

THE PARABLES OF JUDGMENT.

(MATT. XXIV. 45-XXV. 46 ; LUKE XII. 35-48.)

THE Gospel of St. Matthew is not so much a biography of our Lord, as an account of His teaching set in a comparatively slight framework of biography; and it is generally agreed that St. Matthew has not endeavoured to relate the discourses in the order in which they were actually spoken, but rather in such an order that they may throw light on each other. This is no disparagement of the evangelist's inspiration; on the contrary, we have no doubt he was guided in his arrangement of his Lord's discourses by the same Holy Spirit who "spake by the prophets."

St. Matthew has ended his account of the Lord's teaching with a group of consecutive discourses, parabolic in form, and having for their subject the Lord's coming in judgment at the end of the present dispensation. These we call the Parables of Judgment;—this description applies to the account of the judgment of all nations with which chapter xxv. concludes, as well as to the rest; they all describe spiritual realities through visual imagery, and this is the definition of a parable. There are however other Parables of Judgment, notably that of the Wheat and the Tares, and that of the Draw-net, which belong to an early period of our Lord's teaching.

It is perhaps commonly thought that the concluding parables of St. Matthew's Gospel are three: the parable of the Ten Virgins, that of the Talents, and that of the Sheep and the Goats. This however is a mistake, due to the inappropriate division of the chapters. There is no break at the end of chap. xxiv., except the ending of one parable and the commencement of another. The concluding Parables of Judgment are not three but four, and

they begin with what may be called the parable of the Faithful Steward, chap. xxiv. 45-51. This is not usually called a parable, because it is not introduced as such; but it is so in substance. It occurs with very little difference in St. Luke xii. 42-48, where the word *steward* occurs; the corresponding word in St. Matthew is *bondservant* (margin of Revised Version), but there is no inconsistency, for the steward in Eastern households was often a slave, who, though promoted to be a steward, did not cease to be a slave.

The conversation in which these parables occur took place, according to St. Matthew's narrative, on the Mount of Olives, a very few days before the Lord's death; only Peter, James, John, and Andrew were with Him, and it began with this question, when the destruction of Jerusalem and His second coming were to be. The first part of His reply is confessedly a very difficult passage, but its chief lessons are plainly these:—Not to seek after signs and wonders; to preserve a spirit of faith and patience, because the trials of His people on earth would be long and severe; and to continue in habitual watchfulness, "for in an hour that ye think not the Son of man cometh" (ver. 44). At this point in the discourse the Parables of Judgment begin with that of the Faithful Steward.

From St. Luke however it would appear that this parable was spoken by our Lord to His disciples before His last journey to Jerusalem; and supposing this to be historically correct, as most probably it is, St. Matthew has recorded it, not in its historical, but in its logical connexion. According to St. Luke it was spoken by our Lord in reply to a question by Peter, which was itself suggested by a previous parable of our Lord (Luke xii. 35-38) and an exhortation to watchfulness that followed it. This previous parable also is not introduced as such, and is not usually called a parable, though it really is one, and was so called

by Peter (ver. 41). It may be called the parable of the Waiting Servants. It contains what is perhaps the most wonderful of all the many gracious promises spoken by the Lord to His faithful people. "Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that He shall gird Himself, and make them sit down to meat, and shall come and serve them." This parable is followed by an exhortation to watchfulness, illustrated by the familiar image of the thief in the night; and then comes the question from Peter, as the spokesman of the twelve, "Lord, speakest Thou this parable unto us, or even unto all?" The Lord replied by the parable of the Faithful Steward; and in introducing this, His thought in reference to Peter's question appears to be: "I speak it to all My servants, but in a more emphatic sense to you the Apostles, and to your successors in the ministry, who are not only My servants but My stewards, set over My household, with the duty of giving their food to the other servants (ver. 42). You, if you are faithful in such a charge, shall receive, at My second coming, a higher reward than any attainable by the inferior servants, even that of being set over all your Master's property (ver. 44; comp. Matt. xix. 28, where their reward is stated to consist in being judges and rulers over Israel). But I warn you also how terrible will be their doom who, when they see Me delay My coming, use their position in the ministry of the Church as an occasion for tyranny and sensuality" (vers. 45, 46). We can scarcely doubt that this warning is prophetic of a state of things which in our Lord's time could scarcely have been foreseen by merely human wisdom, but afterwards became real, when the Church, which had come triumphantly through the trial of persecution, was assailed by the more dangerous trials of riches and power.

