

## PARABLE XVIII.

*THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT.*

LUKE xi. 5-8.

THE connexion between this parable and the words that go before is easy to be traced. As the Lord '*was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.*' In reply to this request of theirs He graciously gives them that perfect form of words, which, coming immediately from Him, has ever borne his name. But having done this, He now instructs them further *in what spirit*, with what instancy and perseverance, they ought to pray. There is the same argument as in the parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke xviii. 2-8), from the less to the greater, or more accurately, from the worse to the better;—but with this difference, that here the tardy selfishness of man is set against the prompt liberality of God, while there it is the unrighteousness of man which is tacitly contrasted with the righteousness of God. The conclusion is, if churlish man can be won by mere importunity to give, and unjust man to do right, how much more certainly shall the bountiful Lord bestow, and the righteous Lord do justice.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps there is this further distinction, that here it is prayer for the needs of others, in which we are bidden to be instant; while there it is rather prayer for the

<sup>1</sup> Augustine (*Ep.* cxxx. 8): 'From this we should understand that if a man who against his will is awakened from his sleep by a suppliant is compelled to give, how much more bountifully will He give who knows no sleep, and who wakens us from our sleep that we may ask.'

supply of our own. In neither case may we urge the illustration so far, as to conceive of prayer as an overcoming of God's reluctance, when it is, in fact, a laying hold of his highest willingness.<sup>1</sup> For though there is an aspect under which God may present Himself *to us*, similar to that of the Unjust Judge and of the churlish Friend, yet always with this essential difference,—that his is a *seeming* unwillingness to grant, theirs is a *real*. Under such an aspect of seeming unwillingness to hear did the merciful Son of man present Himself to the Syro-Phœnician woman (Matt. xv. 21). But why? Not because He was reluctant to give, but because He knew that her faith would carry her triumphantly over all obstacles in her path; that through such resistance as He opposed to that faith for a while, it would be called out, strengthened, purified, as, had this trial been spared, it could never otherwise have been. In like manner the great Angel of the Covenant contended with Jacob, wrestled with him all the night; yet allowing Himself at the last to be overcome by him, left a blessing behind Him; and Jacob henceforth was Israel; being permanently lifted up through that conflict into a higher condition, as was expressed by that nobler name which henceforth he bore, 'for as a *Prince* hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed' (Gen. xxxii. 28).

The parable of the Friend at Midnight rests on a familiar

<sup>1</sup> This is finely expressed by Dante (*Parad.* 20), in words which have as much a theological as a poetical interest:

Regnum cœlorum violenza pate  
 Da caldo amore e da viva speranza,  
 Che vince la divina volontate,  
 Non a guisa che l' uomo all' uom sovranza,  
 Ma vince lei, perchè vuole esser vinta,  
 E vinta vince con sua beninanza.

'Fervent love,

And lively hope, with violence assail  
 The kingdom of the heavens, and overcome  
 The will of the Most High; not in such sort  
 As man prevails o'er man; but conquers it,  
 Because 'tis willing to be conquer'd, still,  
 Though conquer'd, by its mercy, conquering.'—*Cary*.

incident of common life ; and, spoken as it is to humble men, the incident on which it rests may easily have come within the range of their own experience : ‘ *Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves ; for a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him ?* ’ These words have yielded ample scope for allegorical and mystical interpretations, and some of no little beauty ; though we cannot regard them as more than graceful adaptations for pious uses of the Lord’s words. For example, the guest arriving at midnight has been explained as the spirit of man, which, weary of its wanderings in the world, of a sudden desires heavenly sustenance ;—begins to hunger and thirst after righteousness. But the host, or man himself, in so far as he is ‘ sensual, not having the Spirit,’ has nothing to set before this unlocked-for guest, and in this his spiritual emptiness<sup>1</sup> is here taught to appeal to God, extorting in earnest prayer from Him that which is bread indeed, and heavenly food for the soul.<sup>2</sup> Another interesting adaptation in the same

<sup>1</sup> Augustine : ‘ Set in the midst of tribulation.’

