**WESTMINSTER BIBLE SCHOOL; THE PARABLES AND METAPHORS OF OUR LORD - THE TEACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**10. THE MUSTARD SEED**

*"He set another parable before them, saying, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field; which indeed is smaller than all seeds. But when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches."*

*Matthew 13:31,32*

THIS is the first of the octave of parables contained in this thirteenth chapter of Matthew, of which the Lord gave no explanation. The explanation of the Sower was given in public. That of the sowing of the darnel, was given in private to His disciples.

When approaching such a parable, there are two perils to be avoided, in interpretation. One is that of popularity, and the other is that of misinterpretation of history, in an attempt to understand the parable. We have no right to come to this, or any parable, influenced by the general consensus of expository opinion. Here I would lay down a principle for all Bible study. Whatever the popular interpretation may be, it is not therefore necessarily the correct one. It may be correct, but popularity is not any guarantee of accuracy. That needs no arguing. The acceptation of popular interpretation of Scripture led to the crucifixion of Jesus.

Then there is a danger of considering history from the standpoint of observation, and interpreting these parables of Jesus by the facts of history as we know them. That too may be a perilous procedure against which we need to guard.

There are general principles of interpretation which must be observed. The first is that of the harmony of the teaching of Jesus throughout these parables. Referring now only to those parables contained in this thirteenth chapter of Matthew, we must bear in mind that there is perfect harmony in the general conception and teaching of Jesus throughout.

In the second place, we must bear in mind the consistency of our Lord's figures of speech. He never used one in two different senses. They are all used consistently in the same way.

To apply these canons of interpretation, the popular conception of this particular parable is that our Lord predicted the great success of the Kingdom. Almost invariably the parable of the mustard seed that became a tree is treated as though our Lord was showing the complete and ultimate success of the Kingdom in this age. We must not forget that all these parables have to do with one age.

That view, however, has been distinctly disproved by history. There has been growth, but it has been unsatisfactory. We talk to-day of the Kingdom of God, and of Christian nations. There are no Christian nations. There are nations that profess to be founded upon Christian principles, but there are no Christian nations. We are not a Christian nation. The principles of a Christian nation have never yet been put to the test, and proven, and revealed to the world in national life. There has been a growth in Kingdom understanding, and the application of Kingdom principles, but nothing approaching complete success. On the contrary, there is very much that denies success.

Another principle to be observed is that of the harmony of teaching. Throughout all these parables these things of difficulty, limitation, opposition, and admixture were evidently foretold by our Lord. There is not one parable that moves to a consummation of the age resulting from the activities in the age. The idea that the Gospel is to be preached until all the world is converted, is a mistaken one, if we believe in Jesus, and in what He said. There is nothing that suggests such a result in any of these parables.

To take the figures recurring in all those parables at which we have been looking: the sowing of the seed, and the seed, the Word of God incarnate in human lives, the sons of the Kingdom. The Sower Who sowed the seed is the Son of man. The soil, the field in which the seed is sown, is the world. The birds are symbolic of evil, that come and snatch away the seed. These figures are consistent.

Let us then look at this parable with unprejudiced and open mind. So we will examine the picture, and apply the teaching.

The picture Jesus drew was of a seed, the smallest of all seeds, which seed grew until it became a tree. Normally the mustard seed never becomes a tree. The mustard is a herb, not a tree. As a tree it has been described as "a garden shrub outdoing itself." That is abnormality. All attempts to make the tree square with popular interpretation is of the nature of special pleading. I have referred to Dr. Thomson's *Land and the Book*, invaluable to every Bible student. But even Dr. Thomson evades this, or tries to account for it. Writing from Palestine, and from his own observation, he plainly says that the mustard there was not a tree, and did not grow to a tree. He then says possibly in our Lord's time there was another variety of mustard that grew to be a tree. I have quoted the spirit of what he says. Others have tried in other ways to account for it. Dr. Carr, in the *Cambridge Bible* has this sentence: "The mustard plant does not grow to a very great height, so that Luke's expression, 'waxed a great tree' must not be pressed."

To deal with the Scriptures in that way is to get nowhere. Our Lord said "A great tree" and He also said that this particular mustard seed grew greater than all the herbs, of which it is one. Dr. Royle, another writer, suggests that the reference was to Khardal, or *Salvadora Persica*. But Dr. Morrison has declared there is no proof of the growth of either of these specimens in that neighbourhood. Our Lord was surely teaching that in this age there would be an abnormal and unnatural growth of the mustard seed, so that it would afford as a tree, a lodging for the birds of the air. The word means a camping in it, and living in it. The parable was never intended to teach the progress and growth of the Kingdom to finality in this age. It does mark development, but it is abnormal development.

To turn from the picture that Jesus drew to mark the unnatural development of the Christian principle and ideal, as taught by Him. What is its natural development? Lowliness, meekness, service. These are the things that mark the true Christian spirit, emanating from those in whom the Word of God is incarnate, and who are flung out into the age as the seed of the Kingdom. The marks of true Christianity are always those of likeness to Him Who said, "I am meek and lowly in heart"; likeness to Him Who said, "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many."

What are the unnatural notes? Exactly the opposite of the natural; loftiness, pride, dominance. Wherever in the history of Christianity these things have manifested themselves, loftiness, pride, seeking for dominion and mastery, they have proved not a normal development, but an abnormal and false one.

