

VISITS FROM THE LORD

“Therefore, that disciple whom Jesus loved said unto Peter, It is the Lord. Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he was naked), and plunged into the sea. But the other disciples came in the little boat; for they were not far from land (about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fishes.”

John 21:7, 8

UNTIL our Lord should pour out the Spirit upon His Apostles, they had to wait. It was expedient for them that He should go away and ascend into His Glory. Then when He had received gifts for men and had distributed those gifts, they would be able to go forth in the power of the Spirit, preaching the Gospel. Until then they must wait, and they must not be idle. Therefore they returned to their ordinary trades and once again the little boat plowed the familiar waves of the sea of Tiberias. There they had many old associations brought up before them. And there, moreover, on the memorable night of which we are now to speak, they learned a lesson which would be instructive to them throughout the whole course of their fishing for men! Their condition and position were very much like our own. We, as a Christian Church, are engaged in the great soul-fishery, seeking by any means to bring some to Christ. Out on the dark waters of the Dead Sea of Sin we seek to bring the souls of men, not to destroy them, but that Christ may save them! This is to be the Church's perpetual work. She must never cease from it. For this purpose is she kept in the world and if she does not answer this purpose, she is faulty before her Lord.

Just now we are much in the condition of these Apostles. There is upon some of our spirits a dissatisfaction with the success that we have had of late—in fact, a dissatisfaction with all the success that either we or the Christian Church generally have had for years past. We cannot quite say, with the Apostles, that we have caught nothing. Glory be to God, there are thousands of souls that have been won to Christ in this house, and in many other places where Christ is preached! But compared with the great mass of mankind—compared with the world that “lies in the Wicked One—we might almost say, “We have caught nothing.” Relatively, it comes to very, very, very little—and the Gospel-fishery does not grow, today, as it did at the time of Pentecost, or as it has done at other seasons when God has granted revival and refreshing from His Presence. We are, therefore, like the disciples—we are engaged in the fishing, but we are not satisfied with the results! Now we know what they, perhaps, at the time forgot—that there is only one thing that can change the aspect of affairs, and that is for Jesus to appear in our midst and speak to us, giving us the word of direction and, also, Himself acting as the attractive power to the souls of men, that they may come to the Gospel net! I may go round to all our agencies, if Jesus is absent, and ask them, “What is your success?” The Sunday school will have to say, “We have taken nothing.” The Evangelists at the street corners will have to say, “We have taken nothing.” The young men sent forth from the college to preach will have to return the same sorrowful answer! And alas, for us who stand here and preach to this congregation, we, too, shall have to say, if the Master is not with us, “We have toiled all night, but we have taken nothing.”

Oh, sorrowful account to have to render to God and our fellow men! Yet such it must be. But if Jesus shall come, how changed it all shall be! Then shall the preacher become wise! He shall know where and how to cast the net! He shall select those topics that shall stir the soul—that shall fire the heart! And then, Jesus being present, men shall be as willing to receive the Gospel as the preacher is to preach it! It shall be as much the will of the fish to get into the net, as it is of the fishermen to cast the net! Oh, may the Master come to us! I believe He has come. I think I see Him. Some of my Brothers and Sisters tell me they already perceive it. He has never been entirely absent from us, but we need Him to speak a mighty word, a majestic word—a word that shall compel, by sweet constraints of Grace, tens of thousands of souls to come to Him and live!

Now tonight my one subject is to the Church here, and to God's people elsewhere, who are in the same state of hope and anxiety. I want to speak about Jesus Christ's coming. The all-importance of it you all feel. You all, I trust, as workers for Christ, desire it. Now, Beloved, let us notice, first, when Jesus comes—

1. WHO WAS THE FIRST TO SEE HIM.

The first to see Jesus was John. He said, "It is the Lord." The other disciples perceived Him by-and-by. We know they did, for it is written, "Knowing that He was the Lord"—but the first to see Him was John. What do we gather from this?

