

PARABLE XXII.

THE LOST SHEEP.

MATTHEW xviii. 12-14 ; LUKE xv. 3-7.

THE words with which the three parables of Luke xv. are introduced, ‘*Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him,*’ must not be here understood as designating some single and definite moment of time. The Evangelist is describing rather what at this period was the prevailing feature of Christ’s ministry (cf. Mark ii. 15 ; Luke vii. 37), namely that, as by a secret attraction, it drew the outcasts of the nation to Him and to the hearing of his word.¹ Of these ‘*publicans and sinners,*’ the former were men infamous among their countrymen by their very occupation ;²

¹ Grotius : ‘ This way of speaking [*ἦσαν ἐγγιζόντες*] signifies a continued and daily procedure.’ Cf. Luke iv. 31 ; Mark ii. 18.

² Publicans (*τελώναι, ἀπὸ τοῦ τέλος ἀνείσθαι*) were of two classes. The *publicani*, so called because they gathered the *publicum*, or state revenue, were commonly Roman knights, who farmed the taxes singly or in companies, and this occupation was very far from being in disesteem or dishonour. Thus Cicero, *Pro Leg. Man.* 7 : ‘ The tax-farmers, a most honourable and distinguished class of men ; ’ cf. *Pro Planc.* 9. Besides these were the *portitores*, or *exactores*, the *τελώναι* of the N. T., and of Josephus (*B. J.* ii. 14. 4), men of an inferior sort, freedmen, provincials, and the like, who, stationed at frontiers, at gates of cities, on rivers, at havens (‘ selling the passage of the very air, the land, and the sea : ’ Tertullian), did the lower work of the collection. They were everywhere hateful for their rudeness, their frauds, their vexations and oppressions : we possess long lists of opprobrious epithets with which among the Greeks they were assailed. Cicero (*In Vatini.* 5) tells Vatinius that he must have supposed himself a publican, ‘ Since you most thievishly ransacked every man’s house, the warehouses and the ships, entangled men engaged

the latter, such as, till awakened by Him to repentance and amendment of life, had been notorious transgressors of God's holy law (Luke vii. 39). These He did not repel, as one fearing pollution from their touch; but received them graciously, taught them freely, and lived in familiar intercourse with them. At this the Scribes and Pharisees murmured and took offence.¹ They could better understand a John Baptist, fleeing to the wilderness, separating himself from sinners in the whole outward manner of his life, as well as inwardly in his spirit. And this outward separation from sinners, which was the Old Testament form of righteousness, may have been needful for those who would preserve their purity in those times of the law, and until He came, who brought powers of good to bear upon the world's evil far mightier than ever had been brought before. Hitherto it may have been their wisdom who knew themselves predisposed to the infection to flee from the infected; but He was the physician who boldly sought out these, that his health might overcome their disease, his righteousness their sin. But this seeking out and not shunning of sinners was just what

in business with the most unjust decrees, terrified the merchants as they landed, and delayed their embarkation.' Chrysostom (*De Pœnit. Hom. ii. 4*): 'The tax-gatherer is the personification of licensed violence, of legal sin, of specious greed:' while the modern Greek has a proverb, 'When the devil is poor, he becomes a tax-gatherer.' But there was that which made keener yet the scorn and more intense the hatred with which the Jewish publicans were regarded by their own countrymen. They were nothing less than renegades and traitors, who for filthy lucre's sake had sided with the enemy, and now collected for a profane heathen treasury that tribute which was the abiding token of the subjection of God's people to a Gentile yoke. This scorn and hate found utterance in a thousand ways; no alms might be received from their money-chest; it was not even lawful to change money there; their testimony was not received in courts of justice; they were as the heathen (to keep which in mind adds an emphasis to Luke xix. 9), and in some sort worse than the heathen. See the *Dict. of Gr. and Rom. Antt.* s. v. Publicani, p. 806; Deyling, *Obs. Sac.* vol. i. p. 206; Herzog, *Real-Encyclop.* s. vv. Zoll, Zöllner.

