

## The Gospel of the Kingdom.

BY THE REV. SELWYN BLACKETT.

**I**N the New Testament the Lord Jesus Christ is presented to us as King, more frequently than as Saviour. The preaching of John the Baptist was "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. iii. 2), not "the Saviour is at hand." The preaching of the Lord Himself dealt with the same topic, "Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. iv. 23).

It was as a King that He rode into Jerusalem, as a King that He was accused before Herod and Pilate, and as a King that He was crucified. When Paul and Silas preached the Gospel at Thessalonica they were charged with acting "contrary to the decrees of Cæsar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus" (Acts xvii. 7). The New Testament clearly presents to us three aspects of the kingdom. First, there is the kingdom of heaven, or of God, in which we live now, the King Himself being absent. Secondly, the kingdom of Christ on earth, the millennium, without which the glorious predictions of the Old Testament prophets concerning a coming golden age are unintelligible; and thirdly, the kingdom of the Father for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father . . . Thy kingdom come."

1. The kingdom of heaven, or of God, occupied a greater space in our Lord's public teaching than such subjects as sin, repentance, and forgiveness. The great Sermon on the Mount was a royal manifesto explaining the laws of the kingdom of heaven.

In Matthew xiii. we have a group of seven parables illustrating the growth of the kingdom. The parable of the sower shows with what hindrances and obstacles the preaching will meet.

In the parable of the tares the Lord anticipates a stumbling-block, which in all ages of His Church has caused some to err and

go astray. It is the most zealous and thorough-going Christian who cannot tolerate lukewarmness and hypocrisy. "The Church of Christ," he cries, "is holy : it is a contradiction of terms that unholy men should be called Christians. The Catholic Church cannot be the Church of Christ, therefore let us separate from her and form a Church of the converted only." It is their very earnestness, which we admire, that leads them astray. The inquisitor was probably frequently an earnest man, who thought he was doing God service in casting out, even by torture and death, the tares that showed themselves amongst the wheat. Saul, the persecuting Pharisee, was certainly acting conscientiously when he made havoc of the Church. When men have the power to root out the tares, they persecute the so-called heretics. When they have not the power, they become separatists. Neither party can accept the Lord's teaching. "Let both grow together until the harvest." The harvest is the end of the world : until that time comes the kingdom of heaven will continue to contain both wheat and tares ; persecution and schism will alike fail. Men may sow the seed ; but angels, not fallible, prejudiced men, are to be employed in the final separation.

The parable of the mustard-seed comes next. If the two previous parables had disheartened the Apostles, this would encourage them. The parable of the sower prepared them for a certain amount of wasted effort. The parable of the tares warns of insidious opposition. This parable assures them of a world-wide extension of the kingdom far surpassing their most imperial ideas. *Despise not the day of small things* is one lesson taught by this parable. *Think imperially* is another.

The next parable, that of the leaven, has caused great perplexity to commentators. In all other places in Holy Scripture leaven is a symbol of evil : here apparently it is used as a type of the kingdom of heaven. Various explanations are suggested, but none are satisfactory. The perplexity arises from fixing attention on the leaven itself instead of on the *working* of the leaven. The parable does not stand alone : it is one of a series, and must be interpreted both in connection with the series and

with its particular place in the series. It follows immediately upon the parable of the mustard-seed, and must be interpreted in connection with that parable. Extension is the motto of that : intensity is the motto of this. The working of leaven is a secret operation : no noise, or fuss, or outward show can be seen or heard, but at last "the whole was leavened." Not yet has the Church learned the lesson. In seeking extension we all are apt to overlook the need for a deep intensity. "The secret of religion is religion in secret." Statistics of congregations, communicants, places of worship, etc., may show an extension that is perhaps unreal. The secret working of the kingdom of heaven in the hearts of men is the only true foundation for the throne of the King.

The two parables that follow, the hid treasure and the pearl of great price, must be interpreted in connection with one another, and with their place in the series. The preceding parables have dealt with numbers : these two are essentially individual : one has "a man," the other "a merchant" for its subject. They are meant to draw attention to the fact that men are converted one by one. That is the connection that these two parables have with the others in this chapter. But they have also a connection with each other. The one finds a treasure when he was not seeking any such thing ; the other was spending his life in seeking treasure, goodly pearls. So differently do men come to the knowledge of salvation ; one finds it as it were in a lucky moment ; the sight flashes upon his eye like lightning in a dark night. Another spends a lifetime as a diligent seeker after truth. But both are alike in this, that, having found a treasure, they recognise its superlative value, and sacrifice all their other possessions to secure it.

