

PARABLE IV.

THE LEAVEN.

MATTHEW xiii. 33 ; LUKE xiii. 20, 21.

' *ANOTHER* parable spake he unto them ; *The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.*' This parable relates also to the marvellous increase of the kingdom of God ; but, while the last set forth its outward visible manifestation, this declares its hidden working, its mysterious influence on that world which on all sides it touches. The mustard-seed does not for some while attract observation ; nor, until it has grown to some height, do the birds of the air light upon its branches ; but the leaven has been actively working from the first moment that it was hidden in the lump. Here, indeed, we are met at the outset by Gurtler,¹ Teelman,² and some little bands of modern separatists,³ who altogether deny that the parable has anything to do with the glorious developments of the kingdom of God. They take it rather as a prophecy of the heresies and corruptions which should mingle with and adulterate the pure doctrine of the Gospel,—of the workings, in fact, of the future mystery of

¹ *Syst. Theol. Prophet.* p. 590.

² *Comm. in Luc.* xvi. p. 59, seq.—Vitranga gives, with great impartiality, two alternative expositions of the parable, taking first the leaven in a good, then in an evil sense, but decides absolutely for neither.

³ *Brief Exposition of Matthew* xiii., by J. N. Darby, 1845, p. 40. He makes, in the same way, the parable of the mustard-seed to be a prophecy of the upgrowth of a proud world-hierarchy.

iniquity. The woman that hides the leaven in the meal is for them the apostate Church; which, with its ministers, they observe, is often represented under this image (Prov. ix. 13; Rev. xvii. 1; Zech. v. 7-11). The argument on which they mainly rely in support of this interpretation is, of course, the fact that leaven is oftenest employed in the Scripture as the symbol of something corrupt and corrupting (1 Cor. v. 7; Luke xii. 1; Gal. v. 9). This is undoubtedly true. As such it was forbidden in the offerings under the Law (Exod. xiii. 3; Lev. ii. 11; Amos iv. 5), though not without an exception (Lev. xxiii. 17). The strict command to the children of Israel, that they should carefully put away every particle of leaven out of their houses during the Passover week, rests on this view of it as evil; they were thus reminded that if they would rightly keep the feast, they must seek to cleanse their hearts from all workings of malice and wickedness.¹ But conceding all upon which they rest their argument, it would still be impossible to accept their interpretation as the true. The parable, as the Lord declares, is concerning 'the kingdom of heaven;' it would in that case be a parable

¹ See our Collect for the First Sunday after Easter.—The Jews termed the figmentum malum, that in man 'which lusteth against the spirit,' and hinders him from doing the things that he would, 'the leaven in the lump;' and the reason is given in the book Sohar: 'Evil concupiscence is called leaven because a little of it permeates the heart and swells to such a size as to split the breast' (see Schoettgen, *Hor. Heb.* vol. i. p. 597). The Romans had the same dislike to the use of leaven in sacred things; 'It is not lawful for a priest of Jove to touch meal tainted with leaven' (Gell. x. 15, 19); Plutarch (*Quæst. Rom.* 109) giving no doubt the true explanation: 'The leaven itself is born from corruption, and corrupts the mass with which it is mingled.' Thus it comes to pass that ἄρτοι καθαροί is used as = ἄζυμοι. So Jerome (*Ep.* 31) gives the reason why honey was forbidden in the Levitical offerings (Lev. ii. 11): 'For with God nothing voluptuous, nothing that is merely sweet is approved, but only that which has in it something of pungent truth.' It was the feeling of the unsuitableness of leaven in things sacred which, in part, caused the Latin Church to contend so earnestly against the use of fermented bread in the Eucharist, calling those who used it fermentarii, though an historical interest also mingled in the question (see Augusti, *Handb. d. Christl. Archæol.* vol. ii. p. 662).

concerning another kingdom altogether. Announcing that there was one who should leaven through and through with a leaven of falsehood and corruption the entire kingdom of heaven, He would have announced that the gates of hell *should* prevail against it; He would have written failure upon his whole future work; there would, in that case, have remained no re-active energy, by which it could have ever been unleavened again.

But the admitted fact that leaven is, in Scripture, most commonly the type of what is false and corrupting, need not drive us to any interpretation encumbered with embarrassments like these. It was not, therefore, the less free to use it in a good sense. In those other passages, the puffing up, disturbing, souring properties of leaven constituted the prominent points of comparison; in the present, its warmth,¹ its penetrative energy, the way in which a little of it lends a savour and virtue to much wherewith it is brought in contact. The figurative language of Scripture is not so stereotyped, that one figure must always stand for one and the same thing. The devil is 'a roaring *lion*, seeking whom he may devour' (1 Pet. v. 8); yet this does not hinder the same title from being applied to Christ, 'the *Lion* of the tribe of Juda' (Rev. v. 5); only there the subtlety and fierceness of the animal formed the point of comparison, here the nobility and kingliness and conquering strength.² The silliness of the dove is in one place the point of comparison (Hos. vii. 11), its simplicity at another (Matt. x. 16). St. Cyril³ then could scarcely have had this parable in his mind, when he said: 'Leaven, in the inspired writings, is *always* taken as the type of naughtiness and sin.' Ignatius shows rather by his own

¹ Ζύμη from ζέω, as fermentum (= fervimentum) from ferveo: leaven (in French, levain) from levare, to lift up.

