

CHAPTER XXIV

THE JUDGMENT OF THE KINGDOM

THE PARABLE OF THE LAST JUDGMENT

"But when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the angels with him, then shall he sit on the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all the nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats; and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry, and ye gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, and fed thee? or athirst, and gave thee drink? And when saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? And when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me. Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry, and ye did not give me to eat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me not in; naked, and ye clothed me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not. Then shall they also answer, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungry, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of these least, ye did it not unto me. And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life."

(Matthew 25: 31-46)

CHAPTER XXIV

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The Parable of the Last Judgment

There is the story¹ of a boy who heard of a hillside from whose rocks, seen from a distance, a massive shield had been carved—as though some giant had left it lying there amid sloping meadows. The shield, he was told, was a place of vision and resolve; and he went to seek it. But no sooner had he crossed the valley than, looking back, he saw the shield clearly patterned on his own hillside. One of its quarters was the garden where he had daily played. So we trek towards purple mountains trusting to find there the "words of eternal life." Meanwhile the "eternal words" are in these simple stories told by Jesus in which we have lived since we were born.

But familiarity robs us of the sense of wonder—a gift we can ill afford to lose. If a tree shot instantly into full foliage we would cry, "Miracle!"; yet the growth of leaves in ten days is not less mysterious than would be their growth in ten seconds. We are *accustomed* to slow growth—and custom breeds contempt. The words of Jesus are not less marvellous when embodied in an ancient writing than they would be blown through golden trumpets from the skies. But in a familiar Book they have become ordinary, and the task and despair of the interpreter is to speak with some new accent, some uncorrupted insight which will recover the lost radiance.

Is this parable an actual utterance of Jesus? We are told that He was sitting with His disciples on the Mount of Olives looking down upon Jerusalem.² He should have been looking into an abyss, for in a few hours He would die the death of the Cross. But He saw no picture of the shameful end. Instead there unfolded before Him as He gazed the pageant of

¹ G. K. Chesterton suggests it in the Introduction to his "The Everlasting Man."

² Matthew 24: 3.

a great assize—a pageant of such mingled pathos and majesty, of such convicting truth, that it is stencilled on the world's thought in lines of amazement and awe.

“When the Son of man³ shall come in His glory”—

(His “glory”?—this Artisan of Nazareth on Whom Rome would soon place a callous heel to crush Him as a man crushes a moth?)—

“and all the angels with Him, then shall He sit on the throne of His glory”—

(“all the angels?”—“His throne?”—when all He asked on earth was a manger for His birth and a gallows for His death?)—

“and before Him shall be gathered all nations”—

(earth's teeming millions, of every kindred, tribe and tongue, coming to the throne of the lowly Galilean!)—

“and he shall separate them from one another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats.”

Did this weary Man on the Mount of Olives Himself speak these wild words? It is probable. There was in Him a Divine arrogance encompassed by unparalleled humility. It finds expression too frequent and too clear to be denied. To attribute these sayings to the twelve disciples or to the adoration of the early Church raises as many questions as it solves. Why should the followers of Jesus exalt Him to a judgment-throne above “all nations”? Granted that the language may be that of apocalyptic hope, why should the hope find embodiment in a Carpenter from Galilee? “Let us not therefore judge one another,” they said; “for we shall all stand before the judg-

³ The meaning of the title “Son of man” as used by Jesus is a subject of much debate. Most scholars believe that it argues a Messianic consciousness in Jesus. Certainly its original meaning in the Book of Enoch is Messianic. But to Jesus the title “Messiah” had a far higher and purer significance than it received in average Jewish hope. The acknowledgement of the early disciples that He was the Christ sprang from their instinctive recognition of the Divine in Him. Their feeling for Him was akin to nothing else in human feeling except their feeling for God. How the ideal of Jesus transmuted the old ideal of a “Messiah” is nowhere better illustrated than in the teaching of this parable.

ment-seat of Christ.”⁴ Why did they say it? For that matter, why do we to-day instinctively bring modern practice to the touchstone of His life? We would not dream of singling out some mechanic in the Catskills as the criterion of current motives and manners. Then why choose an Artizan who lived in Galilee years ago and make Him our Judge? It is very surprising! It is almost as if His prophecy were coming true. . . .

The parabolic element⁵ in this utterance must not be ignored. Images forthshadowing the judgment are not to be converted into historical events.⁶ Nevertheless the images are not to be minimized; for they do reveal the tests by which, according to Jesus, judgment here and hereafter must proceed.

