

PARABLE III.

THE MUSTARD-SEED.

MATT. xiii. 31, 32; MARK iv. 30-32; LUKE xiii. 18, 19.

THE four parables which follow group themselves into two pairs. Those of the Mustard-seed and the Leaven constitute the first pair, and might seem, at first sight, merely repetitions of the same truth; but in this, as in every other case, upon nearer inspection essential differences reveal themselves. They have indeed this much in common, that they both describe the small and slight beginnings, the gradual progress, and the final marvellous increase of the Church—or how, to use another image, the stone cut out without hands should become a great mountain, and fill the whole earth (Dan. ii. 34, 35; cf. Ezek. xlvi. 1-5). But each also has much which is its own. That other has to do with the kingdom of God which ‘cometh not with observation;’ this with that same kingdom as it displays itself openly, and cannot be hid. That declares the *intensive*, this the *extensive*, development of the Gospel. That sets forth the power and action of the truth on the world brought in contact with it; this the power of the truth to develop itself from within; as the tree which, shut up within the seed, will unfold itself according to the law of its own being.

Chrysostom¹ traces finely the connexion between this

¹ So also Lyser, with more immediate reference to the question with which the parable is introduced in St. Mark (iv. 30): ‘Since the condition of the gospel is such that so many things hinder its fruit, and it is exposed to such manifold assaults of Satan that hardly may any fruit be

parable and those which have just gone before. From that of the Sower the disciples may have gathered that of the seed which they should sow three parts would perish, and only a fourth part prosper; while that of the Tares had opened to them the prospect of further hindrances which would beset even that portion which had taken root downward, and sprung upward; now then, lest they should be tempted quite to lose heart and to despair, these two parables are spoken for their encouragement. 'My kingdom,' the Lord would say, 'shall survive these losses, and surmount these hindrances, until, small as its first beginnings may appear, it shall, like a mighty tree, fill the earth with its branches,—like potent leaven, diffuse its influence through all the world.' The growth of a mighty kingdom is not here for the first time likened to that of a tree. Many of our Lord's hearers must have been familiar with such a comparison from the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The upcoming of a worldly kingdom had been set forth under this image (Dan. iv. 10–12; Ezek. xxxi. 3–9¹), that also of the kingdom of God (Ezek. xvii. 22–24; Ps. lxxx. 8²).

But why, it may be asked, among all trees is a *mustard-tree*³ chosen here? Many nobler plants, as the vine, or looked for, what shall we say of it? Will it be possible to find aught in nature which may excuse its weakness, and vindicate it from contempt?

¹ See Hävernack, *Comm. üb. Daniel*, p. 139.

² In a striking poem, found in the Appendix to Fell's *Cyprian*, and quoted in my *Sacred Latin Poetry*, p. 200, 3rd edit., the growth of the kingdom of God, under the figure of the growth of a tree, is beautifully set forth.

³ Some modern inquirers recognize in the mustard-tree of this parable not that which goes by this name in Western Europe, but the *Salvadora Persica*, commonly called in Syria now *khardal*. So Dr. Lindley, in his *Flora Indica*; and see in the *Athenæum* of March 23, 1844, an interesting paper by Dr. Royle, read before the Royal Asiatic Society. Captains Irby and Mangles, describing this *khardal*, say: 'It has a pleasant, though a strong aromatic taste, exactly resembling mustard, and if taken in any quantity, produces a similar irritability of the nose and eyes.' There is, on the other hand, a learned discussion in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, June, 1844, calling in question Dr. Royle's conclusion; from which also

taller trees, as the cedar (1 Kin. iv. 33; Ezek. xvii. 3), might have been named. Doubtless this is chosen, not with reference to greatness which it obtains in the end, for in this many surpass it, but to the proportion between the smallness of the seed and the greatness of the tree which unfolds itself therefrom. For this is the point to which the Lord calls especial attention,—not the greatness of the mustard-tree in itself, but its greatness as compared with the seed from whence it springs; for what He would fain teach his disciples was not that his kingdom should be glorious, but that it should be glorious despite its weak and slight and despised beginnings. And the comparison had in other ways its fitness too. The mustard-seed, minute and trivial as it might seem, was not without its significance and acknowledged worth in antiquity. It ranked among the nobler Pythagorean symbols; was esteemed to possess medicinal virtues against the bites of venomous creatures and against poisons, and used as a remedy in many diseases.¹ Nor can I, with a modern interpreter, account very ridiculous the suggestion that the Saviour chose this seed on account of further qualities possessed by it, which gave it a peculiar aptness to illustrate the truth which He

the author of a careful article in the *Dict. of the Bible* dissents; see also Tristram, *Natural History of the Bible*. p. 472.