¹ Gregory the Great (*Hom. 34 in Evang.*): 'Out of the dryness of their hearts they blamed him, the Fountain of compassion.'

the Scribes and Pharisees could not understand. They had neither love to hope the recovery of such, nor medicines to effect that recovery; nor yet antidotes to preserve themselves, while making the attempt.

An earlier expression of their discontent had called out those significant words, 'They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' (Luke v. 31, 32); and now their later murmurings furnish the motive of the three parables which follow. In all of these Christ would shame the murmurers, holding up to them the angels of God, and God Himself, rejoicing at the conversion of a sinner; and contrasting this liberal joy of heaven with the narrow contents and envious murmurings of earth. Heaven and its holy inhabitants welcomed the penitent; only his fellow-sinners kept him proudly aloof, as though there had been defilement for them in his touch; as though they were wronged, if he were freely forgiven.

But this is not all. Not merely was there joy in heaven over the penitent sinner, but *more* joy over one such than over ninety-nine such as themselves. The good that might be in them Christ does not deny. Many among them, no doubt, had a zeal for God, were following after righteousness such as they knew it, a righteousness according to the law. But if now that a higher righteousness was revealed,—a righteousness by faith, the new life of the Gospel,—they obstinately refuse to participate in it, then such as would receive this life from Him, however widely in times past they might have departed from God, should now be brought infinitely nearer to Him than themselves; as the one sheep which had wandered was brought home to the house, while the ninety and nine abode in the wilderness; as for the prodigal a fatted calf was slain, while the elder brother had never received so much as a kid (ver. 29). Nay, they are bidden at last to beware lest the spirit which they are allowing should exclude them altogether from that new kingdom of righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, into

which they, no less than the publicans and sinners, were invited freely to enter.

Of the three parables in this chapter, the two earlier set forth to us mainly the *seeking* love of God; while the third describes rather the size and growth, responsive to that love, of repentance in the heart of man. The same truth is thus presented successively under different aspects,—God's seeking love being set forth first, since all first motions towards good are from Him; yet is it the same truth in all; for it is the confluence of these two streams, of this drawing and seeking love from without, and of the faith by this awakened from within, of the objective grace and the subjective faith, out of which repentance springs. And thus the parables together constitute a perfect and harmonious whole. The first two speak nothing of a changed heart and mind toward God; nor, indeed, would the images of a wandering sheep and a lost piece of money give opportunity for this; the last speaks only of this change, and nothing of the antecedent working of the spirit of God in the heart, the goings forth of his power and love, which yet must have found the wanderer, before he could ever have found himself, or found his God. These parables are thus a trilogy, which again is divided into two and one; St. Luke himself distinctly marking the break and the new beginning which at ver. 11 finds place.

There are other inner harmonies and relations between them. Thus there is a seeming anti-climax in the numbers,—one in a hundred,¹—one in ten,—one in two; which is a real climax, as the sense of the value of the lost would increase with the larger proportion which it bore to the whole. And other human feelings and interests are involved in the successive narratives, which enhance in each successive case the anxiety for the recovery of that which is in danger of

¹ This was a familiar way of numbering and dividing among the Jews, of which examples are given by Lightfoot here. There is also a striking saying attributed to Mahomet, in which the same appears: The Lord God has divided mercy and pity into a hundred parts; of these, He has retained ninety and nine for himself, and sent one upon earth (Von Hammer, *Fundgruben d. Orients*, vol. i. p. 308).

perishing. The possessor of a hundred sheep is in some sort a rich man, therefore not likely to feel the diminution of his flock by one at all so deeply as the woman who, having but ten small pieces of money, should lose one of these; while the intensity of her feeling would fall very short of the grief of a father, who, having but two sons, should behold one out of these two go astray. Thus we find ourselves moving in ever narrower, and so ever intenser, circles of hope and fear and love, drawing in each successive parable nearer to the innermost centre and heart of things.

