



### St. Dionysius the Areopagite.

"Now their storms are all past,  
And their dark sea of blood,  
Hath conveyed them at last,  
To their haven of good."

ATHENS had long been famous for the schools of philosophy which abounded in that ancient city, and for being the resort of the wise and the learned from almost every civilized nation on the face of the earth. But all this time the Athenians were in a state of complete ignorance with regard to the true God: and while they offered divine honours to Jupiter, and Mars, and Minerva, and Venus, they knew not Him who created the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all things therein. They seemed, however, to have an indistinct notion that there was some other god besides those they worshipped; for we find that when St. Paul in the course of his travels came to Athens, he saw an altar inscribed To THE UNKNOWN GOD. It is sad to think that men

who seemed desirous of offering worship aright, should have been so mistaken as the Athenians were, and should have wandered so far from the truth! But so it was. Although the Athenians were so ignorant about God, they understood well the nature of human laws, and were well governed by wise magistrates. Their chief council was called the court of Areopagus, which means, the hill of Mars; and it derived its name from being held in a building situated on a low hill near Athens, which is said to have been called Areopagus, or Mars' Hill, because there was a tradition that the heathen god Mars was once tried there for the murder of a young man who had offered violence to his daughter. But whatever might have been the origin of its name, it was the place where the chief council of Athens was held. The members of the council were called Areopagites, and amongst the number there was one named Dionysius,\* whom St. Luke mentions as a believer in the truths of revelation which St. Paul proclaimed before that assembly.

We know nothing either of his parents or his birth; but he must have been one of the

\* Acts xvii. 34.

principal citizens of Athens, and of excellent life and conversation, otherwise he would not have been admitted into the council of Areopagus. Although we know nothing of his origin beyond what we gather from his life and station, we are informed that he was highly distinguished among his fellow citizens for learning and science. It is said that in this respect he greatly excelled all his contemporaries, and that among the numerous schools of philosophy with which Athens abounded, there was not one with which he was not well acquainted. Such, moreover, was the thirst for learning which he manifested, that he could not rest satisfied with the advantages which his native city afforded, but resolved to improve his mind by foreign travel; and for this purpose he first proceeded to Egypt, in order that he might perfect himself in mathematics, and the more abstruse branches of philosophy, in which the Egyptians at that time were especially skilled.

During the sojourn of Dionysius in Egypt, our blessed LORD was delivered up into the hands of wicked men to be crucified and slain; on which occasion the sun withdrew his beams from the awful spectacle, and there

was darkness over all the earth. The darkness which then took place has been well described as nature putting on mourning for her Maker. This darkness could not have been caused by an eclipse of the sun, because there was a full moon when our LORD suffered death upon the cross, and an eclipse of the sun can only take place when there is a new moon. Indeed, the darkness was much greater than the darkness which occurs at an eclipse of the sun: the day being completely turned into night. The stars are said to have shone brightly; and an earthquake added to the solemnity of the scene.

All these wonderful things were beheld by Dionysius; and on one of his fellow students remarking that there were changes and revolutions of some great affairs taking place, he replied, "Surely either God Himself is suffering, or at least sympathizes with Him who is."

Dionysius having finished his studies in Egypt, returned to his native city; and being in every respect well qualified for the office, was advanced to be one of the judges of the court of Areopagus. He was a member of this council when St. Paul boldly advocated

the doctrines of Christianity against the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, who were opposed to him; and when he made that speech which is recorded in the seventeenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. This speech, which was heard with scorn and derision by some, was not without its happy effects upon the minds of others: and accordingly we find that Dionysius and Damaris his wife, for such St. Chrysostom informs us she was, were persuaded by the eloquence of the Apostle to receive the Christian faith. It is said, but not upon very good authority, that Dionysius had a dispute with St. Paul concerning "The Unknown God," who was to appear in the latter ages, and reform the world; and that St. Paul proved that "The Unknown God" was the LORD JESUS CHRIST, lately come down from heaven; and that Dionysius, feeling satisfied on this point, begged of the Apostle to intercede with God for him, in order that he might be confirmed in this belief. It is very likely that this took place, but it is by no means certain that it did. It is also said on the same authority, that the next day St. Paul having restored sight to one that was blind, charged him to go to Diony-

sius, who having learned the particulars of the miracle, was so much struck by it, that his own faith was fully confirmed, and he and all his family were immediately baptized. Although there is some doubt with regard to the truth of what has just been related, there is none with regard to the effect which St. Paul's reasoning in the court of Areopagus had upon the mind of Dionysius. It is quite certain that he was converted from idolatry to the Christian religion during St. Paul's residence at Athens; and that he and others clave unto the doctrines which they had heard.

