

PARABLE VII.

THE DRAW-NET.

MATTHEW xiii. 47-50.

THIS parable might at first sight seem merely to say over again what the Tares had said already. Maldonatus, ascribing absolute identity of purpose to the two, conceives the parables of this chapter not to be set down in the order wherein the Lord spoke them, but this to have immediately followed upon that. Here, however, he is clearly mistaken; there is this fundamental difference between them, that the central truth of that is the *present* intermixture, of this, the *future* separation, of the good and the bad; of that, that men are not to effect the separation; of this, that the separation will one day, by God, be effected. The order in which we have the parables is that in which they were spoken; that other relating to the progressive development, this to the final consummation, of the Church. Olshausen draws a further distinction between the two; in that, the kingdom of God is represented rather in its idea, coextensive, as it shall ultimately be, with the whole world; in this, in its present imperfect form, as a less contained in a greater, though tending to spread over and embrace that greater; the Church gathering in its members from the world, as the net its fish from the sea.

With all this, the parables resemble one another so nearly, that much which has been already said, in considering the other, will apply to this. The same use has been made of both; there is the same continual appeal to both in the

Donatist controversy; both convey the same lesson, namely that He who founded a Church upon earth did not contemplate that Church as a communion free from all intermixture of evil; but that as there was a Ham in the ark, and a Judas among the twelve, so there should be a Babylon even within the bosom of the spiritual Israel; Esau should contend with Jacob even in the Church's womb,¹ till, like another Rebekah, she should often be compelled to exclaim, 'Why am I thus?' (Gen. xxv. 22). They convey, too, the same further lesson, that all this will in nowise justify self-willed departure from the fellowship of the Church, an impatient leaping over, or breaking through, the nets, as here it has often been called. The separation of a more unerring hand than man's is patiently to be waited for, which shall not fail to arrive when the mystery of the present dispensation has been accomplished.²

¹ See Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. cxxvi. 3.*

² The following extracts will show the uses to which the parable was turned. Augustine (*Enarr. in Ps. lxiv. 6*): 'And as we are now prisoners in the sea in the nets of faith, let us rejoice that we swim there still within the nets, because still this sea rages with storms, but the nets which have captured us shall be brought to shore. Meanwhile, my brethren, let us lead good lives within the nets, and not break the nets and seek our way out. For many have broken the nets and have made schisms, and have sought their way out. And whereas they said that they could not endure the wickedness of the fish captured within the nets, it was they themselves who were wicked, rather than those whom they declared they could not endure.'—The curious ballad verses, in a sort of Saturnian metre, and written, as Augustine tells us, to bring the subject within the comprehension of the most unlearned, begin with a reference to this parable:

Abundantia peccatorum solet fratres conturbare;
 Propter hoc Dominus noster voluit nos præmonere,
 Comparans regnum cælorum reticulo misso in mare,
 Congreganti multos pisces, omne genus hinc et inde,
 Quos cum traxissent ad litus, tunc cœperunt separare,
 Bonos in vasa miserunt, reliquos malos in mare.
 Quisquis recolit Evangelium, recognoscat cum timore:
 Videt reticulum Ecclesiam, videt hoc sæculum mare,
 Genus autem mixtum piscis justus est cum peccatore:
 Sæculi finis est litus, tunc est tempus separare:

This parable, the last in this grand series, commences thus: 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind.' If we ask to what manner of net the kingdom of heaven is likened here, the heading of the chapter in our Bibles calls it a 'draw-net,' and the word of the original leaves no doubt upon the subject. The sagene, seine, or sean,¹ for the word

Quando retia ruperunt, multum dilexerunt mare.

Vasa sunt sedes sanctorum, quo non possunt pervenire.

'The multitude of sinners oft the brethren doth dismay,
Therefore to preadmonish us, Our Master took this way:
Likening the heavenly kingdom to a net cast in the deep,
Which in its folds full many a fish of every kind doth sweep.
And these men straight begin to sort, when they are dragged to shore;
The good they put in vessels, the bad cast back once more.
Who calls to mind this Gospel, full of terrors let him be,
Seeing the net stands for the Church, and for the world the sea.
Mixed is the shoal of fishes, just and unjust side by side,
The shore's the end of the world, and the time comes to divide.
But they who break the nets, of the sea are they full fain:
'Tis the vessels are the seats of saints, which these shall ne'er attain.'