So also in each successive case we may see shadowed forth on man's part a deeper guilt, and thus on God's part a mightier grace. In the first parable the guilt implied is the smallest. The sinner is set forth under the image of a silly wandering sheep. It is only one side of the truth, but yet a most real one, that sin is oftentimes an ignorance; nay, in a greater or a less degree it is always such (Luke xxiii. 34; Acts iii. 17; 1 Tim. i. 13); the sinner knows not what he does, and if in one aspect he deserves wrath, in another he challenges pity. He is a sheep that has gone astray, oftentimes ere it knew what it was doing, ere it had so much as learned that it *had* a shepherd, or belonged to a fold. But there are others, set forth under the lost piece of money, who knowing themselves to be God's, with his image stamped on their souls, even the image of the Great King, do yet throw themselves away, renounce their high birth, and wilfully lose themselves in the world. *Their* sin is greater; but a sin worse even than theirs is behind,—the sin of the prodigal. To have tasted something of the love of God, to have known Him, not as our King who has stamped us with his image, but as our Father, of whose family we are; and to have despised that love, and forsaken that house—this is the crowning guilt; and yet the grace of God is sufficient to forgive even this sin, and to bring back this wanderer to Him.¹

¹ Bengel gives it not quite as I have done above: 'The sheep, the piece of silver, the lost son; these answer respectively to the stupid sinner,

With so much of introduction, we may proceed to consider these parables one by one; and first this of the Lost Sheep. 'What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?' It might at first sight appear as though the shepherd were caring for the one sheep strayed at the expense, or at the hazard at least, of all the others, leaving as he does them, the 'ninety and nine in the wilderness.' But 'the wilderness' here is no sandy or rocky desert, the haunt of wild beasts or of wandering robber hordes; rather wide extended grassy plains, steppes or savannahs, called 'desert' because without habitations of men, but exactly the fittest place for the pasture of sheep.¹ Thus we read in St. John (vi. 10) that 'there was much grass' in a place which by St. Matthew is called 'desert' (xiv. 15; cf. Ezek. xxxiv. 25); and we commonly attach to 'desert' or 'wilderness' in Scripture, images of far more uniform sterility and desolation than the reality would warrant. Parts, it is true, of the larger deserts of Palestine or Arabia are as desolate as can be imagined, though as much from rock as from sandy levels; yet on the whole they offer far more variety of scenery, much wider extents of fertile or at least grassy land, than is commonly assumed.² We must understand then that the to him who is plainly ignorant of himself, and to the conscious and voluntary.'

¹ Compare Virgil, *Georg.* iii. 341:—

Sæpe diem noctemque et totum ex ordine mensem
Pascitur, itque pecus longa in deserta sine ullis
Hospitiis: tantum campi jacet.

'Often the grazing lasts day and night throughout an unbroken month, and the flock journeys into far-reaching deserts, with no fixed resting-place: so great is the expanse of plain.'

² This is the admirable description of a late traveller in the East: 'Stern and monotonous as may be called the general features of a desert, let not the reader suppose that it is all barren. There are indeed some accursed patches, where scores of miles lie before you, like a tawny Atlantic, one yellow wave rising before another. But far from unfrequently there are regions of wild fertility, where the earth shoots forth a jungle of aromatic shrubs, and most delicious are the sensations

residue of the flock are left in their ordinary and safe pasturage, while the shepherd goes in search of the one which has strayed. There is a peculiar fitness in this image as addressed to the spiritual rulers of the Jewish people. They too were shepherds; continually charged, rebuked, warned, under this very title (Ezek. xxxiv. ; Zech. xi. 16); under-shepherds of Him who sets forth his own watchful tenderness for his people by the same image (Isai. xl. 11; Jer. xxxi. 10; Ezek. xxxiv. 12; xxxvii. 24; Zech. xiii. 7; cf. Ps. xxiii. 1; lxxx. 1);—yet not only were they no seekers of the lost,¹ no bringers back of the strayed, no binders-up of the broken, but they murmured against Him, ‘the Shepherd of Israel,’ the ‘great Shepherd of the sheep,’ because He did in his own person what they, his deputies, so long had neglected to do, Himself meeting and making good in his own person all these omissions of theirs.

