

## CHAPTER XXI

### MAKING LIGHT OF THE KINGDOM

#### THE PARABLE OF THE GREAT FEAST

"And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. But he said unto him, A certain man made a great supper; and he bade many: and he sent forth his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a field, and I must needs go out and see it; I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them, I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. And the servant came, and told his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor and maimed and blind and lame. And the servant said, Lord, what thou didst command is done, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and constrain them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, that none of those men that were bidden shall taste of my supper."

(Luke 14: 15-24)

(Parallel passage: Matthew 22: 1-10, being The Parable of the Banquet of the King's Son.)

#### THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING ROBE

"But when the king came in to behold the guests, he saw there a man who had not on a wedding-garment: and he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and cast him out into the outer darkness; there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few chosen."

(Matthew 22: 11-14)

## CHAPTER XXI

### MAKING LIGHT OF THE KINGDOM

*The Parable of the Great Feast*  
*The Parable of the Wedding Banquet of the King's Son*  
*The Parable of the Wedding Robe*

St. Luke quotes the story of the Great Feast as part of the table-talk of Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee. Jesus had commended humility<sup>1</sup> (not a noticeable virtue in the Pharisees at the board!) and then had aggravated heresy in the suggestion that rich men desiring to entertain at dinner should not limit their invitations to the socially acceptable but should beckon "the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind." With subtle humor He added reasons: "Lest haply they (thy rich neighbors) also bid thee again"—(perish the thought! When would any Pharisee issue invitations with such a possibility in mind?). But with the outcasts of society (He said) the generosity would be safe from rebuttal, "because they have not wherewith to recompense thee."

We may imagine that the atmosphere was strained, the topic of conversation distinctly awkward. But some ready-tongued Pharisee saved the day. "Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!"<sup>2</sup> he exclaimed. The ejaculation sounded well—even though it meant nothing. It had a pious ring and the added merit of commanding every one's assent and thus of restoring the broken rapport of the gathering. "But He

<sup>1</sup> Luke 14: 7-14. See Chapter VIII of this book.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Adeney ("Century Bible," Luke, p. 225), with his characteristically irenic spirit, maintains that this remark was "wistful" and sincere. Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 387, agrees that he "was well-meaning, but dim and confused in his conceptions." Other commentators (Dods, Plummer, Bruce, Hubbard) describe him as "self-complacent," "a pious old humbug," etc. There is no need to accuse him of deliberate and premeditated insincerity, but the setting presupposes the likelihood of Pharisaic "piosity," and the emphatic "But" which introduces the reply of Jesus indicates that Jesus took issue with the mood of the remark and insisted on swinging the conversation back to reality. On the question of the proper context of this parable, see footnote to p. 224.

said to him . . ." and the bubble of unreality was instantly pricked as Jesus related another story resistless in its simple truth.

St. Matthew assigns a similar parable (or is it a recension of the same original story?)<sup>3</sup> to a different context. He locates it with a group of parables spoken against the scribes and Pharisees during the Passion week. It is stronger in language and sterner in tone than the Lucan rendering, but in theme it is the same.

*The Parable of the Great Feast*  
*The Parable of the Wedding Banquet*

A rich man planned a feast and invited his friends. In Matthew's account the "certain man" becomes a "king," and the "feast" is the wedding-banquet of the king's son—an occasion which, to the oriental delight in festive celebrations, would be the acme of delight. Thus Jesus again makes joy a dominant note in the kingdom-music.<sup>4</sup> John the Baptist would not have used a feast as a symbol of the overture of God to men. The kingdom to him was an advancing doom. But "the Son of man came eating and drinking."<sup>5</sup> Has the world ever fully understood the gladsome mood of Jesus? His "good news" may expose the disciple to the fires of shame confessed to God and man, but the fires are refining fires and their suffering is

<sup>3</sup> A difficult question to which there is no final answer. Matthew's version shows clear traces of admixture. Vv. 6, 7 reflect the fall of Jerusalem and were probably written after that event. They break the literary and even the didactic integrity of the parable. Harnack suggested that these two verses are akin to certain verses in Luke's parable of the Pounds (see footnote, p. 242 of this book), and Grieve (Peake's Commentary, *in loc.*) and Allen ("I.C.C.," *in loc.*) agree that they should be omitted. But, even when this omission has been made, Matthew's parable and Luke's show little similarity in wording, even though they are undoubtedly similar in theme. If they are "doublets from one original," the redactors must have worked with different versions of the original.

