

THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS.

IN this parable Jesus calls Himself the Bridegroom. In so doing He indicates the point of view from which the parable must be regarded. For the thought of the Bridegroom suggests that of the bride. The thought of the bride fixes our attention on *the holy city, new Jerusalem*.<sup>1</sup> And this last name reveals the relation in which the parable stands to the rest of the great discourse of which it forms a part. Our Lord has just associated the "consummation of the age" and His own "coming" with the destruction of Jerusalem. That awful catastrophe would be the death-struggle of the old world. But resurrection, not annihilation, would be the issue of a God-given existence. The overthrow of the temple and of the walls of the city would be the rolling away of the stone from the mouth of a sepulchre. And from the tomb of Israel's buried hopes would emerge a glorified, spiritual kingdom, *the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*,<sup>2</sup> *the wife of the Lamb*.<sup>3</sup> The precise day and hour of that great crisis would be fore-known by none save the Father only.<sup>4</sup> Yet all things would be accomplished before that generation passed away,<sup>5</sup> and the Bridegroom would come to claim His bride. But would all those who were left till that hour of midnight meet Him when He came? Would they all recognise His "presence" in the darkness? Would they all go in with Him to the marriage-feast which was to mark the beginning of a new age? The Parable of the Ten Virgins contains the answer.

It is significant that the actors in this parable are women, whilst in the complementary parable of the Talents they are men. This contrast between the man-side and the woman-

<sup>1</sup> Rev. xxi. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. xii. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. xxi. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. xxiv. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. xxiv. 34.

side of human nature and life pervades the two parables, and appears to have a distinctive purpose. In the parable of the Talents the interval before Christ's coming is regarded as one of labour; and the disciples are warned that, if they are to meet with their Lord's approval, they must fulfil the true service of men by working. In this parable the interval is evidently regarded as one of *waiting*, for it is recorded of the whole company of virgins, without hint of blame, that *while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept*; and the disciples are taught that, if they are to welcome the Bridegroom when He comes, they must fulfil the true service of women by *watching*.<sup>1</sup> There the diligent servant is rewarded, and the slothful condemned; here, the judgment is the outcome of the exercise or the neglect of woman's distinctive faculty of thoughtfulness. *Five of them were foolish, and five were wise*. There the question is one of the outer life; here, of the inner life. There, of vigorous energy; here, of quiet contemplativeness. There, of action; here, of insight. If we think it necessary to lay stress on the fact that the actors are described as virgins, and not merely as women, we may say that the thoughtful side of human nature is here regarded by itself, before it enters into union with active energy and bears fruit in loving deeds.

That the right use of the contemplative faculty is the subject of the parable is confirmed by the fact that all the virgins *took their lamps*. Much has been written about the meaning of the lamps, some contending that they imply faith, others good works, others Christian or Church-profession. We shall be spared the trouble of deciding between these conflicting, and more or less arbitrary, interpretations, if we call to mind the words of our Lord: *The lamp of thy body is thine eye*.<sup>2</sup> The lamp is that power of spiritual vision with which the thoughtful side of every human be-

<sup>1</sup> Matt. xxv. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Luke xi. 34, R.V.

ing is provided. It is the faculty of insight; the power of seeing through the outward appearance, of looking beyond the things which are seen at the things which are not seen, of beholding the eternal behind the temporal.

This faculty is given to every man. It is indeed distinctive of a true woman, but it is not exclusively her possession. It is exemplified in the mother of the Lord, in whom it must have grown clearer as she watched her Son, kept His sayings, and pondered them in her heart.<sup>1</sup> It is conspicuous in Mary, the sister of Lazarus, whose eyes were "homes of silent prayer"; who grew more keen-sighted through sitting at the Lord's feet, listening to His words; and at last, with "divine intuition" of the coming passion, anointed the Conqueror of death at the supper at Bethany. But it is also characteristic of the man whom Jesus loved, who with quick, sympathetic insight was the first to recognise the Risen Lord by the Sea of Tiberias. This power of insight is given in some degree to every man. But its effectiveness depends on the way in which it is used. *Five of (the virgins) were foolish, and five were wise.* Five of them trusted to what little oil there happened to be in their lamps already. Five were thoughtful enough to obtain a further supply, and to take *oil in their vessels with their lamps.* When we remember that oil is constantly used as a symbol of God's Spirit, and that the purpose for which it is here employed is that of lighting, we can have little doubt as to its meaning. It signifies the illuminating energy of the Spirit of truth. If the faculty of spiritual insight is not fed with this enlightening influence, it is but an unlit lamp, casting no beams into the eternal world. But constantly supplied therewith, it may become so luminous that it can search the hearts of men, can discover the divine meaning that underlies the changing circumstances of daily life, and can discern the eternal purpose