The seventh parable of the series is that of the net cast into the sea, which gathered into its folds both good and bad. At first sight its teaching seems to be a mere repetition of the tares among the wheat, but there are certain points of difference. In the tares the angels are employed to bind the tares in bundles to burn them, and to gather the wheat into the barn—both

destruction and salvation. The parable of the net shows the angels as instruments of judgment only: they "sever the wicked from among the righteous" for destruction. The parable of the tares was spoken to encourage Christian *teachers* under the perplexity caused by the opposition of false teachers. This parable of the net is a solemn warning to false *disciples* that the day is coming when their true character shall be exposed; they may impose on men, they cannot deceive the angels.

2. The kingdom of Christ in the future is another aspect of this subject. The nobleman in the parable went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. We believe that to Jesus all power has been given, and now we are expecting His return. But in what character? Not as the Judge at whose coming all men shall rise again, but as the Conquering King who shall subdue all opposition and reign over the whole earth. The protracted absence of the King has caused a large part of Christendom to give up the belief that a King shall reign in righteousness; that the earth (not the hearts of men, nor heaven, but this very earth) on which we dwell shall be His kingdom; they do not really believe that the curse brought upon the ground by Adam's sin will ever be removed by the obedience of the second Adam; that the desert shall blossom as the rose; that the groaning of creation shall ever be turned into songs of joy. But though the sin of man has put back the hands of the clock, the hour of earth's redemption will strike at last. God's purposes may be postponed by man, but they cannot be absolutely defeated. When God looked upon the new-made earth "behold it was very good": then sin entered and marred God's handiwork. To leave it thus would be to confess defeat. When man fell, the earth shared in his fall. The death of Jesus Christ redeemed not merely man's soul, but his body also; not merely man, but man's home, the earth, was redeemed also. When the Lord's redeemed shall rise at the first resurrection with their redeemed bodies, they will find a redeemed earth prepared for them. The garden of

Eden was but a sample of the whole earth as it shall be when the King comes back.

Another purpose of God postponed by man's sin was that Jesus should be the King of the Jews. At His birth there came wise men from the East inquiring, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" and at His death the title on the cross answered their inquiry, "This is the King of the Jews." Though the Jews had said, "We will not have this man to reign over us," the second Psalm, which is acknowledged to be prophetic and Messianic, declares, "Yet have I set My King upon My holy hill of Zion." The angel who announced His birth to Mary said (Luke i. 31), "Thou shalt call His name Jesus" (this was done literally); "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest" (this was fulfilled literally); "and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David, and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of His kingdom there shall be no end." These latter prophecies also are to be literally fulfilled. It is strange how many people allot all the curses to the Jews and all the blessings to the Christian Church. Prophecies of scattering are seen to be fulfilled of the Jews as a nation; prophecies of gathering to Zion and Jerusalem are spiritualized, and explained to mean the missionary increase of the Church of Christ. Probably the headings to the chapters of Isaiah and other prophets are responsible for this misinterpretation of Scripture. The unknown scholar who put his own interpretations into these chapter headings little thought what mischief he was doing. His private interpretations, being printed in the Bible, partook of the reverence given to the Word of God. We may be thankful that these glosses and notes have disappeared from the Revised Version, and Scripture is now left to interpret itself.

The name Jacob is always used by the prophets in a national sense; it never means the Church of Christ. When we read "the throne of David" and "the house of Jacob," we must interpret these phrases in a literal, not in a spiritual sense. The throne of David was a Jewish throne; the house of Jacob

is the Jewish nation. So the prophecy of the angel Gabriel is to be fulfilled literally throughout.

The human name	...	...	Jesus.
The Divine title	...	...	Son of the Highest.
The throne of David	...	...	King of the Jews.
The endless kingdom	...	...	Universal Empire.

We are all agreed as to the literal interpretation of the first, second, and fourth of these prophecies; why should we hesitate to interpret the King of the Jews in a literal sense? In the prophets Mount Zion and Jerusalem never mean heaven or the Church of Christ; in the New Testament, if a symbolic meaning is given to these places, the writer carefully makes it plain that he is using the words out of their natural and customary sense; he adds some explanatory words: The *new* Jerusalem, the Jerusalem *that is above*, the *holy* Jerusalem, so as to avoid confusion. John Bunyan is responsible for much of this misuse of Zion for heaven. On reaching the wicket-gate, Christian thus announces himself: "Here is a poor, burdened sinner. I come from the City of Destruction, but am going to Mount Zion, that I may be delivered from the wrath to come." Hymn-writers also with their swinging choruses "We're marching to Zion" unconsciously spiritualize what is meant to be understood geographically.

