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

**13. THE PEARL**

*"Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who is a merchant seeking fine pearls, who having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it."*

*Matthew 13:45,46*

SOME figures of this parable have appeared, those of treasure, and of treasure sought and bought, but there are certain new emphases. The man here presented is a merchantman, who is seeking for the possession of something by purchase. The treasure referred to by our Lord is of a peculiar kind - a pearl. The merchantman was seeking pearls, and he found one pearl of great price. The new emphases then are the merchantman seeking for the possession of something by purchase, that something being a pearl, and that of great price.

To understand this parable we need to examine carefully these emphases, the merchantman and the pearl. That which is central is the pearl itself. We must be set free from the bondage of popular and traditional views in interpretation. It does not follow that what is popular is wrong, or that what is traditional is false. However it may be so in both cases.

The general interpretation of this parable is that our Lord was teaching that He is the pearl of great price, and that the sinner is the one who seeks, and purchases, and possesses his Lord. Indeed, that interpretation has found expression in a hymn, not often heard now.

"I've found the Pearl of greatest price,

My heart doth sing for joy;

And sing I must, for Christ I have -

Oh, what a Christ have I !"

It was very beautiful, but quite untrue to the teaching of this parable. To put it bluntly at the beginning, that is not a picture of the sinner seeking Christ. It is Christ seeking His Church. That covers the, ground, and may carry at first little conviction perhaps.

To begin then with this figure of the pearl. It is arresting to remember that the pearl was not counted precious by the Hebrews. They set no particular value upon it. The pearl is never mentioned in the Old Testament. Other stones are named and described by that marvellous phrase "stones of fire," but the pearl is not referred to. In the book of Job there is an interesting and wonderful passage in which he asked what was the price of wisdom, and named certain things by which wisdom cannot be bought. He named precious stones, and in the margin of the Revised Version we find, when Job referred to "crystal," the revisers have inserted in the margin, "or pearl." Even marginal readings are not inspired. The Hebrew word there is figurative, and means something frozen, and the word "crystal" far better interprets it than "pearl." Thus the pearl had no significance to the Hebrews, and there was no reference to it.

When these Hebrew disciples listened to Jesus when He uttered this parable, I think they opened their eyes in surprise. A pearl! A merchantman seeking pearls! Nobody was particularly seeking pearls. Moreover, He made reference to the pearl as of "great price." Let it be admitted that among other peoples than the Hebrews there was a recognition of the value of pearls, and it is an interesting subject to trace. There was a growing sense of their value. Recent investigations have shown that in the regalia of kings which consisted largely of gold, inset with gems, actually pearls were found. In Nineveh pearls were very highly valued, more so than in other countries.

To-day the pearl has become associated with the most precious things, and is of real value. In this parable then of the pearl, as the King revealed secret things to men of faith, whatever His intention was, He turned to something which these people did not consider of value, and He laid tremendous emphasis upon its value.

What are the facts about real pearls? They are the products of a living organism. That is not true of any other precious stone, either of the sapphire, or the diamond, the ruby, the emerald, or any other.

How is it produced? The pearl is the result of an injury done to a living organism. A grain of sand gets within the shell of the oyster, and injury is done to it. That which it injures covers it over with the nacre, layer over layer, until the pearl is formed. Ethel Thorneycroft Fowler wrote these lines some years ago:

"A pearl is found beneath the flowing tide,

And there is held a worse than worthless thing,

Spoiling the shell-built home where it doth cling -

Marring the life near which it must abide."

That is the history of the pearl. A living organism, injured by contact with a grain of sand, or something equally minute and the living organism answers the injury done with a pearl. So comes the precious thing.

Again, it is a thing of priceless value and of great beauty, and is peculiarly an adornment. There is no real value in the pearl except embellishment, the adding of something to the one who possesses it, or the one who wears it. The very word translated "pearl" is derived from a Sanskrit word which means pure. Every woman who bears the name of Margaret or Margarita, that is the meaning of the name. The pearl stands to-day in our thinking suggestive of purity. If that be so, the pearl is a symbol of purity resulting from wounding, which has been enclosed in that which has made it a thing of beauty, and a symbol of purity.

Our Lord never used an illustration without complete understanding of all its height and length and breadth and depth; and when He said "a pearl," He knew whence the pearl came, and how the pearl was formed. He knew its real value. That is the first emphasis which arrests us. There is something different here from anything we have seen, nothing that contradicts, but something different.

Then again, in the merchantman we see a man seeking goodly pearls. It is unthinkable that the man seeking pearls is seeking them merely for himself. Pearls in so far as their value was known then, were specifically and particularly for the adornment of kings. The man who was seeking them was seeking in order to provide that embellishment, that symbol of glory, for other than himself. The merchantman was seeking for pearls, not to hoard them, or to possess them, but for some other. Whether this man was purchasing and selling them does not come within our purview. Jesus said he sought for goodly pearls, and he found one of priceless worth. It was a most wonderful victory. A pearl of resplendent beauty is referred to, and in order to possess it, he went and sold everything he had.

Turning from that attempt to look at the picture in itself, we ask its interpretation. Here it is possible that some may be introduced to a line of thought and consideration which is new. We need not argue who the man is. He is the One Who has been named in other places as the Son of man but here He is seen as a merchantman.

