins *can* be
209 committed; next, because His presence now as little witnesses of itself, or is impressive
210 to the many, as His bodily presence formerly.

211 We see a further reason for this apprehension, when we consider what the tokens of
212 His presence now are; for they will be found to be of a nature easily to lead men into
213 irreverence, unless they be humble and watchful. For instance, the Church is called "His
214 Body:" what His material Body was when He was visible on earth, such is the Church
215 now. It is the instrument of His Divine power; it is that which we must approach, to gain
216 good from Him; it is that which by insulting we awaken His anger. Now, what is the
217 Church but, as it were, a body of humiliation, almost provoking insult and profaneness,
218 when men do not live by faith? an earthen vessel, far more so even than His body of
219 flesh, for that was at least pure from all sin, and the Church is defiled in all her
220 members. We know that her ministers at best are but imperfect and erring, and of like
221 passions with their brethren; yet of them He has said, speaking not to the Apostles
222 merely but to all the seventy disciples (to whom Christian ministers are in office surely
223 equal), "He that heareth you, heareth Me, and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me, and
224 he that despiseth Me, despiseth Him that sent Me."

225 Again: He has made the poor, weak, and afflicted, tokens and instruments of His
226 Presence; and here again, as is plain, the same temptation meets us to neglect or
227 profane it. What He was, such are His chosen followers in this world; and as His
228 obscure and defenceless state led men to insult and ill-treat Him, so the like
229 peculiarities, in the tokens of His Presence, lead men to insult Him now. That such are
230 His tokens is plain from many passages of Scripture: for instance, He says of children
231 "Whoso shall receive one such little child in My Name, receiveth Me." Again: He said to
232 Saul, who was persecuting His followers, "Why persecutest thou Me?" And He
233 forewarns us, that at the Last Day He will say to the righteous, "I was an hungered, and
234 ye gave Me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took Me
235 in; naked, and ye clothed Me; I was sick, and ye visited Me; I was in prison, and ye
236 came unto Me." And He adds, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these My
237 brethren, ye have done it unto Me." [Matt. xviii. 5. Acts ix. 4. Matt. xxv. 35-40.] He
238 observes the same connexion between Himself and His followers in His words to the
239 wicked. What makes this passage the more awful and apposite, is this, which has been
240 before now remarked [Note 2], that neither righteous nor wicked *knew* what they had
241 done; even the righteous are represented as unaware that they had approached Christ.
242 They say, "Lord, *when* saw we Thee an hungered, and fed Thee, or thirsty, and gave
243 Thee drink?" In every age, then, Christ is both in the world, and yet not publicly so more
244 than in the days of His flesh.

245 And a similar remark applies to His Ordinances, which are at once most simple, yet
246 most intimately connected with Him. St. Paul, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians,
247 shows both how easy and how fearful it is to profane the Lord's Supper, while he states
248 how great the excess of the Corinthians had been, yet also that it was a want of
249 "*discerning* the Lord's Body." When He was born into the world, the world knew it not.
250 He was laid in a rude manger, among the cattle, but "all the Angels of God worshipped
251 Him." Now too He is present upon a table, homely perhaps in make, and dishonoured in
252 its circumstances; and faith adores, but the world passes by.

253 Let us then pray Him ever to enlighten the eyes of our understanding, that we may
254 belong to the Heavenly Host, not to this world. As the carnal-minded would not perceive
255 Him even in Heaven, so the spiritual heart may approach Him, possess Him, see Him,
256 even upon earth.

Notes

- 257 1. Preached on Christmas Day.
- 258 2. *Vide* Pascal's Thoughts.