<sup>1</sup> Luke ii. 19, 51.

that is being gradually accomplished behind the events of human history.

It is obvious that this power which quickens the spiritual vision cannot be imparted by one man to another at a moment's notice. Such seems to be the meaning of the next point in the parable. The wise virgins are compelled to refuse the request of the foolish to give them oil. *Peradventure there will not be enough for us and you: go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.* No man can receive more illuminating energy than is requisite for his own use. Each man must win what he needs by his own efforts. He must acquire it by asking, seeking, knocking; by much sitting at the Lord's feet; by constantly yielding himself to the guidance of the Spirit of truth; by "persistently dwelling in the secret place of the Most High, and thus entering into the hidden things of life from the centre whence the issues of them diverge."<sup>1</sup>

Such was the lesson which Jesus taught His disciples ere He left them. All of them must use the power of insight with which they were endowed. But it must be quickened with that illuminating influence which the Spirit of truth was ready to bestow on them abundantly. *He shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you.*<sup>2</sup> . . . *He shall guide you into all the truth: . . . and He shall declare unto you the things that are to come.*<sup>3</sup> They must use the interval before their Lord's coming, not only as a time for working, but also as an opportunity for watching in quiet contemplation. Surrendering themselves to the Spirit's guidance, they would gain a clearer perception of the real significance of Christ's words and works, interpreted in actual life.

<sup>1</sup> The quotation is an extract from a striking description by Mr. George MacDonald of the marvellous power of insight acquired by one of the characters in *Paul Faber* (ch. xxxix. p. 369). Though occurring in a work of fiction, it seems to be a transcript from life.

<sup>2</sup> John xiv. 26.

<sup>3</sup> John xvi. 13.

Taught to perceive the eternal behind the temporal, they would be quick to notice that through their own tribulations and persecutions chains were being forged to draw them nearer to their Lord; and they would see the hands of the living God at work in the wars of nations, in earthquakes, famines, and pestilences. Thus learning to behold with apocalyptic vision those invisible, heaven-directed movements which are the very soul of history, they would be ready when the great crisis came. Their discerning eyes would pierce through the darkness and recognise the Bridegroom's presence, and with glowing hearts they would enter with Him into the glory of a new age and a heavenly kingdom.

But how different the end would be, should they be foolish enough not to seek for clearer light! If, trusting to what little power of perception they possessed already, they should presume to decide for themselves the meaning and the mode of Christ's coming, they would be overwhelmed with grievous disappointment. The Bridegroom's verdict, *I know you not*, would assert decisively that in their thoughts and hopes He could recognise nothing in sympathy with His own, and would pronounce them incapable of rejoicing in the brightness of that great day of the Lord. The crash of Jerusalem's fall would shatter their earthly-minded expectations concerning the coming kingdom, and for them the crisis would issue in nought but disaster and utter darkness.

Of the disciples who heard this parable spoken, one stands out pre-eminently as the typical *wise virgin*.<sup>1</sup> The Apostle St. John, though by no means lacking in masculine energy, was characterized, as we have seen already, by his quiet contemplativeness and sympathetic insight. It was of this beloved disciple that Jesus said: *If I will that he*

<sup>1</sup> Outside the ranks of the Apostles, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews is conspicuous as another striking instance.