In the order of things natural, a sheep which could wander away from, could also wander back to, the fold. But it is not so with a sheep of God’s pasture. Such can lose, but it cannot find itself again. There is in sin a *centrifugal* tendency, and the wanderings of this wanderer could be only further and further away. If, therefore, it shall be found at all, this can only be by its Shepherd’s going to seek it; else, being once lost, it is lost for ever.² The Incarnation of the Son of

conveyed to the parched European, as the camel treads down the under-wood with his broad foot, and scatters to the winds the exhalations of a thousand herbs. There are other districts, where the hard and compact gravel would do honour to a lady’s shrubbery: in these regions you meet with dwarf trees, and long ridges of low bare rocks of fantastic configuration, along whose base you find the yellow partridge and the black-eyed gazelle.’

¹ ‘Neither have ye sought that which was lost’ (Ezek. xxxiv. 4).

² Augustine presses this (*Enarr. in Ps. lxxvii. 19*): ‘The lost sheep returns, but not in its own strength, but brought back on the shoulders of the shepherd. It was able to lose itself as it wandered at will, but it could not find itself, nor would it be found at all were it not sought for by the shepherd’s compassion. Nor have we a contrary example to this case of the sheep in the son, who said when he returned unto himself, I will arise and go to my father. For he also was sought and recovered

God was a girding of Himself for such a task as this; his whole life in the days of his flesh a following of the strayed. And He was not weary with the greatness of the way; He shrank not when the thorns wounded his flesh and tore his feet; He followed us into the deep of our misery, came under the uttermost of our malediction; for He had gone forth to seek his own, ‘*till he had found it.*’ And, ‘*when he hath found it,*’ how tenderly does the shepherd of the parable handle that sheep which has cost him all this toil; he does not smite, nor even harshly *drive* it back to the fold; nay, does not deliver it to an underling to carry; but ‘*layeth it on his [own] shoulders,*’—a delicate touch, which our Translation has let go,—and bears it home (cf. Deut. xxxii. 10). We recognize in this an image of the sustaining grace of Christ, which does not cease, till his rescued are made partakers of final salvation. But when some make much of the weariness which this load must have caused to the shepherd, seeing here an allusion to his sufferings, ‘who bare our sins in his own body’¹ (1 Pet. ii. 24), upon whom was laid ‘the iniquity of us all,’ this is a missing of the true significance. That ‘*until he find it*’ has exhausted the whole story of the painfulness of his way who came in search of his lost creature; and this is now the story of his triumphant return² to heaven with the trophy that He had won, the spoil which He, a mightier David, had delivered from the lion and the bear (1 Sam. xvii. 34, 35).³

by a secret call and inspiration, and by none other than by him by whom all things are quickened: for by whom was he found save by him who went forth to save and to seek that which was lost?’

¹ Cajetan: ‘The placing the sheep on his shoulders is the redemption of the human race in his own body, and because He did this willingly, He is therefore described as rejoicing.’ Melancthon: ‘Inwoven in the text there is a sweet signification of the passion of Christ: He places upon his shoulders the sheep He has found, that is, He transfers to himself the burden of us.’

² Gregory the Great (*Hom. 34 in Evang.*): ‘When the sheep is found he returns to his home, because our Shepherd when He had recovered man returned to the heavenly kingdom.’

