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The Evangelical Quarterly

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THE APOCALYPTIC NOTE IN MODERN PREACHING

IN this discussion of the Apocalyptic note in modern preaching, my aim is to select certain leading features from this body of revelation which bear on contemporary issues, and which we as preachers may profitably employ for the benefit of our hearers. I think I may claim that there is a certain fitness in this choice, seeing that this type of literature was born in the *Sturm und Drang* of dark and clouded days, and that it, as a consequence, has a peculiar relevance to the needs of a troubled age like ours. That Apocalypse is not the exotic product of one age but contains elements in its message which have abiding significance is clearly demonstrated by the fact that it was the bottle into which our Lord poured the new wine of His Gospel, and, if Principal Cairns is to be believed, the veiled vehicle into which He flung "the reserved elements in His thinking" on public questions. In our treatment of this subject we shall ignore the vast literature of this type that the later Jewish Church produced, and concentrate on the Christian product, and more especially on the Book of Revelation, that majestic *Divina Commedia* which closes the canon of Scripture. Let me then address myself to the task of applying to the present situation those elements in this peculiar literature that belong to its permanent message.

I

Our first application is to *the sphere of history*. We naturally enough try to find some clue to the meaning of events, some key that will unlock its fast-barred doors. We want to "see life steadily and see it whole", to unravel its complexities, to interpret its ambiguities, to sense its general drift. Great classical answers have been given to the question of the meaning

of the historic process, few of which satisfy the religious consciousness. The scientific view which held the field in Victorian days that there is an immanent force in the nature of things, an *élan vital* with a forward thrust, a principle at work which guarantees automatic progress, has been discredited by the events of contemporary experience. It has been supplanted in the minds of many by the philosophy underlying Communism, that history is the dialectical process which compasses the doom of the bourgeoisie and works on the side of the proletariat, in short, that history is the product of the clash of blind economic forces. Others frankly give up all hope of detecting any clue, and rest in some doctrine of "eternal recurrence" such as the Greeks held, or else become agnostic on the whole question. The late Professor H. A. L. Fisher in his preface to his book on European history spoke for not a few when he confessed regretfully that he could see in history no plot, rhythm or pre-determined pattern, he could see nothing but "one emergency following upon another, as wave follows wave". No Christian who believes in the God and Father of the Lord Jesus can rest in this position of nescience. He cannot accept the view that history is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". And as he casts about him for light on this question, he finds firm standing-ground in the Apocalypse. Its supreme merit is that it furnishes a *religious* view of history. Not that it stands alone in this regard. The sense of purpose in history is the ground plan of revealed religion. It is the burden of the prophetic message of Israel. But the Apocalyptic message differs from the Prophetic in this regard, that its canvass is vaster, its sphere of reference infinitely more extended. Its interest in history no longer oscillates round the chosen people, their fortunes and their vocation, but round world-empires and kingdoms and their rôle in the unfolding purposes of God. The whole vast drama of history assumes a cosmic aspect, and the controlling influence that fits the disjointed fragments together and gives to them a coherent plan is a power beyond history. It ought to be noticed, too, as this is a point generally overlooked, that the supreme and sovereign Disposer of events makes His influence felt not merely at the beginning and end of history but also throughout its entire process. His are the delicate fingers which on the loom of Time weave the threads, dark or bright, which are wrought into the garment called history. Some

of these threads are very dark, and we hear much of the calamities and tragedies which form an integral part of the time-order. We are led to believe that all that happens on the earth is an outcome of what is decreed in heaven. The book of human destiny, according to John, is already written by the fingers of God, and from beginning to end it is present before Him. It is sealed with seven seals, and cannot be read by our limited human intelligence. Only one Person is worthy to open the book, the Lamb that was slain. In other words, there is no clue to history apart from the redemptive purpose of God in Christ. And as the Lamb breaks the seals, the contents of the book are poured forth upon the earth; the panorama of history unrolls under the shaping hand of God to a glorious redemptive end. Surely this is a view of history well worth proclaiming. It is a profoundly religious interpretation. And in these modern days, when mechanistic views of history hold the field, blind forces contending with each other "like ignorant armies clashing in the night", men may turn with a sense of relief to a view that introduces intelligence and redemptive meaning and purpose into the movement of history.

II

Passing now to a second point, this type of literature has something to offer the modern preacher in the way of light on *the moral struggle*, and its final issue.