Thus interpreters are divided into two main classes: (a) those who hold that the two parables are similar in theme but different in original occasion—"the same theme handled twice by the same artist, but in different languages and for diverse purposes" (Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 461) and (b) those who hold that the two parables were originally one story. Among (a) may be listed Trench, Arnot, Monro Gibson (in Expositor's Bible), Maclaren, Dods, and Plummer ("I.C.C."), Among (b) Calvin himself finds a place and with him Grieve, Allen ("I.C.C."), Box ("Century Bible") and Murray. Most of those who identify the two parables believe that Luke's version is nearer to the original in substance and Matthew's in context. There is no sufficient data for a final opinion. This book suspects that the two stories were originally identical but is content to base its exposition on the undoubted fact that they are similar in teaching. For the relationship of the Story of the Wedding Robe to the other story, see footnote on p. 228 of this book.

<sup>4</sup> See Chapters I, V and XXII of this book.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11: 19.

not worthy to be compared with the deep joy bestowed. The kingdom-music sweeps through all the cadences of unrestrained delight. Forgiveness is to the uttermost (such is its song!) and righteousness is not an outer yoke grievous to be borne but an inner fountain welling up unto eternal life! Thus God makes His dwelling-place with man. In His presence even tribulation is but the tossing of the upper ocean: there is peace in the depths. "Your joy no man taketh from you,"<sup>6</sup> Jesus said. He knew a joy not *in spite of* pain (as though He had said, "Come what may, I am resolved to maintain My cheerfulness"), not *in respite of* pain (as though He had said, "There are saving hours when the load is lifted"), not *in denial of* pain (as though He had said, "The day is really not dark"), but *because of* pain! Cleaving to God's will in scorn of bitter consequence and suffering vicariously in the grief of the world was a joy so intense that pain itself became sacramental—the lower octave of a rapturous song!

Thus He spoke to men about the "great feast" of the kingdom. We have not understood Him. The picture seems folly. We make Him inarticulate because our ears are dull. . . .

To this feast, when the table was spread, the host summoned his invited neighbors. He sent a *vocator*, according to the custom of the time, to remind them of the proffered joy: "Come for all things are now ready." But with one accord they made excuse.<sup>7</sup> One man had just bought a field and must needs inspect his purchase. Presumably he had not bought a field unseen, but property beckons men to glut their eyes upon it and cry in the mazed voice of acquisition, "This is *mine*, this is *mine*." Another man had bought five yoke of oxen. He was that very moment on his way<sup>8</sup> to test them. Presumably he had not been fooled into giving good money for lame and blind oxen, but he was caught in the inexorable claims of "big business" (were there not *five* teams?) and business cannot always pause for the genial neighborliness of

<sup>6</sup> John 16: 22.

<sup>7</sup> These excuses seem to me to be a pivotal factor in the story. George Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 175 ff., and Bruce with lighter emphasis, *op. cit.*, p. 461 ff., have maintained that the story is one of "grace" rather than of "judgment." Its main purpose is (they think) to teach the welcome of the kingdom to the multitude. Such undoubtedly is one of its truths, but the story seems to be aimed primarily at those who made light of the invitation to the feast.

<sup>8</sup> Such is the force of the Greek version.

life, much less for the sanctities. This man was obsessed with business (like a child absorbed in toy trains) but like all obsessed people he was sure that he alone was "practical" and sane. The third man explained that he had recently married and could not come.<sup>9</sup> The other two "prayed" with some courtesy "to be excused," but this man had no niceties: "I cannot come." Wedded loyalty should be a glad some and a sacred plot,

"Fringed pool,  
Ferned grot—  
The veriest school  
Of peace, . . ." <sup>10</sup>

but it can be enclosed with such high walls as to shut out the sight not only of other gardens more barren (and pleading their need) but even of the sky. A home becomes a prison if it has no windows opening on other homes and on the distant hills and the stars.

