

INVITED TO THE SON'S MARRIAGE

It is a long time since this institution was observed for the first time. It cannot be long with any of us when we shall observe it for the last time. There is a first and a last to everything. The first with ourselves showed a puling baby in the cradle; the last brings to view a silent figure in a shroud, waiting to be carried to the last long home. Strange to say, there is a first and a last with God. The first exhibits an aspect of things too vast and subtle for the human understanding. There was a time when He alone existed; how far back we have to go for such a time we cannot begin to imagine; still less can we form any conception of such a state. The understanding tells us there must have been a time when God was alone in the vastness of His underived energy; there was a time when he began to incorporate His power in the stupendous framework of the heavens, and this introduces the idea of the last in relation to Him; it is a very different last from the last of anything else. It is not a last in the sense of end, but only in the sense of a last state. There is a grammatical peculiarity about the Hebrew word translated "*last*," that lets a little light on the subject. When He said in Hebrew by Isaiah, "*I am the first, and I am the last*," it is as if He had said in English, "*I am the first, and I am the lasts*." The latter word is plural, which cannot be rendered into English, but which suggests the intimation that the last phase of the divine existence would be a plural manifestation. This is in exact accord with what we see. Alone in the beginning, He is a multitude at the finish; a multitude in the amplest sense; a multitude of stars inhabited by a multitude of sons in whom His attributes are reflected.

In this there is a very grand conception. God in the first state doubtless was fully content in Himself, but it must have been an increase to His pleasure to have companion objects developed in Himself, and companion intelligences. It is a far more glorious state of things at the finish than at the beginning; it is a finish reached by a gradual process which gives intensity to the glory when fully developed. We see it illustrated in the case of our own earth and our own race, and we are probably justified in judging other cases by our own. Here is a long history since Adam's fall, long and dreadful; but streaked with hope and comfort, and culminating in perfection. If we confine our view to the visions of the transition state through which we are passing, we shall be distressed beyond measure; but if we remember that it is but a part of a divine evolution which, when completed, will have no place for the confusion, our feelings moderate and adjust themselves to the situation as it exists. The confusion will be obliterated in the attainment of the goal; the path we are going through will be like an evil dream which disappears with the sunshine of the morning.

We have strong need to lean upon this view, for the spectacle of human miseries is agonising, continued from age to age, and extending to such multitudes, many of whom desire the right and the good, and are helpless in all their efforts to attain them. It is difficult sometimes to withhold tears at the helpless state of man; even their very badness, as we might express it, is a thing to pity, for it is the inevitable result of the circumstances governing their appearance in being. How can a Zulu help being a Zulu? How can a Christ-blaspheming Jew be otherwise in the circumstances in which he is born and brought up? How can the denizens of British slums of squalor be other than they are? It is a sad sight, enough to break the heart. Why was Christ a man of sorrows, but that he realised the state of things as it exists in strong contrast to what he knew ought to be? God's ways are vast and inflexible, and our only comfort lies in the guaranteed and revealed purpose to work all things to a good result at last. If we could indulge in the Universalist thoughts, it would assuage the asperities of our experience; but so many things exclude this thought that we are obliged, while beholding the dreadful scene of human vanity and misery, to fall back upon the only comfort that is applicable, namely, that in a far-off time the earth will be as bright and happy as it now is dark and miserable:

"The glory of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea."

"All families of the earth shall be blessed in Abraham and his seed;" death itself abolished, and all imperfection swallowed up in the glorious efficiency of spirit nature.

The heart naturally yearns for the manifestation of God's actual presence. His presence is with us, we know, but it is unmanifested, and this makes a great practical difference to limited creatures like ourselves. Man was made for God's society, and he never can be happy apart from it. The traces of His presence we may intellectually discern in the wisdom of all things around us, and especially in the

relics of past manifestation in connection with the Jews, Christ, and the Bible; but this is a very different thing from the joy and comfort of actual communication. We read the Bible and are comforted by it, and affected by Him through it, but the process is indirect and subjective, as we might phrase it, and has none of the exhilarant power of open communion. The feeling I am referring to is the one expressed by David when he says,

“When shall I come and appear before God?” and also when he says,

“My tears have been my meat day and night, while they say unto me, Where is thy God?”