<sup>2</sup> Bede (*Hom. in Luc. xi.*) : ‘ The friend who came from a journey is our own soul, which, as often as it wanders abroad in search of things earthly and temporal, departs from us. It returns therefore, and longs to be refreshed with heavenly food, so soon as it has come again to itself and begun to meditate on things celestial and spiritual. Whence the suppliant beautifully adds, ‘ And I have nothing to set before him,’ for the soul which after the darkness of the world is panting after God, has no pleasure in thinking of or beholding aught save him.’ And Bernard (*In Rogat. Serm.*) : ‘ By the friend who comes to me I understand no other than myself, when deserting things transitory I return unto my heart. The friend comes from a distant country where he was wont to feed swine and to hunger insatiably for the husks. He comes sore pressed by hunger, but alas, he chooses a poor host and enters an empty house. What shall I do for this wretched and pitiable friend ? I own he is my friend, but I am a beggar. Why hast thou come to me, my friend, in such necessity ? Hasten, he answers, run, awaken that great friend of thine than whom none has greater love, and none greater wealth. Call unto him and say, Friend, lend me three loaves.’ Compare Augustine (*Quæst. Evang. ii. qu. 21*) ; and a discourse which is not Augustine’s, but has sometimes been attributed to him (*Serm. 84, Appendix*).

kind we owe to Augustine. He is urging on his hearers the duty of being able to give a reason for their faith, and one not merely defensive, but such as shall win and persuade others; and this, since it may easily happen that one from the heathen world, or a heretic, or even a nominal Catholic, weary of his wanderings in error, and longing to know something of the Christian faith, though lacking confidence or opportunity to go to the bishop or catechists, may come to them, claiming instruction in righteousness at their lips. How greatly it behoved in such a case that they should have something to set before him; or having nothing, they are taught in this parable to whom they should seek for the supply of their own needs and the needs of their friend,—that they go to God, beseeching Him to teach *them*, that so they may be competent to teach others.<sup>1</sup> Vitranga's explanation<sup>2</sup> is a modification of this. For him the guest is the heathen world; the host who receives him are the servants and disciples of Jesus; who in this parable are instructed that they can nourish with bread of life those coming to them, only as they themselves have obtained the same from God; which therefore they must solicit with all perseverance and instancy of supplication.<sup>3</sup> Where such a mystical interpretation has found room,

<sup>1</sup> *Serm. cv. 2*: 'A friend comes to thee from a journey, that is from the life of this world, in which all are passing on as aliens, neither does any abide as a possessor, but to every man there is said: Thou hast been refreshed, pass on, get thee on thy journey, make room for the incomer. Or perchance there cometh from an ill journey, that is from an ill life, some wearied friend of thine, who cannot find the truth by the hearing and receiving of which he may be made happy, but worn out amid all the desires and the poverty of the world he comes to thee as to a Christian and says: Give me an account of it, make me a Christian. And he asks something of which perchance thou in the simplicity of thy faith wast ignorant, and thou hast no means of refreshing the hungry man, but when thus reminded findest thyself needy. For thee perchance simple faith sufficed, for him it does not suffice. Is he to be deserted? Is he to be cast from thy house? Nay rather betake thee to the Lord himself, to him who is asleep with his household, beat at his door with thy prayers, and be urgent in asking.'

<sup>2</sup> *Erklär. d. Parab.* p. 763.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine: 'Whence I live, thence I speak; whence I am fed, this

it will naturally follow that in the 'three loaves' which the suppliant seeks, some special significance will be looked for. In them various scriptural triads have been traced; as that the host, craving these, craves the knowledge of the Holy Trinity, of God in his three persons; <sup>1</sup> or the three choicest gifts and graces of the Spirit, faith, hope, and charity; <sup>2</sup> with more of the same kind. <sup>3</sup>

'And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut; the house is made up for the night, barred and bolted; and my children'—or, as many take it, 'my servants' <sup>4</sup>—'are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee' (cf. Cant. v. 3). In the parable allegorically interpreted these last words find their spiritual equivalent, and are understood to mean, 'All, who by earlier application have obtained right to be called my children, have secured their admission into my kingdom, and are now resting with Me there; it is too late to apply when the time of admission is past.' <sup>5</sup>

'I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.' The strength of the word which the Lord uses here has been a little reduced by our Translators. <sup>6</sup> It is not his 'importunity' which so I minister.' Cf. a sermon by Guericus, *Bernardi Opp.* Ben. ed. vol. ii. p. 1023.

<sup>1</sup> Augustine: *Enarr. in Ps.* cii. 5; *Quæst. Evang.* ii. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Euthymius: 'Loaves; the nourishing teaching of souls.'

<sup>3</sup> Godet: 'The meaning of the image of the three loaves must not be demanded from the allegory; it must be drawn from the picture as a whole. One of the loaves is for the stranger, the second for the host, who would naturally share his meal; the third would form the reserve. The idea of full sufficiency (as many as he needeth) is the true application to make of this detail.'

