

The Mystery of the Kingdom.

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WHEN we pray, 'Thy kingdom come,' we think of the gradual approach of some 'final reign of right,' some consummation to be progressively realized in the indefinitely distant future. When the original followers of the Lord repeated that petition, they and He thought of an immediately-impending, catastrophic event, the resumption by YHVH of His Kingship over Israel, and so over the whole earth. It was the *nearness* of that event which the Baptist and Jesus alike proclaimed, and it was the sounding of *this* note which accounted for the immense stir their preaching created. The coming of the Kingdom was not conceived as an evolutionary process culminating in a 'crowning age of ages,' but as a sudden and wholly supernatural change which God would bring in suddenly and once for all, a change heralded by tremendous upheavals in the realm of nature (Jl 2^{30, 31}; cp. Mk 13^{24, 25}). It requires a very great effort on our part to enter into that conception, so remote from ours; and a still greater to accustom ourselves to the thought that this, and not ours, was our Lord's conception. Yet unless we make that effort, a phrase like 'the mystery of the Kingdom' will perforce remain unintelligible to us.

I.

From the days of the Captivity onwards, a markedly pessimistic tinge is found to colour Jewish thought and literature—a feeling which might be described as God-forsakenness, the result of the people's sins. Israel was under a shadow, YHVH had withdrawn His presence and favour from His disobedient nation, leaving it to its adversaries to oppress; through the influence of Persian dualism the present evil age came to be thought of as under the dominion of ungodly powers—Satan came to figure as 'the prince of this world.' One hope lighted up this darkness, namely, that in the fulness of time, when Israel should have expiated its transgressions, YHVH would once more ascend the throne He had temporarily abandoned, scattering His people's enemies, and restoring their independence under His own sway and sceptre. Thus the great prophet of the Exile prays: 'Look down from heaven, and behold from the habitation

of thy holiness and of thy glory: where is thy zeal and thy mighty acts? . . . Return for thy servants' sake. . . . We are become as they over whom thou never barest rule' (Is 63¹⁵⁻¹⁹ *pass.*). Thus, too, in the days of our Lord, every pious Jew petitioned daily: 'Bring back our judges as aforetime, and our counsellors as from the beginning; cause sorrow and sighing to flee away from us, and be thou king over us, even thou alone, O YHVH.'

To promise a far-distant fulfilment of such instant prayers would have aroused little enthusiasm; what drew the multitudes to Jesus was the assurance He breathed that the Kingdom—the victory of God and the overthrow of Satan; which His hearers would interpret as the casting-off of the Roman yoke and the redemption of Israel—was at the very doors. We do not confound the eschatological form in which His message was proclaimed with the substance of that message; but it has to be recognized that as regards the outward shape and colour of His expectations Jesus was in close accord with the ideas current around Him. Unquestionably He looked for the new era in the immediate future; there is no doubting the authenticity or mistaking the force of His confident prediction to the disciples, 'Ye shall not have gone through the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come' (Mt 10²³), and the same applies to the promise, 'There be some of them that stand here, which shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God' (Lk 9²⁷; cp. Mk 9¹, Mt 16²⁸; also Mk 13³⁰, Mt 24³⁴, Lk 21³²). Even at His trial He told His judges, 'Henceforth'—*i.e.* presently—'ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven' (Mt 26⁶⁴), which, of course, meant the imminent advent of the Kingdom. It is equally true that He depicted the blessedness to be enjoyed by the partakers in that consummation in perfectly realistic fashion; that He promised tangible, hundredfold reward to those who had made sacrifices for the Gospel's sake (Mk 10³⁰, Mt 19²⁹); that He told His disciples they should eat and drink at His table in His kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel

(Lk 22³, Mt 19²⁸); and that He Himself looked forward to drinking the fruit of the vine in the Kingdom of God (Mk 14²⁵). When we add the reminder that He considered His mission to be exclusively to His nation, it will be seen how far He shared the outlook of His age and race.

On the other hand, two facts are to be noted: that, while formally Jesus looked for a Kingdom of God which should be an idealized Jewish theocracy, He has not one word to say on that favourite theme of His co-religionists, the Divine vengeance to be exacted on the heathen; and that in His thought admission to the Kingdom is to be gained, not in virtue of membership of the Jewish race, but on condition of the fulfilment of certain extremely high ethical demands. If the mould into which He poured His thought was inevitably eschatological, the precious metal that flowed into the mould was ethical and spiritual: those who are approved in the Judgment, the heirs of the Kingdom, are those who have practised kindness and brotherly love towards the needy and afflicted, without national or racial qualification.

