

He was not even of Galilee or Judea. He was a physician of Antioch or Ephesus; yet—"it seemed good to me also." He could not forbear to write of the Great Physician who was able to "minister to a mind diseased." That one Face, though never seen in the flesh, reigned in his imagination so benignly, with so winsome a kingship, that he needs must tell of Him!

"It seemed good to me also . . ." How can any expositor of the parables speak a new word? How can he speak an old word more clearly or penetratingly than his predecessors far nobler and abler than he? Yet, perchance, he may speak with a new accent. He may, without doubt, speak to a new generation, since "time makes ancient good uncouth." In any event, and despite the oblivion into which his words may soon pass, he *needs must* speak: "For the love of Christ constraineth us."

PARABLES OF THE EARLY MINISTRY
THE GOOD NEWS OF THE
KINGDOM OF GOD

CHAPTER I

THE CONFLICT OF NEW AND OLD

THE PARABLE OF THE CHILDREN OF THE BRIDECHAMBER

"And they said unto him, The disciples of John fast often, and make supplications; likewise also the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink. And Jesus said unto them, Can ye make the sons of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come; and when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, then will they fast in those days."

(Luke 5:33-35)

(Parallel passages: Matthew 9:14, 15; Mark 2:18-20)

THE PARABLE OF THE NEW PATCH AND THE OLD GARMENT

"And he spake also a parable unto them: No man rendeth a piece from a new garment and putteth it upon an old garment; else he will rend the new, and also the piece from the new will not agree with the old."

(Luke 5:36)

(Parallel passages: Matthew 9:16; Mark 2:21)

THE PARABLE OF NEW WINE AND OLD WINESKINS

"And no man putteth new wine into old wineskins; else the new wine will burst the skins, and itself will be spilled, and the skins will perish. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no man having drunk old wine desireth new; for he saith, The old is good."

(Luke 5:37-39)

(Parallel passages: Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22)

THE PARABLE OF TREASURES NEW AND OLD

"Have ye understood all these things? They say unto him, Yea. And he said unto them, Therefore every scribe who hath been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old."

(Matthew 13:51, 52)

CHAPTER I

THE CONFLICT OF NEW AND OLD

The Parable of the Children of the Bridechamber
The Parable of the New Patch and the Old Garment
The Parable of New Wine and Old Wineskins
The Parable of Treasures New and Old

"Why do thy disciples fast not?"—the perennial question which the old flings hotly or perplexedly at the new! In every generation precedent challenges the prophet: "By what right do you defy the established order?" Always custom complains bitterly against the innovator: "These men do exceedingly trouble our city."¹

Matthew tells us that the disciples of John the Baptist raised the question. Mark says the Pharisees shared it. Luke places responsibility at the door of Christ's own disciples or of interrogators unnamed. Probably all three groups provoked the issue not once but many times. For our most stubborn quarrel is with the sentinel of God who disturbs our slumber amid familiar things, and sounds reveille at the dawn, bidding us strike tents and trek towards the unknown. There is a law of change which compels us to break the systems which we make and love. We must rend what we create so that we may create anew and more worthily. But this lesson of life finds us obtuse and unwilling pupils.

The Parable of the Children of the Bridechamber

The Mosaic law demanded only the annual fast associated with the ancient Day of Atonement.² But pious Jews, trusting to purchase salvation by ceremonies, had added to the number of the fasts until they could boast as did the Pharisee, "I fast

¹ Acts 16:20.

² Leviticus 23:27.

twice in the week.”³ By the tacit consent of Jesus, His disciples must have honored these fasts more in the breach than in the observance.⁴ When their neglect was challenged, He justified them by the startling assertion that His gospel is an influx of sheer joy. It is like a wedding; and for them, the friends of the Bridegroom, to fast at a wedding would be an unpardonable gaucherie.

“Like a wedding” is a description of the Christian life which in our persistent glumness we have refused to allow. Yet Jesus used it frequently.⁵ Old Testament prophets had said with daring, “For thy Maker is thy husband”;⁶ and John the Baptist had claimed as his sufficient honor that he was the friend of the Bridegroom, his joy being to hear the Bridegroom’s voice.⁷ The dominant note of the new religion was deep joy.

The scribes and Pharisees might fast. Religion to them was not joyous; it bound on them burdens grievous to be borne. By its dreary routine of rules and shibboleths men might gain merit, but not a song. Jesus came to lead them from that slavery into a new land of promise. They would still be under the law—God’s decrees welling up within the enfranchised soul—but it was a law whose service was perfect freedom. “The water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”⁸

The disciples of John the Baptist might fast. Religion to them was not joyous. It was a warning of impending doom, a fleeing from the wrath to come. To feel the holiness of God as a fan winnowing the grain from the chaff, or as an axe of retribution laid at the root of the tree, was life compared with the mechanical righteousness of the Pharisees; but it was not jubilant life. Jesus drove the Arch-Fear from the sky and revealed instead a Face of infinite pity, a Holiness inseparable

³ Luke 18: 12. It was believed that Moses ascended Mt. Sinai on Monday, and descended on Thursday. These were the days of fasting.