³ The lines of Prudentius (*Hymn. post Jejun.*) have much beauty:

And as the man when he reaches home *'calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me;'*¹ for I have found my sheep which was lost'—makes them sharers in his joy, as they had been sharers in his anxiety, even so shall joy be in heaven when one wanderer is brought back to the heavenly fold; for heaven and redeemed earth constitute but one kingdom, being bound together by that love which

Ille ovem morbo residem gregique
 Perditam sano, male dissipantem
 Vellus affixis vepribus per hirtæ
 Devia silvæ
 Impiger pastor revocat, lupisque
 Gestat exclusis, humeros gravatus;
 Inde purgatam revehens aprico
 Reddit ovili,
 Reddit et pratis viridique campo,
 Vibrat impexis ubi nulla lappis
 Spina, nec germen sudibus perarmat
 Carduus horrens:
 Sed frequens palmis nemus, et reflexa
 Vernat herbarum coma, tum perennis
 Gurgitem vivis vitreum fluentis
 Laurus obumbrat.

'When faints the lamb with pain out-worn
 Straying through wild and devious track,
 Rending his fleece in every thorn—
 The shepherd brings him back;
 He bears him from the wolf afar,
 On arm unwearied doth uphold;
 The wounded heals, and brings with care
 Back to the sunny fold;
 Back to sweet fields and meadows green,
 Where no dark thorn may point its spear,
 Where no tall thistle intervene
 Its panoply austere;
 Back to the palm-grove and the glade,
 Where the spring flowers are blooming bright,
 And where the laurel its green shade
 Glasses in waves of light.'—*Anon.*

¹ Gregory the Great (*Hom. 34 in Evang.*): 'He saith not, Rejoice with the sheep that is found, but rejoice with *me*; because our life is his joy, and when we are brought back to heaven we complete the solemnity of his joy.'

is 'the bond of perfectness.' 'I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.' Let us not in this 'I say unto you,' miss a slight yet majestic intimation of the dignity of his person; 'I who know—I who, when I tell you of heavenly things, tell you of mine own (John i. 51; iii. 11), announce to you this.' The joy, we may observe, is still in the future; '*joy shall be in heaven*;' and this consistently with the tacit assumption of the Good Shepherd's part as his own; for not yet had He risen and ascended, leading 'captivity captive,' bringing with Him his rescued and redeemed.

Were this all, there would be nothing to perplex; but it is not merely joy over one penitent, but joy over this one '*more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance*,' that is asserted here. Now we can easily understand how, *among men*, there should be more joy for a small part which has been in jeopardy, than for the continued secure possession of a much larger portion. It is as when the mother concentrates for the moment all her affection on her sick child, seeming to a bystander to love none but that only; and actually rejoicing at the recovery of that one more than at the uninterrupted health of all the others. Or, to use Augustine's beautiful words,¹ 'What then takes place in the soul, when it is more delighted at finding or recovering the things it loves, than if it had ever had them? Yea, and other things witness hereunto, and all things are full of witnesses, crying out, "So it is." The conquering commander triumpheth; yet had he not conquered, unless he had fought, and the more peril there was in the battle, so much the more joy is there in the triumph. The storm tosses the sailors, threatens shipwreck; all wax pale at approaching death; sky and sea are calmed, and they are exceeding joyed, as having been exceeding afraid. A friend is sick, and his pulse threatens danger; all who long for his recovery are sick in mind with him. He is restored, though as yet he walks not

¹ *Confessions*, iii. 3.

with his former strength, yet there is such joy as was not when before he walked sound and strong.'¹ Yet whence arises the disproportionate joy? Clearly from the temporary uncertainty which existed about the result. But no such uncertainty could find place with Him, who knows the end from the beginning; whose joy needs not to be enhanced by a grief and fear going before. As little with Him need the earnest love for the perilled one, as in the case of the mother and her children, throw into the background, even for the moment, the love and care for the others; so that the analogies and illustrations drawn from this world of ours supply no adequate solution of the difficulty.

