OUR LORD'S TEACHING CONCERNING HIS PAROUSIA: A STUDY IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

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DR. HOWARD follows up the first instalment of this study, which considered introductory matters, with an examination of the Markan parables and other sayings of Jesus.

II. PARABLES AND SAYINGS

COMPARED with the other Synoptic writers, the proportion of narrative material in Mark is much greater, and accordingly we have to deal with both a relative and an absolute deficiency in the amount of recorded teaching. Consequently there is less material in Mark's Gospel upon which we may draw for our discussion, but this disadvantage is offset by the possibility, which was discussed earlier, that here we are dealing with those elements of the teaching of Jesus which were utilized in the primitive apostolic kerygma, and we may be thus certain that here we have sufficient material recorded for us to be able to outline the main elements in Jesus' teaching concerning His Parousia. The passages which are relevant to our present discussion of the parables and sayings of Jesus bearing upon this event are Mark 4: 26-32; 8: 38 (9: 1), and 14: 62. It is also possible that there is an allusion to the Parousia in the short parable at 4: 21-23, and this will also be briefly considered. The parable of the Burglar at Night which concludes the Olivet Discourse will be considered in relation to that setting. Before making a detailed consideration of those parables which immediately concern us, it is important to note that, in view of what has already been said about the present reality of the Kingdom of God in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, the interpretation of all the parables is ultimately dependent upon "the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah and the recognition of the Kingdom of God which is breaking forth in His ministry."[1] The parables, in fact, relate to the ultimate revelation of God in its various stages.

We commence our study of the Lord's teaching with the short parable of the man planting his seed and its automatic growth (Mark 4: 26-29). It is the one parable recorded by Mark which

[1] E. C. Hoskyns, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (1931), p. 188.

is peculiar to him, occurring in neither Matthew nor Luke. The story itself would have appealed naturally to the Palestinian countryman, and as a story it is simple and straightforward, but its interpretation as a parable has for long been regarded as being beset by many difficulties. C. H. Dodd has rightly pointed out that the interpretation which is given will largely be dependent upon the view taken of the Kingdom of God, and his own view that "the parable would suggest that the crisis which has now arrived is the climax of a long process which prepared the way for it,"[2] is clearly related to his belief that the Kingdom of God came in its fulness in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and his refusal to give the Kingdom a future manifestation. On the other hand A. M. Hunter[3] regards it as a parable designed to inculcate patience—the growth of the Kingdom is something entirely spontaneous, like the growth of a seed it is dependent upon God, and nothing that men can do will accelerate the process. Thus it behoves those who are awaiting the ultimate manifestation of the Kingdom of God to show patience, for it will come in God's good time, when the period of development is complete. There is no doubt an element of truth in both these interpretations, but to the present writer they fail to do justice to the obvious contrast between the seed hidden in the ground, and the full-grown plant, which all can see. It is this contrast, we suggest, that the parable was intended to highlight, to put into pictorial relief this contrast between the "now" and the "then", between the Kingdom of God veiled in obscurity, and its glorious manifestation at the Parousia of Jesus Christ. The seed has been sown, and after the long interval of apparent inactivity, the moment dawns for an intense activity, for the harvest has come. In the words of Jeremias, God "lets things run their course, passes them by and ignores them. But when His hour has come, when the eschatological term is complete, then His wondrous act brings in the Kingdom."[4] When the harvest is ready God's Representative will put in the sickle, and the last phase of the divine drama will be played out. Although the concluding words of the parable are strongly reminiscent of Joel 3: 13, and indeed, without a doubt contain an echo of these words, it is unlikely that it was the thought of judgment which is uppermost in this parable, but rather the thought that here in the glory and joy of harvest was the full revelation and inevitable consequence of that which was hidden in the obscurity of the seed.

[2] C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (1961 edn.), p. 134.
[3] A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (1960), p. 45.
[4] J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (E.T., 1954), p.91.

The Kingdom of God became a reality in the world in the Man Jesus of Nazareth, and although hidden and obscure, as was the seed, events are moving towards the time when it will be revealed in its fullness, in God's good time, in the glorious appearing of the risen Lord and Christ.

The same lesson is pointed by Paul: as he wrote to Titus, the grace of God has been made manifest, it "has appeared" (Titus 2: 11); but what this will bring forth will not be known until the fulfilment of the Christian's hopes in the appearing of Christ in glory at His Parousia (Titus 2: 13). As in the parable there is again this contrast between obscurity and manifestation, indeed, we might almost say that Paul has here personalized the parable. Again, Paul uses the same metaphor of the harvest at Romans 8: 18-25. The present frustrations and misery belong only to the "interim", and we have the pledge of the future harvest, a harvest which will demonstrate the transformation of the present shackles into the liberty and splendour of full sonship. Once again we are brought face to face with the contrast between what is at present veiled and what will be made manifest at the Parousia, an event which, quite clearly, is to bring deliverance to the whole creation.