One or two quotations from the minutes of the Conference at Carthage will show how the Donatists sought to evade the force of the arguments drawn from this parable. They did not deny that, since bad and good were in this net, it must follow that sinners are mixed with righteous in the Church upon earth; and that Christ contemplated such a mixture: only they affirmed (*Coll. Carth. d. 3*), 'this was spoken of hidden offenders, since the contents of a net sunk in the sea is unknown to the fishers, that is, to the priests, until it be drawn forth to the shore to be cleared, and the fish are revealed as good or bad. So also the hidden sinners, who have a place in the Church and are unknown to the priests, when they are revealed in the divine judgment are separated, like the bad fish, from the fellowship of the saints.' They take refuge here in an accidental feature of the parable; and Augustine well rejoins, with allusion to *Matt. iii. 12* (*Ad Don. post Coll. 10*): 'Is it also under water or under ground that the threshing-floor is threshed, or are we at least to say that the separation is made in the night-time and not in the light of day, or that the husbandman is blindfold at his work?'

¹ Σαγήνη (not from ἕσω ἄγειν, but from σάρτω, σέσαρα, onero), = מִשְׁבָּט, a hauling net; in Latin, tragus, tragula, verriulum; vasta sagena, as Manilius calls it; the German Schlepnetze. On the coast of Cornwall, where the 'sean' is well known, it is sometimes half a

has been naturalized in English, is a net of immense length, suffering nothing to escape from it. This its all-embracing nature is no accidental or unimportant feature, but makes the parable prophetic of the wide reach and effectual operation of the Gospel. The kingdom of heaven should henceforward be a net, not cast into a single stream as hitherto, but into the broad sea of the whole world, and gathering 'of every kind,' out of every kindred and tongue and people and

mile long. Leaded below, that it may sweep the bottom of the sea, and supported with corks above, it is carried out so as to enclose a large space of sea; the ends are then brought together, and it, with all it contains, is drawn up upon the shore; thus Ovid, *ducebam ducentia retia pisces*. Cicero calls Verres, with a play upon his name, *everriculum* in provinciâ, in that he swept all before him; and in the Greek Fathers we have *θανάτου σαγήνη, κατακλυσμοῦ σαγήνη* (Suicer, *Thes.* s. v.): see Hab. i. 15-17, LXX, where the mighty reach of the Chaldean conquests is set forth under this image, and by this word. In this view of it, as an *ἀπέραντον δίκτυον Ἄτης*, how grand is Homer's comparison (*Od.* xxii. 384) of the slaughtered suitors; whom Ulysses saw,

ὄσ τ' ἰχθύας, οὖσ θ' ἄλιῆς
κοῖλον ἐς αἰγιαλὸν πολιῆς ἔκτοσθε θαλάσσης
δικτύῳ ἐξέρυσαν πολυωπῶ. οἱ δέ τε πάντες,
κύμαθ' ἄλδς ποθέοντες, ἐπὶ ψαμά θοισι κέχυνται.

'Like fishes that the fishermen have drawn forth in the meshes of the net into a hollow of the beach from out the grey sea, and all the fish, sore longing for the salt sea waves, are heaped upon the sand.'—*Butcher and Lang*. Herodotus (iii. 149; vi. 31) tells us how the Persians swept away the population from some of the Greek islands; a chain of men, holding hand in hand, and stretching across the entire island, advanced over its whole length, taking the entire population as in a draw-net; and to this process the technical word *σαγηνεύειν* was applied. In Bonwick's *Last of the Tasmanians* is a full account of a very singular attempt, about the year 1830, to compel, by a rough process of the same kind, the whole surviving black population of Van Diemen's Land into one corner of the island, and to bring them so within the power of the Government. It issued, as might have been expected in an attempt over so vast an extent of territory, in total failure, in the capture of a single black. Cf. Plato, *Menexenus*, 240, b, c; *Legg.* iii. 698; Plutarch, *De Sol. Anim.* 26; and generally on the *σαγήνη* the *Dict. of Gr. and Rom. Antt.* s. v. Rete, p. 823; and on the difference between it and the *ἀμφίβληστρον* or circular casting-net (*Matt.* iv. 18) my *Synonyms of the N. T.* § 64.