Why, first, that the brightest eyes in the Church are the eyes of those who love most. They perceive Christ first who have most affection for Him! If He is gone, these are the first to sigh. If He returns, these are the first to rejoice with unspeakable joy. Knowledge is said to open the eyes, but as for me, the dust of many learned tomes has often beclouded them. It is thought that men of education will be the first to perceive the Savior, but it was not so in the Savior's day, for these things were hidden from the wise and prudent—but they were revealed unto babes! Let love be your education. Grow in love. To love is better than to know, for a man may know, and only eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—and perish by it—but he that loves, obeys, and he shall eat of the Tree of Life and dwell in the midst of the Paradise of God! Blessed John! Your head had been on the Savior's bosom and, therefore, your eyes were like the eagle's. No angel, one would think, could see as well as Milton's angel, Uriel, that dwelt in the midst of the sun. He was familiar with the light. He dwelt in the full blaze of the orb of day—in the very midst of it! And, "He that dwells in love dwells in God." And "God is Light," so he who dwells in the Light of God sees all things. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The heart that is purified with the celestial flame of Divine Love is the heart that can see God!

But note that in the text John does not describe himself as loving Christ. Much more humbly and instructively does he put it. "That disciple who loved Jesus said unto Peter, It is the Lord!" No, that is my misreading of it! It is, "That disciple whom Jesus loved." Oh, yes, and that is the way that Grace in the heart always teaches us to read it! It is not so much that we love Him, as that He loved, and still loves us! Superabundant love in the heart of the Man, Christ Jesus, towards that choice and chosen spirit had made John a loving disciple. He had not loved so much if Christ had not loved more. He would have told you if you had questioned him about his love, as Peter did—"The Lord who knows all, knows that I love Him." But if you had spoken about Christ's love to him, ah, then his face would have brightened, his eyes would have flashed with delight and he would have said, "He loves me. Ah, and I have had many a sweet word from Him. And my head has often been healed of all its aches when I have laid it down upon His breast." He would have ascribed it all to Christ's love and had little to say of his own! So, Brothers and Sisters, if the love of God is shed abroad in your hearts, you will be quick to see the same. It will not be so much your love as His love that makes you quick of the eye. Then will your eyes become like the eyes of the spouse in the song, "As the eyes of doves by the rivers of water, washed with milk and fitly set." Now the dove, no doubt, can see its home from a very, very long way. Let the pigeon loose and it flies to its dove-cote at once. Ah, those whose eyes Christ has "washed with milk and fitly set" can see their Lord afar off, and they fly to Him with swift and clipping wings—nor are they satisfied till they roost once more at His feet or on His bosom.

Thus, then, those that are quick to see the Savior are those who love Him—better still, those whom He loves much.

Now note that even John appears to have perceived the Presence of Christ very much through His work. As soon as the fishes were taken in the net, then John said, "It is the Lord." And, Brothers and Sisters, if we want to be assured of the Master's Presence in the Church, it must be by the results! I am ashamed of some Christians who are afraid of anything like a holy excitement, or a gracious revival. If there are two or three added to the Church in a year, they say, "This is the finger of God," but if there are many, then straightway they begin to question! Now I think this is not reasonable, for surely when there are great fishes, a hundred and fifty and three, then we may say, "It is the Lord." We may be pretty sure when there are so many brought that God is at work

there, and we may perceive the Presence of Christ. I was noticing the other day some statistics that have been given of certain revivals in different districts of the United States. It has been said that those gathered in during a period of revival are usually an injury to the Church, and more frequently backslide than any other—but taking a range of some eight years in certain churches, it was found that of those persons added during seasons of refreshing from God, the percentage who afterwards backslid was much less than—scarcely, indeed, one half—the percentage of backslider in those churches which had not experienced revival, but had only grown at the slow plodding rate which some of our “sound” Brothers and Sisters so greatly admire! It was found that instead of being worse material, they were better material—and that these stood the fire even better than any other. This I know—that I would like to run the risk—I would like to run the blessed risk of seeing thousands coming forward to profess their faith in Christ! ‘Tis true, we will have some, no doubt, that will turn out to be hypocrites, but I would not refuse some chaff if I could get ten times as much wheat! Who will give up a gold mine because there is quartz in it? Who is it that will shut up a coal pit because there happen to be some slates amidst the coal? No, blessed Master, come! and let us have the net full to bursting if You will—and then we shall say—“It is the Lord!” His great works reveal Him even to the eyes of love!

