

than the testimony of himself and his fellow apostles ; while St. Peter (Chap. i. 10) speaks of the spirit within the prophets of old as " the spirit of Christ " himself ; and when both, in most remarkable language, testify that prophecy did not carry its own interpretation with it ; that, as is said (2 Pet. i. 20), " it is not of any private interpretation," which, as we have shewn above, signifies that the prophet was not the expounder of his own prophecies, and in 1 Pet. i. 12, " Unto whom [the prophets] it was revealed that not unto themselves, but unto us, did they minister the things which are now reported unto you ; " and when to these similarities of thought on most important subjects we add the closeness of resemblance in language and style which it has been the chief aim of this paper to illustrate, there seems to be a large preponderance of evidence in favour of the genuineness of the Second Epistle. If both Epistles be the work of St. Peter, the resemblances are natural, the differences not unnatural, while the hypothesis of a second-century imitator is beset with difficulties which seem beyond all power of solution.

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THE POTTER AND THE CLAY.

JER. XVIII. 1-10 ; ROM. IX. 19-24.

ST. PAUL'S words in dealing with this parable, " Hath not the potter power over the clay ? " have often, I imagine, been read and pondered over with the sense of an intolerable burden. They have seemed to shut out hope and energy and courage. We have found it hard to reconcile them with our sense of human freedom and responsibility. Instead of the glad tidings which tell us that all

men have a Father in heaven, who does not will that any should perish, and hath no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, we seem to hear in them only the proclamation of the absolute sovereignty of the Almighty King. For the gracious and benign aspect of the mind and will of God revealed in Christ we are called to look on One in whom we see, though transfigured with the glory of omnipotence, the lineaments of those earthly rulers who make their will their law and hold themselves exempt from all that limits the exercise of that will. The potter and the clay! Is not that parable the germ of all that is most oppressive in the "terrible decree" of Calvinism? Does it not justify the Moslem's acceptance of the will of Allah as a destiny which he cannot understand, but to which he must perforce submit? Is not this the last word of the apostle, even when he is most bent on vindicating the ways of God to men, in answer to the question which asks now, as Abraham asked of old: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" "Why doth he yet find fault, for who hath resisted his will?"

I do not purpose entering into the dark and thorny labyrinth into which these questions lead us. We all know, some of us by a sad experience, how easy it is to lose ourselves in its wandering mazes, while we discourse on

"Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute,"

and how deadening to all spiritual life and energy such discussions may become. On the one side men have deceived their souls with the false assurance of an inheritance which they cannot forfeit. On the other they have drifted to the abyss of despair, or to "the recklessness of unclean living, no less perilous than desperation." In the imagined strength of their own freedom they have refused to acknowledge that they owe anything to the electing purpose or grace of God, or have rashly questioned the righteousness of his government, or have taken refuge from this unsolvable enigma, the great riddle of the world and life, in the dreary agnosticism of a philosophy calling itself Positive, or in the yet baser sensualism which takes as its law of life, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die;" "Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they are withered;" "Money! money! money! honestly, if we can; but money anyhow, that we may take our

ease and be merry." We all know how one or other of these phases of thought has taken possession of our own souls, or of the souls of others; how they have often succeeded one another as we trace our own spiritual oscillations. It is well for us, often the only pathway of safety, when we turn back from the problems of the universe as from things too high for us, and take refuge in the simple facts of conscience and of duty, in the endeavour, while we refrain our soul and keep it low, to do with our might whatever our hand findeth to do. Work—true, honest, upright work, *that* cannot be wrong whatever may be the ultimate explanation of the things that are now hid from us. We must be content to accept the fact that our theories of the world embrace but half the truth. As with those products of the loom which, as we see them in one light, are bright and radiant in their golden lustre, with fair patterns distinctly wrought into their texture, while, as we change our point of view, the lines are dark and sombre, and the design marred and lost in the prevailing gloom, so is it with the world in which we live. The theories of man's freedom, or of an evolution working blindly, or of an all-controlling Providence, or of a fixed fate seem, each of them, clear and tenable while our thoughts dwell on it exclusively; but each in turn does but present us with a part, and not the whole, of that which a higher intelligence than our's would see to be the true answer to our questionings. We cannot solve the mystery of the beginning of evil in the world, or of its final issues, and must learn, strange as the paradox may seem, to hold in practical union the half-truths which reason cannot theoretically reconcile into a harmonious system.

