

“The Apocalypse of Jesus.”*

STRICTLY speaking, all revelation is apocalypse. We use the word however in a specialised, but generally understood sense. It is an uncovering of that which is not disclosed to normal human sight; it is the seer's account of his vision of things that are, and things that are to be; it is the peculiar style of utterance in which such visions, actual or supposed, are described; it is the language of vivid imagery and symbolism by means of which mysteries of the invisible world or of future happenings are presented to the mind of man.

There was a large out-put of apocalyptic literature in the centuries immediately preceding and following our Lord's appearance on earth. The outstanding example of pre-Christian apocalypse is preserved to us in the book of Daniel; and in the great Christian apocalypse with which the New Testament closes, we reach the culminating point of this remarkable series of writings. Between the two stands Jesus. “The testimony of Jesus” upholds the inspiration of the book of Daniel; while the writer of our Christian book of the Revelation is convinced that the “testimony of Jesus” is the spirit of his own prophecy. When we turn to the Gospels, we find that the “testimony of Jesus” is largely given in the language of apocalypse.

The title of this paper probably suggests that its subject is the discourse to the disciples on the Mount of Olives, in which their Master, a few days before His death, gave to them solemn warning of coming events. That discourse is sometimes described as the “Apocalypse of Jesus.” It would seem unwise however to restrict the application of this title to that single utterance. There are so many others that ought to be included. Indeed, it might well be almost the surprise of a new discovery to some, on reading again through the four-fold record from this point of view, to notice how apocalyptic ideas and modes of expression mingle with Christ's teachings on the Divine simplicities of religious experience and practice. He spoke to men in manifold ways. We find in His words the painstaking lucidity of the teacher, the authoritative declarations of the law-giver, the righteous exhortations and denunciations of the prophet, the kindly speech of brotherhood and friendship—but we find again and again the mystic word of the seer.

* An Address to the Northamptonshire Baptist Fraternal.

It is this last aspect of His teaching as a whole, which is the subject of our present inquiry. Probably, the most difficult question of New Testament exegesis is the question of the interpretation of apocalyptic language on the lips of Jesus. It is difficult because the subject-matter lies, for the most part, beyond the range of our verification. It is difficult because it is so elusive, because it baffles our attempts to arrange it into a self-consistent scheme. It is difficult because it seems to run counter to our modern ideas of evolution—albeit, a Divinely-guided evolution—a gradual progress through the ages, in spite of many set-backs, to the perfect ordering of human life on this planet. Jesus, in His forecast of the future, seems rather to say that conditions will at last become so desperate, that only His personal and visible return to earth, will avail to bring order out of the chaos. The whole subject bristles with unanswered questions. One feels the need of treading with the utmost caution at every turn. In this region of ideas, we are up against mystery all the time. The mystery is largely the mystery of the consciousness of Jesus Himself. The becoming attitude is reverence—a willingness to be taught, a recognition of the necessary limitations of our minds, a readiness to take on trust things at present beyond our understanding.

Now the researches of scholars during the past half-century have made it abundantly clear that during the life-time of Jesus the very air of Judea and Galilee was charged with apocalyptic ideas and expectations. In one form or another, men held the belief that some signal act of Divine intervention was at hand. They looked for the advent of the Messiah, and the establishment of the kingdom of God. It was no wonder that writings which claimed to give disclosures of God's secret counsels, made a strong appeal to the popular mind. Neither, from any point of view, is it any wonder that the language of Jesus should often be distinctly reminiscent of writings that held so high a place in the regard of those to whom He was speaking. When, however, we ask what significance is to be attached to such language, widely different views emerge.

Some there are, who hold the view that this is a clear example of the human limitations of Jesus: He shared the outlook of His time. They would say that, in regard to matters of academic or scientific interest, His mental equipment was no greater than that of the age in which He lived; and that, while His example and His practical teaching are authoritative for us, and while His sacrifice and the power of His endless life may be the means of our redemption, we are not required to accept information from Him on subjects with which it was no essential

part of His mission to deal. My trouble with that attitude, when it is taken up with regard to the apocalyptic language used by Jesus, is that, in this aspect of His teaching, we do not find merely occasional or incidental allusions to current beliefs, but an obvious purpose to impart information and often to correct current beliefs—though always with a very practical aim. His words on things unseen and things to come are for the most part so inseparably associated with moral and spiritual teaching, that to attempt to dissociate them is to deprive some of His most impressive sayings of their power.