Note, further, that the man who first discovered that Christ was present did not long keep the secret, but, turning round to his neighbor in the boat, he whispered to him, “It is the Lord.” Ah, and this is a lesson to us. If any of you that are the King’s favorites and have close fellowship with Him, should perceive that He is in the Church, oh, tell it to us, for we are of your mind! We count the King’s Company to be the most grand blessing out of Heaven! Whisper to some of us, for we shall be so rejoiced to hear the blessed news! But John did not tell all of them. He told it to Peter, for Peter was very near to him. I think John had been partly the means of Peter’s falling. I think so. You notice how John tells us and no one else does—that he was a kinsman to one who kept the door and he took Peter in? And I fancy that he used to smite himself about that, and say, “I ought not to have run the risk of taking Peter there. I ought not to have put him where he would have those questions asked.” And he seems always to stick hard and fast to Peter and to be with him, because though he, of course, had none of Peter’s sin, he felt that somehow, accidentally or unwittingly, he had led Peter into the place where he sinned—and so he loved him very much and he gave him the first intimation of the good news. Said he to him, “Brother Peter, it is the Lord.” Oh, if you perceive the Lord, tonight—if you get a good word from His lips—have not you some Beloved one that you can tell—one, perhaps, that has been a backslider and is now returning to the Lord with broken bones? Oh, tell him! Tell him! Tell him at once, “The Lord is here amidst us. Our Beloved stands and shows His wounds and His pierced hands. Look, my Brother! Look to Him and rejoice with me!” Ah, but you may also tell it to whomever you will, for this is a piece of good news that nobody need ever keep secret! Tell it! Tell it wherever you have the opportunity—that Jesus Christ is visiting His Church! Bid poor sinners come and look to Him whom they have pierced, and live! When you have told it to some, tell it to many more and bid them communicate the blessed tidings that Jesus, mighty to save, still waits to receive sinners and to blot out their transgressions—

*“Tell it unto sinners—tell—
Jesus Christ can save from Hell,”*

and is present, revealing Himself to His Church and doing wonders in the congregation!

Thus much upon those who first see Him. Now a few words upon—

II. THOSE WHO FIRST GET AT JESUS CHRIST.

Peter—quick, hot, impulsive—no sooner hears that it is the Lord than he buckles on his coat, plunges into the sea, and swims to shore to reach his Master! They were not all Peters—it was a mercy they were not. But there was one Peter and it was mercy that there was. Nobody may blame Peter. Nobody may blame those who did not follow Peter. They were quite as right who stayed in the boat as Peter was, who swam to the shore! But I know that wherever Jesus Christ is truly present, there will be some bold noble spirits that will make a dash to get at Him. They love Him—

they will be among the first to reach Him—to enjoy His Presence. Yet if any of them feel moved tonight to do some deed of enthusiasm, let me take them by the hand a moment. Peter would reach his Master, but he first girds on his coat. There is reverence in Peter, though there is haste and enthusiasm. He will not come before Christ all in a careless manner—unclothed. He has too much respect for His Master. O Soul, if you would serve the Lord, serve Him with holy fear, for though He is very near to you, He is God—and you are man. Take off your shoes when you would serve Him, for the place where you stand is holy ground! Be not rash in your worship, nor in your vows, nor in your actions! Gird yourself and then serve Him.

But that once done, Peter commits himself boldly to the waves! Sink or swim, he will be at his Master's side and so he strikes out right gallantly for the shore. Nothing can stop him. He impetuously gets through the breakers and the surf, and is at his Master's feet! Oh, how I wish there were some Peters in this congregation, true lovers of Christ, who, feeling that Christ is come among us, would say, "For the love I bear His name, I will be one of the first to serve Him! Here I wrap myself in the garment of zeal. It shall be my cloak and from this day I will give up all for Christ. I will serve Him beyond all others if I can, and if any can exceed me, it shall be my lack of power that makes me second, but not my lack of will!" It would not do for me to say who Peter is, nor to suggest to a man who is not Peter that he should act as Peter would, but I have noticed that every so often in the Church there will rise up men and women who will say, "We will consecrate ourselves unto the Lord." Sometimes they do it by going forth into the mission field. Perhaps I have a young Peter here who, like Carey of old, and Marshman, and that band of heroes, may feel in his soul the fire burning and say, "I must, and I will preach Christ in the regions beyond." Possibly, however, it may be at home that the same gifts and Graces may be exercised, and I have one here, perhaps, who says—oh, I would I had many hundreds who are saying—"God helping us, we will enter upon something which, though it is apparently beyond our strength, and rather venturesome, yet shall be done! We will plunge into the sea to reach our Master. We will brave anything so that we may get to Him!"

