

The Humour of our Lord.

PART II.

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IN our former Paper (THE EXPOSITORY TIMES for November), representative examples of what I dared to call the humour of our divinely-human and humanly-divine Lord, have been submitted. They were so submitted as guides to very many others, wherein—like the veining and luminousness of an agate—His humour interpenetrates His speech, even when that is of the most grave and solemn kind. In this faculty or quality—venturing the comparison with heart-felt reverence—our Lord's intellect and genius make Him kin with at once the loftiest and deepest and wisest human intellect and genius of all time. For in highest, deepest, wisest, tenderness and strength, pathos and brightness, melancholy and joy, wit and wisdom are startlingly parallel if not indeed fused. So that one finds oneself inevitably returning upon the historic-biographic fact, that no master mind, in man or woman, has been without humour, less or more. *Ergo* it is to derogate from alike the absolute humanness and greatness of Jesus Christ, to assume that He is not to be thought of in relation to this element of humour. "Nay, verily," He was too profoundly human and too intellectually great not to have possessed this *signum* of greatest greatness all round.

I must be permitted still further to return on the same thought, and to affirm, that even amongst our Lord's saintliest servants of earlier and later times, the most saintly have been distinguished for humour—*e.g.* Jerome and Francis de Sales were perhaps as austere and spiritually-minded men as ever the Church of Christ has owned, and yet the Letters of the former scintillate with rarest sparkle of wit and humour—as to Vigilantius, who is slyly dubbed by him Dormitanti; and in the latter's delightful "Spiritual Letters," and others, you come on subtle and deftly-given strokes of the same, while the Bishop of Belley's "Spirit of S. Francis de Sales" furnishes abundant piquant things amid the fragrances of his holy life. One must suffice. Consulted once as to the propriety of going barefoot as was proposed in a certain religious house, Francis replied, "For goodness sake, let them keep their shoes. It is their heads you must try to reform, not their feet." Coming down later, few will gainsay that every way Fénelon had the finer brain and was the truer man, as placed beside Bossuet; and yet whilst the eagle of Meaux is grandly rhetorical, the Archbishop of Cambrai is passionate as St. Paul and loving as

St. John, and withal, renowned to-day for the ebullience of his wit and the blitheness and spontaneousness of his humour, *e.g.* in his *Dialogues des Morts*. Outside of these circles, not Luther only, but John Calvin and John Knox, and even tremendous Jonathan Edwards, had jets of sweet humour. Within our own Presbyterianism, in more recent times, it were not hard to recall foremost men whose humour was as inevitable as their devoutness, and as radiant as the weight ("wecht," Dr. Chalmers' word) of their utterances.

These additional preliminary and explanatory words will not have been written in vain if they further help to rid the reader of any sense of irreverence or incongruity in thinking of the humour of Christ.

In this second Paper, I propose to notice in detail a succession of illustrations of our Lord's humour throughout the Gospel of St. Matthew, and to add, summarily, other three from St. Luke.

It has been seen how vivid and iridescent with play of humour is Christ's taking-down of the dignitaries of Judaism by likening their reception of John the Baptist, and of Himself, to the capriciousness and fitfulness of sulky children who refused to join their companions in mimetic games of either mirth or mourning. I recur to this, because in the opening example of this Paper the ground-thought of the humour lies in our Lord's distinct purpose to "show up" (if the colloquialism be allowable) these Rabbis and Pharisees of Judaism, by holding up a flawless mirror, wherein they could not fail to see themselves as He saw them—and this followed with such word-portraits as remain unique in literature.

I start with the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in St. Matthew; and let not the impatient reader deem it a foregone paradox to argue for humour in the Sermon on the Mount. It is no paradox. It is simple matter of fact. In the outset let the circumstances be observed. A miscellaneous "multitude"—including as usual rabbis and other dignitaries—has gathered around Him, and the Lord embraces the opportunity of promulgating the gracious moralities of His teaching in contrast with the formalism and superstition of later Judaism. By the ordering of events He has a typical "multitude" before Him, and He strikes home—perfectly aware of the surprise, nay indignation, that He will evoke.

