

The Christian Message Concerning Life Hereafter.

IT is frequently said that the Hope of Immortality burns but dimly in the breasts of men to-day; and it would be possible, in spite of the interest in spiritism, to quote scores of passages from the writings of influential and representative men, ranging from H. G. Wells to Middleton Murry, in confirmation of the statement. In so far as it is true, it is part of the general fading of vital belief in God which it is our great task to bring back into the life of our generation. It is the challenge of the hour, and should give energy and content to the Discipleship Campaign. We must not fail men—or God. There have been a number of contributory causes of which it is necessary to mention only one which is relevant to my subject—the preoccupation of the minds of so many, inside as well as outside the Church, with the material conditions of life and the large affairs of the world. Even religion has doffed her shining robes and donned the corduroys of earthly purposes. The New Jerusalem which John saw as a holy city filled with the glory of God and descending from heaven, has become, in the familiar words of Blake, though not with his meaning, a Jerusalem to be built in England's green and pleasant land by human wisdom and law.

I am very far from believing or wishing to suggest that these interests and activities are not right and necessary. If we give Cain's answer to God's question we share Cain's guilt. It is certain that a dynamic religion must have power over the whole life of man, and that the gospel in particular must subdue all things, including the material conditions of men and all human relationships to itself. But it is equally certain that if Christianity were only the "Enthusiasm of Humanity," it would have long since gone the way of other idealisms. I have taken that phrase, "The enthusiasm of humanity," as will be recognised, from that truly epoch-making and, within its limits, still unrivalled, book, *Ecce Homo*. In that book Sir John Seeley wrote, and it is the clue to much that has happened since, that "To love one's neighbour as oneself, Christ said, was the first and greatest law."¹ Christ did not say so. He said that the first and great command was, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God

¹ ch. xiv.

with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind," and the love of man followed upon that and was its necessary consequence. Christianity is primarily the enthusiasm of God, and to divert our minds from that even for the greatest of earthly ends is, in the long run, to lose religion itself, and, with religion, all that gives beauty and worth to life and to the service of man. And it is to lose the Christian Hope of Immortality. For the Christian Hope does not rest on philosophical reasoning, still less on the ambiguous phenomena of spiritism, but on the Christian experience of God. It is bound up with the mighty themes of the Gospel, with the Incarnation and sacrifice of the Son of God, with the Forgiveness of sins, and the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit, with a redemption too vast for the narrow confines of these mortal years. It is because we believe in God as He has manifested Himself in Jesus Christ, and as we have experience of His love, that we believe that man was not made for death.

1. I would write first, then, of *the Christian Hope as implicit in the Christian experience.*

The "Christian message concerning life hereafter" is not simply that there is a future life. When Peter, for example, wrote, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who hath begotten us again unto a living hope," there was much more in his mind than the certainty of continued existence after death, which there is no reason for thinking he ever doubted. The mere assurance of survival is not necessarily a religious assurance, nor need it be good tidings. Harriet Martineau declared in her old age that she had seen quite enough of herself, and had no wish to live with herself for ever. And it must be clear that it is the quality of this life that gives any value it has to the thought of the future. If life is scant and without meaning, if the soul is poor, there is nothing attractive in the prospect of "going on and never ceasing to be." It is only when life is rich in love and aspiration and present good, when the soul is aware of its own unexhausted wealth, even though it is tragic grief that brings the knowledge, that we crave for immortality. "Is there another life?" cried poor Keats in the agony of his final separation from his beloved. "There must be; we cannot be created for this sort of suffering."² And it is this enrichment and intensification of life that is given in the Christian experience, an intensification which makes death incredible as the end of all things. As is well known, even in the Old Testament, the true hope of immortality was born of experience. Men who found life increasing in beauty and power,

² Letters (Forman) ccxiv.

