

The Parable of

THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY

Mark 4:26-29

by

Archbishop Richard Chenevix Trench, D.D.

This parable, the only one peculiar to St. Mark, declares, like that of the Leaven, the secret invisible energy of the divine word,—that this has a life of its own, and will unfold itself according to the laws of its own being; while, besides all which it has in common with that parable, it teaches further, that this divine word has that in it which will allow it to be confidently left to this inherent energy which it possesses.

'So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how.' It is better to deal with the main difficulty in the parable at once—not so much to wait till it arises, as rather to go to seek it. It is this. Whom shall we understand by the man casting seed in the ground? Is it the Son of man Himself? or is it those who, in subordination to Him, declare the Gospel of the kingdom? Embarrassments attend either explanation. If we say that the Lord is Himself the sower here, how then shall we explain ver. 27? It cannot be affirmed of Him that He *'knoweth not how'* the seed which He Himself has sown springs and grows; since it is only by the continual presence of his Spirit in the hearts of his people that it grows at all; while certainly it is a poor evasion of this difficulty to say with Erasmus, that *'he knoweth not how,'* ought rather to be *'it,'*—that is, the seed itself,—*'knoweth not how.'* For who would think of denying this? Neither can He fitly be compared to a sower who, having scattered his seed, goes his way, and occupies himself in other tasks, knowing that it lies beyond the range of his power to do more for the seed; which must live, if it live at all, by its own life; and that his activity will not begin again, till the time of the harvest has come round. This is no fit description of Him, who is not merely *'the author and finisher of our faith,'* but conducts it through all intermediate stages, and without whose blessing and active cooperation it could make no growth or progress at all. Shall we, to escape these embarrassments, take the sower here to represent the inferior ministers and messengers of the truth; the purpose of the parable being to teach such, that the word which they bear has a life which is quite independent of him who may have been the instrument of its first communication; even as a child, once born, has a life no longer dependent on theirs from whom it was originally derived? But on this explanation attends another and not slighter difficulty; for at ver. 29 it is said, *'when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he'* (the same clearly who sowed the seed) *'putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.'* Of whom can it be affirmed, save of the Son of man, *'the lord of the harvest,'* that *'He putteth in the sickle,'*—that He gathers the saints, when they are ripe for glory,—when the work of faith has been accomplished in

their hearts,--into everlasting habitations? The perplexity then is this,--If we say that Christ intends Himself by the central figure of the parable, then a part is assigned to Him falling short of that which to Him rightly appertains; while if, on the other hand, we take Him to intend those who, in subordination to Himself, are bearers of his word, then higher prerogatives are ascribed than belong rightly to any other than Him.

I can see no perfectly satisfactory way of escape from this perplexity. Some seeking to escape the embarrassments which beset the first explanation, urge the sleeping, and the rising night and day, with the leaving the seed meanwhile to its own inherent powers of growth, as accidental features not to be pressed, and belonging to the drapery, not to the essential framework, of the parable. Yet this is only an evasion, for clearly in the sower absenting himself after he has committed the seed to the ground, and leaving it to grow without him, the moral of the whole must lie; and to omit this in the interpretation is to leave all without purpose or point.

But without pleading this, I take, as do these interpreters, the sower to represent first, though not exclusively, the Lord Himself. It remains to see how far the acknowledged difficulties are capable of removal or mitigation. This sleeping, and rising night and day, express, as by nearly all is allowed, not the after carefulness with which the sower follows up his sowing, but the absence upon his part of any such after carefulness;¹ as indeed any other explanation runs counter to the whole drift of the parable. He does not think it necessary to keep a continual watch, having once entrusted the seed to the ground, but sleeps securely by night, and by day rises and goes about his ordinary business, leaving with full confidence the seed to itself; which meanwhile *'should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how.'* These words present no difficulty,--on the contrary, are full of most important instruction,--so long as we apply them to those who under Christ are sowers of the seed of eternal life. They are here implicitly bidden to have faith in the word which they preach; for it is the seed of God. When it has found place in a heart, they are not to be tormented with anxiety concerning the final issue, as though they were to keep it alive, and that it could only live through them; for this of maintaining its life is God's part and not theirs, and He undertakes to fulfil it (1 Pet. 1:23-25).² They are instructed also to rest satisfied that it should grow and spring up without their knowing the exact steps of this growth. Let them not be searching at its roots to see how they have stricken into the soil, nor seek prematurely to anticipate the shooting of the blade, or the forming of the corn in the ear; for the mystery of the life of God in any and in every heart is unsearchable; all

1 Pole (*Synops.* in loc.): 'When the sowing is accomplished he passes his nights and days at ease, entrusting the crop to God, and not doubting that it will spring up, while himself engaged on other businesses.'

