

*THE LIFE OF CHRIST ACCORDING TO ST.
MARK.¹*

XVIII. TEACHING BY PARABLES, IV. 1-34.

THE previous sections of the Gospel have been concerned with the gifts, the character, the work of Jesus, rather than His teaching. We have been told that His marvellous powers of healing drew crowds after Him everywhere, and that His discourses were so remarkable that the people listened even when He did not work miracles. His influence in Galilee had become a source of anxiety to the supporters of the government. Something, indeed, has been partly stated, partly implied as to His teaching; He had announced the imminence of a new dispensation, the Kingdom of God, but we have been told nothing as to the nature of the kingdom. We have, however, learnt that His teaching was ethical, a demand for repentance accompanied by a promise of forgiveness. Moreover He had repudiated the current idea that external ceremonial observances were amongst the essentials of religion; and He had been compelled to break with the representatives of popular orthodoxy, the scribes and Pharisees, and even with His own family.

St. Mark now devotes a short section to some of the more remarkable sayings of Jesus as to the coming—not the nature—of the Kingdom. They were not all uttered on the same occasion, but they belong to what may be called the second stage of the early ministry of Jesus by the Lake of Galilee near Capernaum. He was still a popular idol; great multitudes pressed upon Him so closely that

¹ These studies do not profess to be an adequate historical and doctrinal account of Christ, but are an attempt to set forth the impression which St. Mark's account of our Lord would make on a reader whose only source of information was the Second Gospel, and who knew nothing of Christian dogmatics.

He was obliged to speak from a boat moored at a little distance from the shore.

At this time Jesus adopted a method of teaching by parables, figurative sayings or stories with a moral ; but to His public audiences He told only the stories and reserved the morals for the disciples. " He did not speak to them without a parable, but in private He explained everything to His own disciples." Amongst other things He explained why He used this method : " It is given to you to know the secret truth concerning the Kingdom of God, but to those without it is all set forth in parables, that ' seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand, lest at any time they should turn and be forgiven.' " This reserve indicates a revulsion from the spontaneous enthusiasm of Jesus' first preaching. How quickly it came about we do not know, for the brevity of St. Mark creates an impression of rapid movement which is partly illusory ; but probably a few weeks showed that the preaching of the Kingdom to the people was a failure. The audiences which crowded round Jesus were not seriously affected. They came as the Jews of old to Ezekiel because Jesus was " unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument," and there was the added attraction that they might possibly witness a miracle. But there was no moral or spiritual reformation in Galilee ; these crowds were not the advance guard of the Kingdom in its victorious coming. He was not encouraged in any way by this empty popularity, and His hopes turned to the inner circle of intimate disciples, so that the public ministry became a means of enlisting an occasional recruit, and His main work not so much preaching, but the training of preachers.

Hence, He Himself spoke in parables. The ancient East, even more than modern England, loved to take—or leave—its instruction in the form of proverb, apologue,

fable, allegory, or anecdote, and no doubt this new feature in the teaching of Jesus added to His popularity, while the anger of the Pharisees would be touched with contempt when they saw the arch-heretic assume the character of professional story-teller. But to us it seems that the transparent and suggestive figures used in the parables would attract thoughtful, serious, and inquiring minds, and thus win for Jesus the kind of disciples He desired, while the careless crowd were merely amused. But the Gospel does not thus explain the use of this method. According to St. Mark, Jesus declared that He spoke in parables in order that His hearers might neither understand His meaning nor profit by His teaching. The Evangelist, in his matter-of-fact way, reports this saying without comment, and the record does not suggest any complete explanation, although various helpful ideas would occur to a sympathetic reader. In the first place, the saying is a quotation, probably current in some conventional sense, familiar to Jesus, to His hearers, and to St. Mark, but quite unknown to us. Again, men use quotations for the sake of some one point bearing on the subject with which they are dealing, and cite the rest of a quotation merely for the sake of completeness, and without intending to apply all its literal meaning to present circumstances. Some help, too, is given by the parable of the Sower. Direct personal appeal to a miscellaneous audience, sowing on high roads, in thickets, and on thin layers of soil that half hid the underlying rock, secured numerous adherents, who might even obtain the experience of forgiveness. But, for the most part, such converts soon lapsed; some became openly indifferent, while others injured the cause more deeply by continuing to be partisans when they had ceased to be disciples. Those who had passed through such an experience and fallen back to their old level, were further from the kingdom than they had been before. "For as touching those who were once enlightened

and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost and tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the age to come, and then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance." Hence, the wise husbandmen would only sow in good ground which had been prepared for the seed; the teaching in parables was a form of preparation in which the spiritual significance of the message was mercifully veiled from those to whom it would have been "a savour of death unto death."