We are in the position of a woman long separated from her husband, who perhaps has gone to some distant land. She has letters, perhaps, that she received a long time ago, and they are some comfort to her as she reads them over and over again; but what comparison is there between the meagre satisfaction she derives from this process and the joy that would be caused to her by a new letter, or, still more, by the arrival of her husband? The Bible is the letter that was sent long, long ago, and we have read it and read it until our poor mortal minds faint and fail in the effort to extract the sense of God’s presence and guidance. We yearn even to death for the day of His revived work and revived communication with His people. We know it is coming, because it is promised, and this institution for the breaking of bread has just this one meaning—or, rather, specially this one meaning, for it has many meanings—that the long day of solitariness will end, and that Christ, the bridegroom, will make his long-promised visit to wed his waiting and watching bride, and introduce her to those glorious attendant circumstances that belong to his arrival.

The chapter we have read this morning introduces this illustration in some measure, and in connection with it exhibits various features of the divine plan that will be interesting for us to consider for a few moments. I refer to the parable of the King’s son; this parable is in fact a sort of summary of the work of God upon the earth, from its beginning to its close, and we may find that in its scope it embraces ourselves in a sense. It is scarcely possible to make a mistake in the application of any of the details of the parable: the text shows that Christ was purposing to illustrate the attitude of Israel towards the invitation that had come by the hand of God’s messengers.

“A certain king made a marriage for His son:”

This in a sentence is the purpose of God in its widest application to the earth. A more gladsome purpose could not be intimated as regards the form of the parable; a marriage is in universal experience the most gladsome occasion of a life, full of joy, and promise, and hope. That God should purpose such a thing for Christ reminds us of that other beautiful promise, that—

“The Lord of Hosts will make a feast to all people, a feast of fat things, full of marrow.”

Christ is the King’s son; who is the bride? This also we know, by abundant instruction in the apostolic letters. It is not a single lovely woman, but an innumerable company of people selected from all lands and all ages, on the principle of that which is esteemed excellent in God’s eyes, that is, faith towards Himself, and submission to His requirements. These, generated and developed in circumstances of evil, are to be gathered together at a fixed time, and to be presented to and united with Christ, who comes for the purpose of the marriage. There is an element in the marriage not present in the ordinary institution except by a legal shadow. When a man takes to himself a woman in marriage, she is legally considered to be merged in him; she takes his name, and she assumes all his relations to circumstances, property, surroundings, etc.; but there is nothing in the case that answers to what takes place in the union of Christ with his multitudinous bride: he changes their nature from the weak, earthly, corruptible thing it now is, into the nature which he now possesses, which is incorruptible, glorious, and immortal. This change, in fact, must be considered the act of marriage, after which there is fulness of joy and inheritance for ever. As husband and wife they enter upon possession of the whole earth; with the specially interesting work in hand of enlightening its populations, and governing them in peace and righteousness, and bringing them into reconciliation with God and love with one another, and finally, as a race, into eternal life itself. This is a very glorious work lying before the newly-married pair; the immortal population developed at the end of the thousand years as the result of their labours may be considered as the family they beget in their joyous intercourse. To this marriage Jesus says the King sent out invitations:

“The King sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding, and they would not come. Again He sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them that were

bidden, behold I have prepared My dinner; My oxen and My fatlings are killed, and all things are ready; come to the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise. And the remnant took His servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them."

It will be recognised that in this Jesus represents the attitude of Israel towards the word of God by the hand of the prophets. For many generations He had entreated them by His messengers to conform to His ways and purposes; but in almost every case they had rejected the entreaties and ill-used the messengers. There is frequent reference to this in the sayings of Christ. He speaks of Jerusalem as—

"Thou that killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto thee."

Paul also says that—

"They both killed the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men" (1 Thess. 2:15).

We easily understand this part of the parable therefore; the Jews were first invited to the glorious occasion coming, and they rejected the invitation—not all of them—the parable represents things broadly; as a nation, this was Israel's attitude, but there were, of course, in all their generations a chosen remnant who were in harmony with God's will, of whom the fathers, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and many such like examples. Even in the darkest days of Israel's apostasy under Elijah, God told him of 7,000 faithful ones, at a time when Elijah supposed he was alone. Still, as a nation, Israel took the position figured in the parable. If it be asked why the chosen remnant could not have answered the purpose, the answer is supplied to us in another expression in the parable,

"Still there is room."

