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E. J. G. TITTERINGTON, Esq., M.B.E., M.A., in the Chair.

ANNUAL ADDRESS
THE CHRISTIAN ASSURANCE

The Challenge of our Early Background.

By Rev. Principal F. CAWLEY, B.A., B.D. Ph.D.

THE subtitle—The Challenge of our Early Background—will give us THE CHRISTIAN ASSURANCE. We have the near background, and the distant background. The near background is as perilous as it could possibly be: and there are many hearts failing them, and many minds perturbed. It was so with the Early Church. What a gallant group that Early Church constituted; just a handful—no more—against the world! Yet they stood out against their complete environment. They brought a new mind to it: a new heart: a new will. They were conscious of a new Presence. He had been with them: now He was beyond them, accessible only by faith and its experience. They challenged the traditions, the faith, and the practices of their time, to say: “Jesus is Lord.” If I were to take a text for what I have to say to-night, it would be just these three words: “Jesus is Lord,” as Paul wrote so graphically in his Epistle to the Philippians, chapter 2, verse 11. He was new, totally new: they had never met anyone just like Him; and what He said was new. What they were out to do was to see that their world became new in Him through them. As far as I can, I would bring this into our present setting. If we fully understood all that that meant, we would have all the assurance we need, and it would be definitely Christian, not dogmatically, save in the sense that truth is dogmatic, but experimentally, vitally, decisively. Our minds would be settled, our hearts sure, our wills steadfast. We would have a goal: we would have a Leader, a Master, a Lord. All that would constitute assurance, something very wonderful in its essence, something marvellously real, and especially so in any moments of crisis.

There are three main thoughts to lay before you: first, *Their Resources*. Let me begin where they began—the fact of Christ. It was not a new idea, nor a new system of thought, but a new fact. This is a day of hard facts. We are bidden to test every-

thing factually. Jesus was just that! Later on they spoke of Him as the God-Man. That was something utterly new. They had an experience of His grace, and it remains to this day. The early apostles had known Him in the flesh. They had walked with Him, talked with Him, had eaten and drunk with Him; in calm and in storm they had been with Him; on hill and in dale. They had lived with Him. As a result of their experience of Him in the flesh, they understood His grace. Now, the next generation was as near Him in spirit as the early Apostles had been near Him in the flesh; and, somehow, there was no loss: indeed, there was a gain. Now they knew that on any of life's roads the believer could meet Him, and He would be the same Christ, only greater, with all power at His disposal, beyond all limitations, and yet precisely the same. Each succeeding generation has entered into that wonder. It is the same Christ, now apprehended in spirit by faith and love; not by faith only, nor by love only, but by faith and love. That delivers from sentimentality; it would deliver us from love merely of the passing moment. Each succeeding generation has been won by that same Spirit. To each succeeding generation He has been God's amazing grace, and right down to this present moment. We name His Name with the same awe, the same reverence, the same devotion, and, one would say, with the same loyalty. We still say: "Jesus Christ the same yesterday (in the dead centuries), and to-day (in the living present, and amid all the perils of the hour), and for ever." "For ever"—what an experience! Who can say anything about to-morrow? Not a new idea; not a new theory; but an ageless fact, a timeless fact, that the Christ of Galilee is the Christ of experience, the eternal Christ, as free as the winds of God; nay, freer, for they are under control, but He is not, save the law of His own Being, and that Being, we say, in faith and in love, is the very Being of God.

From their experience of His grace, we pass, secondly, to *Their Re-creation in that Experience*. This is something that has been a phenomenon down the centuries. They knew Him in thought; they gave Him devotion and love; their wills were anchored to His will; and He willed Himself through them. You know the process. They were stirred by Him. Each generation understood that they had been bought by Him, and in being thus possessed by Him, they were re-ordered in Him. That can stand for the old term "conversion." I was interested recently in coming across this quotation: "Conversion is not so