Ah, there are those who will always repress anything like Divine enthusiasm and yet, mark you, the brightest ages of the Church have been those in which men consecrated to God have risen above the dictates of common prudence and have dared for Christ what others of a cooler temperament could have not dared! Oh, may the Master send the sacred fire into this congregation! I shall never rest content until I have going out of this Church many who count not their lives dear to them to preach the Gospel among the heathen! I wonder how it is this has not broken out among us before? Is it my ministry that is faulty in this respect? It may be so. Then will I cry to Heaven to be taught better. But at Hermansberg, under Pastor Harms, the whole village seemed to be moved with a desire to carry Christ's Gospel to Africa—and they emigrated in shiploads to become missionaries there! Of course, many said that Harms was infatuated. Blessed infatuation! May it fall upon many of Christ's ministers! The Moravian Church in years gone by had scarcely a member who was not a missionary. When they joined the Church, they gave themselves up to the Church and to Christ. Oh, when shall we come to this—if not all of us, yet, at any rate, the Peters who shall throw themselves into the sea that they may get to their Master? Knowing that it is the Lord who is in their midst, they shall be able to do venturesome deeds, brave deeds, for the glory of His name!

But I will not dwell on that, but just mention next how the rest came to Christ. We have seen who first saw Him. Afterwards they all saw Him. We have seen who first reached Him. Afterwards they all reached Him and I think the second did no worse than the first. For how came the rest of the disciples? In a little boat—I suppose in their fishing vessel, dragging the net after them. I feel that to be my particular department and suppose the lot of most of my dear Brothers here. We are tied to this Church, and we have the net. And though I would gladly enter often into fellowship with Christ by a bold dash, somehow or other I generally have to drag a net after me! I want to commune with Christ, but I have about a thousand souls that I have to preach to on the coming Sabbath. I want to rejoice in the Lord with unspeakable joy, but often get cumbered with much serving. There is this poor soul in trouble, and that poor heart who needs consolation. Well, well, if the Master bids us drag the net, we won't leave it, but keep a hold of it and if we come a little more slowly, nevertheless, if we are doing His bidding, our slow pace shall be as accepted as Peter's swimming! And many of you, dear Friends, would be very wrong if you were to give up your common callings. You are like the fishermen with the net—you have to drag it. If you should

say, "I will give myself up to Christ. I will row to shore. I shall renounce my business. I shall leave all my earthly callings"—I think, unless I was quite certain you were a Peter, I would say, "Brother, go back! Drag the net. It must be brought to shore. There are your children. Oh, what a care they need and how wrong you would be if you neglected them!"

I remember a man, whose children were most neglected, who used to frequently go out preaching in the country villages. I know that once or twice he was spoken to about it, but he never mended matters. While he would be preaching, his children would be in the streets! He lived to see them grow up reprobates—and the sin was at his door. Stick to Christ! Drag your net and bring your family after you. Let this be your vehement desire—that your children shall be brought to Him! Or you have servants, or a little district in some place in London. Don't run away from your work! A Brother wrote to me some time ago telling me how much distressed he was in his mind. He said he thought he should never be happy till he got out of business. I said, "Don't run away from Satan. Fight the devil where you are! Tell the devil you will grapple with him where you are, and you mean to beat him right there." Oh, if God in His Providence has made you a servant, very well—beat the devil as a servant! And if you are a tradesman, don't say, "I cannot keep this trade and honor God." Do not let it be said that our God is the God of the hills and not the God of the valleys, and that it is only certain people in certain places who can honor Him! No, in every place you can honor your Master! Keep to your net. Drag it to Christ, however. Oh, what a drag it will be, sometimes, to bring it Christ's way!—all the business and all the work you have to do—to do all for Christ! Yet this is true religion—to sanctify not only the vessels of the altar, but the pots and the bells that are upon the horses—to make everything holiness unto the Lord! God grant us Grace to do this! May He send us here and there a Peter and, at the same time, may He keep the bulk of you, while steadfast in your callings and diligent in business, to be "fervent in spirit, serving the Lord." Oh, blessed Church that shall thus unanimously be drifting towards Christ and be heartily seeking after fellowship with the dear Redeemer—some impetuously, all industriously—and all successfully!

