

THE SECOND ADVENT IN RELATION TO THE INDIVIDUAL.¹

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“The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober and watch unto prayer.”—I PETER iv. 7.

THERE are, of course, a number of aspects in which the personal and individual application of the doctrine of the Lord's Return may be viewed. I propose to select two, as being of outstanding interest and importance. The first is that which has reference to the individual in his civic capacity, *i.e.*, as citizen, householder, elector and all other rôles or functions which he may exercise in relation to the State—in other words, the expression of his duty towards his neighbour. The second is that which has reference to the individual as a Churchman, meaning by the term Church what our Prayer Book calls “the mystical body of Christ, which is the blessed company of all faithful people”: this aspect involves in a particular sense the duty of the individual towards God. Whatever other points of view may be found, I doubt whether any of them can be considered as of such cardinal importance as these. In one form or another they comprise the sum total of man's external obligations. They are the dual foci round which his being revolves in its orbit of moral and spiritual responsibility.

I.

Dealing first of all with the civic aspect of the matter, St. Peter's admonition “to be sober” comes with special force and emphasis. To those who fully realize the significance of all that is conveyed in the warning, “The end of all things is at hand,” soberness of thought, language and conduct is the only appropriate disposition. To my mind, the Apostle does not merely, or even primarily, intend to inculcate sobriety of conduct (there is, of course, no allusion here to intoxication or misuse of wine), but mainly, I think, soberness of thought and attitude, sanity and temperance of opinion and judgment. The Revised Version brings out this rendering of the passage more clearly: “Be ye, therefore, of sound mind and be sober unto prayer.” In writing these words, St. Peter had, no doubt, in view

¹ A paper read at the London meeting of Lay Churchmen on February 15.

a stable and settled state of mind, the reverse of that which he attributes to the followers of Balaam, the son of Bosor, so aptly described in his second epistle (ii. 17) as "clouds that are carried with a tempest," and by Jude, in a parallel passage, as "raging waves of the sea." To be sober in the sense in which the word is very commonly used among us, is to be free from wild, visionary and passionate impulses, to be calm, well balanced and deliberate in affairs,

"To see life steadily and to see it whole."

The guiding principle, therefore, of the individual, as citizen, in his expectant attitude towards the Lord's Reappearing, is to maintain a quiet, dispassionate survey of the world's affairs as of things which are ephemeral, transitory, passing away. "The things that are seen are temporal." They occupy our time, thoughts and attention for a little space, but they are remote from the great, eternal verities of "righteousness, temperance and judgment to come." In this world the Christian is "a stranger and a sojourner as all his fathers were." "Here," says the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "we have no continuing city" (Heb. xiii. 14). "We look," says St. Peter, "for new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Pet. iii. 13).

This detached frame of mind does not, however, carry with it any sense of slackness, or indifference to temporal duties. On the contrary, we are expressly enjoined by St. Paul (Rom. xii. 11) to be "not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord." The underlying motive redeems the apparently paradoxical injunction from the least inconsistency. It is not because the matters we are engaged upon are of such vital importance or of such urgent necessity, that we are bidden attend to them diligently. It is because we are thereby conforming to God's will, serving Him in our day and generation, and fulfilling our allotted tasks in the state of life to which it hath pleased Him to call us, provided, of course, we do it in the right spirit—"not with eye-service as men pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God" (Col. iii. 22).