² See Augustine (*Serm.* lxxiii. 2): 'How vast is the difference betwixt Christ and the devil! Yet Christ is called a lion, so also is the devil. . . . The one a lion on account of his bravery, the other a lion on account of his ferocity. The one a lion for that He conquers, the other a lion for that he injures.' Cf. *Serm.* xxxii. 6.

³ *Hom. Paschal.* 19.

application of the image, how it may be freely used, now in a good, now in a bad sense; for, warning against judaizing practices, he writes: 'Lay aside the evil leaven which has grown old and maketh sour, and be transmuted into the new leaven, which is Christ Jesus.'¹ Nor is it to be forgotten that if, on one side, the operation of leaven upon meal presents an analogy to something evil in the spiritual world, it does also on the other to something good; its effects on bread being to render it more tasteful, more nourishing, lighter, and generally more wholesome.

We need not then hesitate to take the parable in its obvious sense,—that it prophesies the diffusion, and not the corruptions, of the Gospel. By the leaven we are to understand the word of the kingdom, which Word, in its highest sense, Christ Himself was. As the mustard-seed, out of which a mighty tree should unfold itself, was '*the least of all seeds*,' so too the leaven is something apparently of slight account, but at the same time mighty in operation; in this fitly setting forth Him, of whom it was said, 'He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him;' but then presently again, 'By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; . . . and he shall divide the spoil with the strong' (Isai. liii. 2, 11, 12); and who, when He had communicated of his life and spirit to his Apostles, enabled them too, in their turn, poor and mean and unlearned as they were, to become 'the salt of the earth,' the leaven of the world. For, in Chrysostom's words, 'that which is once leavened becomes leaven to the rest; since as the spark when it takes hold of wood, makes that which is already kindled to transmit the flame, and so seizes still upon more, thus it is also with the preaching of the word.'²

¹ *Ad Magnes.* 10. Cf. Gregory Nazianzene (*Orat.* xxxvi. 90), who says that Christ by his Incarnation sanctified men, 'like leaven working throughout the dough, and uniting it to itself.'

² *In Matt. Hom.* 46; see also *Con. Ignaviam, Hom.* iii. 2. So Cajetan: 'The disciples of Christ, the first members of the kingdom of heaven,

Is it part of the natural machinery of the parable, the act of kneading being proper to women (Gen. xviii. 6; 1 Sam. xxviii. 24), that it should be '*a woman*' who hides the leaven in the three measures of meal? or shall we look for something more in it than this? A comparison with Luke xv. 8 (*the woman* who loses, and then seeks and finds, her piece of money) may suggest that the divine Wisdom (Prov. ix. 1-3), the Holy Spirit, which is the sanctifying power in humanity (and it is of that sanctifying that the word is here), may be intended. But if it be asked, Why represented as a woman? to this it may be replied, that the organ of the Spirit's working is the Church, which evidently would be most fitly represented under this image. In and through the Church the Spirit's work proceeds: only as the Spirit dwells in the Church (Rev. xxii. 17), is that able to mingle a nobler element in the mass of humanity, to leaven the world. So again, why should '*three*' measures of meal be mentioned? It might be enough to answer, because it was just so much as would be often kneaded at one time (Gen. xviii. 6; Judg. vi. 19; 1 Sam. i. 24¹). Yet the '*three*' may intend something more, may prophesy of the spread of the Gospel through the three parts then known of the world; or, as Augustine will have it, of the ultimate leavening of the whole human race, derived from the three sons of Noah; which amounts to much the same thing. And those who, like Jerome and Ambrose, find in it a pledge of the sanctification of spirit, soul, and body (1 Thess. v. 23) are not upon a different track, if, as has not been ill suggested, Shem, Japheth, and Ham, do indeed answer to these three elements, spirit, soul, and body, which together make

penetrated with their spirit the hearts of men, and nurtured their crudity and acerbity to the ripeness and savour of the heavenly life.'

¹ In the two last places the Septuagint has *τρία μέτρα*. For the Gnostic perversion of this parable, these '*three measures*' being severally men *χοϊκοί* (1 Cor. xv. 47), *ψυχικοί* (1 Cor. ii. 14), and *πνευματικοί* (Gal. vi. 1), see Irenæus, *Con. Hæc.* i. 8. 3. It furnishes a notable illustration of what has been said already (see p. 43) on the manner in which the Gnostics dealt with the parables.

tip the man—the one or other element having, as is plainly the case, predominance in the descendants severally of the three.

