

CHAPTER IV

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF HEARING

THE PARABLE OF THE SOILS

"And he spake to them many things in parables, saying, Behold, the sower went forth to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the birds came and devoured them: and others fell upon the rocky places, where they had not much earth: and straightway they sprang up, because they had no deepness of earth: and when the sun was risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell upon the thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked them: and others fell upon the ground, and yielded fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He that hath ears, let him hear. Hear then ye the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the evil one, and snatcheth away that which hath been sown in his heart. This is he that was sown by the way side. And he that was sown upon the rocky places, this is he that heareth the word, and straightway with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but endureth for a while; and when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway he stumbleth. And he that was sown among the thorns, this is he that heareth the word, and the care of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. And he that was sown upon the good ground this is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; who verily beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

(Matthew 13: 3-9, 18-23)

(Parallel passages: Mark 4: 2-8, 13-20; Luke 8: 4-8, 11-15)

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The first word of this story challenges attention—"Hearken!" The last word repeats the challenge—"He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." Hearing is an urgent business. We assume that because initiative is with the speaker a message controls the hearer. But the parts may be reversed: the hearer may control the message. An appeal, even the appeal of Jesus, may be frustrated by unreceptiveness. This is the salient truth of the parable and the ground of its terse counsel: "Take heed, therefore, how ye hear."

The story is autobiography, a transcript of the experience of Jesus. Probably He did not expect swift victory to crown His proclamation of the kingdom, but it is certain that He did not expect such checks and reverses as befell Him. Sometimes His disillusion is plain to see, as when "He marvelled because of their unbelief."¹ Baffled hope² cries aloud in the doom He pronounced on the Cities of the Lake: "Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."³ It was clear to Him that, if the kingdom was to reach full harvest, His hearers must be quickened into self-examination. Hence a parable which is strictly not a parable of the Sower, nor of the Seed, but rather a Parable of the Soils.⁴

¹ Mark 6: 6.

² George Murray, *op. cit.*, pp. 219, 220, interprets this parable as a message of hope. The failures indicated are only "incidents—shadings in the picture." The mass of the seed "succeeded—in fact was marvellously multiplied." It is an interesting interpretation, but the parable does not appear to justify it, and the Gospels' frequent references to the (at least temporary) defeat of Jesus' expectations make it still more untenable. The hope of Jesus remained but He did not blink the stern facts of an experience which was not free from disappointment.

³ Matthew 11: 21.

⁴ It is difficult to hold with Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 20, and others that this is chronologically first of the parables, and that previously Jesus had spoken in explicit state-

The "sower" is any sower of truth, but primarily Jesus.⁵ The title well befits Him. Pioneers such as Abraham and Moses had cut away the tangled growths from Jewish soil, prophets had driven through it the ploughshare of teaching sternly kind, and the alternating storm and shine of national experience had weathered it. Now Jesus came to sow the seed. A lonely Figure, for the sower is always lonely! The reaper has comradeship and the harvest-song, but the sower's task is solitary. Theophile Gautier looked at Millet's famous picture, "The Sower," and said: "With a superb gesture he who has nothing scatters far and wide the bread of the future." So it might be said of Jesus. But the parable does not primarily concern the Sower.

Nor is its main emphasis upon the "word of the kingdom" which, Jesus tells us, is the seed. That symbol likewise is inspired and it is not surprising that Jesus often used it. His simple teaching about God, duty, death and life seemed as precarious as seed; but it was vital, as history has shown. Like seed it has produced more seed from its own growth. Beginning in Galilee it has come to harvest in every land. Yet, though the figure is so apt, the parable is not about the seed.

It is about the soil of human understanding and response into which the teaching falls. "And there were gathered unto him great multitudes"—there was the soil! Why had they come? Some came from curiosity—idle followers of the crowd. Some came from self-seeking motives—it might be profitable to cultivate the company of this seven days' wonder. Some came as revolutionaries—to make Him king, to use Him as a flag of revolt or a party cry. Some came in quick but shallow enthusiasm, others in deep longing, and others they knew not why. How would they receive His words? As variously as the soil of a Galilean hillside receives the seed! Not in vain had He watched the sower tramping his furrows.

ment, resorting to parables only because of the spiritual blindness of His hearers. A teaching method of which Jesus is so divinely a Master cannot have been a patch on a failure and for Jesus to have neglected the accepted medium of instruction (see p. xiv) would have invited misunderstanding. But this parable, as its mood and message indicate, does undoubtedly mark a turning-point in His ministry.

⁵ In the words "the sower" the article is generic and means any typical sower. But if the parable is autobiographical the immediate reference would be to Jesus. Wellhausen goes so far as to say, "Jesus is not so much teaching here as reflecting aloud upon the results of His teaching."

He would tell the multitudes a story about themselves. Being under no illusions (brave Son of Fact!) He would tell them just what chance His teaching would have with them, and why in some of them it would find no lodgment. "And he spake many things . . . saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow. . . ."

