Discourse 10.-Domnina

Methodius of Olympus (d. c. AD 311)

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Chapter I.-Chastity Alone Aids and Effects the Most Praiseworthy Government of the Soul.

O Arete, I also, omitting the long preludes of exordiums, will endeavour according to my ability to enter upon the subject, lest, by delaying upon those matters which are outside the subject in hand, I should speak of them at greater length than their importance would warrant. For I account it a very great part of prudence not to make long speeches, which merely charm the ears, before coming to the main question, but to begin forthwith at the point in debate. So I will begin from thence, for it is time. Nothing can so much profit a man, O fair virgins, with respect to moral excellence, as chastity; for chastity alone accomplishes and brings it about that the soul should be governed in the noblest and best way, and should be set free, pure from the stains and pollutions of the world. For which reason, when Christ taught us to cultivate it, and showed its unsurpassable beauty, the kingdom of the Evil One was destroyed, who aforetime led captive and enslaved the whole race of men, so that none of the more ancient people pleased the Lord, but all were overcome by errors, since the law was not of itself sufficient to free the human race from corruption, until virginity, succeeding the law, governed men by the precepts of Christ. Nor truly had the first men so often rim headlong into combats and slaughter, into lust and idolatry, if the righteousness that is by the law had been to them sufficient for salvation. Now truly they were then confused by great and frequent calamities; but from the time when Christ was incarnate, and armed and adorned His flesh with virginity, the savage tyrant who was master of incontinence was taken away, and peace and faith have dominion, men no longer turning so much as before to idolatry.

Chapter II.-The Allegory of the Trees Demanding a King, in the Book of Judges, Explained.

But lest I should appear to some to be sophistical, and to conjecture these things from mere probabilities, and to babble, I will bring forward to you, O virgins, from the Old Testament, written prophecy from the Book of Judges, to show that I speak the truth, where the future reign of chastity was already clearly foretold. For we read: "The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said unto the olive-tree, Reign thou over us. But the olive-tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by the they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? And the trees said to the fig-tree, Come thou, and reign over us. But the fig-tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said the trees unto the vine, Come thou, and reign over us. And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon."

Now, that these things are not said of trees growing out of the earth, is clear. For inanimate trees cannot be assembled in council to choose a king, inasmuch as they firmly fixed by deep roots to the earth. But altogether are these things narrated concerning souls which, before the incarnation of Christ, too deeply luxuriating in transgressions, approach to God as suppliants, and ask His mercy, and that they may be governed by His pity and compassion, which Scripture expresses under the figure of the olive, because oil is of great advantage to our bodies, and takes away our fatigues and ailments, and affords light. For all lamp-light increases when nourished by oil. So also the mercies of God entirely dissolve death, and assist the human race, and nourish the light of the heart. And consider whether the laws, from the first created man until Christ in succession, were not set forth in these words by the Scripture by figments, in opposition to which the devil has deceived the human race. And it has likened the fig-tree to the command given to man in paradise, because, when

he was deceived, he covered his nakedness with the leaves of a fig-tree; and the vine to the precept given to Noah at the time of the deluge, because, when overpowered by wine, he was mocked. The olive signifies the law given to Moses in the desert, because the prophetic grace, the holy oil, had failed from their inheritance when they broke the law.

Lastly, the bramble not inaptly refers to the law which was given to the apostles for the salvation of the world; because by their instruction we have been taught virginity, of which alone the devil has not been able to make a deceptive image. For which cause, also, four Gospels have been given, because God has four times given the Gospel to the human race, and has instructed them by four laws, the times of which are clearly known by the diversity of the fruits. For the fig-tree, on account of its sweetness and richness, represents the delights of man, which he had in paradise before the fall. Indeed, not rarely, as we shall afterwards show, the Holy Spirit takes the fruit of the fig-tree as an emblem of goodness. But the vine, on account of the gladness produced by wine, and the joy of those who were saved from wrath and from the deluge, signifies the change produced from fear and anxiety into joy. Moreover, the olive, on account of the oil which it produces, indicates the compassion of God, who again, after the deluge, bore patiently when men turned aside to ungodliness, so that He gave them the law and manifested Himself to some, and nourished by oil the light of virtue, now almost extinguished.