The duties referred to are not only those associated with the earning of our daily bread; rather are they the fulfilment of our obligations to the community in which we dwell. We are bidden to seek the welfare of others, in preference to our own. In considering these obligations we naturally turn to those many problems of social improvement and reconstruction with which we are confronted at

the present time, the difficulty and complexity of which are causing us no little apprehension and concern : Rehousing and land settlements, garden cities and allotments, improvements in sanitation and the amenities of city life, child welfare and care of the aged, shorter hours of labour and better pay for workers—these and many other schemes for improving the standard of physical health and fitness, and, at the same time, ensuring a higher degree of happiness and comfort by material means, are the chief topics of our newspapers and the main items in the programmes of our politicians. Closely associated with them are schemes for intellectual development : an extension of the period of school life, improved general and scientific education, greater facilities of access to the universities, increased endowments for learning and research, more scholarships, libraries and reading rooms—all intended to promote the regeneration of human life and thought, and to raise the moral sense to a higher plane. In reviewing these projects in the light of the Second Advent, it is necessary to make an important distinction. Far be it from us to decry or depreciate, in the least degree, the beneficent efforts of civic reformers to alleviate and improve the truly deplorable conditions which still prevail, to our national disgrace, in the crowded purlieus of many of our populous towns and cities. God forbid that we should do otherwise than cordially encourage every attempt to demolish the dark dens of iniquity and disease and to cleanse fetid areas of moral evil. To those labouring in the Master's cause, every co-operation and assistance in the task of cutting away the roots of misery and degradation is welcome. Those who have gone in and out of the slums and courts of a great city cannot fail to be sensible of the trenchant indictment contained in Tennyson's *Locksley Hall*, written more than a generation ago, but still applicable in too many cases to-day :

“ There among the glooming alleys, Progress halts on palsied feet,
Crime and hunger cast our maidens by the thousand on the street ;

“ There the master scrimps his haggard sempstress of her daily bread,
There a single sordid attic holds the living and the dead ;

“ There the smouldering fire of fever creeps along the rotted floor,
And the crowded couch of incest in the warrens of the poor.”

The picture in its truthfulness is almost too terrible to contemplate, and his would not be a human—to say nothing of a Christian—heart which did not beat in cordial sympathy with every movement

to obtain cleaner dwellings, healthier surroundings, and purer influences for the lives of the poor. Whether by legislation or private benevolence, the problem cannot be faced too soon, too earnestly, or too insistently. It is repellent to all our conceptions of the love of God, that want and penury, misery and disease should be tolerated among us. "Whoso hath this world's good and seeth that his brother have need and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" (1 John iii. 17).

The sense of detachment to which I referred has more particular reference to those schemes which are put forward for the ethical improvement of mankind by means other than those based on the revelation of God's Word; that is, by feeding men on the dry husks of morality, instead of on the Bread of Life. The schemes and the nourishment are alike unsatisfying. "The most helpful and sacred work," says Ruskin in *Frondees Agrestes*, "is to teach people not how to *better* themselves, but how to *satisfy* themselves," and he goes on to point out that there is only one kind of water which satisfies all thirst, and only one kind of bread which satisfies all hunger. As fellow-Christians we cordially agree. The first element in successful work for moral betterment is, and must be, a recognition of the basic truths of the Gospel message. "The condition of man," says our Tenth Article of Religion, "is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith and calling upon God." "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jer. xvii. 9). No external or superficial change will suffice: "Ye must be born again;" such was the lesson impressed upon Nicodemus. Fundamental principles like these cannot be ignored. Schemes, in which they are neglected and despised, have been tried again and again and have lamentably failed. Such schemes have been well-intentioned, enterprisingly initiated and energetically carried on—but they failed because the element of vitality in them was lacking. They were mundane and therefore transitory: little "systems that had their day and ceased to be."

It is very necessary, therefore, to insist upon the fact that to the convinced believer in the revelation of God's Word and in the truth of the Advent Prediction, the regeneration of mankind by other agency than the Spirit of God is an idle dream. Too many people talk of the impending Peace and the proposed League of