in height and depth, through their fellowship with God, rebelled against death, and could not believe that God would break the promise implied in their experience. "God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol; for He shall receive me," says the Psalmist. But the Christian experience is by so much greater than theirs, as it is associated with a greater revelation. And it is no rare thing, confined to a few gifted spirits. It is a "common salvation," shared by a growing multitude of men and women redeemed from sin and futility by the love of God in Jesus Christ, and in whose hearts that love is shed abroad by the Holy Spirit. It is quickening experience that transforms life and the whole aspect of the world. "He hath made us priests and kings," wrote John; such was the height to which it raised common men in the beginning. "All things are yours," cried Paul; and indeed Christians knew themselves to be the heirs of the whole creation, "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ." There was a new glory in the sky, a new loveliness in the earth, a new radiance in human love, a new vitality in heart and mind and will. "I am come," said Jesus, "that men might have life, and might have it abundantly." And it was this life that was experienced, life in its recreating energy claimed all things as its own. There is a joy in living that rings through the New Testament like a tumult of bells. How could death touch such vitality, or dry up the springs of it? How could those to whom life was so great believe in death? "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." How could they separate when the love of God was filling the universe? The Christian Hope is begotten of a great experience of the wealth of life, for great hopes are never born of spiritual poverty. And this experience is a living experience still, and it begets the same assurance. Are there not many of us who can say what C. F. Andrews says of his conversion in that most beautiful book, *What I owe to Christ*, "This that had now happened was no fantasy of the imagination, no dream to vanish like mist in the morning when we awaken, but a life-change, a new spiritual birth, with power to overcome sin itself, and swallow up death in victory" ?³

Nor is this all. Dr. Matthews says in his *God in Christian Thought*, "Man is the deepest mystery of the world. He alone has the possibility of indefinite development."⁴ It is part of the great joy of the Christian experience that it is alive with a

³ p. 97.

⁴ op. cit. 31.

sense of a divine purpose which gives meaning to life. The early believers were delivered from the bondage of fatalism, from servitude to fortune and circumstance, as they were delivered from the moral and intellectual anarchy of polytheism. It has been said that "the God of the modern world is Luck," and the spreading frenzy of gambling is a sign of it. But Luck and Fate are two sides of the same thing, and the ancient world was, to a great extent, subdued by fear of a Fate that blindly settled the destinies of men, a fate that many believed was written in the stars. And it was part of the glory of the Christian experience that it set men free from that nightmare, because the Gospel not only revealed God as Love, but disclosed a purpose in life with which they could freely co-operate. They were the masters, not the slaves, of circumstances, because they could subdue them to their heavenly calling and compel them to work together for good. The circumstances of life were the material out of which they wrought a type of character new in the world. They had set before them in the Gospel, as we have, a new ideal which they knew to be the purpose of God for men, and the energy of it was working in them. "He has granted unto us His precious and exceeding great promises; that through these we may become partakers of the divine nature," wrote one. "He has foreordained us to be conformed to the image of His Son that He might be the firstborn among many brethren," wrote another. Nothing less than likeness to Christ, as He was and is, is the Christian ideal. We are called and consecrated to high and lovely and eternal ends towards which we strive. Our horizon cannot possibly be bounded by time, for never in the world of time can such a goal be reached. If Immortality is implicit in the Christian experience, it is necessitated by the Christian calling and the Christian interpretation of the purpose of life. "If in this life only we have a hope in Christ," said Paul, "we are of all men most to be pitied." Because in that case the Christian experience is a delusion, and none the less a delusion for having set before men the highest hopes and values that ever haunted the human soul. But we do not believe that we are living in so irrational a universe.

II. This for us is beyond doubt because, in the second place, *The Christian Hope is secured by faith in Jesus Christ as Living Lord and Saviour.*

I quoted the words of Peter, "He hath begotten us again unto a living hope"; but he added "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." And Paul said that "He was declared⁵ to be the Son of God with power, according to the

⁵ 'decisively declared' (Goodspeed).

