

*A PARABLE OF THE FIG-TREES.*

“BRING forth fruits meet for repentance.” But what fruits *are* meet for repentance? To that question let me reply with a parable.

You remember that as our Lord went from Bethany to Jerusalem He saw a fig-tree by the wayside, full of leaves, and came to it that He might eat of its fruit. But when He reached it He found nothing but leaves on it, and condemned it to perpetual barrenness. The conscious tree withered beneath his rebuke; and when they passed it the very next morning the wondering disciples saw that it was “dried up from the roots.” This story is familiar to you all: but perhaps you did not know that three other fig-trees were growing hard by, near enough to hear what passed between Christ and the fruitless tree, and to mark how it withered beneath his curse. Yet there were such trees, or we shall assume that there were. And being observant and reflective trees they were very much alarmed to see that “the axe was laid to the roots of the trees,” and that “every tree which brought not

<sup>1</sup> Many years ago I heard a singularly beautiful and heart-searching sermon from the late Rev. T. T. Lynch, based, I think, on the words, “Bring forth fruits meet for repentance” (St. Matt. iii. 8). I was so deeply impressed by the opening passage of the discourse that I took some hasty notes of it at the time, and afterwards wrote them out as nearly in Mr. Lynch’s language as I could. I cannot be sure that I recalled his very words, and therefore I do not venture to attach his name to this brief paper, lest I should do wrong to one whose very memory is dearer to me than the presence of most living men: but I am sure the substance of it is his; and I believe that all who are familiar with his style will feel that I have presented at least a few of his happy turns of thought and expression.—E.D.

forth good fruit would be hewn down and cast into the fire." They said among themselves: "We indeed have some fruits; but, oh, how few! We will do better next year, lest we should likewise perish." The seasons passed; the winds blew, the rains fell, the sun shone: and now, at last, "the time of figs" has come round again. We take the road to Bethany, to see how these three trees have kept their purpose of amendment.

We approach the first tree; and, looking at it attentively, we are surprised and grieved to find that, though it is thick with broad tender leaves, it has but little fruit, and that its fruit is as poor as it is scanty. We say: "How is this, that thy fruit is so scanty and poor when thy purpose of amendment was so alarmed and earnest?" And the tree replies: "I waited day after day, month after month, to see what would come; and no prophet passed this way; no look, no word, of reproach was cast on me: and Nature is lenient, and has room for leaves as well as for fruit. Why should I trouble myself to do too much? I have done more than last year. I have some fruit to shew, and many leaves. Why should I not be content? No prophet will ever pass this way again; or, if a prophet should come, I have done enough to save myself from his curse." *This* tree has *not* brought forth fruits meet for repentance; for it has done nothing from love, and very little from fear.

We advance to the second tree; and on this also we find only a few figs; but they are very large and good. We do not for a moment mistake it for a cumberer of the ground; its few but large fruits

shew plainly through the leaves. Yet the tree wears an aspect of sadness, and waits with some apprehension to hear what we have to say to it. Noting its aspect of settled grief, we do not ask : "Why are your fruits so few when your purpose was so earnest?" We say : "Be not sad and discouraged, O tree, because you have borne but little fruit ; rather be glad that your fruit is so fine and sweet. Heretofore you brought forth nothing but leaves ; now you have good, if not much, fruit. You will do more and better next year, if you hold fast to your purpose of amendment, and soon your fruit will be as abundant as it is good." This tree *has* brought forth fruits meet for repentance ; for it has done well, and is sorry that it has not done better.

We pass on to the third tree ; and on this we find much fruit indeed, but its fruit is exceedingly various in quality : some of the figs are large and sweet, but some are so small and crude that there is little chance of their being brought to perfection. We accost it, and, as our looks blend surprise with congratulation, the tree makes haste to prevent us from giving it more than its due, and says : "It grieves me that my fruit, which is so abundant, is yet so poor. I have discovered in myself, since I resolved to amend, both a power that I knew not of, and an impotence which I did not suspect. I did not know I could do so much as I have done ; but I did think that what I could do, *that* I should do well. Power is mine ; alas, that I should so have wasted it ! but, alas, weakness is also mine ; and though I can do much, I do it but to little purpose !" This third tree, like the second, has brought forth fruits meet

for repentance ; for it has done much, and would fain have done better : and therefore we bid it be of good heart, and leave it with good hope that, as it has already borne much fruit, so in due time all its fruit will become perfect.

But here some humble soul may cry out, “ Alas, sir, I am no fruit-tree ! I am but as a thorn or a brier. Have you no word of comfort, or promise, for me ? ” Surely I have. Even a thorn may yield flowers which gladden men with their beauty and their fragrance ; even the bramble yields berries which the birds and the children find very sweet. There is your comfort ; and here is your promise : “ Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir-tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle-tree. ” In the kingdom and garden of Christ strange transformations take place : the old man is changed into the new man ; clean men are brought out of unclean ; fruitful and serviceable men out of men who by nature are wild and barren ; firs out of thorns, myrtles—nay, even vines and fig-trees—out of briars. However wild and barren your nature may be, if you crave comfort and promise, that is, if you honestly desire to amend, to become better—there is a power in Christ capable of making you better. You are repenting of the past ; and He will shew you how, in the future, even you may “ bring forth fruits meet for repentance. ”