“As a shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats”⁷—as easily, with the same unerring certainty! Syrian sheep were usually white and Syrian goats were usually black. When the combined flock came home at night the division could be made without mistake, even in the gathering dusk. With the same sureness will the separation proceed among mankind. There is no need for pleading and counter-pleading, and the marshaling of evidence is superfluous; for some souls are seen to be white and others black.

But such a judgment (our immediate protest runs!) is a parody of facts. Human character is not usually found in black or white. It moves constantly to and fro through innumerable shades of grey. Joaquin Miller reflects about the poet Byron, whom some would hurry to pronounce black:

“In men whom men condemn as ill
I find so much of goodness still,
In men whom men pronounce divine
I find so much of sin and blot,
I do not dare to draw a line
Between the two, where God has not.”⁸

⁴ Romans 14: 10, 13.

⁵ It would seem that there is no more than a nucleus of parable in what we have called “The Parable of the Last Judgment,” but that nucleus is sufficiently definite to justify the title. The sudden transition from “Son of man” (v. 31) to “King” (v. 34) may hint the composite character of the scriptural passage. The original parable may have been pastoral in setting and adapted later to the “Parousia” expectation. (See “Peake's Commentary,” *in loc.*) Dr. Allen (“I.C.C.,” *in loc.*), suggests that this whole “splendid” section reads like a Christian homily.

⁶ See p. 130 of this book.

⁷ See Ezekiel 34: 17.

⁸ From Joaquin Miller's “Byron.” (“Complete Poetical Works,” Harr Wagner Publishing Company.)

The reflection approves itself. Yet Jesus dared to "draw a line." Often He asserted sharp contrasts in human disposition. Some build on the rock (He said) and others on the sand; some are "wheat" and others "tares"; some walk the narrow way to life and others the broad way to destruction. But is there among us any virtue of a whiteness unblemished and any perfidy of a blackness unrelieved? Dare we draw the line? No. Nevertheless Jesus made it clear that character in its main intention, in the "set" of its motives, is either right or wrong. Some faces are turned to the light, be that light distant or near, and others towards darkness. Some souls serve God; in spite of many lapses they still own the sway of conscience and compassion. Other souls serve idols; in spite of many compunctions they still own the sway of idols—the money-idol with a brazen face, the pleasure-idol wearing a fool's mask, the fashion-idol decked in silks, the fleshliness-idol with lecherous eyes. Some are on the right hand of the throne, and others on the left; the warp of their spirits allocates them.⁹

Then what is the dividing line that Jesus drew? Clearly it cuts across our customary lines of distinction. We are not judged *now* by nationality: the color of a man's skin does not *now* make him black or white.¹⁰ We are not judged *now* by social prestige or by any accident of earthly rank. Lines of creed seem *now* to be transversed, and the ritual observance of religion is not mentioned. But unaffected kindness is mentioned!—

"Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me."

⁹ Plato, "De Republica," pp. x, 13, records the experience of a man whose soul temporarily left his body, and who, being thus permitted to see the judgment, came to a place where there were two chasms in the earth and two openings in the heavens opposite to them. Between these sat the judges of the dead. They commanded the just to go to the right hand up through the heavens, and the unjust downwards to penalty. Both the just and the unjust bore on them marks of the deeds done in the flesh. Similarly Virgil locates the Elysian Fields on the right of the palace of Dis and the gloom of Tartarus on the left. ("Æneid" vi.)

¹⁰ The phrase "all nations" in this parable has been the occasion of much controversy. It frequently means the Gentile world as distinguished from the Jewish, and consequently the suggestion has often been advanced that Jesus is here stating a test of character applicable to the Gentiles who have not heard of Him, and not applicable to Jews from whom a higher enlightenment is expected by reason of their higher privilege. The suggestion is not necessary. Wise judgment will, of course, ignore no fact of opportunity or hindrance; but basically there cannot be a different criterion in one part of the world than holds in another. It is better to take the phrase "all nations" in its comprehensive meaning. How the criterion established by Jesus relates itself to the revelation of truth in His person this character attempts to show

This test of kindness was not new in His teaching: "For whosoever shall give you a cup of cold water to drink, because ye are Christ's, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward."¹¹ Again He said, "Whosoever shall receive one of such little children in my name, receiveth me."¹² But in this parable all qualifying phrases are omitted. The test is plainly stated: Whoever keeps the wellspring of kindness uncongealed is worthy of eternal life. The inference is that this essential kindness is acceptable in the judgment even though it may lack the badge of Christian discipleship. The idiom of this kindness is made equally plain: it feeds the poor, is hospitable to the stranger, clothes the naked, visits the sick, and shares the loneliness of the prisoner.¹³ These are not grandiose achievements. The world allows them no meed of fame; they have no accompaniment of trumpets. Yet it would appear that Jesus regards them as

". . . that best portion of a good man's life:
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and love."¹⁴

They inherit a kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world!