The parables of this section, the Sower, the City on a Hill, the Lamp and the Bushel, the Seed Growing Secretly, and the Mustard Seed, reveal the mind of Jesus as to His early ministry and the future of the Kingdom. In the Sower He recognizes without bitterness or discouragement the comparative failure of indiscriminate preaching.

There had, indeed, been a measure of success, good ground which brought forth abundantly; but the figure of sowing used in three of these parables implies the limited usefulness of public preaching; sowing is only effectual on certain soils under certain conditions, usually after careful and laborious preparation, and at the right season. Often the germination of the seed is only a beginning, which speedily comes to a disastrous end. The parable of the Seed Growing Secretly recognizes that in the Kingdom, as in farming, human agency can effect little; the preacher may sow, but he must leave the result to the working of heavenly powers upon the heart, and must allow such working its appointed time.

These parables also show how the hopes of Jesus centred in the inner circle of disciples. From them the Kingdom would grow; the seed in the good ground would multiply a hundredfold; the mustard seed would become a great tree. So far the real beginnings of the Kingdom were very small, but they were the earnest of a great future. Indeed, in

spite of difficulties and delays, the Kingdom was so real and present to Jesus, that He already foresaw the troubles which would follow its establishment. In the parable of the Sower, the birds of the air snatch up the seed from the wayside ; but they lodge in the branches of the tree sprung from the mustard seed. When the powers of evil had failed to destroy the Kingdom, they would find an entrance into it, and fight against it from within. Obviously, an intimate acquaintance with the Twelve must have shown that the Kingdom, of which they were to be the heralds, could not be without blemish—Judas Iscariot was one of the number.

Some aphorisms recorded with the parables may have originated in His sense of the failings of His followers, and in His anxiety that the chosen few should rise to their opportunity and responsibility. "Take heed how ye hear ; with what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you, and more shall be given unto you."

The parable of the Lamp and the Bushel implies that the private teaching to the disciples would not always be esoteric ; Jesus was kindling, keeping alive, and cherishing a light which, at the right time, would be put on a stand and shine through the whole house. "There is nothing hid but that it may be manifested, or made secret, but that it may come to light." The truth that for a moment was a secret between Jesus and His disciples, would one day be proclaimed throughout the world.

XIX. THE STILLING OF THE STORM, IV. 35-41.

Up to this point it has been possible to trace a certain progress in the narrative, in the revelation of the character of Jesus, and in the development of His work ; now we have a series of incidents in which St. Mark's intention is to illustrate the greatness of His miraculous gifts by

instances surpassing any yet hitherto recorded. The first of these is the Stilling of the Storm.

At the close, as it seems, of a long day's teaching, from a boat moored at a little distance from the land, Jesus did not land on the western coast and go home to Capernaum; He was too tired to run the gauntlet of the curious crowd with its importunity for miracles and deeds of healing; and He bade the disciples take Him across to the other side. The little voyage was a sudden inspiration; no preparation had been made for it, and they took Him just as He was. Tired out He lay down on a cushion in the stern and fell fast asleep.

All at once the lake was swept by one of those sudden storms which are common on inland waters surrounded by hills; the waves beat over the boat, and it seemed as if it must sink; but Jesus still slumbered in utter weariness; and the disciples forgot Him, absorbed in their labour and their danger. At last they could do no more, and their thoughts turned to their Master. The whole Kingdom of God, the answer to the prayers of many generations, the fulfilment of the promises of God, the hope for the future of the world, was on board that fishing smack; and the boat might be swamped at any moment. But the disciples were simply concerned for their own lives—what is the Kingdom of God to drowning men? They were irritated by the contrast between their own terrified excitement, and the serene repose of Jesus; they roused Him with a petulant, "Master, carest Thou not that we perish?" He woke no doubt to the vague confusion that follows the sudden termination of deep sleep; the wild scene broke upon Him; the tumult of winds and waves, the pitching and rolling of the boat, the incoherent cries of His disciples; but in a moment He was Master of Himself and His circumstances. "He arose and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still: And the wind ceased, and there was a great

calm." To Him, with His imperturbable serenity in the face of such troubles, the terror of the disciples seemed strange. "Why," said He, "are ye so fearful? How is it that you have so little faith?"