¹ Pliny, *H. N.* xx. 87. *Sinapis scelerata* Plautus calls it, for its pungent qualities; and Columella, *Seque lacessenti fletum factura sinapis*, 'Mustard that to its challenger brings tears.' This, too, may make part of its fitness here: for as little is the Gospel all sweets, being compared by Clement of Alexandria to the mustard-seed, 'that biteth the soul for its profit.' And in the Homily of an uncertain author: 'Like as when we take a grain of mustard, our face is pained, our brow contracts, we are moved to tears, and receive even that which brings health to our body not without weeping for its harshness . . . so also, when we accept the commands of the Christian faith, our mind is pained, our body is distressed, we are moved to tears, and attain to our very salvation not without lamentation and grief.' This its active energy makes it as apt an emblem of the good as the ill: and thus when Darius, according to Eastern tradition, sent Alexander the Great a barrel of sesame, to acquaint him with the multitude of his soldiers, Alexander sent a bag of mustard-seed in return, to indicate the active, fiery, biting courage of his (D'Herbelot, *Biblioth. Orient.* s. v. Escander).

had in hand. Its heat, its fiery vigour, the fact that only through being bruised it gives out its best virtues, and all this under so insignificant an appearance and in so small a compass, may well have moved Him to select this seed by which to set forth the destinies of that word of the kingdom, that doctrine of a crucified Redeemer, which, to the Greeks foolishness, and to the Jews a stumbling-block, should prove to them that believed 'the power of God unto salvation.'¹

But not Christ's doctrine merely, nor yet even the Church which He planted upon earth, is this grain of mustard-seed in its central meaning. He is Himself at once the mustard-seed² and the Man that sowed it. He is the mustard-seed, for the Church was originally enclosed in Him, and unfolded itself from Him, having as much oneness of life with Him as the tree with the seed in which its rudiments were all enclosed, and out of which it grew; and the Sower, in that by a free act of his own, He gave *Himself* to that death whereby He became the Author of life unto many;³ as Himself has said, 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit' (John xii. 24). And the field in which He sowed this seed

¹ Thus the author of a sermon on the martyrdom of St. Lawrence, ascribed to Augustine (*Serm. 87, Appendix*), and to Ambrose: 'Like as a grain of mustard at first sight seems but a little thing, both common and despised, giving no savour, shedding no odour, indicating no sweetness; but, as soon as it is bruised, straightway it sheds its odour, manifests its sharpness, exhales a condiment of fiery savour, and is inflamed with such burning heat that it seems a marvel how so much fire was shut up in such trifling grains: . . . so also at first sight the Christian faith seems but a little thing, both common and insignificant, not showing its power, exhibiting no pride, affording no grace.' Ambrose has much instructive, with something merely fanciful, on this parable (*Exp. in Luc. vii. 176-186*).

² See a fragment of Irenæus (p. 347, Bened. ed.), who also notes how the mustard-seed was selected for its fiery and austere qualities (τὸ πικρὸν καὶ αἰσθηρόν). So Tertullian, *Adv. Marc. iv. 30*.

³ Early Christian art had a true insight into this. Didron (*Iconographie Chrétienne*, p. 208) describes this as a frequent symbol: 'Christ in the tomb; from his mouth proceeds a tree on the branches whereof are the apostles.'

was the world ;—‘ *his field,*’ or as St. Luke expresses it (xiii. 19), ‘ *his garden ;*’ for the world was made by Him, and coming to it, ‘ He came unto his own.’

This seed, when cast into the ground, is ‘ *the least of all seeds,*’—words which have often perplexed interpreters, many seeds, as of poppy or rue, being smaller. Yet difficulties of this kind are not worth making ; it is sufficient to know that ‘ small as a grain of mustard-seed ’ was a proverbial expression among the Jews¹ for something exceedingly minute (see Luke xvii. 6). The Lord, in his popular teaching, adhered to the popular language. And as the mustard-seed, so has been his kingdom. What, to the eye of flesh, could be less magnificent, what could have less of promise, than the commencements of that kingdom in his own person ? Growing up in a distant and despised province, till his thirtieth year He did not emerge from the bosom of his family ; then taught for two or three years in the neighbouring towns and villages, and occasionally at Jerusalem ; made a few converts, chiefly among the poor and unlearned ; and at length, falling into the hands of his enemies, with no attempt at resistance on his own part or that of his followers, died a malefactor’s death upon the cross. Such, and so slight, was the commencement of the universal kingdom of God ; for herein that kingdom differs from the great schemes of this world ; these last have a proud beginning, a shameful and miserable end—towers as of Babel, which at first threaten to be as high as heaven, but end a deserted misshapen heap of slime and bricks ; while the works of God, and most of all his chief work, his Church, have a slight and unobserved beginning, with gradual increase, and a glorious consummation. So is it with his kingdom in the world, a kingdom which came not with observation ; so is it with his kingdom in any single heart : there too the word of Christ falls like a slight mustard-seed, seeming to promise