What is He doing? He is seeking pearls, and He finds one. Finding means here, He perceives, He discovers, and He obtains. Our Lord is showing what was His mission in the world. This is a parable viewed from the standpoint of heaven's outlook and interpretation. Nothing here contradicts what we have seen of the application to the Kingdom principle, illustrated in the other parables. We are looking from the heavenly height, and we see this merchantman seeking, and seeing what He finds, and seeing how to obtain what He finds. Notice our Lord says, "Having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had." Went where? Went from the place where He was. Where was that? Heaven. That does not mean He left earth, and went away to purchase it, but He came to earth. The parable is viewing things from the heavenly standard. He has seen the pearl. He knows it, and desires to possess it, and He went to earth, and sold all that He had. It is a picture of the purchase of the Church of God, the whole Church.

All kinds of questions arise, distinguishing between the Church and the Kingdom of God. There is a clear distinction, and in the ages that lie ahead there will be many who are ransomed who are not members of the great, mystical Church of Christ. But the view here is that of the Church. He went and found a pearl. With great reverence we may say He went, and by His action created the pearl. The pearl fastened upon Him, injured Him, harmed Him; and by His action He surrendered all that which wrought Him wrong, and harmed Him, until it, by transmutation, became the very costly pearl for which He was seeking. "He sold all that he had."

With reverence take the picture of the pearl, and the process of its making, that action of a living organism that surrounds the tormented and unperceived thing with mother-of-pearl, with nacre, until presently the pearl is formed. When Peter wrote his letter he said, "Unto Whom coming, a living stone, rejected indeed of men, but with God elect, precious." After that he said this, "For you therefore which believe is the preciousness." In the Authorised Version it reads, "Unto you that believe He is precious." That is a beautiful statement and thought, one of absolute truth. Is He not precious to us? But that is not what the apostle meant. It is not what he wrote. "Unto you … is the preciousness." The Stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the Head of the corner and all that constitutes the good pleasure of God in Christ, "My Son, in Whom I am well pleased." The things in Christ that were precious to God, they are all made over to us. "Unto you that believe is the preciousness." But who am I, who are you? We are the people who put Him on His Cross, who wronged Him, the glorious One, who caused His suffering and His pain; and in an infinite mystery of power and grace, greater than the mystery and the wonder of the creating of the pearl in the oyster shell, He covered us over, and changed the thing of injury to the wanted thing, into a pearl of great price.

So the whole Church is seen as the most wonderful and precious thing, resulting from the mission of the Son of man. The Kingdom is here, but also a gathered-out company constituting at last His Church.

The parable does not tell us anything about the purpose. The picture is of what is going on in this age, the finding and the purchasing of this sacred thing. We are warranted, however, in deducing from it something more. What was the purpose of this purchase? Roughly and commercially, what was the value of that pearl, to obtain which He sold all that He had in order to buy it? We cannot answer that fully in the terms of time, or in the terms of individual and personal experience. We cannot answer that fully in the terms of any one Church, or the Church at any given period in this age. We can answer it fully only when there is given to us to see the ultimate glory of the Church, and her ultimate vocation.

We have never seen the Church of God. Churches, yes we have a conception of the universal Church, the holy, catholic Church as we call it; but we have never yet seen it. It is a sorry thing that Christian men, leaders quarrel among themselves. The day will come when we shall see that our quarrels have been concerned with scaffolding, but behind the scaffolding the Church is growing to a holy temple in the Lord. If we would find the final interpretation in the New Testament of the value of the pearl He bought, of the value of the Church to God, we shall have to turn to one great letter, that to the Ephesians. In that Paul reached the culminating glory of his great theological system. That system began with the Roman letter, of which the one theme is salvation. Then there came to him the mystery of the Church, and by stages he interpreted it. The ultimate glory is found in the twin epistles of Ephesians and Colossians. Colossians is concerned with the glories of Christ. Ephesians is concerned with the glories of the Church as she embodies and reveals the glories of Christ.

Glance at two passages in the Ephesian letter. In the first chapter Paul made use of a remarkable phrase. He prayed that these Ephesian Christians and all others, might know Him, have full knowledge, *epignosis*, "What are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints." It is a daring thought, a tremendous thing. It lifts all our thinking about our holy religion from the commonplace of to-day and the littleness of our activities here, however true they may be, when we see that God gains something in His Church; that when Jesus sold all that He had to buy that pearl to flash in splendour upon the bosom of Deity, God was enriched. He is enriched not in essential glory, but by finding a medium through which that essential glory can be revealed."

Go on in the Ephesian letter to the fifth chapter. "Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself up for it, that He might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the Word, that He might present the Church to Himself, a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." The intrusive wounding sand is transmuted into the beauty of a pearl, and that for the honour of God.

In the Ephesian letter there are two statements in which Paul tells what is the ultimate vocation of the Church. It is not earthly at all. She has her vocation here, and her responsibility in the world, which in our measure we are all attempting to fulfil. But the ultimate meaning of the Church is not for time, it is for eternity. It is not for earth, but for heaven, the place where all the company of the ransomed and redeemed will fulfil a sacred mission. Paul has told us two things about that mission. In the ages to come we shall teach angels; and through us there will be manifested the grace and the glory of God. The Church's vocation is that she will be the revealer of the infinite grace of God to all the ages, and to all the unfallen intelligences, the pearl of great price.

"He found the pearl of greatest price,

My heart doth sing for joy;

And sing I must, for I am His,

And He is mine for aye."

It is our business to look for the Kingdom here, to pray for it, to toil for it, to hope and expect its coming in fulness but do not forget that beyond the little spell of earth's limited history there lie the ages, and in those ages the ransomed Church of God will be the pearl through which His grace and His glory are to be manifested.