By some perversity we are quick to blame the sower or the seed and correspondingly slow to blame the soil. The factors of initiative are cankered, so our hasty accusation runs, while the factors of receptiveness are incorruptible. Thus we condemn our political or social leaders when the fault may be in their followers. "Every man," said Russell Lowell, "is a prisoner of his date"; and every leader, we might add, is a prisoner of the visionless sloth of those whom he would rally to his cause. Not that the light of a great man can be utterly quenched: he comes bearing divine fire. He cannot be explained in mundane terms: the sky of heaven's intention opens to let him through. Yet his message may be maimed, his achievement circumscribed, by a stiff-necked generation. "He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief."* Similarly we blame the institution rather than the man. We have keen eyes to discover grievous faults in old forms of government, but blind eyes for faults within the governed. Establishing with enthusiasm a new city charter, but leaving unimproved the old quality of citizenship, we are pained at our failure to induce forthwith a heaven on earth. We can detect innumerable flaws in the institution of marriage, but few in married people. Therefore, we cry, "Away with marriage," or, if our laws miscarry in justice, "Away with laws." A man suffering from indigestion might as wisely cry, "Away with food."

But our bitterest quarrel is with the prophet and his message, and our imperturbable complacency is with the hearer. If the prophet would only speak vigorously for this "cause" or strike lusty blows at that corruption!—by which we mean that religion must become an economic crusade, and be robbed of its essential mysticism. Or if the prophet would "only stick to

* Matthew 13: 58.

the gospel"!—by which we mean that he must take an innocuous orthodoxy for an airing every Sunday, that religion must never be *applied* religion, and that in particular, it must never come within telescopic range of modern business or pleasure. If only the prophet were a different man and his message a different message!—on that text, as our magazines (their sensitive finger meanwhile on the pulse of circulation) are well aware, we are always glad to hear a sermon.

Let the sins of the prophets and the impoverishment of the message be frankly admitted. The genuine prophet, conscious of unworthiness, will be first to make confession. But this fact remains: There was once a Messenger who spake "as man never spake" the words of eternal life—and they nailed Him to a cross! The fault then was not in the Factor of initiative, but in the factor of response; not in the Sower or the seed, but in the soil. The hearer was to blame: "Neither will they be persuaded, if one rose from the dead."⁷

Mark, therefore, the interpretation:⁸ "Some seed fell by the wayside"—at the edge of the beaten track. There it found no lodgment. It rolled away before the wind. Birds came and gathered it at will. Seed sown on bare stone would have almost as good a chance to fructify. There are lives that are a beaten track!—hardened not by heredity or crushing circumstance (as lives sometimes are), but self-hardened. This parable, because its whole emphasis is on responsibility, so declares; and the indictment is made not in censure but in compassion. Why had such people come to listen to Jesus? To satisfy an idle curiosity perhaps, or to follow the crowd, or to kill time! They were of the same soil as their brethren, but the soil had been trampled. They had made their souls a thoroughfare. Everything had gone over them—weddings, funerals, pleasures, trade; but nothing had stirred them to the depths. Finally they were impervious, a roadway for whatever procession of inter-

⁷ Luke 16: 31.

⁸ The "interpretations" of parables given in the gospels have been called in question as to their genuineness by critics of good standing (see p. 68). This interpretation (Matthew 13: 18-23, Mark 4: 13-20, Luke 8: 11-15) seems by its simplicity, force and convincing "fitness" to be the utterance of Jesus or directly derived from such an utterance. The interpretations appended to the parables respectively of the Tares and the Dragnet do not seem to stand these tests, but to be rather the conventional apocalyptic of the early church.

ests and happenings might choose to pass that way. Matthew's Gospel describes them in words of singular insight—poignant words on the lips of Jesus: "When any one heareth the word . . . and understandeth it not." They did not understand! There was a man who visited Rome and afterwards could recall nothing of the visit save that he had found a new gambling device: he did not understand the "grandeur that was Rome"! There were people at Niagara Falls who hurried from that marvellous torrent to a cheap and crowded carnival: they did not understand that thunder-majesty! There are people to whom the Fifth Symphony is only a farrago of sounds: they do not understand Beethoven's spirit-rapture. So there were people who listened to Jesus and had no comprehension of His message. He spoke one tongue and they another. He lived in one world and they in another. He was always below the surface and they were always on the surface: they had made their lives a common pathway!

What could Jesus do? At the moment, nothing! Soon the birds would come and gather the seed. Some twittering interest, some new excitement, some trivial item of gossip would eat up all He had said. He could do nothing until God should drive a ploughshare of pain or loss in cruel mercy through their lives to make new furrows for the seed. Tragedy is indeed gain that compels men to meet life with serious purpose. . . .