And in yet another respect we see Him as One who had already outgrown the limitations of the current conception of the Kingdom; for whereas that conception was purely futurist, Jesus is conscious as it were by flashes that the new order has already begun, is already 'in the midst' (Lk 17^{20, 21}), while men are still waiting for its manifestation with pomp and circumstance. It is true that He accounted for that consciousness by pointing to His success in casting out demons; but the inner assurance was there in the first place, and the explanation came later. He felt that His personality was introducing a new factor into the world, which was no longer the same now that He had come. The Baptist He saw, for all his greatness, as still quite definitely belonging to the old order of things, which was passing away, whereas He Himself marked a fresh epoch, the daybreak of God's righteous reign. That glimpse was none the less true for being occasional and intermittent; in a manner past explaining, nor needing explanation, He knew that *by the fact of His coming* the threshold was already crossed, the new Dispensation begun.

II.

So much by way of barest orientation. We now turn to the subject indicated in our title, the

question raised by the words, 'Unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God,' addressed by the Lord to the inner circle of His disciples (Mk 4¹¹; cp. Mt 13¹¹, Lk 8¹⁰). What is this mystery, the knowledge of which, we are given to understand, is confined to a small knot of intimates, but withheld from the great multitude?

The mere imminence of the Kingdom was, of course, no secret, but rather the key-note of both the Baptist's and our Lord's preaching. We hold, with Schweitzer, that the secret is to be sought in the explanation *why* the crisis was approaching just then, and, possibly, in an indication of *how close* it was thought to be; and that both explanation and indication are contained in certain parables, the inner meaning of which the habitual associates of Jesus might be expected to penetrate, while the multitudes could apprehend it only dimly, if at all. Mark, followed by Matthew, relates a tradition, doubtless authentic, according to which Jesus on a certain day taught the crowd by the lake-shore 'many things in parables' (4²), and in connexion with that day's teaching he records the saying, spoken to the disciples, 'Unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but unto them that are without all things are done in parables.' Not all the parables related in this chapter are equally concerned with this 'mystery'; the Evangelist gives us neither all those nor only those which were uttered on that occasion, the fact being that even in his day the 'mystery' was no longer understood—as how could it be, seeing that it referred to the extreme nearness of an event which had not come to pass forty years later?

The principal parables setting forth the mystery of the Kingdom are those of the Sower, the Seed growing secretly, the Mustard-seed, and the Leaven; the latter is given in Mt 13³³ as following the Parable of the Mustard-seed, to which it forms a companion picture, as that of the Seed growing secretly does to that of the Sower. If we can find one strand of thought running through them, or find them linked in an unforced manner by one principle, the mystery will grow clearer. We leave on one side, with a good conscience, the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower (Mk 4¹³⁻²⁰), which represents the thought, not of the Lord, but of another, later mind, replacing originality by ingenuity.

What these four parables exhibit uniformly is the contrast between small causes and great effects; a hidden process set in motion by seemingly inade-

quate means, and the inevitable and disproportionately large results which supervene; in the first three the emphasis lies on seed-time and harvest, the day of small things and the season of surprising issues. In that spring-time the Word is being sown, the momentous process is being initiated, which will bring in the Kingdom with the same inevitableness, and presumably the same speed, with which the sowing of the grain leads on the harvest, which is elsewhere (Mt 13³⁹) used as signifying the consummation of the age. The generality of hearers, 'they that are without,' know only that Jesus is *announcing* the Kingdom; but those who are familiar with His mind are aware that He is Himself *bringing* it, *compelling its advent*—that is the mystery. As the farmer's sowing of the seed compels the earth to respond with her harvest of ripening corn, so the sowing of the Word, though much of the seed may come to nothing, will compel the heavenly harvest to ripen—invisibly, mysteriously, irresistibly—and the Kingdom to appear, just about the time when the reapers on earth put forth their sickles. Some of the seed is sure to fall on good ground, and will bring forth abundantly; and once it is sown, the end is assured, and the sower may go home, sleep and rise, rise and sleep, for without further co-operation on his part the seed is growing in the dark soil, sending up first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. The sower 'knoweth not how' the growth proceeds, but that is immaterial, since the result is pre-ordained. Man's part seems exiguous in proportion to earth's mysteriously large response; the little leaven mysteriously pervades and alters the nature of the whole lump; the little grain of mustard-seed mysteriously grows into a shrub ten feet high; the little movement now in progress must issue in the Kingdom of God—*there is the mystery.*

III.

