

CHAPTER XXII

PREPAREDNESS AND EMERGENCY

THE PARABLE OF THE WISE AND FOOLISH BRIDESMAIDS

"Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For the foolish, when they took their lamps, took no oil with them: but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there is a cry, Behold, the bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are going out. But the wise answered, saying, peradventure there will not be enough for us and you: go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went away to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage feast: and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour."

(Matthew 25: 1-13)

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The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids

There were mystery plays based upon this parable as early as the fourteenth century—a testimony to its poetry and dramatic power. The spirit of Jesus was constrained by the tenderness and tragedy of human lot. He wove life into stories which by their perfection of truth and form are unforgettable. We must interpret this parable for what it is—a poignant, pleading tale—and forget that commentators have tormented themselves and it in their attempt to allegorize and theologize its details.¹

Ten bridesmaids go forth to meet the bridegroom and escort him to the home of his bride.² Oriental weddings are celebrated by night. Each bridesmaid carries a staff at whose top is a brazen bowl filled with rag and oil for a lamp.³ The torches sway to their steps and send fantastic waves of light across the dark. The bridegroom's journey being delayed they fix their lamps in the ground and wait. Soon they nod drowsily; then they fall asleep.⁴ But at midnight the sudden cry is raised: "The bridegroom cometh!" Eagerly their lamps are tended. But five bridesmaids cannot arouse their flickering lights. They have forgotten their extra oil. "Give us of your oil for our lamps are going out." "Nay," the others answer, "for there may not be enough for you and for us. Go to

¹ Calvin (quoted by Dods, *op. cit.*, p. 205) protests against these extravagances of exegetical method.

² We need not vex ourselves unduly with the question whether they actually journeyed forth along the highway to meet the bridegroom, or went to the home of the bride there to await him, or went to meet both bride and groom to escort them to their new home. Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 501, argues at length for the second of these suggested courses and Plummer ("I.C.C." on Luke) agrees with him. Bruce seems to suggest (unconvincingly, as it appears to us) that decision on this point will affect the meaning of the story. Why should it?

³ So Lightfoot.

⁴ Dods, *op. cit.*, p. 205, has an interesting account of a similar wedding in modern India.

them that sell and buy for yourselves." Later, their negligence redeemed, they reach the marriage chamber. Now their lamps burn bright. Now they can hear the banquet-joy, the happy laughter, the strain of harps. But the door is shut!

Another poet, humble follower of his Poet-Lord, has caught the poignancy and pleading of that closed door:

"Late, late, so late! and dark the night and chill!
Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.
Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

"No light had we: for this we do repent;
And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.
Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

"No light: so late! and dark and chill the night!
O let us in that we may find the light!
Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

"Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?
O let us in, tho' late, to kiss his feet!
No, no, too late! ye cannot enter now."⁵

The story says again that the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding.⁶ Jesus came to woo and win mankind to his own joy. Luke assigns the parable to the last week of His earthly life. That striking context is not disproved by the gladness of the figure, for we have assurance elsewhere that the valedictory of Jesus to His disciples was the gift of gladness: "These things have I spoken unto you that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full."⁷ This joy came of self-renouncement in God's name for man's sake!

In one aspect, Christian discipleship is the carrying of a cross; in another, the cross itself is the purchase price of peace. The world's way also has a double semblance; but, whereas the Christian's cross is set in joy, the world's pleasure is set in bitterness. There is no crown of thorns so cruel as a bartered sanctity. There is no torture like the gratuitous torture of a conscience turning to rend itself. There is no spear driven into the side with sharper thrust than the spear of shame. But a life laid down is joy beyond telling. Greater joy hath no man

⁵ The little novice's song in Tennyson's "Guinevere" from "The Idylls of the King."

⁶ See Chapter I, p. 4.

⁷ John 15: 11.

than this "that a man lay down his life for his friend." The kingdom of God is like a wedding feast.

The coming of the kingdom is to be greeted expectantly in lives alert for its advent. "Watch, therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour." Mark the nature of true watchfulness. To be alert does not mean to be feverishly anxious. All the bridesmaids slept, and neither the wise nor the foolish were indicted for their drowsiness. They could not always be at strained attention. The wise fisher-wife, her husband out at sea, will not haunt the end of the dock and peer night and day across the waves for sign of a returning sail. She will rather care for her cottage and mother her children, glancing now and then through the open door for promise of the homing ships. It is not in human nature to be sleeplessly vigilant, with the torturing question ever on our lips: "Is He coming?" Watchfulness is rather a set of the soul; it is the undertone of expectancy sounding through the daily faithfulness.