Nations as an end of all war, and as the inauguration of an era of universal goodwill and brotherhood to be followed by a degree of prosperity of indefinite duration—quite oblivious of the natural depravity of the human heart and of the “pride, cruelty and ambition of man.” Those who, in accordance with St. Peter’s injunction, think soberly, are under no such delusion. They see the futility and emptiness of it all. In serenity and resignation they await the inevitable “end of all things.” Waiting is the keynote of their attitude: patient, hopeful, cheerful acquiescence in the duties laid upon them, like the husbandmen of Horace, *Spe finis dura ferentes*, even if their toil cannot hope to achieve permanent results, or produce a new Eden. One of the lessons to be learned by all God’s servants is that of “carrying on,” without prospect of seeing the fruit of their labours. Moses did not enter the Promised Land, and Paul died in the darkest hour of Christian persecution. This cheerful acceptance of “the daily round and common task” is no easy matter. Waiting is, at times, tedious and irksome. Under it we grow weary and impatient. But it is splendid discipline. Milton has dignified it very finely in his sonnet on his blindness:—

“They also serve who only stand and wait.”

The word Reconstruction, just now in the mouths of every one, has an implied significance which is often overlooked, but is none the less real, and constitutes an eloquent testimony to human frailty. The particle prefix, *re*, *again*, speaks of so many previous disappointments, so many unrealized hopes. It is full of the pathos of aspirations which have failed, of dreams which have not come true, of longings which have not been satisfied. Like the spectres which thronged about Ulysses, when he visited the abodes of the dead,

“Thin airy shoals of visionary ghosts,”

they flit back into view as sad remembrancers of the past. And though the word also bespeaks newly awakened energy and courage, the cycle of human experience leaves no doubt as to the ultimate outcome. Plato’s *Republic*, More’s *Utopia*, Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, and a score of other outlines of an ideal State, have been drawn in fruitless succession. The aspiration is as old as the days of the ancient dreamers of Egypt and Chaldea. It is essentially the same cry as that which went up from the Plain of Shinar: “Go to now, let

us build a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven." The overthrow of great civilizations of the past fails to deter succeeding ages from cherishing fresh hopes of success. The ruins of Nineveh, Tyre and Babylon, "the glory that was Greece and the splendour that was Rome," the faded lustre of Venice and Spain, are object lessons spread in vain before the eyes of a perverse generation, which rejects the unpalatable truth that no purely human agency, however lofty the motive and splendid the conception, can cope with the degradation of the human heart steeped in trespasses and sin. Have we any more forcible example of this in modern times than the nation which prided itself on its Kultur, meaning thereby its attainments in the physical sciences, in materialistic philosophy and in religious criticism—the last, a thinly veiled disguise for scepticism and infidelity? It is stated on the basis of official statistics that for the past twenty years Germany has been far and away the most crime-ridden country in Europe. Figures from the *Statistisches Handbuch*, quoted in the *Daily Mail* of November 19 last, show a prevalence of crime and violence which can only be described as appalling. It is little wonder that a nation so depraved gloated over the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and viewed with callous indifference the outrages inflicted upon the inhabitants of the countries they invaded.

The inevitable comment is that mere legislation and precepts of morality alone cannot transform the heart, or produce a righteous and God-fearing people. Indeed, State regulations and ordinances are of very limited scope and application. Dr. Johnson, in a couplet which he contributed to Goldsmith's poem, "The Traveller," has penetratingly observed :

"How small, of all that human hearts endure,
That part which kings and laws can cause or cure!"

If society is to be uplifted, regeneration must commence in the hearts of men, and the transformation can only be effected by the influence of the Holy Spirit. No satisfactory substitute has ever been found.

II.

And now let us turn to a consideration of the Second Advent as it affects the individual in his capacity as a member of Christ's Church, responsible for his stewardship and called upon to render

an account at his Master's Return. Here we touch upon the spiritual side of the matter. Let us recall the latter part of St. Peter's exhortation : " Watch unto prayer." Just as soberness is the characteristic of civic duty, so watchfulness and prayer are the keynotes of spiritual life. Our Saviour Himself emphasized them : " Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation " (Matt. xxvi. 41). " Thy kingdom come " is the first petition in the Lord's Prayer relative to human needs. " Take ye heed : watch and pray " was the Saviour's almost final injunction to His disciples.

