

## CHAPTER II

### SIMILITUDES OF THE KINGDOM (I)

#### THE PARABLE OF SPONTANEOUS GROWTH

"And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed upon the earth; and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring up and grow, he knoweth not how. The earth beareth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the fruit is ripe, straightway he putteth forth the sickle, because the harvest is come."  
(*Mark 4: 26-29*)

#### THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

"And he said, How shall we liken the kingdom of God? or in what parable shall we set it forth? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown upon the earth, though it be less than all the seeds that are upon the earth, yet when it is sown, groweth up, and becometh greater than all the herbs, and putteth out great branches; so that the birds of the heaven can lodge under the shadow thereof."  
(*Mark 4: 30-32*)

(*Parallel passages: Matthew 13: 31, 32; Luke 13: 18, 19*)

#### THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

"Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened."  
(*Matthew 13: 33*)

(*Parallel passage: Luke 13: 20, 21*)

## CHAPTER II

### SIMILITUDES OF THE KINGDOM (I)

*The Parable of Spontaneous Growth*  
*The Parable of the Mustard Seed*  
*The Parable of the Leaven*

The new religion was "the good news of the kingdom of God."<sup>1</sup> The ideal of a "kingdom" is one which the historic creeds of Christendom have virtually ignored, but which Jesus proclaimed as His one purpose and passion. It dominates His manifold message as a prayer-bell rules the shrines, cloisters, and courtyard of a temple. He defined that ideal quite clearly: "Thy kingdom come; Thy (Fatherly) will be done on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>2</sup> It comprised not merely the perfection of the individual, for "if religion ends in the individual, it ends";<sup>3</sup> nor yet the perfection of a super-community submerging the individual; but, rather, a Divine Commonwealth in which each personality is realized in seeking the welfare of all, and in which each is regarded "not as a means but always as an end."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus described the kingdom in terms of startling paradox. It will one day *arrive* (. . . "until the kingdom of God shall come")<sup>5</sup> yet it is ever *present* ("the kingdom of God is within you").<sup>6</sup> It is like that realm of music in which we live, but which did not "come" until the radio caught faint snatches of its song. The kingdom is *possessed* ("Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"),<sup>7</sup> yet it must ever be *sought* ("Seek ye first his kingdom . . .").<sup>8</sup> Though

<sup>1</sup> Mark 1: 14.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6: 10.

<sup>3</sup> A. B. Belden, "The Greater Christ," p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> See Kant's "Kingdom of Ends" in the "Critique of Pure Reason."

<sup>5</sup> Luke 22: 18.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 17: 21.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5: 3.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 6: 33.

it is within all life, it may be *entered* as a man crosses the bounds of one country and enters another, its passport being a childlike spirit—"Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall in no wise enter therein."<sup>9</sup> Conversion serves to open blind eyes upon the kingdom—"Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."<sup>10</sup> Beyond conversion lies the joy of the once-blind exploring a now-seen universe. . . .

"O glory of the lighted mind!  
How dead I'd been, how dumb, how blind.  
The station brook, to my new eyes,  
Was babbling out of Paradise,  
The waters rushing from the rain  
Were singing Christ has risen again."<sup>11</sup>

On this ever-recurring theme of the kingdom of God, Jesus played sphere-music.

Early in His ministry He portrayed it in a series of little parables, three of which give likenesses of the kingdom's growth. They were spoken in the mood of unshakable confidence—as though He held the future in the hollow of His hand. The hope probably was needed by the disciples! They must have had their seasons of misgiving about this Galilean who sought without benefit of sword, hierarchy, wealth, or learning, to conquer the world! But surely their hope was kindled by these stories. They must have sensed that His hope was sure—not from any "foreknowledge," which would have killed hope (for "hope that is seen is not hope"<sup>12</sup>); but from His soul's invincible surmise and His faith in God.