The Apocalypse is acutely, almost morbidly, conscious of the dual nature of the ethical struggle. Good and evil stand over against each other in stark contradiction. There are no intermediate stages where the colours merge into each other. The lines of the picture are all drawn in black or white. The moral struggle takes the shape of two contending camps that are drawn up against each other in battle array. There is no ground between the two except battle-ground. The opposing forces are personalised; Michael fighting with the Devil, Christ confronting Antichrist, the Lamb making war on the Beast. In the ensuing struggle between the principal contestants and their organised supporters there is no possibility of compromise, nor of their understanding each other or ever coming to terms. They stand for opposite ways of life, and when they meet it is war *à l'outrance*. Men must take sides, and if they refuse,

“ the choice goes by for ever twixt the darkness and the light ”. One of the things we need to recover to-day is this stern attitude to evil, this healthy recoil from it, this uncompromising protest against it, this apocalyptic sense of the decisive and critical nature of the ethical conflict. Moreover it ought to be observed, as John suggests in his vision, that evil, so far from exhausting itself by the output of its energy, and becoming self-destructive, tends rather to increase in virulence and violence, in resource and ingenuity. It battens rankly and luxuriantly on the spoils of its own conquests. It intensifies its pressure and quickens its pulse-beat up to the very last trial of its strength in some final fatal field of Armageddon. This sense of the gravity of evil, its subtlety, its resoluteness, its resourcefulness, its unrelaxing pressure, its claim to occupy ground in its own right, and set up a counter-kingdom, this stern note should find a ready echo in the hearts of modern hearers who are no strangers to the death grapple “ with evil things ”. As to the final issue of the conflict, the teaching of John is both pessimistic and optimistic. It is pessimistic as regards the possibility of redemption of the time-order from the evil in which it lies. Slight indeed is the hope it holds out of spiritual forces so permeating and transfusing the present Satan-ridden age as to change it into something better. Nothing can be done with the present age except to destroy it and all the works and workers of iniquity. It is optimistic, however, as to the final issue of the struggle. There can only be one issue, and that is the victory of God. The beasts and their kingdoms will disappear, and yield place to the empire of the Son of Man. Satan and all his deluded victims will be cast into the lake of fire. The ground of this conviction in the final triumph of good rests in the nature, the power and purpose of God. Because the Lord God omnipotent reigneth, the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ. It would be easy to criticise the Apocalyptic outlook on the problem of evil, but meantime let us do justice to the virility of this creed. When an insolent and swaggering secularism threatens to destroy all the values for which Christianity stands, might not the Christian Church do well to listen again to this virile note, and find in its confident reminder that the final issue is never in doubt the rallying cry for the restoration of its sagging life ?

III

A third note in this message which has a direct bearing on modern preaching is its message of *comfort to beleaguered Christians* in troubled times. In this connection the practical aim of Apocalyptic writers must not be ignored. The book of Revelation is a tract for the times, and it was designed to support the faith of sore-bested Christians during the killing times of the Roman persecutions. In his book John cannot hold out any promise to the Christians of his time that their spiritual loyalty would secure immunity from suffering. He himself was in the isle called Patmos "for the testimony of Jesus", and he suggests he was merely sharing a fate common to others. Christians must share the misfortunes of life in common with pagans. They cannot and should not expect to contract out of the natural order with its inevitable crop of calamities, catastrophes, and woes. The vials are poured out on them as well as those who are guilty, but with this difference that Christians are sealed and marked by God, and that the vials fall on them not as punishment but as trial. *That* they would all understand, and it would be no problem to them. It was different with that other range of sufferings which fell upon them because of their loyalty to Christ. These were exceeding bitter and hard to bear and difficult to understand. Their lot was like that of the Confessional Church in Germany to-day, whose sufferings arise out of the conflict between the time-order and the Eternal order. The tyranny of the great Leviathan has always meant for the Church the sufferings of the "great tribulation": "Zion in her anguish with Babylon doth cope." The Apocalypse offers to people in this case great fortifying compensations. For one thing loyal Christians will be delivered from the oppressive burden of having to endure *unintelligible* suffering. They would see a meaning in it because they would know it to be part and parcel of the will of God for them. They would see that they were designed to carry forward His purpose of good. Their sufferings also were underscoring their witness, printing in italics the truth of God in unbelieving hearts. Like a flaming light they lit up the darkness of heathenism and exposed its unworthiness. They also knew that suffering was allowed of God for disciplinary ends, and in its crucible their souls were being made worthy to take their place in the emerging Divine order. They also