It is, therefore, no part of my present purpose to enter upon these dark and unprofitable questions on the grounds of abstract reasoning. But we may, I believe, without risk and with some hope of profit, track out the limits which the wise of heart, taught by the Spirit of Truth, have thrown out as tending to assure our hearts and to strengthen our wavering faith. And among those hints this parable of the Potter and the Clay may well claim its place as at once the most conspicuous and the most suggestive. We shall do well to trace its history and to note its bearings. Does it really teach what men have imagined that it taught—the powerlessness of man and the arbitrary sovereignty of God? or does it lead us to acknowledge a

wisdom and righteousness and mercy in the history of men and nations? Does it simply crush us to the ground with the sense of our own impotence? or does it rightly take its place in that noble argument which makes the Epistle to the Romans, more than any other part of Scripture, a true Theodicæa, a vindication of the ways of God to man?

Let us, then, track that similitude from the time when it first presented itself to the mind of a living man, himself also taught of God, as presenting an analogy to what he saw passing round him in the history of the world. It was in a dark and troublous time that the Prophet Jeremiah was called to do his work. He had fallen on evil tongues and evil days, and his work seemed a failure. He turned in passionate complaint to the Lord, who had called him to that work, and in the bitterness of his soul gave utterance to the rash words, "Thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived." Kings, priests, people, were drifting blindly to their destruction. The purpose and promises of Jehovah to his people Israel seemed to fail utterly. It was in this mood that there came to him an inner prompting in which, then or afterwards, he recognized "the word of the Lord." Acting on that impulse he left the Temple and the city, and went out alone into the valley of Hinnom, where he saw the potter at work moulding the clay of the valley into form and fashioning it according to his purpose. The artist-worker had, when he began his task, a design or pattern in his mind, which the observer knew not. That lump which he had taken shapeless into his hands might be for honour or dishonour; a vessel for a king's table, a vase for fruit or flowers, a basin in which men might wash their hands or feet. The prophet looked and saw that here too there was apparent failure. "The vessel that he wrought was marred in the hands of the potter." The clay did not take the shape; there was some hidden defect that seemed to resist the plastic guidance of wheel and hand. The prophet stood and gazed—was beginning, it may be, to blame the potter as wanting in his art, when he looked again and saw what followed. "So he returned, and made it another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it." Skill was seen there in its highest form—not baffled by seeming or even real failure—triumphing over difficulties. And then by one of those flashes of insight which the world calls genius, but which we recognize as inspiration, he was taught

to read the meaning of the parable. "Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine, O house of Israel." Did the thought which thus rushed in on his soul crush it as with the sense of a destiny arbitrary, supreme, not necessarily righteous, against which men struggled in vain, and in whose hands they had no freedom and therefore no responsibility? Not so. Far otherwise than that. To him that which he saw was a parable of wisdom and of love, working patiently and slowly; the groundwork of a call to repentance and conversion. "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them." That thought, we must believe, was one that brought light and hope into the thick darkness in which the prophet's soul had before been wrapt. It had as its necessary complement that which, dealing with the case of seeming failure, frustrating the purpose of the Divine Artificer, involves what seems a change of another kind in that purpose. "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; if it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good wherewith I said I would benefit them." But this, no less than the other, shewed that what seemed to the prophet the one great lesson taught by the parable of the Potter and the Clay was not that the decrees of God are irreversible, but that man is free to choose, and that though God may be constrained to punish He delights rather to forgive.