### *The Parable of Spontaneous Growth—(The Vitalism of the Kingdom)*

"What is a farm but a mute gospel?" asks Emerson. Never more of a gospel than in the mystery of growth! No one knows what a seed really is, or how it is changed into a flower.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 10: 15.

<sup>10</sup> John 3: 3.

<sup>11</sup> John Masefield, "The Everlasting Mercy." ("Collected Poems," The Macmillan Co., 1921.)

<sup>12</sup> Romans 8: 24.

Science may talk in polysyllables; the polysyllables only serve to acknowledge a mystery.

"Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies;  
Hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
Little flower;—but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is."<sup>13</sup>

Jesus faced the enigma of growth in brimming gratitude to God who "made every tree to grow."<sup>14</sup> He confessed our human ignorance: man "knoweth not how" a seed fructifies. Then He declared that the kingdom of God has the spontaneity of a seed. It possesses a divine vitality, the inherent forces of a self-fashioning life.

A harvest field demands two seasons of human toil—the times of planting and reaping. After the planting, the farmer can do little until the harvest, except pursue other tasks in patience and trust. He must be content to "sleep and rise, night and day." "It is good that a man should hope and quietly wait for the salvation of Jehovah."<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile inscrutable energies are loosed beneath the ground. Soon the tender blade appears, then the ear rich in promise, and finally the grain driven by the wind into the waves of a golden sea. Gladly the farmer "thrusts in the sickle." How have a few handfuls of seed filled his barns with food? "He knoweth not how." He is baffled and blessed by the mystery of life—spontaneous, self-ordering, self-developing. Such a mystery is the kingdom of God.<sup>16</sup>

The kingdom is a *vital force*. It thrives not primarily by

<sup>13</sup> Tennyson's "Flower in the Crannied Wall."

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 2: 9.

<sup>15</sup> Lamentations 3: 26.

<sup>16</sup> The pith of this beautiful and fundamental parable has been sadly overlooked. Some have deemed it only a shorter version of the parable of the Tares. Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 122, 123, wrongly fastens on the phrase, "first the blade," etc., as crucial; while Greswell dismisses the phrase as parenthetical. It is neither parenthetical nor crucial. It indicates that the *development* of the seed is also inherent; the germ quickens into a cycle of life. But Bruce staunchly insists on the slow development of the kingdom as the central teaching, and makes the parable merely a counsel of human patience. Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 313, and Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 289, place this exquisite simile on a rack and torture it with such questions as, "Who is symbolized by the 'man'?" and "What is represented by the 'reaping'?" This, as G. H. Hubbard has said, is as if a man should scrutinize Da Vinci's "The Last Supper" to inquire, "What is the texture of the table-cloth?" There is an illuminating discussion of this parable in G. H. Hubbard, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

human aid, but by inherent power. A man may dissect the roots of a flower, and analyse the soil, but the secret of growth will still elude him. "God giveth the increase." Here is the antidote for the stern message of the Parable of the Soils. That story gives warning that a seed may fail of fruitfulness because of the stubbornness or shallowness of human earth; whereas this gives assurance that, despite the unreceptive quality of the soil, the seed has still strong hope of survival. The kingdom of God is within human life as vitality is in the seed. Given any reasonable chance, it will grow!

"Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise  
From outward things, whate'er you may believe.  
There is an inmost center in us all,  
Where truth abides in fullness; and around,  
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,  
This perfect, clear perception—which is truth.  
    . . . and to know  
Rather consists in opening out a way  
Whence the imprisoned splendor may escape,  
Than in effecting entry for a light  
Supposed to be without."<sup>17</sup>

This intrinsic divinity in life is no encouragement to sloth. It rebukes a feverish trust in human agency. It shames complacent self-praise. But it is an encouragement to hope: "Work out your own salvation . . . for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."<sup>18</sup>

The kingdom is also one of *wondrous adaptations*. "The seed springeth up"—"the earth bringeth forth fruit," because soil and seed are in harmony. The soil provides the very elements needed for the seed's nourishment, and the seed gives the soil its opportunity. So, says Jesus, the kingdom fits human life. The universe shows many instances of mutual adaptation. The eye and the seen world are made each for the other. The ear and the realm of sound are in divine accord. The mind finds the objective world comprehensible; intellect and phenomena swim in a common medium. (This latter assumption is the venture of faith of both philosophy and science, and except they believe they shall not be saved!)

