

CHAPTER XX

THE REJECTED OVERTURES OF GOD

THE PARABLE OF THE CRUEL VINEDRESSERS

"Hear another parable: There was a man that was a householder, who planted a vineyard, and set a hedge about it, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into another country. And when the season of the fruits drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, to receive his fruits. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them in like manner. But afterward he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But the husbandmen, when they saw the son, said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and take his inheritance. And they took him, and cast him forth out of the vineyard, and killed him. When therefore the lord of the vineyard shall come, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those miserable men, and will let out the vineyard unto other husbandmen, who shall render him the fruits of their seasons."

(Matthew 21:33-41)

(Parallel passages: Mark 12:1-9; Luke 20:9-16)

THE PARABLE OF THE REJECTED CORNERSTONE

"Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures,
The stone which the builders rejected,
The same was made the head of the corner;
This was from the Lord,
And it is marvellous in our eyes?
Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And he that falleth on this stone shall be broken to pieces: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will scatter him as dust. And when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them."

(Matthew 21:42-45)

(Parallel passages: Mark 12:10, 11; Luke 20:17, 18)

CHAPTER XX

THE REJECTED OVERTURES OF GOD

The Parable of the Cruel Vinedressers *The Parable of the Rejected Cornerstone*

Shakespeare could recompose an ancient tale so that under his magic it glowed with unsuspected colors, and laid on the mind undreamed-of compulsions. So, in higher manner, with Jesus. Often had Israel been likened to a vineyard.¹ The simile had become almost prosaic. But under the touch of Jesus, it was reborn a concerto with ravishing melodies, movements to melt the spirit, and finally a crash of doom. See how this old story,² grown too familiar, is changed "unto something rich and strange."

First, it sounds the gamut of *human privilege*. The vineyard was "planted"; it was not a wilderness; it was a well-cultivated plot on a very fruitful hill. It was "hedged about" to protect it from wild beasts. It had its "winepress" for the harvesting of fruit; its "tower" whence the approach of marauding foes could be seen, and where the vinedressers could find shelter. Every gift had been lavished, every preparation made, that it might "bring forth abundantly." The reference is clearly to Israel. Abraham, the father of his people, had left Ur of the Chaldees, because it was a city of evil breath. From that moment the Hebrews were a chosen people destined to bequeath to mankind the consciousness of a Holy God, as the

¹ The classic instance is Isaiah 5:1-7. Others are Deuteronomy 32:32, Psalm 80:8-16, Isaiah 27:2-7, Jeremiah 2:21, Hosea 10:1.

² This parable is clearly of a strongly allegorical character. Its authenticity has been questioned (a) on that ground, (b) because it reflects a historical situation later than that of the time of the telling of the story, and assumes Christ's death, and (c) because it claims Messiahship with a frankness inconsistent with the usually guarded claims of Jesus. In rebuttal it may be urged *seriatim* (a) that some of the parables have a strongly allegorical cast, as, for example, the Parable of the Soils, (b) if the parable were of a later date it would probably suggest the manner of the death of Jesus and make reference to His *resurrection*, (c) the Messianic claims of Jesus became more open as he approached that death of which he seemed to have clear premonition. (See Peake's Commentary, p. 695, and Professor Burkitt's comment in the "Century Bible," volume on Mark, p. 325.)

Greeks were later destined to bequeath the sense of beauty, and the Romans the strength of governmental law. All endeavors converged on Israel that she might fulfill her appointed task. Moses came to lead her toward a land "flowing with milk and honey," and to lay upon her great decrees—tablets of stone reflecting the eternal verities written on the fleshly tablets of the heart. Israel had been "planted." She had been taught the worship of the one God while other nations were still immersed in polytheistic barbarism; she had been blessed in singers whose psalms have since become the world's confessional and hymnary; she had been "hedged about" by prophetic warnings, harrowed by persecutions, and fertilized by countless mercies.

The story strikes the note of *human freedom*. The vine-dressers in this story were under no restraint. They were left in sole possession. They could live as freemen. The only condition of their leasehold was that they should pay in fruit produced. Such is our freedom. It is not an unlimited freedom (the garden has its bounds), but it is within limits a real freedom. We are not free to choose our heredity, but we are free to make the best or worst of it; not free to choose our native talent, but free to double the talent or to bury it; not free to select the vineyard, but free within the vineyard's capacity to hold it to ransom for its harvest (even though with bruised hands), or to surrender it to a chaos of weeds. Such a freedom is attested by valid evidence. We know it by what Dr. Henry Van Dyke³ has called "our judgments of regret" and "our judgments of condemnation." Why should we regret any action if it is merely automatic? Yet we do regret. Why should we condemn any action, as, for instance, the action of a man brutishly whipping a child, if both he and the child are predetermined to the event by an inexorable chain of circumstance? Yet we do condemn. Freedom is its own evidence. On that score no apology need be made. Human love is its own evidence, and when love knows itself to be love not a million experimental crucibles nor all the findings of modern psychology can add to or subtract from its conviction. If we cannot

³ Henry C. Van Dyke, "Joy and Power," Chapter II.

trust our innate knowledge of freedom—a real freedom, though within limits—we cannot trust either the sight of our eyes or the hearing of our ears, much less the instinctive faith of the scientist that the universe is cosmos and not chaos.