This shows that a certain number are needed for the marriage of the King's son. This must be so, because the work of governing the earth is great, and requires a multitude. Those who were faithful under the Law will form a part of that multitude, but it is evident they were far from being sufficient.

The parable proceeds to say,

"The King sent forth His armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burnt up their city."

The meaning of this is one of the plainest things in the parable. The destruction of Jerusalem stands before universal mankind as a lurid spectacle of God's angry judgment against Israel for their incurable insubordination. Nothing ever equalled it in the history of mankind. There have been great sieges and tragic events; nothing ever came near the thorough and appalling destruction of a whole nation effected by the Roman nation.

It is worthy of notice that these Roman armies are in the parable styled God's armies. This will seem strange unless we have those wide views which the Scriptures create. By these views all things belong to God, and when He condescends to use any of them in a special work, they are His in a special sense. Thus the Assyrian is described as His weapon of indignation against Israel, and Nebuchadnezzar as His servant, though it is carefully intimated in both cases that they did not know Him, nor were aware that He was using them. The Romans were God's army of destruction against Israel for their sins. Another thing to be thought of, as we contemplate the unparalleled horrors of the Roman subjugation, is that there is a terrible side to God's character, as well as a kind and loving one. We need to call this to mind in our age, when the tendency is to presume upon the love of God, in the absence of submission to God. What Paul says is terribly illustrated in the destruction of Jerusalem, that *"our God is a consuming fire."* It is according to the analogy of things running all through nature; the ordinances of heaven and earth, whether in things small or great, are inflexible in their operation, but you must adjust yourself to them to experience their beneficial operation. The fire in the grate will prepare wholesome food, but in the wrong place it will scald and burn and destroy; so with everything else.

It is in the next phase of the parable where our own place as Gentiles comes in.

"Then saith He to His servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage."

The servants in the case were the apostles, who went forth first in the highways of Jewish life outside the synagogue, and then in the highways of Gentile lands to gather a sufficient number to fill the vacant places. The work was a very effectual work for the time, for God worked with them, confirming their word with signs following, and great multitudes were added to the Lord everywhere.

But when the apostles died, and the caprice of human ambitions came into play, the work deteriorated, and practically ceased. The present system of state churches throughout Europe is the relic or survival of their labours in a mummified form. Still, we cannot doubt that, as in the case of Elijah's 7,000, there have been all along the dark centuries and generations some who have been generated by the Word of God. The work has received a certain feeble revival in our own day, but there is nothing to give any satisfaction. The only instrumentality in operation (namely, the power of appeal to reason on the basis of the Scriptures) is ineffectual against the high fortresses of human prejudices and vested interests that rear themselves on every hand to the enslavement of the respectable multitudes. Very little has been done, so little as to be invisible in the general situation of things, and probably very little more will be done. It is likely that the muster-roll is nearly finished, and the moment ready for the Judge to step forth to inspect the result. The result, though meagre in our age, will be glorious in its totality, for the whole number from Eden downwards will be great.

The parable informs us that *"when the King came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment,"* and ordered the man to be excluded. This is a remarkable feature, which is fully explained to us in the apostolic writings as well as in the Lord's other teachings. All who present themselves for admission to the glorious occasion will not be accepted, the parable would be incomplete without giving a place to this feature. It does it on the very smallest scale; only one person will be found unfit for presence at the marriage supper, but stands to represent a class, and that a large one, for the interpretative remark with which the Lord concludes this parable is this:

"Many are called, but few are chosen."

The reason why the rejected guest was not admitted was because he was not suitably attired; he had not on a wedding garment. What this means we know, and it is of the greatest moment to us. The wording is explained in the Apocalypse as the righteousness of saints; that is, the righteous character of saints finding expression in the righteous deeds of saints. It is the constant declaration of Paul that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God, and that he only is righteous that doeth righteousness. Let us beware then of trusting to the easy doctrines that are in vogue in the religious communities around us, and hold fast by the wholesome words of the Lord Jesus and his apostles, which will give us at last an entrance into the glorious Kingdom, when the darkness of night shall have passed away.

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Pages 540-545

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