Thus the neighbors excused themselves, though to refuse an invitation so generous at the moment of summons was a discourtesy hardly less than an affront.<sup>11</sup>

Matthew's account avows of the "king" that he sent "other servants."<sup>12</sup> He indulged the first brashness only to meet repeated insult. Matthew also lays bare the root of the refusal: "They made light of it, and went their ways." There is a "making light" which is commendable. To laugh in the face of one's own fear—that is the crown of heroism. When we read of Charles II making apology on his deathbed for being "a most unconscionable time dying" we feel that the historians who would make him an unmitigated knave have done him less than justice. But that "making light" of the kingdom which comes of "making heavy" of farms and merchandise is the mark of a despised birthright. "Nothing succeeds like suc-

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 24: 5 gives the ancient law respecting men just married. They were exempt from military service and from tribal responsibility for one year.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Edward Brown, "My Garden."

<sup>11</sup> Canon Tristram observes (see "Century Bible," Luke, p. 225) that among the Arabs such a declaration of a second invitation was regarded as equivalent to a declaration of war.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 469, following Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 227, declares that the second group of servants were the apostles, Jesus being the original "summoner." This seems unwarranted allegorizing, and postulates a prescience on the part of Jesus of a kind which He was slow to claim and which is not characteristic of His teaching.

cess"? It would be truer (in any high sense of the word "succeed") to say that nothing fails like so-called success. It belittles and ignores the spiritual meaning of life. . . .

"Spiritual" is a term admittedly hard to define. The words with which we attempt to imprison it are nets spread to catch the wind. It "breaks through language and escapes." "The wind bloweth where it will, and thou . . . knowest not whence it cometh and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."<sup>13</sup> But as a working definition this might serve: *The spiritual endures.* Houses do not endure; they crumble. Flesh does not endure; it rots. Stars do not endure; their fires grow cold. Sin does not endure; it commits suicide. But conscience endures (though it be but as a torture) speaking of an eternal Right. Human love endures speaking of an eternal Love. Ideals endure, the waving banners of our human pilgrimage, speaking of an eternal Perfection. Jesus endures, haunting and redeeming the longings of the race. The spiritual endures! Once the spiritual became flesh and blood, and summoned men to the feast with living voice; but "they made light of it and went their ways, one to his farm and another to his merchandise."

Yet the banquet-hall was filled. For this surprising story tells how the host sent his servant through the streets of the city to invite cripples, ne'er-do-wells, and drabs to the feast. When this motley crowd could not tax his boundless hospitality, he dispatched servants into the whole countryside with urgent pleas to the vagrants on the highroads and the waifs of the hedges: "Constrain<sup>14</sup> them to come in." Familiarity and a dull imagination have hidden from us the amazing sight of that strange banquet. Lame beggars jostled each other with their crutches! Blind beggars groped ravenously towards the bounteous tables! Dumb beggars mumbled horribly their inarticulate delight!

"Walking lepers followed, rank on rank,  
Lurching bravoes from the ditches dank, . . .  
Vermin-eaten saints with mouldy breath,  
Unwashed legions from the ways of death—" <sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> John 3: 8.

<sup>14</sup> That this word "constrain" (which means "strongly to persuade") should have been made the occasion for religious persecution is illustration of the extreme to which Biblical literalism and "religious" bigotry will go.

<sup>15</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "General William Booth Enters Heaven." ("Collected Poems," The Macmillan Co.)

These became for the nonce members of high society! These entered the enduring kingdom!

"Drabs and vixens in a flash made whole!  
Gone was the weasel-head, the snout, the jowl;  
Sages and sibyls now, and athletes clean,  
Rulers of empires, and of forests green!"<sup>15a</sup>

Thus was the feast supplied with guests.

The thrust of the teaching is inescapable. If the religious leaders of Israel proved recreant, a pristine response might be found among that dim crowd whom the Pharisees deemed "accursed." If the chosen people despised their election, the hated "stranger" living in far fields beyond the city might prove worthier of God's favor. If the "classes" forget the name of Love, a Savior may be born among the "masses" as of old. If occidental "efficiency" makes light of the spiritual, the "effete" Orient may speak "words of eternal life." It pleases God to open uncorrupted springs among His "poor and maimed and blind and lame." There is an end of privilege to those who construe privilege as vested interest rather than as faith and love: "For I say unto you that none of these men that were bidden shall taste of my supper."<sup>16</sup>

### *The Parable of the Wedding Robe*

Matthew has hung as a pendant to the story of the Great Feast another parable<sup>17</sup>—that of the Wedding Robe. Commentators have soberly suggested that the chequered assembly at the Great Feast were "not instantly hurried into the great

<sup>15a</sup> Vachel Lindsay, "General William Booth Enters Heaven." ("Collected Poems." The Macmillan Co.)