nation; or, as some understand it, men good and bad; that as the servants, in another parable, 'gathered together all, as many as they found, both bad and good' (Matt. xxii. 10); so here they collect of all kinds within the folds of their net; men of every diversity of moral character having the Gospel preached to them, and finding themselves within the confines of the visible Church.¹

But as all use not aright the advantages which fellowship with Christ in his Church affords, an ultimate separation is necessary. Our Lord proceeds to describe it—'Which, when it was full, they drew to shore,² and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away.' Whether these 'bad'³ are dead putrid fish, such as a net will sometimes

¹ Beza, indeed, translates *ἐκ παντός γένους*, ex omni rerum genere, as mud, shells, sea-weed, and whatever else of worthless would be swept into a net; these being the *σαρὰ*, which in the next verse are 'cast away'; and so in the Geneva Version, 'of all kinds of things.' But the whole drift of the parable makes it certain that the net is here regarded as a *πάρυρον*, and that fish of all kinds (as the Vulgate, ex omni genere piscium), and not things of all kinds, are intended. H. de Sto. Victore (*Annot. in Matt.*): 'He makes assembly from all those who are divided from God by sins, whether smaller or greater, and are scattered by the multitude of their iniquities.'

² Claudian:

Attonitos ad litora pisces
Æquoreus populator agit, rarosque plagarum
Contrahit anfractus, et hiantes colligit oras.

'The waster of the waters drags to shore
The astonished fishes, and his net's loose folds
Tightens, and draws its gaping edges close.'

³ *Σαρὰ*, scil. *ἰχθῦδια*. Grotius: 'These are the trash and refuse of the fish, a kind which, as not worth keeping, we see thrown away by fishers' ('uneatable and worthless,' Lucian; 'worthless fishes,' Apuleius); and this despite of Vitringer's note (*Erklärung d. Parab.* p. 344) I must think the right interpretation. Dead fish in a net can only rarely occur; while of the fish which, for instance, Ovid enumerates in his fragment of the *Halieuticon*, how many, though perfectly fresh, would be flung aside as not edible, as worthless or noxious, the *immunda chromis*, *merito vilissima salpa*, *Et nigrum niveo portans in corpore virus Loligo*, *durique sues*; or again,—*Et capitis duro nociturus scorpius ictu*,—all which might well have been gathered in this *σαγήνη*. Moreover, with Jewish

include, or fish worthless and good for nothing, 'that which was sick and unwholesome at the season,' or such as from their kind, their smallness, or some other cause, are profitable for nothing, and therefore flung carelessly aside to rot upon the beach, or to become food for the birds of prey (Ezek. xxix. 4, 5 ; xxxii. 3, 4), has been often a question ; and it is not easy, as it is not very important, to decide. The interpretation, which is not affected by a determination in one of these senses or in another, is obvious, 'So shall it be at the end of the world.' When all nations have been gathered into the external fellowship of the Church, when the religion of Christ has become the religion of the world, then the severing of the precious from the vile, of the just from the unjust, shall begin. But who are they that shall effect it ? to whom shall this awful task be confided ? Here I must entirely dissent from those, Vitringa,¹ for example, and Olshausen, who urge that they who first carry out the net, and they who discriminate between its contents, being, in the parable, the same ; therefore, since the former are evidently the Apostles and their successors, now become, according to the Lord's promise, 'fishers of men' (Matt. iv. 19 ; Luke v. 10 ; Ezek. xlvii. 10 ; Jer. xvi. 16) ;² the latter must be in like manner,

fishermen, this rejection of part of the contents would of necessity find place, not because some were dead, but because they were unclean ; 'all that have not fins and scales shall be an abomination unto you' (Lev. xi. 9-12). These probably were the *σαπρά*. Fritzsche combines both meanings, for he explains it, 'useless and putrid.' Our Translation has not determined absolutely for one sense or the other (see Suicer, *Thes.* s. v.). But some words of Tristram (*Natural History of the Bible*, p. 290) seem decisive on the matter : 'As illustrating this expression, we may observe that the greater number of the species taken on the lake are rejected by the fishermen, and I have sat with them on the gunwale while they *went through their net*, and threw out into the sea those that were too small for the market, or were considered unclean.'