There are others who take the view that Jesus deliberately accommodated Himself to the thoughts of His hearers and, in order to win acceptance for His teaching, clothed it in language with which they were familiar. There is, as we know, a Christian principle of accommodation based on sympathy—“I am become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some”: but to suggest that Jesus seemingly accepted ideas of little or no value in themselves, and that He used them as a kind of rough and ready-made foundation, on which to super-impose ideas of true worth, rather savours of unreality if not of actual dishonesty. It is hardly likely that a super-structure so supported would stand the test of time! It is surely far easier to believe that any language used by Jesus had a real meaning for Him, and that every idea or set of ideas adopted in His teaching, had for Him a deep and abiding value.

Yet again, there are others who accept in all simplicity the teaching of Jesus just as it stands. They are content to let it make its own impression on their minds along with the rest of Scripture. They have certain clear beliefs that satisfy them and enable them to get on with their job in the world. They say: The Lord is coming again: we know not the day nor the hour: we must be found ready when he comes, fulfilling the task He has appointed for us. You know the kind of people I mean. I am not thinking of cranks; nor of those who are intolerant of other opinions: but of those who, in their child-like reliance upon whatever is written, and their daily endeavour to translate their faith into actual experience, are thus enabled to live lives of real saintliness amid all the stress and distraction of this modern world. There is something enviable in their attitude of mind. There is about them a serenity, a confidence, a simple consistency that does not characterise the Church of Christ as a whole in these days. The circle of ideas in which they move is pervaded by the romance of religion. The spirit of adventure is in them. They dwell on the frontiers of a land of mystery, into which they must be prepared at any moment to

move forward. They find in themselves the strongest possible incentives to holy living. The Master's words of solemn exhortation and warning, in view of the approaching end, come to them with their original force unspent through the lapse of centuries. It is just here that the significance of their attitude lies. Most of us, I imagine, could not persuade ourselves to think of things in their way without doing violence to our intellect. Yet, I am persuaded that the effect produced in their lives by the words of Jesus regarding His coming, and the end of the age, is the kind of result at which He aimed in speaking those words. Whatever construction we may put upon His language, it does seem clear that no interpretation can possibly be adequate, which does not tend naturally to produce in the minds of disciples an earnest response to such a word as this: "What I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch."

My purpose then, for this occasion, is to indicate—it can be no more than that—the kind of interpretation that commends itself to me. Perhaps it is hardly necessary to say that I am not in the company of those who imagine that the prophetic and apocalyptic portions of the Bible were given with the idea of enabling curious minds in this or any age to draw a "plan of the ages," and to write history in advance. The elaborate schemes that have been worked out, the "keys" that have been constructed to unlock the door of mystery, have not been of the Lord's making. The sort of teaching with which some of us have become sadly familiar in "Russellism" and Christadelphianism is instinctively felt by the average Christian to be utterly foreign to the mind of Jesus. We must keep close to Him. His teaching must be our constant reference in considering all other things that have been written. Our discussion at this time is limited to the words of Jesus, not simply because to go beyond them would take us into too wide a field, nor because they provide a convenient starting point, but because of the conviction that His words must be the fixed centre around which all our thinking as Christians must needs revolve. We assume of course that in the Gospels we have a substantially accurate record of His teaching—though we may have to admit that in the fourth Gospel some of it probably comes to us in the form of interpretation, rather than of a verbatim report.

Two questions need to be kept in mind. (1) To what extent, and in what way, were the mysteries of the unseen and the future open to the view of our Lord? (2) To what extent, and with what intent, did He seek to disclose these to His disciples? The first of these may seem a bold question. A complete answer to it is not possible. To think about it is inevitable. Two well-

known sayings come to one's mind with haunting persistence. They lead, it seems to me, to the heart of the problem. Rightly to interpret these is most important. There can be no doubt that a true and adequate interpretation of them would give, at least in principle, the answer to our two questions.

