

PARABLE XXVIII.

THE UNJUST JUDGE.

LUKE xviii. 1-8.

THIS parable, addressed to the disciples, stands in closest relation with all which has just gone before; with the announcement of those times of tribulation, when disciples themselves 'should desire to see one of the days of the Son of man, and should not see it' (xvii. 22). Then, according to the deeply significant language of the Jewish schools, allowed and adopted by our Lord (Matt. xxiv. 8; cf. John xvi. 21; Rom. viii. 22), will be the birth-pangs of the new creation; and the distresses which shall then come to a head, and which, always felt, shall then be felt more intensely than ever, are here set forth as the motive for persevering prayer. '*He spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray,*' that it behoved them always to pray, if they would escape the things coming on the earth. It is not so much the duty, as the absolute necessity, of instant persevering prayer that is here proclaimed; ¹ while in the further words, '*and not to faint,*' there are open to us glimpses into the inmost mystery of prayer.

We shall scarcely err in taking these words as words of Christ Himself, rather than of the Evangelist commenting by

¹ Chrysostom, in two sermons (*De Precatione*) on this parable, has much which is beautiful on prayer. It is the medicine expelling spiritual sicknesses—the foundation of the spiritual building—that to the soul which the nerves are to the body. The man without prayer is as the fish out of water, and gasping for life—as a city without walls, and open to all assaults;—but from him that is armed with prayer the tempter starts back, as midnight robbers start back when they see a sword suspended over a soldier's bed.

way of preface on the parable which he is about to record. Christ spake the parable, and at the same time announced the object with which He spake it ; namely, ‘*that men ought always to pray,*¹ *and not to faint.*’ But, some may ask, is there not exaggeration here? Must not this command be taken with very large abatements indeed? Not when we understand of prayer as the continual desire of the soul after God ; having, it is true, seasons of an intenser and more concentrated earnestness, but by no means restricted to these seasons ; since the whole life of the faithful should be, in Origen’s beautiful words, ‘one great connected prayer,’—prayer, as St. Basil expresses it, being the salt which should salt everything else in the life. ‘That soul,’ says Donne, ‘that is accustomed to direct herself to God upon every occasion, that, as a flower at sunrising, conceives a sense of God in every beam of his, and spreads and dilates itself towards Him, in a thankfulness, in every small blessing that He sheds upon her, . . . that soul which, whatsoever string be stricken in her, bass or treble, her high or her low estate, is ever tuned towards God, that soul prays sometimes when it does not know that it prays.’² Admirable are Augustine’s utterances on this matter, drawn from the depths of his own Christian experience. Thus in one place: ‘It was not for nothing that the Apostle said, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. v. 17). Can we indeed without ceasing bend the knee, bow the body, or lift up the hands, that he should say, “Pray without ceasing”? There is another interior prayer without intermission, and that is the longing of thy heart. Whatever else thou mayest be doing, if thou longest after that Sabbath of God, thou dost not intermit to pray. If thou wishest not to intermit to pray, see that thou do not intermit to desire ; thy continual desire is thy continual voice. Thou wilt be silent, if thou leave off to love ; for they were silent of whom it is written, “Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.” The coldness of

¹ Tirinus : ‘Despite weariness, fear, and temptation.’

² *Sermon xi., On the Purification.*

love is the silence of the heart; the fervency of love is the cry of the heart.'¹

With this introduction, indicating the drift and intention of the parable, the Lord proceeds: '*There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man.*' Two strokes describe the reckless and desperate character of the man. He '*feared not God*;' all that God's law had spoken of the awfulness of the judge's charge, of the guilt and punishment of the unrighteous judge, he set at nought (Exod. xxiii. 6-9; Lev. xix. 15; Deut. i. 16, 17; 2 Chron. xix. 6, 7). Nor was it only that higher motive, the fear of God, which he lacked, but its poor and miserable substitute, respect for the opinion of the world, was equally inoperative with him. Some rise above this respect for the opinion of men; others fall below it, and he was one of these; and, worst sign of all, he dared to avow all this to himself (see ver. 4). And it is with such a judge as this that the Judge of all the earth is likened here! None might have ventured upon this comparison, it would have been overbold on the lips of any, save only of the Son of God. Yet with all this we must beware of seeking to extenuate his unrighteousness,---as some by various forced constructions have sought to do.² So far from this,