¹ *Erklär. d. Parab.* p. 351, seq.

² In that grand Orphic hymn attributed to Clement of Alexandria (p. 312, Potter's ed.), Christ Himself is addressed as the chief Fisher ; and, as here, the world is the great sea of wickedness, out of which the saved, the holy fish, are drawn :

not the angelic ministers of God's judgments, but the same *messengers* of the Covenant, and as such, '*angels*' (ver. 49); to whom, being equipped with divine power, the task of judging and sundering should be committed. No doubt the Church, in her progressive development, is always thus judging and separating (1 Cor. v. 4, 5; 2 Thess. iii. 6; 2 John 10; Matt. xviii. 17; Jude 22, 23); putting away one and another from her communion, as they openly declare themselves unworthy of it. But she does not count that she has thus cleansed herself, or that a perfect cleansing can be effected by the exercise of any power which now she possesses. There must be a final judgment and sundering, not any more from within, but from without and from above; and of this decisive crisis we find everywhere else in Scripture the angels of heaven distinctly named as the instruments (Matt. xiii. 41; xxiv. 31; xxv. 31; Rev. xiv. 18, 19). It is contrary then to the analogy of faith so to interpret the words before us as to withdraw this office from them. It is indeed true that in that familiar occurrence of our workday world which supplies the groundwork of the parable, the same who carry out the net would also bring it to shore; as they too would inspect its contents, selecting the good, and casting the worthless away. But it is a pushing of this, which in fact is the weak side of the comparison, too far, to require that the same should hold good in the spiritual thing signified. In the nearly allied parable of the Tares, there was no improbability in supposing those who watched the growth of the crop to be different from those who should

Ἄλιεῦ μερόπων τῶν σωζομένων,
 πελάγους κακίας ἰχθῦς ἁγνοῦς
 κύματος ἐχθροῦ
 γλυκερῆ ζωῆ δελεάζων.

'Fisher of mortal men,
 Those that the savèd are,
 Ever the holy fish
 From the wild ocean
 Of the world's sea of sin
 By thy sweet life Thou enticest away.

finally gather it in ; and, accordingly, such a difference is marked : those are the 'servants,' these are the 'reapers ;' just as in every other parable of judgment there is a marked distinction between the present ministers of the kingdom, and the future executors of doom ; in the Marriage of the King's Son between the 'servants' and the 'attendants,' though our Translation has effaced it (Matt. xxii. 8, 13). In the Pounds there is the same distinction between the 'servants' and 'those that stand by' (Luke xix. 24). That the agents in the one work and in the other are not the same could not here be so easily marked ; but is slightly, yet sufficiently, indicated in another way. The fishers are not once mentioned by name.. The imperfection of the human illustration to set forth the divine truth is kept in good part out of sight, by the whole circumstance being told, as nearly as may be, impersonally. And when the Lord Himself interprets the parable, He passes over, without a word, the beginning ; thus still further drawing attention away from a feature of it, upon which to dwell might have needlessly perplexed his hearers ; and explains only the latter part, where the point and stress of it lay. Assuming, then, as we may and must, the angels of heaven to be here, as everywhere else, the takers and the leavers, we may recognize an emphasis in the '*coming forth*' attributed to them. Ever since the first constitution of the Church they have been hidden,—for ages withdrawn from men's sight. But then, at that grand epoch, the winding up of the present age, the commencement of another, they shall again '*come forth*' from before the throne and presence of God, and walk up and down among men, the visible ministers of his judgments.

