

PARABLE XIII.

THE TEN VIRGINS.

MATTHEW xxv. 1-13.

'*THEN*'—in that great day of decision, wherein the Lord shall have shown Himself 'a swift witness against the hypocrite and unbeliever' (Matt. xxiv. 51), He shall in other ways also bring the faith of his servants to the final test, and, as they endure or fail under this, shall receive or reject them for ever. '*Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.*' The circumstances of a marriage among the Jews, so far as they furnish the groundwork of this parable, are well known, and have been abundantly illustrated by writers on Jewish antiquities. Use also may be here made of notices gathered by modern travellers in the East; the lapse of centuries having changed little or nothing in that stationary world. That the virgins should be ten in number is not accidental: exactly so many formed, to Jewish notions, a company (Ruth iv. 2); which fewer would have failed to do.¹ These '*took their lamps,*' marriages in the East being celebrated of old, as they are now, invariably at night; hence the constant mention of lamps and torches as borne by the friends and attendants: cf. 2 Esdr. x. 2; and Jer. xxv. 10; Rev. xviii. 23; in both which

¹ Thus it was ruled, that where ten Jews were living in one place there was a congregation, and there a synagogue ought to be built. On the completeness of the number ten, see Vitringa, *De Synagogâ*, p. 232 seq.; and Bähr, *Symbolik d. Mos. Cultus*, vol. i. p. 175.

passages 'the light of a candle,' and 'the voice of the bridegroom and the bride,' are found close to one another.¹ Thus furnished, they '*went forth to meet the bridegroom.*' The order of the bridal procession appears to have been as follows: the bridegroom, accompanied by his friends, 'the children of the bride-chamber' (Matt. ix. 15) 'the friends of the bridegroom' (John iii. 29; see Judg. xiv. 11), went to the house of the bride, and led her with pomp and gladness (1 Macc. ix. 37-39)² to his own home, or, where that was too narrow to receive the guests, to some larger apartment provided for the occasion. She was accompanied from her father's house by her youthful friends and companions (Ps. xlv. 15), while other of these, the '*virgins*' of the parable, joined the procession at some convenient point, and entered with the rest of the bridal company into the hall of feasting (Can. iii. 11).³ Some take rather differently the circumstances which furnish

¹ Among the Greeks and Romans torches were chiefly used: thus Catullus, *Epithal.* 98: 'The torches toss rays of gold;' and again: 'Toss the pine torch with thy hand;' so Apuleius, 10: 'Like ladies going forth to a marriage feast they lighted their path with glittering torches;' and Euripides speaks of 'bridal lamps:' cf. Becker, *Charicles*, vol. ii. p. 465. Among the Jews, lamps fed with oil were more common. Such in earlier Greek would have been *λύχνος* or *ἐλλύχμιον*. It is only at a later day that *λαμπάς* obtained this meaning. At the same time the mention of the oil does not of itself make it impossible that these also were torches; for Elphinstone (*Hist. of India*, vol. i. p. 333) has noted, 'The true Hindu way of lighting up is by torches held by men, who feed the flame with oil from a sort of bottle' [the *ἀγγεῖον* of this parable] 'constructed for the purpose.'

² 'With a great train' (ver. 37).

³ See Wolf's latest *Journal*, p. 174; and for accounts of earlier travellers, Harmer, Burder, and Hughes (*Travels in Sicily, &c.* vol. ii. p. 20): 'We went to view the nocturnal procession which always accompanies the bridegroom in escorting his betrothed spouse from the paternal roof to that of her future husband. This consisted of nearly one hundred of the first persons in Joannina, with a great crowd of torch-bearers, and a band of music. After having received the lady they returned, but were joined by an equal number of ladies, who paid this compliment to the bride.' These last correspond to the virgins here, and do not join the procession till the bridegroom, having received the bride, is escorting her to her new abode.

the machinery of the parable. They suppose these virgins to meet the bridegroom, not as he returns with, but as he goes to fetch, the bride; accompanying him first to her home and only then to his own. But such was not the manner either with the Jews or the Greeks:¹ while the spiritual significance of the parable is seriously disturbed thereby. The virgins we may confidently affirm, '*went forth to meet the bridegroom and the bride,*'—however the last words, found in some earlier Versions, have no right to a place in the text.

But these '*virgins,*' why are they so called, and whom do they represent? There are two mistakes to which the pressing too far the title which they bear has given rise. There is first theirs who argue, All are virgins; all, therefore, belong at the inmost centre of their life unto Christ. Some, it is true, are found unready at the decisive moment, and therefore suffer loss (1 Cor. iii. 13), even a long deferring of their blessedness. Yet the honourable name bestowed alike upon all gives assurance that all are saved in the end, none finally shut out from the kingdom of glory. They who make this milder estimate of the guilt of the foolish virgins, and of the nature of their doom, usually connect with this the doctrine of the thousand years reign of Christ upon earth and a first resurrection; from the blessedness of which these should be shut out for this unreadiness of theirs, whether at the hour of their death, or of the second coming of their Lord. Their imperfections, and the much in them remaining unmortified and unpurified still, will need the long and painful purging of this exclusion, and of the fearful persecutions to which all thus excluded shall be exposed: while yet the root of the matter being in them, they do not forfeit everything, nor finally fall short of the heavenly joy.² But the premisses from

¹ See Becker, *Charicles*, vol. ii. p. 468.