¹ *Enarr. in Ps. xxxvii. 10*: 'Thy very desire is thy prayer, and if thy desire is continual, thy prayer also is continual. . . . If love grows cold, the heart is silent: if love is burning, the heart cries aloud;' and elsewhere: 'The whole life of the good Christian is a holy desire;' and again: 'Thy tongue gives praise hourly, let thy life give praise always.' Cf. *Ep. cxxx. 8*. 'Εκκακεῖν is a favourite word with St. Paul; outside St. Paul's writings, here only in the New Testament. Augustine (*Enarr. in Ps. lxxv. 20*) warns against the danger of this '*fainting*': 'Many grow faint in prayer, and in the newness of their conversion pray fervently, afterwards faintly, afterwards coldly, afterwards carelessly; as though they are become presumptuous. The enemy watches, and thou art sleeping. . . . Therefore let us not fail in prayer; He takes not away, though He may defer, that which He will grant.'

² For a monstrous attempt to get rid of the ἀδικία of the judge, see Theophylact (in loc.); it is not approved by him: cf. Pseudo-Athanasius (*De Parab. Script. qu. 30*), and Suicers, *Thes. s. v. κριτής*. It can only be matched by the explanation of Nathan's parable of the Ewe Lamb (2 Sam. xii. 1) given by Ambrose (*Apol. Proph. David, 5*).

the worse that we think of him, the more encouragement does the parable contain, the stronger the argument for unwearied persistency in prayer becomes. If a bad man will yield to the mere force of the importunity which he hates, how much more certainly will a righteous God be prevailed on by the faithful prayer which He loves.¹ The unrighteousness of the judge is not an accident, cleaving to the earthly form under which the heavenly truth is set forth, such as would have been got rid of, if it conveniently might; but is rather a circumstance deliberately chosen for the stronger setting forth of that truth,—which truth indeed would not have been set forth at all without it.

‘*And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.*’ We have heard the character of the judge; we may conceive therefore how hopeless the case of a suppliant at once weak and poor,—weak, so that she could not compel him to do her justice,—and poor, with no bribe to offer which should induce him to brave for her sake the resentment of formidable adversaries. Such, no doubt, is the widow of the parable, one ‘that is a widow indeed and desolate.’ The exceeding desolation of the state of widowhood in the East has been often noticed, and the obviousness of the widow, as one having none to help her, to all manner of oppressions and wrongs;² from hence the numerous warnings against such oppression with which Scripture abounds (Exod. xxii. 22; Deut. x. 18; xxiv. 17; xxvii. 19; Job xxii. 9; Isai. i. 23; Prov. xv. 25; Mal. iii. 5). Very fitly does a widow such as this represent the Church

¹ Augustine (*Serm.* cxv. 1): ‘If therefore he who hated her prayer yet listened to it, how, think you, does He listen who bids us pray?’ and Tertullian, on the holy violence of prayer: ‘This violence is pleasing to God.’ Clemens too (Potter’s ed. p. 947): ‘God rejoices when thus overcome.’

² For instance, Ward, in his *Illustrations of Scripture from the Manners and Customs of the Hindoos*. Thus too Terence:

Non, ita me Dii ament, auferet facere hæc viduæ mulieri,
Quæ in me fecit.

‘By heaven, he would not dare to treat a widow as he has treated me.’

under persecution,¹ under that persecution which never ceases, the oppression from an adverse element in which she draws her breath. Nor is it only the Church at large which by this widow is represented here, but every single soul in conflict with those spiritual powers which are arrayed against the truth. The 'adversary' will in either case be the prince of the darkness of this world, the head of all which is fighting against the manifestation of the kingdom of God, either in a single soul, or in the world; the spiritual Herod, who is ever seeking to destroy the heavenly child. But the elect, who having the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan within themselves, waiting their perfect redemption, are here represented as struggling with those adverse powers, as oppressed by them; under the sense of this oppression, and of their helplessness to effect their own deliverance, crying mightily for aid, for the revelation of the Son of man in his glory,—exclaiming with the prophet, 'Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down' (Isai. lxiv. 1); for they know that not till then shall the wicked fall and not rise again, and the Church be set free for ever from all her foes. We apprehend too slightly those cries for deliverance whereof Psalms and prophets are full, when we restrain them to special outward afflictions or persecutions which the Church or any of her members are enduring. The world is *always*, consciously or unconsciously, by flattery or by hostile violence, oppressing the Church; and Satan evermore seeking to hinder the manifestation of the life of God in every one of its members. Prayer is the cry *de profundis* which the elect utter, the calling in of a mightier to aid, when the danger is urgent lest the enemy should prevail. And the widow's prayer, '*Avenge me of mine adversary,*' wonderfully expresses the relation in

