

“READINESS”

“. . . to make ready a people
prepared for the LORD.”

Luke 1. 17.

Many are the books written concerning the Coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; some, if not all, with the worthy object of arousing His people, and encouraging them to be ready to meet their Lord; but can it be said that there is one-ness of mind in what is involved in this? and in what "readiness" really consists?

There will no doubt be agreement that, first and foremost it is a matter of personal concern, and one of individual preparation of heart; for while it is important to know the doctrine of "the Second Coming", and to be clear as to the order of events, yet we should hesitate to say that these things alone, constitute "readiness". Do we not feel that the need of the present hour is a fuller realization of relationship to "The Coming One"? so that our affections may be stirred, which in turn will cause an expectant looking for Him, and a longing for "His Return"? This surely is the thought expressed by the words, "all them also that *love* His appearing" (II Timothy 4).

This individual aspect is emphasised in one of the most heart-searching parables of our Lord, in which we read, "The Bridegroom came, and they that were ready went in with Him to the marriage, and the door was shut" (Matt. 25). Outwardly there was nothing to distinguish between the wise, and the foolish virgins. They all had lamps, and went forth together, and yet only a part of that separated company were ready when the Bridegroom came. In what are they said to differ? "The foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps". Thus we see that oil was the vital necessity. Its absence not only meant loss, and they themselves saved, as those mentioned in I Cor. 3, but they were shut out from the marriage, and the kingdom. What then is the meaning of the symbol? Lamps,—though of a different kind—and oil, were seen in vision by Zechariah the prophet, and in answer to the question, "What are these my lord?" the reply was given, "This is the word of the Lord unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit saith the Lord of Hosts" (Zech. 4). It is also declared of John the Baptist that, "he was a burning and a shining lamp". Was this a natural brilliance? Was it the display of certain inherent qualities? No! The answer is found in Luke 1. 15, "He shall be filled with the Holy Spirit". "Lamps" in the Scripture are associated with the worship, the witness, and the walk of the saints, and as oil is essential for the lamps, so the Spirit of God alone can enable these spiritual exercises. But it is written, "Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His" (Rom. 8). How important then are the words, "*Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith, prove your own selves*" (II Cor. 13).

We would also draw attention to the words of the Lord Jesus to His disciples. "Let your loins be girded about and your lamps burning", and again, "Be ye also ready for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh".

Another word which has a repeated emphasis in the gospels and epistles alike is "Watch". There is evidently a danger of those who are children of "the Day" being overcome by sleep in this world's night, and following this word is also found the exhortation, "and

be sober.” Is it possible that any of the Lord’s people could be deceived by wine or strong drink? It may even be so, but the words should also warn against any excess which would impair their vision, or cause forgetfulness of His near Coming (cf. Luke 21. 34). The apostle adds, “Putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and for an helmet the hope of salvation” (I Thess. 5). These articles of clothing while of a protective character have a further advantage in that they are not by any means conducive to sleep.

From other Scriptures we learn that those who are alive and remain unto the Coming of the Lord, will experience a sudden and transforming change, which is a necessary preparation for an entrance into the Kingdom, “for this corruptible must put on incorruptibility, and this mortal must put on immortality” (I Cor. 15), but the preparedness of which we speak is one of spiritual condition that does not usually take place “in a moment” but is often the result of a somewhat painful process: although the thing may be done suddenly (cf. II Chr. 29).

Is this individual aspect then the complete picture of “readiness” which the Holy Spirit brings to view?

Have not our hearts been attracted by the words, “Let us be glad and rejoice and give honour to Him for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready?” (Rev. 19). Here as in Matthew 25 the scene is one of a marriage, but now it is not a company of virgins which engages our attention, in a parable of individual devotedness, but the bride, the wife of the Lamb. Who is the Lamb? Ah! We know, it is the Lord Jesus Christ. Who is His wife? Again we speak with assurance, for to us has been shown the mystery, it is the Church (cf. Eph. 5), and so consists of those who have been redeemed by His precious Blood, and she has prepared herself. What does this thought of preparing herself imply, and when does it take place? Is it that previous to the Coming of the Bridegroom there will have been a reviving which has caused individual repentance, and personal purification? Has there been a concern for that unity for which the psalmist pleads in the words, “Unite my heart to fear Thy Name”? (Psa. 86). We answer, Yes! But does not the thought of “*His wife*” making herself ready go beyond this? and speaks of a united, collective preparation? *Can it be said that the Church is ready to meet her Lord when there remains such a lack of unity among her members?*