knew that their sufferings brought them near to God, His presence and His support and His companionship was ample compensation for all they had to endure. The souls of the martyrs were always near to the altar of God. Knowing all this, fortified by such conviction, aware that suffering had a context beyond itself, they had the further assurance that the time they had to bear them was short, and that presently they would be translated into the tearless and blissful life that lay just beyond this sphere of mortal strife. It would be interesting here to trace the intimate connection between the Apocalyptic message and the eschatological hope. Perhaps it is enough to say that the one gave rise to the other. The great heavenly hope was born in the wreckage of all earthly hopes. It was the disorders of the present moral order that gave birth to the certainty of a future life where all earthly anomalies would be rectified. And let it be carefully noted, that this assurance of personal immortality was not the outcome of a need for compensation, that is of the need of future reward to make up for present suffering, it arose rather through the necessity of justifying God's ways with men. That is to say, it was the pressure of an acute moral issue and not anything metaphysical in the nature of man that yielded this golden hope. In this respect Christian apocalypse differs from Greek speculation. All these compensations for a life of suffering are abiding realities, as applicable to-day as when first uttered. One can understand how in Germany to-day this Gospel is stressed almost to the exclusion of any other. But indeed even under normal conditions it has its place and value. To the Christian Church it has a special relevancy. For the Christian Church is always an alien institution in the secular world. Even when the marches are more clearly "redd" between Church and State, as they are in this country, there is always an uneasy tension in the minds of Christians as to what they owe to Caesar as citizens, and what they owe to God as members of the commonwealth of grace. I can quite easily envisage a period, when the secular arm even in Democratic countries, encroaching as it tends to do more and more on the rights of personal freedom, will create a situation when the uneasy tension will become acute conflict. At all events the essential conditions of our problem are always present with us, and we shall continue to need the challenge this Gospel addresses to us, of loyalty to conviction, at whatever cost, of faithfulness

to the divine order in scorn of consequence, and the assurance of ample divine support to carry us through all our trials. "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee the crown of life."

IV

Turning now to another facet of our subject, let me dwell for a little on the relation of this message to *the new social hopes* to which our age is giving birth. I can only offer here a few tentative suggestions. It should be borne in mind that the main, though not the sole interest, of Apocalyptic writers is not in the historic process itself so much as in its end. It is chiefly concerned with the *dénouement* of history, that one divine event to which the whole creation moves. Its emphasis is on the new order that will emerge, when the present order shall be dissolved catastrophically "like the insubstantial fabric of a dream". At this point it aligns itself with the social hopes that have haunted and disturbed the thoughts of mankind since the dawn of history. "Man never is, but always to be blest." The human race has a forward-looking tendency, and "the rapture of this forward view" has given birth to noble Utopias, such as Plato's Republic, Rousseau's Social Contract, More's Utopia and other similar works. To-day it is finding its most striking expression in the social passion to build Jerusalem in this green and pleasant earth. It looks as if no experience to the contrary, no failure to achieve this ambition, will ever deflect the will of mankind from the prosecution of this laudable purpose. However much human schemes have been wrecked by brutal obstacles, however much the historic process has resisted this line of development, men have picked up the broken fragments and resumed their march to the beckoning goal. To this extent the Apocalyptic hope aligns itself with the enduring hopes of mankind. It also cherishes the dream of a future age of gold. It also believes in a future consummation, when the divine purpose on earth will reach an end worthy of itself. Apocalypse possesses a full-blooded teleology. It is not of course contended here that the end envisaged in Apocalyptic literature can be equated with modern social Utopianism. This, however, we can confidently affirm, that the modern conception of social progress can only be rationally held within some such framework as the Apocalyptic scheme presupposes.