¹ Augustine (*Enarr. in Ps. cxxxi. 15*): 'Every soul which understands that it is forsaken of all help save of God alone, is a widow; . . . every Church is as a widow, forsaken in this world; that is, if this is felt, if the widowhood is recognized; for then is help nigh at hand;' and *Quæst. Evang. ii. qu. 45*: 'This widow may bear a likeness to the Church, which seems desolate until the Lord come, who yet in secret even now is watching over her.' Cf. Isai. liv. 1-8.

which we stand to the evil with which we contend ;—that it is not our very self, but an alien power, holding us in bondage, —not the very ‘I,’ as St. Paul (Rom. vii.) is so careful to assert, for then redemption would be impossible, but sin which, having entered in, would now keep us in bondage. It is the Spirit’s work to make men feel this distinctness between themselves and the evil which is in them ; the new creation in this resembling the old, that it is a separating and disengaging of the light from the darkness in the soul of man,—that so the light, brought into direct relation with the fountain of all light, may disperse the darkness and overcome it. The renewed man, knowing that he has an adversary, knows also that this adversary is not his very self, but another ; who, resisted, will flee from him ; that all dominion by the other exercised upon him is an usurped dominion, which it will be a righteous thing for God to bring to an end ; and thus is able to cry, with the widow in the parable, ‘*Avenge me of mine adversary,*’ or rather, since men seek of a judge not vengeance, but justice,—‘*Do me right on mine adversary,*’ being, as this is, no other than our daily petition, ‘Deliver us from evil,’ or ‘from the Evil One,’—from him who is the source and centre of all evil.

‘*And he would not for a while.*’ When it was asserted just now that the strength of the parable lay in the *unlikeness* between the righteous judge of the world, and this ungodly earthly judge, it was not intended to deny that to man God often *seems* as this unjust Judge, with an ear deaf to the prayers of his people. For even the elect are impatient in affliction ; they expect a speedier deliverance than He always wills to vouchsafe them ; and count that they have a claim to be delivered so soon as ever their voices are heard on high.¹ Left long, as they count length, to the will of their enemies, in the furnace of affliction, they are tempted to hard thoughts of God, as though He took part with the oppressors, at any rate was contented to endure them, while the cry of his afflicted people was as nothing in his ears. They are ready

¹ Augustine, *Enarr.* 2^a in Ps. xxxiv. 17.

to exclaim, they do exclaim with the storm-tost disciples, 'Carest Thou not that we perish?' It is this very temptation, to which the faithful in hours such as these are exposed, that the parable is intended to meet.

There is recorded for us next, not of course what the judge spoke aloud, scarcely what he spoke in his own hearing, but the voice of his heart, as it spoke in the hearing of God.¹ '*But afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary² me;*' or '*wear me out,*' as it might be rendered. Stirred to do her right by no other motive than a selfish regard for his own interrupted ease, he yet '*will avenge her,*' if so to be quit of her importunities, and not plagued by her more. The same

¹ Bernard: 'God hears in the heart of the thinker that which even the thinker himself hears not.'

² Ὑποπίδζη = sugillet, a pugilistic word; ut sub oculis vibices et maculæ luridæ existant (Wahl). The same emphatic word (1 Cor. ix. 27) describes the discipline by which St. Paul kept under or, as it is in the Revised Version, 'buffeted' his body. There, as here, another reading, ὑποπίδζη or ὑποπιέζη, has some authorities in its favour. But the birth of this reading, here at least, is easy to trace; transcribers thinking the other too strong a word for anything which the widow could effect; for how could she punish him *till his face became black and blue*? But Bengel well: 'This exaggeration is very appropriate to the character of an unjust and impatient judge.' It is exactly this exaggeration of language which selfishness uses where its own ease is threatened: thus σκύλλειν, to annoy, means literally to flay; its Spanish equivalent 'ahorcar,' to strangle; we English complain of being plagued, visited with the 'plague,' when we have only been a little troubled; an Italian or Frenchman would declare on the same provocation that he had been 'assassinated,' 'assassinato' or 'assassiné;' and these examples might easily be multiplied. Beza's obtundat is happy; ne me obtundas hâc de re sæpius (Terence). There is a curious variety in the English renderings here; 'condemne me' (Wiclif); 'hagge on me' (Tyndale); 'rayle on me' (Cranmer); 'make me weary' (Geneva); 'defame me' (Rheims); 'weary me' (Authorized Version); 'wear me out' (Revised Version), with a marginal notice that 'bruise' would be the closest rendering. There are no doubt other passages in which each of the seven English Versions has an independent rendering of its own, differing from all the others, but I cannot call such to mind.

motive, and not that the disciples were more pitiful than their Lord, moved them to intercede for the woman of Canaan, that she might obtain what she asked : ' Send her away ; for she crieth after us ' ¹ (Matt. xv. 23). This parable and that miracle serve each as a commentary on the other (cf. Eccclus. xxxv. 17).

