



### St. Ignatius.

"Though the tyrant is stern,  
Yet they fear not his rod;  
For their fears nought discern,  
But the terrors of God."

THE quiet which usually prevailed among the citizens of Antioch was disturbed by the unexpected visit of the Roman emperor Trajan, who having been successful in his wars against the Scythians and Dacians, came about the ninth year of his reign to Antioch, in order to make preparations for attacking the Parthians and Armenians, who had refused to submit to his authority. The citizens were filled with delight at the unusual honour which a visit from the emperor conferred upon their city. Every preparation was made which could manifest to their distinguished visitor the high respect which they entertained for him: and he was no less anxious

to secure their reverence by the pomp and solemnity with which he was surrounded. Antioch had long been reckoned among the chief of the Christian cities, and was, moreover, held in peculiar veneration, from the circumstance of having first given the name of Christians to the followers of our LORD JESUS CHRIST.\* St. Peter was the first bishop who presided over the Church at Antioch; and at the period to which we are now referring, St. Ignatius was the bishop, having been consecrated to that charge about forty-four years before by the Apostles, who, previous to their deaths, had appointed successors, through whom an unbroken succession of ministers in the Church might be preserved, until the end of time; when the Lord of hosts shall reign in Mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before His saints gloriously.†

St. Ignatius was a bishop in trying and dangerous times: regardless, however, of himself, his anxiety was for the welfare of the Church, which he endeavoured to secure by his tears, fastings, and unwearied diligence; and his only fear was lest any of the

\* See page 96.

† Isaiah xxiv. 23.

weak and unsettled Christians should, through the force of persecution, be moved away from the hope of the Gospel, and thus make shipwreck of their salvation. Whenever a calm period was vouchsafed to the Church, and the furiousness of persecution abated, he greatly rejoiced in the blessing which was thus bestowed upon his people, although it seemed to remove from him the prospect of martyrdom on which his mind was fixed; since he thought that without martyrdom he could never perfectly attain to the love of CHRIST, or fulfil the duties of a true disciple of his LORD. The time, however, was now fast approaching, when the LORD would vouchsafe to this aged servant his heart's desire by receiving him into glory along a pathway of pain and suffering.

The emperor had no sooner been received into Antioch amid the pomp and splendour which befitted his high and exalted state among men, than he began to inquire into the nature of the religious ceremonies which were observed there, he being a zealous promoter of that heathen worship of imaginary gods, from which the inhabitants of Antioch had long been delivered. When he found

that Antioch was now a Christian city, and had renounced his favourite worship, he was greatly enraged, considering it no small affront that peaceful Christians should dare to resist his authority, to which fierce and war-like nations had been obliged to bend; and therefore, as he had apparently checked the progress of the Christian religion in other parts of the empire, he was determined to try how far he could accomplish the same at Antioch, by a fierce persecution of the Christians. No sooner had this cruel resolve of the emperor reached the ears of Ignatius, than he determined at once to present himself to Trajan, and endeavour to move him from his bloody purpose. A long conversation ensued between them, in which the emperor expressed his surprise that Ignatius had dared to transgress the laws to which he was bound to yield obedience. The holy man, however, asserted his innocence; declaring what power God had given the Christians over evil spirits, and added, that the gods of the Gentiles were no gods; and that there was but one supreme Deity who made the world, and His only-begotten Son JESUS CHRIST, who, although crucified under

Pontius Pilate, had yet destroyed him that had the power of sin, that is, the devil, and would ruin the whole power and empire of darkness, and tread it under the feet of those who carried God in their hearts.

The emperor being hardened against the servants of God, was so far from being convinced by the discourse of St. Ignatius, that he immediately ordered him to be cast into prison, where he endeavoured to overcome his constancy in adhering to the truth, by subjecting him to the most cruel torments. He was whipped with scourges made more than ordinarily severe, by having leaden bullets fastened at the end of the lash. He was then compelled to hold fire in his hands, while his sides were burnt with torches; and when this was found to be of no avail in shaking his holy resolution, he was obliged to stand upon coals of fire, while his flesh was torn from his sides with burning pincers! Notwithstanding all this, his mind remained firm, and being strengthened by divine grace, and having his heart fully set on the recompense of reward to which he was well aware his sufferings, borne with patience, would entitle him, through the merits of that gra-

cious LORD whose servant he was, he bid defiance to his persecutors, and overcame all the malice and cruelty to which he was exposed.