² Thus Poiret (*Divin. Econom.* iv. 12, 18, vol. ii. p. 276): 'Those who at the time of the Advent shall be living indeed in a state of grace, but at the same time hampered with many imperfections and many sins of negligence, which so far they have not yet corrected or purged away, these, I say, shall be shut out from the glorious reign of Christ upon

which these conclusions are drawn appear to me nothing worth. There would be something in the fact that unwise as well as wise are here by the Lord styled 'virgins,' if others sometimes undertook the office of welcoming the bridegroom, and He, notwithstanding, had chosen to give the appellation of virgins to these. But seeing that to such the office in the usual order of things appertained, *their* arguments who like Von Meyer,¹ Olshausen, Stier,² press to such conclusions as I have just stated the title of virgins which the foolish bear, appear to me to possess no force at all.

Into the second error Chrysostom, with others, has fallen ; who, accepting the title of virgins in the literal, while every-

earth during the passing of the thousand years of this period, and shall see the gate fastened against them. They shall thus be left in the outer darkness of expiation, and their bliss shall be deferred until the general resurrection after the accomplishment of the thousand years of the reign of Christ and the saints. And this is clearly enough taught by the parable of the foolish virgins. For we see that by reason of their negligence, these were shut out from the marriage feast, although they were virgins, and had the lamp of faith, and called upon the Lord. For the door once closed was never again opened while this time endured ; since the shaking which there is to be in this world before the end cometh of it and of the times, through which also God will work in this world and in all things which are in it this glorious change (which shall be as the door and the introduction into his kingdom), is only to take place once. Yet once, He saith, and I will shake the heaven and the earth ; and all who at that time through the perfection of their purity shall be fitted to attain to glory, shall receive the impact of this divine shaking and shall be changed : but after this time until the general resurrection there shall no new shaking or change come to pass. For then shall arrive the day of the resting of nature and of all created things which shall have been introduced into it. Hence the foolish virgins and all who shall have not yet put on the marriage garment will needs wait for eternity itself. For it seems improbable that these careless virgins, in whom there was yet so great a disposition towards good, and they also who at that time were not duly prepared and yet had already made a good beginning, should be doomed to perish eternally : but it is also improbable, however zealously, after the door has once been closed, they may betake themselves to preparation, that Christ will again issue forth from his rest, and for their sakes will institute a new division and special separation in nature.'

¹ *Blätter für höhere Wahrheit*, vol. vii. p. 247.

² *Reden Jesu*, vol. ii. p. 581.

thing else is taken in a figurative, sense, limit the application of the parable to those who had made a profession of outward virginity; ¹ instead of seeing that the virginity here is the profession of a pure faith, the absence of spiritual fornication, of apostasy from the one God (Rev. xiv. 4; 2 Cor. xi. 2). This all the virgins have; and in the number of these must be included all who profess to be waiting for the Son of God from heaven, to love his appearing; all who with their lips join the confession, 'I believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, who shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead,' and who do not in their lives openly deny this hope; all are included, who would desire to include themselves in the number of his believing people.² The whole company of the virgins have this in common, that they confess to the same Lord, and to the same hope in Him,—as is implied in the fact of all alike taking the lamps, and going forth to meet the bridegroom.

That which constitutes a distinction among them first appears in the words that follow. When it is added '*And five of them were wise, and five were foolish,*' the numbers make nothing to the case; only the division is essential. They are not divided into good and bad, but, as the hearers elsewhere (Matt. vii. 25–27), into '*wise*' and '*foolish*;' for, as a certain degree of good-will toward the truth is assumed.

¹ Augustine (*Serm. xciii. 2*) warns against any such limitation of the parable; which belongs to all souls, 'which have the Catholic faith and appear to have good works in God's Church;' and elsewhere, 'Virginity of heart, untainted faith.' Jerome (in loc.): 'They are called virgins because they make their boast in the knowledge of the one God, and their mind is unviolated by the tumult of idolatry.'

² Jerome (*Adv. Jovin. 2*): 'The ten virgins are examples not of the whole human race, but of the careful and the indolent, of whom the one are always looking for the advent of the Lord, the others surrender themselves to sleep and sloth and take no thought for the judgment to come.' Tertullian (*De Animâ, 18*) mentions a strange abuse, which some of the Gnostics made of this parable: The five foolish virgins are the five senses, foolish inasmuch as they are easily deceived, and often give fallacious notices; while the five wise are the reasonable powers, which have the capacity of apprehending ideas.

there on the part of the 'foolish,' as evidenced in their willingness to hear, and in the superstructure, however weak, which they raise, so on the part of these in their going forth even with the intention of meeting the bridegroom. They are severally described,—the wise, 2 Pet. i. 5–8, and the foolish, 2 Pet. i. 9. We are next informed wherein consisted the foolishness of these, and the wisdom of those: '*They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them; but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.*' Here is the turning-point of the parable. On a right apprehending of what the having, or the not having, a reserved supply of oil may mean everything must depend. Again we meet with a controversy between Roman Catholics and the early Reformers, and one differing in little from that to which 'the wedding garment' gave occasion (see p. 241). The Reformers asserted that what the foolish virgins lacked was the living principle of faith; that what they had were the outer circumstances of a Christian profession; these were their lamps shining before men; but they wanted the inner spirit of life, the oil which they should have had, if their lamps were to be found burning in the day of Christ's appearing.¹