"*And others fell upon rocky places*"—not on soil impoverished by many stones, but on shallow earth with a ledge of rock two or three inches below the surface. On such ground the harvest follows the rule of "quickly come, quickly go." The thin earth begets a feverish growth which straightway withers from lack of moisture. Applied to human nature this description is startling in its psychological truth. "I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest,"⁹ vowed one would-be disciple, but Jesus quenched the sudden, thin enthusiasm: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the heaven have nests: but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." There was no calmness, no insight, no counting the cost in that wild word "whithersoever." "Straightway with joy," says Jesus of our

⁹ Luke 9: 57, 58.

shallow loyalties. "Straightway"—no deep pondering, no trembling of reverence! The serf in olden days pledged fealty to his feudal chief in noble words: "Dear, my lord, I am liege man of thine for life and limb and earthly regard, and I will keep faith and loyalty to thee for life and death, so help me God." Dimly we realize that we owe such a vow to Jesus, that life without Him is black confusion, but we make our vow with glib and over-reaching protestations, not with sacramental surrender. "Straightway"—there is no realization that discipleship means a revolutionary change of life, a stern battle against odds, a forsaking of the world. . . .

"When persecution cometh straightway he stumbleth"—it is "straightway" both in vow and in the apostasy! The emotion ruffled only the surface of life, and when contradictions appeared its strength was spent! Our "persecutions" are not physical. So far as Jesus is concerned they are not even opposition in words, for the world unites to pay Him lip-service, and editorial columns vie to do Him honor. Our persecution is by a prevalent cynicism which hints or openly asserts that the ideal is but a momentary phosphorescence, a day-dream, or, at best, an impossible counsel of perfection. The cynicism takes deadliest form in the atheism of conduct—an omnipresent worldliness with its crass standards of "success." Before such persecution our precipitate enthusiasms soon wither!

"*And others fell among the thorns*"—not on ground already covered with thorns, but on land "fouled" by latent weed-seeds. Who has not seen a grain field brilliantly but ruinously streaked with red poppies or defaced by patches of thistles? The weeds were not visible when the crop was sown; they were in the uncleansed soil. There is a gradual ascent in quality of the three types of character thus far described. The first is impenetrable, the second shallow, but the third is rich earth with possibilities of a generous harvest. This hearer is a man of high imagination, of genuine passion, but he is not whole-hearted. He is divided between irreconcilable loyalties: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon."¹⁰

"The care of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke

¹⁰ Matthew 6: 24.

the word." Sometimes carking anxiety slays the good grain, and sometimes money "deceiving" people with its promise of life. Soon or later we must come to terms in industry, social ethics, and the teaching of religion with the conviction held by Jesus in regard both to the poverty that crushes and the wealth that deceives. . . . In the quest for the Holy Grail the knight Gawain was shallow and his impulse soon withered, but Lancelot was "our mightiest," a man of magnificent parts. Yet Lancelot failed in the quest only less signally than Gawain, nor did he flinch to confess the cause of failure:

". . . but in me lived a sin
So strange, of such a kind, that all of pure,
Noble and knightly in me twined and clung
Round that one sin, until the wholesome flower
And poisonous grew together, each as each,
Not to be plucked asunder."¹¹

He failed because the soil of his life was "thorny ground" in which the weeds "growing up choked the word"!

But there was good soil, and therefore Jesus sowed in hope. Among the multitude there were men and women who were sin-sick and world-weary, who prayed to the ideal within them as to a healing shadow thrown across their path, who cherished every sanctifying motive.

Jesus found in these valiant spirits His great cheer, and they found in Him their dreams come true. Luke's Gospel has described them in three little phrases which glow like torches. They were "such as in honest and good heart"—not faultless people, but sincere. Sinning or striving, they always "consented to receive the knowledge of themselves," and despite all lapses they refused to parley with anything lower than the highest. Again, they were "such as . . . having heard the word, hold it fast." They clung doggedly to every intimation of eternity. They walked in the light while it was day, and when night came they kept faith with the illumined hour, nor allowed the world's glare to make them disobedient. Again, they were "such as . . . bring forth fruit with patience." Mahatma Ghandi is reported as saying, "If a man would know God he must be as patient as one transferring an ocean drop

¹¹ Tennyson, "The Holy Grail" ("Idylls of the King").

by drop at the end of a straw." There is no get-rich-quick blasphemy in the land of heavenly treasure, for the treasure must still be bought by the pains and patience of good character. These translated their hopes into deeds, and "brought forth fruit with patience"; and the Farmer of Human Fields did not rashly plough up the land because the harvest was slow to appear.

No parable can be pressed to a rigorous conclusion. There is a point at which analogy ends. The soil of life is not in every regard like the soil of nature. Some soils in nature are never cultivable: arctic icefields and the sands of the Painted Desert yield no bread; but human soil is never completely bereft of promise. The soil of nature cannot change its climate; but human soil can help to create its own weather: "Take heed therefore how ye hear." Hearing is an urgent business. The factor of receptiveness conditions the factor of appeal. We may make even the toil of Jesus a failure, or we may receive it as good soil receives the seed and cause it to fructify according to the plenitude of our gifts, "some thirty-fold, some sixty, and some an hundred."