

HOW CHRIST CAME TO CHURCH

I

THE DREAM

NOT that I attach any importance to dreams nor ever have done so. Of the hundreds which have come in the night season I cannot remember one which has proved to have had any prophetic significance either for good or ill. As a rule moreover, dreams are incongruous rather than serious, a jumble of impossible conditions in which persons and things utterly remote and unconnected are brought together in a single scene. But the one which I now describe was unlike any other within my remembrance, in that it was so orderly in its movement, so consistent in its parts, and so fitly framed together as a whole. I recognize it only as a dream; and yet I confess that the impression of it was so vivid that in spite of myself memory brings it back to me again and again, as though it were an actual occurrence in my personal history.

And yet why should it be told or deliberately committed to print? "I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord," says the apostle. His was undeniably a real, divinely given, and supernatural vision. But from the ecstasy of it, wherein he was caught up into paradise and heard unspeakable words,

he immediately lets himself down to the common level of discipleship. "Yet of myself I will not glory but in my infirmities." God help us to keep to this good confession evermore; and if perchance any unusual lesson is taught even "in visions of the night when deep sleep falleth on men" let us not set ourselves up as the Lord's favorites to whom he has granted especial court privileges in the kingdom of heaven. No, the dream is not repeated as though it were a credential of peculiar saintship, or as though by it God had favored me with a supernatural revelation; but because it contains a simple and obvious lesson, out of which the entire book which we are now writing has been evolved.

It was Saturday night, when wearied from the work of preparing Sunday's sermon, that I fell asleep and the dream came. I was in the pulpit before a full congregation, just ready to begin my sermon, when a stranger entered and passed slowly up the left aisle of the church looking first to the one side and then the other as though silently asking with his eyes that some one would give him a seat. He had proceeded nearly half-way up the aisle when a gentleman stepped out and offered him a place in his pew, which was quietly accepted. Excepting the face and features of the stranger everything in the scene is distinctly remembered—the number of the pew, the Christian man who offered its hospitality, the exact seat which was occupied. Only the countenance of the visitor could never be recalled. That his face wore a peculiarly serious look, as one who had known some great sorrow, is clearly impressed on my mind. His

bearing too was exceeding humble, his dress poor and plain, and from the beginning to the end of the service he gave the most respectful attention to the preacher. Immediately as I began my sermon my attention became riveted on this hearer. If I would avert my eyes from him for a moment they would instinctively return to him, so that he held my attention rather than I held his until the discourse was ended.

To myself I said constantly, "Who can that stranger be?" and then I mentally resolved to find out by going to him and making his acquaintance as soon as the service should be over. But after the benediction had been given the departing congregation filed into the aisles and before I could reach him the visitor had left the house. The gentleman with whom he had sat remained behind however; and approaching him with great eagerness I asked: "Can you tell me who that stranger was who sat in your pew this morning?" In the most matter-of-course way he replied: "Why, do you not know that man? It was Jesus of Nazareth." With a sense of the keenest disappointment I said: "My dear sir, why did you let him go without introducing me to him? I was so desirous to speak with him." And with same nonchalant air the gentleman replied: "Oh, do not be troubled. He has been here today, and no doubt he will come again."

And now came an indescribable rush of emotion. As when a strong current is suddenly checked, the stream rolls back upon itself and is choked in its own foam, so the intense curiosity which had been going out toward the mysterious hearer new returned upon the preacher: and the Lord himself "whose I am

and whom I serve" had been listening to me today. What was I saying? Was I preaching on some popular theme in order to catch the ear of the public? Well, thank God it was of himself I was speaking. However imperfectly done, it was Christ and him crucified whom I was holding up this morning. But in what spirit did I preach? Was it "Christ crucified preached in a crucified style?" or did the preacher magnify himself while exalting Christ? So anxious and painful did these questionings become that I was about to ask the brother with whom he had sat if the Lord had said anything to him concerning the sermon, but a sense of propriety and self-respect at once checked the suggestion. Then immediately other questions began with equal vehemence to crowd into the mind. "What did he think of our sanctuary, its gothic arches, its stained windows, its costly and powerful organ? How was he impressed with the music and the order of the worship?" It did not seem at that moment as though I could ever again care of have the smallest curiosity as to what men might say of preaching, worship, or church, if I could only know that he had not been displeased, that he would not withhold his feet from coming again because he had been grieved at what he might have seen or heard.

We speak of a "momentous occasion." This, though in sleep, was recognized as such by the dreamer—a lifetime, almost an eternity of interest crowded into a single moment. One present for an hour who could tell me all I have so longed to know; who could point out to me the imperfections of my service; who could reveal to me my real self, to whom,

perhaps, I am most a stranger; who could correct the errors in our worship to which long usage and accepted tradition may have rendered us insensible. While I had been preaching for a half-hour He had been here and listening who could have told me all this and infinitely more—and my eyes had been holden that I knew him not; and now he had gone. “Yet a little while I am with you and then I go unto him that sent me.”

One thought, however, lingered in my mind with something of comfort and more of awe. “He has been here today, and no doubt he will come again”; and mentally repeating these words as one regretfully meditating on a vanished vision. “I awoke, and it was a dream.” No, it was not a dream. It was a vision of the deepest reality, a miniature of an actual ministry, verifying the statement often repeated that sometimes we are most awake toward God when we are asleep toward the world.