¹ This is very much Augustine's interpretation (*Ep.* cxl. 33; *Serm.* cxlix. 11): 'The lamps are good works. . . . and a conversation which even in the eyes of men shines forth as worthy of praise; but it makes the greatest difference with what intention this is practised. . . . What then is the carrying oil with us save the having the consciousness of pleasing God by good works instead of taking for the limit of our joy the praise of men?' Cocceius explains the oil in the vessels thus: 'The teaching of the Holy Spirit continually feeding our faith so that it fail not;' and Cajetan, a Roman Catholic expositor, consents to this interpretation; his words are so excellent that I will quote them: 'They who work good works differ in this that some have the witness of their goodness only without in the good works themselves: for within they have no feeling that they love God with all their heart, that they repent of their sins because these are displeasing to God, that it is for the sake of God that they love their neighbour. But others there are who so work good works that their shining deeds bear witness without of good disposition, and within in the inner consciousness the Holy Spirit himself witnesses to the spirit of their doers that they are the sons of God. These feel in all their heart that they love God, that it is for the sake of

The Roman Catholic reversed the whole ; for him what they had was faith, but faith which, not having works, was ' dead, being alone ' (Jam. ii. 17) ; they were not careful to maintain good works, to nourish the lamp of faith, which they carried before men, with deeds of light done for and in the sight of God ; they did not by well-doing stir up the grace of God that was in them, and so the unused grace was taken from them ; their lamps burned dim, and at last were wholly extinguished, nor had they wherewith to revive them anew.¹

Here again it is only necessary to call attention to the different senses in which the two contending parties employ the word *faith*,—the Roman Catholics as the outward profession of the truth,—the Reformers as the root and living principle of Christian life.² Except for these diverse uses of the same term, the two interpretations would not be opposed to, or exclude one another,—would indeed admit of a fair reconciliation.³ For we may equally contemplate the foolish virgins, unprovided with oil, as those going through a round of external duties, without life, without love, without any striving after inward conformity to the law of God, whose religion is all husk and no kernel ; or, again, as those who, confessing Christ with their lips, and holding fast the form of the truth, are for all this remiss in the work of the Lord, in acts of charity, of humility, and self-denial ; and who therefore, by that law of the kingdom of heaven which decrees

God that they repent, for the sake of God that they love their neighbour and God himself, and, in a word, that God is the principle of their love, hope, fear, their joy and sorrow, and briefly of their working both within and without : and this is oil in fitting vessels.'

¹ Thus Jerome (in loc.) : ' Those who have no oil are those who seem to confess the Lord with a like faith, but neglect the works of virtue.' Cf. Origen. *in Matth. Tract.* 32.

² As Augustine, when he says : ' The soul of thy soul is faith.'

³ For instance, who would refuse to accede to the explanation given by Gerhard ? ' By the lighted lamps we must understand the outward profession of the lip and the outer appearance of piety : by the oil in the vessels, the inner righteousness of the heart, true faith, sincere charity, watchfulness, and prudence, which meet the eyes only of God, not of men.'

that from him who hath not shall be taken even that which he hath, gradually lose that grace which they had, and discover that they have lost it altogether, at the decisive moment when they need to have it in largest measure. It is clear that whatever is merely outward in the Christian profession is the lamp; whatever is inward and spiritual is the oil reserved in the vessels. When we contemplate with St. James (ii. 14–26) the faith as the body, and the works as witnessing for an informing vivifying soul, then the faith is the lamp, the works the oil in the vessels; but when, on the other hand, we contemplate with St. Paul the works as only having a value from the living principle of faith out of which they spring, then the works are the lamp, and the faith the oil which must feed it. Yet in either case, before we have exhausted all the meaning of the oil, we must get beyond both the works and the faith to something higher than either, the informing Spirit of God which prompts the works and quickens the faith, of which Spirit oil is ever in Scripture the standing symbol (Exod. xxx. 22–33; Zech. iv. 2, 12; Acts x. 38; Heb. i. 9; 1 Joh. ii. 20–27).

But under whatever aspect we regard the relation between the oil in the lamps and in the vessels, the purpose of the parable is, as we cannot doubt (see ver. 13), to impress upon all members of the Church their need of vigilance. Regarded in the one view, it is a warning that they be careful to maintain good works, that they be not satisfied, as some, with saying, 'Lord, Lord,' while they do not the things that He says. Regarded under the other aspect, it is a warning that they be watchful over their inward state,—over their affections,—over all which, withdrawn from the eyes of man, is seen only of God;—that they seek to have a constant supply of the Spirit of Christ Jesus in their innermost hearts, to approve themselves before God,¹ as well as to show fairly and unblamably

¹ See Augustine, *Ep.* cxi. 31; *Serm.* xciii. 8; Gregory the Great, *Hom.* 12 *in Evang.*; and the author of a sermon found among the works of St. Bernard (vol. ii. p. 722): 'The oil in the lamp is a good work in its manifestation, but while the charity of the work is beheld by those around

before the world. In either case, we must remember, and it adds much to the solemnity of the lesson, that by the foolish virgins are meant,—not hypocrites, not self-conscious dissemblers, much less openly profane and ungodly,—but the negligent in prayer, the slothful in good works, all whose scheme of a Christian life is laid out rather to satisfy the eyes of men than to please Him who seeth in secret. Nor is it that they are wholly without oil; they have some, but not enough; their lamps, when they first go forth, are burning, otherwise they could not speak of them as on the point of expiring just as the bridegroom is approaching. In fact, the having no oil provided in the vessels is exactly parallel to having no deepness of earth (Matt. xiii. 5); the seed springs up till the sun scorches it; the lamps burn on till their oil is exhausted through the length of the bridegroom's delay. In each case something more is implied than a mere external profession, conscious to itself that it is nothing besides; it is not that there was no faith, but only that *fides temporaria* which could not endure temptation, nor survive delay. *They,*