Now this leads me a little farther on. Supposing we should reach the Savior, as I trust we may, each man after His own order—

III. WHAT WILL BE THE RESULT OF COMING TO CHRIST?

Three results. The first will be refreshment. He will say to us, "Come and dine." Ah, how well fed are those whom Christ feeds! When we go up to the House of Prayer and look to the pulpit, we are disappointed. But if we go and look to the hills from where comes our help, we are never disappointed! What can the pastor do unless the superior Shepherd shall give us the daily food? I might well say to hungry souls, as the King of Israel said to the woman in Samaria, when she spoke of their having eaten her child in famine, and asked the king to help her—"Woman, if the Lord does not help you, how shall I help you?" And so might we all, with the most anxious desire to do good, yet reply, "If the Lord does not help you, how can we help you?" No, Brothers and Sisters, it is not in the power of ordinances, any more than of ministers, to feed souls! There is nothing in the bread and wine of the Communion Table that can spiritually nourish us. There you have bread—no more—wine—no more. It is only when, through these, you get to Jesus—when you pass through the doorway of the outward and get into the inward, into the spiritual—it is only then that your souls are entertained! And once get there, His banqueting table is better than that of Ahasuerus! There is no such feast as that which Jesus gives—of "fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees, well refined." By your enjoyments in the past, my Brothers and Sisters—by those ravishing moments when your souls have burned within you with intense delight—ask Him to come to you again! Beseech Him to favor you tonight with this refreshment. And mark you, that prayer need not be a selfish one, for all the strength that is gained in communion with Christ will afterwards be spent in the service of Christ!

But again. When the disciples had all come to our Lord, and had dined, the next thing was examination. It was addressed to Peter especially—but it must have been a lesson to all the rest of them—"Do you love Me?" The very first question that we should ask ourselves concerning our Christianity is this, "Do you love Me?" The second is, "Do you love Me?" The third is, "Do you love Me?" Answer that, and all is answered! The old orator said that the first essential of eloquence

was delivery or action. The second was delivery. The third was delivery. So we will say that the first essential of a truly healthy Christianity is to love Christ! And the second is to love Christ! And the third is to love Christ! Our Lord would not talk of commonplace things at that time. He selected a vital topic, and this is always vital—"Do you love Me? Do you love Me? Do you love Me?" Beloved Brothers and Sisters, I hope you will always be sound in the faith but then that is little comparatively to what it is to be sound in loving Christ! I trust, Brothers and Sisters, you will always be holy in life—but that can only be as you love Him in the heart. Out of the heart the life proceeds! He is the fountain—our actions are but the streams. Do, then, pass the question round among you, "Do you love Me?" I desire to put it to myself. I beg you to put it to yourselves. Pause a moment. Do you love Christ? What say you? With a true love? With a love that is such as He demands, that is above the love of mother or of child? "Do you love Me? You are coming to My Table, you are baptized—you are a member of the Church—but do you love Me?" Is it so? I trust you can reply, "Lord, You know all things: You know that I love You."—

*"Yes, I love You and adore—
Oh, for Grace to love You more!"*

Well, then, lastly, after coming to the Savior, who had given them refreshment and caused them to examine themselves, the next thing was that it ensured for them commissions of service—prepare it for the blessing. A number of sailors wrecked on a desert island are thirsting for water, but suppose a shower comes at once—it will be a wasted blessing! They must be so thirsty that they are led to put up an apparatus for catching the water when it comes—otherwise the water comes too soon and is lost! I love to see a Church in such state of agony for God's Grace that it has, as it were, the reservoirs ready to hold the Grace when it comes! "They that pass through the Valley of Baca make it a well." They "make it a well." The water does not rise in the well. "The rain also fills the pools." Yet they dig the wells to hold the rain—and the rain comes. Remember that notable incident when Israel and Judah were engaged against the King of Edom! The Prophet said, as he took his harp and began to play by Inspiration, "Make this valley full of ditches!" And they wondered why—but they dug the trenches and made the troughs all along the valley. By-and-by, the water came and filled the valley, and the host was refreshed! We need to make this valley full of ditches. We need, as a Church, to be ready and waiting for the blessing!