When Trajan found that his cruelty had no effect upon the saint, he declared that his superstition was incurable, and ordered him to be conveyed in chains to Rome, and there given up a prey to wild beasts. This by no means disturbed his composure; and rather rejoicing at the decree, he exclaimed, "I thank Thee, O LORD, that Thou hast condescended thus perfectly to honour me with Thy love, and hast thought me worthy, with Thine Apostle St. Paul, to be bound with iron chains." He then cheerfully embraced his chain; and having fervently prayed for the Church, and especially for that portion of it committed to his charge, and with tears having commended it to the divine care and providence of Almighty God, he delivered himself up into the hands of the soldiers who were appointed to carry him to Rome.

When all things were ready for his departure, he took leave of his beloved Antioch, and a sad parting it was; for he left there many dear friends who were broken-hearted at the

removal of their bishop, whose face they were never to behold again. He was conducted on foot to Seleucia, a seaport of Syria, about sixteen miles from Antioch, the very place from whence St. Paul and St. Barnabas had set sail to Cyprus. Here Ignatius went on board a vessel; and after a tedious voyage, he came to Smyrna, and immediately on his arrival he obtained permission to salute St. Polycarp, bishop of that place, his old fellow pupil under St. John, the beloved disciple of our Lord. What a joyful sight was the meeting of those two aged but holy men! It was by no means discouraging to St. Polycarp to behold his friend in chains; he rather rejoiced at the prospect of the martyr's crown which awaited him, and earnestly urged him to a firm and final perseverance. The presence of St. Ignatius became quickly known at Smyrna, and many, especially the bishops, priests, and deacons of the Asian Churches, hastened to behold the venerable stranger, to partake of his prayers and blessings, and to encourage him to hold on to his consummation! In return for the kindness which he met with from so many members of the Church, he wrote epistles to them, com-

mending their love, and strongly urging them to submit to their spiritual guides, and to avoid those pestilential doctrines which were then disturbing the peace of the Church.

He was not permitted to remain long at Smyrna, for his keepers being impatient to proceed on their voyage, he was obliged again to go on board his ship, which immediately sailed for Troas, at which place he was delighted to learn that the persecution of the Christians had ceased at Antioch. At Troas he was visited by several of the neighbouring bishops, who were anxious to show every mark of respect to this aged servant of the LORD; but he was again hurried away from his friends by his impatient attendants, and was conveyed to Neapolis, a town of Macedonia, and from thence to Philippi, a Roman colony, (the very same journey which St. Paul had gone before,) where they were entertained with the greatest kindness and courtesy. From Philippi they proceeded on foot through Macedonia and Epirus, till they came to Dyrrachium, where again taking ship they sailed through the Adriatic, and arrived at Rhegium, from whence they sailed to Puteoli; and here St. Ignatius was solicitous to have

ended his voyage, and to have travelled the remainder of the journey to Rome by land, pursuing the same way that St. Paul went, but it was not permitted him; and after remaining a day and a night at Puteoli, he was obliged to embark again, and a prosperous wind soon brought him to the mouth of the river Tiber. Thus ended the long and tedious journey of Ignatius, who was no less anxious to finish his earthly course, and receive the crown of martyrdom, than the soldiers who attended him were desirous of arriving at their destination.

The hardships and difficulties of the journey were much increased by the cruelty of the men to whose custody St. Ignatius had been committed, who heaped upon their venerable prisoner every insult that their malice could invent. In one of his letters he thus alludes to his journey: "From Syria to Rome I fight with beasts by sea and land; day and night I am bound to ten leopards, that is, to a file of soldiers, who being kindly treated by me, become worse and worse. By their injuries, however, I am the more instructed: but for all that I am not justified. O, that I might enjoy the wild beasts that are provided for

me! which I heartily wish may be found fierce, which I will allure to devour me immediately, that they spare me not, as out of fear they have left some untouched. If they be unwilling to do it, I will compel them by force. Pardon me: I know what is good for me. Now I begin to be a disciple, let nothing visible or invisible divert me from, or envy my happiness of attaining JESUS CHRIST. Let fire and the cross, the assaults of the wild beasts, the pulling asunder of bones, the cutting off of members, the stamping in pieces of the whole body, the punishment of the devil come upon me, so that I may obtain JESUS CHRIST."

