

THE PRODIGAL SON, OR THE STORY OF AN INTELLECTUAL WANDERING.

The first of four Sermons preached in Zion Church, Montreal, by the Rev. Alfred J. Bray.

I.

ST. LUKE XIV. 11-32.

This parable is not only the most beautiful, but perhaps the most many-sided of all the parables. Taken as the story of an ordinary life wandering—of fine purposes perverted, of struggle and defeat, the slow coming of want, the fierce grip of a grim and deadly famine, and the remorse that follows, the return and the reception;—it is full of the divinest pathos, truth and love. But it has suggested another line of thought and teaching to my mind. I propose to mentalise the parable, to take the narrative form as given here, follow pretty closely the lines marked out, and show how a man with the best of motives may wander from his early faith, travel into regions unknown and dangerous, get bewildered by false teachers, get bewitched by the harlotry of worldly wisdom, hire himself to an alien, that is to say, embrace and profess a creed of pure negation, and hold it till the famine comes with its hot breath to scorch and wither through the soul; and then he is driven by steps of inward want back to man's original, grandest, though simplest creed, "Father, forgive, receive thy son."

Believe me, friends, I am not prompted to do this by any desire to find new ways of presenting the truth. I am no seeker after novelties, though I always rejoice to be able to put a word of rebuke or of instruction in a new and clear light; for it seems to me that Wisdom has cried in the streets so long, and her truths have become such undeniable truisms that men have got to disregard her. Truths the most profound and startling seem to lose their force and meaning from a constant repetition. Facts that wear the same colour, propound the same teachings day by day, year in and year out, soon become objects of indifference, if they are not altogether banished from the attention. The imagination is a great and powerful element in our nature. Christ often sent His truths through the imagination to the soul. The bird on the house-top, the corn swaying in the summer wind, the water gleaming far down the well, the lily, lifting its beautiful face to the light, innocent childhood clasped to the breast of passionate motherhood, all were to him as broad avenues leading straight to the inner chambers of the soul. This parable is just a magnificent appeal to the imagination. Not a publican or sinner that heard it, but would grasp the great mystery of godliness, and feel that he too might return to his Father and his home.

You will agree with me that these are times of peculiar danger. Speaking broadly we are prosperous everywhere. It is a time of plenty and of full supply. We have tremendous energy, and that has commanded a tremendous success. We have such a command of material wealth as the world has never seen. Pleasures are refined of much of the old vulgarity and violence. Learning is in highest esteem—the scientists are reaping a wonderful harvest. It seems as if amends are being made for some past times of drought and barrenness. And our very plenty is our peril. We are in danger of falling into the same mistake as did ancient Jeshurun. There is danger arising from the fascinating pleasures of the day, there is danger arising from our love and worship of wealth: there is danger arising from the recoil from the old strictness and sternness in matters of scientific and religious beliefs; there is not the danger of a storm, and being driven on to the rocks to find wreck and death, but there is the danger of soul drifting in the calm. Men are drifting into doubts, losing their hold and their place, drifting dreamily on to the rocks. Some have drifted and can be carried no further. I know them. Their doubts have given birth to morbid impulses, and the morbid impulses have given birth to the most dangerous reactions. And there they are, like a ship flung upon the sand, gaping in every seam, cracking in the sun, drifted souls, flung on to the rough and pitiless shores of unbelief. I want to see how it came about. And now to the scene and story. You are to imagine to yourselves this home. A calm, quiet place, far away from the scenes of strife and controversy. So far that they hardly hear the din of contending theologians and scientists and philosophers. There are two brothers, with many strong points of likeness. They both have the father's image outlined on the face; they have both the father's mode and manner of expression; they both seek and love to have the guiding counsel of the father. But there are also points of difference. The elder is of contented mind, can look on mystery with scarce a longing to see what it means, will take the teachings of his childhood on to be the faith of his manhood. But the younger is of another mind. He may often be seen to stand with eager, anxious face before some mystery of truth; there is now and then the light of curious questioning in his eyes, and try as he may, the throbbing heart will not be still. He has accepted the early teaching as his brother does, he is not given to doubting, but only to wondering; he doesn't dispute, but puts an earnest question now and then. The father can say now, though not a murmur has been heard, to the elder, "Son, thou wilt ever be with me," but he cannot say it of the younger.

These brothers are types, you see, friends. The elder, of that class who are always content with the creed they received from their fathers. There are multitudes of people who are never troubled with a religious doubt, never open the lips to make an enquiry, never know what it is to have a storm of fear sweeping through the soul. The old landmarks are dear and precious things; they have served as guiding points to many a voyager in life's sea, and they may not be removed. They are content with the old ways, and the old words, and would as soon think of quarrelling with the stars of heaven as with an ancient form of faith. I have no word of censure for them. That elder brother is true to his nature, and he didn't make himself.

