CHRIST, OR ARCHELAUS?

It was perhaps inevitable that our translators should have transliterated "austēros" by "austere" in Luke xix. 21, but it is not a good translation. For, however little we may *like* austerity in practice, we all recognise a certain fineness and nobility in it. It would be easy to name both statesmen and men of letters among our contemporaries who owe to their austere character much of the confidence and respect which they enjoy. Whereas the slothful servant certainly intended nothing which could be twisted into a compliment: he meant to say that his master was a hard and grasping man of business, against whom he had to be very carefully on his guard. In a word "austēros" here is practically indistinguishable from "sklēros" in Matthew xxv. 24. What is so perplexing is the fact that in both stories, but more especially in St. Luke's, the "austere man" fully justifies by his subsequent conduct the bad character ascribed to him by his servant. In the first Gospel the punishment inflicted on this servant is excessive and vindictive. *We* indeed vaguely understand the words as if they referred to the sufferings of the lost: but those who heard the story would think at once of those dreadful dens of darkness and of torture into which the miserable slaves were cast who had aroused the wrath of cruel masters. Still more odious is the conduct of the "austere man" in St. Luke. It was probably quite in keeping with the character of Archelaus that on his return from Rome, triumphant over Antipas, he should have the Jews who had petitioned against him collected together and slaughtered before his eyes. Whether he actually did this is immaterial. Everybody knew that nothing would have better pleased the tiger-cub who had inherited his father's lust for blood. But then the story

is not really about Archelaus; it is about Christ. The whole value of it lies in the fact—which everybody takes for granted—that our Lord is talking about Himelf on the one part, and about us on the other. At once, then, we run up against the extraordinary difficulty that our Lord, in talking about Himself, assumes the rôle (without any sign that He dislikes it) of an "austere man"—of a harsh, callous, and cruel ruler. The difficulty is, no doubt, familiar, for it recurs often enough in the parables: but here we meet with it in its simplest and most unequivocal form. There can be no question that the parable speaks of duty, responsibility, and reward to those who "serve the Lord Christ": but we should not want to serve Him if He went on to have His personal enemies slaughtered before His face. If He *were* like that, He would deserve the character imputed to Him by the defaulting servant: we could have little sympathy with Him and feel no affection for Him: our service, if rendered at all, would be prompted either by fear or by self-interest. Why should our Lord go out of His way, as it were, in such a connexion as this, to resemble Himself to a vindictive and blood-thirsty creature like Archelaus? St. Augustine indeed saw the point, and utilised it against Marcion and all his followers. You see, he said, that after all the God of the New Testament is just as inexorably stern (vindictive even, from a human point of view) as the God of the Old Testament! But then for St. Augustine the Divine Being *was* emphatically "austere" and "hard," sending men and women by the million into this world pre-condemned to moral failure and eternal punishment. It is not any use to quote St. Augustine on the harshness of the Gospel. Modern writers, therefore, lay themselves out to tone down this harshness, urging (what no man need doubt) that rebellion against God must needs bring about its own punishment, and that inexorably.

What they wholly fail to explain is that our Lord takes to Himself the rôle of one who is incapable of being generous even in the hour of his triumph: that the thing quite clearly intimated is not a sad necessity, not abstract justice, or even righteous retribution, but vindictive cruelty and the gratification of personal animosity. Try as hard as you like, you cannot see the Christ of God in it, you can only see Archelaus.

For our Lord and the princes of this world (including Archelaus) are eternally and diametrically opposed. In all the Scriptures, and in the very truth of things, they stand over against one another as opposites. Behind the princes stands the Prince of this world, who secretly controls their action, and is in turn openly represented by them. They try, they convict, they crucify the Lord of glory. In that very act they are themselves judged, convicted, and (in principle) abolished. "The Prince of this world hath been judged," in the person of those princes—of whom Archelaus is one. Harshness and vindictiveness are no less condemned "under Pontius Pilate" than licentiousness or moral cowardice. The character of the "austere man" must needs be odious in the eyes of a good Christian.

Why then does our Lord seem to identify Himself with a character so odious?