And the reason of this was that he had not forgotten, as we too often do when we interpret the parables of nature or of human life placed before us by the Divine Teacher, or coming to the minds of those who see that all things are double, one against another, that parables and analogies are, for the most part, suggestive and not exhaustive. Facts over-ride what seem to be the logical conclusions from them. Take, for example, the parable of the Sower, and might we not infer from what it tells us of the seed that fell on the wayside, or on the thin surface-soil that overlay the rock, or among the thorns, that the preaching of the Word of Life did but develop natural tendencies, and leave

men practically as it found them? The parable offers an explanation of the partial failure of the Gospel of the Kingdom based upon that assumption. But we do not read the lesson rightly unless we remember that the ground *can be changed*, that it is the work of all teachers, educators, rulers of mankind, to endeavour to effect the change from bad to good. We are to break up the fallow ground, to tear up the thorns, to deepen the layer of earth, and to bring it under the sweet influences of God's sun and of the rain and dew from heaven. Even the seed itself, the Word of Life coming from the lips of the Preacher of righteousness, brings with it, as the experience of Christendom has shewn, at once in the history of nations and the record of individual lives, a strange transforming and fertilizing power, giving to the ground on which it falls a capacity which it had not before. Or think, again, of the Wheat and Tares : how easy is it, if we dwell only on the framework of the parable, to draw from it the conclusion that all men, even within the visible Church of Christ, are from first to last either children of God or children of the wicked one, that all that it teaches us is to restrain our impulse to thrust out heretics and evildoers, and to let both grow together until the harvest, when each shall receive according to his works. It is not till we go below the surface, and interpret the special teaching of the parable by the analogy of faith, that we see that there is another reason for that forbearance than the risk that we, in our hot eagerness and zeal to root out the tares, should tear up the wheat with them. There is the deeper truth that *the tares may become the wheat*, that every actual sinner is a possible saint of God, that it is the work of all true servants of Christ to be fellow-workers with Him in effecting that transformation.

So it was with the prophet. When he passed from the potter and his wheel to the operations of the great Work-Master, as seen in the history of nations, he saw in the vessels that were being moulded, as on the wheel of Providence, no masses of dead inert matter. Each was, as it were, instinct with a self-determining power, which either yielded to or resisted the plastic workings of the potter's hand. The urn or vase designed for kingly uses refused its high calling, and chose another and less seemly shape. The Supreme Artificer, who had determined in the history of mankind the times before-appointed and the

bounds of men's habitations, had, for example, called Israel to be the pattern of a righteous people, the witness of Truth to the nations, a kingdom of priests, the first-fruits of humanity. That purpose had been frustrated. Israel had refused that calling, had chosen to be as the nations round it in its worship, its sensuality, its greed of gain, the tyranny of its oppressors. It had, therefore, to be brought under another discipline, fitted for another work: "He returned, and made it another vessel." The pressure of the potter's hand was to be harder, and the vessel was to be fashioned for less noble uses. Shame and suffering and exile—their land left desolate, and they themselves weeping by the waters of Babylon—this was the process to which they were now called on to submit. But at any moment in the process, repentance, acceptance, submission might modify its character and its issues. The fixed unity of the purpose of the skilled worker would shew itself in what would seem at first the ever-varying changes of a shifting will.

True it was that a little later on in the prophet's work he carried the teaching of the parable one step further, to a more terrible conclusion. This time it was not enough to point to the potter's patient skill. The word of the Lord came to him again, "Go and get a potter's earthen bottle, and take of the ancients of the people and of the ancients of the priests, and go forth unto the valley of the son of Hinnom" (Jer. xix. 1), and there in their sight he was to break the bottle as a witness that, in one sense, the day of grace was over, that something had been forfeited which now could never be regained. Israel and Judah had been unfaithful to the ideal of their national existence. Never again was that form of their existence to be renewed. Never again were a king and princes to sit upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses. The form and the uses of the potter's vessel were to be altered altogether. But not for that was the purpose of God frustrated. The people still had a calling and election. They were still to be witnesses to the nations, stewards of the treasure of an eternal Truth. In that thought the prophet's heart found hope and comfort. He could accept the doom of exile and shame for himself and for his people, because he looked beyond it to that re-moulded life. Those who, instead of accepting it, were rebelling and resisting, questioning the wisdom or

the righteousness of God, were as the thing formed saying to Him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?