But St. Matthew, as we have seen, separates the parable of the Faithful Steward from its original context, and

associates it with three other Parables of Judgment. We have now to consider the four in relation to each other.

The parable of the Faithful Steward is, as we have seen, a parable of the judgment of the Christian ministry; and its chief lesson is the duty of fidelity in service, with its necessary condition of watchfulness.

The next is the parable of the Ten Virgins. It is not a specially difficult parable; and of course every one who knows anything at all of biblical subjects is aware that its imagery, which to us Europeans is so strange as almost to seem like a leaf from the Apocalypse, is taken from one of the commonest scenes of Eastern life. Its teaching is very like that of the foregoing parable, but there are two important differences. It describes the judgment, not of the ministry especially, but of the entire Church; and it lays an exclusive emphasis, not on the active service of Christ, nor even on the habit of watchfulness, but on the necessity for keeping alight what is called, by a most appropriate though not scriptural metaphor, "the flame of vital religion." Virginitv signifies purity of life; the lamps are the profession of religion; the oil is the grace of God the Holy Spirit; and the flame in the lamps is the true religion of heart and life which is produced by His gracious presence. This parable has consequently nothing whatever to do with the judgment of the heathen who know not God, or of the openly ungodly in Christian countries, or of those who, while living an orderly life, do not in word and deed acknowledge Christ. Its teaching is exclusively for the inner circle of true Christians; and for them its lessons are, in the first place, the necessity for the supply of the Holy Spirit; and, in the second, that, having received it, we are not to think that we shall retain it as a matter of course, but must use all diligence to preserve and renew it by the appointed means of grace. For it must be remembered, if we would understand the meaning of the parable,

that the foolish virgins took with them, not merely the lamps, symbolizing the external profession of religion, but enough of oil in the lamps to last for some time ; and yet the failure of the oil at the critical moment prevented them from meeting the Bridegroom. We can imagine no more emphatic rebuke of the folly of the saying, "once saved, saved for ever," which we believe is, or was, current in some religious circles ; or of the reply which, to the writer's knowledge, a dying woman gave to a clergyman who asked her about her hopes, that she was safe, having been converted some years before. It is no doubt true that our Lord has elsewhere said, "My sheep shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (John x. 27, 28). The one saying is for our warning, the other for our encouragement ; the present writer does not pretend to know how the two are to be reconciled, and perhaps this must be put off until we attain to know as we are known.

The incident of all the virgins, the wise as well as the foolish, falling asleep while the Bridegroom delayed his coming, is no doubt perplexing. It appears to contradict the saying in the parable of the Waiting Servants, "Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching" (Luke xii. 37) ; and it appears no less to contradict the inner meaning of the parable of the Virgins itself ; for how can the watchful state of the spirit which is symbolized by the burning lamps and the reserve supply of oil, be compatible with falling asleep ? But it must be observed that this is mentioned without the smallest hint of blame. We feel doubtful as to its meaning, but would suggest that it may be meant as a caution against that temper of mind, perhaps never common, but certainly not unknown, which fears to let prayer and meditation cease for a moment, lest the enemy should get an advantage. This feeling may seem very pious, but it is really born of mistrust, and of that perverted kind of faith which believes

in itself and in the "efficacy" of its own prayers, rather than in the God who hears and answers prayer. The right reply to such notions is contained in the most deeply spiritual of all the Psalms, where the Psalmist expresses his trust in his God by saying, "When I awake, I am still with Thee," and therefore fears not to fall asleep (Ps. cxxxix. 18).

"No evil shall have power on me,
Under Thy shelter safely kept;
And when I wake, I am still with Thee,
For Thou wast with me while I slept."