and they wonder and praise, the heart of the doer is for the most part uplifted and rises elate; he boasts in himself and not in the Lord, and so the light of his lamp is brought to nought; it lacks its appropriate food, and, though shining clearly before men, is darkened before God. Now the prudent virgins, besides the oil which they have in their lamps, store other oil in vessels: since assuredly holy souls while awaiting the coming of their bridegroom, and while daily with the utmost yearning crying unto him, Thy kingdom come, besides these works which shine in the eyes of their neighbours to the glory of God, and are seen, do yet other works in secret, where only the Father sees. Thus is the king's daughter glorious within when her boast is rather from the oil which gleams in the vessels of her conscience, than from that which shines outwardly: she esteems all that is perceived to be lost, and judges nothing to be worthy of reward which gains the favour of men. She, therefore, who prevails, works hiddenly, she seeks secresy, beats heaven with her prayers, and outpours the tears which are the witness of love; this is the glory of the daughter and friend of the king, but it is a glory from within and unseen. This oil the foolish virgins lack, because they only do good works unto the splendour of vain glory and the favour of men. This oil, in which the prudent place their trust, they store in the hidden vessels of their consciences.'

on the other hand, are like the wise virgins, who recognize the possibility that the Bridegroom may tarry long, that the Church may not very soon, perhaps not in their days, enter into its glory; who, therefore, foresee that they may have a long life before them of patience and self-denial, before they shall come to the kingdom, or the kingdom to them; and who therefore rightly judge that it is not a few warm excited feelings which will carry them triumphantly through all this, and enable to endure unto the end; for such are but as a fire among straw, quickly blazing up, and as quickly extinguished. They understand that principles as well as feelings must be engaged in the work, that their first good impulses will carry them but a very little way, unless revived, strengthened, and purified by a continual supply of the Spirit of God. If the bridegroom were to come at once, it might be another thing; but their wisdom is that, since it may very well fare otherwise, they make provision against such a contingency.

‘*While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.*’ We may number this among the many hints that the time of the Lord’s return might possibly be delayed very far beyond the expectation of his first disciples. It was a hint, and no more. Had more been granted, had He said plainly that many centuries should elapse before his return, then the earlier ages of the Church would have been placed at a manifest disadvantage, being deprived of that powerful motive to holiness and diligence which each generation finds in the possibility of his return in their time. It is not that He desires each succeeding generation to believe that in their day He will certainly return; for He does not desire our faith and our practice to be founded on a mistake, as then the faith and practice of all generations save the last would be. But it is a necessary element of the doctrine concerning the second coming of Christ, that it should be *possible* at any time, that none should regard it improbable in theirs.¹ The love, the

¹ Augustine: ‘The last day is hidden, that every day may be regarded;’ and Tertullian (*De Anima*, 33): ‘That the assiduity of faith

earnest longing of those first Christians made them to assume that coming to be close at hand. In the strength and joy of this faith they lived and suffered; and when they died, the kingdom was indeed come unto them.¹ As a further reason why the Church should not have been acquainted from the first with the precise moment of her Lord's return, it may be added, that it is in itself, no doubt, undetermined. Prophecy is no fatalism,² and it has been always open to every age by faith and prayer to hasten that coming, so that St. Peter can speak of the faithful not merely as looking for, but also as *hasting*, the coming of the day of God (2 Pet. iii. 12); with which we may compare Acts iii. 19, 'Repent ye, . . . *that* the times of refreshing may come;' these 'times of refreshing' being identical with 'the times of restitution of all things' (ver. 21), the glorious setting up of the kingdom; the same truth, that the quicker or tardier approach of that day is conditional, being elsewhere declared in clearest terms (2 Pet. iii. 9). We too have learned to pray that it may please God 'to accomplish the number of his elect, and to *hasten* his kingdom.' But while the matter was left by the wisdom of God in this uncertainty, it imported much that after the expectations of the first ages of the Church had failed, those who examined the Scriptures should see plainly there that no pledge had thus been broken, that no prophecy had failed, that what had actually come to pass had been contemplated from the beginning.³

may be tested by the uncertainty of expectation, ever looking for the day, yet ever in ignorance, daily fearing what it daily hopes.'

¹ Yet Augustine, claiming a right to dissent from a scheme of prophetic interpretation current in his day, which made the end of the world to be already instant, says very beautifully (*Ep.* cxcix. 5): 'He therefore loves the coming of the Lord not who asserts that it is at hand, or who asserts that it is not at hand, but rather who, whether it be near or far off, awaits it with sincerity of faith, constancy of hope, and fervour of love.'

² In Augustine's words, 'I foretold, I did not fix.'

³ Augustine (*Ep.* cxcix. 5): 'Lest haply when the time at which they had believed He should come had passed by without their beholding him, they should think that all the other promises were deceitful, and should despair of the very reward of their faith.'

