

THE SECOND ADVENT IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY¹

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THE prediction of enmity between the Woman and the Serpent, connected as it was with the multiplication of the Race, shadowed forth the Coming of a "Son of Man" who, though wounded in the encounter, was to win a terrible conflict with Satan. Looking back at that great prophecy we can see in it now, what was hidden from our first parents, Calvary, and also Olivet crowned with triumph and glory.

How far God's great purpose was disclosed to the generations which followed before the Flood we know not; yet St. Jude tells us in his Epistle that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, had had a prophetic vision of the Lord's return to judgment with ten thousands of His saints (Jude 14, 15). Job also knew that his redeemer (or vindicator) would stand at the latter day upon the earth, and that in a resurrection body he would see God, another prediction of the Second Advent (Job xix. 25, 26, 27). The Psalmists knew the same great truth, as can be seen from several Psalms, e.g., xlv. and lxxii. Whilst Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah had a clear perception of the coming of the Messiah; not only His first coming in humble guise as "a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief," "by whose stripes we are healed" (Isa. liii.); but also of the glorious day when "His feet shall stand upon the Mount of Olives," and "the Lord shall be King over all the earth and there shall be one Lord and His name one" (Zech. xiv. 4, 9).

The splendour of these latter predictions had sunk into the Jewish mind, and in their pride and anxiety for the realization of the earthly kingdom, in which their race was to figure so gloriously, they overlooked the clear prophecies of Our Lord's first coming and put Him to an ignominious death. When He came into the world it was so different from what the Jews had expected, that His very disciples hesitated to believe in Him, and it was not until the last

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few days of His earthly life that He fully disclosed to them the great truth of the Second Advent.

From the time when, in the supreme moment of His trial, He was solemnly challenged by the High Priest in the words, "I adjure Thee by the living God that Thou tell us whether Thou be the Christ the Son of God"; and, repeating some of the words of Daniel vii. 13, answered publicly, "Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven." The Second Advent, which He had already announced privately to His immediate disciples, became the great hope of the Church Universal. This hope was confirmed to His disciples by the two angels who appeared at His Ascension and said, "This same Jesus which is taken up from you into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven." It seems strange that any one can read such declarations as intimating a spiritual coming into the hearts of believers; for, certainly, the High Priest and the audience gathered around him were no believers, and yet they were to see the returning Lord coming in the clouds, and when St. John in his great revelation (Rev. i. 7) says, "He cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him." It is difficult to conceive any words which could more effectually describe an actual physical return. In that sense the early Christian believers understood them, and, for example, the inscriptions in the Roman catacombs show that the persecuted saints who took refuge there had their attention riveted upon the Coming Christ rather than looking back at the great scenes of His life and death upon earth. So fully were their minds fixed upon the Second Advent that they fell into the error which St. Paul corrected in his Second Epistle to the Christians at Thessalonica, and evidently expected the great event to happen in their time; not understanding that a long historical interval was to elapse and that great events and signs were to precede His Coming.

When we read our Lord's conversation with His disciples in Matthew xxiv, He gives two great signs of the approaching day. 1. The preaching of the Gospel in all the world for a witness to all nations, which was to immediately precede the end. 2. The fig tree, which He had used before as an emblem of the Jewish nation, was to show signs of returning life by putting on leaves.

The first sign, which is closely mixed up with history, seems to have been the one to which the great Enemy of Salvation determined to oppose his fullest powers. No sooner had the "Faith" begun to spread than he attacked it with fire and sword. Persecution, torture, martyrdom fell upon the humble soldiers of the Cross; but special grace and fortitude were granted to them and, in spite of every effort to destroy them, the blood of the martyrs proved to be the seed of the Church, and the Gospel seemed likely within a short time to spread throughout the whole known earth and so to hasten the end and the doom of the Prince of this world.

It was under these circumstances that he appears to have developed the greatest of all his plans for the ruin of mankind. When the Christian religion was fast spreading towards the countries of the East, Mohammed appeared on the scene. Once, as Dr. Koelle, the well-known missionary at Constantinople, said, a member of what was equivalent to a Christian Bible Class, some members of which afterwards were men of mark on the Christian side, whilst others followed Mohammed, he became the greatest opponent that Christianity ever had to contend with. In a marvellously short time, with diabolical energy and enthusiasm, he overwhelmed the forces of the Cross and carried all before him. Within 100 years after his death his followers had cut the trade routes between East and West, and had not only swallowed up Egypt and Palestine, but had extended their conquests northwards as far as Turkestan and Bokhara and westwards along the coast of Africa to the Pillars of Hercules, thus effectually drawing a curtain from North to South and from East to West which shut Europe up in a corner by itself. From that moment communication with Asia and Africa was cut off, and so for centuries the day was postponed when the spread of the Gospel was to bring in the end of the Dispensation and the return of the Saviour.

How successful this part of the Devil's plan was and how impenetrable was the curtain which cut off Europe from the rest of the world may be judged from the fact that, even as late as the reign of Edward VI, when the English Prayer Book was being prepared, it did not enter into the minds of our Reformers to insert a prayer for the heathen; the only prayer approaching it being the Collect for Good Friday for Jews, Turks, Infidels and Heretics, these marking the extreme horizon of those days. They could not see beyond the

curtain, and the heathen were completely out of sight and out of mind.