Is the "coming" prophesied in this story Jesus' "Second Coming"? We do not know. Interpretation must not be confined within the limits of that doctrine. It may hold within those limits; it *certainly* holds beyond them. The early Church awaited the speedy return of Jesus in the flesh. Undeniably the Epistles are filled with predictions of His imminent re-arrival: but the hopes were not fulfilled. That fact is a determinative fact in any present-day discussion of the Second Coming.⁸ Such a discussion has here no main relevance, except as it affects interpretation. The story cannot solely or chiefly refer to Jesus' return in flesh, for these three good reasons: First, there is a widespread opinion among competent

⁸ It is axiomatic in scientific method that facts shall test theory. The fact that Jesus has not returned leaves us with this dilemma: Jesus was mistaken as to the date, fact or manner of His return, or the disciples were mistaken in their interpretation of His prophecies. Most of us would expurge the first term of that dilemma. The second term remains, and beckons us to a new examination of the teaching of Jesus. That teaching has apparently conflicting elements. There are statements which, *prima facie*, support the hope of His physical return. There are other statements which, *prima facie*, discourage any such hope and bid us look rather for a spiritual coming. Thus these questions become pivotal: How much has the teaching of Jesus been colored in the hands of redactors by the eschatological hopes then current in Palestine? Which doctrine of the "Second Coming" (spiritual, physical, post-millennial, pre-millennial) is most in accord with His total message and with His conception of human need and human welfare? These questions are beyond the scope of this book, but we venture here the modest opinion that a considered reply to them will not encourage any dogmatic assertion of Christ's physical return.

and reverent scholars that some of Jesus' teaching has been colored by the apocalyptic hopes of the redactors and their times.⁹ Second, the plea for spiritual preparedness was dominant in His message. It sounds, for instance, in such germ-parables as The Householder and The Thief, The Porter, The Watchful Servants, and The Closed Door.¹⁰ Not all of these occur in an apocalyptic context, and we may assume that the plea, "Watch, therefore," was an integral element in His entreaty. Third, if the reference of this story is solely or chiefly to the "Second Coming" it has mocked discipleship for upwards of two thousand years, enjoining alertness for an event which has not happened. We must seek a vital, rather than a doctrinal, application of its truth.

Then do the words, "The bridegroom cometh" herald the approach of death? Say some commentators in effect: "We are to live righteous lives that we may be ready to die righteous deaths." Verily; but the changeful, challenging days of mortal life must surely have their own purpose. They cannot be merely the slave of a dying moment or of a heaven out of sight. Dying will probably be a simpler test than we anticipate. Not often does the dark angel's arrival strike terror. The nerves are then mercifully slack, and the spirit eager for release. Is there not a story of a man who, blindfolded, was suspended a few inches from the ground and told that he was hanging over a chasm? The rope was cut and he expected to fall through sickening space to a violent doom. Instead he lit gently on his feet. The test of actual dying may not be more severe! A true preparedness for death will honor this clear fact: the only way to heaven is through heaven. In May, 1780, the famous Dark Day descended on New England. Men felt the Judgment Hour had come, and senators rushed from the Senate Chamber to the meeting-house to pray, or would have rushed had not one Senator Davenport prevailed over them:

"Bring in the lights: let us be found
Doing our duty's common round.

⁹ Thus Montefiore (see Peake's Commentary, p. 271), thinks this parable "grew up to explain the delay in the coming of the kingdom," and George Murray (*op. cit.*, p. 211) refers to the strong emotions of that age about the Second Coming and believes this parable was "turned to account for the benefit of the apostolic age."

¹⁰ Matthew 24: 43; Luke 12: 39, 13: 25; Mark 13: 34.

Bring in the candles: keep to the task:
What more can Judgment Angels ask?"¹¹

This parable is laid upon life—life now and life hereafter.

What, then, is "the coming"? It is the *divine unexpectedness* of our experience. The kingdom comes like a thief in the night!—like a flood!—like a returning master!—like a bridegroom long-delayed but suddenly appearing!¹² Jesus rang the changes on similes—now terrible, now glad—to teach us the ordained alternation of experience by which periods of routine are punctuated by crises of calamity or joy. The command, "Watch, therefore," rings out bidding us prepare during eventenored months for the midnight of sudden testing. Temptation comes "like a thief in the night," giving us no chance to choose a favored battle-ground, compelling us to stand to the challenge and fight. Sorrow sweeps down like a flood and blots out all the familiar landmarks. Joy and opportunity surprise us as with a cry: "The Bridegroom cometh." The danger of the commonplace is that by force of habit it may unfit us for heaven's hour of surprise. Thus the emergency of gladness or grief finds us off-guard and unprepared. The latch is not lifted for God's "angel unawares." Watch, therefore!