tarry till I come, what is that to thee?<sup>1</sup> To him especially was assigned "the service of waiting, . . . the service of thought, . . . the service of inward meditation directed to the vision of Christ's coming."<sup>2</sup> We are told scarcely anything about his active work. The interval that elapsed before the revelation of the Bridegroom was for him one of silent contemplation, in which he sought earnestly for clearer light. Gradually led by the Spirit to a point of view from which the world could be regarded in its true aspect, he was enabled to write to the Churches an inspired history of God's government of the nations during the last few years before the consummation of the age; to declare to them under the form of sign and symbol the true meaning of the awful calamities which marked the end of the old world; to direct their vision to the new Jerusalem which he had seen appearing *as a bride adorned for her husband*;<sup>3</sup> to bear witness of the revelation of the Lamb, and of the joy of them that were *bidden to the marriage-supper*.<sup>4</sup> Then entering in spirit with the Bridegroom into the clear light of the heavenly world, he received power to give to men the last and greatest Gospel,—a Gospel, as has been well said, not of the past, or the present, or the future, but of the eternal.<sup>5</sup>

Though primarily intended for our Lord's first disciples, this parable of the Ten Virgins is for all time, and has a distinct meaning for ourselves. Christ, though always

<sup>1</sup> John xxi. 22.

<sup>2</sup> See Westcott's *Revelation of the Risen Lord*, p. 144. It may be noticed here that St. Peter, who was characterized by his active energy, and to whom was assigned "the service of working," may be regarded as the typical good and faithful servant of the parable of the Talents. In fact, the passage in St. John's Gospel (xxi. 15-23), so exquisitely interpreted by the Bishop of Durham in sections VII. and VIII. of the book just mentioned, may be regarded as a beautiful illustration, offered to us by our Lord Himself, of the meaning of these two complementary parables of the inner and the outer life.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. xxi. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. xix. 9.

<sup>5</sup> See Westcott's *Introduction to the Study of the Gospels*, 6th ed., p. 225.

present, yet "comes" again and again in the crises of our own lives, and in the momentous events of the world's history. But all such manifestations of His presence will pass unheeded unless we prepare ourselves beforehand. In an age of restless hurry we must, whilst faithfully doing our work in the world, find time also for quiet thought. Through an inner life, in which we humbly seek admittance into the Divine Presence, we must learn to regard all things from a heavenly standpoint. With watchful eyes, guided by the Spirit of truth, we must strive to see how the Father's loving hand is always shaping our lives, even in the sorest tribulations, and how it is through suffering that Christ leads us into His glory, death being ever the condition of newness of life. Our powers of insight thus quickened through sufferings patiently borne, we shall be able to look farther afield, and to behold the kingdom of God continually coming even through those calamitous events which to the unseeing eye seem to envelop the Son of man in impenetrable darkness.

When the assaults of scepticism seem to shake the Church of Christ till it totters, we shall see that nought is being overthrown but some unsound interpretations of the Scriptures on which a counterfeit Christianity has been erected; that thereby the eternal city is being brought forth into a clearer light, *the city that hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God*;<sup>1</sup> and that the living Word is manifesting Himself in more radiant glory.

When some civil revolution seems to be undermining the most stable foundations of society, we shall see that the axe and the fire are levelling the way for another coming of the true Husband of humanity, and that the Son of man is revealing in some new light the *kingdom that cannot be shaken*.<sup>2</sup>

When nation rises against nation in some internecine

<sup>1</sup> Heb. xi. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. xii. 28.

war that reddens the earth with blood, we shall see that, whatever visible armies may be engaged in the conflict, the heavenly hosts are also fighting against the powers of darkness. We shall see that, however disastrous the apparent results may be, the real issue as regards men's eternal interests cannot be doubtful; that the Lord of hosts is Himself contending on behalf of men of every nation who love righteousness; and that all who are ranged on His side must share in the victory. We shall see that the King of kings is once more coming to proclaim that *the kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.*<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible for us to determine beforehand the outward forms through which the consummation of our own age will be manifested. We can only endeavour to interpret in succession each sign that marks its approach. Nor yet is it for us *to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set in His own authority.*<sup>2</sup> We must wait in patience, with eyes turned steadfastly towards Christ, and give unceasing heed to His bidding: *Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour.*

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. xi. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Acts i. 7.