The steps by which the virgins fell into deep sleep are marked; first they nodded the head or slumbered, and next they slept profoundly. Some have understood by this sleeping of *all*, a certain unreadiness that will have overtaken the whole Church, a too great acquiescence in the present time and in the present things even among the faithful themselves—though with this difference, that *their* unreadiness will be remediable and easily removed; this removal being actually signified by the trimming and replenishing of their lamps; while that of others will be too profound to be capable of any such remedy.¹ Augustine² proposes this interpretation, but only to reject it; for he asks, Why were those wise admitted, unless for the very reason that their love had *not* grown cold? But there is, he goes on to say, a sleep common to all, the sleep of death, which is indicated here. We may fitly prefer this, which is the explanation of nearly all the ancient interpreters, to that which understands by this sleeping the negligences and omissions of even the best Christians. Our Lord would scarcely have given, as it were, this allowance for a certain measure of negligence, seeing that with all the most earnest provocations to watchfulness, there will ever be too much of this. Least of all would He so do in a parable, whose very aim and moral is, that we be always ready, that we be *not* taken unprepared.

And yet by this slumbering and sleeping more may not after all be meant than that all, having taken such measures as they counted needful to enable them to meet the bridegroom as they would wish, securely awaited his approach.³ For, indeed, the fitnesses of the parable, which demand to be

¹ So Cocceius: 'It signifies the carelessness which amid the rest from persecution came over the Christian Church after the first watch, as it were, of the night;' and Grotius quotes in confirmation Jam. iii. 2; Rom. xiii. 2. Maldonatus gives this explanation in a form popular at the present day: 'I interpret the words to sleep as to cease to think of the Lord's coming.'

² *Serm.* xciii. 5; *Ep.* cxi. 32.

³ Hilary (*Comm. in Matt.* xxvii.) unites this meaning and the preceding: 'The sleep of those that wait is the rest of the faithful, and in the time of penitence the temporal death of all.'

observed, required such a circumstance as this. Had the foolish virgins been in a condition to mark the lapse of time, and the gradual waning of their lamps, they, knowing that they had not wherewith to replenish them, would naturally have bestirred themselves, and that in time to procure a new supply. The fact that they fell asleep, and were only awakened by the cry of the approaching bridal company, gives,—and nothing else would give,—a natural explanation of their utter and irremediable destitution of oil at the moment when it most needed that they should have it in abundance. So, too, if the wise virgins had not slept as well, had they been represented as watching while the others were sleeping, it would have been a failure of love upon their parts, not to rouse their companions, and warn them of the lapse of time and the increasing dimness with which their lamps were burning, while help was still within reach.¹

So fared it with all, until, '*at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh:*' or rather '*Behold the bridegroom!*' for '*cometh*' has no right to a place in the text; '*go ye out to meet him.*' The cry which at this midnight hour startles the sleepers is either that of the retinue running before, or of the jubilant multitude, who, even till that late hour, had waited for the passing of the procession through the streets, and now welcomed it with these acclamations. Its spiritual signification has been variously given. Most have understood by it the descent of the Lord 'with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel and the trump of God' (1 Thess. iv. 16), when He, the heavenly Bridegroom, shall at length draw nigh, accompanied by the angels, the friends of the bridegroom and leading home his bride, the triumphant Church, and looking to be met and greeted by the members of his Church yet militant on earth, themselves a part of that mystical bride,² that so He may bring her to the glorious

¹ Storr, *De Par. Christi*, in his *Opusc. Acad.* vol. i. p. 133.

² Augustine (*Quæst.* lxxxiii. qu. 59): 'These virgins together form the one who is called the bride, as though when all Christians run together to the Church they should be spoken of as sons running to

mansion, the house of everlasting joy and gladness which He has prepared for her. Some, however, regard this cry as proceeding from watchers in the Church, such as shall not be altogether lacking in the last times (Isai. lxii. 6); by whom the signs of the times shall have been observed, and who shall proclaim the near advent of the Lord.—And this cry is ‘*at midnight.*’ It was a belief current among the later Jews, that the Messiah would come suddenly at midnight, as their forefathers had gone out from Egypt, and obtained their former deliverance, at that very hour (Exod. xii. 29); from which belief Jerome¹ supposes the apostolic tradition of not dismissing the people on Easter eve till the middle night was past, to have been derived. But it is idle to suppose that midnight is here named for any other reason than because it is a time when deep sleep falls upon men, when therefore such an event as the passage of a bridal company through the streets would be expected the least; and because thus the unlooked-for character of that day of the Lord, which ‘cometh as a thief in the night’ (1 Thess. v. 2), would be in the liveliest manner set out.²

The parable will obtain a wider application if we keep in memory that, while there is one crowning advent of the Lord at the last, He comes no less in all the signal crises of his Church, at each new manifestation of his Spirit; and at each of these, too, there is a separation among those who are called by his name, into wise and foolish, as they are spiritually alive or dead. Thus at Pentecost, when by his Spirit He returned to his Church, He came: the prudent in Israel went in with Him to the feast, the foolish tarried without. Thus, too, He came at the Reformation: those that had oil went in; those that had empty lamps, the form of godliness without their mother, when she who is called the mother is formed by the gathering together of these very sons’ (Rev. xix. 7, 9).

¹ *Comm. in Matt.* in loc.

² Augustine (*Serm.* xciii. 6): ‘What does at midnight mean? When He is not looked for, when He is in no way believed.’ Jerome: ‘For suddenly, as though at the dead of night and when all are off their guard, the coming of Christ will resound.’

the power, tarried without. Each of these was an example and a foretaste of that which shall be more signally fulfilled at the end.