The age in which St. Paul lived was like that of Jeremiah, a dark and troublous time for one whose heart was with his brethren, the children of Abraham according to the flesh. Once again the potter was fashioning the clay to high and noble uses. His people might have taken their place as the first-fruits of the Church of Christ, which was to include the nations of the redeemed, as the prophets and teachers of mankind. He started, as it were, with the hope that it would be so. "To the Jew first, and also to the Gentile," was the law of all his work. But here also there was apparent failure. Blindness, hardness, unbelief, these marred the shape of the vessels made to honour. Did he for that cease to believe in the righteousness and faithfulness of God? Did he see no loving purpose behind the seeming severity? No, the vessel would be made for what men held dishonour—exile lasting through centuries, dispersion over all the world, lives that were worn down with bondage—but all this was in his eyes but the preparation and discipline for the far-off future, fitting them in the end for nobler uses. The gifts and calling of God were without repentance, and the wisdom of the great Work-Master would then be made manifest when He who had concluded all in sin and unbelief should at last have mercy upon all. Did any Israelite, zealous, impatient, eager to anticipate the purpose of Him who sees the end from the beginning, question yet once more the wisdom or righteousness of God in this discipline, for him the apostle had the answer, "Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Hath not the potter power over the clay?"

The history of nations and Churches has through all the ages borne witness of the same truth. Each has had its calling and election. Dimly as it has been given to us to trace the education of mankind, imperfect as is any attempt at the philosophy of History, we can yet see in that history that the maze is not without a plan. Greece and Rome, Eastern or Latin or Teutonic Christendom—each nation or Church, as it becomes a power in the history of mankind, has been partly taking the shape and doing the work which answered to the design and purpose of God, partly thwarting and resisting that purpose. So far as it has been faithful to its calling, so far as the collective unity of its life

has been true to the eternal law of righteousness, it has been a vessel made to honour. Those who see in history, not the chaos in which brute forces are blindly working from confusion to confusion, but the unfolding of a righteous order, can see in part how resistance, unfaithfulness, sensuality, have marred the work,—how Powers that were as the first of nations have had written on them, as it seemed, the sentence passed of old on Amalek, that their latter end should be that they should perish for ever. Spain, in her decrepitude and decay; France, in her alternations of despotism and anarchy; Rome, in the insanity of her claims to dominate over the reason and conscience of mankind—these are instances, to which we cannot close our eyes, of vessels marred in the potter's hands. The great drama on the opening scenes of which we are now gazing with alternations of hope and fear, the collapse and ruin of a nation that has used its power for tyranny and wrong, what is it but the breaking of the potter's vessel? Doubtless, plain and clear as the lesson is, it is not well to dwell upon it in the spirit of national pride or Pharisaic exultation. Each such example of the judgment of the Heavens bids us not to be high-minded, but to fear. We need to remember, as of old, that the doom which seems so far from us may be close at hand, even at our doors, that that which seems ready to fall on this nation or on that, Turk or Christian, Asiatic or European, is not irreversible. "At what time soever," now as in the prophet's days, "a nation shall turn and repent," and struggle over the stepping-stones of its dead self to higher things, there is the beginning of hope. The Potter may return and mould and fashion it, it may be to lowlier service, perhaps even to outward dishonour, but yet, if cleansed from its iniquity, it shall be meet for the Master's use.

I have spoken so far of the bearing of the parable on God's dealings with nations and with Churches. That is obviously what was prominent in the thoughts both of prophet and apostle in their interpretation. But we need not shrink from accepting it as it bears upon the individual life of every child of man, and it is obviously that aspect of its teaching which has weighed most heavily upon the minds of men, and often, it would seem, made sad the hearts of the righteous whom God has not made sad. Does it leave room there also for individual freedom and responsibility? Did the inspired teachers think of it as leading men to