But the leaven which is thus mingled with the lump, which acts on and coalesces with it, is at the same time different from it; for the woman *took* it from elsewhere to mingle it therein: and even such is the Gospel, a kingdom not of this world (John xviii. 36), not the unfolding of any powers which already existed therein, a kingdom not rising, as the secular kingdoms, 'out of the earth' (Dan. vii. 17), but a new power brought into the world from above; not a philosophy which men have imagined, but a Revelation which God has revealed. The Gospel of Christ was a new and quickening power cast into the midst of an old and dying world, a centre of life round which all the moral energies which still survived, and all which itself should awaken, might form and gather;—by the help of which the world might constitute itself anew.¹ This leaven is not merely mingled with, but *hidden* in the mass which it renewed. For the true renovation, that which God effects, is ever thus from the inward to the outward; it begins in the inner spiritual world, though it does not end there: for it fails not to bring about, in good time, a mighty change also in the

¹ Augustine, in whose time the fading away of all the glory of the ancient world was daily becoming more apparent ('The world is so wasted with all this destruction that it has lost even the appearance of seductiveness'), delighted to contemplate and to present the coming of Christ under this aspect. Thus *Serm.* lxxxix.: 'Was it a small thing that God did for thee, whereas in the old age of the world He sent unto thee Christ to refresh thee at the time when all things are failing? . . . Christ came when all things were growing old, and made thee new. That which was made, that which was established, that which was doomed to perish, was already on the brink of destruction. Need was that it should abound in labours; but He came, and brought thee consolation amid labours, and the promise of eternal rest. Be it far from thee then to wish to cleave to the outworn world, and to be unwilling to be restored to youth in Christ, Who says to thee: The world perishes, the world grows old, the world is failing, it labours with the difficult breathing of old age. Let fear be far from thee, thy youth shall be renewed as the youth of an eagle.'

outward and visible world. This was wonderfully exemplified in the early history of Christianity. The leaven was effectually hidden. How striking is the entire ignorance which heathen writers betray of all that was going forward a little below the surface of society,—the manner in which they overlooked the mighty change which was preparing; and this, not merely at the first, when the mustard-tree might well escape notice, but, with slight exceptions, even up to the very moment when the open triumph of Christianity was at hand. Working from the centre to the circumference, by degrees it made itself felt, till at length the whole Græco-Roman world was, more or less, leavened by it. Nor must we forget that the mere external conversion of that whole world gives us a very inadequate measure of the work which needed to be done: besides this, there was the eradication of the innumerable heathen practices and customs and feelings which had enwoven and entwined their fibres round the very heart of society; a work which lagged very far behind the other, and which, in fact, was never thoroughly accomplished till the whole structure of that society had gone to pieces, and the new Teutonic framework had been erected in its room.¹

But while much has thus been effected, while the leavening of the mass has never ceased to go forward, yet the promise of the parable has hitherto been realized only in a very imperfect measure; nor can we consider these words, '*till the whole was leavened*,' as less than a prophecy of a final complete triumph of the Gospel—that it will diffuse itself through all nations, and purify and ennoble all life. We may also fairly see in these words a pledge and assurance that the word of life, received into any single heart, shall not there cease its effectual working, till it has brought the whole man into obedience to it, sanctifying him wholly, so that he shall be altogether a new creation in Christ Jesus.²

¹ On this subject there is much which is admirable in Tzschirner's *Fall des Heidenthums*, 1829.

² Corn. a Lapide quotes from an earlier commentator: 'He says,

It shall claim every region of man's being as its own, and make its presence felt through all. In fact the parable does nothing less than set forth to us the mystery of regeneration, both in its first act, which can be but once, as the leaven is but once hidden : and also in the consequent renewal by the Holy Spirit, which, as the further working of the leaven, is continual and progressive. This side of the truth is that exclusively brought out by Hammond, who thus paraphrases our Lord's words : ' The Gospel hath such a secret invisible influence on the hearts of men, to change them and affect them, and all the actions that flow from them, that it is fitly resembled to leaven, so mixed thoroughly with the whole, that although it appeareth not in any part of it visibly, yet every part hath a tincture from it.' We may fitly conclude, in the words of St. Ambrose : ' May the Holy Church, which is figured under the type of this woman in the Gospel, whose meal are we, hide the Lord Jesus in the innermost places of our hearts, till the warmth of the Divine wisdom penetrate into the most secret recesses of our souls.'¹

Until the whole was leavened, because the charity hidden in our mind must continue to grow to the end that it may change the whole mind unto its own perfection, for here indeed a beginning is made, but perfection is reached in the future.'

¹ *Exp. in Luc.* vii. 187.—Clement of Alexandria (p. 694, Potter's ed.) gives an admirable exposition of the parable, and in very few words. The kingdom of heaven, he says, is likened to leaven, ' because the strength of the word by virtue of its directness and power, in the case of every one who receives and possesses it within himself, secretly and invisibly draws him to itself and brings his whole nature into unity.' On this parable and that preceding Godet writes : ' These two parables form the most complete contrast to the picture created by the Jewish imagination of the establishment of the Messiah's reign. All was to be effected instantaneously by the stroke of a magic wand. Jesus opposes to this superficial notion the idea of a moral development, which, working by spiritual means and recognizing the existence of liberty, is consequently slow and progressive. How is it possible to admit in the face of such words that He believed in the imminence of his return ?'