

JESUS MIRRORED IN MATTHEW, MARK,  
AND LUKE.

VI. JESUS LONGING FOR TRUE DISCIPLES.

It has been customary to call the remarkable utterance preserved in Matthew xi. 28-30 *The Gracious Invitation*. It has been gradually dawning on my mind that, without prejudice to the truth underlying that title, the saying might with even greater appropriateness be described as the *pium desiderium* of the Great Master for apt scholars. Its setting in the Gospel narrative suggests this view. It forms the suitable close of a chapter whose burden is *disillusionment*. Jesus appears in this chapter as a disappointed, though not discouraged or utterly forlorn, Teacher. Nowhere has He found the reception He might reasonably have looked for. The Galileans in whose synagogues He has preached, the people whom He has taught and healed wherever they gathered in crowds, the religious guides of Israel, even John the Baptist—one and all have failed to satisfy His desire for sincere, intelligent, sympathetic discipleship. He finds consolation in the honest attachment of some humble persons whom He calls "babes." Yet "babes," while a comfort, can hardly give complete contentment. Something higher is easily conceivable—a class of disciples who are babes and *more*, combining the simplicity of children with the understanding and experience of men. That were the ideal; it is for that Jesus here sighs.

If this sigh of the Lord Jesus be placed in its proper historical environment, its date is approximately fixed by the various allusions to contemporary opinions contained in the eleventh chapter of Matthew. That the synagogue ministry is past, is shown by the complaint against the

three cities.<sup>1</sup> The later mission to the publicans lies far enough behind to give time for the coining of slanderous epithets and sneering nicknames.<sup>2</sup> The fame of Jesus as a popular Preacher and Healer has spread far and wide till it has even reached the ears of the illustrious prisoner in Machaerus, provoking that doubting message, Art thou the Coming One? The hostility of the scribes has had ample space to develop itself, so as to make it manifest that nothing but contempt or bitter opposition is to be looked for from the "wise and prudent."<sup>3</sup>

The situation thus defined suits such an utterance as that contained in Matthew xi. 25-30. The word and the environment fit into each other so well as to leave little doubt that the Evangelist has given that word its true position in his story, and as little that we may legitimately interpret it in the light of its context. In that case its general character is at once fixed. It is the utterance of One who is profoundly conscious of isolation, and who is driven in upon Himself and upon God; yet is full of peace and hope because He is assured that His Father knows and approves Him, and will not leave Him forlorn. Herein the soul of Jesus goes first up to God in resignation and trust,<sup>4</sup> then out in eager longing towards an ideal discipleship not actually there, perhaps not to be found then anywhere within the bounds of Palestine, but existing for the prophetic eye in the womb of the future, and to be born in due season.<sup>5</sup>

Surprise has often been expressed that Luke should have failed to preserve this precious oracle, giving only the outpouring of Christ's spirit towards God, and omitting what seems to suit his pages so well, the outgoing of His loving heart towards the labouring and heavy-laden. Of this hereafter. Meantime I remark that what is most to be

<sup>1</sup> vv. 20-24.

<sup>2</sup> v. 19.

<sup>3</sup> v. 25.

<sup>4</sup> vv. 25-27.

<sup>5</sup> vv. 28-30.