Having sounded the theme of privilege, the parable next reveals an equal *responsibility*. There was a rightful demand for the fruit of the garden. The plot of Israel was given, not for pleasuring, but that there might come to birth a race washed white. The veil of allegory is translucent; we can see beyond cavil that it is the fruit of character which God expects. The teaching of Jesus was constantly concerned with human worth. When the disciples prattled of earthly gain, He swung the discussion back to sanity: "What doth it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his life?"⁴ When men of fine promise were squandering their powers on a fishing boat, He called them to the human crusade: "Come ye after me, and I will make you fishers of men."⁵ If the question of harvest prospects excited them, He recalled them to the foremost garnering: "Lift up your eyes! The fields—the human fields—are white already unto harvest."⁶ The demand of God is that this little plot of earth shall produce an industry that blooms like a garden, homes that are like ripened grain, souls ever "wearing the white flower of the blameless life."⁷ That obligation was laid on Israel, and it is laid on every land. To deny the obligation were futile: who among us can command his conscience? The moral imperative moves before our human pilgrimage, condemning or approving, speaking ever in regal tones. It were as foolish to deny responsibility as to deny freedom. Thus the parable reveals both privilege and obligation, and, with these, Jesus' overwhelming sense of foreordaining by God. God planted the garden of Israel. God hedged it. God sent his messengers unto it. The succession of the prophets was not happenstance. Human history is not fortuitous; it issues from the purpose of the Eternal. Great men are not an accident, nor the "national product of their heredity and environment"; a Will sends them! God is not a prisoner within His own

⁴ See Mark 8: 36.

⁵ Matthew 4: 19.

⁶ John 4: 35.

⁷ Alfred Tennyson, in the "Dedication" to "The Idylls of the King."

laws, devoid of initiative, impotent as an idol; He is God indeed. "He can create and He destroy."⁸

Another major movement, in this new world symphony based on an old world song, is *the witness of Jesus to Himself*. God (Jesus says) sent unto them "other servants"; then, "last of all, He sent unto them His son."⁹ The gospel of Mark draws the distinction with an even sharper line: "He had yet one, a beloved son: He sent him last unto them." The claim is the more impressive because it is unforced, being woven into the texture of the story without explanation or discussion. This Galilean Peasant retelling one of the old Jewish stories declares in effect: "Elijah, Zechariah, Jeremiah, Isaiah and John the Baptist were prophets and more than prophets. They were servants of the Most High. They were sent forth from God to do His bidding. When one by one they had been harshly used, God sent His 'son.'"

If the Fourth Gospel—the proclaiming of the Logos made flesh—is to be dismissed as *mere* interpretation (and few thoughtful minds will so dismiss it), such testimonies as this parable have still to be met. The unique self-consciousness of Jesus is even more significant when revealed by indirection than when it is explicit: "Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake"—"Blessed are ye when men shall . . . persecute you . . . for my sake,"¹⁰ as though He and righteousness were in some deep sense identical. This self-witness seems to be woven into the fabric of His teaching. He constantly hinted a relationship between God and Himself, which transcends the relationship between God and us, and *we* feel that His communion with God was a mystery of light beyond our fathoming. Elijah, Isaiah, John the Baptist were "servants." "Last of all He sent His son!" Jesus thus refuses (though the refusal, in the paradox of His nature, is without

⁸ From the hymn, "Before Jehovah's Awful Throne" (Isaac Watts).

⁹ George Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 301, denies the force of this distinction. He says: "but treated strictly as a parable, and not originally as allegory, it would be uncritical to think that the son in the story was meant to be interpreted as a heavenly figure." But what if the story is of an allegorical cast? And what if its reference (by force of long usage) is to the history of Israel? The "servants" are the succession of Israel's prophets, and "son," as contradistinct from "servants," implies a difference. This contention receives added weight from the context of the parable. Each of the first three gospels makes the story a commentary by Jesus on His discussion with the Pharisees concerning His authority.