The millennial reign of Christ on earth, the kingdom of Christ as distinguished from the kingdom of heaven, is the Church's lost hope; if this be recovered a new incentive will be given to spiritual life and missionary zeal. If what we see in the world now is the kingdom of Christ, what a failure is the kingdom of Christ! How disheartening to look up from the glowing picture painted by Isaiah to gaze upon the world as it is! Is this all that Christ can do for the world? No; thank God! Whilst the King is absent there will be confusion and disloyalty, but when the King is come to His own again, our eyes shall see the King in His beauty, and the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. But not merely by the preaching of the Gospel. There will be

fierce conflict before His foes will submit. The heathen will rage, the peoples will imagine a vain thing, the kings of the earth will set themselves against the Lord and against His anointed. He will break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

The common idea that the world will gently succumb to the spiritual rule of Christ as proclaimed by the missionaries has no place in Scripture. In Revelation xix. we have two pictures of our Lord: in the first He is the Bridegroom come to fetch His Bride; in the second He is the Warrior come forth at the head of His army to make war against the kings of the earth. If the Lord's friends are to expect Him as the Bridegroom, His foes must expect Him as their Conqueror. Then the reign of universal peace and happiness shall begin, when might shall be no more right, when the truce of God shall cause the nations to beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; "neither shall they learn war any more." This glorious time described by the prophet Micah (iv.) is associated with Jerusalem as the religious and political centre of a world-wide empire. "Out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." During this time Satan will be bound, but at the end of it he will once more be loosed, probably in order that those who shall have been born during the reign of peace may be tested by the same methods of probation as all men that have gone before them. But his time is short, and ends with his final overthrow.

3. The kingdom of the Father remains to be considered. In the Lord's Prayer we are taught to look further even than to the kingdom of Christ on earth. "Our Father, Thy kingdom come." St. Paul says (1 Cor. xv. 25, 24, R.V.) of the reign of Christ, "He must reign till He hath put all His enemies under His feet. Then cometh the end, when He shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father." In expounding the parable of the Tares, our Lord alludes first to His own kingdom and then to that of His Father (Matt. xiii. 41-43). "The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His

kingdom all things that cause stumbling and them that do iniquity, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire : there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." Again, in taking leave of His disciples at the Last Supper, our Lord said, " I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom " (Matt. xxvi. 29).

The kingdom of the Father is but another name for that " far-off, grand event " which we all long for—the entering upon that future stage of life in which all our loftiest ideals shall be realized, the life that is life indeed.



## A New Book on the Gospels.<sup>1</sup>

BY THE REV. CANON GIRDLESTONE, M.A.

**A** **N**OTHER book on the most fascinating of topics, the Gospels, written by a lay theologian who is well known to all ordinary Biblical students by his Syriac lore, and by the fact that he combines in himself the ancient and modern spirit. Professor Burkitt is a frank and suggestive writer, who deals with serious topics with a certain airiness of style, but without real irreverence. He keeps his knowledge well in hand, and has plenty in store, but treats speculation, his own and other people's, as provisional, not final or infallible. If anyone does not mind having his deepest convictions torn up by the roots, pruned, and cheerfully put back again, he will read this book with interest, though often startled and sometimes shocked.

The best thought in the book, and one often impressed on the reader, is that Christ is everything, and that to have Him as " a living, bright reality " is the secret of Christianity now, as always. The Gospel is not intended to introduce us to a code of conduct, but to introduce us to Jesus Christ. " It is the great charm of Christianity that its innermost doctrine is incarnate in the person of its Founder." This is really the solution of all the puzzles of the Gospels. The writers were engaged in recording what Professor Burkitt calls (p. 150) " the common memory of the first circle of disciples." It would have been helpful if he had developed this thought instead of perpetually running away into discussions of sources. As we read his strong references to " the Christ of history " our mind goes back to Young's notable book on

<sup>1</sup> " The Gospel History and its Transmission," by F. C. Burkitt, M.A., Norrisian Professor of Divinity, Cambridge. T. and T. Clark. 6s. net.