¹ So also in the Coran (*Sur.* 31) : ‘ Oh my son, verily every matter, whether good or bad, though it be of the weight of a grain of mustard-seed, and be hidden in a rock, or in the heavens, or in the earth, God will bring the same to light.’

little, but effecting, if allowed to grow, mighty and marvellous results.¹ For that seed which was the smallest of all seeds, 'when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof' (Isai. xviii. 6). There is no exaggeration here. In hot countries, as in Judæa, the mustard-tree attains a size of which we do not so much as dream in our colder latitudes, sometimes such as will allow a man to climb up into its branches (this, however, was counted worth recording),² or to ride on horseback under them, as a traveller in Chili mentions that he has done. Maldonatus assures us, that in Spain he has seen large ovens heated with its branches; often, too, he has noted when the seed was ripening, immense flocks of birds congregating upon the boughs, which yet were strong enough to sustain the weight without being broken. All this was probably familiar to our Lord's hearers as well, and presented a lively image to their minds. They, too, had beheld the birds of the air coming and lodging in the branches of the mustard-tree, and finding at once their food and their shelter there.

There is prophecy too in these words. As in that grand announcement of the kingdom of God (Ezek. xvii. 22-24) which has so many points of contact and resemblance with this parable,³ it is said of the tender twig which the Lord

¹ Jerome (*Comm. in Matt. in loc.*) brings out this difference well. 'The preaching of the Gospel is the least among all systems of teaching. For at the first doctrine it produces no confidence in its truth, preaching the Godhead of a man, the death of God and the offence of the cross. Compare a doctrine of this kind with the dogmas of the philosophers, with their books, their splendid eloquence, and the style of their discourses, and you will see by how much the seed of the Gospel is less than all other seeds. But when these are grown they prove nothing that is penetrating, nothing vigorous, nothing vital, but all is flaccid' and rotten, and the effeminate growth produces only poor garden stuff and herbs which quickly wither and waste. This preaching, on the other hand, which at the outset seemed so small, when it has been sown either in the mind of a believer or in the world at large, springs up into no poor garden stuff, but grows into a tree.'

² Lightfoot, *Hor. Heb. in loc.*

³ See Hengstenberg, *Christologie*, vol. ii. p. 556, 2nd edit.

shall plant, 'it shall bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a goodly cedar : and under it shall dwell all fowl of every wing ; in the shadow of the branches thereof shall they dwell ;' and as these last words announce there the refuge and defence which men shall find in the Church of God (cf. Ezek. xxxi. 6, 12), so must they have the same meaning here. Christ's kingdom shall attract multitudes by the shelter and protection which it offers ; shelter, as it has often proved, from worldly oppression, shelter from the great power of the devil. Itself a tree of life whose leaves are for medicine and whose fruit for food (Ezek. xlvii. 12 ; Rev. xxii. 2), all who need the healing of their soul's hurts, all who need the satisfying of their soul's hunger,¹ shall betake themselves to it ; and all who do so shall be enabled to set their seal to the words of the Son of Sirach (xiv. 20, 26, 27), 'Blessed is the man that doth meditate good things in Wisdom. . . . He shall set his children under her shelter, and shall lodge under her branches ; by her he shall be covered from heat, and in her glory shall he dwell.'²

¹ By 'the fowls of the air' [τοῦ οὐρανοῦ] Gregory of Nyssa (*Hexaëm. Proëm.*) finely understands 'the souls that soar aloft and wander on high.'

² Augustine (*Serm.* xlv. 2) : 'The Church has grown, the nations have believed, the princes of the earth have been conquered in the name of Christ, to become conquerors in all the world. Once men took vengeance on Christians before idols, now they take vengeance on idols for the sake of Christ. All seek the help of the Church, in every affliction, in all their trials. That grain of mustard-seed has grown, and there come to it the birds of the air, the proud men of the world, and rest beneath its branches.'