And further, how can it be affirmed of any that they '*need no repentance*,' since '*all like sheep have gone astray*;' and all therefore have need to try back their ways? the explanations commonly given do not quite satisfy.² We may indeed get rid both of this difficulty and the other, by seeing here an example of the Lord's severe yet loving irony. These '*ninety and nine, which need no repentance*,' would then be,—like those whole who need not, or count that they need not, a

¹ Thus too St. Bernard (*In Cant. Serm.* 29): 'I know not how it is, but I feel drawn with more tenderness to those who after reproofs and by means of reproof have at length recovered from weakness, than to those who have remained strong from the beginning without any need of such medicine,'—words the more valuable to illustrate the text, as not spoken with reference to it.

² As for instance that by Grotius: 'Who from the whole character of their life have no need to quit home;' and by Calvin: 'The term penitence is specifically restricted to the conversion of those who, after a complete estrangement from God, rise again as if from death to life. For otherwise the whole of life must be the subject of continual penitential meditation, nor is any one exempt from this necessity, since each man's own vices urge him to daily improvement.'—The suggestion of some that the ninety-nine who need no repentance signify the whole unfallen creation, the world of angels, is nothing worth. 'These,' says Theophylact, not, however, adopting the interpretation (*φασίν τινες*), 'the Good Shepherd left in the wilderness, that is, in the higher heavenly places, for heaven is this wilderness, being sequestered from all worldly tumult, and fulfilled with all tranquillity and peace,' and came to seek the wandering and lost human nature.

physician (Matt. ix. 12),—self-righteous persons; as such displeasing to God; whose present moral condition as it causes *no* joy in heaven, it can be nothing strange that a sinner's conversion should occasion more gladness there than the continuance of these in their evil. But the whole structure and course of the parables refutes this. The ninety and nine sheep have *not* wandered, the nine pieces of money have *not* been lost, the elder brother has *not* left his father's house. These difficulties will only disappear when we regard these 'righteous' as such indeed, but their righteousness as merely legal, of the old dispensation, so that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than they. The law had partially accomplished its work in them, restraining from grosser transgressions; and thus they needed not, like the publicans and sinners, repentance from these; but it had not accomplished all, it had not been 'a schoolmaster to Christ,' bringing them to see their sinfulness, and consequent need of a Saviour. The publicans and sinners, though by another path, had come to Him; and He here pronounces that there was more real cause of joy over one of these,¹ now entering into the inner sanctuary of faith, than over ninety and nine of those other, who lingered at the legal vestibule, refusing to go further in.²

¹ Here the illustration of Gregory the Great may fitly be applied: 'In a battle a captain feels more affection for the soldier who turns again from flight and bravely presses on the enemy, than for him who never showed his back and never did any brave deed.' And Anselm (*Hom.* 12): 'There are some just persons who, although they live just lives and keep themselves from things unlawful, yet never work any great deeds of good. Again, there are others who at first have lived worldly and criminal lives, but who afterwards return unto their heart, considering with themselves that they have acted wrongfully; these pricked with their grief are inflamed with love for God, practise themselves in great virtues, seek out the posts of peril in the holy contest, and forsake all the allurements of the world; and because they perceive that they have wandered away from God, make up for their former losses by ensuing gains.' Compare Jeremy Taylor, *Life of Christ*, part iii. § 16, no. 12.

² On no image did the early Church dwell with more fondness than this (see Tertullian, *De Pudic.* 7); as witness the many gems, seals, fragments of glass, and other relics, which have reached us, on which Christ

is thus portrayed. It is frequent also in bas-reliefs on sarcophagi, and paintings in the catacombs. Sometimes other sheep are at his feet, generally two, looking up with pleasure at Him and his burden; in his right hand He most often holds the seven-reeded pipe of Pan, symbol of the attractions of divine love, while with his left He steadies the burden which He bears. Sometimes He is sitting down, as weary with the greatness of the way. This representation always occupies the place of honour, the centre of the vault or tomb (see Münter, *Sinnbilder der Alt. Christ.* vol. i. pp. 60-65; Bosio, *Rom. Sotterr.* pp. 339, 348, 349, 351, 373, 383, 387; Didron, *Iconogr. Chrétienne*, p. 346).