

PARABLE VI.

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE.

MATTHEW xiii. 45, 46.

ALMOST all which it would have needed to say upon this parable, had it stood alone, has been anticipated in the sister parable, which has just gone before. The relations in which the two stand to one another have been already noticed.¹ We

¹ Keim (*Jesu von Nazara*, vol. ii. p. 451) has brought out these relations excellently well: 'With deliberate purpose Christ has here distinguished a twofold analogy, that of the Finders and that of the Seekers. For most men come to the Kingdom of Heaven as to a lucky find, and it is veritably hidden in the world as the treasure is in the field. This kingdom of the Messiah, which is in the mind, sounds no alarm, nor does it study effect, since it is no kingdom of ostentation nor of prodigies, but of the Word. Rather it presents itself to man without any effort on his part, and comes to him as a surprise, and he takes what, so soon as he has eyes to see, shines before him as precious metal. But there are also some who, like merchants at markets, have sought for a costly, pure, and brilliant jewel of pearls. These are they who hunger and thirst after the Kingdom of God, after righteousness; who, like the prophets and judges of the Old Testament, are unsatisfied with any jewel to be found in the world's market; who search yearningly amid mental and spiritual possessions for a consolation and support for their souls, and for the cleansing of their consciences. Henceforward there is one and the same way for finders, and for the seekers, who now at last are finders, to whose eyes the pearl of great price has been revealed. Upon both comes the presentiment of the endless value of the treasure which lies before their eyes. The finder hides again the hidden treasure which he has come upon unawares in his digging. He cannot lightly abandon it for some one else to carry off while he leaves it exposed; and he cannot take it away until he has won a right to it. The seeker can no longer hasten to seek any other or any more pearls: he can only hasten to fetch the

have not here, as there, merely a *finder*, but also a *seeker*, of true wisdom—‘*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man,¹ seeking goodly pearls.*’ To find them has been the object of his labours: ‘the search is therefore determinate, discriminative, unremitting.’ He has set this purpose distinctly before him, and to it is bending all his energies; as one assured that man was not made in vain, that there must be a centre of peace for him, a good which will satisfy all the cravings of his soul, and who is determined not to rest till he has found that good. As yet he may not know that it is but *one*, for at the outset he is seeking *many* goodly pearls; but perhaps imagines that it is to be made up and combined from many quarters: but this also will be revealed to him in due time.²

It makes much for the beauty of the parable, and the fitness of the image used to set forth the surpassing value of the kingdom of God, that we keep in mind the esteem in which pearls were held in antiquity,³ sums almost incredible

purchase-money for the merchant in whose strong hands the pearl is lying. Thus both are hastening—the one to the merchant with the pearl; the other to the lord of the field to purchase the field which contains the treasure; and both find no sum too high, but throw into this all their fortunes. So also the title to the Kingdom of Heaven and to its fellowship will only be won with the abandonment of all things with the spiritual renunciation of everything earthly, house and home, father and mother, even one’s own person, in order to win the favour of the Lord of the Kingdom.’

¹ The pearl-merchant was termed *margaritarius*, a name sometimes also given to the diver.

² Augustine (*Serm. de Disc. Christ.* vol. vi. p. 583, Bened. ed.) assumes the *oneness* of that which here is found as furnishing another point of contrast, besides those already detailed, between this parable and the last. There the kingdom of heaven is presented as manifold, even as a treasure would contain precious things of various kinds laid up in it; here it is presented in its unity—as much as to say, This which is so manifold, is also single and at heart but one.

³ Pliny: ‘Pearls hold the chief and highest place of all precious things:’ and the word which was rendered (Prov. iii. 15; viii. 11; xx. 15; xxxi. 10; Job xxviii. 18) by earlier translators of Scripture most commonly as ‘rubies’ (רִבְיָנִים) is generally believed now to signify pearls (Gr. *πέρλα*).

having been given for single pearls, when perfect of their kind. There were many defects which materially diminished their value, as for instance, if they had a yellow or dusky tinge, or were not absolutely round or smooth. The skill and wariness which the pearl-merchant therefore needed, if he would not have a meaner thing imposed on him in place of the best, will not be without its answer in the spiritual world.¹ There are many pearls of an inferior quality,² but this merchant is seeking 'goodly' pearls; as he whom the merchant represents, has set before himself, not low and poor, but noble and worthy, aims; and this even in times anterior to that in which he finds the pearl of price. He is not one living for sensual objects. He has not made pleasure, or gain, or the high places of the world, the end and scope of his toils. But he has been, it may be, a philanthropist, a seeker of wisdom, a worshipper of the beautiful in nature or in art; one who has hoped to find his soul's satisfaction in some one of these things. 'Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.' This 'pearl of great price,' what is it? Many answers have been given, which yet, diverging as they may seem from one another, grow all out of one and the same root; all ultimately resolve themselves into one.³ Whether we say the pearl is the kingdom of God within a man,—or the knowledge of Christ,⁴—or Christ

¹ Augustine (*Serm.* xxxvii. 3): 'Learn to value jewels aright, ye merchants of the kingdom of heaven.'