' *Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps;*'¹ and in this act of trimming, the foolish discovered to their dismay that theirs was going out, and that they had not wherewith to feed the expiring flame. In a higher sense, every one at the last prepares to give an account of his works, inquires into the foundations of his faith,² seriously searches whether his life has been one which will have praise not merely of men, for that he now feels will avail nothing, but also of God. Many put off this proving of the grounds of their hope to the last moment, nay, some manage to defer it, with all its miserable discoveries, beyond the grave, even till the day of judgment;—but further it cannot be deferred. When the Day of Christ comes, it will be impossible for any to remain ignorant any longer of their true state, for that day will be a revelation of the hidden things of men, of things hitherto hidden even from themselves; a flood of light will then pour into all the darkest corners of all hearts, and show every man to himself exactly as he is; so that self-deception will be possible no longer (Prov. xvi. 2; xxi. 2; Rcm. ii. 16).

The foolish virgins turn in their extremity of need to their wiser companions, saying '*Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out;*'³ or rather, as it is more correctly in the

¹ Ward (*View of the Hindoos*, vol. ii. p. 29) describes a marriage-ceremony in India of which he was eye-witness: 'After waiting two or three hours, at length near midnight it was announced, as in the very words of Scripture, "Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him." All the persons employed now lighted their lamps, and ran with them in their hands to fill up their stations in the procession: *some of them had lost their lights, and were unprepared; but it was then too late to seek them;* and the cavalcade moved forward.'

² Augustine: 'They prepare to give an account of their works.' Cocceius: 'Every man inquired within himself of the firmness of his own faith.'

³ The hand-lamp naturally was small, and would not contain a supply of oil for many hours. The trimming itself implied two things, an infusion of fresh oil, and removal of whatever had gathered round

margin, 'are going out.' Had their lamps already 'gone out' they would have needed not merely to trim and feed them, but must have further asked permission to kindle them anew, of which we hear nothing. The request, with the refusal which it meets,—like the discourse between Abraham and Dives (Luke xvi. 24–31),—can be only the outer clothing of the truth; but of truth how momentous!—no other than this, that we shall look in vain from men for that grace which God only can supply, that we shall be miserably disappointed, if we think thus to borrow in an easy lazy way that which must be *bought*,—won, that is, by earnest prayer and diligent endeavour. And the answer of the wise, 'Not so;¹ lest there be not enough for us and you,' has its lesson also. It tells us that every man must live by his own faith. There is that which one can communicate to another, and make himself the richer; as one who imparts a light to another has not therefore less light, but walks henceforth in the light of two torches instead of one: but there is also that which, being divine, is in its very nature incommunicable from man to man, which can be obtained only from above, which each must obtain for himself. One can indeed point out to another where he is to dig for the precious ore, but after all is said, each one must bring it up for himself, and by labour of his own.

and was clogging the wick. For the last purpose a little instrument often hung by a slender chain from the lamp itself—pointed, for the removing of the snuffs (the *putres fungi*) from the flame, and with a little hook at the side by which the wick, when need was, might be drawn further out ('And with a needle draws the unmoistened flax,' Virgil, *Moretum*, 11). This instrument is sometimes found still attached to the bronze lamps discovered in sepulchres. See Becker, *Gallus*, vol. ii. p. 205, seq.

¹ The answer in the Greek is strongly elliptical, as in a moment of earnestness and haste. Bengel: 'An abrupt speech, suiting that moment of hurry.' On the spirit of the answer of the wise virgins, as regards themselves, Augustine remarks: 'It was not spoken from despair, but from a sober and religious humility;' and Chrysostom (*De Pœnit. Hom.* 8): 'They acted thus, not from lack of sympathy, but because of the shortness of the time.'

In the reason which the wise virgins give for declining to comply with the others' request, '*lest there be not enough for us and you,*' there lies a witness against works of supererogation, however Roman Catholic expositors may resist the drawing of any such conclusion from it. 'The righteous shall scarcely be saved' (1 Pet. iv. 18).¹ The wise do not imagine that they have anything over, which, as not needing for themselves, they may transfer to others: happy if their own lamps are burning so brightly that they may be themselves allowed to make part of the bridal company, and to enter with them that enter into the joy of the festal chamber.² To

¹ Augustine (*Ep.* cxl. 34): 'They beg oil from the wise virgins, but find it not, neither receive it, since these reply that they know not whether they will find sufficient for themselves even that consciousness by which they look for mercy from the Judge. For when the Judge is seated on his throne, who will boast of the purity of his heart, or who will boast that he is clean from sin, unless compassion shall outstrip judgment?'

² Tertullian (*De Pudic.* 22) makes good use of this answer of the wise virgins, when opposing the *libelli pacis* or 'letters of peace,' which the confessors of the African Church in the Decian persecution were wont to give to the lapsed: 'Let it suffice a martyr that he has purged his own sins. It is only the ungrateful or the proud who would scatter to others that which he has dearly obtained. Who can buy off another's death by his own save only the Son of God? . . . Therefore thou who viest with him in remitting offences, if thou thyself hast in nought offended, then indeed suffer for me. But if thou art a sinner, how may the oil of thy little lamp suffice both for thee and for me?'—Gurtler (*Syst. Theol. Proph.* p. 711) quotes a strange story from Melchior Adamus, showing vividly what a witness was once felt to be here against all trusting in man and in the merits of man rather than in God: 'There was, A.D. 1322, exhibited at Eisenach before the Margrave Frederick of Misnia, the mystery concerning the five wise and as many foolish virgins. The wise were St. Mary, St. Catharine, St. Barbara, St. Dorothy, and St. Margaret. To these came the foolish, seeking that they will impart to them of their oil—that is, as the actor explained it, intercede with God for them that they also may be admitted to the marriage—that is, to the kingdom of heaven. What happens? the wise absolutely deny that they can communicate aught. Then a sad spectacle began; the foolish knocked, they wept, they were instant in prayer; but all profited not a jot, they were bidden to depart and buy oil. Which when that prince saw and heard, he is said to have been so