Yet this criterion is not to be interpreted in any shallow confidence. Jesus does not mean that an occasional philanthropy is a sufficient substitute for a living faith. If a man writes a check for charity, salving his uncomfortable scruples as he makes the gift, is he therefore justified whatever may be the pattern of his daily conduct? Are moral distinctions to be confounded, and duty turned into a sentimentalism? Such questions need no answer. Character is judged not by its fitful bad or its fitful good, but in its wholeness and by its controlling motives. Of what avail is a man's charitable sop flung to a beggar, if that man's prevailing purposes are so unsound that his influence spreads like an evil breath? The inwardness of

¹¹ Mark 9:41. Notice the qualifying phrase—"because ye are Christ's." The corresponding chapter in Matthew (10:42) has a different qualifying phrase: "And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only, in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you he shall in no wise lose his reward."

¹² Mark 9:37.

¹³ The best rabbinical thought placed such kindnesses above mere almsgiving. Compare Isaiah 58:7.

¹⁴ William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey, 1798."

kindness has yet to be learned. Why do we forget that Jesus said: "The good man *out of the treasure of his heart* bringeth forth that which is good"?¹⁵ And why do we ignore that other penetrating word: "Give for alms those things which are *within*"?¹⁶ Jesus Who insisted that murder and adultery are ultimately sins of the hidden desire, and not alone of the deed, will never approve a merely superficial kindness. Kindness is unworthy the name unless it is written in the "inward parts." The true almsgiving is the unconscious outgoing of a noble spirit.

Such almsgiving will not live independently of Jesus. In Him the nature of veritable kindness became flesh. He did not create the hope of immortality, but He brought that dim and buried hope to life and light. He did not originate the "golden rule," but He gave it final meaning so that it becomes almost unintelligible without Him. Similarly, He did not bestow the motive of love, but He quickened it and made it regnant. There is in truth a "light which lighteth every man coming into the world,"¹⁷ but those who have seen Him through eyes unveiled by dogma or prejudice confess gladly that only in His light can they see light. It has come to pass that we cannot throw a penny to a beggar without having in the back of our minds His words: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these . . ." Behind every cross that we may choose to carry another Cross is lifted in healing and incentive. At the last He made no demand that kindness should be done "in His name." The modes and forms of recognition were not dear to Him; He thought not of Himself. Therefore the true almsgivings for which He pleaded have become the "Gesta Christi"!

There are surprising verdicts in that judgment; strange reversals of human estimates; dramatic overturnings and revealings. Even the just are taken aback: "Lord, when saw we thee hungry, and fed thee?" Their simple kindness had not been done with any sidelong glance for man's approval. It had been unconscious of merit in itself. Moreover it had been unaware

¹⁵ Luke 6: 45.

¹⁶ Luke 11: 41.

¹⁷ John 1: 9.

of the complete self-identification of Jesus with human need: "When saw we thee hungry?" The *com-passion* of Jesus is the earth's spiritual miracle. If some Zaccheus had made havoc of his life, Jesus felt Himself involved in Zaccheus' fall: "I *must* abide at thy house."¹⁸ If a woman was held in the grip of an inner demon Jesus felt Himself socially accountable: "*Ought* not this woman to have been loosed?"¹⁹ If a church had lost its prophetic vision, Jesus felt Himself chargeable with that church's failure: "I *must* preach the good tidings of the kingdom of God."²⁰ The unutterable need of the family of God laid imperious claim on Him: "The Son of man must suffer . . . and be killed."²¹ So He asked with a love which leaves us defenceless, "Behooved it not the Christ to have suffered these things?"²² So He asks to-day as He sees the shame of our streets, our obsession with things, and the dim benighted multitudes in other lands: "*Ought* not the Son of man to suffer? With the world as it is, there is nothing to do but accept a Cross. I could have done no other, could I?" O Brother-Heart of Jesus!—the honor of the human name was His to keep! The stain of the human sin was His to cleanse! The fullness of human joy was His to seek, and to purchase by His blood! That "feeling with" our human need proclaims Him Messiah, and ordains that kindness done to any comrade of earth is kindness done to Him. "Inasmuch as ye have done it . . ."²³

The unjust were even more surprised by their condemnation than the righteous by their recompense of joy. Wherein had they been unjust? No positive crime had been laid to their account. They were not charged with theft, adultery or murder. They had kept respectability inviolate. "When saw we thee hungry?" Had they known that royalty was incognito in the beggar at their gate and in the stranger whom they left shelterless they would have been instant with every courtesy.