The younger is type of another class; of the men and women who have restless minds, daring natures; men and women who seem born to questioning as they are born to trouble. They cannot see a mountain peak without feeling the desire to climb to its top. To discover the mouth of a cave is to enter in however dark it may be. They are not content to use a thing until they have attempted some process of analysis. They search, question, test, undeterred by thoughts of age or popularity. Don't sneer at them. They also are true to their nature; and a brave, noble true nature it often is. They often blunder, and stumble and fall; they are men who get wrecked as we shall see; they are the men who go down to herd with the swine and eat husks as you will see before

we have done with this parable; but, these also are the men who king the ages; from this class are gathered your prophets and priests. Sometimes they pass through the fiery furnace and come out with scarce a hair singed or the smell of fire on the garments. Sometimes they come from the land of famine, come to be true, great sons for evermore. Your Peters, your Thomases, your Philips, your Pauls, your Luthers, are drawn from among them. As yet I like that younger son. It is grand to receive, but grander when receiving you enquire.

So much for the points of difference in the brothers. I have done with the elder now, shall have no need to look at him again. I want to follow this younger. Look at him there at home—Father and Son—that is the relationship they sustain. That relation is eternally fixed. His mind bears on it the Father's image, the Father's thought moves in it. There in his innocence and beauty, with no thought of wandering from his home, trusting, loving, and always glad, he is a son. And he will always be a son. Turning away from early forms of faith, wandering here and there in quest of others, bewildered and in doubt, lost to faith and an alien, he will ever be a son. He cannot efface the image. He cannot altogether cast out the thought. He cannot quench the last spark of that fire kindled first by a father's breath. Don't you see the teaching brethren. In your innocent and beautiful childhood the image of God was on you, the light of truth struck full on the soul, the fire was kindled by Him who made you. You have since wandered, doubted, rioted in unbelief, but you cannot altogether efface the original impress. You have buried the fire under load upon load of black ashes, but the spark is still there. Man may destroy the beautiful and make all round him a waste and howling desert, but he is still man, and as man, belongs to God. While your self, your inner self of soul exists, you must bear somewhat His likeness. You feel this at times. At rare moments you hunger and thirst after righteousness, you long to have truth in calm possession, you long to have a settled faith and home, you are weary of doubt, you are sick of mysteries. Sign of your parentage my brother. In spite of your fears, doubts, wanderings and riotings, while your soul lives God will have a son, a son in His own likeness, a likeness marred, disfigured, but still bearing some resemblance, and while God lives you will have a Father, a Father wronged, rebelled against, sinned against, but always a Father, and always ready to forgive.

I must ask you now to regard this young man as beginning to question his early faith. For intellectual wandering never begins by doubt of God and a wish to break away from communion with Him, it begins I think in questioning what man has said about God. Man's interpretation of the facts of nature and of revelation, man's judgment concerning right and wrong, where in pleasure sin begins and where in duty the imperative is touched. Now what are the great disturbing forces that come to young and thoughtful minds? Perhaps if I went to the root of the matter I should find that it comes from this, a great and manifest difference between men's lives and their creeds. For when the reflective faculties are aroused and begin to exercise their rightful functions in criticism, that criticism is directed first of all not toward creeds, but toward the men and women who hold the creeds, not toward principles in their abstract form, but toward principles in their concrete form, as embodied in daily life. This young man of whom I am speaking has begun to use his reflective powers and to exercise his critical faculty. He is working among men and always observant. He has been taught in the ordinary popular creed of the day, Calvinistic or Armenian. He hears men speak of an enthusiastic devotion to heaven, and finds that in all the work of every day they are devoted to nothing but the world. He finds men holding a creed pledging them to make peace on the earth, and in their daily baptising the flesh and the devil. He sees everywhere a huge contradiction between faith and practice, and he turns to examine the faith if haply he may find the reason and explanation of the practice. And that examination by men that can satisfy in most points a young and honest mind. A mind worn and wearied with much toil may embrace some creed, Calvinistic, Armenian or Popish to find the longed for rest, but not so the young spirit which has just begun to put its great unanswerable questions. For it desires not rest, but information of the truth. And while some points of belief will receive instant confirmation from his reason, his conscience, his affections, others will offend and nature. He cannot command for himself the faith that shall receive them. Be God is a great and awful King before whom the universe must tremble. He hates arbitrary law, with slumbering wish and will to break it. He broke it, and at once was hurled from happiness, stripped of the majesty of his nature, and doomed to transmit to each of his children the fearful guilt of his own and everlasting hell his birth-right. True, He found a ransom, but even then it is a transaction, and God is careful first of all, not for Christ died, not to rescue man from his sinful wanderings back to truth and heaven, but to appease the infinite anger of an infinite God. In Romanism men are under an infallible man; in Protestantism men are under an infallible human life, but infallible as a teacher of history, revealing the truth of God and of the past and of science. It is in fact a will, published by heaven at different times through different men. And interpreters take those different utter-mystic vagueness of speech, and oriental fancy, and the hot rush of rhetoric to meet the demands of the moment, and clear judgments calmly given, to make so the young enquirer stumbles at once on inconsistencies and things unreasonable. Love is not at the root of all things, but law. God is first a King; the cross of Calvary is the awful record of heaven tell of his infinite power, and the way he enquires on, pondering deeply on the vengeance he takes upon sin. That the divine government to human condition and character. He meets with facts of fatalism which no reasoning can destroy, facts also of free will that are incontrovertible. He sees the lines of rival systems running into each other and