This leads us to a consideration of the parable which Mark has placed immediately following the parable of the man and his seed, namely the parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4: 30-32). Many commentators have taken this to be a demonstration of the gradual growth of the Kingdom of God from obscure and insignificant beginnings, a growth which will eventually produce something that will fill the world. Thus Hunter can write, "the Reign of God may seem a fact of little importance; yet it is destined to span the earth with its empire and to embrace in its sweep the Gentiles from afar."[5] No one will quibble with the statement as such, only its position with relation to this parable. For C. H. Dodd and those who like him think in terms of "realized eschatology", the parable of the Mustard Seed demonstrates that "multitudes of the outcast and neglected in Israel, perhaps even of Gentiles, are hearing the call," and this in itself "is a sign that the process of obscure development is at an end. The Kingdom of God is here: the birds are flocking to find shelter in the shade of the tree."[6] On the other hand, especially in the setting which Mark has given to the parable, the emphasis does not seem to be so much on the growth and development of the seed, but rather upon the contrast between the hidden and insignificant beginnings—it is "the least of all the

[5] A. M. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
[6] C. H. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

seeds"—and the final outcome in a plant so large that it is capable of affording shelter to the birds of the air. Once again we are being brought to see this contrast between the veiled and obscure beginning and the ultimate glorious manifestation of the Kingdom of God. It is thus a parable which points the same lesson as did that of the man and his seed. Jeremias has pointed out[7] that in order that we should grasp the significance of these parables it is essential for us to lay aside our concern with the process of growth, and concentrate upon the idea which would have been uppermost in the oriental mind, namely, the contrast between the two states, between two totally differing situations, the replacement of the one by the other being a miracle of divine power. Thus it is with the Kingdom of God, as Stauffer wrote, "Christ once came to the earth as the *rex absconditus*, but at the end of history he will come in state as the *rex triumphans*, the *deus salvator revelatus*."[8] Thus the "present age with all its woe and sin will give place to the Age to Come, a supranatural, supra-historical order of existence, which will be the Lord's doing,"[9] and as such will be marvellous in our eyes. Further, we should note that in the parable the period of the "interim" fades out, not because it is of no importance, nor because it concerns the "mystery church" of the dispensationalists, but because the vital contrast is between two states, obscurity and revelation.

Brief mention should be made of the parable of the Lamp (Mark 4: 21-25), which in its present setting would also seem to be a parable of contrast. The present writer remains unconvinced that this was the primary setting of the parable, but it would certainly appear that, at least as far as Mark's Gospel is concerned, this is a valid approach to its interpretation. The parable brings to us the fact that although the Kingdom of God in its present state may be hid, its ultimate purpose is to be made manifest, just as a light is designed to illuminate its surroundings and not be wasted beneath a corn measure or a bed. In its present setting the parable may be seen then as a promise that what is at the moment veiled will eventually be revealed in glory, a promise re-echoed throughout the pages of the New Testament.

Thus far the Lord has been concerned with emphasizing the contrast between the "Now" and the "Then", between the Kingdom in mystery and the Kingdom in its full and final manifestation. In terms of the allusion to Joel, mentioned above, this final

[7] J. Jeremias, *op. cit.*, pp. 90ff.
[8] E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (E.T., 1955), p. 216.
[9] J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (1957 edn.), p. 172.

revelation of the Kingdom of God would be at the great harvest of the Day of the Lord, that day which, in both the Old and New Testaments, is the eschatological day of salvation and judgment, and which, in the New Testament, is made identifiable with the Parousia of Christ, being called the Day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5: 2), the Day of Christ, of Jesus Christ, of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1: 8; 5: 5; Phil. 1: 6, 10; 2: 16, etc.), or simply the Day (1 Cor. 3: 13; Heb. 10: 25, etc.). It may perhaps be as well to point out that these various expressions are clearly identical; to distinguish between them, as some have tried to do, is "an attempt to draw a distinction which is not drawn in Scripture."[10] Yet, as Peter demonstrated on the day of Pentecost, the day of reaping had already begun, the prophecy of Joel concerning the end time had already been fulfilled, the initial crisis of the Day of the Lord had broken in upon mankind, and the elect are now being gathered out of the *massa perditionis* of the world. Nonetheless, this beginning of the end is essentially a process taking place in obscurity, the ultimate revelation of the Day of the Lord is yet to be, and in the two sayings of the Lord which are now to occupy our attention He demonstrates that this final unveiling is coincident with and dependent upon His own Parousia.