2 Calvin urges this side of the truth, though an important one, too exclusively: 'He directs this sermon at ministers of the word, lest they should apply themselves less zealously to their task because the fruit of their labour is not immediately visible. Therefore He sets forth for their imitation these husbandmen, who cast their seed upon the land in the hope of harvest, are tormented by no anxious disquietude, but go to their rest and rise, that is, are occupied as usual with their daily toil, and refresh themselves with rest at night, until at last in its own time the seed ripens. Therefore, although for a time the seed may be lying buried, yet Christ bids pious teachers to be of good cheer, lest distrust abate their ardour.'

attempts to determine that its course shall be exactly this way, or that way, can only work mischief. It has a law, indeed, of orderly development, *'first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear;'* words which suggest a comparison with 1 John 2:12-14, where in like manner the Apostle distributes the faithful, according to their progress in the spiritual life, into 'little children,' 'young men,' 'and fathers;' but this law is hidden; and the works of God in nature, where He never *exactly* repeats Himself, are not more manifold than are his works in grace. Therefore let the messengers of the Gospel be content that the divine word should grow in a mysterious manner, and one whereof the processes are hidden from themselves; and, the seed once sown and having taken root, let them commit what remains to God, being satisfied that this seed is incorruptible, and that He will bring his own work to perfection. Or course it can be never meant that they are not to follow up the work which has been through their instrumentality commenced; for as, when it is said, *'the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself,'* this excludes not the rain, and sun, and other favourable influences, so neither, when we affirm that the seed of God implanted in any heart has a life of its own, does this imply that it will not require the nourishment suitable for it,--nay, rather it is involved that it will require it. A dead thing would want nothing of the kind; but because it is living, it needs whereon it may feed. Still it is a different thing to impart life, and to impart the sustenance of life: this latter the Church has still to do for her children; but then it is in faith that they have a life of their own once given and continually maintained from on high, by which they can assimilate to themselves this spiritual food provided for them, and grow thereby (Ephes. 4:16). It may excite surprise that instead of the words last quoted, *'the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself,'*³ we do not rather read, 'the seed groweth and springeth up of itself;' for that, strictly speaking, is the point which the Lord is now urging; and if the earth signifies here, as it must, the heart of man, it is not in it, but in the word which it receives, that the living power resides. But his purpose, in using this language, is pointedly to exclude the agency of the sower, at least a continuous agency on his part of the same kind as he exercises at the first, and this done, He is not careful for more.

It still remains to consider in what sense this leaving of the seed to itself can be attributed to Christ. It is true, Olshausen observes, that the inner spiritual life of men is in no stage of its development without the care and watchful oversight of Him who was its first author: yet there are two moments which, more than any other, are peculiarly his own; one, when the divine life is by Him first implanted in a soul; this is the seed-time; the other, when that soul is ripe for his heavenly kingdom, and He gathers it to Himself; this is the harvest.⁴ Between these lies an interval, in which his work is going forward,

3 Αυτομάτη, from αὐτός and the obsolete μάω, desidero, a word of singular fitness and beauty, occurs but once elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts 12:10: cf. Josh. 6:5, LXX). It is often used by classic authors to describe the earth's spontaneous bringing forth in the golden age. In the next verse, ἐαυτόν must be supplied after παραδῶ. Virgil (Geor. i. 287) will then have exactly the same idiom: *Multa adeo gelida melius se nocte dederunt.*

4 We may compare Job 5:26: 'Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in in his season.' There, however, it is rather said that the favoured of God shall not die till they have known the fulness of earthly blessing, and Abraham's 'good old age.' But in our parable, consistently with the higher dispensation which looks to higher blessings, it is rather affirmed that the faithful are not taken away while yet the work of grace is incomplete

not indeed without the daily supplies of his Spirit, and the daily orderings of his providence, but without any putting to of his hand so distinct and immediate as at those two cardinal moments. And the difficulty will be slighter, when we make application of all this,--as undoubtedly we ought,--to the growth and progress of the universal Church, and not to that of any single soul alone. The Lord at his first coming in the flesh sowed the word of the kingdom in the world, planted a Church; which having done He withdrew Himself; the heavens received Him till the time of the consummation of all things. Often and often since that day the cry has ascended in his ears, 'Oh, that Thou wouldest rend the heavens, that Thou wouldest come down!'--often it has seemed as though his Church were at the last gasp, its enemies about to prevail against and extinguish it for ever, unless He appeared for its deliverance. But for all this He has not come forth; He has left it to surmount its obstacles, not without his mighty help, for He is with it always, yet without his visible interference. He has left the divine seed, the plant which He has planted, to grow on by night and by day, through storm and through sunshine, increasing secretly with the increase of God; and this shall continue, till it has borne and brought to maturity all its appointed fruit. And only then, when the harvest of the world is ripe, when the number of his elect is accomplished, will He again the second time appear, fulfilling that glorious vision beheld by the seer in the Apocalypse: 'And I looked, and behold a white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe.⁵ And he that sat on the cloud thrust in his sickle on the earth and the earth was reaped' (Rev. 14:14-16).

in them, that in this respect there is a provident love ordering their death as well as their life, that it is only '*when the fruit is brought forth,*' that Christ '*putteth in the sickle.*'

⁵ Grotius: 'The meaning seems to me to be clear; namely, that Christ from the accomplishment of the sowing until the time of harvest will not visibly visit the field.'