

## ART. III.—THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS.

## AN ADVENT STUDY.

THERE is a very remarkable difference between the New Testament description of our Lord's return and modern sermons upon the Second Coming and the Resurrection Day. In the first place, the New Testament writers never speak of "the Second Coming." The only phrase like this is found in Heb. ix. 28 (Revised Version): "Christ also, having been once offered to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time, apart from sin, to them that wait for Him, unto salvation"; from which it appears that this Second Advent is only "to them that wait for Him." Nor does the phrase "the general resurrection" occur in Scripture. We are familiar with it from its occurrence in the Burial Service, "that at the general resurrection in the last day we may be found acceptable in Thy sight."

But it is not merely in phraseology that we have departed from Scripture in our Advent preaching, but, what is of far greater importance, in the spirit and motive. The New Testament idea is that for Christians the Lord's return is a joyful rather than a solemn event. Many devout Christians regard the Lord's return as they regard death—a solemn event connected with the Judgment Day; they no more welcome the thought of His coming than they welcome the thought of death; they try to think as seldom about the one as the other. Contrast with this the tone in which St. Paul and St. Peter speak of the attitude of the believer towards the coming of the Lord Jesus: "looking for a blessed hope;" "a glorious appearing;" "the revealing of the sons of God;" "hastening the coming." The explanation of this difference is to be found in the gradual merging of the different comings of our Lord into one great day. Historical events in the future, separated by intervals of months or years, look to us like a cumulation of events in one day. The popular idea of the Second Advent is probably something like this: That on some future day the world will be startled by the sudden blast of a trumpet, all the graves will open, the dead will come forth, Christ will appear with the angels, a judgment-seat will be set up, books will be opened, every person will be summoned separately to stand before Christ whilst his sins are read out of the book, the Judge will pass sentence either of acquittal or of condemnation, the great crowd of humanity will be separated for ever, some going to hell, the others to heaven, and then the deserted earth will be destroyed by fire,

all taking place in about twenty-four hours, "the last day." There is nothing in this popular notion that is unscriptural, yet it is contrary to Scripture. It brings into one day the events spread over a long period. The coming of Christ for His people is as clearly separate from His coming to judge the world as His coming "in great humility" is separate from His coming "in His glorious majesty."

The New Testament speaks of His coming in different characters at different times for different purposes. First He comes a Saviour—as man to live and die for men—the Lamb of God. We know that He came thus many centuries ago, and fulfilled many of the types and prophecies of the Old Testament, but not all. These spoke of His sufferings and the glory that should follow. The prophecies of suffering have been fulfilled; those of glory are still awaiting their fulfilment. Both sets of prophecies refer to events in this world's history. As the suffering was on earth, so must the glory be.

His Second Coming will be to fetch His chosen ones. "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh" (Matt. xxv. 6). This is "the marriage of the Lamb" (Rev. xix. 7). He who was the Lamb is now the Bridegroom. The Bible contains frequent references to the union of Christ and His people under the similitude of marriage. In the Psalms we have marriage songs, and in the parables we have the marriage of the King's son, the unworthy guests, the wedding garment, and the Ten Virgins. The Epistles and the Apocalypse carry on the same idea of "the union that is betwixt Christ and His Church." This marriage is something more than the spiritual affinity between Christ and Christians; it is an event which takes place at a definite time: "the marriage of the Lamb is come" (Rev. xix. 7). That time is the day on which the Lord will appear in the air accompanied by the souls from paradise (which must not be confused with heaven): at that moment will take place the first resurrection, which is limited to "the dead in Christ." There are three resurrections spoken of in the New Testament (1 Cor. xv. 23): "every man in his own order—(1) Christ the firstfruits [at the first Easter Day]; (2) then they that are Christ's [which is definitely stated to be "at His coming"]; (3) "then cometh the end." A long interval has elapsed between the resurrection of Christ and the still future resurrection of His people. There will be an interval also, called "a thousand years," between the rising of them that are Christ's and of them that are not His. This resurrection of the saints is the marriage of the Lamb. The same adjective, *blessed*, is applied to both events. "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrec-

tion." "Blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb." At this time will take place the great sifting, when one shall be taken and another left. The resurrection of the dead is not to be confounded with the resurrection from (among) the dead. Our Lord rose from among the dead (*ἐκ νεκρῶν*); the first resurrection also is to be from the dead; but the last resurrection is to be a resurrection of the dead. When our Lord pointed out to His Jewish host that the hospitality which should receive the Divine approval was that which he might show to the poor, the maimed, and the blind, He promised that this should be rewarded at the resurrection of the just (Luke xiv. 14): no general resurrection at the last day is here spoken of, but a particular resurrection of the just alone.

But this sifting will take place among the living as well as among the dead. At the coming of the Son of man (Matt. xxiv. 40, Revised Version) "shall two men be in the field; one is taken, and one is left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; one is taken, and one is left." And St. Luke adds the striking fact that, whereas it is in the daytime that the men are working in the field, at the antipodes it would be night: "In that night there shall be two men in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left" (Luke xvii. 34). This sifting process comes out most strikingly in the parable of the Ten Virgins. Five were wise, and five were foolish; five were admitted to the marriage feast, and five were excluded.