XX. THE DEMONIAK AMONG THE TOMBS, V. 1-20.

We next read how Jesus landed in the district east of the lake, and met a demoniac among the tombs, and cast out devils from him. Like other demoniacs, the man saluted Him as the Messiah, the Son of God Most High. The incident is narrated on account of some special features; it was a signal victory over the powers of evil because the man was possessed by a legion—or, as we should say, by a whole army—of demons; and their presence, number, and malignity were shown by their passing from the man into a herd of swine, which forthwith ran headlong over a precipice into the lake, and were drowned. The chief result was that the people of the district were alarmed at the loss of their property, and induced Jesus to leave their country at once, so that the miracle prevented Him from preaching the Kingdom there. Hence Jesus departed from His usual practice, and, instead of bidding the sometime demoniac be silent about his experience, He bade him go home and tell his friends what the Lord had done for him.

The population of this eastern district was largely Gentile, and the readiness with which Jesus departed may be an indication that He felt no call to preach to any but Jews. Perhaps, indeed, He had simply sought solitude there and rest from active ministry; and if so, the incident did not affect His work.

It is doubtful whether the reader whose impressions we are trying to realize would have thought it necessary to discuss the morality of our Lord's conduct—at any rate St. Mark had no misgivings. There was, indeed, a wholesale destruction of other people's property without compensa-

tion or apology; but this would seem to the reader the result of an unforeseen accident; who could calculate, or be responsible for, the vagaries of an army of demons expelled from their chosen habitation?

XXI. JAIKUS' DAUGHTER AND THE WOMAN WITH THE
ISSUE, V. 21-43.

We come next to two incidents, the Raising of Jairus' Daughter, and the Healing of the Woman with the Issue, which are so closely combined that they must be considered together.

When Jesus again reached the western shore of the Lake, He was met by the usual crowd. On this occasion they were escorting, so to speak, a ruler of a synagogue, probably at Capernaum—a man of some position, corresponding roughly to a deacon or churchwarden. His twelve-year old daughter lay dying, and he begged Jesus to save her. Jesus went with him, and the crowd followed and thronged Him.

In the confusion another sufferer found her opportunity. A woman had suffered for many years from an obstinate ailment, an issue of blood, which had defied such skill as the doctors of the time possessed. She had absolute faith in Jesus, but in her modesty and diffidence she had shrunk from obtruding herself upon His notice. Now it seemed that she could snatch a blessing unperceived. She made her way through the crowd and touched His robe; at once she felt that she was healed and tried to escape as unnoticed as she had come.

But there was an abrupt pause in the movement of the crowd; Jesus had stopped and turned round, and was looking with searching eyes on those about Him. As He turned, He spoke with a certain sharpness inspired by a new and startling experience; "Who touched my clothes?" The words seemed to the woman to be charged with stern reproof, and her retreat was arrested. A moment's respite

was afforded her by the disciples' answer to their Master's question, "Thou seest the crowd pressing on Thee and sayest, Who touched me?" But Jesus took no notice. He had felt a touch that drew power from Him, as no touch had ever done before, and His eyes still sought to discover who had done it. They seemed to the woman to single her out, and, frightened and trembling, she came and fell at His feet and told Him all the truth, fearing perhaps that she might lose the stolen blessing. But He comforted her with gracious words, "Daughter, thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace, and be healed of thy plague."

As He spoke, messengers from the ruler's house made their way through the crowd to where their master stood by the side of Jesus, impatient at the delay that was wasting precious moments.

"Thy daughter," they said, "is dead; it is no use troubling the Teacher."