The deliberate character of that judgment-act which they shall accomplish, the fact that it shall be no hasty operation confusedly huddled over, is intimated in the *sitting down* of the fishers for the sorting and separating of the good from the bad.¹ From some image like that which our parable

¹ Thus Bengel, who to this *καθίσαντες* appends, *Studiose* ; cf. Luke xiv. 28, 31 ; xvi. 6. At the same time it completes the natural picture :

supplies, the 'taking' and 'leaving' of Matt. xxiv. 41, 42, must be derived. There too the *taking* is probably for blessedness, the selecting of the precious; the *leaving* for destruction, the rejecting of the vile. Some reverse the meaning, yet hardly with justice; for what is the '*left*' but the refused, and the *refused* but the *refuse*? We dare not lay any stress upon the order here, that the good are *first* '*gathered into vessels,*' even though it is also the order of Matt. xxv. 34, 41, seeing that it is exactly reversed in the cognate parable of the Tares, where with a certain emphasis it is said, 'Gather ye together *first* the tares' (ver. 30). Of these '*vessels,*' Christ gives no interpretation; nor indeed is any needed. They are the 'barn' of ver. 30; the 'many mansions' of John xiv. 2; the 'everlasting habitations' of Luke xvi. 9; the 'city which hath foundations' for which Abraham looked, of Heb. xi. 10, 12, 22; ¹ the 'New Jerusalem which cometh down out of heaven' of Rev. iii. 12. This task accomplished, those who drew the net to shore '*cast the bad away.*' ² These words hardly prepare us for the fearful meaning which in the interpretation they receive—'*and shall cast them,*' that is, the wicked, '*into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.*' No wonder that Chrysostom should characterize this as 'a terrible parable;' ³ that Gregory the Great should style it one 'rather to be trembled at than expounded.'⁴ But on this '*furnace of fire*' something has been said already (p. 104). Thus, and

in illo

Cespite consedi, dum lina madentia sicco,

Utque recenserem captivos ordine pisces. Ovid, *Metam.* ix. 30.

'There on the turf I took my seat, while I dry my dripping nets, and that I might duly tell over the captured fish.'

¹ Augustine (*Serm.* cclxviii. 3): 'The vessels are the seats of the saints and the great places of retreat of the happy life.'

² Note the frequency of the term *ἐκβάλλειν ἔξω*, resting on the image of the Church as a holy enclosure, with its line of separation from the unholy *κόσμος* (= *οἱ ἔξω*, Mark iv. 11; Col. iv. 5) distinctly drawn; thus John vi. 37; xii. 31; xv. 9.

³ Φοβερὰ παραβολή.

⁴ *Hom.* 11 in *Evang.*: Timendum est potius quam exponendum.

thus only, God Himself taking in hand to cleanse his Church, shall that entire freedom from all evil which belongs to the idea of the Church be at length brought about (Rev. xxii. 15).

Comparing once more this parable with that of the Tares, we find that, notwithstanding seeming resemblances, the lessons which they teach are very different. The lesson of that it is needless to repeat; but of this it clearly is, that we be not content with conclusion within the Gospel-net, since 'they are not all Israel who are of Israel;' that in the 'great house' of the Church 'there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour;' that each of us should therefore seek to be 'a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use' (2 Tim. ii. 20, 21); since despite of all the confusions of the visible Church, 'the Lord knoweth them that are his,' and will one day bring these confusions to an end, separating the precious from the vile, the gold from the dross, the true kernel of humanity from the husk in which for a while it was enveloped.

I conclude with a few remarks on the relation of these parables to one another. The mystical number seven has tempted not a few interpreters to seek some hidden mystery here; and when the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer, and the names of the seven first deacons (Acts vi. 5), have been turned into prophecy of seven successive conditions of the Church, not to speak of the seven Apocalyptic Epistles (Rev. ii. iii.),¹ it was unlikely that this heptad of parables should escape being made prophetic of the same. They have, in fact, so often been dealt with as prophecy, that a late ingenious writer² needed not to apologize for an attempt in this kind, as though he were suggesting something altogether novel and unheard of before. 'It is,' he says, 'my persuasion that the parables in this chapter should not be considered

¹ See my *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia*, 4th edit. p. 59.