much a new character as a new order in the old character." At first I dissented. It was put psychologically in order to enable modern students who knew nothing of Conversion in the sense in which our fathers knew it, to appreciate the modern way of treating Conversion. At first, I say, I dissented. Then I remembered that it is the same character. I am myself as I was forty years ago; and so are you. There is the law of continuity in all life. Yet between the Christian and the non-Christian what a great difference exists! Is it not the Christ-order within the old character? I just throw it out as a suggestion. Further, they were reinforced by His Spirit, as though His Spirit had been interlocked with theirs, becoming one with them. Their selfhood began where His left off; and His began where theirs left off. So much so that Paul could say: "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless, I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." It means this, that they were changed at their deepest levels, changed at their deeper unconscious levels. In these psychological days we speak a good deal about the sub-conscious, or the unconscious. We are well aware in these days of modern research that unless we have a special technique we cannot understand the subconscious. Now where we may not reach down, save by special technique and long training, these men knew that the Spirit of Christ had been knocking at their heart's door, and that, somehow, He had constrained them to open the door and let Him in. They found new life in Him; they lived in Him; and He lived in them. They were changed at their deepest levels by this One, factual in history, and in experience—the very fact of the Spirit of God.

There you get the perennial miracle of real and vital religion. It is a miracle, and any man who has had this experience knows it. For instance, I can remember the time of my conversion. I was only a lad of thirteen: careless up to that time. I entered into a religious meeting, with no particular intentions on my part so far as I can remember. I went in, and I came out other than I had been. That change marked a miracle in my life. Would to God it had been greater than it has been! To illustrate further: A German professor and a Chinese were accidentally flung together in an hotel abroad. The German knew no Chinese, and the Chinese knew no German. They were divided as races are, but they made signs to each other, and, somehow, those signs did convey something. Then suddenly the name "Jesus" was uttered, and the face of the Chinese lit up. He

seemed to say, with his expressive hands: "So you know Him, do you? So do I." The Galilean experience we have in the New Testament was no other than the experience of that German and Chinese. That is its perennial quality. It does not change; it does not alter. The man who belongs to Christ, belongs to every other racial character.

In this perennial miracle of real and vital religion there is a sense of identification with Christ: *i.e.*, to be made one with Him. Paul delighted in it. Every generation has done the same. Yet Jesus remains Jesus, and you and I remain just what we are. Again, the Christian feels and knows by faith that he is being indwelt by that same Spirit the Apostles knew in Galilee, and the generations have known since. There is a new spirit at their command when they are at His command. There is a new quality of thought in the mind; there is a new quality of love within the heart; and there is a new purpose. It is this perennial miracle, by means of which Jesus is conquering generation after generation and goes on to dominate the future. Here is the Christian's assurance. May I say, inevitable? Why? Because Jesus is Jesus, the very incarnate God of our faith and our devotion. If the Christian Church only lived that out, it would put the world right side up. As it is, the Church in a host of centres seems to be as effete as the dead centuries. Yet is it not true, that the miracle still goes on its widening way? Or, shall I say, not the miracle, for that is an abstraction, but the Living Christ goes on still, conquering and to conquer.

This brings me, thirdly, to *Their Achievements*. They are so notable that imperceptibly they have changed our total world. The secular world does not know it, and the religious world does not know it as it ought. Furthermore, these achievements go on to perpetuate that change in the oncoming years. Of course, you and I know that the Lord Christ may come at any moment, but no one knows when, or how. Quite a number of people have said they knew: but they are now all dead, and, being dead, they utter a warning against those who want to take their vacant chair. Let the chair remain vacant! The Lord Christ said in the days of His flesh that only the Father knew when He would come; not even the Son on earth, nor the angels. I think that still holds true. He may come at any moment, but He may not come in any moment in which you and I live. What then? All we have to do is to maintain faith and love, as those early Apostles did, and to perpetuate the achievements of our forebears, in order

that the Lord Christ may come more deeply into this present very perturbed, very anxious, and deeply imperilled world.