Jesus' reputation as a worker of miracles was limited; no one supposed that He could raise the dead. Jesus, however, heard the message, and bade the ruler "Fear not, only believe." The ruler had seen what faith had done for the woman, let him imitate her. In order to appreciate our Lord's quiet confidence at this crisis we must remember that He had already spent a measure of His healing power upon the woman with the issue, and that He went straight from her to Jairus' daughter. He did what He could to collect His forces. Just before, in His patient, tolerant, simple kindness, He had permitted the crowd to hustle and jostle Him; now He asserted His authority and dismissed the thronging multitude and even the majority of the Apostles. Only three were allowed to accompany Him, Peter, James, and John, three out of the four fishermen whom He called first of all; He was fain to strengthen Himself by the sympathy of His dearest friends.

When they reached the house, the ceremonies consequent

on a death had begun ; and the air was filled with clamour, wailing, and shrieking. Jesus surveyed the scene for a while, and then entered the inner court where the mourners were assembled. His entrance there was a momentary lull in the tempest of lamentation, and the mourners looked curiously at the miraculous Healer who had come too late. What had He come for ? He was going to speak. What would He have to say ?

“ Why,” said He, “ do you clamour and wail ? The child did not die ; she is only asleep.”

They burst out into peals of laughter ; but He bade them go, and they obeyed. Then He took with Him the father and mother and the three disciples ; and went into the room where the child lay, and took her by the hand, and said, “ Damsel, rise.” At once she got up, and began to move about the room—probably she went straight to her mother. The little group of spectators were carried out of themselves by the tide of overwhelming emotions. When they recovered, the first impulse of some of them was to rush out and spread the wonderful news ; but Jesus checked them, and bade them tell no one. Then, with that absolute self-possession which He had maintained since He had heard the news of the child’s supposed death, He told them to give her some food.

There are a few points which must be considered at rather more length. We have referred to the self-possession of Jesus. Our narrative constantly shows that one chief feature of the memories which the early Church cherished concerning Him was His perfect calmness in the most exciting circumstances. He was not startled when He woke in the boat, and found Himself face to face with death ; He was not daunted when it seemed as if the task set Him was not merely to heal the sick but to raise the dead. Moreover, He did not seek to call forth His mysterious powers by any exciting stimulant such as music, or ecstatic

ritual, or an expectant crowd ; but He sought strength in quietness and self-recollection, and the mute sympathy of friends. When He triumphed over disease and demons there was no sign of exultation. Yet sometimes He was stirred by what would seem a matter of course to ordinary men, as for instance by the cold-blooded cruelty of fanatics. Again He was sensitive to influences which did not affect others. In this incident he distinguished the woman's timid touch amid the pressure of the jostling crowd, as a mother, even in her sleep, singles out her infant's feeble cry from a babel of loud noises. There was, so to speak, an emotional circuit set up between Him and her, so that He felt the shock of her importunate demand for healing and the immediate drain upon His mysterious forces. By such an experience even He was startled.

Another point is the contradiction between the words of Jesus and the statements of the household of Jairus. According to them the girl actually died ; Jesus however said that she did not die but was sleeping.¹ We may assume that in such a conflict of authority St. Mark intends his readers to accept the view taken by Jesus. How then did Jesus know that she was not dead ? Had He questioned the messengers, and drawn His conclusion from the further details He elicited ; or has St. Mark omitted to tell us that Jesus had already seen the child before He checked the mourners. Either view is possible, but the following is a more probable explanation. He had set out for Jairus' house in the assured conviction that He was going to heal the child ; the news of her death seemed incredible because He was not conscious of any power or commission to raise the dead. So that if they were right, His conviction that He was going to heal the child was a mistake. That was impossible, therefore He knew that she

¹ The view that Jesus spoke figuratively, meaning that though the girl actually died, she was not permanently dead, but would soon be resuscitated, seems improbable if not impossible.

was not dead. This view may have been confirmed to Him by some mysterious intuition, such as that by which He was made aware of the woman's touch and its meaning.