wondered at is that any part of the utterance has been preserved ; for it is really a soliloquy, a devotional meditation of our Lord by Himself apart, not a prayer spoken in the hearing of disciples. Even the part which concerns men, the sigh for true disciples, was not meant for human ears : it was simply a private breathing in which the weary heart of the Master unburdened itself. How then did it become known to any ? True reverence perhaps would be best shown by abstaining from conjecture, but a simple suggestion may be pardoned. A ray of light seems to come to us from the fact that, on the testimony of Papias, the original reporter of our Lord's words was the Apostle *Matthew*, a publican, and in virtue of that occupation also a *scribe*. We have already seen that in calling a publican Jesus had an eye to service in connection with His mission to the class to which Matthew belonged. May He not also have had in view service with the pen by the same disciple, acting as a kind of secretary ? How was it possible for Matthew, years after the Master left the world, to compile that book of *Logia*, *i.e.*, Oracles of the Lord ? Did he draw simply on a retentive memory ? Is it not more likely that he had at command *memoranda* written in bygone disciple days ? Would not the instinct or habit that led him to write the *Logia* lead him to take notes at the time ? and may the desire that this should be done not have been one of the reasons of his call ? But, granting the reasonableness of this suggestion with reference to such sayings as those which constitute the Sermon on the Mount, it may be asked, What has all this to do with a soliloquy of Jesus such as that under consideration ? How should even a private secretary know that his Master had thought or spoken so ? Who can tell ? Would it surprise you if the one disciple who had access to the Master at such a solemn hour was just the *publican* ; the last first, the despised one privileged to be the confidant of the still more Despised

One, despised too very specially on account of the relations He had chosen to enter into with the class to which that disciple belonged? When Jesus uttered this prayer, He passed through a kind of minor agony. At the hour of the greater agony He desired to have three disciples near Him. What wonder if He chose *one* to be with Him at the earlier crisis, and just the one most fitted by his own previous experience to understand the Master's mood?

Not doubting that in the closing part of a precious leaf from the private prayer-book of Jesus, though preserved in the first Gospel alone, we have a true word of the Lord, let us try still further to penetrate into its inmost meaning.

In the utterance beginning with "I thank Thee, O Father," and ending with "My yoke is easy and my burden is light," there is a mixture of conflicting feelings—of satisfaction and longing, of thankfulness for babe-disciples, and intense desire for disciples who are "babes" and something more. The babes include the Twelve, though not them alone. Therefore Christ's feeling even about them is of a mixed character. He is pleased to have these simple Galileans about Him, and yet they do not fill His heart. He is conscious of isolation in their company. They love Him, but they do not understand Him. He has many thoughts in His mind, which He must speak if He is to fulfil His mission, and make known to the world the vision of the kingdom which lies before His spiritual eye. But to whom are they to be spoken? To these babes? Yes, if no better audience can be had. They possess one fundamental requirement of discipleship—moral sympathy with the Teacher. They are ready to hear what He has to say, and implicitly trust in His wisdom. To such hearers it is not idle to speak; revelation of the things of the Kingdom to the like of them, to some extent at least, is possible. But "these things" can be shown to such only in part.

They cannot understand them fully now, perhaps never. The natural limitation of their thinking powers, still more the limitations of their experience in the past or in the future, may present an insurmountable barrier to complete comprehension of the ideas of their Master. It is possible that there is not one among them who has it in him to attain full insight into the Christianity of Christ, or to become so completely possessed by the Master's mind as to be fit for the rôle of a thoroughly competent enthusiastic interpreter. It may be assumed as certain that not all, or even the majority, of them possess any such capacity. But to the presence or absence in his disciple-circle of persons endowed with such capabilities no great teacher or religious initiator can be indifferent. He will make the powers of his scholars a subject of frequent study. He will often consider what they severally are good for, what part this one or that one is fitted to play. And if among them all, after due consideration, he find no one able to receive or effectively reproduce his scheme of thought, whatever pleasure he may have in their society, he will certainly not be free from a haunting sense of loneliness and sadness.

It is in some such mood and for such reasons, it appears to me, that Jesus here speaks. With longing heart He looks over the heads of the actual disciple-circle, with wistful eye, in quest of an ideal discipleship.

But how is the ideal to be defined? What are the marks of the perfectly apt disciple? Jesus, we observe, addresses Himself to the "labouring and heavy laden." Is that the kind of description we should look for, assuming that an ideal discipleship is in view? To answer the question, one must have some sort of *a priori* conception of the ideal. How then are we to conceive it? Somewhat after this manner :

1. The ideal disciple will, of course, possess in a high

degree the disciple-*spirit*: desiring wisdom above all things, with a single mind and a pure heart.