What of their achievements? First, through Christ, they have split *time* asunder. Probably the most difficult concept to understand is time. This is what I want to stress: They split time asunder irrevocably, so that now you cannot change what they changed. That is the marvellous thing. Whether one is a theist or an atheist, a Christian or a pagan, every modern man dates his engagements by the change that came over history with the birth of Jesus—B.C., "Before Christ"; A.D. "In the Year of our Lord." Moscow acknowledges that. China acknowledges that. They cannot do anything else. They are not religious by acknowledging it; but still they live in a changed world, and it has been changed by that fact. God works in the dark. He bids His people see what a light He kindles, even in the dark. I would emphasize this: Jesus did it, apparently without any command, without expressing any wish to that effect, without bidding them go out and do it. But He did it, and, so far as they were concerned, unconsciously. On the other hand, statesmen, soldiers, conquerors, emperors, many of them, have tried to date time by their own personality, or achievement; but not one did it, though they set out on purpose so to do. What Jesus did, through His people (they did not know He was doing it), stands irrevocably and unchangeably. Is there not something inevitable about it? There the miracle comes in again. It has come about almost as silently as dawn succeeds night. There came a change as silently as that, as a quiet, relentless pressure, the pressure of Jesus, changing life, and therefore, changing the centuries, and therefore marking them as though He wrote His own Name across them. Thus He divided them—He split time asunder. Is not that assurance? I think it is. He is the Lord of time! If that is so, then He is the Master of it. Very quietly He does His work: there is no noise about it. The stream runs noisily over pebbles. The great deeps are silent, but they move with terrific force. The stars also move silently in their orbit. So it is with Jesus.

His people split, not only time, but *character* asunder. There was the pagan character of their day, polytheistic, shackled by fear and superstition, uncertain of earth, and with little knowledge of heaven. Then there emerged, again very quietly, a new race. They were called a new race even by their enemies. They were as new almost as Jesus. They

bore the hallmark of His re-creation, and yet they were all races together—the Greek, the Roman, the Jew, the Ethiopian, the Scythian—and they all came together as new men, new women. They maintained their own identity, the same continuity, and yet were very different folk of the new race, the new way, the new life, the new truth, because of the new Master. There was bred in them a fine loyalty though the majority were slaves.

Remember how Paul put it: “Not many mighty: not many wise are called. . . . But God hath chosen the base things of the world, and *things which are not.*” “Things which are not”—there you get the scorn of the patrician of the day. They scorned these Christian slaves, bought like chattels in the market place, butchered by the master, if he so willed. But what a royalty there was about them! It was against the most terrific odds for any slave to be in Christ. Seneca once wrote: “Once a slave; half a man.” You see the deadly truth of it. Suppose any one of us this minute was bought by another, would it not mean that life would be cut in half—without the right to person, to time, to loved ones; robbed of the right to go where we would, tethered to the will of another? “Once a slave; half a man”! It would be the poorer half left! But here is the miracle: here is the royalty too. Not only did Christ deny that fact: He transcended it, for to be a Christian would not mean that you were half a man, but double a man. That is what Christ did. Tertullian, when he became a Christian, and when the fires of persecution broke out, wrote a letter, and he said this, or words to this effect: “Do what you like. Do your worst. We are everywhere. You cannot keep us under.” That is true. Did He not split character asunder? Was not a new race called into being when Christ called the slaves and the patricians together—the Jew, the Roman, the Greek, the Scythian, the Ethiopian?

Does He not do it now? Is not that where our assurance lies? There is not a great deal to be said for a man when he stands up against the worst, unless he knows a power other than himself: if he does, then he is master. In their very worst hour they knew that. They were in Christ, and they could not go under for the simple reason that He could not be put under. That is true to-day. The Christian Church will only go under when the Living Christ is buried—though the Church, here and there, has been buried. Recall that dark passage in the Book of the Revelation about the candlesticks being taken away if they do not shine. We must not presume, though we may rest in assur-

ance. Assurance is one thing: presumption is another! We are delivered to the one: we must never forget the other.

