

The Voice of Jeremiah (continued) IV

T. Austin-Sparks:

"They knew not... the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath" (Acts 13:27).

The Peril of Self-interest

"Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not" (Jeremiah 45:5).

When the Apostle Paul used the words of our title to the "Brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and God-fearers" in Antioch in Pisidia, as the context shows, he was relating the "Voices of the Prophets" particularly to Israel's attitude and actions to Jesus of Nazareth: "A Saviour, Jesus". In these chapters we have, so far, widened the application of the statement, but, we feel, not illegitimately. The voices of the Prophets do speak to many needs and situations, but it will be understood that we are all the time keeping in mind the possibility of a discrepancy between hearing words and hearing the "voice". Jeremiah had definitely said something like this. "To whom shall I speak and testify, that they may hear? behold their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken..." (Jeremiah 6:10).

Jesus Himself said something with the same meaning. "Why do ye not understand my speech? because ye cannot hear my word" (John 8:43). This gap between hearing all the words of teaching and hearing the voice in it, as we have said, can account for the lack of life and power even where there is much knowledge of the truth. It can also account for violent contradictions, as in the case of Israel.

We proceed to our next "Voice" - the peril of self-interest.

The story of Baruch's association with the Prophet Jeremiah is a very touching one. Baruch was younger than Jeremiah. His relationship with the Prophet was more than an association: it was a friendship; it was no empty attachment, but his loyalty to his older friend cost him almost everything. From the first time that Baruch appeared on the scene he never seemed to have been far from the Prophet's side. When Jeremiah was shut up in prison, Baruch was a constant visitor and helper; and when Jerusalem was at last captured, he refused the option of release and stayed alongside his worn-out old friend. When, finally, Jeremiah was carried off into Egypt, Baruch follows in his train. Baruch goes down in history, and in immortal records, as "a friend that sticketh closer than a brother". Oh, for more Baruchs!

This friendship survived one of the greatest tests that any man, and especially a young man, could be put to. The Roll had been written by him at Jeremiah's dictation, and it had been cut to pieces and destroyed in the fire by the king. The second one had been written, with additional judgments. Chapter 45 indicates that Baruch had gone down deep in despair at what had been written; then Jeremiah (or the Lord) added to the woes. Then follow these warning, and could-be desolating, words: "And seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not."

If we feel that this was too hard and cruel and unkind to say to a young man of such fidelity and devotion, our answer will come along the line of a wider horizon. We must look further and take in the long view. Perhaps we may find the most satisfactory answer to our question if we leave Jeremiah and Baruch for a moment and look a long way ahead to another situation which had many features similar to theirs. From vales of Galilee and vicinities of Jerusalem querulous voices can be heard:

"Lord, who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" ... "And they disputed who was the greatest" ... "And there arose a contention among them, which of them is accounted to be the greatest" ... "Lord, grant that one may sit on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand when thou comest in thy Kingdom" ... "Jesus began to show unto his disciples how that he must go up to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and be killed..." ... "And Peter began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall never be to thee" ... "All ye shall be offended because of me, this night" ... "And they all forsook him and fled" ... "We had hoped that it had been he who should redeem Israel" ... "Lord, dost thou at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?"

How very appropriate it would have been for Jesus to have used the warning words of Jeremiah over all the above:

"Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not."

We must remember that as with Jeremiah and Baruch, so with Jesus, dark clouds were on the horizon. Many

things had been said by both which pointed to ominous and distressing days. The great ordeal by fire was prophesied. For the disciples that was to be the Cross. For Israel, the devastating and desolating ordeal of A.D. 70 had been definitely intimated by Jesus. In view of both these pending tragedies it was no time to seek great things for themselves. But, there, in the last two words, we have the clue: "For thyself."

In the sovereign counsels and righteousness of God, both Jeremiah and Baruch have been vindicated. Baruch has greater things than he could have had in a perishing kingdom of this world. And we have only to read Peter's first Letter to know whether he thought that the loss of all earthly and temporal "great things" for the 'preciousness' of Christ was a poor exchange, a bad bargain. Everything turned upon the object of ambition; "thyself" or the Lord. When their Lord became the object and the end of all their seeking, they came into the greatest things of all! "Great things"? Yes; a thousand times, Yes! Not for ourselves, but for Him.

Israel lost everything by holding to themselves and denying Jesus His rights. It was a desolating self-interest. Peter, John, Paul, and ten thousand others have gained the transcendent things of eternity and glory by that change of object. "No longer I", 'not myself', but "unto him be the glory for ever and ever".

"As the serpent beguiled Eve..." (2 Corinthians 11:3). The key to all beguiling is selfhood. It is as subtle as the serpent and intrudes into the most sacred things. Hidden beneath our most convinced sincerity and devotion to God (as we believe, and as Peter believed) there may lurk that element of desire for place, for power, for self-realization. Only a shattering defeat can disclose this hang-over of the original 'Fall'. Herein, then, lies the imperative of a real and deep work of the Cross at the root of the self-life.