

The Elder Brother of the Prodigal Son.

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THE late Archbishop Trench, in what he modestly calls *Notes on the Parables of our Lord*, a work which went through many editions, and which should still be in the hands of close students of the Gospels—this ripest scholar and delightful critic of the Greek Testament has not been so successful, I think, in his treatment of this parable as in some of the others. He rightly rejects the shallow theory that, of the two brothers, the elder represents the Jews and the younger the Gentiles. But he has failed, in my judgment, in his exposition of the two parties immediately in view.

The true key to the interpretation of this parable is to be found in the scene which gave occasion to the utterance of it. It is the last of three parables, all designed to illustrate the same truth, and that truth is expressed in naked terms by our Lord Himself. Let us hear the evangelist, Luke xv. 1, etc. : 'Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners (profligate characters, harlots) for to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured (muttered), saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them'—He keeps company with disreputable characters. Little did they know what brought them in crowds to hear Him ; and still less did they know why Jesus encouraged their approach. They had heard Him preaching in the streets and lanes of the city words which never were heard before from mortal lips, words which were good news especially to them. One day they heard Him say, 'Come unto Me all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' What! rest for us? We never knew a day's rest since we went astray. But He says He will give it to us, and somehow He seems able to do it. Another day we heard Him say, 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.' Sinners? alas for us, we are steeped in sin! We hate the life we are living and bitterly we repent, and gladly will we come at His call. *What* and *who* this wonderful man is, we cannot tell. But His voice is the voice of heaven ; and when He looks to us, it is a look of such pity that it goes to our heart. We will go wherever we can hear He is preaching ; and here they are all crowding around Him. And Jesus saw and welcomed them, and for once He will let the Pharisees and scribes

know clearly why He does so. He does this, in His usual way, by parables. Three parables He speaks, all to illustrate truths, of which the one of the prodigal son is the last and richest. Our Lord takes the Pharisees before Him as what they professed to be, children of Abraham, devout and believing Jews, the ninety and nine sheep already within the fold, who go out and in and find pasture, while the harlot sinners whom He was welcoming home to their Father in heaven He represents as the one sheep whom the shepherd lost, but brings back with rejoicing. 'Likewise I say unto you, there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons that need no repentance'—repentance such as these prodigals. Like the son in the parable, they 'have come to themselves,' and say, 'I will arise, and go to my Father,' confessing how basely they had prostituted themselves, and how unworthy they are to be received again into His house ; and the Father, seeing them afar off, has run to them in His person and is falling on their necks and kissing them, and saying, 'This my son was dead, and is alive again ; he was lost, and is found.'

If this is the correct view of these represented by the prodigal son, it is plain that in his 'Notes' on this parable the Archbishop has not given the right one. He says that in the departure to a far country from his father's house, the prodigal son represents '*man's desire to live apart from God, to be a god to himself.*' This, indeed, is an undeniable and lamentable truth ; but it is not *the* truth represented by that part of the parable. In *preaching* upon this parable this truth which expresses itself in these words, 'Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways' (Job xxi. 14), ought to be enlarged upon and emphasised, but only as an *application* of the parable.

So much for the *younger brother* of the parable. Now for the *elder brother*. Here, also, I venture to think that the good Archbishop has not been successful. The usual opinion is that he represents the large number of those who lead a virtuous life, respectable people, who never abandon themselves to vicious courses. But would our Lord have called these 'righteous

men'? I cannot think so. For in Scripture phraseology, 'the righteous' mean godly persons. 'Thou, Lord, wilt bless the righteous; with favour wilt Thou compass him as with a shield.' 'The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree,' etc. The question (says the Archbishop) is embarrassed with difficulties, whichever of the two theories about it be embraced—whether, with some, we suppose the righteous Pharisees, or, with others, the hypocritical Pharisees; both of which have something to say for themselves. He chooses a middle course, which he thinks involves fewer difficulties, namely, that of the elder brother represents '*men really righteous, but of a low, legal self-righteousness.*' But such nice distinctions between one kind of real righteousness and another are not in our Lord's manner of teaching by parables. What He says of the elder brother here is all in praise of him, and a higher character no father could give of a son who had ever been the best

of sons than this, '*Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.*' He even thinks it necessary to make the father justify himself to so good a son for not rejecting his prodigal but now penitent brother, and even inviting 'his friends and neighbours' (meaning 'the angels in heaven') to rejoice with him, 'because this my son was *dead*, and is *alive* again; he was *lost*, and is *found*.'

In every age since this parable was spoken, it has been found that those who from their youth up have lived godly lives have been reluctant to keep company with reclaimed profligates, or to believe in their conversion. And at the Lord's Table they would rather not sit beside them. But such excellent Christians have need to be told that Heaven sees them in a different light from themselves, and that there is more joy among the angels of God over one of these restored prodigals than over themselves; because it is a greater miracle of grace.

Sermonettes on the Golden Texts.

BY THE REV. R. C. FORD, M.A., GRIMSBY.

The Empty Grave.

'He is not here, but is risen.'—LUKE xxiv. 6.

VERY early on that first Easter morning the women were sorrowfully journeying to the Saviour's tomb with the spices which they had prepared for the purpose of embalming His body. They anticipated many difficulties in the accomplishment of their self-imposed task. There were the stone and the seal and the guard. It was with no small surprise therefore that they perceived that the stone was rolled away. As they peered into the dark depths of the tomb they observed two men in shining garments standing beside them, who, pointing into the darkness, asked the purpose of their visit, for He whom they were seeking was not there, but had risen.

I. THE ANGELS' ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE RESURRECTION.—Angels announced His birth, and also His resurrection. Mark says of the one who addressed the women, that he was a young man. Angels are never old. 'The oldest angels are the youngest.' The longer they wait on the Lord the

more they renew their strength. Such angels were always about our Lord, though but seldom visible. At critical hours they attended Him to minister unto Him. At the resurrection they made their way into this dark tomb. No human eye saw the awakening of our Saviour from the deep sleep of death. But these angels in all probability gazed upon the greater mystery of a dead Saviour, as well as on what was to them the lesser mystery of a rising Saviour. It was a sight more wonderful than the resurrection of dry bones witnessed by Ezekiel in his vision. Hence when the women came to the tomb they were able to announce to them that that event had happened of which Jesus had told them during His earthly life. The angels are but one branch of God's great family, and the work by which Christ reconciles us to God also brings angels and men nearer to each other. Here we see them familiar, condescending, free to those who seek the same Jesus whom they adore.

II. THE ANGELS' EXPOSTULATION WITH UNBELIEF.—The angels gently chide them for their unbelief. 'Why seek ye . . . He is not here . . .