2. He will feel profoundly that he has not yet attained. No one comes to the school of the wise who is self-satisfied—who thinks he knows all and can himself teach others.

The first of these qualities differentiates the disciple from the ordinary frequenter of synagogues, or the average hearer in a street crowd. The second differentiates the disciple from the “wise and prudent.” Both qualities were possessed by the Twelve, and therein their Master had cause for satisfaction. But there is a third quality, which they probably all lacked.

3. The ideal disciple is one who has been prepared for receiving the instruction of a new master by disappointing trial of other masters. He has toiled in the quest of wisdom and has failed. He comes to the new school a weary man, longing for the rest which the revelation of truth satisfying to the whole inner being brings. He comes thoroughly qualified to appreciate the lessons he is to be taught by knowledge of other doctrines with which he can compare them. For men living in Palestine in the time of our Lord this would mean acquaintance with the teaching of the Rabbis, and the discovery by earnest experiment of its unsatisfactory character. It would mean, in other words, an experience similar to that of Saul of Tarsus, who was first an enthusiastic disciple of, and then a convert from, Rabbinism. His soul-history in those years was a very tragic business—a sore toil of the spirit ending in vexation and heaviness of heart. What if he had met Jesus while He was on earth, become one of His disciples and heard His golden words, and seen His gracious deeds from day to day, instead of being “one born out of due time”?<sup>1</sup> It might have made some difference in his conception of the

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. xv. 8.

Christian religion, and in the colour of his writings. But be this as it may, what I wish to say now is that it was for such disciples as he that Jesus craved; for men who were not merely simple, sincere, and honest-hearted, but in possession of spiritual senses exercised to discern between good and evil; that is to say, not only between the obviously good and evil, but between the real and the reputedly good, and the real and the reputedly evil. To that the Twelve had not attained. Possibly there was not a single man living in Palestine at that time that had attained. The man who came inquiring concerning eternal life was on the way to the attainment: hence the interest he created in the mind of Jesus, who saw in him a possible Paul or Barnabas, and may, for ought we know, have thought of him as a substitute for a false disciple already suspected of treason. But he had the fatal defect of insufficient earnestness. He knew more than he was prepared to put in practice.

Is the ideal disciple, as just described, properly designated by the epithets "labouring and heavy laden"? Yes, if we take the words, as they surely ought to be taken, in a spiritual sense. There is no toil so arduous as the quest of the *summum bonum* when carried on in the spirit of a Paul or a Buddha, and no burden so heavy as that of the heart which has long sought and not yet found. Those who have passed through the experience know the truth of this statement, though to others it may seem a great exaggeration. Christ comprehended the labour and the burden, and pitied the sufferer, and yearned to give him relief. Let us not be deceived by the simple terms in which He addresses him into the prosaic idea that it is purely physical toil and weariness He has in view, and that in a spirit of disgusted reaction He turns from the disdainful scribe to the illiterate peasant for satisfying discipleship. Bodily labour and fatigue simply serve the purpose of an emblem. The toil present to His mind is

not that which has for its object the meat that perisheth, but that which has for its aim the meat that endureth unto everlasting life. So understood, the words of Jesus necessarily point to the highest type of religious experience: that which is heroic in effort and temper and tragic in career. Nothing short of that deserves to be so characterized. Feeble desire for the eternal is not labour, and failure to obtain the object of such desire is no burden.

When we know who are meant by the "labouring and heavy laden" we understand why Jesus describes Himself as "meek and lowly in heart." Till we perceive who are addressed, we fail to discern any fitness in the allusion. Might not the Teacher with equal appropriateness have specified some other characteristics? Probably many a student of the Gospels, while drawn to this oracle by its inexpressible charm, has had such a feeling, while hardly willing to avow it to himself. The feeling disappears when we have defined the ideal disciple. The underlying thought is then seen to be that the moods of Master and scholar correspond. The weary seeker after wisdom, or the knowledge of the Highest Good, is meek and lowly. He is as one whose heart has been broken and his spirit bruised. His heart is not haughty, nor his eyes lofty. His soul is even as a weaned child. He needs one who can speak tenderly as well as wisely, fully acquainted with his case, and sympathetic in his attitude towards both his aspirations and his disappointments. As such an one Jesus offers Himself. To the labouring and heavy laden He in effect says: "The Lord God hath given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary." And how has He acquired this supreme talent? By an experience of disappointment answering to that of those whom He invites to His school. They have been disappointed in their teachers, He has been disappointed in His scholars. In synagogue and street crowd,