But how could Jesus connect, and so intimately connect, His preaching with the coming Kingdom? And if He did so, was He not, in consequence of His eschatological prepossessions, the victim of a tragic delusion, since the Kingdom certainly did not come as and when He expected it? Such a conclusion, though it might be impatiently put forward, would only amount to ignoring the golden treasure of His thought because of the eschatological earthen vessel containing it.

For the all-important element in the thought of Jesus was not that the new era was quite close at hand, but that it was to be brought in by the sowing of the Word, quickening human effort, and effort of a certain kind—palpably inadequate as such an instrument might seem to accomplish such a result. It is a total mistake to point to the Parable of the Seed growing secretly as showing that in His view man could only wait passively for the Kingdom, as the farmer did for the corn; on the contrary, the farmer, by his seemingly insignificant act, as we have seen, *made* the earth yield her increase, compelled the corn to rise from the ground. Jesus was not at all a passive character; that He declined the futility of armed insurrection must not make us think of Him as averse to the most strenuous exertion which He thought would bring in the Kingdom.

What kind of exertion could this be? We find the answer in Mt 11¹², where He declares that 'from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and men of violence take it by force.' This, in accordance with the conventional conception of our Saviour as a calm, serene sage, has been taken to express a rebuke to those ardent spirits who would not wait, but meant to realize their aspirations by a supreme effort: in truth it expressed the very opposite of a rebuke, which the words do not so much as imply, and it would be truer to say that even if Jesus did not approve of all the methods of these men, He warmly sympathized with their strenuous, activist disposition. The Kingdom of God was to be forced on, pressure was to be brought to bear which would compass the great end—and *this process had been going on from the days of John the Baptist, i.e., for a year or two.* What did this process consist in? In a passionate return to God—that is the meaning of the term rendered in our Gospels by *μετάνοια*, 'repentance'—and a moral renewal. It was this which the Baptist had preached (Lk 3⁸⁻¹⁴), this, we may surmise, which had drawn Jesus so mightily to him. Repentance, and fruits worthy of repentance, were to compel the Kingdom to appear.

This idea is not unrelated to, yet sharply differentiated from, what was held by the professedly religious of the day. The Kingdom lingered because the people were sinful. To the Pharisee this meant that the Law was not observed with anything like sufficient strictness; it was a saying

recorded in the Talmud that Israel would be redeemed if the nation would keep only two Sabbaths as the Sabbath should be kept. That, of course, was a mere caricature of the prophets' view that Israel was out of favour with YHVH because of its disobedience and backsliding, but that YHVH would return to His people when they sanctified themselves, and turned to Him; and this prophetic conviction Jesus instinctively adopts. This is the point where His ethical enthusiasm coalesces with, and transforms, His eschatological hopes: He preaches the nearness of the Kingdom, but preaches it as a consummation to be realized by a resolute moral regeneration, a vehement, passionate willingness to surrender all, sacrifice all, and so to achieve that worthiness of the Kingdom upon which the Kingdom itself will follow with the same inevitableness as harvest follows seed-time. That explains the touch of 'violence' which meets us in so many of His demands, the absolutism of His moral code, which admits of no qualifying circumstances: only 'by force,' by the utmost moral energy, is the Kingdom to be taken—and how immeasurably does the prize transcend in worth our highest effort to attain it, as the pearl of great price is far more valuable than all the merchant pays for it, though what he pays is his all!

That, then, is the grandiose conception of Jesus, His plan to call the Kingdom into being, quickly, immediately, with power; not by a quietism, waiting with folded hands, but by a heroic ethic, ready for the Cross, by the most implicit obedience to God's will, was the Golden Age to be brought in. It is open to us to see the essential truth of this conception, and its independence of those mere garments of eschatology which speedily dropped from it. We mean that the Kingdom, the Sovereignty, of God can always be realized by the individual soul which acknowledges and obeys Him as its Sovereign; while every one who seeks with sincerity to do His blessed Will is conscious of working for the advent of His Kingdom on earth. That that consummation did not appear *when* Jesus expected it, is a detail; that it can and will come only *in the way* He expected it, matters everything. Not in one glorious burst, but little by little, not catastrophically but evolutionally, will the more perfect human society, with God as its Blessed and Only Potentate, be established; but the method is that proclaimed and enjoined

by Jesus Christ—moral regeneration, rightness of motive prompting rightness of conduct.

IV.

But did our Lord really anticipate such a return and renewal to be effected on the part of all and sundry, and that so rapidly that the grand climax would be reached by the time of approaching harvest? He entertained no such extravagant anticipations; for here we touch the very centre of the mystery of the Kingdom.