Between it and the lesson of encouragement which it contained the Lord may have paused for a little, and then resumed : '*Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him ?*' In the first clause of the sentence the emphasis should be laid on '*unjust ;*' in the other, the epithet of goodness or righteousness, which should complete the antithesis, is omitted, as being of necessity included in the name, God. If the '*unjust judge*' is moved by prayer to do right at last, shall not the just '*God avenge his own elect*' ? And the antithesis should be carried through all the members of the sentence. As the righteous God is opposed to the unrighteous judge, so the '*elect,*' the precious before God, to the widow, the despised among men ; their mighty crying to her impotent clamour ; and the '*day and night*' ² which these prayers of theirs fill, to the time, short by comparison, during

¹ The endeavour to obtain redress by long-continued crying, and by mere force of importunity to extort a boon or a right obtainable in no other way, is quite in the spirit of the East. Chardin (*Travels in Persia*) tells us that the peasants of a district, when their crops have failed, and they therefore desire a remission of taxes, or when they would appeal against some tyrannical governor, will assemble before the gate of the Shah's harem, and there continue howling and throwing dust in the air (Job ii. 12 ; Acts xxii. 23), refusing to be silenced or driven away, till he has sent out and demanded the cause, and thus given them at least an opportunity of stating their griefs ; or sometimes they would beset him riding through the streets, and thus seek to gain, and often succeed in gaining, their point, not from his love of justice, but from his desire to be freed from annoyance (Burder, *Orient. Illustr.* vol. ii. p. 382).

² ' *Ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός* here = *πάντοτε* of ver. 1. Our English '*cry*' too weakly renders the original *βοᾶν*, which is = mugire, whereby Tertullian renders it ; a *mighty* wailing (Gen. iv. 10 ; Jon. iii. 8 ; Jam. v. 4) is here attributed to the elect : though the word expressing this is hard to find.

which her importunities beset the judge. The certainty that they will be heard rests not, however, on their mighty crying as its ultimate ground, but on their election of God; which is, therefore, here urged,¹ and they named '*his elect*,' this being here, among their many names, the most appropriate; compare Dan. xii. 1: 'At that time thy people shall be delivered, *every one that shall be found written in the book.*' The Revised Version, which has restored the true reading here in the Greek, has, as a necessary consequence, been compelled to change the English text, and for the words, '*though he bear long with them,*' to substitute '*though he is long suffering over them.*'² I cannot say that the words as they now stand, come out in their meaning very clearly to me;

¹ Bengel (*in Matt.* xxiv. 22): 'Where the power of the temptation exceeds the ordinary strength of the faithful, election is brought in.'

² This καὶ μακροθυμεῖ (for such, and not μακροθυμῶν, is undoubtedly the true reading) ἐπ' αὐτοῖς has given rise to much discussion. Some refer αὐτοῖς to the oppressors on whom the vengeance is taken: '*Shall not God avenge his elect, though He bear long with their oppressors?*' Wolf, with reason, objects, 'Christ is not alluding to the wicked on whom vengeance is to be taken.' But μακροθυμέω is not necessarily, I delay *punishment*, but merely, I delay, I wait patiently: see Heb. vi. 15; Jam. v. 7, 8; Job vii. 16; Ecclus. xxxv. 18 (in the Greek xxxii. 18); as Grotius well points out: 'In this word there is the meaning of delay, which as it is profitable to a debtor so is grievous to him who is suffering wrong.' Suicer (*Theas.* s. v.), who has given the meaning rightly ('although He proceed slowly to avenge them') has much good on the parable. The proverb may be brought into comparison: 'God has his own hours, his own delays.'—Hassler (*Tübing. Zeitschr.* 1832, pp. 117–125) objects to this explanation, and finds here a description of God's patience with his suppliants, as contrasted with the fretful irritation of the judge under the solicitations of the widow: '*Shall not God avenge his own elect, when also He is patient toward them?*' shall He not do them right, and so much the more, seeing their reiterated prayers do not vex or weary Him, as that widow's did the judge, arouse no impatience, but only extreme compassion, in his heart? Possibly the Vulgate, Et patientiam habebit in illis? means this; and Luther: Und sollte Geduld darüber haben? This interpretation is not novel. Homberg (*Parerga*, p. 146) long ago proposed it: and Wolf (*Curæ*, in loc.) sums up the meaning thus: 'The patience of God is here referred to his listening to the prayers of the elect, and this is made probable by the opposition of the example of the unjust judge, who did not listen patiently to the complaint of the widow.'