The two sayings of Mark 8: 38 and 14: 62 are very similar, both referring to the future appearing of the Son of Man in glory. That the Son of Man is the chosen self-designation of Jesus seems to be the inescapable conclusion we are to draw from the Synoptic narratives, in spite of the ingenuity of some scholars who, for various reasons, have wished to prove otherwise. The saying at Mark 8: 38 occurs within a context of a discourse on the present reality of suffering on the part of the Messianic Community throughout the "interim", that period in which the Kingdom of God is concealed. The "interim" is a period of expectation, lived out in the certain hope that what is now veiled will be made manifest, and that the future age which has already broken into the existing order of things will be revealed in its entirety. During this period suffering is to be accounted a condition of discipleship, Jesus is one of whom men will be ashamed, as the Servant of Yahweh He was despised and rejected by the great majority (Isa. 53: 3), and the knowledge of His present exaltation is "veiled", being a matter revealed only to those whose faith has brought them into the Messianic Community. Thus those who have accepted the demands of the Kingdom of God during the "interim" must also share in the shame associated with its "veiledness". This is

[10] O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (1955 edn.), p. 190.

a matter which is constantly reaffirmed throughout the New Testament—"if we endure, we shall reign with Him" (2 Tim. 2: 11)—but there is a corollary to these words, "if we deny Him, He will also deny us," which latter denial will occur at the Parousia, for the situation of "veiledness" of the Son of Man and the Kingdom of God will not last indefinitely, as was emphasized in the parables of contrast. Here, in this saying of the Lord, what has so far only been implicit becomes explicit, the coming of the Kingdom of God with power is associated with the glorious appearing of the Son of Man, and the oblique references of the parables now become clear. Further, this Parousia is to be associated with the final judgment, in the particular context, one which applies to those who have professed the name of Jesus. The almost identical picture is to be found in the Pauline writings. At 2 Thess. 1: 7-9 we have again this picture of Christ coming in power and glory, with the angels to execute judgment, in this case a judgment upon those who are oppressing His Church. That this judgment is also to be one affecting His followers is also made clear by the apostle at 2 Cor. 5: 10 and 2 Tim. 4: 1, which latter verse adds further confirmation that the Pauline eschatology did not differ from those matters revealed by his Lord, for here he also demonstrates that the Parousia of Christ, the final judgment and the establishment of the Kingdom are all coincident.

It is clear that the companion saying of 9: 1 is very closely associated with, and related to 8: 38, but the present writer remains largely unconvinced by the various attempts which have been made to overcome the difficulty of Jesus' followers not seeing death until they had seen the Kingdom of God coming with power. Perhaps the most satisfactory solution is to relate the saying to the events of Pentecost. The power of God was released in a new way from that day forward, and this was the foretaste of the future power and glory to be manifested at the Parousia. It is certain that Peter and the other apostles regarded Pentecost as the beginning of the "End", as the quotation from Joel demonstrates. Pentecost may thus be viewed as the opening event of the full manifestation of the Kingdom of God, separated from the ultimate *eschaton* only by the "interim". That the apostles viewed this period of time as being in the nature of a short interlude of harvest seems reasonably certain, and thus we see the events of "resurrection, exaltation and second advent as being, in their belief, inseparable parts of a single event."[11] However, through the grace of God, who is "not willing

[11] C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (1963 edn.), p. 33.

for any to perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3: 9), the "interim", the period of gathering through the Holy Spirit working in the Church, has become a lengthened era. It is possible that we have an echo of this in the words of Paul to the Christians at Corinth; "the Kingdom of God", he wrote, "is not in word but in power" (1 Cor. 4: 20), a power in evidence through the operation of the Holy Spirit, ever regarded as a Messianic gift, and also regarded as the pledge to the Church that the final harvest would come (Rome 8: 23).

The saying recorded at Mark 14: 62 is similar to the one which we have been considering. There has been some controversy as to whether in fact this is a reference to the Parousia or to the exaltation of Christ following His Passion and resurrection. T. F. Glasson[12] has suggested that the "coming" in question here is a coming *up* or *to* the Ancient of Days to receive the dominion, glory and kingdom referred to at Daniel 7: 14. On this view our Lord is warning the high priest and his fellows that, although they have rejected His claims, they may rest assured that events and circumstances will soon demonstrate the fact that in Himself both the references to Psalm 110: 1 and Daniel 7: 14 have been fulfilled. On the other hand it is the view of the present writer that these words fit the context of the Parousia much better, for this will be the complete and final vindication of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they mockingly called "the King of the Jews", but whose appearing will show Him to be "King of kings and Lord of lords." The One who then stood before His judges in shame will eventually return in glory as the Judge of His judges. Thus, once again that which was a veiled reference in the parables becomes explicit, the coming kingdom is inseparably linked with the coming King, the present shame will give place to the future glory, the veiled will be made manifest. The majesty of the occasion is heightened by the allusion to Daniel 7: 14, already mentioned, and this is also taken up by Paul in his description of the Parousia at 1 Thessalonians 4: 13ff. The link is unmistakable and a unity of concept is not to be questioned. The Day of the Son of Man is also the Day of the Christian's hope, "that Day" upon which Paul expected to receive of the Just Judge the crown of life (2 Tim. 4: 8).

Thus far Jesus has been emphasizing the contrast between the veiled and the manifest, between the Kingdom of God veiled "in mystery" and the Kingdom revealed in glory, between His life of humble obscurity, a life to be shared by His followers, and His

[12] T. F. Glasson, *The Second Advent* (1947), pp. 63ff.

future Parousia in might and power, in which those who remain faithful will also share. That the present is in the nature of an "interim" to be concluded at the Parousia has been demonstrated, and we must now turn to our Lord's teaching concerning the "how" and the "when" contained in the Olivet Discourse.

(*To be concluded*)

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