As we look out upon the many organisations and denominations in which these members are found, the words come to mind, “My brethren these things ought not so to be”. Often have we heard the lament of the apostle in his letter to the saints at Corinth, “Now this I say that every one of you saith I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ. Is Christ divided?” Have not these words an application to-day? Have we dear fellow believers faced up to this inquiry, “Is Christ divided?” And yet another question may be asked, “Must not the Holy Spirit be grieved?” Towards the close of the last book of Scripture we find the words, “and the Spirit and the Bride say Come”. Does this mean that

here and there a few earnest believers exercised in heart are praying for the Lord to come? Nay! That would come very far short of the full meaning. Does it not rather speak of the united appeal of a united company who together with the Spirit of God are saying "Come"? And is it not the same united company who, when He Who testifies these things declares, "Behold I come quickly", sends back the reply, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus"?

Is it then presumption to expect Reviving and the Restoration of manifest unity? If as we think of the immensity of the task our hearts fail, and we ask, "Who is sufficient for these things"? Let us remember that "we are not sufficient of ourselves, to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God". With men it is impossible, but not with God, for with God all things are possible (Matt. 19). We would also remind ourselves that there is a unity which cannot be broken, for every saved one is united to Christ, Who is the Head, and in Him, to one another, but how sad to think that for so long a time this unity has not been evident in experience and manifestation.

In view of the approaching Day there is a word of exhortation found in Hebrews 10, "Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is, but exhorting: or inviting to the side, *and so much the more as ye see the Day approaching*". It may be we have limited the "one another", and "ourselves" to the particular company with whom we enjoy closest fellowship, if so shall we not from now onward see in it an appeal to each, to reach out to all who are known to be fellow members of that one body, in prayer, and in loving effort; no matter how feeble that effort may at first appear to be?

That "unity" is the will of the Lord for His people is clear from the words of intercession addressed to the Father previous to His suffering on their behalf. We are admitted into the Sanctuary as we read John 17, and the words are heard, "That they all may be one . . . that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me". But that which is found among believers generally is an entire lack of concern that unity is not manifested. Some have even sought to justify the position by suggesting that the various churches are like to regiments in the one army. A little thought will show that the illustration is not an apt one, as it presents no real parallel, for an army is under a unified command, with all its various parts acting in unison, this cannot be said of the churches to-day. We do not ignore the fact that there have been times of reviving among the Lord's people in the past when these things have come with power to the heart; and there has been a going forth unto Him without the camp, with a more earnest looking and longing for His return. Further, we are aware that to-day there are many believers, who are not found in National or Nonconformist bodies, neither are their gatherings of an inter-denominational character, and the question comes, "Have we in these a basis for the unity of saints"? Alas! When we examine the situation more closely we discover that among such there are deep cut divisions, so that to identify oneself with one such gathering would

still result in separation from others, thus the difficulty remains. Is there not then a solution? The Lord's solution, to this age long problem? Surely the answer must be in the affirmative.

Let us then see if Scripture encourages us in this belief. The inference to be drawn from this last suggestion is that the Scriptures are alone authoritative, and the only court of appeal, so that the first essential for unity among the saints is the unqualified acceptance of the truth that, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (II Tim. 3). We cannot build without a foundation, neither can we judge without a standard, both of which are found in the Scripture of Truth.

In our further approach to this subject it may be well to remember that God ever desires to dwell among His people, and the words are found, "Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Ex. 25), and during the wilderness journey when Israel were dwelling in tents, God had His tent, but be it noted when Moses was about to make the Tabernacle he was warned of God, "for see saith He, thou make all things according to the pattern shewn thee in the mount" (Heb. 8).

Many years later David desired to build a house for God, but although his heart's desire was not granted, he was allowed to prepare for it; and given its design, "All this, said David, have I been made to understand in writing from the hand of the Lord even all the works of this pattern" (I Chron. 28R.V.). So in a future day there is to be built another temple at Jerusalem and already the pattern has been shown and its details given. We see that nothing is left to man's choice, but the pattern, the form, the fashion, the goings out, the comings in thereof, all the forms thereof, and the ordinances thereof, and all the laws thereof are Divinely given (cf. Ezek. 43).

What of the present? Has God a house for a dwelling place among His people to-day? The answer is, Yes! but not a worldly sanctuary, not a temple made with hands, but a house which is being built upon the foundation of the apostles—not one apostle—and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief Corner Stone, in Whom all the building fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord. In Whom also ye are being builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit (Eph. 2).