The first is this: “Of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.” Extreme critics allow that to be a genuine utterance of Jesus, because of its confession of ignorance! As if He, or His disciples for Him, ever laid claim to omniscience! Obviously He asked questions, sometimes with the simple object of eliciting information which He required. Yet the impression made upon men by all His teaching was summed up in the word “authority.” He spoke as one who knew at first hand: not as a seer, reporting his visions. He spoke as one whose knowledge was not mediated, but directly derived from the Source of all illumination. After all these centuries, this is still the feeling produced by His reported words, even in highly critical minds. This very confession of ignorance conveys the impression of authority. “Neither the Son,” He says—as though there were something quite surprising in that. These words moreover follow immediately upon a claim that surely no other teacher has ever dared to make: “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away.” That in its turn is preceded by the statement: “This generation shall not pass away, until all these things be accomplished.” He has no doubt as to the validity of His claim, or the certainty of the things He has been describing. It is only “that day or that hour” that is beyond the province of His knowledge. What day? What hour? The clear reference seems to be to the passing away of heaven and earth. “That day” is the familiar prophetic phrase for the fulfilment of some great purpose of God. “Many will say to Me in that day.” “Of that day or that hour knoweth no man.” Do not the words suggest that the very idea of the day is mystery, something belonging to the secret counsels of God, the nature of which is not disclosed? It is not some fixed and pre-determined point of time to which Jesus is making allusion here. It is something of far greater importance than any point or period of time can be. “That day or that hour” is best regarded as a symbolic expression for that which, in the nature of the case, can be known only to God. It is surely a mistake to think of ordinary days and hours at all in this connection. “That day” is a reality hidden in the heart of the Father. It is part of the incommunicable mystery of the Divine consciousness. It is of the nature of eternity. It may have its

manifestations on the field of time, but it represents a principle eternally operative in the life of God Himself. It is for ever God's own secret—just how His eternal righteousness and judgment determine the course of events in heaven or on earth. The Son knows the Father so perfectly as to know that there is that in the Father which He cannot know. Christ himself stands outside the ultimate mystery—the mystery of God's conscious relationship to the created universe. Yet He is the supreme expression of that mystery.—God's secret disclosed in the Incarnation. Only God can know His own relation to the changes and developments brought about in His ordering of the universe. So the "one far-off Divine event" will be the disclosure of "that day," one more disclosure of the secret locked up in the heart of the Eternal, and remaining His secret still.

The second is this: "It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set within His own authority. But ye shall receive power," &c. Here is a statement of the principle apart from which, we may be sure, Christ would give no disclosure of the future to His disciples. The concern of the disciple, as a disciple, is not primarily with knowledge, but with power—and with knowledge only as it contributes to power. "Though I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, . . . and have not love, I am nothing."

Now just as our Lord's allusion to "that day" leads us back to the thought of an ultimate mystery in the life of God, so this second saying conveys a similar suggestion. The risen Jesus, it is worth while to note, does not commit himself to any idea of the restoration of a political kingdom to Israel. It is not true, as some have maintained, that His silence implies support for the disciples' expectation of a political future for the Jewish nation. That is a matter of minor importance, and He lets it pass without comment. What is far more important than any such question is the Lord's reiteration of the principle that times and seasons, eras and epochs, are a mystery hidden in the heart of God. The "course and periods of time" have been placed by the Father within His own authority. These are matters beyond the province of our minds. It is enough for us to know that. Not for a moment can we believe that our Lord's words give any countenance at all to the purely Jewish notion, that God has, as it were, a plan spread out before Him, to which the course of events on this earth and elsewhere must rigidly conform. That would be fatalism indeed. All Jesus says is that times and seasons are God's own affair. His words suggest again the thought that what men call times and seasons represent an eternal principle at work in God's providential ordering of His

universe. We might call it God's readiness to use His opportunity. “When the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman.” The state of the world was such that it was opportune for God to intervene in the coming of Jesus. It marked an epoch in this world's history. Only God could know that it was the right time. Back of the time lay that eternal something in God, which makes His intervention always exactly opportune. Man cannot know when any time of God should come; he is not always wise enough to see when it has come: “Ye cannot discern the signs of the times,” said Jesus to the Pharisees; and again, to Jerusalem, “Thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.”

