



St. James.

“Lo, He stands at His martyr's side,
Death with nobler life surrounding,
And takes him with Him to abide,
The dread tyrant's wrath confounding.”

THERE was a proud and haughty king named Herod, the grandson of that Herod who wished to destroy JESUS CHRIST, and who, in the wicked hope of doing so, cruelly put to death all the little children in Bethlehem. He reigned for about three years in Judea, and during that time showed that he was no less cruel than his grandfather; and that as his grandfather had tried to kill JESUS CHRIST, he was determined to follow his example by destroying as many of His disciples as he could get into his power. Oh, what sad times were those, when the believers in the LORD JESUS CHRIST were obliged to hide themselves from their enemies, or else be in danger of being put to death! God

however, can always bring good out of evil; and the cruel deaths which holy men of old suffered, proved how much better they thought it was to die for the sake of JESUS CHRIST, than to live without knowing any thing about Him; and this encouraged others to believe in that Name, through which alone we can be saved.* We too may derive benefit from it; for if we should ever be vexed with any thing here on earth, we have only to look back at the holy martyrs of old, and see what they suffered, and then let us ask ourselves why we cannot patiently suffer some of the evils of life, when they were willing to give up even their lives, because they thought it was their duty to do so? At the period to which we are now referring, Judea was a Roman province, and Herod went to Rome to ask the emperor to make him a king; and having obtained his request, he returned back to Judea to take possession of his kingdom. Herod was a Jew, and the Jews continued to hate the Christians as much as they had hated the LORD JESUS CHRIST, and we cannot be surprised that they did so, because our LORD had told His disciples that if the Jews

* Acts iv. 12.

called the Master of the house Beelzebub, much more would they call those of his household by that name :* by which we understand Him to say, that if the Jews called JESUS CHRIST a wicked man, and would not listen to the gracious words which He spoke, but wished to put Him to death, His followers, who were called Christians, must expect to be treated even worse than He was ; but He also told them not to be afraid of those who could only kill the body, and who could not hurt the soul ; and He also said, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

The Jews thus continuing to hate the very name of Christians, and Herod having been appointed by the emperor Caligula to reign over them, he thought he could not obtain the favour of the Jews more certainly, or in a quicker way, than by persecuting those who were called Christians. The greater and better known any Christian was, the more surely he thought he should gain the goodwill of the people by putting him to death. We may suppose that he would thus reason with himself, as he sailed along from Rome to Judea : "I am a very lucky person to

* St. Matthew x. 25.

have obtained the kingdom of Judea from the Romans, which my grandfather once had, and also my uncle, but which has now for a long time been ruled over by a Roman, who is called the governor. I must take care not to lose it again. Let me see: it was the discontent of the Jews which caused my family to be driven away; I must, therefore, try to regain the favour of the Jewish people. Now how can I best manage to do this? I know that the Jews hate the Christians, and I have no great love for them; I will, therefore, persecute them as soon as I get possession of my kingdom, and by doing that I shall become a great and powerful king." We may easily imagine that such thoughts filled his mind as he sat listening to the bubbling waves which gently washed against the side of the ship, as she pursued her course through a calm and unruffled sea. When he landed he soon put his evil intentions into effect; and having commenced a fierce persecution, he seized upon St. James, whose reputation was very great, since he, together with his brother St. John, and the apostle St. Peter, had been selected by our LORD JESUS CHRIST to witness that glorious sight, which was called the

Transfiguration of our LORD on Mount Tabor, and also to be present at that sad time when our LORD suffered such bitter agony in the garden of Gethsemane. All this had made St. James a very remarkable character among the early Christians, and rendered him an object which Herod was likely to seize upon, in order to gain the good opinion of those who were sure to be much pleased by the death of one whom they had often heard talking of the LORD JESUS CHRIST, and of all the wonderful and glorious things which he had seen when he was with our LORD upon earth.

Accordingly he seized upon St. James, and condemned him to be put to death. When the hour arrived for this faithful servant of his LORD to die, there was a crowd assembled to see the mournful sight. Some were there whose hearts were delighted to think that a man whom they hated for his goodness would soon cease to make them angry: these were impatient for the coming of the prisoner, who was about to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel, even by his death. Every minute seemed an hour to these impatient people, and the least stir at a distance made them think

that the holy man was coming. Others were there with sad and mournful countenances, whose hearts were too full to give utterance to their feelings, and who came there to learn how a true and sincere Christian ought to die. Many and bitter were the taunts they received from the crowd of unbelievers, and many were the threats held out to alarm them. At length, however, all was silent, and St. James was seen coming along with a soldier who was guarding him. There was no fear in the countenance of the Apostle, but a pleasing serenity overspread his face as he walked with a firm step to the place of execution. Neither the crowd of bloodthirsty men who were gathered together, nor the preparations which had been made for his execution, could shake his constancy or subdue his courage. It was, indeed, a wonderful sight to see that venerable man so calm and so composed when in the hands of his enemies; and to witness the firm reliance which he had on his Lord's support in his last sad trial, to which he was about to be subjected. Among the crowd of spectators by which he was surrounded, there was one man who seemed to be perfectly overcome by his patience and his

courage. One who, although he had often mingled in the bloody fight, and seen heroes perish through love for their country, had never yet seen any one so completely unmoved by the approach of an ignominious death, at the hands of a public executioner. This man was the soldier who had guarded St. James, and who was conducting him from his dungeon to the place of execution. His eyes appeared to be riveted on his prisoner, and he now felt sure there must be truth in that religion which enabled him who professed it to be so calm and so composed at such an awful time. He heard him, as he slowly walked along, discoursing on the truths which he had learned of JESUS CHRIST, and of that wondrous love for mankind which caused the Lord of life and glory to come down from heaven, and to take upon Him our nature, that He might open the kingdom of heaven to all believers. He heard him tell of all that JESUS had done and said whilst upon earth; of the kindness He had shown, and the hardships He had undergone. He heard him relate what He had suffered in order to save men from their sins, and to make them for ever happy in His heavenly kingdom.

