

Justice, Human and Divine.

FEW theological books have been as long lived as Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo, Why God Became Man*. Few have exercised a wider influence. The thesis of the book is that Christ entered this world to meet the demands of justice. We are members of a sinful race. Justice claims that the proper penalty for sin is eternal death, which means not extinction but alienation from God, the Author and Fount of life. God was bound to admit the claim, for though He *may* be merciful, He *must* be just; and if justice were not done the heavens would indeed fall. It was not necessary, however, that the sinner should bear the penalty of his sin, provided that another, innocent of any transgression, were prepared to suffer in his place. Christ, then, died on Calvary, though death could not in fact hold His spirit; and thus enabled God to pardon sinners without affronting justice. It was for that reason that He took flesh and assumed our nature. He came into the world, to die.

This theory has influenced Christian thought for generations, and is widely held even to-day among Christian people. It has often been restated, never perhaps more persuasively than by R. W. Dale, whose great book on the *Atonement* remains the ablest and noblest presentation of the traditional doctrine. There is, Dale asserts, a Law of Righteousness which has "An eternal and necessary authority independent of the Will of God," though God is in fact identified with it. This Law affirms that sin must be punished; and Dale is most careful to distinguish the punishment that is the fitting penalty of sin from the moral and spiritual deterioration that is its natural consequence. If this demand that sin be punished were ignored, "God would no longer be identified with the Law of Righteousness, and conscience would vehemently maintain that the Law is supreme." If, then, God would remit the penalty sinners have incurred, He must honour the Law that links sin with punishment, in another act of "at least equal intensity." That He has done. "The Lord Jesus Christ laid aside His eternal glory, was forsaken of God, died on Calvary that God might remit the sins of men. It belonged to Him to assert by His own act that suffering is the just result of sin. He asserts it, not by inflicting suffering on the sinner, but by enduring suffering Himself."¹

This is the form in which many splendid souls have held the faith; and nobody is entitled to speak lightly of a theory that has nerved saints to deeds of sacrificial devotion, and martyrs to

¹ R. W. Dale, *The Atonement*, 392.

meet death with a smile. Nevertheless, the theory has led to misunderstanding, and occasionally to worse. It has had the effect in certain cases of weakening the feeling of moral responsibility that is among the noblest elements in our nature. "Jesus," the Church affirms, "paid our debt." Some have concluded, "Then we are His, and must spend our strength in His service." Some, however, have inferred, "Then we are free. We may act as we will." Not long ago a man who had committed a cruel wrong and brought suffering on a number of innocent folk was asked by his minister if he were not troubled by what he had done. "No," he exclaimed, "It's all *under the blood.*"

The most damaging criticism that may be levelled against this theory, however, is that it is not in harmony with the teaching of the New Testament, and, in particular, of our Lord Himself. According to His own teaching, it was not to meet the claims of justice that Christ entered the world, but to amend our conception of justice. What is justice? In common speech it means, an eye for an eye. It means, reward proportioned to merit, and suffering to sinfulness. That was the Jewish conception of justice, but Christ expressly repudiated it. The justice of the Kingdom, expounded in His sayings and in many of His parables, is of a different order from that of the Scribes and Pharisees. His own treatment of the sinful was extraordinarily varied, tied to no theory, bound by no formula. He warned those who had not realised that they were sinners that they were heading for catastrophe. In handling those who could not conceal their sin He displayed an amazing tolerance. Asked how He would deal with a woman caught in sin, He refused to condemn her, and dismissed her with the injunction to sin no more. In the immortal story the Prodigal is received by his father as though the lad were a conquering hero. There was not a word of retribution, nor rebuke. There was only the eager greeting, the ring, the best robe. Urged by His friends to punish the Samaritans who had refused Him hospitality, He answered, "The Son of Man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." The key to His thought of justice is in that sentence. It was S. T. Coleridge, that great and greatly neglected thinker, who first asked theologians what they meant when they talked of justice. Was this justice, of which they had so much to say, a *moral* attribute? Morality, Coleridge observed, begins in the distinction between persons and things. It is concerned not with the achievement of an exact equation between things, so much reward for so much merit, but with the development of human beings according to the law of their own nature. That is what justice means in the thought of Jesus, from whom in

fact Coleridge derived the idea. In our thought justice is retrospective, looking back to what men have done. In the thought of Jesus it is prospective, looking forward to what they may become. Our concern is that sinners should not avoid punishment. His concern is for the liberation of the best in their nature.