¹⁸ Luke 19: 5.

¹⁹ Luke 13: 16.

²⁰ Luke 4: 43.

²¹ Luke 9: 22.

²² Luke 24: 26.

²³ Many medieval legends set forth the identity of Jesus with the "least" by telling how the saints saw Him in those whom they pitied and helped. Such stories are told of St. Augustine, St. Martin and others. John Greenleaf Whittier's "Saint Gregory's Guest" is one of many poems composed on this theme.

Of course they would! It was to their gain to cultivate the good graces of royalty! Therein was their crime: they had done all things with an inward-turning eye, and had despised the brotherhood. Jesus plainly tells us that when they quenched the fountain of love they quenched the fountain of life. There was no need that sentence should be pronounced against them. They passed dark judgment on themselves. By their self-chosen path and by their own momentum they went into "eternal punishment."²⁴

Genuine love is life, and lovelessness is its own curse; such is God's decree from the foundation of the world! With this dictum of Jesus we may fittingly close this simple study of His parables. For this is the central impact of His teaching, the one insistent plea of His life and death, the truth with which His continuing presence haunts our earth. When a young scribe inquired the secret of life, He asked him: "What is the commandment?" The scribe thereupon recited with assurance, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart . . . and thy neighbor as thyself." The answer of the Master was final: "This do and thou shalt live."²⁵ To love God (God seen in the mystery and faithfulness of earth and sky, God heard in the deep undertone of the music of humanity, God become incarnate in Jesus) and to love our neighbor (especially the neighbor who by reason of life's merited or unmerited tragedy most needs our love)—is to live! There is no other life here or hereafter. To slay that motive of love is to die. A man who has extinguished the glow of genuine sympathy may still have appearance of life, but the reality of life has gone. He has a "name to live and is dead."²⁶ He is going horridly through the antics and gestures of life; like those men and women of Dante's imagining whose bodies walked and talked in the City of Florence but whose souls were already incarcerated in the

²⁴ "Punishment" is not the strongest Greek term that could have been employed. It usually signifies "chastisement," and has some of the meaning of "remedial penalty." Similarly "endless" is indefinite. It sometimes means "everlasting," but not always; and the core of its meaning is probably qualitative rather than quantitative. But when this careful discrimination of meaning has been made, it must be remembered that Jesus used not the Greek but the more uncertain Aramaic. While we cannot affirm that the words forbid all hope for the future, neither can we affirm that they encourage hope. The prospect is dark and the end is not yet! Such is the conclusion which the phrase allows.

²⁵ An abbreviation of Luke 10: 25-28.

²⁶ Revelation 3: 1.

nether world. We may call such a man "a live wire," but he is only a jerky bundle of galvanised flesh. Having lost his love for God and man, he has lost life. "This my son was dead."²⁷ No funeral procession had wound its sad way to an open grave—but he was dead to love! What *we* call "death" is merely an accident of the body; real death is otherwise—and far more profound.

Such was His teaching Who "spake as never man spake."²⁸ We are here for a few years on a little swinging ball which we call—for the sake of courtesy and to bolster up our courage—an "earth." We are on a balloon excursion for the space of mortality. We can trample on our fellow-passengers, if we wish. We can crowd them from the best seats, despise them because their clothes are poorer than ours, and generally seek our own comfort—or we can prove ourselves friends remembering Him Who said, "I have called you friends."²⁹ Those who live as friends seem to breathe already the air of that land toward which we are hurrying. With deep confidence they say: "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love. . . ." ³⁰ When they are told that such kindness may bring them poverty, sadness, and harsh fortune, and that One Whose Name means Savior languished on a bitter Cross for His reward; when they are told that passengers who grab and scramble are counted "successful," they smile as with an inner certainty of joy unspeakable. What do they gain, these "friends" of the mortal journey? Nothing—except Life!

THE WORDS THAT I HAVE SPOKEN UNTO YOU
ARE SPIRIT AND ARE LIFE.

I CAME THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE, AND MAY
HAVE IT ABUNDANTLY.

²⁷ Luke 15: 24.

²⁸ John 7: 46.

²⁹ John 15: 15.

³⁰ 1 John 3: 14.