He moreover heard him declare his firm reliance on the promises of his Lord, and how utterly worthless everything upon earth is, compared with the true riches, and never-ending glory of the kingdom of heaven. "Let death come," said he, "with all its horrors, it will bring me soon to everlasting joys!" The soldier's heart was moved by the discourse which he had heard; he beheld in his prisoner a servant of the living God: and being forcibly struck, not only with the discourse, but also with the whole demeanour of the Apostle, he fell down at his feet, and embraced Christianity!

This greatly increased the rage of the Apostle's enemies; and the singular conversion of the Roman soldier made them more determined than ever to suppress, if possible, the Christian religion. They seized the new convert, and from a soldier appointed to guard another, he was changed into a prisoner; and in the same hour that he became a Christian, he became also a martyr for the sake of his new religion!

Amidst the tumult which this remarkable scene had excited, St. James and the soldier were brought to the place of execution; and

as they were approaching it, the soldier intreated the Apostle to pardon him for having taken any part in bringing him to execution. He said that he was obeying the commands of his superior officers, who were acting under the directions of those who were in authority, and that he was therefore compelled to take the part he did against so holy and so innocent a man. St. James silently listened to the soldier's apology, and then pausing for a few moments, as though he were deliberating what to say in reply, exclaimed, "Peace be to thee!" They then embraced each other with the tenderest affection, such affection as Christian hearts alone can feel; and when at length the patience of their enemies was exhausted, they calmly laid their heads upon the block, and the executioner having performed his cruel office, their souls entered into that glorious rest which remaineth for the people of God. Thus fell St. James,—the first of the glorious company of apostles that received a martyr's crown. In the death of this servant of God the wickedness and cruelty of man seemed to triumph; but the triumph was not of long continuance; for the hand of God was soon after stretched out

against those who had done violence to the Apostle.

When king Herod had reigned about three years, and had during that time filled up his measure of wickedness, he went down from Jerusalem to Cæsarea to superintend the performance of some games which were about to be celebrated in honour of the Roman emperor. The exhibitions which were usual on such occasions brought together great crowds of people, and they were not thought beneath the attention of the great men of the province. The games commenced in the most gorgeous manner; and it was not till long after the shades of evening had set in, that the spectators retired from the attractive scene.

On the morning of the second day of this grand festival, the king having arrayed himself in his most splendid robes, entered the theatre; while the bright rays of an eastern sun which were reflected brilliantly from the silver ornaments of his robes, added greatly to the magnificence and kingly bearing of his person. Indeed the grandeur which was displayed on this occasion was so unusual, that when Herod had ended an oration to those

around him, many of his foolish flatterers exclaimed that he was a god : and they besought him to be propitious unto them. "Hitherto," said they, "we have revered thee as a man, but now we acknowledge thee to be above mortal nature : thou art a god !" This impious flattery being far from displeasing to the king, he neither refused the blasphemous homage, nor rebuked those who offered it. But he had soon reason to bitterly regret his folly. Amid the splendour with which he was surrounded, and during the time he was listening with foolish gratification to the impious flattery which was addressed to him, he suddenly beheld an angel over his head, whom he feared was the herald of some impending evil. Although his courtiers flattered him by telling him that he was more than a man, he well knew that it was an untruth ; and no sooner did he behold something supernatural, than his guilty conscience told him that his vanity and pride were bringing down upon him the angry displeasure of the living God !

He was immediately seized with a sharp pain which seemed to pierce his heart, and in the midst of his agony he turned towards his

servants and said, "Behold, I whom ye called your god am now about to end my life; and the affliction which is now laid upon me at once proves the falsehood of your base adulation. I whom ye called immortal am now about to be snatched away by death: but that which Providence has decreed must be borne with. We have hitherto lived by no means despicably, but in such splendour as was by many deemed most fortunate. But—" here the pain becoming extremely violent, he could add no more, and he was carried to his palace, where he soon afterwards died in most excruciating torments.

How very different was the end of this cruel king compared with that of the Apostle whom he had persecuted even to death! The one had good hope in his death, for he died bearing witness to the religion of Jesus CHRIST, and well knew that although for the sake of CHRIST he lost his life in this world, yet he would assuredly find it again in CHRIST's everlasting kingdom. That as he suffered for his Divine Master upon earth, so would he reign with Him eternally in heaven. The other had nothing to support him in the bitter agony of mind and body which he suf-

fered. He had not only persecuted God's servants, but he had also allowed his flattering attendants to confer upon him divine honours; and he therefore felt that in the severity of his pain he was only experiencing the anger of God! Knowing his own weakness, and being conscious of his guilt, his mind was as much oppressed as his body, and death could not be looked forward to as a relief from his sufferings! Since the holy Apostle St. James and his cruel persecutor met their deaths under such widely different circumstances, it should be our constant endeavour so to follow the example of St. James, that forsaking all worldly and carnal affections, we may be evermore ready to follow God's holy commandments, that we may indeed die the death of the righteous, and that our last end may be like his!*

* Numbers xxiii. 10.