Turning then to the Sermon on the Mount, we have the punctilious Formalist bitten in like an

etching, all the more memorable from the preceding beatitudes. We read: "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God" (ver. 8). And, "Ye are the salt of the earth; but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and trodden under the foot of man" (ver. 13). And "I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven" (ver. 20). And again, "Ye have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; but I say unto you, Resist not him that is evil; but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (vers. 38, 39). Finally, "Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy; but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that you may be sons of your Father which is in heaven; for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust" (vers. 43, 44).

Two elements inform these words, and indeed run through the entire Sermon on the Mount, and (in my judgment) suggest humour:—

1. The grotesque though also sad contrast between the actual and the ideal in the case of the vast majority of the "multitude" of followers to whom the Lord spoke. The very sweetness and sanctity of the phrase "pure in heart," turns it not merely into accusation but irony, and irony that was tremulous with humour. For what a beatitude was this to men whose whole religion was external and made up of interminable washings and ritual observances. Then how drastic a touch was that, "If the salt have lost its savour!"

2. The bewildering unexpectedness of the new Teacher's enunciations, the audacity of His innovations on traditional and contemporary opinion and sentiment. Even to-day one can picture the uplifted eyebrow, the snorting nostril, the hissing lip, as the hearers caught the charges: "Resist not him that is evil"; "Love your enemies." And all this aggravated by the supreme assumption of authority by Christ in His placing of "I say unto you" over against the divine law of Moses. But the Lord, as I maintain, foreknew all this, and could not have done so without a clear sense of humour.

Advancing, in chap. vi. of St. Matthew, we have kindred word-portraits that reveal how seeing and searching were the eyes of our Lord in studying characters, and how incisive was His scrutiny of not the hypocritical merely, but the pompous and ridiculous. Let this be studied: "Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them; else ye have no reward with your Father which is in heaven. When therefore thou doest alms, sound not a trumpet before thee,

as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have received their reward" (vers. 1, 2). Self-evidently here the Lord drew from the life. He had seen and spotted and seen through this got-up spectacular doing of righteousness. What a stroke that, "Take heed that ye do not your righteousness"! And then that sounding trumpet! A mere grave, solemn Rabbi would have left that out. But Christ put it in advisedly as He reproduces before their very eyes the heartless almsgiver and his hired runner-before. Is it conceivable that our Lord did not smile? albeit His smile passes into exquisite contempt for such hypocrites and their vain-glory, as He adds: "Verily I say unto you, They have received their reward." That is, not only such was the sum-total of their "reward," but it was already "received," and nothing to follow.

The same satirically-humorous and humorously-satirical touches follow,—e.g. "In praying, use not vain repetitions, as the Gentiles do; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking" (ver. 7). And, "When ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance; for they disfigure their faces, that they may be seen of men to fast." . . . "But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head, and wash thy face; that thou be not seen of men to fast, but of thy Father which is in secret."

Here again, got-up actors of a part, with their "disfigured" and dirty faces, stand out on the canvas imperishably. The cunningness of the portraiture, the turning inside out of the poor lay-figures revealing the spiring sawdust, the showing-up of the entire sham, compels us to recognise the Lord's humour side by side with His grief and holy indignation.

In chap. vii., the Lord again draws from the life and His own observation, so that we feel that it is in recollection of what He had Himself seen that He once more speaks (vers. 9, 10): "What man is there of you, who if his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? or if he shall ask for a fish, will give him a serpent?" To this must be added the other illustration of an egg in St. Luke xi. 12, "Or if he shall ask an egg, will he give him a scorpion?" To grasp the humorous satiric significance of these successive intentional mistakes, it is to be remembered that the flat yellow-brown pieces of stone that lie scattered all over the sandy plains and desert spots of the East (especially in "the great and terrible wilderness") closely resemble Eastern loaves (so-called). Hence it might easily happen that not until the teeth snapped, and perchance smashed on the stone, would the discovery be made that it was stone and not bread. So with the fish. As with ourselves, there is an eel species of fish in Palestine—Sea of Galilee, Lake of Merom, and the Kishon—that could very

readily be represented by a lean yet longish "serpent." One must, therefore, think of the ludicrousness of the discovery, that instead of being an edible and savoury "fish," a nasty and even poisonous serpent was in the hand. And similarly with the "egg" passed off as a bird's egg. The Palestine "scorpion," as I repeatedly saw it, is housed in an egg very much resembling a pigeon's, though more globulus. So that again we have to picture the grotesque horror of the son on breaking the shell of his supposed choice morsel of an "egg" to find a flame-tongued "scorpion" darting out of it. To me, all this again tells how our Lord observed men and things, and took in the humours of them and turned them to account.

