CHARLES SIMEON is dead – in more senses than one. His name is seldom mentioned; his works are never read. Yes, for all that, he is one of our epoch-makers and empire-builders and history-makers. To few men do we owe more than we owe to him. Has he not been canonized by the most penetrating, the most illustrious and the most critical of all our ecclesiastical biographers? Sir James Stephen says that if the Church were to revise and correct her standard of personal values, she would mercilessly purge her roll of saints. He points with disdain to many ponderous names in our present calendar. What, he demands, have Saint Dunstan, or Saint George, or Saint Swithin, or Saint Margaret, or Saint Crispin done for us that they should elbow out Saint Charles of Cambridge? It is true that he never attained to any exalted rank or dignity; he never achieved any thrilling or romantic exploit to send his name echoing about the world. As a young man leaving college he was appointed to the charge of Holy Trinity, Cambridge; and when death overtook him fifty-four years later, he was still ministering unostentatiously to the same people. “But,” as Lord Macaulay says, “if you knew what his authority and influence were, and how they extended from Cambridge to the most remote corners of England, you would allow that his real sway in the Church was far greater than that of any Primate (archbishop).”

So speaks one British statesman; and another, Sir James Stephen, has a passage to much the same effect. “The splendor of a bishop’s mitre pales,” Sir James declares, “before that nobler episcopate to which Charles Simeon was elevated by popular acclamation. His diocese embraced every city of his native land and extended to many of its most remote dependencies. In every part of the empire he could point to teachers who revered him as the guide of their youth and the counsellor of their later years.” His disciples have become more famous than their master; for many an illustrious name which has become a household word among us would never have been heard of but for the beautiful and potent influence of Saint Charles of Cambridge.

Some men make history noisily; you hear, far off, the clanging of their hammers. Circumstanced as they are, it is the only way in which the work can be done. The time is ripe for violent methods and resounding blows. The iron is hot and the anvil stands ready. But while the village blacksmith works in one way, the village artist works in quite another. There are men who make history as the sun makes daylight. They are silent as the dawn. Of that quiet company Charles Simeon is the most distinguished representative. He captivated everybody by the serene calm of his tremendous passion. It was Charles Simeon’s deadly earnestness that so deeply impressed William Wilberforce. It impressed everybody.
Even his critics relented when they heard him. An earnest man carries at his girdle the magic key that unlocks all hearts. At his Sesame every door swings open. Therein lies the secret of Charles Simeon's amazing and historic triumphs. There he stands in Trinity pulpit, a man of medium height, with the easy movements of the trained athlete! His face is cultured and kindly: his hair is very fair: and in his hazel eyes there is the suggestion of purposefulness and high resolve. His style of speech is not prepossessing. His voice is weak and unmusical; his address is by no means graceful; and, viewed from some angles, his appearance is a little grotesque. But, as soon as he becomes impassioned, we forget all that. His voice becomes fervent and compelling: his gestures, becoming more natural as he becomes less nervous, are expressive of an intense desire to convey the full force of his argument or appeal: he strikes you as feeling deeply every word that he utters: his face is illuminated by intensity and pleasant animation. “Who,” asked Canon Abner Brown, “who ever heard a dry sermon from Simeon's lips, or had to listen to a dull remark in conversation with him? You feel that, on the still altar of this man's soul, a great fire burns. At that fire, torches were lit that dispelled the darkness of continents. But when, and in what way, was that flame itself kindled? That is the question.

And the answer to that question is that the life of Charles Simeon was dominated, for nearly sixty years, by one sublime passage of Scripture. He was never tired of quoting it. He used to speak rapturously of “its overwhelming and incomprehensible grandeur.” He was never so happy as when preaching on it. It occurs repeatedly in his correspondence. I must make one or two extracts from his letters. Here is one addressed to Miss Elliott:

“My dear Ellen,” he says, “Only get your soul deeply and abidingly impressed with the doctrine of the Cross and everything else will soon find its proper place in your system. Labor from day to day to comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge. That is all I want.”

Three years later I find him writing to the Rev. J. Venn on the proper discharge of his ministerial duties. Mr. Venn has written stating his difficulties, concluding the list with “etc., etc.” Mr. Simeon urges him, in his reply, to get comprehensive views of the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge. “Then,” he asks, triumphantly, “what will all your etcs. come to?”