⁴ Mark 9: 29 and Matthew 17: 21, in which Jesus recommends fasting, are absent from the best MSS.; but Matthew 6: 16 seems to imply that He did recognize the place of fasting in a well-ordered life.

⁵ See the chapters in this book on the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, and the Parable of the Great Supper.

⁶ Isaiah 54: 4-10, Hosea 2: 19.

⁷ John 3: 29.

⁸ John 4: 14.

from Compassion. The rainbow was set against the storm. The abounding sin was swallowed up in more abounding grace.

His joy was thus the gladness of an inner law exchanged for the sadness of the rabbinical yoke. It was the song of God’s tender-heartedness for the fear of God’s anger. But it was more!—for the fullness of joy is love. Jesus replaced the weariness which hangs upon the soul’s quest for its own righteousness with the “large delight” of serving another’s need. Joy is not in defiance of pain, or in pain’s respite. It is *through* pain,—that pain borne for others by which the world is saved. He, “Who for the joy that was set before him endured the Cross,”⁹ had entered into joy’s deep secret. Therefore He could say with utter truth, “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.”¹⁰ It was joy like a wedding—the marriage of earth and heaven!

With such joy as their heritage how could the disciples fast? If the appropriate mood and circumstance are lacking, fasting is a pious mummery. The acts of religion must be the natural issue of the soul, and congruous with the event, or they are a pretense. The day would come, said Jesus, when His followers would fast without compulsion. Already He could hear the first rumblings of the storm. Soon the “old order” would pass, “yielding place to new”; but in its death-struggle it would slay the Bearer of new tidings. “Then will they fast in that day.” Then food would have no flavor. Sorrow, weeping for a Bridegroom taken away and for the sin that slew Him, would flee to abstinences then as to a refuge. Fasting then would be the soul’s inevitable language.

The Parable of the New Patch and the Old Garment

“Why do thy disciples fast not?” Soon they would ask Him why His disciples ate with unwashed hands,¹¹ and why they flouted the rigorous law of the Jewish sabbath.¹² All these were but variants of the deeper question: “By what right do you

⁹ Hebrews 12: 2.

¹⁰ John 15: 11.

¹¹ Mark 7: 2-5.

¹² Mark 2: 24-28.

break tradition?" Jesus, well aware of the agelong conflict between the old and the new, made answer gently, but keenly: "Nobody sews new cloth on a threadbare garment."

Where had Jesus seen robes so worn that they fell apart under the attempt to patch them? Is this a hint of the poverty of His boyhood home? Did the robe of the oldest descend in turn to each younger brother, fortified against the years by Mary's ingenious needle? Had Jesus watched His mother's anxiety when the robe could be patched no more, when mending only aggravated the holes? Perhaps Mary wondered how new clothes could be bought—but somehow the money was found, and they were bought. Was it that anxiety which scored the incident deeply upon His mind, so that years later it was spoken as a parable?

Creedal-robes and ritual garments become threadbare. The clothes of international polity and industrial systems grow shabby and can no longer give decent covering to the flesh. We ought to be ashamed to be seen on the street in them. We should let them go; God in His mercy will see that new clothes are bought when they must be bought. The way of Jesus came to supersede a worn-out Judaism, but His age had ceased to believe in anything new. There could be no fresh creation invading the established world. There was nothing new under the sun. Rivers flowed to the sea only to return to their source. Events ran in meaningless cycles. War and peace were only the ebb and flow of the tides. Existence was a squirrel-cage. The best the Jew could hope for was the destruction of the old world and the wholesale transfer of good people to another realm. In this despair, as in other recreancies, he was unfaithful to the flaming vision of his prophets. *They* had promised a "new song" and a "new name" and a "new heart." *They* had been ever expectant, looking for "a new heaven and a new earth" fresh from the springs of Divine birth.¹³ Afterwards the hope died—until Jesus came claiming to be in Himself the realization of the prophets' dream. "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" . . . "And he closed the book."¹⁴ The

¹³ For instance, Psalm 40: 3, Isaiah 62: 2, Ezekiel 18: 31.

¹⁴ Luke 4: 17-21.

book was superseded by a Life! His way was an original creation, a new thing under the sun!

How could it be a patch on an old Judaism, either on the recreant Judaism of the scribes or even on the more vital Judaism of John the Baptist? To try to patch the old faith would only rend it. In its threadbare state it was at least venerable, and when the demands of life were not too stern it might still be comfortable; but to attempt to repair it would tear it into unsightliness. Jesus had due regard for the old.