<sup>17</sup> Browning, "Paracelsus."

<sup>18</sup> Philipians 2: 13.

But of all adaptations, that which most inspires to awe and confidence is the one that Jesus here teaches, namely, that the kingdom of God and our life are native each to the other:

"Our wills are ours, we know not how:  
Our wills are ours to make them thine."<sup>19</sup>

When a man "comes to himself," he is at home with God.

Again, the kingdom of God moves through *orderly development* to a resistless harvest. The seed appears to have a precarious existence. Buried in the earth, who knows that it will ever survive? Then is seen the miracle of the first shoot piercing its way through the hindering soil; then the ear; then the full grain! Quietly and without haste the moral and spiritual powers resident in human life unfold. The tender green of spring, the pledge of the summer's ripening wheat, the reapers' song, and the bursting granaries are all stored within the seed. Unhurried but sure, the hidden vitality evolves through its full cycle of development. What a history of Puritan achievement was hidden in the seed of the "Mayflower"! What centuries of Christian growth were folded vitally in the seed of the Apostles' band!

So Jesus cast Himself into the rough furrows of our little earth. The blade even now is visible. The harvest song shall one day be raised in joy!—"Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit."<sup>20</sup>

#### *The Parable of the Mustard Seed—(The Expansion of the Kingdom)*

In two pregnant sentences Jesus traced the lowly origin and mighty climax of the "realm of heaven" among men. The pedants have protested that the mustard seed is not "the least of all the seeds that be in the earth," and that the grown plant can hardly be dignified as a "tree."<sup>21</sup> It is enough to retort

<sup>19</sup> Tennyson's "In Memoriam," first canto.

<sup>20</sup> John 12: 24.

<sup>21</sup> The travellers Irby and Mangles were first to suggest that the mustard "tree" of this parable must be identified with the tree called "*khardal*" (Arabic for mustard). See Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 99. The conjecture, though plausible, is not proven; nor is it necessary.

that proverbially the mustard seed was smallest. As such it found a place in the similes of the rabbis, and in those of Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, a tree was a favorite Old Testament symbol for the growth and beauty of the "age of gold," or for the might of a foe.<sup>23</sup> The minuteness of the mustard seed compared with its relatively vast growth, made it an excellent figure for the expansion of the kingdom.

The commonwealth of God, Jesus daringly foretold, would increase from tiniest beginnings until "the height thereof reached to heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth." In Galilee it seemed a speck, too trivial for reckoning. Men did not heed the birth of Jesus. Bethlehem, amid the bustle of the Roman census, talked not of Him, but of the oppression of the conqueror, the movement of the legionaries, the arrival of caravans from Damascus, and the probable yield of harvest—of all the momentous affairs of the world. He found no room in that hubbub of voices, even as He found no room in the inn. Had they been told that salvation was near to them in a little Child, they would have laughed incredulously, and perchance bitterly. A savant with a new learning, or a priest making patriotism blaze with a new fervor, or a Maccabeus to be a living sword against their foes—such a one might be a savior, but not an obscure Babe!

"They all were looking for a king  
To slay their foes and lift them high:  
Thou cam'st, a little baby thing  
That made a woman cry."<sup>24</sup>

Grown to manhood's estate His witness was still negligible. The Roman State and the Jewish Church both frowned upon Him; He was only a Carpenter from a village in an inconsequential and conquered province. In our times the means of travel, together with the telegraph, telephone, and radio, have changed the world into a neighborhood. The ends of the earth are at the end of every street. If Jesus returned in the flesh and we recognized Him (which is doubtful, since His

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 17: 20, Luke 17: 6.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel 4: 10; Ezekiel 17: 22, 31: 3-9.