their unhappy companions they give the only counsel that, under the circumstances, is possible, '*But go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.*' They bid them turn to the dispensers of heavenly grace, to those whom God has appointed in the Church as channels of his gifts; or, as some would explain to the prophets and Apostles, that they might learn of them how to revive the work of God in their souls, if yet there should be time. Some take the words as ironical;¹ but how much more consistent with their character whom the wise virgins represent, to see in them a counsel of love, of that love which 'hopeth all things,'—an exhortation to their fellows that they trust not in man, but betake themselves to the source from which effectual grace can alone be obtained, that they seek even at this latest hour to revive the work of grace in their hearts.

What the wise had ventured to hope for themselves is granted. While the others are absent, vainly seeking to repair the negligence of the past, '*the bridegroom came; and they that were ready,*'² they whose lamps were burning,

amazed, that he fell into a grievous and dangerous sickness. "What," he exclaimed, "is our Christian faith, if neither Mary nor any other saint can be persuaded to intercede for us?" From this sadness an apoplexy had its rise, of which he died the fourth day after, and was buried at Eisenach.' Compare Carlyle, *Miscellanies*, vol. ii. p. 415.—Within the last few years a copy of the famous Mystery to which such fatal effects are ascribed has been discovered, and has been edited, with introduction, notes, and a translation in modern German, under the title, *Das Grosse Thüringische Mysterium*, Halle, 1855. It is a very grand and solemn composition; and being evidently a Dominican protest against the extravagances of saint-worship and reliance upon saint-intercession, as encouraged by the Franciscans, has a theological no less than a poetical interest. Dr. Neale was preparing a translation of it, at the time of his lamented death. In Cardinal Petra's *Hymnographie de l'Eglise grecque*, Rome, 1867, p. 39, mention is made of a Greek Drama or Mystery Play, called *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, by St. Methodius; apparently of very rude construction.

¹ Augustine (*Serm.* xciii. 8): 'This is the answer not of those who advise but of those who ridicule;' and Luther quotes, 'The righteous shall laugh at the death of the wicked.'

² In the *Pirke Avoth* there is this comparison: 'This world is like a

having been fed anew from their vessels, ‘*went in with him to the marriage* :¹ *and the door was shut* ;’ shut as much for the security and the joy without interruption of those within,² as for the exclusion of those without (Gen. vii. 16 ; Rev. iii. 12). ‘What door?’ exclaims the author of an ancient homily on this parable: ‘that which now is open to those coming from the east and from the west, that they may sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven,—that Door which saith, Him that cometh to Me I will in nowise cast out. Behold how it is now open, which shall then be closed for evermore. Murderers come, and they are admitted,—publicans and harlots come, and they are received,—unclean and adulterers and robbers, and whosoever is of this kind, come, and the open door doth not deny itself to them ; for Christ, the Door, is infinite to pardon, reaching beyond every degree and every amount of wickedness. But then what saith He? “*The door is shut.*” No one’s penitence,—no one’s prayer,—no one’s groaning shall any more be admitted. That door is shut, which received Aaron after his idolatry,—which admitted David after his adultery, after his homicide,—which not only did not repel Peter after his threefold denial, but delivered its keys to be guarded by him’ (Luke xvi. 26).

‘*Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us* ;’—not that we are to suppose that they have now obtained oil ; but, having sought it in vain, they return entreating that the want of it on their part may be

vestibule, the world to come like a festal couch. Prepare thyself in the vestibule, that thou mayst approach the couch.’

¹ Compare Milton’s grand *Sonnet to a Virtuous Young Lady* :

‘Thy care is fixed, and zealously attends
To fill thy odorous lamp with deeds of light,
And hope that reaps not shame. Therefore be sure,
Thou, when the Bridegroom with his feastful friends
Passes to bliss at the mid hour of night,
Hast gained thy entrance, Virgin wise and pure.’

² For, in Augustine’s beautiful language, the heavenly kingdom is one ‘where neither does an enemy enter, nor a friend go forth.’

overlooked: as those suing for mercy, when now the time of judgment has arrived (Prov. i. 28).¹ In the title '*Lord,*' by which they address the bridegroom, they claim to stand in a near and intimate relation to him; as in the '*Lord, lord,*' twice repeated, is an evidence—not, as some say, of their vain confidence—but of the earnestness with which they now seek admission (Gen. xxii. 11; Exod. iii. 4; 1 Sam. iii. 10; Matt. xxvii. 46; Luke viii. 24; x. 41; xiii. 25, 34; xxii. 31; Acts ix. 4); of the misgiving which already possesses them, lest the shut door should refuse to open any more. Even so it proves.² All which they hear from within is the sentence of their exclusion: '*He answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not*' (cf. Matt. vii. 23); he does not *know* them, that is, in that sense in which the Good Shepherd *knows* his sheep, and is known of them (John x. 14). Other parallel passages in which exactly the same emphasis is laid on the word are these: Ps. xxxvii. 18; cxliv. 3; Nah. i. 7; Amos iii. 2; Hos. xiii. 5; Matt. xxv. 12; 2 Tim. ii. 19. Such knowledge is of necessity reciprocal, so that Augustine's remark, seeming a slight, is indeed a very profound one, that this '*I know you not,*' is nothing else than, '*Ye know not Me.*'³

¹ Augustine, *Ep.* cxl. 35.