Another problem is involved in the command to the girl's friends to tell no one. It was probably called forth by the special circumstances of the moment, but this can hardly be all. The words as they stand would have a general application, as in other passages. Yet the command seems futile. The child's supposed death was generally known; the public lamentation had begun; and it would have been impossible to conceal the fact that she was alive. Some explanation may perhaps be found in the misunderstanding as to the supposed death. The household would cling to the belief that the girl actually died; and the popular form of the story would be that Jesus had raised her from the dead. Thus Jesus' reputation as a wonder-worker would be still further enhanced, and His work hindered; but the excitement might be somewhat checked if Jairus and his family refused to talk about the matter.

One more point before we pass on. The popular tradition would certainly be that Jesus had restored a dead girl to life. If, therefore, St. Mark had had no better authority than popular tradition, he would have made it clear that Jairus' daughter actually died, and would have left no loophole for doubt. St. Mark's reserve and accuracy on this point can only be due to the testimony of an eye-witness; that is to say, the Evangelist was acquainted, directly or indirectly, with an account of the incident given by one of the three Apostles.

XXII. THE VISIT TO NAZARETH, VI. 1-6.

In spite of the precaution taken by Jesus, the mighty works discussed in the last section must have encouraged the people to resort to Him, and have stimulated their importunity. Now, therefore, Jesus withdrew from the district,

and at last turned His steps homeward to Nazareth. No doubt the Nazarenes had heard from time to time of the doings of their fellow townsman ; of His eloquence and His miracles—and also of His heresy ; His contempt for the law ; His lax life ;¹ His neglect of the Sabbath ; His flouting of constituted authorities, holy and learned men like the scribes ; and the bad company He kept, how He went about the country with a disreputable rabble at His heels, tax-gatherers, sinners, and such folk. There must have been Nazarene sympathisers with the Pharisees who told many scandalous tales about Jesus. The last thing that was known for certain about Him was that His family were convinced that He was mad, and had set out for Capernaum in order to place Him under restraint. The townspeople may have heard how He had quarrelled with His family, and had disowned them.

Now, however, He and His disciples appeared at Nazareth ; and people could see for themselves that one at any rate of the charges against Him was true, He certainly had a tax-gatherer for one of His chosen disciples. We are not told how He spent His time till the Sabbath ; but when the Day of Rest came, He went, according to His custom, to the Synagogue, and began to teach. For a time the people listened, they were even impressed ; but soon there arose a hostile murmur. What right had this man to speak with an air of wisdom and authority ? Who was He that people should credit Him with working miracles ? He was only a carpenter, a member of a poor family known to them all. The murmur grew till it became impossible for Jesus to continue His teaching. He uttered a brief emphatic protest, “ A prophet is not without honour except in his own town, and amongst his own kinsfolk, and his own family ” ; and then sat down, or more probably turned and left the synagogue. Soon after He left the town.

¹ As the Pharisees would consider it to be

In the interval, before He departed, He healed a few sick folk. St. Mark tells us that, with these exceptions, "He could there do no mighty work." Not indeed that He tried and failed, but partly because His fellow townsmen did not believe in His powers of healing—"He marvelled at their unbelief"; and partly because He did not feel the spiritual impulse which moved Him to undertake "mighty works," and assured Him of power to perform them.

The rebuff at Nazareth was the third stage in the failure of the preaching of the Kingdom. Jesus had failed to gain the Pharisees, and had thus provoked the hostility of the only living religious force amongst the Jews. His appeal to the people generally had been powerless to effect any widespread moral and spiritual reformation. But, hitherto, in spite of the interruptions of demoniacs, and the criticism of the Pharisees, He had shown Himself master of any audience He addressed. Now, however, in His native town, amongst His kinsfolk, His old playmates and acquaintances, He could not command a hearing.

Probably the episode did not affect His public reputation, but it must have been a profound discouragement to Jesus. Rejection by His own family and townfolk might well seem an omen of rejection by His own people, Israel; the Shadow of the Cross was already falling across His path. Moreover, the incident was a new revelation of the hardness of men's hearts, and Jesus was astonished at their unbelief. The astonishment of Jesus marks Him out as a stranger on the earth, a visitant from some higher, purer, and nobler world. He is surprised at what we take for granted, the harshness, selfishness, and suspicion which we call human nature.

When He left Nazareth, He did not return to Capernaum, or to the shores of the Lake, but carried His message to the neighbouring villages. Thus the imminent coming of the Kingdom was preached in a new district.

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