In the first place, because He is never afraid of being misunderstood. We *are* afraid: and the more conscientiously we try to stand for what is good and true, the more afraid we are. It is not so much that to be misunderstood hurts *us* (although most of us are very sensitive to that) as that it compromises the cause of goodness and truth. Our Lord was, it seems, quite indifferent to any such considerations. He never guarded His utterances, never stopped to tone them down—never "hedged" in any way. He went habitually to the very outside of a truth in order

to teach it effectively, and only avoided gross exaggeration by teaching the complemental truth with equally unguarded emphasis. We need not doubt that it is quite the most successful way of teaching—men being what they are. Only, it is not open to *us*. In proportion as our eyes are open to the many-sidedness of Christian truth, we are obliged to balance and guard our presentation of it in every direction, lest we be misunderstood. Our Saviour alone was equally concerned with all the many sides of the Truth which He taught, and yet remained wholly indifferent to the danger that His teaching of it should be misunderstood. In this He was guided by Divine wisdom. Humanly speaking, we may say that He had some three years in which to make an adequate impression upon a thousand generations: He had no time for guarding Himself, for balancing His statements, for avoiding misconceptions: He had to make an impression which should go deep enough, and last long enough, for the immensity of His purposes.

This, however, although it explains much, does not explain all. It explains, e.g., why He allowed Himself (without protest) to be called an "austere man": it does not explain why He went on to justify the application of that title—or even of a worse one—to Himself. It had been a mild use of words to call Archelaus an "austere man": and the nobleman who begins (as it were) by being Christ, ends flatly by being Archelaus. We are thrown back, therefore, on our Lord's own words, so strong and yet so unregarded, when He first began to teach in parables. In these memorable words, reported at considerable length in the two first Gospels, it is impossible not to recognise a large element of paradox. It could not really have been our Lord's object to prevent men from being converted and healed. But neither can it have been wholly paradox: we must allow that our Lord deliberately adopted this

method of teaching because it would to a great extent obscure the truth He had to teach. A true statement may be thrown into a paradoxical form, but it remains substantially true. It is evident that the third Evangelist perceived this element of paradox, and wished to get rid of it: yet he had to admit the crucial words "to the rest in parables, that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand." That is the irreducible minimum with which we have to deal. Apply it therefore to the parable of the pounds. That parable was intended to meet the requirements of a certain definite situation. It was spoken between Jericho and Jerusalem just before the last Passover: it was spoken, not specially to the disciples, but to the people who were going with Him: it was spoken to them because they supposed (very naturally) that the kingdom of God was immediately to appear. He had all along announced its approach, and latterly its swift approach. He had freely intimated that He Himself would be the King thereof, and many of them were eager to accept Him in that capacity. It was exactly these ardent souls who must have been baffled and bewildered by the parable, because it depicted the Lord of the Kingdom as another Archelaus, an austere man, callous, cruel, odious. Whereas all men knew well enough that the Prophet of Nazareth was just the opposite of this. The story could have had no other effect than to damp the enthusiasm and to baffle the faith of all that wished to find in Him the promised Messiah, the Saviour of the world. The same thing is true of the great majority of the parables. They are, for the most part, concerned with the Kingdom—that Kingdom for which all the faithful in Israel were hoping and looking—that Kingdom over which so many of them believed that our Lord was to reign. Yet they habitually, and of set purpose, drew a most disagreeable picture of the Lord of the Kingdom.

In one He appears as a ruthless tyrant, in another as a capricious employer who claims to observe the letter of fair dealing whilst outraging the spirit. Even in such a very simple and intimate illustration as that of the Master whose servant is come in from ploughing, our Lord seems bent on being unjust to Himself, for no one can doubt that He speaks of Himself and His own. "Doth he thank the servant because he did the things that were commanded?" The answer implied (not, in the true text, expressed) is of course "no." But we cannot possibly accept it. If the Master be anything of a gentleman—in whatsoever position in life—he *does* thank him. And so he would have done then, even if the servant were a slave. As to our Lord Himself, it is precisely because all service will be so kindly received and acknowledged by the Master, that He finds such whole-hearted and devoted servants to do His work at all times. "Doth He thank the servant?" Let that other "well done, good and faithful servant—enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" answer, if answer be needed. One is driven to the conclusion that the parables do in general grievously misrepresent our Lord's character. Recalling His own words, one perceives (with astonishment may be) that this was done intentionally "that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand."

Now whatever may have been our Lord's ultimate purpose in choosing a method of self-manifestation which was to a great extent misleading, it seems impossible to deny that such was in fact its character—even as He Himself said. But it will be our own fault if we allow ourselves or others to be misled, beause we do not choose to remember His warning. The conduct, e.g., of the "austere man" who orders a massacre of his citizens because they had opposed his claims, is the conduct of Archelaus, not of Christ. It has simply nothing to say to us about Christ, because