In the Narrative of Mr. Simeon's Last Illness, appended to Canon Carus's great biography, we are told that, as soon as he began to fail, his mind turned to his text. “I am fully determined,” he said, “to begin at once a set of sermons on that grand subject in Ephesians: That ye may be able to comprehend what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge. I don't expect or desire to preach them; but, if my life be spared, write them I will!”

A fortnight before he died, he was still harping upon the same theme. “During the greater part of Thursday,” says Canon Carus, “his whole mind was absorbed upon his favorite passage: That ye may be able to comprehend what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge. His thoughts were fixed intently on this glorious theme. He declared that he thought that no higher honor could be conferred upon him than to be permitted to prepare for publication a set of discourses on that text. “It is,” he said, “the grandest subject I can conceive of. I should think a life well spent in which one wrote four sermons on that passage in a manner worthy of it!” The subject was in his mind all the time.

The text not only dominated him, it permeated him. His entire personality became steeped
and drenched and saturated with the spirit of it. Acquaintances like William Wilberforce, and historians like Sir James Stephen, were arrested by it. “Charles Simeon is staying with us,” writes Wilberforce, “his heart glowing with the love of Christ. How full he is of that love! Oh, that I might copy him as he copies Christ!” Sir James Stephen speaks of Simeon’s life as a triumph of love. “Slowly, painfully, but with unaltering hopes, he toiled through more than fifty successive years, in the same narrow chamber and among the same humble congregation, requited by no emoluments, stimulated by no animating occurrences, and unrewarded, until the near approach of old age, by the gratitude and the cordial respect of the society amidst which he lived. Love soaring to the Supreme with the lowest self-abasement, and stooping to the most abject with the meekest self-forgetfulness, bore him onward, through fog or sunshine, through calm or tempest. His whole life was but one long labor of love - a labor often obscure, often misapplied, often unsuccessful, but never intermitted, and, at last, triumphant.”

There can be no doubt, then, about Charles Simeon’s text. I had, in my congregation at Hobart, an old Quaker gentleman of quaint and charming ways. I knew that he had recently moved, and, chancing to meet him one day on the street, I asked where he now lived. “Well,” he replied, with a characteristic smile, “I’m living in the Epistle to the Ephesians!” Charles Simeon dwelt there too. He made his home in the love that passeth knowledge. But what led him, in the first instance, to take up his residence there?

Bishop Moule says that Simeon’s story of his conversion deserves to rank among our religious classics side by side with the spiritual autobiographies of David, Paul, Augustine, Luther and Bunyan. As a boy at Eton, and as an undergraduate at Cambridge, Charles Simeon was troubled by the thought of his evil and corrupt desires. “To enter into particulars,” he says, “would serve no good end. My sins were more in number than the hairs of my head, or than the sands upon the seashore.” He found that it was compulsory, under penalty of expulsion from the University, that he should attend the Lord’s Supper. “My conscience told me,” he writes, “that Satan was as fit to go as I was,” and he resolved that, since he must go, he must prepare himself for the awful ordeal. He bought a book – Bishop Wilson on The Lord’s Supper – and applied himself earnestly to its study. He became much interested in Bishop Wilson’s exposition of the story of the Scapegoat. He seemed to see the Jewish priest laying his hands upon the creature’s head and confessing over it the transgressions of the people; and he watched the scapegoat, as, bearing the guilt imputed to it, it went to its death in the desert. “Suddenly,” says Mr. Simeon, “the thought rushed to my mind: ‘What! May I transfer all my guilt to Another? Has God provided an offering for me that I may lay my sins on His head? Then, God willing, I will not bear them on my own soul one moment longer. I will lay my sins on the sacred head of Jesus.’” This was at Easter-time, 1779; he was then in his twentieth year.

“On Easter Sunday, April 4,” he tells us, “I awoke early with these words upon my heart and lips” Jesus Christ is risen today; Hallelujah! Hallelujah!” I had as full a conviction that I relied on the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation as I had of my own existence. From that hour peace flowed in rich abundance into my soul. “He recognized, in the Risen Savior, the Lamb of God who had taken his sins and borne them completely away. The love that made such a sacrifice on his behalf overwhelmed him, as he said, by its incomprehensible grandeur; and he set himself from that hour to comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.

He commemorated that unforgettable experience with each returning Eastertide. “I look forward with peculiar delight to Passion-week,” he says, nearly thirty years afterwards. “It has always been with me a season to be remembered, not only on account of the
stupendous mysteries which we then commemorate, but because, on Easter Day, 1779, I was enabled, through God's unbounded mercy, to see that all my sins were buried in my Redeemer's grave."