among the disciples of the Rabbis, and even in His own disciple-circle, His experience has been disenchanting: limited receptivity at the best, not infrequently a total lack of receptivity. So the ideal disciple and He need one another, and suit one another. He needs them to fill His teacher's heart, they need Him to satisfy the hunger of their souls. And there is mutual sympathy as well as mutual need. Similarity in experience has produced congeniality of temper.

When such a Teacher and such scholars meet, one can predict what will happen. They will find solace in each other's company; of that also Jesus speaks, though only on one side of the joint experience. Of the solace the disciple will bring to Him, He makes no mention; but to the solace He will communicate He does refer in these words: "And ye shall find rest to your souls." There will be at least the rest that comes from the sense of being perfectly understood and fully sympathised with. But that is not all that is needed. There must be instruction as well as sympathy. The Teacher must be able to give what the scholar has hitherto sought in vain: a word of eternal life that shall bring contentment to the whole inner being—mind, heart, conscience. Jesus recognises this when He speaks of His "yoke." The taking of the yoke means coming to His school, and the invitation to come is an acknowledgment of obligation on His part to perform the Teacher's *rôle*. He must teach, and teach satisfactorily, so that the pupil shall not need to leave Him, as he has left others, and go in quest of a new teacher. And accordingly He promises satisfaction by characterising His yoke as "easy." A teacher's yoke is easy when his doctrine commends itself to reason and conscience. An easy yoke does not necessarily imply a low, accommodating ideal of life. On the contrary, the teacher's ideal may be lofty, exacting, apparently unattainable, yet the reverse of burdensome be-

cause sweetly reasonable and true to the deepest instincts of the soul. Such was the moral ideal of Jesus as set forth in His recorded words: high and difficult, yet not grievous; awakening enthusiasm, therefore no burden to the spirit. What a contrast to the yoke of the Rabbis!

In the light of the foregoing interpretation of Christ's statement concerning Himself, we can see clearly how feeble is the argument which has been based upon it against the authenticity of the Logion "Come unto Me." Christ, it is argued, could not have said "I am meek and lowly" just because He was meek and lowly. Self-eulogy, even in soliloquy, is incompatible with humility.<sup>1</sup> Various things might be said in reply to this ethical canon of criticism. But the simplest way to dispose of it is to point out that what we have in the words objected to is, properly speaking, not self-eulogy but self-description. They describe a *mood* rather than lay claim to a *virtue*. If it was not egotism in the prophet to represent himself as one whom God had trained to speak a word in season to him that was weary, as little was it egotism in Jesus to use a form of words which in effect means the same thing. If a Psalmist in the Divine Presence might say, "My heart is not haughty," why might not Jesus say "I am meek and lowly" without prejudice to His humility? Prophet, Psalmist, and Jesus all speak out of the same mood, not in a spirit of boasting, rather in a tone of self-humiliation. Their utterances are the devout breathings of a broken and contrite heart too familiar with the vanity of life while still able to hope in God.