But there is an interpretation of a different kind, which however is perhaps not incompatible with this; though in advancing it we do not forget that any prophetic interpretation of a parable is of secondary importance to the spiritual interpretation, and also generally of much inferior certainty. It seems probable, and has been suggested before, that this parable is not only a parable of the spiritual state of the Church for all time, but an apocalypse of its state in the age immediately before the second visible coming of the Son of man: when the Church, after passing with varying degrees of success through the trial of persecution in the first ages, the trials of power and riches in what we call the Middle Ages, and the trials of intellectual perplexities in the ages which are now, shall have to

"fulfil
The harder task of standing still";¹

when there shall be no special form of trial; when the speculative perplexities and the practical difficulties of this present age shall be partly solved and partly given over as insoluble; when the *ennui* of a stationary civilization, which is described with such mournful force in the book

¹ Whittier.

of Ecclesiastes, shall have again settled down on mankind; and when it shall be more evident than it is in these days of manifold activity, that the only blessed are those who keep alight the lamp of spiritual faith and hope.

The general lesson of the parable of the Virgins appears to be identical with that of the parable of the Wedding Garment, which was spoken by our Lord some short time before, not however to the disciples alone, but to the multitude (Matt. xxii. 11-13). The foolish virgins, who accepted the invitation to the wedding, and took their lamps to go to meet the Bridegroom, but neglected the needful supply of oil, are identical with the man who, unlike some of the others, did not make light of the King's invitation (ver. 5), but accepted it, and went in among the guests; yet was turned out just as the feast was going to begin, because he had not on the wedding garment which symbolizes the "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. xii. 14).¹

The parable of the Virgins has produced no effect whatever on the outer world, beyond supplying it with subjects for art and allusions to adorn rhetoric and poetry. Very different in this respect has been the parable of the Talents. Except the parable of the Prodigal, nothing in our Lord's teaching has impressed men in general so much; indeed, it is perhaps more clearly appreciated by the better kind

¹ We have little doubt of the truth of the comment, that the wedding garments were supplied by the giver of the feast. Were it not so, the man who came in without one would not have been "speechless," but would have pleaded, whether truly or not, that accident or poverty had prevented him from procuring one. This point is illustrated by the following from the Marchioness of Dufferin's *Our Viceregal Life in India*, giving an account of a native dinner party:

"Our first proceeding was to dress ourselves properly for this festival, and as soon as we got to the house we were taken into a dressing room, were divested of our own gowns, and were draped in saris.

* * * * *

About ten o'clock we took off our native costume and returned home, our hostess insisting on presenting each of us with the saris we had worn."

of worldly men—those who have a serious and unselfish interest in such legitimate secular matters as science, art, and politics—than by the inner circle of those who recognise the obligation of doing all things in the name of Christ and with a sense of responsibility to Him; for the latter have too often been inclined to treat those secular interests as if they were outside the dominion of Christ, and incapable of being consecrated to His service. The impression which this parable has produced on the general mind of Christian countries is shown in the curious way in which the word talent, which ought never to be used in the sense of endowment without an evident allusion to this parable, has come, not only in our language, but also in French and German, to be a mere synonym for ability.

The parable of the Virgins and that of the Waiting Servants describe the judgment of the entire Church. The parable of the Talents, like that of the Faithful Steward, on the contrary, especially describes the judgment of the Ministry; for we are told that the lord of the servants, on departing for a time, distributed his goods, evidently meaning all his money, among his servants; thus symbolizing the departure of Christ, and His entrusting His interests on earth to His apostles and their successors in the ministry. It is self-evident, however, that the principle is applicable to all; and this is expressly taught, by the same imagery, in the parable of the Pounds (Luke xix. 12), where a great nobleman is described as entrusting ten servants with a pound (*mina*, about £3 sterling) each, in order to make trial of their fidelity and their devotion to his service. There is nothing here about confiding all their lord's interest to these ten; they were all placed in an equal and not very high position of trust, representing the position of all who have learned the "first principles of Christ" (Heb. vi. 1).