<sup>24</sup> George MacDonald, "The Holy Thing." ("Poetical Works," E. P. Dutton & Co.)

own land knew Him not), His every word and gesture would be flashed around the planet. But in the days of His flesh, His opportunity as compared with that of almost the obscurest preacher to-day, was "cribbed, cabined, and confined."

His end was a gallows—with only a handful of friends to mourn His death. How could His faith endure? In very truth it was "less than the least of all seeds." Yet Jesus was sure it would survive and grow. Let it be buried deep in the earth; it would germinate and find the sun! Let it be cast to the winds; it would gain lodgment in some obscure rock-crevice and there blossom! Let it be drowned in a sea of blood; red tides would carry it to the soil of some strange shore! An incredible optimism—but history has kept troth with Him. The microscopic seed is now a plant overtopping all others in the planet-garden.

We are victimized by bigness. Our banks claim their millions in deposits. Our buildings, like the tower of Babel, must "reach unto heaven" and "make us a name." Every village not pathetically passé is eager to disfigure its beauty with factories. Every city not hopelessly moribund is ambitious to double its population. Meanwhile, in our crass chamber-of-commerce philosophies, we ignore the leading fact that a bigger city does not therefore breed better people. Even the Church brings forth "movements" which flourish for a day like a green bay tree and then die, having printer's ink for sap and being stricken by the blight of statistics.

Science has lately shown us "the infinitude of the little." A drop of water is a Venice with tides of traffic flowing through its streets. A drop of blood is a battle ground with marshalled hosts of red and white corpuscles. An atom is not the ultimate smallest particle, but a universe with worlds weaving amazing patterns in its fields of space. . . .

Significantly Jesus spoke often of "the infinitude of the little"—the grain of mustard seed, the cup of cold water, the one talent, the widow's mite, the lost coin, and the kindness done unto "one of these least." Jesus craved the peace of the whole world as the fruit of His travail; but He knew what we forget—that spread of branch and towering loveliness depend on the vitality of the seed. A vital seed, however minute, will

produce its tree, with foliage to give shelter to both man and bird. Some day we shall learn His mind and rest our hopes on God's tiny seeds—this man's utter consecration; that mother's prayer; this girl's joy, "as white as river sand"; that boy's imagination, glorious with ideals unfurled like banners! For of such is the tree of the kingdom of heaven.

*The Parable of the Leaven—(The Permeating Influence of the Kingdom)*

This parable has suffered many offences at the hands of the allegorizers. Trench,<sup>25</sup> following commentators as early as Jerome, gives symbolic meaning to the "three measures of meal." They represent the three parts of the ancient world; or body, mind, and spirit,—the three elements of human life; or the race descended from the three sons of Noah. Even Arnot<sup>26</sup> allows that these analogies "are entitled to a respectful hearing"; and so discriminating a mind as Dr. Bruce<sup>27</sup> finds it "hard to reconcile ourselves to such conclusions" as would compel us to forego these "tempting" comparisons. Arnot takes sharp issue, however, with those who contend that the "woman" in the parable represents the Holy Spirit or the Church.<sup>28</sup> For that word of protest we may be thankful! Allegorizing of the parables dies a stubborn death.

Three measures were an ephah of flour, the amount of a customary baking. The virtue of the parable is that it is at once homey and apt—so homey that every peasant woman listening to Jesus would understand it, and so apt that no one would miss a truth so fitly pictured. The kingdom of God is a permeating and transforming influence; it conquers the life of mankind as leaven subdues dough.<sup>29</sup>

Leaven is a *silent agency*. So is the kingdom of God.

<sup>25</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>28</sup> He adds the pungent and timely comment: ". . . while I endeavor to keep my mind open for everything that the Scriptures bring to the Church, I am disposed to shut the door hard against everything that I suspect the Church is bringing to the Scriptures." Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 144. See also Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> That leaven is ordinarily used, even by Jesus, as a symbol of evil influence (Matthew 16:6, I Corinthians 5:7, Galatians 5:9) need not debar us from the interpretation which is explicit in this parable.