<sup>16</sup> These words (Luke 14: 24) seem to have been spoken by Jesus as a comment on the story. The emphatic "you" suggests as much; though Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 338, maintains that they are the words of the "host" and therefore part of the parable.

<sup>17</sup> It is quite generally agreed that this was originally a separate story. Trench argues against Strauss for the integrity of Matthew 22: 1-14, but even Arnot admits that the Wedding Robe is another (though connected) parable, and Bruce (*op. cit.*, p. 464) also, though he thinks the two stories were originally joined by Jesus. Murray (*in loc.*), Box "Century Bible" (*in loc.*), and Grieve (Peake's Commentary) are clear-cut in the opinion that this is another and distinct story. The casual reader can supply the introductory sentence which is all that is necessary to give it wholeness. Hubbard takes Matthew's account for granted. His work seems to me to be marred in this and some other instances by his failure to allow for the great contribution which critical and exegetical study can make to the interpretation of the parables.

hall"<sup>18</sup> but that opportunity was given them to array themselves in appropriate garments provided by the host. It is better to assume that the story is distinct and separate, though like the story of the Great Feast in its background.

The wedding-banquet of a king's son was prepared with lavish hospitality. The guests were assembled in resplendent robes. They were awaiting the state entrance of the king. He came; the festive hour was crowned! But no sooner had he come than his eye fell on a man dressed as if he had come direct from his "farm" or his "merchandise"—a man without sense of propriety, neglectful of even elementary courtesies, guilty of unpardonable rudeness. His companions appear not to have noticed his uncouthness. It went unchallenged until the king came! But the king was kind. He was ready to believe there was good reason for the seeming temerity: "Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment?"<sup>19</sup> But no good reason could be offered: "And he was speechless."

He might have said in ancient words: "Woe is me! for I am undone; . . . for mine eyes have seen the king."<sup>20</sup> Only in the white light of a royal presence could he know the blackness of his offence. Other men had made light of the kingdom—and stayed away; but he had made light of it—and come! They were at least avowed in their despising of the spiritual—they went to their possessions. But this man accepted the overtures of grace, attended the feast—with a spirit still alien and worldly! In appearance he was serving God; in reality he was serving mammon. He was going through all the motions of religion, while secretly his discipleship was with the world.

The grace of God (Jesus would have us know) is joy unspeakable—but not for the jaunty, the heedless, or the hypocritical. It demands its preparation. A man must strip away the robe of sophistication, and come clothed in childlike trust: "Except ye turn, and become as little children ye cannot enter.

<sup>18</sup> Thus Storr. See Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

<sup>19</sup> There is some argument for the suggestion that at such a banquet the king himself would provide the necessary wedding-robes. Trench (*op. cit.*, pp. 235, 236) and Dods (*op. cit.*, p. 195) offer interesting illustrations to confirm the suggestion. It adds force to the parable because it scores in deeper colors the negligence of the erring guest, but it is not essential to the story.

<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 6: 5.

. . ." <sup>21</sup> He must lay aside the garment of his sin, and come clothed in penitence: "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." <sup>22</sup> He must doff his old earthy loyalties for the new robe of righteousness. <sup>23</sup>

Insincerity is robbed of all disguise when the king enters. It has no haven save the poor haven of "outer darkness." It is cast forth from the brightness and warmth of the banquet-hall where Jesus plights His troth with those who would sincerely love Him. It is flung into the narrow street which has no light!

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 18: 3.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 13: 3.

<sup>23</sup> This parable has not escaped the allegorizers. Olshausen suggests that the man without a wedding-garment is Judas (I) and there has been a Protestant-Catholic controversy about the significance of the "robe," Catholic expositors maintaining that it symbolizes "charity" and Protestants that it stands for "faith." There is no need thus to circumscribe the meaning.