It is therefore all the more surprising that our modern reformers should disregard the reinforcement such an outlook would give to their social efforts. It is true that Karl Marx, influenced by his Jewish heritage, employs the technique of Apocalyptic, its crisis and revolution, but there his dependence ends. What is really significant in Apocalyptic, its religious implications, he ignores, and so do all the others. And the reason is not far to seek. They turn from it, as the Jews rejected their Apocalyptic heritage in the first century A.D., and for the same reason. The ground of its offence is that it is predestinarian and evangelical. The Jew growingly put his trust in the law and not in the Gospel, and sought salvation in its precepts rather than in the initiative of God. Our modern social reformers are likewise predominantly legalistic. With their hands they seek to build the Jerusalem of their dreams. With human sagacity and skill and the aid of applied science they seek to construct their El Dorados. By human planning, by programmes of reconstruction, by blue-prints, and the educative and coercive power of legislation they seek to fashion anew the earth. The Apocalyptic message stands as a perpetual protest against these autosoteric schemes of human salvation. Its message is that man has no help but in the name of the Lord who made Heaven and earth. The New Jerusalem is not built by human hands, it descends from God out of Heaven. It is by a fiat of the Almighty, by divine intervention, through crisis and cataclysm, that all things become new. Salvation does not emerge within the historic process, but through a force acting on it from without. There is another side to this, of course, but this view certainly puts the emphasis on the right place. It reminds us that it is not in man to direct his steps aright and least of all to construct a righteous social order, apart from the help of God. If man, Atlas-like, seeks to carry this monstrous burden on his toiling shoulders, he sinks under its weight and falls into a state of disillusionment or despair. There is something intractable in nature, some resistant medium that is not malleable to human action, some hostile element that defies and in the end defeats mere human endeavour. I was talking recently to one of Glasgow's M.P.s, a left-winger, who characterised religion as "small beer". Yet he was a man passionately concerned for the uplift of the poor. I asked him how he felt about all his efforts for social uplift. He frankly confessed that

he was a disappointed man, that he met nothing but resistance, and that he could show only slender fruit of all his labours. Every generation needs to learn afresh this lesson of the failure of the human race to achieve its own salvation. And this Apocalyptic note will not have been preached in vain if mankind to-day, facing the task of rebuilding the shattered structure of our civilisation, lays to heart the truth it so easily forgets: "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it."

V

These then are the notes in the Apocalyptic message to which I should like to draw attention. It would be easy to point out its limitations. It has been criticised for limiting too narrowly the field of human activity. When William Carey summoned the Christian Church to prosecute seriously the task of world-evangelism, certain sections of the Church turned the edge of his challenge by affirming that this was God's task and not theirs. Someone has wittily caricatured this complacency thus:

Sit down, O men of God!
His Kingdom He will bring
Whenever it shall please His Will;
You cannot do a thing.

We know that there are sects of Christians who seriously take this view, and contract out of all social obligations on the ground that it is not their province to do the work of God. That this is a false reading of the message is clear by reference to the Book of Revelation, and the vigorous summons addressed there to the seven Churches to play their part in the great redemptive drama. A more serious limitation is the absoluteness of the chasm which Apocalyptic makes between the temporal and the eternal order, so that the one does not impinge on the other, and in no way grows out of it. Under its scheme there is practically no place for the play of redemptive forces. This is a real difficulty which can only be resolved by importing into the starkness of its message those elements in our Lord's teaching which bridge this cleavage. Cognate to this is its incomplete solution of the problem of evil, in that evil is not transformed but destroyed, and that by a *tour de force*, by a naked fiat of the Almighty. The time-element also is another difficulty, its tendency to stress the imminence of the end, with which the

facts of history conflict. The notes of mercy and grace are but rarely struck. God "is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored ; He hath loosed the fatal lightnings of His terrible swift sword". We scarcely recognise in its sternness the sunny notes of the Galilean Gospel in which God is not so much Judge as Father, the brightness of Whose love embraces the evil as well as the good, and Whose passion is to seek and to save that which is lost. But what is all this but to say that Apocalypse is not complete in itself? It needs to be completed by reference to the use that Christ made of it.

Yet perhaps by its very onesidedness it calls attention to aspects of truth we easily overlook. It should not be forgotten that the central aspects of its message were countersigned by Christ Himself. He found in this system of Jewish thought a vehicle which could carry His new message of the Kingdom more truly than any other alternative system at His disposal. It strikes these great religious notes which time cannot dim, nor experience efface. It publishes the truth of a divine order in the natural world. It exalts the sovereignty of God over creation and history. It stresses the critical nature of moral choice. It exposes the gravity of evil. It proclaims the certainty of divine judgment. It emphasises the given-ness of salvation and the total inability of man to achieve it by his own efforts. It enunciates in ringing tones the refusal of God to acquiesce in a state of evil, and prophesies with certainty its elimination from the earth by the power of God. Finally it unfolds the increasing purpose of the ages, and points to the end of creation's long travail. The vision of such an end, be it distant or near, is one worthy of its Creator, and is well calculated to create and enrich faith, and to fortify the heart of believers in a dark and troubled age.

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