Again, He not only split time asunder, and character asunder, He split *the dominant moods of life* asunder. They are two, in the main. The first is pessimism: a very ancient word, but a very modern experience. Is it not in the atmosphere? Is it not everywhere? You cannot get away from it. It is in Berlin, in Moscow, in Sydney, in New York. Gilbert Murray once said that the reason why Greece failed was simply because of failure of nerve. The only thing that really matters is, when the unexpected comes, to be ready to meet it. The failure of nerve really occurs not because there are not good resources, but because you have not those good resources in yourself. Optimism is the other mood. There is the sky-blue optimism of Emerson. But the optimism that can only live when the skies are blue is not good enough. The optimism that tells is the optimism that lives on when the skies are black, with not a star visible and not a single light for direction. It was precisely that which Jesus gave to His disciples. He split the moods of life asunder. He dismissed one, and He reinforced the other. "I am the Light of the world." "Ye are the light of the world." "Ye are the salt of the earth." "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." Paul sums it up when he says: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." That is true optimism and perfectly obvious. What is it? It is the Spirit of Jesus alive in a virile personality, operative when one gives Jesus right of way. He is Himself again, as in Galilee. Have you not noticed in the New Testament that Jesus was always master, even in Pilate's court? He dominated the entire proceedings. On the Cross, in the eyes of men, He was anathema (*i.e.*, accursed); but it was the hidden glory of God redeeming men. He took the shame of it, and made it a glory beyond any human ideal. He took death, and made it a messenger to the ends of the earth to proclaim, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." He was never taken by surprise; never dominated; never thrust out of His stride. His own disciples, when they are most His own, have that same characteristic. First, it is a matter of choice; then it is a matter of surrender; and then, finally, it is a fact of life. The living Christian incarnates within himself the fact of Christ, as surely as Christ was incarnate within His own flesh in that far-off Galilee. Thus He split the dominant moods of life asunder, for, as we sing, "I'd rather walk in the dark with God, than walk alone in

the light." Many walk in the dark and are paralysed for action. The ageless miracle is that where Christ is loved, and obeyed, and followed, the darkness disappears as in the coming of dawn.

Lastly, *Their Successors*. The question is, "Who follows in their train?" Incidentally, here is the true apostolic succession. The true apostolic succession is in every man and woman who, from the first day, has followed Him. Anyone who to-day follows Christ, in mind, and heart, and will, is within that apostolic succession, for the life of Jesus through the centuries runs into them, and is transmitted through them. Jesus, who, in the days of His flesh, walked by the Galilean shore, still walks by the side of that man and woman who obey Him, and who love His law for love of Him. Every generation has shared their resources. The Early Church had no more, and no less. To know Christ in spirit is not to have less than those had who knew Him in the flesh; they share their resources, and enhance their achievements. The vital question is: Who are their true successors to-day? Every generation must be won, or the garden of the Church becomes a sepulchre. Let one generation be unwon for Christ, and the Church ends. That is the reason why every generation must be sought out, pleaded with, and lured to Christ. Every generation must be won, because every generation buries its last, and forwards the next. Every generation must freshly hear His call, and must know Him to be the Lord and Redeemer He is, and must count the cost carefully, and clearly, and decisively, and then be prepared to say: "I can do no other; I follow."

In one of Dorothy Sayers' fine plays, Christ confronts the soul. Christ is pressing, and the soul is resisting. The pressure goes on, until at last the soul, as in Francis Thompson's *Hound of Heaven*, feels that it can no longer resist. "Peace, Peace, I follow! Why must I love Thee so?" But the cost! It is easy to talk about it. but it is not so easy to pay. The ancient world, in effect, said to the Christian: "There is no need to desert us. Scatter a pinch of incense on the altar in honour of the nation's god." That would mean owning him as Lord: a disloyalty to Christ, his Lord, who had taken death in His stride. The equivalent of the cost that followed is to be seen in China today, and in Russia.

A recent story from India is apposite. A convert from a caste family in India, who later became a gifted minister, was ostracized from the outset by his family as one dead. He exercised a great ministry. He heard that his mother, whom

he loved deeply, was dying of cancer. He went home and standing outside her door, said: "Mother, it is your son who stands here desiring to see you. May I come in?" Icily as the poles, came back the answer: "I have no son: my son is dead. Go away!" Such is the cost!

What is required of their successors? A faith that can believe in Him, and commit life to Him; a loyalty to Him and to His Kingdom that can meet any and every cost. One such loyal successor was a missionary friend of mine in India. When I last met him I invited him to come along for a few days' rest. The answer was brief and poignant. "My doctor has told me that if I stop all work I might last out for six months; if not, only three months. I must return to my native people. In three months I can accomplish much." I never saw him again, to my own loss. He went back immediately to his lonely missionary bungalow. The last news I had was that the time permitted him was just those three precious months. His one and great desire was to serve and love these people whom he had won for his Lord until the last moment—loyal to God, loyal to all the folks in his pastoral charge. It was a great ending. Surely, when he passed over, it was a case of "Well done, good and faithful servant." Again, let me ask, who follows in their train?