² In them that solemn line must find itself true:

Plena luctu caret fructu sera pœnitentia.

'A tardy repentance is full of sorrow and lacks fruit.'

³ At Luke xiii. 25–27 the same image of the excluded vainly seeking an entrance reappears, though with important modifications. The master has appointed a set time in the evening by which all his servants shall have returned home. When the hour arrives, he rises up and bars his doors, and those who arrive later cannot persuade him again to open them. Other words of our Lord (Luke xii. 35–38) offer many points of resemblance to this parable, though with differences as well. There too the faithful appear not as virgins, but as servants,—and wait for him, not when He shall *come to*, but when He shall *return from*, the wedding, from the heavenly bridal, the union with the Church in heaven. The warning to a preparedness to meet him clothes itself under images not exactly similar. They must have their loins girt up (cf. Jer. i. 17; 1 Pet. i. 13), and their lights burning—that is, they must be prompt and succinct to wait upon him, and his house must be

The exclusion of the foolish virgins from the marriage feast, if this interpretation be correct, is not temporary; but, so far as our horizon reaches, final. Many regard it in a different light, as who would not gladly do? and the views of some of these have been touched on already; but to me the sterner and severer interpretation alone approves itself as the true (Isai. lxx. 13). On this exclusion of theirs Bengel observes, that there are four classes, which among them will include the whole company of the saved and of the lost. There are those to whom 'an entrance is ministered *abundantly* into the kingdom,' entering as with all sails set into the haven of their rest; those secondly, that are just saved, like shipwrecked mariners who hardly reach the shore. On the other side, there are those who travel plainly on the broad way to destruction, whose sins go before them to judgment; while lastly, there are such as, though they might have seemed not 'far off from the kingdom of God,' yet fall short of it after all. Of this last class were these foolish virgins; and their fate, who were so near a crown and a kingdom, and yet missed them notwithstanding, he observes with truth, must always appear the most miserable of all. Lest that may be our lot, the Lord says to us,—for what He said to his hearers then, He says unto all, to his Church and to every member of it in every age,—'*Watch therefore; for ye know neither the day nor the hour;*'¹ and while we know not, the only sure way to be ready upon *that* day, is that we be ready upon *every* day: unreadiness upon that day being unreadiness for ever; and this doom of the foolish virgins proclaiming that the work, which should have been the business of a life, can-

bright and beaming with lights; and He must be admitted without delay. Then that which they have prepared for him shall indeed prove to have been prepared for themselves; 'He shall gird Himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and come forth and serve them.' What He did once at the paschal supper (John xiii. 4) shall be only a prophecy of what He shall repeat in a more glorious manner at the marriage-supper of the Lamb.

¹ What is more in this verse should have no place in the text, having probably been transferred from Matt. xxiv. 44.

not be huddled up and accomplished in a moment (Luke xii. 40; xxi. 34-36; 1 Thess. v. 6; 2 Pet. iii. 10; Rev. iii. 3).

A few words on the relation in which this parable stands to that of the Marriage of the King's Son, and to explain the fact that in that the unworthy guest actually obtains admission to the marriage supper (Matt. xxii. 11), and is only from thence cast out, while in this the foolish virgins are not so much as admitted to the feast. It would be easy to say, that this is an accidental difference growing out of the different structure of the two parables; but by such answers everything distinctive in the parables may be explained away: and we treat them with more reverence, when we look for some reason lying more deeply. May it not be that the marriage festivities there are different from the present? In Gerhard's words, 'Those are celebrated during this present life in the Church militant, these at the last day in the Church triumphant. To those even they are admitted who are not adorned with the wedding garment, but to these only they to whom it is granted that they should be arrayed in the fine linen which is the righteousness of saints (Rev. xix. 8); to those men are called by the trumpet of the Gospel, to these by the trumpet of the archangel. To those who enters can again go out from them, or be cast out; who is once introduced to these, never goes out, nor is cast out from them any more: wherefore it is said, "*The door was shut.*"'¹

¹ In the early and Middle Ages this parable was a favourite subject of Christian Art. We have already seen (p. 264) how mysteries or religious plays were founded upon it; and see Du Ménil, *Poésies populaires Latines*, p. 138. Münter (*Sinnbilder d. Alt. Christ.* vol. ii. p. 91) mentions a picture of the five wise virgins in the cemetery of the Church of St. Agnes at Rome, of very early date; and Caumont (*Archit. Relig. au Moyen Age*, p. 345), on the representations of the Last Judgment so often found over the great western door of a cathedral: 'One often finds on the covings of the doors ten statuettes of women, some holding carefully in both hands a cup-shaped lamp, the others carelessly holding with one hand only the same lamp reversed. The sculptor has always been careful to place the wise virgins on the right of Christ, and on the side of the blest; the foolish virgins on his left, on the side of the reprobate.' Compare Didron, *Manuel d'Iconographie Chrétienne*, p. 217, sqq.