² Origen (*Comm. in Matt.* in loc.) has much curious learning about pearls; and details the theory of their formation current in antiquity. The fish conceived the pearl from the dew of heaven, and according to the quality of the dew, it was pure and round, or cloudy and deformed with specks (see Pliny, *H. N.* ix. 35; Ammianus Marcellinus, xxiii. 6. 85). The state of the atmosphere at the time of conception, and the hour of the day, had great influence on their size and colour. Thus Isidore of Seville: 'White pearls are better than those which have a tinge of yellow: for the former are white, either by reason of their freshness, or as the product of the morning dew: the latter are made dusky either by age or the evening air.' Cf. Greswell, *Expos. of the Parables*, vol. ii. pp. 220-222; and Bochart, *Hierozoicon*, pars ii. 5, 5-8.

³ See Suicer, *Thes.* s. v. μαργαρίτης.

⁴ H. de Sto. Victore (*Annott. in Matt.*): 'The good pearls are the

Himself,¹—we do but in different ways express one and the same thing.

The merchant, having found this pearl which so transcended all other, ‘*went and sold all that he had, and bought it.*’² What this selling implies, has been already seen;³ and to understand what the buying means, and what it does not mean, we may compare Isai. lv. 1; Matt. xxv. 9, 10; Rev. iii. 18; and Prov. xxiii. 23; ‘Buy the truth, and sell it not;’ obtain the truth at any price, and let no price tempt you to part with it. Chrysostom calls our attention here to the *one* pearl which the merchant finds, and the *many* which he had been seeking.⁴ The same contrast is marked elsewhere; Martha is troubled about *many* things; Mary has found that but *one* thing is needful (Luke x. 41, 42). There is but one such pearl (though every seeker may obtain that one), since the truth is one, even as God is one; and the truth possessed restores that unity to the heart of man, which

law and the prophets; the one of great price is the knowledge of the Saviour.’ Origen has these instructive references, Matt. xvii. 5-8; 2 Cor. iii. 10. Schoettgen observes (*Hor. Heb.* vol. i. p. 132): ‘Beautiful and noteworthy doctrines and lessons were called by the Jews pearls.’ Von Bohlen (*Das Alt. Ind.* vol. ii. p. 122) derives margarita from a Sanscrit word, manaâritâ, signifying The pure. Another name it bore signified The beloved.

¹ Theophylact says, that it was at a moment when it lightened that the conception of the pearl from the heavenly dew took place; which explains an otherwise obscure passage in Clement of Alexandria (Potter’s ed. p. 1014): ‘This Pearl is the most pellucid and pure Jesus, whom the Virgin conceived from the divine lightning.’ Augustine, too (*Quæst. ex Matt.* qu. 13), likens Christ to the pearl, though he does not bring out this point of comparison: ‘For the Word of the Lord is lucid with the lustre of truth, and solid with the firmness of eternity, and self-similar at all points with the beauty of divinity, whereby, penetrating the shell of the flesh, we must recognise God. Bochart (*Hierozoicon*, pars ii. 5, 8, in fine) has a graceful bringing out of the points of likeness between the kingdom of God and a pearl.

² Prudentius (*Psychom.* 872-874) has a fine allusion.

³ Vitranga tells here the story of Galeazzo Carracioli as an illustration of what this selling of all before now has meant for one who, having found the pearl of price, has resolved at all costs to make it his own.

⁴ ‘For truth is one and not manifold.’

sin had destroyed. The heart which had been as a mirror shattered into a thousand fragments, and every fragment reflecting some different object, is now reunited again, and the whole with more or less clearness reflects, as it was at the first intended to do, the one image of God. It is God alone in whom any intelligent creature can find its centre and true repose: only when man has found *Him*, does the great *Eureka* burst forth from his lips; in Augustine's beautiful and often-quoted words, 'Lord, Thou hast made us *for* Thee, and our heart is restless until it resteth *in* Thee.'¹

Before leaving this parable, it may be worth while to mention an interpretation which strangely reverses the whole matter. According to this, the merchant seeking goodly pearls is Christ Himself. The Church of the elect is the pearl of price: which that He might purchase and make his own, He parted with all that He had, emptying Himself of his divine glory, and taking the form of a servant.² Or yet more ingeniously, the pearl, as in the common explanation, is the kingdom of heaven; but Christ the merchant, who to secure that kingdom to us and make it ours, though He was so rich, gladly made Himself poor, buying that pearl and that treasure,—not indeed for Himself, but for us.³

¹ 'Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is not at peace until it rests in Thee.'

² Salmeron (*Serm. in Par. Evang.* p. 66) applies the same to the parable preceding: 'The man who found the treasure, that is, the precious Church of the elect, is Christ, Who spent all his goods for the sake of winning so great a treasure of the holy.' Compare the *Brief Exposition of Matth. xiii.* by J. N. Darby, pp. 30, 31.

³ So Drexelius (*Opp.* vol. i. p. 209): 'Who is a truer merchant than Christ the Lord, Who gave for that precious merchandize the infinite price of his blood? He truly went and sold all things, and laid down his reputation, his blood, his life, that for us he might purchase heaven.' Compare the *Theol. Stud. und Krit.* 1846, pp. 939-946.