You see, Christ prepared Peter and all the Apostles by saying to them, "Feed My lambs. Feed My sheep. Shepherd My flock." And He says to you, tonight, "Are you refreshed by My Presence? Have you examined yourself and seen that you love Me? Now, then, gird up your loins and prepare for the service of the Church." I want, Brothers and Sisters, to see among us men and women who are looking after Christ's sheep and lambs! I hope it is not so everywhere, but I met the other day with a good Brother who has attended for a long time this Tabernacle, to whom nobody has ever spoken yet, as he told me. I do not know where he sits—at least, I half think I do, but I shall not tell you, because then somebody or other would find out who he was. But I will suppose he sits anywhere you like, all around you, and your own consciences shall judge. Now ought it to be so? Ought a person to come here Sunday after Sunday, and no one ever give him a brotherly salutation, or say a word concerning his soul? Oh, that you were looking out in the neighborhoods where you live, and in the part of this building where you sit, for opportunities of doing good! I know that there are persons who are longing to be spoken to, and they wonder why you do not speak to them! They are Christ's lambs and they need carrying in some kindly bosom. Oh, Look after them and help them! You do not know how half a word said in Christ's name during your journeying about your business may be life from the dead! As it is said by Herbert, "a verse may strike him whom a sermon flies." So a little word from you may be effectual where the most earnest public ministry might fail!

Oh, Beloved, the Lord is not slack! We are slack! If we have not a blessing, we are straitened somewhere, but it cannot be in Him! We are straitened in our own hearts and sympathies. What is that memorable text of the Prophet, "Bring you all the tithes into the storehouse that there may be meat in My house; and prove Me now herewith, says the Lord of Hosts, if I will not pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it." We are not to say that we are proving the Lord to give us a blessing because we pray. The test He puts us to is bringing the tithes into the storehouse—that is to say, what is God's due! Am I giving less of my substance than

I ought to give? Am I giving less of my time than I ought to give? Am I giving less of my talent than I ought to give? If I withhold anything that is really God's tithe, I am not proving God! But when we are all giving and doing to our utmost, then we prove God and we shall see whether He will not open the windows of Heaven and pour us out a blessing such as we shall not have room enough to receive!

I charge you, my Beloved—you who have been the flock of my care these many years—remember the history that God has given us during these 17 years. We were very few when we began, but there was a living seed among us, and there was mighty prayer—and a blessing came. “By terrible things in righteousness” God answered us! But the answer did come. What Prayer Meetings we had at Park Street! How often we sat down and wept under the Divine Influence! Thank God, the Holy Spirit overshadowed us! What ardor there was among you, then, and how many souls were brought to Christ! Since then He has led us on from strength to strength. He has never failed us! Never is this place empty or deserted. Crowds still come to listen to the Word of God! Oh, shall we not have a blessing as we had it before? I trust we may. And we shall if you are all, to the full measure of your obligations, engaged in the service of your blessed Master and seeking strength from on high! By the hands that were nailed for you—by the feet that were pierced for you—by the head that was crowned with thorns for you—by the heart that poured out blood and water for you—by the Christ who died for you—I implore and beseech you, lay yourselves out upon the altar of God, and say, “Henceforth, for us to live is Christ. Christ is all. We desire to say continually, “The Lord be magnified.”

Oh, that some here who know little enough about this might desire to know it! Poor Soul, if you desire Christ, Christ desires you! And if you will have Him tonight, you shall have Him! If you believe that Jesus is Christ, and have put your trust in Him as your Savior, you are saved! Look to Him now! God help you to do it, for Christ's sake! Amen.