In studying this parable, the first point that strikes us is the unusual phrase at the beginning: "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins" (Matt. xxv. 1). No other parable begins thus. All the others are in the present tense: "the kingdom of heaven is like" this or that. The use of the future tense shows us that the kingdom of heaven is not now to be compared to these ten virgins. The word "then" throws us back to the previous chapter to ascertain the time, which we find to be the coming of the Son of man. This coming was regarded by the early Church as being in the very near future. The absence of the Lord might last a few months, but surely then He will come, they thought. St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians, the earliest of all his Epistles, were specially written to correct this mistake. The Church then realized that her Lord's absence might be prolonged into years, and when the years became centuries she "slumbered and slept." All idea of the Lord's return as a Bridegroom to fetch His Bride the Church died away. With it died away missionary zeal. The only thought of the Lord's return that survived was that of the coming of the Judge. Not that the Bridegroom's coming was forgotten by all.

The lamps carried by the Bridegroom's friends were not quite extinguished — only "going out." The mystics and the Roman Catholic nuns still cherished the idea of the marriage of Christ to His people, but it was to a select and devoted few.

In our days the cry has gone forth, "Behold, the Bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet Him," and the Church is waking up. "Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps." With this revival of the expectation of the Bridegroom is connected that revival of missionary zeal which is such a striking feature of the Church life of to-day when compared with the indifference of many centuries past.

The foolish virgins are not fools in the Old Testament sense of that word. They are not *ungodly*, but stupid, silly, or thoughtless. They are sincere friends of the Bridegroom. They are no hypocrites. Nor are their companions merely mocking when they bid them go and buy oil for their lamps, which are not gone out, but going out. The lamps are not actually extinguished, but are burning so feebly that they are not fit to take their places amongst the brilliant lights of the procession. Surely they are not sent on a fool's errand when they are told to go and buy oil. They go to buy oil. Did they succeed in obtaining a supply? We may assume that they did, for their exclusion from the feast is not attributed to the lamps being extinguished, but to the virgins not being ready.

We drew attention to a remarkable difference in the beginning of this parable. There is also a striking difference in its conclusion. The parable that precedes this (the Evil Servant, Matt. xxiv. 51) ends with "weeping and gnashing of teeth"; the parable that follows this (the Talent, Matt. xxv. 30) ends with "weeping and gnashing of teeth"; but this of the virgins does not end with condemnation, but with a solemn warning, "Watch, therefore." Though they are shut out from the feast, they are not sentenced to weeping and gnashing of teeth. *They are late, but not lost.*

The marriage supper of the Lamb is not eternal life in heaven. When the Bridegroom has gathered His elect from amongst the dead and the living, and they have been caught up to meet Him in the air, He takes them away to some prepared place. "I go to prepare a place for you. . . . I will come again, and receive you unto Myself." At this marriage feast in this prepared place, perhaps in one of the stars, a judgment is held, for "we must all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ." Not a judgment of sins, for they were forgiven during our lifetime at our conversion, and forgiven sin is forgotten sin with God. There is no opening of books of judgment, but of the Book of Life. It is a judgment for

rewards. The cups of cold water given out of love to Christ are now to have their promised reward. The faithful in small things are now to be promoted to great charges. The earthly stories of the parables of the Pounds and the Talents are now to have their heavenly meaning fulfilled. In thus standing before the judgment-seat of Christ, there is no fear, no condemnation, no judgment, to them that are in Christ Jesus. It is part of the joy of the marriage feast. It is exclusion from this that is the punishment of the five foolish virgins. They remain outside. "One is taken, and one is left." They are left. Upon them will fall "the great tribulation" (Rev. vii. 14), but through it they will come purified and strengthened. It is for their unreadiness that they are punished with exclusion from the joy of welcoming the Bridegroom; they do not have a part in the first resurrection, but are condemned to wait until the resurrection of the last day.

The Third Coming of the Lord will be in the character of King of the Jews. "The door was shut" as He passed with His Bride to the marriage supper. When next it is opened (Rev. xix. 11), He is seen coming forth as a warrior. The future of the Jews is closely connected with this third stage of the Advent. The Jews will then be back in their own land, Antichrist will be attacking Jerusalem, and be on the point of overpowering the Jews, when the Lord shall suddenly appear as a warrior, and save them by the destruction of Antichrist. Then will the Jews look on Him whom they pierced: they shall mourn because of Him. He was born King of the Jews: they had said, "We will not have this man to reign over us"; He was crucified as the rejected King of the Jews. Yet the purposes of God cannot be frustrated by man, though they may be delayed by him. The angel had said to the Virgin Mary: "The Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David, and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever" (Luke i. 32, 33). This has not yet been fulfilled, but it must be; and it can only be fulfilled by His being accepted by the Jews as their King.

The millennium follows upon the rule of Christ in Jerusalem, with a widespread preaching of the Gospel, through which probably far more will be converted than during all the years of Christ's absence.

The Fourth Coming of the Lord will be as Judge, when the graves shall be opened and cast forth their dead, when the sea shall give up the dead that are in it, and all, both small and great, shall stand before the great white throne.

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