The view here presented as to the import of the Logion "Come unto Me," and the mood which it expresses, help us moreover to understand its omission by Luke, assuming that he was not unacquainted with it, but knew perfectly

<sup>1</sup> So in substance Martineau. *Vide my Apologetics*, p. 4.

well that it formed a part of a larger whole, the former portion of which he has preserved. We have seen that it is the way of this Evangelist to exercise editorial discretion in reference to whatever affects the character of the Lord Jesus or of His apostles, omitting, pruning, strongly stating, as the case might require. This idiosyncrasy comes into play here, giving rise to modification of what has been retained, and to the omission of what could not be modified. The modification consists in the altered mood out of which the utterance is made to spring. In Luke's account Jesus speaks at a moment of exulting gladness, occasioned by the glowing reports of the Seventy just returned from their evangelistic mission. The historical setting there assigned to the devotional outpouring is intrinsically improbable as compared to that given to it in Matthew, and the exultant mood ascribed to Jesus is hardly what we should have expected from Him even in such a connection as Luke's narrative postulates. That the great Master had already found His own ministry disappointing is beyond doubt. Is it likely that the results of the minor efforts of the Twelve or of the Seventy, however gratifying so far as they went, would move him to ecstatic joy, and to passionate outpouring of His soul in devout thanksgiving? The situation and the mood, as conceived by Luke, are wholly inadequate to the quality of the utterance. It is another instance illustrating his inability to do justice to the tragic element in our Lord's character and experience.

The omission of the second part is due in some measure to the same inability. Luke apparently did not know what to make of it. He felt instinctively that it did not fit in to the supposed situation and mood. Two things would give him this feeling: the unmistakable tone of sadness pervading the words, and the description of the persons addressed as labouring and heavy laden. "I am meek and lowly in heart." Luke understood better than some modern critics

that these words were the description of a mood, not a piece of self-eulogy; and taking them so, he perceived their unsuitableness to a moment of triumphant gladness. That was one reason for omission. Another was the inapplicability of the epithets "labouring and heavy laden" to the case of the Seventy or the Twelve. There need, indeed, have been no difficulty on that score if the words, as Resch supposes,<sup>1</sup> referred to the fatigue connected with the recent mission, and, as employed by Jesus, meant: Come, ye tired and weary Evangelists, and I will give you a recreative holiday. But I do not think it possible that an idea so utterly prosaic could ever have entered Luke's head. He knew enough of Christ's intellectual habitudes to be aware that the labour and the burden must be symbols of spiritual experiences. And just there lay his perplexity. He could not imagine the members of the disciple-circle as the subjects of any such experiences. Were they not rather happy men in possession of enviable privileges and powers? Why should they be asked to come to Christ's school? Had they not been there for some time already, and had they not made some progress in the lore which brought light and peace and contentment to the spirit? There was nothing for it but to omit the words so long as they were supposed to refer to the disciple-circle. They might have been preserved as words spoken to other persons, as expressing a desire for a discipleship of a more radical and satisfying character. But that course was not open to Luke, who was ever anxious to spare the Twelve. So viewed, the "Come unto Me" would indicate dissatisfaction with all actual disciples; therefore, even with them. Words bearing such a meaning Luke would certainly not report.

Yet one other argument against the authenticity of this famous saying remains to be disposed of; that, viz., based

<sup>1</sup> In his recent work on *The Extra-canonical Parallels to Matthew and Mark*, p. 132.

on an alleged literary resemblance between it and *the Prayer of Jesus the Son of Sirach*, in the last chapter of the Old Testament Apocryphal book which bears the name of the *Wisdom of Sirach*. That a certain resemblance does exist, I am not disposed to deny. There is just enough to have led me years ago, in reading the book, to note in the margin a reference to Matthew xi. 28-30. It will be best to reproduce the passage in which the likeness appears, so that readers may judge for themselves. In the version of the Apocrypha, recently published by the Revisers of the Authorised Version of the Old and New Testaments, it stands thus :

- Chap. li. 23. *Draw near unto me, ye unlearned, and lodge in the house of instruction.*
24. Say wherefore are ye lacking in these things, and your souls are very thirsty.
25. I opened my mouth and spake: get her for yourselves without money.
26. *Put your neck under the yoke and let your soul receive instruction; she is hard at hand to find.*
27. Behold with your eyes how that I laboured but a little and found for myself *much rest.*
28. Get you instruction with a great sum of silver and gain much gold by her.
29. May your soul rejoice in His mercy, and may ye not be put to shame in praising Him.
30. Work your work before the time cometh, and in His time He will give you your reward.