Let us remember that it is the relatively small proportion of the seed falling on the good ground which produces the abundant harvest; it is the little leaven that leaveneth the whole lump; it is the little grain of mustard-seed which grows into so imposing a plant—or, according to an ingenious conjecture of the original meaning of the parable, which by its pungency alters the whole flavour of the dish; and it was the small number of men of violence—let us substitute 'passion'—the spiritual élite intent upon the one aim, whose efforts would 'take the Kingdom by force': there was the mystery.

This idea, too—the salvation of all Israel, not by its own merits, but by the availing merits of a pious and God-pleasing remnant—is a reminiscence from Isaiah (1⁹); and the prophet, in turn, shows that he is inspired by the ancient and beautiful story of Abraham's pleading with YHVH, and how the cities of the Plain might have been saved from the destruction they deserved, had there been but ten righteous persons in them. In the same way Jesus, though He is leagues removed from the bitter contempt of the Pharisees for the common people—cp. Jn 7⁴⁹, 'This multitude which knoweth not the law are accursed'—feels almost from the outset that the success of His movement, *i.e.*, the coming of the Kingdom, is not dependent upon the acceptance of His message by the masses: that aim will be attained *for all* by the consecrated efforts of *a few*, the vehement lovers of God and His righteousness—which is a mystery indeed.

And here once more we see all history vindicating the spiritual intuition of our Lord. If the world is getting better, not, indeed, from generation to generation, but in the long sweep of the centuries—if an abuse is abolished here, and a hoary evil improved out of existence there—the result is

due, not to the great mass of careless humanity, but to the chosen band, few in number, yet invincible in purpose, who are consumed by their zeal for the Lord's house, the leaven which leavens our dulness and indifference; to the men and women whose heart is so inflamed by the wrong that round them lies, by the vision of the good to be won, that they are determined to perish themselves if that is the only way by which the Kingdom can be brought nearer. And at the head of these stands the Great Chief of faithful souls, 'the holiest among the mighty, and the mightiest among the holy,' who for the joy that was set before Him—to win the Kingdom for mankind—endured the Cross, despising shame. It is the supreme sacrifices of supreme souls which abound unto the salvation of the world, and prove 'a ransom for many' who are not even

conscious of what has been done and suffered for them.

In anticipating the advent of the Kingdom in the imminent future, whether within the year or within the lifetime of His generation, Jesus was the child of His age; in pointing to the method and agency by which alone the goal would be won, He declared a central mystery which is also a vital truth, and which every age and every soul may verify anew. When the love of goodness becomes a passion—not an academic approbation, but a dynamic violently struggling into life—then, and not till then, redemption draweth nigh, and the Kingdom is 'in the midst.'

The Mystery of the Kingdom is sealed and unsealed with a Cross.

In the Study.

Virginibus Puerisque.

I.

May.

EMPIRE DAY.

'With a great sum obtained I this freedom.'—Acts 22²⁸.

MANY years ago, a little girl got a letter on her birthday. It was written on very fine paper with a grand crest at the top. If you were to see any of your little girl friends look as demure and old-fashioned as this child did when the letter was read to her, I believe you would feel half sorry, and wonder if she ever played. That little girl's letter of long ago came at length to be printed in a book, and this morning I want to let you hear the first sentence of it.

24th May 1822.

'Uncle William and Aunt Adelaide send their love to *dear little Victoria*, with their best wishes on her birthday, and hope that she will now become a *very good girl*, being now *three years old*.'

Little Victoria afterwards became our Queen, and a very good Queen she was. She lived to be an old woman, having reigned more than sixty years.

During her reign her birthday was always kept. Those of your fathers and mothers who had their

early homes in a city will remember how, on the 24th of May, or as near that date as possible, they used to get a school holiday—The Queen's Birthday. When King Edward became king he made no change; the old holiday remained, and in Victoria's memory was called 'Victoria Day.'

1. To you the 24th of May is known by the bigger name of 'Empire Day.' I wonder if you ever ask yourselves what that name means? You run about and enjoy yourselves; you take all the fun you can out of your holiday, for it is generally a day of bright sunshine. The name probably conveys as little meaning to you as 'Whitsunday' does. Yet there is a long and wonderful story behind the word 'Empire.'

When Trafalgar Day is mentioned, what big boy or girl does not think of Nelson and his famous battle-cry—'England expects every man to do his duty'? On Empire Day we are meant to be happy and proud because we belong to the British Empire. At school, I feel sure that you have been told how the sun never sets on it. That is just a poetical way of saying that it includes countries all round the Globe—Australia, New Zealand, India, part of Africa, Canada. But it is possible that not so much of its wonderful story has been told you as might have been.

2. That story is only in the making. Your