² Alex. Knox, *Remains*, vol. i. p. 408.

disjointedly, but taken together as a connected series, indicating, progressively, the several stages of advancement through which the mystical kingdom of Christ, upon earth, was to proceed, from its commencement to its consummation. . . . It will be understood, then, that each parable has a period peculiarly its own, in which the state of things, so signified, predominates; but when another state of things commences, the former does not cease. It only becomes less prominent; operative as really as ever, but in a way subsidiary to that which now takes the lead. It will follow that each succeeding stage implies a virtual combination of all that has gone before, and of course the grand concluding scene will contain the sublimated spirit and extracted essence of the whole.' Bengel has anticipated all this.¹ He refers the first parable to the times of Christ and his immediate Apostles, when was the original sowing of the word of eternal life. The second, that of the Tares, belongs to the age immediately following, when watchfulness against false doctrine began to diminish, and heresies to creep in. The third, that of the Mustard-seed, to the time of Constantine, when the Church, instead of even seeming to need support, evidently gave it, and the great ones of the earth sought its shadow and protection. The fourth, that of the Leaven, sets forth the diffusion of true religion through the whole world. The fifth, of the Hid Treasure, refers to the more hidden state of the Church, signified in the Apocalypse (xii. 6) by the woman flying into the wilderness. The sixth, that of the Pearl, to the glorious time when the kingdom shall be dearer than all things else, Satan being bound. The seventh, of the Draw-

¹ 'Besides illustrating the normal and constant relations of the kingdom of heaven or the Church, these seven parables agree in having a further and most recondite import, which refers to the different periods and ages of the Church, so that one of them takes its beginning after another as a complement to it, and no one of them leaves off before the beginning of the next in order.' An essay by Reuss: *Meletema de Sensu Septem Parab. Matth. xiii. Prophetico*, Jenæ, 1734, is in the same line of interpretation. See too the *Collected Writings of the late Thomas Carlyle* (Advocate), 1878, pp. 361-402.

net, describes the ultimate confusion, separation, and judgment.

In rejecting this notion of an historico-prophetical character, as belonging to these parables, for which certainly there is no warrant whatever, we must not at the same time refuse to acknowledge that the mystical number seven has here, as almost everywhere else in Scripture, its purpose and meaning, that the parables possess a most significant unity of their own, being knit to one another by very real bonds, succeeding one another in a logical order, and together constituting a complete and harmonious whole. But it is the ideas and laws, not the actual facts, of the Church's history which they declare. Thus in the Sower are set forth the causes of the failures and success which the word of the Gospel meets, when it is preached in the world. In the Tares, the obstacles to the internal development of Christ's kingdom, even after a Church has been hedged in and fenced round from the world, are traced up to their true author, with a warning against methods in which men might be tempted to remove those obstacles. The Mustard-seed and the Leaven announce, the first, the outward, and the second, the inward, might of that kingdom; and therefore implicitly prophesy of its development in spite of all these obstacles, and its triumph over them. As these two are objective and general, so the two which follow, the Hid Treasure and the Pearl, are subjective and individual; declaring the relation of the kingdom to every man, its supreme worth, and how those who have discovered that worth will be willing to renounce all things to make this their own. They have besides mutual relations already touched on; and in the same way as the Mustard-seed and the Leaven complete one another. Finally this of the Draw-net declares how that entire separation from evil, which it is right to long for, but wrong by self-willed efforts prematurely to anticipate, shall in God's own time come to pass; looking forward to which, each should give diligence so to use the privileges and means of grace which the communion of the Church affords him,

that he may be among the 'taken' and not the 'left,' when the great 'Fisher of men' shall separate for ever between the precious and the vile.¹

¹ Marchius, who (*Syll. Diss. Exerc. 4*) sets himself against the caprice of the historico-prophetic exposition, recognizes them as in this sense prophetic: 'The Church was destined to be planted by means of the preaching of the Gospel, a preaching which, nevertheless, among many was to prove useless. By the cunning malice of Satan many were to be associated with the Church who did not really belong to it, and hence must one day be separated from it. From small beginnings the Church was to rise to the highest greatness; from this it was to advance to embrace all the elect; enclosed in its bosom it was to hold the true and highest good, for the sake of which it was rightly to be sought before all else. And this highest good, as it outshone all other excellent things, so also was to be sought by the elect with the loss of all besides. Furthermore, this good was not by any means to be shared by all who might have been drawn into external communion with the Church, but yet were destined to be cast from it into perdition. In this manner these parables are easily linked together in respect to their principal aim.'