One thing remained to be done to complete the ruin of Christianity. A drop of sacerdotal poison at Rome, the fountain-head of the Christianity of that day, soon turned Europe into a charnel house. The narrow enthusiasm which enabled the early Christians to conquer Greek and Roman heathenism now turned into the religious bigotry of the Middle Ages, bringing in ultimately the terrible Inquisition with all its horrors ; and the Prince of Darkness must have felt secure of his triumph.

But God, "Who hath chosen the weak things of this world to confound the things that are mighty," kept the true light shining in the mountain fastnesses of the Cottian Alps and Bohemia and other places too insignificant for the Holy Office to investigate, and by Huss and Wickliffe and Tyndale and Luther and Gustavus Adolphus and Henri Arnaud and others of the heroic band He brought the Gospel through this awful trial.

The Devil's weapons were also turned against himself.

The heathen had been forgotten, but not so the wealth of India and China ; and the cupidity, which had ruined all spirituality in the Roman Church and had been such a terrible motive in many of the persecutors, had probably been fed by the stories in the *Arabian Nights*. Thus it was that Columbus and Vasco da Gama, and afterwards Cortez and Pizarro and the Spanish Conquistadores, were sent forth to discover a new world or to rediscover one that had been known and lost, the great hope being that they would bring to Europe once again the wealth of the Indies by a new route. The success of Columbus and Cabot and others who followed him into the Western World led to the discovery of New England and the Atlantic coast of America. Fishermen and settlers went out and the world was astonished to find that heathen existed. To the credit of England a Society was at once formed upon the initiative of Sir Walter Raleigh to carry the Gospel to them ; and this "New England Company," which was launched by Raleigh with a liberal donation of £100, is, we believe, still in existence.

Why then did not Protestant Missions at once go forth into all the world and hasten the great day ? History shows the reason plainly. The Enemy of Souls had not exhausted all his armoury. War after war drained the resources of Europe and occupied men's

minds with fear and apprehension for their lives and for the very existence of their nationalities. England herself was continually fighting for her life with Spaniards, French and Dutch and others, and under this hecatomb of war the Gospel for the heathen lay buried.

But the end was at hand. When the American War of Independence had come to a conclusion, and the conflict between England and France had for a time been suspended, the great and terrible Revolution in France broke out. The effect of the horrors of that tragedy upon the minds of all good men must have been immense, particularly in England where Wesley and Whitfield had aroused the consciences of multitudes of people. Christians, no doubt, were shocked beyond expression, and there came an awakening in Great Britain to the fact that the Nation had sadly neglected its duty to the world at large, which resulted in the formation within a period of ten years of the principal Protestant Missionary Societies. The Baptist, Wesleyan, London and Church Missionary Societies came into existence, and the Religious Tract Society to supplement their efforts with literature, followed by the great British and Foreign Bible Society, which arose out of the latter society early in the nineteenth century. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel had been established much earlier, but originally to minister to the religious needs of Colonists. From that time dates the rapid progress of the Gospel in the world.

Another historical event, we believe, greatly contributed to the movement. The voyages of Captain Cook to the Pacific Islands had disclosed a large population living in heathen darkness, many of them cannibals and all of them subject to most cruel superstition and devil worship. Himself a good humane Christian man, he pleaded the cause of these poor people, and the pathetic circumstances of his death helped to arouse the conscience of Christian people in all European countries.

But two things were wanting: 1. Access to the heathen; 2. Rapidity of communication.

In the boyhood of some of us Africa was still a mere coastline, with very small exceptions. No one since Marco Polo had penetrated China and Central Asia. A great part of North America was trackless forest and prairie—whilst most of South America and Central Asia were entirely inaccessible. Persons going to India took

many months to reach their posts. The Australian Colonies were considered suitable principally for penal settlements because of the sparse populations of Europeans ; and the distances seemed so great that when emigrants went off, even to America, we all sang " Cheer, boys, Cheer," and bid them farewell as though we could hardly expect to meet again in this world.

What a marvellous change has taken place since then ! Was it mere chance that made Watt watch the lid of his mother's kettle and apply the force of steam to commercial purposes ? Was it not under the inspiration of God that George Stephenson showed the practicability of using steam for land haulage ? We believe it was. In the result the whole earth has become accessible in the most wonderful way, whilst steamers, railways, telegraphs, telephones and posts have drawn the world together and have enabled the good leaven to spread with marvellous rapidity. The discovery of cylindrical printing early in the nineteenth century, and the application of steam to the production of literature, has enabled millions of Bibles in hundreds of languages and dialects to be distributed in all the world ; and now it may be truly said that the Gospel is being preached by lip or printed page through all the continents and islands of the earth as a witness. The world has opened within the last hundred years, as a bud opens into full bloom, with a rapidity which our forefathers could never have contemplated.

Does anything stand between us and " the end " so far as this sign is concerned ? ¹

Let us take to ourselves Our Lord's solemn words : " When ye shall see all these things know that it is near even at the doors." " Therefore be ye also ready, for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh."

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¹ The second sign, viz. that in relation to the Jewish nation, was dealt with in a subsequent paper.