¹⁰ Matthew 5: 10, 11.

any loss of humility) to be catalogued with the greatest of mankind. Never has the earth seen such sovereignty in the midst of such incomparable lowliness. "The claim is amazing!" we cry. Then we check ourselves before a greater wonder, namely, a life which in every act and accent, every attitude and word honors the claim, enshrining it in flesh and blood.

This self-witness of Jesus was endorsed by those who walked and talked with Him. True it is that the custom of that age made almost inevitable the deification of so radiant a personality. True that the Romans, for instance, deified their glorious leaders. But this also is true: the Romans, having elevated their "great ones" to the pedestal of deity, did not make any of them an "only" god, nor did they make any persistent claim for their gods' unblemished souls. Their multitude of deities had faults as well as virtues, weaknesses as well as powers. The deification of Jesus was of a different order. Certain Jews, trained in a rigidly monotheistic faith, and taught from their earliest years to say, "the Lord thy God is one God,"¹¹ found themselves acknowledging with glad compulsion an unwonted "grace and truth" in Jesus. They beheld Him,

"How He walked here, the shadow of Him love,
The speech of Him soft music, and His step
A benediction."

Confronted by His poise and proportion, by the courage of His Face set like a flint, by the heartbreaking compassion of His Cross, by His felt Presence, vitalizing and empowering when others were calling Him dead,—they went groping for words new enough and vast enough to portray Him: "The Logos became flesh and tented among us."¹² He was "Man"; He was "Teacher"; He was "Prophet." But these were titles which, when applied to Him, were so feeble as to be almost futile. They were as feeble as a handbreadth laid against the immensity of the sky,—so pitifully inadequate as to be almost false. Thus His followers were constrained to discover new resources of language for His sake: "We have seen his glory—glory such as an only son enjoys from his father—seen it to be

¹¹ Deuteronomy 6: 4.

¹² John 1: 14.

full of grace and reality."¹³ This peculiar impact of Jesus upon the mind of man continues down the years. A modern critic who throws all orthodoxies to the winds, and who writes for "modern men" (whose only approach to Jesus, he avows, is after the flesh), remarks strangely: "We have to know Him after the flesh. There is for us no other way. But to know Him after the flesh is to know Him after the spirit: for we shall find that He was, in very truth, the ineffable Word made Flesh." He declares further that modern men through the effort to make the earthly life of Jesus real to themselves "find their souls possessed by love and veneration." Finally he confesses instinctive adoration for the soul of Jesus: "We shall look like men, on the man Jesus. He will stand our scrutiny. Keep we our heads as high as we can, they shall be bowed at the last."¹⁴

The conviction deepens that the supremacy of Jesus needs no better evidence than this perennial witness of the human spirit to Him. Our orthodoxies may crumble—poor and unnecessary supports to prop up His sovereignty—but man's age-long "acknowledgement of God in Christ" remains. "He sent unto them his servants. Last of all he sent unto them his son."¹⁵

There is a third dominant movement in this old story made new: *the persistent and sacrificial love of God*. It is reported that Dwight L. Moody once said that until he became a father he had much to remark about the love of Jesus, but that afterward the burden of his preaching was oftener the love of God.¹⁶ God is the real subject of this story. He planted the garden and bountifully endowed it. He rightfully required the garden's yield at the hands of the vinedressers. He sent servant after servant with such unwearied persistence that we marvel at His forbearance and the withholding of the merited chastisement. He finally sent His "son."

Frequently we speak about the almightiness of God, yet here we see Him beaten in the person of one servant, killed in the

¹³ John 1:14 (Moffatt's Translation).

¹⁴ J. Middleton Murray, "Jesus—Man of Genius," p. xiii and p. 372.

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that the adjective "beloved" as used in Mark's account seems to be, in part of its connotation, synonymous with "only."

¹⁶ See Dr. J. D. Jones' sermon on this parable in "The Gospel of Grace"

person of another, and stoned to death in the person of a third. Almighty? A God of power? Yes!—for we cannot measure Divine power until we know the Divine purpose. Niagara Falls has titanic strength to sweep a man to destruction, or to turn giant wheels; but it has no power to forgive sins, or to teach a little child to pray. Power is estimated aright only in the light of purpose. If God's purpose is a garden of redeemed humanity, the true almightiness is an almightiness of holy love. Such an almightiness this story reveals: "He had yet one, a beloved son: he sent him last unto them, saying, They will reverence my son." It was love's final and uttermost entreaty.

The true picture is not that of Jesus receiving in His body the darts which an angry God has hurled at us, but rather that of God in Jesus receiving all the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" which rebellious humankind has hurled at Him. Behind the cross of Golgotha there is a cosmic Cross flinging its vast shadows. Behind the spear piercing the side of Jesus there is a spear piercing a "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." In no parable told by Jesus, not even in the story of the Prodigal, is the love of God in its persistence and its sacrifice more poignantly revealed.