A person of so much importance as Dionysius was a valuable worldly instrument in propagating the doctrines of Christianity in a city like Athens, and in inducing others to embrace them. His great reputation, and his acquirements in wisdom and knowledge would give a powerful effect to all he said and did, and thus render him a valuable assistant to St. Paul in turning some from idolatry to Christianity, and in building up the faith of those who were not altogether idolaters, but who were only almost persuaded to become Christians. There is some doubt with regard to the manner in which

St. Dionysius passed the first few years after his conversion to Christianity. That he remained firm and true to his new profession is very certain; and we may also be sure that the example of one so eminent as St. Dionysius was, in everything which exalts the character of man, could not fail to influence others, and to cause them to renounce the errors in which they had been brought up. To the influence of this good man must be attributed, humanly speaking, that congregation of devout worshippers which now met to offer prayer and praise to the known God. It was in truth through the interposition of divine Providence that this happened, but God generally brings his purposes to pass through the instrumentality of human means, and St. Dionysius was an instrument of this kind. It must have been an encouraging sight to St. Paul to behold an assembly at Athens, not met together for the purpose of telling or hearing of some new thing, but for the solemn worship of Almighty God! His heart must have rejoiced with joy unspeakable when he heard the accents of devotion issuing from lips which once had delighted in recounting the fabled exploits of imaginary deities!

A scene like this would, indeed, have been most gratifying wherever it was beheld, but particularly so in a city like Athens! But whatever his gratification might have been, he had other places to visit, and other duties to perform, and on this account he could not long continue at Athens to support and rule the Church which his hands had raised. He would not, however, leave his people without a guardian, his sheep without a shepherd, and therefore, after being well convinced of his fitness for the sacred office, he appointed St. Dionysius to be the bishop of the Church at Athens; for in those apostolical times, when men were under the immediate direction of the HOLY SPIRIT, it was thought that without a bishop there could be no Church. Such is really the case now, although so many close their eyes against the truth! St. Paul consecrated St. Dionysius with his own hands; and under his care the Church continued to flourish at Athens, and believers were daily added unto the Lord.

When the Church at Athens had attained sufficient stability to be left for a time without a bishop, St. Dionysius is said to have made a journey to Jerusalem, to meet those of the

glorious company of the apostles who still survived, and who were assembled at Jerusalem to be present at the last hour of the blessed Virgin Mary, and to pay the last tribute of respect to the mother of their Lord. He did not long continue there, for after enjoying the converse of this venerable body, composed of those whom our blessed Lord had vouchsafed to call His friends,\* he returned to Athens, and continued to preside over the Church there, only occasionally leaving it for a season to visit the Churches of Phrygia and Achaia.

The diligence and fidelity, however, with which he discharged his office, and the kindness which he showed to all with whom he had any communication, did not shield him from the attacks of his enemies. Indeed, the excellence of his reputation, and the dignity of his office, would only serve to render him a more conspicuous object for the enemies of the Christian religion to destroy. The throne of the Cæsars was at this time filled by Domitian, whose jealousy was greatly excited by a prophecy which had long prevailed in the east, that a person from the line of David

\* St. John xv. 15.

should rule the world. He therefore trembled for his own power; and in order, as he thought, to secure it, he commanded all the Jews who were of the house and lineage of David to be diligently sought out, and put to death. Two Christians, grandsons of St. Jude the Apostle, being of that line, were brought before him; but finding them poor, and by no means ambitious of power, he dismissed them as being too contemptible to excite his jealousy. His fears with regard to a rival from the line of David having been in some measure allayed, he directed all his hatred against the Christians; and the persecution which took place during this reign is said to have been much more severe than any which had preceded it. The fury of the emperor was not confined to the region near home; but by his letters and edicts it was extended throughout the empire; and Christians were everywhere sought for, and many of them were cruelly put to death.

It was after one of those sultry days which are common in the early part of the autumn, that the Christians at Athens were assembled with their bishop for the purpose of evening prayer. An oppressive weight seemed to

rest upon each, as if they felt that some evil was likely to betide them. They had heard of the excessive cruelty of Domitian towards all who refused to renounce Christianity, and they had sincerely sympathized with the sufferers, and had offered up prayers to God in their behalf. But now they were about to experience the effects of the fury which they had hitherto only known by report, and they seemed to have a presentiment of it.

Amid the calm which prevailed, a vessel with the Roman ensign was seen slowly to enter the harbour of Athens, and a messenger was speedily landed, bearing a command of the Roman emperor to the prætor of Athens. The painful intelligence of the nature of his mission was quickly spread, and soon came to the ears of Dionysius. The command which the messenger bore was that a persecution of the Christians at Athens should forthwith commence; and the aged bishop well knew that he would be one of the first victims; but this had no other effect upon his mind than to produce an earnest hope that his SAVIOUR might be magnified in his body, whether it were by life or by death.

"Let the heathen rage," said he, "and let

the people imagine vain things, what can they do? Can they shake my hope, or deprive me of my crown? No. I am ready to be offered, and God grant me strength for the trial! The martyr's robe is white, and his crown is unsullied; and these are the rewards of those who testify to the truth of the Gospel with their lives." He had scarcely ceased speaking, when he was rudely seized by the officers who were sent to conduct him to the prætor. His firmness, however, was unshaken: and when they found they could not disturb his faith, or turn him from his purpose, they subjected his aged body to the severest torments. But torments were as ineffectual as arguments in turning him aside; for nothing could sway the mind of one whose faith was so well grounded and settled. At length, when the cruelty of his persecutors had exhausted itself upon his torn and mangled body, death released this eminent servant of God from his sufferings, and brought his soul in safety to its recompense and its rest.