Our next saying has the grimness of a Rembrandt etching, but none the less a scintillation of humour in the verbal play on "dead": "Follow me; and leave the dead to bury their own dead."

The humour of Christ overflows sometimes, and one seems to see the sweet sunshine of a gracious smile, edged with scorn—as light is by its shadow, e.g. reproving the moribund stickler for the letter of observance of the Sabbath, who mourned that He was breaking the holy day by working a miracle to heal the man with a withered hand, He puts it to them thus: "What man shall there be of you, that shall have one sheep, and if this fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?" and launches this at them with irresistible sense of the absurdity of such dead literalism, "How much then is a man of more value than a sheep?" (xii. 9-12). May I venture to say they must have looked very sheepish under such an exclamation? Did St. Luke penetrate still more deeply into the Lord's humour when he records (xiv. 5), "Which of you shall have an ASS . . . fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the Sabbath day?"

There is scathing sarcasm in Christ's condemnation of the traditional get-off from consecrating means to the Lord's service by pronouncing the word "Corban" (xv. 5); but there is also ebullency of satisfaction in laying bare the unfilial fraud. Humour was on His lips and in His eyes when He pricked that bubble of "Corban."

Most noticeable and lightly and brightly touched is the Lord's exposure of the weather-prophets (xvi. 3). Another example of grim humour that is Dantesque, is the "greater damnation" of "long prayers" (xxiii. 14). What looks they must have worn who heard that! Such utter traversing of their conceptions could scarcely fail to mould their faces into gargoyle-like passion. One sees it all repeated to-day when one feels constrained by the

Lord's condemnation to abbreviate your wearily long and fluent ("dreich") praying folks.

What a genuine word-photograph, again, is there in these two portraits! (xxiii. 25) "Ye blind guides, which strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel." How ludicrous! Then (ver. 24), "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye cleanse the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within are full from extortion and excess." "Cleanse the—*outside* of the cup." What inexpressible humour in the picture!

Our limits do not admit of further *minutiae*. But it seems expedient to recall, in conclusion, three ironical as well as humorous-betraying word-portraits that have been preserved by St. Luke.

(a) St. Luke v. 37, 38: "No man putteth new wine into old wine-skins; else the new wine will burst the skins, and itself will be spoiled, and the skins will perish. But new wine must be put into fresh wine-skins." None but one almost daring in His sense of humour would or could have trusted Himself by so homely and ridiculous metaphor to state His attitude towards Judaism.

(b) St. Luke xv. 29: Δουλεύω σοι = here am I who have been toiling and serving Thee as a slave, etc. It was the representative of the self-righteous Pharisee whom our Lord made thus to express himself; and could anything have more deftly put the character of their relations to their heavenly Father, in its bondage and self-pleasingness, in its superficial performance and low *motif*? There was sarcastic reproach of the Pharisees, as well, in respect of the hollowness of their punctilious "service" without moral values. To my mind we have here humour of a winsome sort.

(c) St. Luke xviii. 5. The unjust judge is represented as saying "within himself": "Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest she weary me out by her continual coming." The Revised Version so translates it, but in the margin places "bruise" (ἔπρωιάζω). It is a pugilistic term, and means literally "to strike under the eye." St. Paul also uses it in 1 Cor. ix. 27. Personally, I do not hold it correct exegesis to push etymology to its utmost,—e.g. Hebrew expressions for divine anger and the like so dealt with would transmute solemnity into sheer grotesquerie; nevertheless, as elsewhere, only one possessed of a vivid sense of humour would so have drawn this "Unjust Judge" and the importunate widow.

N.B.—As I was writing the above Paper, the August EXPOSITORY TIMES reached me with its note on ἔπρωιάζω. I the more willingly say little of it here because of this suggestive "note."