<sup>4</sup> Augustine has taken *παῖδια* so (*Ep.* cxxx. 8): 'As he was already asleep with his servants, a most pressing and importunate petitioner aroused him.'

<sup>5</sup> Augustine: 'Why dost thou knock so unseasonably who in the due season wast slothful? Day was, and thou didst not walk in the light; night has come on, and thou beginnest to knock.'

<sup>6</sup> On some other occasions they have done the same. *Σχιζομένους*

much prevails as his 'shamelessness;' <sup>1</sup> so that we may suppose many askings, each more urgent than the last; although only that one is recorded which at length extorts the gift.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is a 'shamelessness' mitigated by the fact, that not for himself, but for another, and that he may not fail in the sacred duties of hospitality, he thus pertinaciously urges his request; even as the same may be affirmed of Abraham, who offers us another example of successful 'importunity,' rising almost to *shamelessness* in asking; he too is pleading not for himself, but for the city where his kinsman dwelt (Gen. xviii. 23-33). With no other arms than those which his 'importunity' supplies, the suppliant here triumphs in the end; he obtains, not merely the 'three loaves' which he asked, but 'as many as he needeth;' like that woman already referred to, from whom the Saviour at first seemed to have shut up all his compassion, but to whom He threw open at the last the ample treasure-house of his grace, bidding her to help herself. Nor is it merely that he thus at last gives all which the other desires; but he who refused at first so much as to send one of his household, himself now rises, and supplies all the wants of his friend; for so 'the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.' On the return of prayers not being always

(Mark i. 10) is more than 'opened' ('cleft' in the Geneva Version); so too βασιλιζομένους (Mark vi. 48) than 'toiling;' οικοδεσποτεῖν (1 Tim. v. 14) than to 'guide the house;' ἀποσπασθέντας ἀπ' αὐτῶν (Acts xxi. 1) than 'were gotten from them.'

<sup>1</sup> Ἀναίδεια—by the Vulgate happily rendered improbitas, expressing, as this does, an unwearied labour either in good or in bad. The Greeks had a proverb which one scarcely can help being reminded of here, θεὸς ἀναίδεια, 'Impudence is a god,' expressing in quite another spirit, yet with a similar energy, all which ἀναίδεια will obtain for a man. The Jews, in like manner, have a proverb, 'Impudence is an uncrowned king,' and another, 'Impudence succeeds even with God.' Von Meyer (*Blätter für höhere Wahrheit*, vol. v. p. 45) has some interesting remarks on the ἀναίδεια of this petitioner, and how it is reconcilable with the humility which is praised in the publican (Luke xviii. 13).

<sup>2</sup> Augustine (*Enarr. in Ps. cii. 5*): 'He extorted from weariness what he cannot extort by his deserts.'

immediate Augustine has many excellent observations, not a few in connexion with this parable ;—as this : ‘ When sometimes God gives tardily, He commends his gifts, He does not deny them ; ’—‘ Things long desired, are more sweet when obtained ; those quickly given, soon lose their value ; ’—and again : ‘ God withholds his gifts for a time, that thou mayest learn to desire great things greatly.’ Faith, patience, humility, are all called into exercise by these temporary denials. It is then seen who will pray always and not faint ; and who will be daunted by the first ill-success ; like the leopard, which, failing to attain its prey at the first spring, turns sullenly back, and cannot be induced to repeat the attempt.<sup>1</sup>

A few concluding words give the moral of all which has been spoken : ‘ *And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you ; seek, and ye shall find ; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.*’ More is here than merely three repetitions of the same command ; since to ‘ *seek* ’ is more than to ‘ *ask*, ’ and to ‘ *knock* ’ than to ‘ *seek*.’ In this ascending scale of earnestness, an exhortation is implicitly contained not merely to prayer, but to increasing urgency in prayer, even till the suppliant carry away the boon which he requires, and which God is only waiting for the arrival of the proper moment to bestow.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stella : ‘ There are many who in nature and habit are like the leopard, who if at the first or second leap he fails to secure his prey, pursues it no further. Even so are those who, if they be not heard at their first or second prayer, straightway desist from praying and are branded as impatient.’

<sup>2</sup> Augustine : ‘ To this end God desires to be sought even that they who seek may become able to receive his gifts.—He gives not save to him who asks, lest He may give to him who cannot receive ’