God—always knowing the time of His opportunity!

Man—so often perversely unable to see his own opportunity in God's time!

God's opportunity for the accomplishment of any of His great purposes for this world is conditioned by man's acceptance of his own spiritual opportunity. That is why the disciple's concern is with power, responsiveness, and influence, rather than with predictions of coming events. God's future is held up, and not hastened, by irreverent curiosity in regard to mysteries which are not for man to know.

Many would-be interpreters of apocalypse have surely stumbled here. They have been more concerned about periods than about principles. It is admitted that imagery and symbolism are characteristic of this kind of speech and writing. Why then should not “times and seasons” be interpreted symbolically, instead of literally? Students of apocalyptic literature know well that certain kinds of numbers are always found in association with certain ideas. Seven, ten, and their multiples, signify completeness, perfection, the fulfilment of God's will. Other numbers suggest broken periods, the temporary frustration of Divine purposes. So the Millennium ceases to be a specified length of time. The futile controversies of the past, between Pre-Millennialists and Post-Millennialists, tend to fade into obscurity. The Millennium is the expression of an idea. It represents the fulfilment of an ideal. It is the Divine opportunity meeting at last with the looked-for response from a community that knows the time of its visitation. According to Revelation, even in such conditions the power of evil lifts up its head once more, but now, at long last, it is infinitely outweighed by the forces of righteousness, and is finally swept into oblivion.

This detour into the book of the Revelation may be continued a little further without really taking us away from our subject.

It may serve the purpose of emphasising the thought of a timeless reality in the life of God manifesting itself in the field of time. That thought receives unique expression in that verse which speaks of our Lord as "the Lamb that hath been slain from the foundation of the world." The Atonement belongs to the mystery of God's very being. During the progress of revelation many partial unfoldings of that mystery were given. "But when the fulness of the time was come," God found His completest possible self-expression in a Human Life of perfect goodness, accepting the inevitable suffering involved in the closest contact with a sinful world. So we think of the Incarnation as representing the timeless reality of love and self-giving and sacrifice that belong to the very nature of God; and we think of the Millennium as an ideal for the human race, eternally in the heart of God, and still awaiting the fulness of the time for its final manifestation on the plane of this world's life. There may be other expressions of that ideal in a world that as yet is hidden from our view. In similar fashion we may think of the Day of Judgment, to which Jesus often refers. The phrase becomes a symbol for a reality that centres in a world where space and time, as we know them, have small significance. "That day" may belong to the eternal "Now"; and the sequence between the Judgment and the Millennium, as it is described in the book of Revelation, may have to be conceived as logical and moral rather than temporal. We know that the word "eternal" as used in Scripture refers primarily to quality, and only secondarily to duration. It is a word that relates directly to the nature of God Himself. Eternal life is life with Divine quality in it. Eternal punishment is punishment that belongs to the eternal recoil of the Divine Holiness from what is evil, and the eternal purpose to abolish what is hopelessly and irremediably evil. In like manner we may have to take many other phrases, the surface meaning of which is a reference to time, or to a particular day on which certain events will come to pass, and try to see the underlying and hidden meaning. Behind descriptions of things to come, there is always the spiritual principle which may have many progressive applications in the out-working of human destiny, both in this world and the world unseen. It may even be that the hope of the coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead will have to be regarded as standing for spiritual realities which may have more than one kind of manifestation.