Thus from a Jewish folk-song Jesus draws new and mighty harmonies—the music of human privilege and obligation, the music of His own sonship, the melting music of God's love. Now hear the climax of this symphony—on a tragic note of human failure. The vinedressers were guilty of an ascending series of horrors.¹⁷ Elijah was driven by Israel into the wilderness; Isaiah, if tradition be true, was sawn asunder; Zechariah was stoned to death near the altar;¹⁸ John the Baptist was beheaded. The bitterness of ancient persecution flowed with such undiminished venom through the veins of the Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke, that He charged them with all the persecu-

¹⁷ Luke's account speaks of three servants, the first of whom was beaten, the second painfully used, the third wounded and cast forth, and finally of the coming of the son who was killed. Matthew and Mark speak of several servants who were killed before the arrival of the heir. This latter account is truer to the historical facts. The Synoptic problem is interestingly raised by a comparison of the three versions. Luke alone has "God forbid. But he looked upon them and said . . ." In Matthew's version, the listeners answer the question, "What will he do unto those husbandmen?" There are other significant divergences.

¹⁸ II Chronicles 24: 21.

tions of the years, and required of them "the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world."¹⁹ Soon they would kill Him. He describes that dark event as though it were already consummated.

Why did they so requite the mercy of God? Not because there was no record to teach them, for all history cried aloud, "This is the way." Not because they lacked the power to discriminate between good and ill; for they confessed, "This is the heir," and then straightway forswore their noblest conviction. Self-will was their curse. They resolved that the garden of life should be theirs—theirs for gain, theirs for fame, and not God's for worthy manhood. "Let us keep the inheritance."

It may be urged that we to-day are not guilty of such outrage. We do not stone the prophets in one generation, and in the next elect them to the calendar of saints. But are we sure? The Gettysburg Speech at the time of its delivery was overshadowed by another oration, of ninety minutes' length, given on the same occasion. Such comments as were made on the Gettysburg Speech were for the most part adverse. "A silly little speech," said one newspaper. He used "soldiers' graves as a stump for political oratory," charged another; while the *Springfield Register* (the newspaper in Lincoln's home town) bluntly declared: "When he uttered the words he knew he was falsifying history and enunciating an exploded political humbug."²⁰ This concerning the Gettysburg Speech! And why? Because Lincoln dared to suggest that the black man has human rights. In short, the old cry was raised, "Let us keep the inheritance." If some new Lincoln were to say to us, "Behold the appalling monotony, and the threatening uncertainty of employment under our boasted industrialism. In a planet which could yield enough and to spare, need these things be? Must life be thus bruised? Where are the human fruits?"—would we listen to him? It is dangerous for a prophet to touch the nerve of our money or our comfort. . . .

The story ends in a crashing of doom. As if the setting of the original parable supplied no colors dark enough with which

¹⁹ Luke 11: 50.

²⁰ See the "Life of Abraham Lincoln," by William E. Barton, Vol. II, p. 220. The epilogue of George Bernard Shaw's "Saint Joan" is an incisive comment on our habit of garlanding dead prophets' tombs and slaying the living messenger.

to paint the coming condemnation, Jesus deliberately changes the figure. He harks back to the imagery of one of the Hallel psalms: "Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected the same was made the head of the corner?"²¹ That living stone, even when passive, would be a stone of stumbling to any man neglecting it. Again, ceasing to be passive, hurtling through life in the momentum of holy wrath, it would crush its victims and scatter them as chaff.²² The garden would be taken away from its recreant tenants and given into worthier hands: "The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given unto a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."²³ God cannot falsify His own nature and deliver His garden to become a wilderness of weeds. Or (if we like the language better) selfishness is its own curse, just as love is its own reward—and opportunity has its end. "These things have I spoken unto you . . . that ye should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide."²⁴

²¹ Psalm 118: 22. It is instructive to notice that the rabbis regarded this psalm as Messianic.

²² Dr. W. C. Allen ("I.C.C." Matthew, pp. 232, 233) believes that this verse (Matthew 21: 44, Luke 20: 18) is an early gloss. The verse is evidently constructed from Daniel 2: 45 and Isaiah 8: 14.

²³ Note that Matthew in this verse (v. 43) uses "the kingdom of God" instead of his familiar "kingdom of heaven." For the significance of this change, see Peake's Commentary, p. 718. The word "nation" in this verse need not necessarily exclude a worthy core or remnant of the Jewish nation.

²⁴ John 15: 11, 16.