Chapter III.-The Bramble and the Agnos the Symbol of Chastity; The Four Gospels, that Is, Teachings or Laws, Instructing to Salvation.

Now the bramble commends chastity, for the bramble and the agnos is the same tree: by some it is called bramble, by others agnos. Perhaps it is because the plant is akin to virginity that it is called bramble and agnos; bramble, because of its strength and firmness against pleasures; agnos, because it always continues chaste. Hence the Scripture relates that Elijah, fleeing from the face of the woman Jezebel, at first came under a bramble, and there, having been heard, received strength and took food; signifying that to him who flies from the incitements of lust, and from a woman-that is, from pleasure-the tree of chastity is a refuge and a shade, ruling men from the coming of Christ, the chief of virgins. For when the first laws, which were published in the times of Adam and Noah and Moses, were unable to give salvation to man, the evangelical law alone has saved all.

And this is the cause why the fig-tree may be said not to have obtained the kingdom over trees, which, in a spiritual sense, mean men; and the fig-tree the command, because man desired, even after the fall, again to be subject to the dominion of virtue, and not to be deprived of the immortality of the paradise of pleasure. But, having transgressed, he was rejected and cast far away, as one who could no longer be governed by immortality, nor was capable of receiving it. And the first message to him after the transgression was preached by Noah, to which, if he had applied his mind, he might have been saved from sin; for in it he promised both happiness and rest from evils, if he gave heed to it with all his might, just as the vine promises to yield wine to those who cultivate it with care and labour. But neither did this law rule mankind, for men did not obey it, although zealously preached by Noah. But, after they began to be surrounded and drowning by the waters, they began to repent, and to promise that they would obey the commandments. Wherefore with scorn they are rejected as subjects; that is, they are contemptuously told that they cannot be helped by the law; the Spirit answering them back and reproaching them because they had deserted those

men whom God had commanded to help them, and to save them, and make them glad; such as Noah and those with him. ”Even to you, O rebellious,” said he, ”I come, to bring help to you who are destitute of prudence, and who differ in nothing from dry trees, and who formerly did not believe me when I preached that you ought to flee from present things.”

Chapter IV.-The Law Useless for Salvation; The Last Law of Chastity Under the Figure of the Bramble.

And so those men, having been thus rejected from the divine care, and the human race having again given themselves up to error, again God sent forth, by Moses, a law to rule them and recall them to righteousness. But these, thinking fit to bid a long farewell to this law, turned to idolatry. Hence God gave them up to mutual slaughters, to exiles, and captivities, the law it self confessing, as it were, that it could not save them. Therefore, worn out with ills and afflicted, they again promised that they would obey the commandments; until God, pitying man the fourth time, sent chastity to rule over them, which Scripture consequently called the bramble. And she consuming pleasures threatens besides, that unless all undoubtingly obey her, and truly come to her, she will destroy all with fire, since there will be hereafter no other law or doctrine but judgment and fire. For this reason, man henceforth began to do righteousness, and firmly to believe in God, and to separate himself from the devil. Thus chastity was sent down, as being most useful and helpful to men. For of her alone was the devil unable to forge an imitation to lead men astray, as is the case with the other precepts.

Chapter V.-The Malignity of the Devil as an Imitator in All Things; Two Kinds of Fig-Trees and Vines.

The fig-tree, as I said, from the sweetness and excellence of its fruit, being taken as a type of the delights of paradise, the devil, having beguiled the man by its imitations, led him captive, persuading him to conceal the nakedness of his body by fig-leaves; that is, by their friction he excited him to sexual pleasure. Again, those that had been saved from the deluge, he intoxicated with a drink which was an imitation of the vine of spiritual joy; and again he mocked them, having stripped them of virtue. And what I say will hereafter be more clear. The enemy, by his power, always imitates the forms of virtue and righteousness, not for the purpose of truly promoting its exercise, but for deception and hypocrisy. For in order that those who fly from death he may entice to death, he is outwardly dyed with the colours of immortality. And hence he wishes to seem a fig-tree or vine, and to produce sweetness and joy, and is ”transformed into an angel of light,” ensnaring many by the appearance of piety.