Peter the apostle also writes of this, "If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious, to Whom coming, a living Stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, precious, ye also as living stones are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices well pleasing to God through Jesus Christ" (I Pet. 2). It is this temple, this spiritual house which should have its outward manifestation to-day.

But what shall we say of the magnificent Cathedrals and other buildings found in this and other lands? Are they according to a

pattern shown, or given in writing from the hand of the Lord? Nay! They differ both in design and ordinance, and the Scriptures are silent as to the erection of any special buildings for worship in the time now present. We humbly acknowledge that the Lord alone is the Searcher of hearts, and knows what prompted the builders, but it is certain that if there is to be unity of purpose and action among the Lord's people, all wishes and desires must be confirmed by that which is found written (see I Chr. 17). Therefore if we are to return to the primitive order and arrangements, these costly buildings with their elaborate ritual will have to be forsaken.

That God ever desires the worship of His people and seeks worshippers we know, but it is "neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem" that the Father is to be worshipped (John 4). In this present period there is no appointed earthly centre, but worship in Spirit and in truth, is in the Holiest; into which we enter by the blood of Jesus. Should this appear mystical, and lacking in practical application, because of our still being in the body, it may be said that although the place of worship is heavenly, yet there are gathering places of saints, as we have been reminded we should not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. Not however in any special buildings, not even—we would suggest—in gospel halls, however simple these may be, but rather in the houses, or homes of the saints. Thus we read of "the church that is in their house" (I Cor. 16), "The church in thy house" (Phm. 2).

A little may be said as to the Scriptural view of "the church", and "the churches". Generally speaking "the Church" embraces the whole company of the redeemed, while "churches" are viewed as the local expressions of that whole. So that the churches in Asia or in the towns and cities of Europe would rightly include all the believers in those various localities. Never do we read of more than one church in one town, but if the numbers increased, gatherings would take place in several homes, but those acting together would be viewed as one. Paul describes such a local arrangement as "a house of God, which is a church of a living God, a pillar and ground of the truth", "a house" speaking of a dwelling place for God, and the worship of God. "A church", being a called out company united in fellowship and service, "a pillar and ground" telling of that which is fixed and holding aloft the Truth. Thus referring to the united testimony of such a gathering.

A further description of local churches is given in the last book of Scripture chapter 1. Where in vision they are seen as "lamp-stands". In Chapter 11, two witnesses are described in the same way, hence we may conclude that not only worship but witness is the thought expressed, and that from these, and from all such gatherings the light of truth should be displayed in the dark places of the world, in the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Never does the word "church" refer to a building of bricks and mortar, but whether in its entirety, or as a local miniature the stones are living, the Lord Jesus is the Builder, His people are the building. He is also the Owner, "Whose house are we" (Heb. 3).

Let us now consider what is found representing the Church of God to-day. Instead of one church in each city and town, we find a number of gatherings with special buildings and various names, *e.g.* Presbyterian, Episcopal, Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, as well as others. Having noted these, let us compare with the primitive church, or churches at the beginning. Does it come as a surprise to find that these names which to-day speak of differences, if not in what many have called fundamentals, yet in order and practice, were characteristic of the one church when there was manifest unity? The local churches were cared for by local brethren of godly character and experience who were appointed presbyters (or elders), these brethren are said to have been made overseers (or bishops) by the Holy Ghost, and the word "overseer" is the true rendering of the word from which "episcopal" is derived. The churches were "catholic" in that no distinction was made between Jew and Gentile, and disciples were being made of all nations (Let it be said not Roman Catholic, a contradiction in terms). They were "baptist"; or rather baptized churches, in that those who gladly received the Word were baptized, and were added (Acts 2), and if we may so say the churches were "methodist", in that they continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. This was the primitive method; how blessed it would be if the Lord's dear people to-day retraced their steps, and came back to the place where believers were at the first.

When we think of the barriers which have been raised, and the divisions which have been caused, do not the words come to mind, "An enemy hath done this"? Not that by this we wish to justify ourselves, or to suggest that we are not to blame, far otherwise, for the words of the Holy Spirit remind us that the Lord is not slack concerning His promise (*i.e.* to come again), as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering to usward (*viz.* His people), not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (II Pet. 3). Revival, Conversion, Repentance are experiences which are not limited to the unsaved, for the Lord's people may need to be revived, a disciple converted, and saints brought to repentance. How important therefore that as believers we should have a Scriptural viewpoint, and should take, by grace, the Lord's standpoint. Thus individually and collectively we shall be getting ready for the Return of our Lord from Heaven, Whose Coming draweth nigh.

S. A. Bown

