

A RAY FROM THE PAST - R831

I suppose there are few readers of the Bible who have not felt, if I may use the expression, a little puzzled as to the real meaning of St. Paul's language when, in addressing the Philippians, he says, "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife, and some also of good will; the one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds; but the other of love.... And I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice." Phil. 1:15-18.

How any man could preach Christ of envy and strife, and how St. Paul could experience gratification in consequence, appears to us almost a paradox. Now every difficulty removed is a step gained; and although I would not venture to affirm that the solution I am about to suggest is indisputable, yet it commends itself to my judgment as at least highly probable; and if I can help any inquirer after truth to the removal of even one difficulty, whether of more or less importance, it is certainly not labor thrown away to make the effort.

We must remember that these words were written by St. Paul when he was a prisoner in Rome. We know that he was suffered to dwell by himself with a soldier who kept him. Can we doubt that he spoke of the things of the kingdom to that man, and preached to him Christ crucified as the sinner's only hope? or is it very difficult to suppose further that under the great Apostle's teaching and prayers this man became a convert to Christianity? If so, his conversion would soon become known to his fellow-soldiers, and he would become to them an object of scorn and derision.

Now the excavations of recent years at Rome have brought to light a very remarkable drawing commonly known as the "Blasphemous Graphite," which was found on the plaster wall of a guard-room of the Imperial barracks in the substructions of the Palatine, and which, I think, gives us the clue we are seeking. It is a rude representation of the crucifixion. The Saviour is represented extended on the cross, having a human figure with the exception of the head, which is that of an ass, from which circumstance the epithet "blasphemous" has become irrevocably connected with the drawing. On the left hand is a rudely-drawn figure of a supposed worshipper; and in ill-formed letters, such as we might suppose an illiterate soldier would draw, there is the inscription

ALEXAMENOS SEBETE THEON

(Alexamenos worships God).

The whole purport of the designer of the sketch is evidently to hold up to scorn some fellow-soldier of the Praetorian guard as a worshiper of a God who was at the best only half-human, and who underwent the ignominious punishment inflicted only on slaves and the vilest criminals. See, he seems to say, what kind of God Alexamenos the Christian worships!

"Little," says the Rev. Dr. J. R. Macduff in his most interesting remarks on this drawing, "did this jeering Pagan dream that his blasphemous work would be one day dug up as one of the evidences of Christianity, proving as it does in the most incontestable form that the early converts believed the great doctrine that the crucified Man was none other than God," [i.e. "manifest in flesh."]

But important and interesting as is the inference drawn by this distinguished author from the discovery of the Graphite, I think we may safely proceed a step farther. St. Paul tells us that his bonds became manifest in Christ throughout the whole "Praetorian guard," – as the word in the original means, and as indeed it is translated in the Revised Version; and then in the same connection he proceeds to use the language we are considering: – "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds."

Does not all difficulty in understanding the passage now vanish? The scoffing author of the Graphite only intended to cast ridicule and contempt upon his fellow-soldier and his religion, but notwithstanding, whether in pretense or truth, Christ was preached, and "I therein," said Paul, "do rejoice, yea and will rejoice."

God manifest in the flesh, the sinless one dying on the cross for the sinful – thus preached of envy and strife by the Pagan soldier in the early ages of Christianity, but by a most remarkable providence of God, has been preserved for centuries in the Praetorian guard-room, and is now brought up from its long burial in the dust to proclaim anew the foundation truth of the gospel, and incidentally to throw light on a somewhat obscure passage in the writings of St. Paul.

If this be so, do we not here see another instance of God's over-ruling of all events to the fulfillment of his own purposes? Has he not once more made even the wrath of man to praise him?