For we find in the Sacred Writings that there are two kinds of fig-trees and vines, ”the good figs, very good; and the evil, very evil; ” ”wine that maketh glad the heart of man.” and wine which is the poison of dragons, and the incurable venom of asps. But from the time when chastity began to rule over men, the fraud was detected and overcome, Christ, the chief of virgins, overturning it. So both the true fig-tree and the true vine yield fruit after that the power of chastity has laid hold upon all men, as Joel the prophet preaches, saying: ”Fear not, O land; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord will do great things. Be not afraid, ye beasts of the field; for the pastures of the wilderness do spring, for the tree beareth her fruit, the fig-tree and the vine do yield their strength. Be glad then, ye children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God, for He hath given you food unto righteousness; ” calling the former laws the vine and the fig, trees bearing fruit unto righteousness for the children of the spiritual Zion, which bore fruit after the incarnation of the Word, when chastity ruled over us, when formerly, on account of sin and much error, they had checked and destroyed their buds. For the true vine and the true fig-tree were not able to yield such nourishment to us as would be profitable for life, whilst as yet the false fig-tree, variously adorned for the

purpose of fraud, flourished. But when the Lord dried up the false branches, the imitations of the true branches, uttering the sentence against the bitter fig-tree, "Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever," then those which were truly fruit-bearing trees flourished and yielded food unto righteousness.

The vine, and that not in a few places, refers to the Lord Himself, and the fig-tree to the Holy Spirit, as the Lord "maketh glad the hearts of men," and the Spirit healeth them. And therefore Hezekiah is commanded first to make a plaster with a lump of figs-that is, the fruit of the Spirit-that he may be healed-that is, according to the apostle-by love; for he says, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance; " which, on account of their great pleasantness, the prophet calls figs. Micah also says, "They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig-tree; and none shall make them afraid." Now it is certain that those who have taken refuge and rested under the Spirit, and under the shadow of the Word, shall not be alarmed, nor frightened by him who troubles the hearts of men.

Chapter VI.-The Mystery of the Vision of Zechariah.

Moreover, Zechariah shows that the olive shadows forth the law of Moses, speaking thus: "And the angel that talked with me came again and waked me, as a man that is wakened out of his sleep, and said unto me, What seest thou? And I said, I have looked, and behold a candlestick all of gold, with a bowl upon the top of it.... And two olive-trees by it, one upon the right side of the bowl, and the other upon the left side thereof. And after a few words, the prophet, asking what are the olives on the right and left of the candlestick, and what the two olive-boughs in the hands of the two pipes, the angel answered and said: "These are the two sons of fruitfulness which stand by the Lord of the whole earth," signifying the two first-born virtues that are waiting upon God, which, in His dwelling, supply around the wick, through the boughs, the spiritual oil of God, that man may have the light of divine knowledge. But the two boughs of the two olives are the law and the prophets, around, as it were, the lot of the inheritance, of which Christ and the Holy Spirit are the authors, we ourselves meanwhile not being able to take the whole fruit and the greatness of these plants, before chastity began to rule the world, but only their boughs-to wit, the law and the prophets-did we formerly cultivate, and those moderately, often letting them slip.

For who was ever able to receive Christ or the Spirit, unless he first purified himself? For the exercise which prepares the soul from childhood for desirable and delectable glory, and carries this grace safely thither with ease, and from small toils raises up mighty hopes, is chastity, which gives immortality to our bodies; which it becomes all men willingly to prefer in honour and to praise above all things; some, that by its means they may be betrothed to the Word, practising virginity; and others, that by it they may be freed from the curse, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

This, O Arete, is the discourse on virginity which you required of me, accomplished according to my ability; which I pray, O mistress, although it is mediocre and short, that thou wilt receive with kindness from me who was chosen to speak last.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.