Meanwhile new cloth must be fashioned into a new garment. Its strength is pristine. To use it merely for repair debases it and does despite to the renewals of God. The Christ spirit is new. It cannot be a patch on the old ritual—it may retain the Sabbath, but only as it transforms it from bondage to blessing. It cannot be a patch on an old industrialism—how can Jesus who said, "No longer do I call you servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends,"¹⁵ ever be regarded as merely tinkering at an economic order still largely feudal? It cannot be a patch on national imperialisms—for when Jesus said to His disciples concerning the Gentile rulers who loved to "lord it" over lesser breeds, "Ye shall not be so,"¹⁶ He was pointing them not to the repair of an outworn imperialism but to a new adventure in constructive goodwill. It cannot be a patch on an old life—there can be no hankering after old loyalties, no compromise with old attitudes, no botching up of old selfishness. "A new faith," said Jesus, "demanding new forms of complete allegiance. . . ."

"Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are past away; behold they are become new."¹⁷

The Parable of New Wine and Old Wineskins

The truth was re-expressed in a parable not less apt than the last, nor less intimately linked by its imagery with Jewish life. Jesus frequently used twin parables. The parables of the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep, and the parables of the Hidden

¹⁵ John 15: 15.

¹⁶ Luke 22: 25, 26.

¹⁷ II Corinthians 5: 17.

Treasure and the Long-sought Pearl are instances. Nor do these double comparisons merely repeat a truth; rather they reveal it in different aspects. They are complementary as well as reiterative. In the last parable there was some concern lest the old ritual should be torn asunder; in this the emphasis is upon the preservation of the new.

Jesus was not remote from the familiar life of men. He was a child of "the daily round, the common task." His citizenship in that heaven with which our earth is interfused, did not make Him a stranger in the rough-and-tumble world. He was at home in both realms; so common things were to Him the symbol of things unseen.

How often He had watched the wineskins hanging in His Galilean home! One of the singers of Israel had said of his sorrows: "I am become like a bottle in the smoke."¹⁸ Jesus had noticed how a wineskin would crack and become hard with age. Foolish then to pour new wine into it! Soon the new wine would begin to ferment—with disaster both for the wine and the wineskin!

The heady tumult of the new gospel! It would burst the Judaistic wineskin—the New Testament Epistles shake under that agitation! Later it would stretch the old bottle of slavery beyond limits, and spill over the world in a new wine of freedom. Man's ancient concept of womanhood was unable to hold the ferment, and was thrown to the debris of broken systems. The red tide running from the winepress of Calvary is not easily restrained!

Then why try to save old wineskins? They exist for the wine, and only the wine is precious. In each new generation it must be poured from one perishable vessel to another without the spilling of a drop. The discarded vessel need not be mourned so long as the spontaneous energy of the new life is preserved. But in tragic blindness we invest the wineskins with peculiar sanctity. Religion becomes a creed or a polity, instead of a spirit. Heresy in doctrine falls under the ban, while heresy in spirit goes unnoticed. Furthermore, in our

¹⁸ Psalm 119: 83.

concern for the system, we denounce as lawless the man in whom new life pulses and who finds the system too small. We forget that lawlessness is of two kinds. Some lawbreakers, who are unworthy of the system, break it in anger or rebellious greed. Other lawbreakers, of whom the system is not worthy, break it because of the soul's imperious decree. Such say with Luther: "I dare not retract. Here stand I. I can do no other." But we have not learned to distinguish the lower lawlessness from the higher. We hang Jesus and the two thieves on the same hill. . . .

These bottles of our dogmatism—can they ever hold the wine of the grapes of God? These denominational wineskins—how hard and unelastic!—can they ever stretch enough to permit the redeeming fermentation of the spirit of Jesus? New modes of expression, new channels of action—would we ever rebel against them if we had really learned the first lesson in history or psychology? The rebellion will not avail us. We may fortify our poor creeds, our dried-up formularies, with precedents, stern penalties, and acts of legislature; but the Divine ferment will not be held until the wineskin is vast enough to hold it—as vast as the soul of Jesus! Meanwhile the pity is that by our obdurate clinging to old forms the wine of new truth is spilled.