We have considered *Waiting* as a civic duty—it is to some extent passive and non-committal. *Watching* differs from it greatly in degree, if not in kind. It is much more intense, more earnest, more eager. He who watches for the sunrise differs from him who merely waits for day, in that the former is keenly alert to the first almost imperceptible glow on the horizon and the first faint flush on the sombre hills. It is no matter of mere nonchalance or indifference. It is a deep longing and desire voicing itself in words of earnest supplication to the great Ruler of the Universe :

Thy kingdom come, O God !
 Thy rule on earth begin :
 Break with Thine iron rod
 The tyranny of sin !

Now watchfulness is the special duty of a sentry, and, indeed, there is much in the status and functions of a sentry suggestive of Christian experience. A sentry is not only alert : he is also armed. He has to guard against a sudden enemy attack, and if at all practicable, be prepared to repel it until assistance arrives. He is on the defensive as well as on the alert. There is a very striking incident recorded in Old Testament history, which effectively illustrates this combined watchful-defensive attitude manifested in the prosecution of daily duties. It has often been applied in a spiritual sense to indicate the dual rôle filled by those who not only contend earnestly for the truth, but also labour for the building up of Christ's Church. You will recall that when Nehemiah set about restoring the dilapidated walls of Jerusalem, on the return of the Jews from captivity, he was much hampered by the aggressive tactics of certain adversaries, to wit, Sanballat, the Horonite, Tobiah, the Ammonite, and others, who stirred up the Arabians, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites to attack the Jews at their work. The only means of

repelling these sudden onslaughts was for every man to have a weapon ready to hand. The historian tells us : " They that builded on the wall and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side and so builded " (Neh. iv. 17, 18). The spiritual application is so obvious that it hardly needs to be pointed out. In St. Paul's words, " We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph. vi. 12). Evil agencies are continually on the aggressive, necessitating the utmost vigilance and readiness to repel them.

Let us just briefly consider one or two manifestations of this hostility at the present time.

I have already mentioned the subject of Reconstruction and pointed out that, even from an entirely secular standpoint, it is by no means an universal panacea for the evils of life. Looking at it in connexion with matters affecting religion, it is often anything but ameliorative; it exhibits tendencies, some of which are distinctly retrograde and subversive. The following are two or three instances in which the infatuation for a policy of Reconstruction has within the last few decades produced consequences which threaten to be disastrous in the extreme.

The first is the Reconstruction of the Bible. There is a certain school of theological thought, with a spiritual home in Germany, which has devoted a considerable degree of intellectual ingenuity to the dissection and analysis of the text of Holy Scripture, with the result that the venerable Record has been recast in a series of mutilated fragments, unrecognizable by, and, in fact, unintelligible to, those who have known and loved them in their original form. One is irresistibly impelled to the conviction that the spirit animating sacrilege such as this, is very much akin to the agnostic philosophy of that amiable old infidel, Omar Khayyam of Naishapur :

" Couldst Thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would we not shatter it to bits—and then,
Remould it nearer to the Heart's Desire ! "

There is in both parties a manifest delight in shattering things to bits and both cherish the notion of Reconstruction on a system of

eclecticism which will meet their own particular fads and fancies. As it stands, the Bible is no doubt distasteful to no small section of humanity. It is too plain spoken on the subject of man's depravity and his inability to attain unaided to the correct knowledge and right perception of God. Hence the desire to substitute for it some more flattering and agreeable doctrine. Accordingly, the policy pursued is that of casting discredit upon its accuracy and authenticity. Suggestions are put forward that it is unreliable and erroneous in its statements, and, in certain places, is little, if at all, distinguishable from a mere literary fake. Really, the situation, if it were not so tragic, would be ludicrous and absurd. To designate sheer desecration of this kind by the title of Higher Criticism is to impart to the movement a dignity and standing which it does not deserve. I make no pretence to the least competence to deal with textual difficulties, but it seems to me, as a mere "man in the street," that the Bible is doctrinally so interwoven in all its parts, that it must be accepted or rejected as a whole. No differentiation in regard to the degree of inspiration—to say nothing of charges of fabrication and mis-statement—is compatible with its recognition as the Word of God.