To think along such lines does seem to be a necessary condition of finding a satisfactory interpretation of much of our Lord's teaching. Just as in His parables He makes use of

familiar happenings to represent spiritual truth, so He sometimes uses terms relating to space and time to symbolise realities belonging to an order of being to which ideas of space and time, as we know them, do not properly apply. He plainly tells us that there are matters in regard to which it is beside the point to say, Lo, here! or, Lo, there! They do not belong to that order of things at all. In the same way, when we are considering expressions which represent that which belongs to our very conception of the Godhead, it may sometimes be singularly inappropriate to ask, Where? or When? There are things in God's hidden world beyond the power of human speech to utter. We feel that Jesus is immediately aware of such things. Many a time His words lead up to a point where they seem to stop short, as in the presence of inexpressible mysteries. As we follow Him in His teaching, we must be prepared at any moment to lift our thoughts to the contemplation of things that are not on the plane of this world's life at all. Behind His warnings and His forecastings of the future stand the eternities, to which His mind is intimately related. He speaks of this age in virtue of His knowledge of the age to come. If He foreshadows in any sense the course of human history in this world, it is through His awareness of the working-out of human destinies in the unseen. If He speaks of His coming-again, it is because He knows that, having once been identified with the life of humanity in this world, He can never really be separated from it. His relation to our race has its origin in eternity, and is eternally inviolable. Who would dare to limit the insight and foresight of such a personality as His? Who shall say in what deeps of His Divine-human consciousness all these impressive words on things unseen and things to come have their rise?

Now one ought to go on from this point to illustrate what has been said by means of a detailed examination of at least some of the portions of Christ's teaching that are obviously apocalyptic in character. Such a procedure is impossible within the limits of this paper. We must try to bring our study to a conclusion in a way that is more practicable. This at least must be said. As Christian preachers it ought to be possible for us to lay stress on this aspect of Gospel teaching, as we inevitably do on other aspects. Some of us might have to confess to a measure of evasion in this regard hitherto. For myself I should be obliged to admit that there has been little of this kind of language with which I should be able to deal in a convincing and satisfying way. Recently, however, I have arrived at a simple working theory, which seems to open up passages that previously I could hardly touch in public ministry. Roughly

stated, it would be something like this:—There is no doubt that our Lord predicted certain happenings, which He saw would inevitably take place in the course of human history on this earth. Notably He foretold the judgment on Jerusalem. That event had its spiritual significance, as indeed is the case with all events of history. It was not only an act of judgment: it was also a parable of judgment. Jesus knew it must happen. He saw that the spirit in the Jewish nation which was bringing Him to the cross, was bound to lead on to the suicidal conflict with Rome, and the destruction of the city. That coming terrible event represented for Him an unseen reality that could have other occasions of manifestation. Moreover, this day of judgment was associated in His thought with the idea of the coming of the Son of man—certainly an invisible coming at that time it proved to be. Now, many of the words of Jesus have a first application to things that have happened, or are going to happen, on this earth—but even so, they represent eternal principles which can only have their full and final application in the world unseen. This then is the principle of interpretation on which it seems reasonable to proceed. When we find it impossible to imagine how His words can in any sense be descriptive of things visible—whether past, present, or future,—we may take refuge in the thought that they have their fulfilment in that transcendent world to which we all really belong. As a matter of practice, when we find ourselves unable to express in modern language the spiritual meaning of the most mysterious utterances of Jesus, we must not neglect to read them in public. They will make their own impression, and it will probably be not far removed from that which He intended.

Here are a few thoughts in conclusion, which one's study of this side of the Master's teaching has helped to make more real.

Christ comes at every crisis in the history of the world. That is to say, there is a special revelation of His presence in the things that are happening to all who are spiritually prepared. That word "Parousia," which is so often translated "coming" in our English Bible, is a word of beautiful appeal. It suggests the idea of Christ standing by—even as the martyr Stephen had a vision of the Lord standing up to help him in his hour of extremity. The destruction of Jerusalem is the great illustration. If one half of what Josephus describes is to be accepted, it was a time of tribulation without precedent, and without subsequent repetition. I think of Jesus standing by at that time, ready to help all who could receive His help. I think of Him standing by, like the gardener in the parable, no longer able to ward off the impending judgment, but doing everything possible to

mitigate it, succouring His saints in their distress, ready at any moment to receive them to Himself. God's judgments mostly appear on this earth in the breaking-up of groups of men, organised on wrong principles. Such dissolution is always attended with suffering, but in these times there is always the Parousia.