Shrewd ears would be required to detect leaven busy at its task. No one overhears a seed in process of germination. Victimized by bigness, we have succumbed also to the noisy and the obtrusive. Our music is a strident frenzy. Our art is lurid and bizarre. Notoriety feasts in plenty; reputation is a beggar at the gates. News shrieks from the public press, and the din of our cities is like bedlam broken loose. A raucous age has discovered, and bequeathed to posterity as an eternal truth, that "it pays to advertise."

Jesus said His kingdom is like leaven. His followers are the "salt of the earth," "the light of the world." He did not "strive or cry aloud," nor did "any one hear his voice in the streets."<sup>30</sup> Leaven, salt, light, are silent forces—as are all God's mightiest powers. The stars do not chatter on their orbits. The armies of spring blow no trumpets as they march with leafy banners down the furrowed fields. Human love holds deepest converse when the clumsy tongue is still. The kingdom comes not in the boisterous tumult of our doings, or in the fever of our excitements: "Be still and know that I am God."<sup>31</sup>

Leaven is *invisible and inward*. So is the kingdom of God. It "cometh not with observation."<sup>32</sup> It has no tariff-laws or trade returns. Its thrones are not propped on bayonets. Its stock is not quoted on Exchange. Its coming is not heralded in the press. Its fortunes are not debated in senates and parliaments. Its advance is not registered in church statistics, nor do denominations mark its bounds. It is invisible and inward, like honor, pity, and courage. These last become articulate in words and splendid in deeds, and without words and deeds they would be of scant worth; nevertheless, words and deeds are but the "meal." Honor, pity, courage, are the invisible leaven which make of words and deeds that living bread by which mankind is truly fed.

Leaven works by *contagion* "until the whole is leavened." So does the kingdom of God. "One loving heart sets another on fire." When Jesus came from His wilderness of temptation

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 12:19.

<sup>31</sup> Psalm 46:10.

<sup>32</sup> Luke 17:20.

to win the world to God, He began that transcendent task by talking to two men on a country road<sup>33</sup>—"and they abode with him that day." Later He chose twelve "that they might be with him";<sup>34</sup> and lavished on them His full spirit, that they in turn might spread the contagion of the kingdom. So it came to pass. Andrew found Peter, and Philip found Nathanael. Jesus did not meet many people, but "as many as touched him were made whole."<sup>35</sup> That Divine health still spreads. Words which He flung away on sadly blemished people like the woman of Samaria, or on people of fitful courage like Nicodemus, shine with an ever-growing luster; not primarily because of the words themselves, but because *He* was a living radiance. The spirit of the kingdom broadens on the world like light, preserves and adds savor like salt, permeates and transforms like leaven.

How far the leaven has penetrated who can tell? Many who do not name His name implicitly confess His benign mastery. Many who deny or forget Him live under freedoms and ameliorations that He has given. Hospitals are but one visible token of His spreading influence. The process will continue until the whole is leavened—our business, churches, politics, and pleasures. There is a pathetic mustering of excuses evident in such phrases as "business is business," "competition is the rule of life," "self-preservation is the first law" (as though it were therefore the last law or the best law!). There are specious pleas against the cooperative venture of the nations into goodwill,—an adventure which must be made, and at risk, if history is to be better than a recurrent slaughter-house. But these excuses and unworthy pleas are but the acknowledgment that the leaven is at work! The presence of Jesus is proving awkward. His counsels are too difficult, we say; but their loveliness haunts us. His way is too hard; but we cannot forget its austere glory. Soon or late we must come to terms with Him—or suffer torment. "For the kingdom of God is like leaven"—"until the whole is leavened."

<sup>33</sup> John 1: 39.

<sup>34</sup> Mark 3: 14.

<sup>35</sup> Mark 6: 56.