If He was, as we believe, the Son of God, that is God's concern, too. In sending Christ into the world, God simply thrust our human notions of justice aside. "Whilst we were yet sinners"—before we had repented or made restitution—"Christ died for us." Had He then to die? Aye! In such a world as this, being what He was, He could not avoid death, the death of the Cross. But it was *not justice* that demanded that He should die. It was human sin, human stupidity, human stubbornness. He declared that He had entered the world to establish the Kingdom of God in the world. In that Kingdom, men would find the fulfilment of their own nature. They would live together in harmony and fraternal love. "Repent," He cried, "Change your minds, your way of thinking about God, about life." They would find that the Kingdom was among them. They would not have it. They demanded, rather, that He should be sent to the Cross. That was not the end, for Him or for them. "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me." Thus He looked confidently to the future. "Father," He cried, "Forgive." Even now He was concerned not with what they had done, but with what they might become.

The shadow of tragedy hangs over all things human, even over human justice. It might be argued that all human justice has injustice at its core. "What's done, we haply may compute, but know not what's resisted." Wars are fought for justice, and from them spring the injustices that demand rectification in the next war for justice. That is, in great part, the story of modern Europe. In 1914 the Germans invaded Belgium, bringing destruction and desolation with them. Our hearts were moved to anger at such wanton injustice. In 1918 the Germans were at our mercy, and we determined that they should never again disturb our peace. We fashioned the Treaty, of which the best that its defenders can say is that it was "stern but just." Four years later Nitti, who had signed the Treaty and repented, wrote: "The Treaty of Versailles broke all the pledges that had been given, and introduced new forms of domination and strife into modern history by adopting a series of measures which could have no other object than that of strangling Germany." Ten years later Stresemann, a dying man, pleaded at the Hague Conference: "If you would make one concession I could save my country." Audibly, a British delegate muttered: "Why

doesn't some German bring his fist down on the table?" Then Hitler appeared, *bringing his fist down on the table*—not pleading for concessions, but demanding justice. Now we are at war again, this time to rectify the awful injustices for which he is responsible.

How can we break through this tragic circle? It is disquieting that even now so many Christians are pinning their faith to what the world calls justice—that justice of which the New Testament knows nothing, that justice that has so often failed us. "If justice be thy plea, consider this, that in the course of justice none of us would see salvation." Christian justice, as Coleridge perceived, is always "personal," aiming at the redemption of the evil-doer, at reconciliation, at the peace that is guaranteed not by force of arms but by the power of indwelling love. If it looks to the past, it is not to the offences of the past, but to the things that have fostered the spirit in which offences occur; and its concern is never to avenge the past but always to fashion a fairer future. We are told that on the North-West Frontier to-day roads are being cut over the mountains, rivers are being bridged, the tribesmen are being trained in the art of agriculture; that they may no longer rely on robbery for food, but may learn to trade with each other, to trust each other, to love each other. That is peace-making in the spirit of *Christian* justice. There has been all too little of it in India, or in Europe. It is for that, that Christians must stand, that quiet, patient effort to soften enmity, to dispel suspicion, to create trust; loving their enemies, doing them good, despairing of no man. We shall hear much in the next few months of Leagues and Pacts, and plans for the resettlement of Europe. If they are designed, as the League of Nations largely was, to establish security rather than to effect reconciliation, to punish or to restrain rather than to help and to appease, they will fail, and our children will pay the price of our failure. It is not for Christians to echo the watchwords of the hour, to follow blindly in the steps of politicians, ready enough, when their own ends have been achieved, to cry Peace, where there is no peace. The Christian ethic, we are often told, springs from the Christian Evangel. Then let us be clear what the Christian Evangel is, for most of our errors are the effect of our imperfect understanding of it.

There is but One who can deliver Europe. "Ye are come unto Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant; and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better things than that of Abel." It is for Christians to follow Him. It is their part to bring His healing spirit to bear on this sad world, judging the present, planning the future, in the light that streams from His Cross.

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