"I am happy," he says in his Diary, on Easter Sunday, 1807, "I am happy and thankful that the peace which, twenty-eight years ago today, flowed into my soul, has never been lost, and that I am as much bent as ever on securing the prize for my high calling."

"It is now forty years," he says in 1819, "since I found peace through the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world. From that time to the present hour I have never for a moment lost my hope and confidence in my adorable Savior."

And, not long before his death, he wrote in the margin of his Bible a solemn pledge never to forget that Easter Sunday, 1779, on which his deliverance was completed.

Charles Simeon's text is the text of the Four Magnitudes: "to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge." The Breadth of it! the Length of it! the Depth of it! the Height of it! It is, as a Roman Catholic expositor has said, "wide as the limits of the universe; long as the ages of eternity; deep as the abyss from which it has redeemed us; and high as the throne of God itself." "Immensity is," as Dr. Dale finely says, "the only adequate symbol of its vastness." Charles Simeon explored all four of these dimensions.

He scaled the heights. As you follow him through the pages of Canon Carus's great biography, you seem to be watching some patient mountaineer as he steadfastly ascends the rugged slopes. Time after time he reaches a point that he had mistaken for the summit. There is always a peak towering above him, beckoning him on and on and on. There is always a height beyond the height. Great as were the discoveries of the love of Christ that Simeon made, he found that love still incomprehensible to the very last. It was always beyond him.

He sounded the depths. He tasted heavy losses, crushing sorrows and bitter persecutions. At one stage of his career at Holy Trinity, the parishioners locked up their seats, undergraduates broke up the services, and Mr. Simeon was insulted whenever he ventured on the streets. He bore it all uncomplainingly, and, many years afterwards, told of the anguish through which he then passed. "One day," he said, "when I was an object of much contempt and derision in the University, I strolled forth, buffeted and afflicted, taking my little Greek Testament in my hand. I prayed that God would comfort me with some cordial from His Word; and opening it, the first text which caught my eye was this: They found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name; him they compelled to bear His cross. Simon, you know, is the same name as Simeon. It was the very word I needed. What a privilege – to have the cross laid on me to bear it with Jesus! It was enough! I could leap and sing for joy! "Lay it on me, Lord!" I cried; and henceforth I bound persecution as a wreath of glory round my brow." However deep the abyss, the love of Christ was always beneath him.

He explored the breadths. He felt that the love of Christ was vast enough to embrace the whole wide world. He, therefore, became one of the founders of the Church Missionary Society; and, not content with this, set himself to raise up a generation of missionaries. For years he gave a tea party once a week to which nobody was personally invited, but at which all young men from the University were welcome. Every Friday evening his rooms were thronged. The gatherings became historic. From that tea table there went forth men who, in all parts of the world, made their names illustrious and renowned. As the Bishop of Calcutta said at the time, "the last day alone will reveal the aggregate of good he thus accomplished. If we take, as examples, only four or five cases – David Brown – Henry
Martyn – John Sargent – Thomas Thomason – and Bishop Corrie – we may judge by them, as by a specimen, of the hundreds of similar instances which occurred during the fifty-four years of his ministry. He always spoke of his tea-party men with a faltering of the voice and a moistening of the eye. As an old man of seventy, he glanced over a list of the names of the men, who, during the forty years between 1789 and 1829, had been most successful in missionary work in India. “Why,” he exclaimed with delight, “they are all of them my tea-party men!” He ever afterwards referred playfully to India as “my diocese.”

The story of his death, which occupies several pages, is one of the most exquisitely beautiful narratives of the kind on record. “Well, sir,” said Canon Carus, as the end approached, “you will soon comprehend what is the breadth and length and depth and height and know the love of Christ that passeth knowledge!” “Ah,” the dying man exclaimed, with rapture, “I shall soon understand that text now!” A little later, seeing that Mr. Simeon was fast sinking, Canon Carus pronounced over him the Aaronic benediction: “The Lord bless thee and keep thee: the Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace!” The dying man smiled, folded his hands, whispered a faint Amen, and never spoke again. “The like of his funeral,” exclaimed one astonished spectator, “was never seen before, and never will be seen again. More than fifteen hundred gownsmen attended to honor him.” “He went down to his grave,” says Sir James Stephen, “amidst the tears and the benedictions of the poor, and with such testimonies of esteem and attachment from the learned as Cambridge had never before rendered even to the most illustrious of her sons.” And why? Simply because he had, by his lovely life, helped men to comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.