He is not like that at all. There cannot be anything in the Kingdom of God which really resembles that massacre in the least, because everything in the Kingdom depends upon and is determined by the character of the King—and the character of the King is known to us from other (and better) sources to be inconsistent with any such orders being given. It is therefore worse than futile to found any Christian exhortation or warning upon this incident. It belongs to that element in the parable which has no object except to fill up the outlines of a story which would be all the more interesting to its hearers because it recalled certain horrible incidents in their own recent history: in doing this—in being true to "life" as they knew it by a bitter experience—it had the effect, and (in some sense) the purpose, of misrepresenting Christ, so "that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand." Now if our Saviour chooses to set before our eyes an ugly picture of Himself which does Him serious injustice, we have no right to be displeased, because He told us beforehand that He was going to do so: but still less have we the right to pretend that (with due allowance) the picture *does* resemble Him—we *are* to think of Him as being like that. Does not a very large part of the Christian teaching habitually given on the basis of our Lord's parables fall under this condemnation?

The truth seems to be that our Lord's parables about Himself stand halfway between what we may call the Old Testment and the New Testament presentations of Him and of His work. Our fathers delighted greatly in such foreshadows as the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis xxii., or the vision of the blood-stained conqueror from Edom in Isaiah lxiii. We ourselves acknowledge with gratitude that they bear a partial, though often illusive, likeness to Him: but we are even more conscious that they combine with this likeness many features which are altogether odious.

We have therefore to a great extent, if not entirely, ceased to use them for teaching purposes. If we use them, it is with great caution, among such as are already instructed. The parables stand, no doubt, on a higher level: they illustrate in a hundred ways, with singular effectiveness, the very complex relationship in which our Saviour stands to us and we to Him. But they too combine many odious traits with their presentment of Christ—traits which belong not to Him, but to the wicked or worldly people whom He chose as the characters in His stories. In the face of this we shall assuredly abandon the notion of basing upon a parable any religious teaching which is not authenticated by the testimony of the New Testament in general, which is not sanctioned by what we believe concerning the real character of "Him with whom we have to do."

If this be accepted, we shall understand at once why the fourth Evangelist ignored altogether the parables of our Lord. Doubtless he set himself consciously and deliberately to draw such a picture of Christ as should do Him justice, and lay deep the necessary foundations for religious faith in the ages to come. For this purpose he realised that our Lord's parables, confusing and baffling as they are, were quite unsuitable: so he set them wholly on one side. We shall also understand why it is that in the Synoptic Gospels, side by side with a multitude of parables, we find an even greater multitude of miracles. No one can doubt that the miracles raise very considerable difficulties and seem (on the face of them) singularly useless. Unquestionably, regarded as forming part of an historical narrative, they are formidable hindrances to faith. But if one takes them in close connexion with the parables—as they stand in the narrative—their true value becomes evident at once. The parables, as we have seen, do grievous injustice to the character of Christ: above all, they represent Him as hard,

"austere," pitiless. The miracles with one voice proclaim that such an impression would be utterly false—that He was in truth the very opposite of this. Even those who cannot believe in the Gospel miracles as facts will agree that they represent the impression made upon the people by our Lord's personal ministry among them; that He must have had singular gifts, and must have used them in the way indicated. That is to say, He possessed gifts and powers which would have secured Him a great following in any age or land: but He used them so exclusively for the good of others and for the relief of suffering, and with such a rigid disregard of His own interests, that His enemies were never afraid of His hurting them. The whole and sole use of the miracles, we may say, is to infuse into the reader's mind an overwhelming conviction that Jesus Christ was (and therefore is) the most compassionate, the most friendly, the most pitiful, of all the Beings who have ever come in contact with the infinite sorrows and sufferings of mankind. And this conviction is immensely strengthened when we learn—what the narrative not obscurely intimates—that He never wrought "a miracle" except at the cost to Himself of exhaustion and (may be) suffering (Matt. viii. 17; compare Mark v. 30; vii. 34; John xi. 38).

Should we then ask "which of these two methods of self-manifestation gives us the real clue to His character?" the answer can only be, "facta non verba." It is a cynical saying that language was given unto man in order to conceal his meaning; but it is true, even of our Lord, in part. He manifested Himself in word, and the parables which He habitually used, and almost exclusively used with the common people, did grievous and manifold injustice to His character. He manifested Himself in deed, and He appeared to all men more loving and more lovable than any other ever was.

When we come to think of it, we perceive that what a man *says* in the way of self-explanation is limited, is coloured, by a thousand difficulties: what he *does*, in any sphere of action wherein he is free, declares the man. And it was precisely in this peculiar region of supernatural healing that our Lord found Himself practically alone, unhindered by the difficulties which beset ordinary mortals, untrammelled by the prejudices of other people, unmoved by anything but the impulses of a heart divinely pitiful and generous.

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