Some years ago in the Isle of Man I had a conversation with Sir Hall Caine. He had just issued his novel, *The Christian*, with John Storm as his hero. It had troubled me, and I said to him, "Do you mean to suggest that John Storm is the normal type of Christianity?" Quickly and sharply he answered me, "By no means. I am only suggesting that John Storm is what Christian people were, or aimed to and that it is not Christian." Then he said this remarkable thing, which I am not defending or attacking. "I can put the whole of the works and ethic of Jesus into two brief quotations." I said "What are they?" He replied, "He that is greatest in the Kingdom of heaven, let him be servant of all." "And what is the other?" "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust corrupt. Now," he said, "test England by those, test the common life of the Christian Church by this, and you will see how little practical vital Christianity iris understood."

I have quoted that conversation, and leave it, but take a look down history. Yes, the Church has grown in loftiness. It has often become powerful that it has become proud, and has sought dominion over others. All these things are the outcome not of normal, but of abnormal growth. As we look down the history of the age, so far we shall see the truth illustrated. It began when those first disciples when Jesus was with them, said, "Who is greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" There was the passion for prominence, position, and power. We know how He answered that. He told them that only those who were prepared to drink His cup, and be baptized with His baptism were great in the Kingdom of heaven. The early Church had illustrations of it. Peter, in his letter, charged them not to lord it over God's heritage.

The supreme illustration of this abnormal growth was in the espousal of Christianity by Constantine, the Roman emperor. That was the darkest day that dawned in all the history of the Church. His espousal of Christianity was an astute and clever political move, and he grafted upon Christianity much of paganism, and elevated it to a position of wordly power; and in that hour the whole Church passed under the blight from which it has never completely escaped. That is the whole sin and wrong of the Papacy, domination won in the name of Christ, the claiming of power to rule over kings, emperors, and rulers and dictate terms to them; a great tree, spreading its branches. That spirit remains in every attempt even to-day, to realize the Divine purpose by high organization, vested power. It is not a good thing. It is an abnormal growth.

It has gone on, and is still going on. Christ said it would, and the unintended issue has been the false greatness of external position and power, a great tree. The tree is always the symbol of greatness and authority. Nebuchadnezzar was likened to a tree. Pharaoh with all his power was likened to a tree; and the Kingdom of heaven has become like that, a great worldly power, principality occupied with its loftiness, the expressing of itself in pride, seeking dominion, or domination in the affairs of the world; and consequently it has become the refuge of unclean things. Such the parable, and its teaching.

Again we must remember that in these parables our Lord was not dealing with the true nature of the Kingdom. "The Kingdom of heaven is like …" He spoke, even in these parables, in the abiding terms, and the abiding tense. He was surveying the age, and He looked on twice to the end of the age, its consummation. It was the age initiated by His first advent, and which is bounded and will be consummated by His second advent. Not in one of these parables was He revealing the inward nature of the Kingdom, except at the beginning, when He showed that the Kingdom principles are found in the Word of God, as it is embodied in the lives of Christian men and women. That, of course, includes everything, but there is no detailed reference to it in interpretation. The ethics of the Kingdom are not found here in detail. They are found in the Sermon on the Mount.

This is of great importance, for our Lord was not revealing the nature of the ultimate issue. Twice He referred to that issue in this chapter clearly and distinctly; but there is no detailed description. He was depicting Kingdom processes during one age of Divine procedure. This is not the only age. It will come to consummation; but the work of God will not end with its consummation. There are other methods of God predicted in the Word of God, following the ending of this age are other ages, the Kingdom of the Son, and beyond that the hour when Paul says, "Then cometh the end, when He shall deliver up the Kingdom to God … that God may be all and in all." What lies beyond that who shall tell? Paul wrote of the great procession of the ages in those descriptive words of infinite poetry, "the generation of the age of the ages." God is not exhausted in this age. He has others to come, the details of which are not revealed, but the fact is declared.

Christ was in no doubt about the happenings of this age. There should be the sowing of the seed, its scattering far and wide.

"Sow in the morn thy seed,

At eve hold not thy hand."

Said Christ, That seed will be sown by the Sower, but only a portion will be fruitful. There will be the scattering of seed that bears no fruit. He suffered no delusion. He did not say that the seed being planted, a complete and perfect harvest would result. He saw an enemy scattering amid the seed, darnel. He saw that the age must run on with the development of wheat and darnel, until the consummation of the age. So here He saw the growth, out of life, but abnormal. A herb becomes a great tree, and the fowls of the air lodge in its branches.

What is the bearing of this parable on us? It calls us to a recognition of the facts of the age in which we live. That will save us from the delusion that so often fills the minds of honest souls with despair. We thought it would have been so different, that the Kingdom principles were winning. We thought that was so, with a certain measure of arrogance, at the close of the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth. Then like the crack of doom we found the Kingdom ideal rejected by the philosophers of earth, and the earth bathed in blood, and muck, and war. With reverence again I say, Christ had no such delusions.

Finally if this parable corrects our thinking about this age, and tells us of its true nature, it should have its effect on our individual lives, and on our Church life to-day. We should see to it that there nothing in our lives contrary to the genius and spirit of our Lord and Master, and of the Kingdom of God; no loftiness or pride, or seeking for mastery, all contrary to the genius of the Kingdom of God and of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. These false things create a false greatness which He disowns. So surely as that false greatness is there, the unclean birds come in, and lodge in the Church, and in our lives; and the Kingdom is thwarted and hindered. We are not to help in the development of a great tree out of a mustard seed, which is the least of all seeds. We are called upon to have faith as that smallest of seeds, as Jesus elsewhere said. If we have that, then by the power of that faith, which is life, we can help to remove the mountains, and to fling up a highway for the coming of the King into His own Kingdom.