spirit of holiness, by the resurrection." The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the guarantee of the Christian hope, not in the sense that it is evidence of survival, which is a very mean and inadequate interpretation of it, but in the sense that it is the demonstration of the eternal reality of the values incarnate in Jesus and which have no existence apart from personality, human and divine. We sometimes forget in these days of Psychical Research and Spiritism that evidence of the survival of Jesus would have meant little or nothing to His followers. They were not modern sceptics or even ancient Sadducees. They never doubted His continued existence in the world of spirits, any more than they doubted their own existence after death. What they needed was to have their faith in Him restored, to be convinced that they had not been deceived when they had believed Him to be the Christ of God, above all to be assured that He had triumphed in and through the Cross. And it was this and no mere proof of the survival of Jesus that was given in the Resurrection and in what followed. It was this that made them breathless with exultation when they proclaimed that their crucified Master was seated at the right hand of God. And this Gospel of the Resurrection had tremendous implications which became explicit later on in the profound cosmic teaching of Paul and John. Peter had a sudden glimpse of this on the Day of Pentecost; for, when he said that it was not possible that Jesus should be holden of death, he was affirming not only the glowing certainty of a recovered faith but the conviction, based on the Resurrection, that the universe was of such a nature that it justified the faith of Jesus, the life He had lived and the death He died. There is a notable passage in the latest interpretation of Shakespeare which I will venture to quote in this connection. In *The Essential Shakespeare*, Dr. Dover Wilson says, "Lear is like some peak of anguish, an eternal and sublime symbol of the majesty of humanity, of the victory of spirit over the worst that fate can do against it. The last scene reminds us, inevitably, of Calvary. But it is a human Calvary; there is no resurrection to follow, not a hint of a Father in heaven. And yet the universe in which Lear is possible cannot be wholly evil, since he is part of it, and Cordelia is part of it, and the possibility of such souls may even be a clue to its meaning."⁶ The reasoning is sound, though it ends on a great May-be. But it is on the field of history and in the Person of Jesus Christ that the immense issue is raised once for all, for Calvary was both human and actual. In our Lord Jesus Christ we have no "possibility," but an historic Person, who, in the range and majesty of His humanity, was beyond the power of even the greatest and most creative

⁶ op. cit. 126.

imagination men have known to conceive. Those who companied with Him in the days of His flesh so felt His power that they associated Him with God, and when they called Him "the Christ" they meant that He was the clue to the meaning of their universe. And for twenty centuries He has drawn the souls of men after Him, nor does His power decrease. We can only speak of the mystery of His Person in broken language, but this we can say of His human life, that it was what it was by virtue of His transcendent experience of God and His obedience to the divine will, the one conditioning the other. But when we say that Jesus always did the will of God we are saying in religious language that He lived always according to His insight into Reality, the real nature of the universe and the real values of life. The beauty and the wonder of His life and its inner tranquillity and joy came of that insight and obedience. It uttered itself in the music of His speech, in the loveliness of His deeds. All His teaching was born of it. All His activities proceeded from it. "The Son can do nothing of Himself but what He seeth the Father doing," He said. The whole life of Jesus was a surrender to His vision of God, and His surrender was so complete that in Him, and in Him alone, vision and life were one. And that vision, that insight, brought Him to the Cross; not merely because the obdurate hearts of men rejected Him as they have rejected others, but because the Cross was in the Vision. He died because His vision of Reality, of the Ultimate Truth, was a vision of redemptive Love, a Love with which He identified Himself even to the pouring out of His soul in death. He died and was buried, and "on His grave with shining eyes, the Syrian stars look down."

Is Jesus the clue to the meaning of the universe, the universe that was silent while He agonised on the Cross, the universe through which there rang that dreadful cry of forsakenness? "The voice of utter despair is ever the same," writes Middleton Murry, "The cry 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' has been wrung from human lips many times in human history, but never till then, and never again, from the lips of such a man."⁷ That is why the immense issue is raised at Calvary as nowhere else. And if, with a silent heaven above and a mocking earth below, Jesus, with His last breath, reaffirmed His faith, all the more are earth and heaven brought to judgement at Calvary. If that were indeed the end, if the greatest of all, the most sure of God and the most obedient, has gone down into the dust and the silence for ever, what is there left for men but bewilderment and despair? As the profoundest of the Russians wrote, "If that is so . . . then all the planet is a lie, and rests

⁷ *Life of Jesus*, p. 309.

on a lie and on mockery.”⁸ And as a greater than he said long before, “If Christ be not raised, then is our faith vain.”