The Parable of Treasures New and Old

Must we conclude, then, that the advent of Jesus was mainly a sign of revolution?—attended, as revolutions always are, by wreck and destruction? Are the ways of heaven iconoclastic? Is the road of human advance to be littered with fragments of shrines long held dear and wantonly destroyed? No; for though Jesus came to bring not peace but a sword¹⁹ (since His coming always precipitates the conflict between old and new), He came, nevertheless, "not to destroy but to fulfill."²⁰

The Gospel of Luke adds a significant sentence to the Parable of the New Wine and the Old Wineskins: "And no man having

¹⁹ Matthew 10: 34.
²⁰ Matthew 5: 17.

drunk old wine desireth new; for he saith, The old is good." Therein is the recognition that a new spirit must not only make its own forms, but must live within them for a time in order to mature and realize its own nature. The form gives character to the spirit. Furthermore, there is the recognition that an old system which has won man's affection and given him shelter should be allowed to live out its honorable day. The old wine-skins may still be used for wine whose fermentation is done. No one can read the words of Jesus with understanding without reading His debt to the truth of other days. His mind kindled to the dreams of holy men of old. He was not insensible to that mellow half-sadness which hangs about ancient altars like a remembered fragrance. "No man having drunk old wine desireth new"—that is, of course, a warning against the false conservatism that so easily besets us. But it is also, surely, the Master's tribute to the "honest lovers of old ways"; and His admission that upstart theories and the fiery zeal of new discipleship can taste very harsh and sour, and be raw almost to the measure of sacrilege! "The old is good"—it is a word, not merely of warning against reaction, not merely of indulgent concession to the old, but of rare insight and wisdom.²¹

For we cannot escape the old. In individual and social experience past sins crouch like wild beasts at our door, and past victories are ministering angels. "To-day" in the very word implies a "yesterday." Every time we date a letter to a friend we acknowledge the centuries which are beating in our blood. The language we use has been hammered, shaped, and polished by successive generations until it rings like steel and shines like a cloth of gold. The "clean slate" demanded by the revo-

²¹ G. H. Hubbard, *op. cit.*, p. 229, seems to me to be too harsh in his interpretation of Luke 5:39; though one is loth to take issue with so stimulating a book. The verse surely seems to be not simply a condemnation of blind conservatism—though such condemnation is implied. That word "noone," and the whole range of Christ's teaching bear out the exegesis which A. B. Bruce has suggested *op. cit.*, pp. 307 and 308. The interpretation here suggested may be compared with the saying of Rabbi Jose, b. Judah of Chephar Babli (second century): "He who learns from the young, unto what may he be likened? Unto one who . . . drinks wine from the vat. And he who learns from the old, to what may he be likened? Unto one who drinks old wine." (See A. Feldman, "The Parables and Similes of the Rabbis," p. 141.) Almost certainly the saying of Jesus in Luke 5:39 echoed a current phrase.

lutionary has history in its very texture; it cannot be wiped clean. The iconoclast ever waits,

"till some new world-emotion rise,
And with the shattering might of a simoon
Sweep clear this dying Past that never dies"²²

only to find that the inconsiderate thing about the past is just that "it never dies." It is wiser to "accept the universe"!

Neither can we hope to escape the new. Change is the law of life. Matter is an unending dance of electric energies; and our very flesh constantly decays and is constantly renewed. Old thought-forms must be used as milestones—a man who does not guide himself by them wanders in darkness; but they must not be used as millstones, or we shall find them round our necks and we ourselves drowning in the depths of the sea. Our mental and spiritual constitution impels us onward. Only for a night may we tarry, then we must strike our tents. A conservatism which, for the sake of the future, safeguards the treasure of the past wins its crown. A conservatism which denies the future, counting its little systems as full and final truth, has blood upon its hands—the skyline of the ages is black with the cruel crosses it has raised!

We must journey; but the journey is still one journey. It is from the heart of the old that we gain access to the new. Change is only in the form; the essence abides eternal. The morning may be new, but time is old. The vintage may be of to-day's garnering, and the wine from to-morrow's winepress, but the seed is from the foundation of the earth. If the new has no root in the old, it withers. If the old grows no new leaves, it dies. "Therefore every scribe who hath been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." Only such a scribe, filled with the spirit of that kingdom which is love and peace, can interpret the old to the new and the new to the old, and clothe the eternal verity in its fresh and appropriate time-vesture.

Mankind still divides into two camps—those who cry "The

²² William Watson, quoted by J. Brierley in "Religion and Experience." (Collected Poems of William Watson are published by The Macmillan Co.)

old things," and those who cry "The new things." Neither camp understands God's wise law of change. Standpattism and garish novelty in religion are equally blasphemous. Standpattism helps to nail Jesus to His Cross; and novelty, with that stark beam before its eyes, discards it as a morbid and meaningless symbol. The reactionary and the radical must always share the guilt of revolution. How the troubled realm of industry needs the "scribe who has been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven," so that he might "bring forth from his treasure things new and old"—the old basic law of individual leadership with the new friendliness which, because it shares all its leader's mind and heart, is the conquest of slavery! How theology needs that scribe to bring forth eternal truths (such as that of atonement which has been written on sacrificial altars since human life began) along with new science!

"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfills Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."²³

"If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away. Behold they (the old things) are become new."

²³ Alfred Tennyson, "The Passing of Arthur" (from "The Idylls of the King").