We are to be ready not only for the worst but for the best;¹³ not only for the thief in the night but for the wedding-joy. To prepare for the worst is proverbial wisdom; to prepare for the best, an unwonted grace. In August, 1914, many countries were equipped for war, but in November, 1918, no country was equipped for peace—as a botched and impossible Peace Treaty abundantly proved. Nations and men provide for advents of terror but are all unready for the advent of God. There is a character in a recent novel¹⁴ who was strong in limb, gifted in intellect, with quickness of sympathy and a subtle charm. But a wanton imagination had made him a philanderer. Fleshliness was so much his thought that when he met the woman whom he loved and who gave him in return love's utter confidence, he

¹¹ Edwin Markham's "A Judgment Hour" ("Gates of Paradise," Doubleday, Page and Company), which describes the incident.

¹² Matthew 24: 38, 43.

¹³ See a chapter entitled "Preparation for the Best," in Dr. John Kelman's "Ephemeræ Æternitatis."

¹⁴ A. Hamilton Gibbs' "Soundings."

could not keep even her image free from smirch. An unclean fancy left him no escape; it was "like a recurring decimal." He was prepared for "a thief in the night" but not for the rapture of a perfect love. How intense the pain when some fetter of our own forging mocks the bugles of heaven! Resources for "a rainy day,"—but what of resources for the splendid day of Divine beckoning?

Sometimes life moves on monotonous wheels. Habit claims us:

"To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day."¹⁵

We work, eat, write letters, sleep. There is no hint of the coming of a king; no movement in the gray hills to betray the spiritual hosts. Then suddenly the cry is raised, "The Bridegroom cometh!" and the humdrum hours flash with eternal meanings! Then we are challenged like Galahad to the quest of the Grail. Then we know if the slow weeks of the "common task" have been so lived as to gird us for the high emprise. "No man," it has been said, "has more religion than he can command in an emergency." That we should sleep at nightfall after the eager day needs no forgiveness, but that in the eager day we should have bought no oil to replenish our lamps against the midnight cry is negligence which only heaven's forgiveness can mend.

If a man lack that inner resource, others cannot transfer to him their grace. The reply of the wise virgins to the extremity of their comrades sounds unpardonably selfish and smug: "Peradventure there will not be enough for us and you. Go ye rather to them that sell and buy for yourselves." But interpreted in terms of experience the answer is not smug; it is inevitable. Imagine a flippant woman caught in the flood of unexpected sorrow. Her response to sanctifying motives has been only in fitful moods. Imagine a friend who has tended inborn faith until it burns with steady flame. Can the flippant soul borrow her friend's faith in that dark emergency? Is character instantly transferable? Nay, she must go where strength is sold at the price of sacrificial pain! When tempta-

¹⁵ Shakespeare. "Macbeth."

tion comes as a thief in the night there can be no loaning of moral fiber. When the trumpets of God sound reveille, a shabby conscience cannot be exchanged forthwith for a memory void of offence.

Any manner of prior life seems sufficient for the routine day, but not for the hour of the midnight cry. A merely perfunctory faith will not then avail. Then the reinforcements gathered in the quiet season turn the tide of battle. Then the oil bought at a price and husbanded against the joyous emergency trims the spirit's lamp to greet the king. To read the Bible until its immemorial insights become the texture of thought, to pray until prayer is the day's rule and rapture, to look on Jesus until His image is stamped on the retina of our eyes and we see all things through Him—this does not proclaim itself essential in life's *ordinary*, but in life's *unexpected* it is the difference between wisdom's light and folly's groping.

"And the door was shut." There is an end to opportunity. The "tide in the affairs of men" does not remain at flood; it ebbs. There may be another tide, but *that* tide has gone. We plead with time to pause in her flight, but time is adamant to every plea and hurries on. Our vigilance or negligence are scored deep in a living book. Neither our piety nor wit "can cancel half a line," nor all our tears "wash out a word of it." It is not in human skill to reach back and recapture the hour when the king came—and found us sleeping. We fain would live that hour again, but we cannot. "The door is shut." Therefore do men and women become like Bewick Finzer:

"Familiar as an old mistake,
And futile as regret."¹⁶

But in the mercy of God the king comes often on His way. To-morrow He may come radiant as dawn. At midnight He may come in sudden gladness. But only our vigil and our care in these dull, present hours, will enable us to greet Him with hearts aflame!

"Watch, therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour."

¹⁶ Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Bewick Finzer" ("Collected Poems," The Macmillan Co.).