But the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fact of history and experience, and earth “bears as chief treasure one forsaken grave.” The Resurrection is the vindication of the insight and obedience of Jesus; and it means not simply that He continues to exist but that, being what He was through that perfect surrender, He broke through death into life limitless in power and glory. And we who believe in Him and who follow Him know beyond a peradventure that death has no dominion over such life as His, but rather that it rises through death to resurrection, that resurrection to which, with the apostle, we also would attain.⁹ For it is “resurrection,” which is not of the flesh and is more than a meagre survival, but is life triumphing through death unto fullness of personality, that is the Christian Hope. And the way of Jesus is the way of Life. We are living not only in a rational universe, but in a spiritual, where spiritual values are ultimate, and the life which enshrines them mounts from glory unto glory; for it is the eternal life, the life of God in man. And Jesus Christ, who was dead but who is alive for evermore, is the source of our experience and the foundation of our hope.

And He is that in no mere external and evidential sense. “Because I live ye shall live also,” He is reported as saying. The words are intensive and qualitative, and it is because He lives that we live now and shall live. The radiant energy of His life, over which death could have no dominion, is the power that reproduces itself in us. Do you remember the lines that come near the end of Browning’s *Death in the Desert*?

See if, for every finger of thy hands,
There be not found, that day the world shall end,
Hundreds of souls, each holding by Christ’s word
That He will grow incorporate with all,
With me as Pamphylax, with him as John,
Groom for each bride!

It is “Christ in us who is the hope of glory.” The Christian life is a supernatural life inasmuch as it springs from and is nourished by the Spirit of Him who dwells within us. And for this reason, and here and now, it is the life of the Kingdom of God which men enter as into the “brave, new world” of children. That kingdom is not of this world, or rather, as Christ said, it is not *from* this world. It is from above, and it comes into this world, out of the eternal into time, through them in whom Christ lives. And yet though its light may illumine the world and its

⁸ Dostoevsky—*The Possessed*, pp. 582-3.

⁹ cf. Philip. iii. 11, Luke xx. 35.

powers transform society, it can never fully come here. Whatever peace and blessing may fill the earth at some far distant date there will still be sorrow and death to eclipse its joy. Not here in a world that is passing away can the eternal purpose of God be fulfilled, and the kingdom which cannot be shaken be established for ever. For what is that kingdom, in its eternal reality, but the perfect and unbroken fellowship of the sons and daughters of God with Him and, through Him, with one another? It is the divine Harmony, the Goal of all creation, the everlasting joy of God in beings He has made for Himself and whom He has drawn into the great Communion. We but taste the powers of it in this present world, and most imperfectly do we realise it in our lives. But in so far as we are one with Christ, and the love that God is moves in our hearts, bringing us into fellowship with Him and with one another, we are of and in the kingdom. Love is of its essence, but the perfect love is yet to be. But it is in the fellowship of the kingdom that we have the best assurance of reunion with our beloved and blessed dead. Walter Lippmann, in his brilliant book, *A Preface to Morals*, says wisely of marriage, "The emotion of love is not self-sustaining; it endures only when the lovers love many things together and not merely one another. It is this understanding that love cannot be successfully isolated from the business of living which is the enduring wisdom of the institution of marriage."¹⁰ It is also the enduring wisdom of the kingdom of God. And what stronger ground of confidence in the permanence of human love can Christians have than this, that it has grown to a pure and hallowed beauty in the life and fellowship of that kingdom? Nothing that is of the kingdom can perish or lose aught of its preciousness.

I have written of the grounds and nature of Christian Hope, and have indulged in no speculations. It is a hope centred wholly on Christ. Of its greatness no man can speak worthily. Of its splendour no man can speak at all. Before its blinding glory even an apostle lowered his eyes :

Beloved, now are we the children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that if He shall be manifested we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him even as He is. And every one that hath this hope set on Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure.

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¹⁰ op. cit. 308.