The Christians at Rome had heard that St. Ignatius was coming, and were daily expecting him, when they were informed that he was actually arrived. They went out to meet him as he approached the city, with mingled feelings of joy and sorrow: of joy to behold so eminent a servant of God, and of sorrow that he was about to be taken from them by a cruel death. The approach of death, however, had no terrors for him; and when some one expressed a hope that his enemies might relent in their savage inten-

tions, he begged that no let or hindrance might be placed in his way now that he was hastening to his crown.

While preparations were making at Rome for his martyrdom, Ignatius and his friends who visited him spent their time in prayers: and while they commended the Church to the protection and care of our blessed SAVIOUR, they earnestly prayed that the persecution of Christians might at length cease, and that Christians might entertain sincere love and charity towards each other.

These were, indeed, gloomy days for the Church, and the faith of Christians in the promises of the LORD was put to far severer trials than we, who live in such different times, can well imagine. But these trials were ordained by a God who seeth not as man seeth; and those very persecutions, which seemed to threaten the existence of the Church, were overruled by God's providence for its benefit; and the blood of the martyr was said to be the seed of the Church!

In order that the punishment of Ignatius might be rendered as public as possible, one of those days was selected for his execution on which the people were accustomed to

be entertained with the bloody conflicts of gladiators, and the fighting with wild beasts. Accordingly he was brought into the amphitheatre, where these cruel sports were carried on; and in conformity with his own fervent desire that he might have no other grave than the stomachs of wild beasts, the lions were let loose upon him, whose roaring did not shake his constancy, but only increased his desire that "now as God's own corn he might be ground between the teeth of these wild beasts, and become white bread for his heavenly Master!" The lions were not long in fulfilling the wishes of their victim, and in a few minutes nothing remained of the body of Ignatius but a few bare bones.

This mode of execution was deemed by the Romans to be one of their severest punishments, and was only resorted to in capital offences, and towards the vilest and most despicable malefactors, among whom they invariably reckoned Christians! So familiar were the Christians of those days with this kind of punishment, that upon any trifling or frivolous pretence, such as a famine or earthquake, the common outcry was, "Away with the Christians to the lions!"

Among other Christians who were the sorrowing spectators of St. Ignatius' martyrdom, were the deacons who had accompanied their beloved bishop from Antioch, and whose comparative obscurity preserved them from sharing the cruel fate of their venerable friend. Having come so far from home, they were desirous of returning with something more valuable to the Church at Antioch than the mere recital of their sad story. They accordingly obtained permission to gather up the few bones which the lions had left, and taking them with them on their return, they were joyfully received as precious relics of one for whose memory the inhabitants of Antioch entertained the utmost reverence; and were solemnly deposited in the cemetery which was near one of the principal gates of the city. From hence they were afterwards removed; and those remains which were thus so highly prized, and were treated with becoming reverence, unhappily became the subject of some of those fables which were circulated in a credulous age, and by which the memory of departed saints was sought to be magnified.

As a martyr, St. Ignatius gave the highest testimony to the truth of that religion which

he both preached and practised. He gloried in his sufferings, which he deemed his honour and his privilege; and looked upon his chains as his jewels and his ornaments. He was so much raised above the love or fear of this life, that St. Chrysostom says, "he laid down his life with the same ease and freedom, as another man would put off his clothes." His mind being fully set upon martyrdom, he omitted no occasion of expressing his firm trust and reliance on his crucified REDEEMER; and the epistles which he wrote, and which are still extant, are filled with instruction and exhortation to faith and patience, and to the constant practice of all those Christian virtues which are necessary in building us up in the religion of our LORD and SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST.