but the key to them probably lies in the words that follow. He may be slack in avenging his people, as 'men count slackness' (Rev. vi. 10; Ps. xxxv. 17; lxxiv. 10; xciv. 3), as compared with their impatience; but, indeed, '*He will avenge them speedily,*' not leaving them a moment longer in the fire of affliction than is needful, delivering them from it the instant that patience has had her perfect work; so that there is, and is meant to be, an apparent contradiction, which yet is no real one, between ver. 7 and 8. The relief, which to man's impatience tarries long, indeed arrives speedily; it could not, according to the loving counsels of God, have arrived a moment earlier.¹ Not while Lazarus is merely sick, not till he has been four days dead, does Jesus obey the summons of the sisters whom He loved so well (John xi. 6). The disciples, labouring in vain against a stormy sea, must have looked often to that mountain where they had left their Lord; but not till the last watch, not till they have toiled through a weary night, does He bring the aid so long desired (Matt. xiv. 24, 25).

The concluding words, '*Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?*' are perplexing, for they appear to call in question the success of his whole mediatorial work.² But though there are other grounds for

¹ Unger (*De Par. Jes. Nat.* p. 136): 'The words "though he is long suffering" and "speedily" are opposed to each other; the former, perhaps, should be referred to the opinion of men (meaning that He is to come, though He may seem slow in coming), the latter to the wise counsel of God.' Cf. Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. xci. 6*: 'That which seems to thee long is really short: all these things quickly pass away: What is the long life of a man to God's eternity? Dost thou wish to be long lived? Behold the eternity of God. For thou regardest thine own few days, and in thy few days wouldest that all things were fulfilled. What are all things? The damnation of all the wicked and the crowning of all the good. Wouldest thou have these things fulfilled in these thy days? God fulfils them in his own time. Why dost thou suffer and make weariness? He is eternal, and waits: join thy heart to the eternity of God, and thou shalt be with him eternally.'

² They were used by the Donatists, when the Church urged against them her numbers and her universality ('for all heretics are in fewness

believing that the Church will, at that supreme moment, be reduced to a little remnant, yet the point is here, not that the faithful then will be few, but that the faith even of the faithful will have almost failed. The distress will be so urgent when the Son of man shall at length come forth for deliverance, that the hearts of his elect themselves will have begun to fail them for fear. The lateness of the help Zechariah describes under images of the old theocracy,—Jerusalem shall be already taken, and the enemy within its walls, spoiling and desolating, when the Lord shall come forth, his feet standing on the Mount of Olives, to fight against its enemies (xiv. 1–5). All help will seem utterly to have failed, so that the Son of man at his coming will hardly ‘*find faith*,’—or rather, ‘*that faith—upon earth*’—the faith, namely, which hopes against hope, and believes that light will break forth even when the darkness is thickest; and believing this, does not faint in prayer.¹ The words throw light on other words of our Lord’s; receiving light from them again: ‘for the elect’s sake,’ lest their faith also should fail, and so no flesh should be saved, ‘those days shall be shortened’ (Matt. xxiv. 22).²

and in part:’ Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. xxxi. 2*). The Donatists answered (applying this prophecy to their own day), that the Lord himself had declared the fewness of the faithful; how He should hardly find faith on the earth.

¹ Theophylact: ‘Faith is the basis and foundation of all prayer.’ Augustine: ‘If faith fails, prayer dies away: for who prays without belief?’ Godet draws out very happily the force of this *πλῆν*: ‘I fear not that the Judge should fail of his duty. What *alone* disquiets me is lest the widow should fail of hers.’

² Vitringa’s explanation of the parable (*Erklär. d. Parab. p. 960 seq.*) is curious. The unjust judge represents the Roman emperors, the importunate widow the early Church, seeking to plead its cause before them, and to find in them deliverance from its oppressors. The emperors, after a long while, undertook its defence, ceasing themselves, and not suffering others, to persecute it more. Stranger still is the interpretation of Irenæus (v. 25), and of the author of the treatise, *De Antichristo*, 37. The widow is the earthly Jerusalem, Israel after the flesh, which, forgetful of God, turns to the unjust judge, that is, to Antichrist, despiser alike of God and men (ver. 2), for aid against him whom she falsely believes her adversary, namely Christ.