The second instance of ill-advised reconstruction is the Reconstruction of the Creed. The simple, straightforward declaration of "those things which are most surely believed among us," repeated Sunday after Sunday by successive generations through centuries of the world's history, is now deemed too crude in statement and too highly imaginative in form for acceptance by modern thought. The Virgin Birth and the Corporeal Resurrection of our Lord are pronounced "such stuff as dreams are made of," fancies of an untutored age, fragments of folk-lore imported into the faith in the period of its infancy. The testimony of Holy Writ is set on one side and the scrupulous investigation of St. Luke is ignored. You may perhaps have read, or have seen, a notice of a recent book called *The Faith of the Apostles' Creed*, by Dr. J. F. Bethune-Baker.¹ The argument of the book is outlined by the reviewer as follows: "The Creed was originally an artistic (!) whole based upon conceptions of God, man and nature, which have now been outgrown. The adoption of a modernized interpretation of individual articles only makes it a patchwork, and its unity can

¹ *The Record*, Jan. 9, 1919.

only be restored by looking at it as a whole from an entirely new standpoint." I hope I do the book no injustice, but if this be a correct statement of the author's attitude, it seems to me that he will be entirely out of focus, whatever point of view he may select, since his object is to suit what he terms, "dynamical conceptions of personality and life and ethical attainment by which our thought is inevitably fashioned to-day." The inherent weakness of his position is that human philosophic thought varies from age to age and there is no finality about it. New standpoints are the cry of each succeeding epoch, and the present generation resembles in every whit the Athenians of St. Paul's day who "spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or hear some new thing." It behoves those of us who decline to be swayed by passing modes of thought and sentiment to contend in its entirety for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.

The third ill-omened example of Reconstruction is that of the Liturgy on reactionary lines, tending to bring it more into harmony with medieval errors cast aside at the Reformation. I allude more particularly to the attempt which is at present being made with the cognizance and approval of certain Bishops and Pastors of the National Church to alter the Holy Communion Service so as to impart to it a decidedly Romish bias and disturb its doctrinal balance. I do not wish to imply that the Prayer Book is incapable of improvement, or that its revision is not a desirable undertaking. In several respects I agree that it is. But the alteration to which I have alluded is such as to cause grave misgivings as to the tendency of the movement. Rather than change its teaching in the manner proposed, it would be better to leave the Prayer Book severely alone.

These and other inimical activities must be resisted with vigilance and determination. We are expressly warned that one of the indications of the near approach of the Second Advent will be a falling away from the truth. We must be keenly alert to the more insidious forms of its manifestation. Evil can assume the guise of truth, just as Satan is related by Milton in his *Paradise Lost* to have taken the harmless semblance of a toad.

"Close at the ear of Eve,
Assaying by his devilish art to reach
The organs of her fancy."

It is not everybody, however, who is equipped like the seraph Ithuriel

with a spear, the touch of which transformed the Father of Lies into his true shape.

Time will not permit us to dwell on the aggressive tactics of the "principalities and powers" arrayed against the Christian Faith in these days. There is plenty to keep the watcher fully occupied, so that there is no excuse for "the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin." Slackness is at all times inopportune. Under its old name of Sloth, it was classed among the seven deadly sins. In a Christian, as in a sentry, it is unpardonable. Our Lord treated the matter as of supreme importance. He made it the subject of one of His most impressive homilies. He likened Himself to a man taking a far journey, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. "Watch ye therefore," He said, "lest returning suddenly he find you sleeping" (Mark xiii. 34).

And on this note we conclude. Whether the Lord tarry or whether He be even now at the door, whether the cry "How long" still continue to ascend from under the altar of heaven, or whether the trump of God be already at the archangel's lips, the injunction is plain and clear: "And what I say unto you, I say unto all: Watch" (Mark xiii. 37).