repentance and faith and hope, or as stifling every energy under the burden of an inevitable doom? The words in which St. Paul speaks of it might be enough to suggest the true answer to that question. To him even that phase of the parable which seems the darkest and most terrible does but present to man's reverential wonder an instance of the forbearance of God enduring with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction. Men, that is, individual men, in the exercise of their fatal gift of freedom, had resisted and thwarted the generous purpose which would have moulded them into chosen instruments—"vessels of election," to use the Scripture phrase—for working out his gracious purpose for them and, through them, for men their brothers. They were fitting themselves for the destruction, the casting away, the breaking of the potter's vessel, which was the necessary issue of that persistent antagonism. But for them too the patience of God was great. For many a long year He had endured with a patience compared with which all human patience is as an irritable harshness. The Potter would fain return and mould and re-mould till the vessel is fit for some use, high or humble, in the great house of which He is the Supreme Head. By the discipline of life, by warnings and reproofs, by failures and disappointments, by prosperity and success, by sickness and by health, by varying work and ever-fresh opportunities, He is educating men and leading them to know and to do his will. Who does not feel in his calmer and clearer moments that this is the true account of the past chances and changes of his life? True, there is a point at which all such questionings reach their limit. The words, "Hath not the potter power over the clay?"—power to determine the form of the vessel into which it is to be fashioned and the uses, honourable or, as men count them, dishonourable, to which they are to be applied—retain their force. Why a man is born into the world in this country or in that, one the heir of the culture and the creed of European Christendom and another in the dim twilight of barbaric heathenism;—why one man is in no peril of death, but is lusty and strong, and another goes softly all his days in the bitterness of his soul;—why one child is the light and joy of a happy home, and another grows up as the wastrel Arab of the streets;—why some are endowed with, the gifts of knowledge and the far-reaching intellect which stretches before and after, and others are ignorant of the glorious

gains of time ;—why some inherit the dangers of riches and others those of poverty ;—these are questions which we cannot answer. The secret of that infinite diversity lies behind the veil which no man has as yet lifted. We can but answer in words which are but a development of the thoughts which the parable of the Potter and the Clay suggests, “ In a great house there are vessels not only of silver and gold, but also of wood and of earth, and some to honour and some to dishonour.”¹ Some seem to have no higher calling than to be tillers of the soil, delvers in the mine, toilers at the oar. “ Their lot is to maintain the state of the world, and all their desire is in the work of their craft. Without these cannot a city be inhabited ;”² but “ they shall not be sought for in public counsel, nor sit high in the congregation.” Others take their place among the wise of heart, the rulers of men, leaving behind them a name and fame which the world will not willingly let die. In the language of another parable, to one is given five pounds, to another two, and to another one—to each according to his several ability. But the thought that sustains us beneath the burden of these weary questions is that the Judge of all the earth shall assuredly do right. Men’s opportunities are the measure of their responsibilities. “ To whom men have committed much of him will they ask the more.” The bitter murmur and passionate complaint are checked by the old words, “ Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus ?” The poorest and the humblest may find comfort in the thought that if his work be done faithfully and truly, if he sees in the gifts which he has received, and the outward circumstances of his life, and the work to which they lead him, but the tokens of the purpose of the great Designer, he, too, yielding himself as clay to the hands of the potter, may become in the least honoured work, a vessel of election. What is required in such a vessel when formed or fashioned is, above all, that it should be clean and whole, free

¹ 2 Tim. ii. 20.

² Ecclus. xxxvii. 32, 33. The chapter which thus draws the broad line of demarcation between the toilers and the thinkers of the world contains a graphic description of the labour now before us, which it may be well to quote: “ So doth the potter sitting at his work, and turning the wheel about with his feet, who is always carefully set at his work, and maketh all his work by number. He fashioneth the clay with his arm, and boweth down his strength before his feet ; he applieth himself to lead it over ; and he is diligent to make clean the furnace.”

from the taint that defiles, from the flaws that mar the completeness of form or the efficiency of use. The last lesson of the parable is found in the words, full of hope, if also full of warning.

“If a man cleanse himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master’s use, and prepared unto every good work.”¹ The seeming poverty of material, or uncomeliness of form, or lowliness of use, is no real dishonour. The vessel of the potter’s clay, thus fashioned and thus cleansed, is precious as the golden chalice, rich with gems, and consecrated for service in the temple of the great King. The work of each soul of man is to seek this consecration, to flee the youthful lusts, the low ambitions, the inner baseness, which desecrate and debase. Our comfort is, that in so striving, we are fellow-workers with the great Work-Master. Our prayer to Him may well be that He will not despise what his own hands have made. I know not in what better or nobler words that prayer can clothe itself than those in which a poet of our own time has summed up the teaching of the parable of the Potter and the Clay :

“So take and use Thy work,
Amend what faults may lurk,
What strain o’ the stuff, what warpings past the aim,
My times are in Thy hand,
Perfect the cup as planned,
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same.”²

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¹ Tim. ii. 21.

² Robert Browning, “Rabbi Ben-Ezra.”