The resemblance is in the passages I have marked in italics, and it is real so far as it goes. Far from wishing to

deny this, I am rather tempted to exaggerate the extent of the likeness, because if it were certain that the author of the words in the Gospel, whoever he was, had the Prayer of the Son of Sirach in his view, an argument might thence be drawn for the unity of the whole passage (Matt. xi. 25-30). For Sirach's prayer, like this evangelic section, begins with a prayer and ends with an invitation, and the first word of both prayers is the same.<sup>1</sup> If the utterance of the later Jesus be a composition based on the devout outpouring of the earlier, then Matthew has preserved the whole of it and Luke has given only a fragment. It is worth noting a literary affinity which has any chance of yielding so satisfactory a result. But it may be feared that what we gain in one direction we lose in another. In other words, the question readily suggests itself, Does the literary affinity, once recognised, not compel the admission that Matthew xi. 25-30 is not a genuine utterance of our Lord, but a composition by the Evangelist, or by some one from whom he has borrowed? Without hesitation I say, by no means. Why should not the resemblance in question be the result of an acquaintance on the part of Jesus Himself with the *Wisdom of Sirach*, an acquaintance dating possibly from boyhood, and leaving its traces in phrases which perhaps unconsciously colour the style of His address to ideal disciples? How far, as a matter of fact, acquaintance with an Apocryphal book such as Sirach was likely to be possessed by non-professional Galileans in the time of Christ, I do not know. But on the hypothesis we are considering some one belonging to the early Christian Church knew the book; and if that was possible for him, why not also for Jesus? And if the book was within His reach, I do not think he would have any scruple about perusing it. He might read it as a good book though not canonical; and

<sup>1</sup> "I will give thanks to Thee," in Sirach; "I thank Thee," in the Gospel.

though abstaining in the time of His public ministry from citing it as authoritative Scripture, He might not think it necessary to be anxiously on His guard against allowing its phrases to find an occasional faint echo in His own style.

All this is merely hypothetical reasoning. Whether the resemblance between the two devotional utterances be more than an accident, I am not prepared confidently to determine. It is so slight that it might quite well be an utterly undesigned coincidence. It concerns the expression chiefly, hardly at all the thought, in respect of which the utterance of the Lord is incomparably superior. Even in the matter of style the words of the earlier Jesus are poor by comparison. How artificial and stilted its diction compared with the simplicity, felicity and spontaneity of the "Come unto Me"! This has taken its place among the golden words of the religious literature of mankind. The "Draw near unto me" of Sirach has nothing in it to insure even temporary fame, not to speak of immortality. It is redolent of the lamp rather than of Divine inspiration. I owe an apology to devout Christian people for placing the two prayers side by side even for a moment. My excuse must be that modern critics have compelled me.

The unity of Matthew xi. 25-30 justifies an important inference as to the central truth the great Master is to communicate to His ideal disciples. It is that God is a Father. In the first part of the devotional soliloquy He has spoken of that truth as a secret which it is His exclusive prerogative to reveal. It must be supposed to be present to His mind when He proceeds to invite the labouring and heavy laden. That truth He will be pleased to reveal to them. The revelation He expects to give them deep satisfaction. As the Revealer of that truth, they will recognise in Him a Teacher standing in sharp contrast to their other masters, and One whose yoke is easy because the truth He teaches sets free from everything in religion that

imposes fetters on the spirit. Nothing but a true doctrine of God can meet the requirements of the case. The vital thing in religion and in life is how we conceive God. On the idea we cherish of the Divine Being it depends whether our religion is to be a bane or a blessing, emancipating or enslaving, in moral tendency elevating or degrading. Come then to Christ's school, all ye who desire the true knowledge of God. Learn of Him how to think of God, man and their relations. His doctrine solves all vital problems: the problems of past sin, of present duty, and of future destiny.

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