The parables of the Virgins and of the Talents are also con-

trusted in another and a far more remarkable way ; namely, as to the principle on which judgment is to be awarded. In the former, as we have remarked, exclusive stress is laid on the necessity for keeping the flame of true religion burning in the heart ; service, and even watchfulness, are lost sight of ; all, the wise as well as the foolish, slumbered and slept while the bridegroom tarried. In the parable of the Talents, on the contrary, nothing is said about the religion of the heart ; watchfulness is no doubt implied, for a man cannot make money while asleep ; but the stress is exclusively laid on the duty of active and earnest service. It is not a sufficient answer to say that the devotion of the heart and the service of the life imply each other, for this is not always true. Our Lord has taught us that it is possible to do mighty works in His name, and yet, not having His Spirit, to be none of His (Matt. vii. 22, 23 ; comp. Rom. viii. 9). But He demands both the heart and the life ; and the exclusive emphasis, first on the one and then on the other, in each of these two parables, is an instance of our Lord's method, which is that of the biblical writers generally, of insisting on one truth at a time, and letting their reconciliation take care of itself. The truth in which these two truths are reconciled and combined is the truth taught by our Lord in the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (though He does not teach it as a way of reconciling other truths) ; namely, that we shall be received, not according to what we have done, nor according to what we have believed, but according to what we are. For both faith and works are of value in the Divine sight only in so far as they form character.

It is much more remarkable, that in the Parables of Judgment our Lord carries His method of enforcing one truth at a time so far as to speak not one word about the possibility of repentance and forgiveness ; and yet we know that this is with Him a characteristic and cardinal doctrine.

We have seen that the parable of the Waiting Servants and that of the Virgins represent the judgment of the Church, and the parable of the Faithful Steward and that of the Talents the judgment of the Ministry: in like manner, the judgment of the World is represented by the imagery of the Sheep and the Goats. All men, of all nations, shall be gathered together for judgment; those who have shown kindness shall be rewarded, and those who have shown unkindness shall be punished, as if their deeds were done to Christ Himself, even though they have not thought of Him, nor ever heard His name. Not as if there were three distinct judgments, for the Ministry, the Church, and the World: "all must be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor. v. 10). There shall be one judgment for all, but each shall be judged according to his knowledge and according to his responsibilities. Mercy and kindness shall be demanded from those who have had to live by the light of nature only; the account of the judgment of all nations is, in fact, an expansion of the Lord's saying, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy," combined with the equally certain truth that the unmerciful shall be judged without mercy (Jas. ii. 13). But, in addition to this, the Lord demands watchfulness and the cultivation of spiritual life from those who have been taught to know Christ; and especial devotion to His service from the ministers of His gospel, and from all others who have been entrusted with any especial "talent."

In the relation between the judgment of the World, the Church, and the Ministry, as set forth in these parables, there is no difficulty whatever. But there is a real difficulty, as it seems to us, regarding the principle on which our Lord declares that the world is to be judged. His only

demand is for mercy and kindness. Of course faith, in the distinctively Christian usage of the word, is not to be asked of those who have had no opportunity of learning to know Christ. But why, in concluding His teaching on the subject of future judgment, does the Lord say nothing about purity and truthfulness, virtues which are insisted on in all scriptural teaching, as well as taught by the light of nature? We are unable to answer this question. It is impossible that our Lord can have meant to underrate the importance of purity and truthfulness; in such a context it seems unsatisfactory to speak of His method of teaching one truth at a time, but we have no other explanation to suggest.

The difficulty however is not a practical one. It is universally true, that "to whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required" (Luke xii. 48); a closer conformity with the law of God shall be exacted from those who have been taught to know Christ than from the ignorant and the heathen. We know not how the heathen shall be judged; we know only that the God of all the earth will do right, and that the Searcher of hearts will make right allowance for each man's ignorance and inability. But we know that from all who have had the light of nature the Judge demands kindness, purity, and truthfulness; we know that from all who have learned to understand the parable of the Watching Servants He demands the spirit and the habit of watchfulness; we know that from all who have learned to understand the parables of the Talents and of the Pounds He demands the consecration of all their powers to His service; and we know that from all who have learned to understand the parable of the Ten Virgins He demands the consecration of the heart to Himself.

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