The Day of Resurrection is surely in the eternal Now. The idea of remaining in a sort of semi-existence until the end of this present age is of as little use to most of us as it was to Martha. It is hard to imagine any reason for a prolonged interval between the passing of a child of God from the conditions of this life and the entrance upon the condition of full immortality. A similar conception of the Day of Judgment is not necessarily inconsistent with Christ's description of the assembly of nations before the throne of His glory. You remember in Studdert Kennedy's *Rough Rhymes of a Padre* the soldier's dream of what might be awaiting him beyond death. He stood, a solitary soul, in the presence of One who looked upon him and then said, "Well?" That was enough. He would sooner go through unnamed torments than contemplate the prospect of being faced with that searching, heart-breaking question from the One whom, more than all, he had injured by his sin.

"And boys, I'd sooner shrivel up in the flames of a burning 'ell, Than 'ave to stand, and see 'Is face, and 'ear 'Is voice say, "Well?" It is easy to believe, in the light of our knowledge of Jesus, that such a picture represents reality. The Day of Judgment may have numberless manifestations, in the case of nations and individuals, both in this world and the world beyond.

When we read our Lord's exhortations, telling us to watch and to be ready, it may be helpful to think that He is really asking us to make His opportunity for Him. He is always wanting to come in a special way to the particular community with which we are associated. What He means by watching He interprets for us in His parable of the servants who were given each their job to do. The spiritual world, the world of God's kingdom, is all about us, waiting to break in upon us and to transform earthly conditions, whenever we are ready. The Lord is at hand! If we do not make ready for His coming in grace and power, we may find ourselves surprised by a coming in judgment. In one or other of these modes of dealing with souls or societies, with Christians or Churches, He is ever on the point of appearing. "Be ye also ready."

As to the future of this world, Christ's words suggest that it will go on with its times of travail leading on to the birth

of better times in proportion as His coming is recognised and welcomed, until at last His completest coming brings about the consummation of the age. What that will prove to mean, who can say? One thing we cannot believe, and that is that human life will gradually die out from this planet, as its energies become exhausted, until the last lonely mortal gives up the struggle of existence, and the world is left wheeling its way through space—a cold, silent, unoccupied globe. Long before that can happen, we may surely believe that the life of this race will have been translated into another sphere. Whether Jesus in His glory, will ever be manifested again on this earth in visible form, as a Person to be seen by mortal eyes, is a question that must needs be left open. No word of Scripture concerning His appearing compels us to give this literally physical interpretation of it. That His kingdom is to triumph on earth, the prayer He has given us makes certain. We pray in hope—the hope that must needs spring eternal in the *Christian* breast. The scene of Christ's humiliation will become increasingly the scene of His manifested glory. The final outcome, however, cannot belong to a world which, in the nature of things, must pass away. It is hidden from our view in that transcendent region of mystery, where the glowing ideals of our eternal Lord find their perfect fulfilment in an endless progress from glory unto glory.

E. L. BEECHAM.

“IF we have regard to consecrated abilities and purity and beauty of character, there is perhaps hardly a nobler figure to be found in the whole Reformation movement.” So we wrote concerning the Anabaptist Hans Denck, in “An early ‘Baptist’ View of Scripture” (*Baptist Quarterly*, January 1923), and so we still think. We therefore give a ready welcome to the handy little monograph on him from the pen of Mr. Coutts, published by McNiven Wallace (price 5s. net.). He begins with a review of Denck's sorely chequered life, and then passes to a detailed sketch of his views, which is based upon a direct study of Denck's own writings. While Mr. Coutts is a sincere admirer of Denck's great qualities he is no indiscriminating eulogist. He concludes his book with a critical estimate of Denck's teaching, which calls attention to its weaker as well as its stronger places. Altogether this volume furnishes us with a convenient and dependable introduction to one who, besides being both a beautiful and pathetic figure, was in a number of points astonishingly in advance of his time—not to say, of many Christian folk in these latest days. There was room for such a representative treatment of the subject in English, and we are grateful to Mr. Coutts for providing it.