

The Delay of the Parousia in the New Testament

by Arthur Moore

Dr. Moore, who is an Anglican minister in Clevedon, Somerset, England, gets to grips in this article with one of the «assured results» of New Testament criticism which is widely accepted almost without question. His recently published *The Parousia in the New Testament* (Brill, Leiden) deals in full with the issues raised.

If we wish to make sense of the Parousia delay we must first learn to understand what the New Testament means by the nearness of the Parousia. The N.T. insistence that the End is near, though nowadays elevated to pride of place in some reconstructions of Church history and in some forms of redactional criticism, is no new problem: it has long been a thorn in the flesh of N.T. scholars. Some, seeking to defend Jesus against apparent errancy, have gone to great lengths to blame the earliest disciples for sayings which appear to predict a return of Christ within their own lifetime, concluding that they returned to a pre-Christian apocalyptic. Others have interpreted the sayings in question, often with considerable difficulty, in terms of Christ's death or resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, or the expansion of the Christian mission. Others, however, have been content to say that Jesus was in this matter, as in some others, simply mistaken and that such errancy belonged to His humanity.

Unfortunately, amidst all this speculation about where we are to lay the blame for the supposed miscalculation and what we are now to make of the apparent delay so far as Church history

and Church dogmatics are concerned, it is too often taken for granted that the N.T. as a whole *does* speak of a Parousia which is to happen within the contemporary generation. Just recently the writer came upon this statement in the Bible reading notes (Getröster Tag) for 22nd December issued by the German Evangelical Church, «. . . dass Paulus sich in der Naherwartung seines Herrn getäuscht hat» («. . . that Paul was mistaken in his near-expectation of his Lord»), and other examples of the same confident opinion are legion. The present writer believes that this position is not infrequently held more on account of its being often and boldly affirmed than because of genuine and overwhelming evidence in its favour. At any rate, there is room to take another look at the sayings (relatively few) in the N.T. which appear at first sight to speak of a Parousia within the lifetime of the disciples and to ask whether they do indeed predict such a temporally fixed return of Christ or whether they speak of a Parousia which is in some sense «near» but without necessarily delimiting the time which must elapse before its occurrence. Space allows only the briefest glimpse at the main references, but the writer has endeavoured

elsewhere (in *The Parousia in the N.T.*, Leiden, 1966) to examine all the relevant evidence in detail.

THE PAULINE EVIDENCE

Paul certainly believed that the End was in some sense near (cf. e.g., Rom. 13:11, Phil. 4:5), and this view is shared by the other N.T. writers (cf. e.g., Heb. 10:25,37; James 5:7ff.; I Pet. 4:7; I Jn. 2:18). But the references which lead many to conclude that Paul definitely expected the Parousia before his own death are patient of other interpretations. Rom. 15:19 is sometimes taken to mean that Paul had preached in a representative way and that prior to the End nothing more could be expected (cf. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 211; J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, pp. 47ff.). But *peplérōkenai* may well mean simply that Paul had completed his task as a pioneer missionary in the areas mentioned, and there is nothing to suggest that he believed his preaching in those parts would be the only preaching they would hear or that on the completion of his personal missionary task the Parousia would come. As for I Thess. 4:15,17 (cf. also I Cor. 15:51) where many contend that Paul included himself in the number of those who would be alive at the End, there appears to be more to support the view that Paul, in speaking of «we», is thinking of the Church in general and means «some Christians will be alive» at the Parousia. The essential concern is with the two classes, those alive and those already dead at the Parousia, and not who is actually in which group. Furthermore, *hêmeis* is expanded in a general way as «those who are alive, who remain to the Parousia,» and in 5:9f. Paul can say «whether we watch or sleep,» seemingly acknowledging that he himself might live to the End but might instead die before it (and II Cor. 5:9 and Phil. 1:20 seem to reckon with the same

dual possibilities). It certainly seems unlikely that Paul, whose experiences had brought him often near to death (cf. Acts 9:23f., II Cor. 11:23f.), should have held any confident expectation of life. I Cor. 7:26 mentions «present distress,» but even if this refers to pre-messianic woes there is nothing to say how long these woes should continue, and perhaps in any case the reference is to the local conditions at Corinth. «The time is short» in v. 37, whilst affirming that the Parousia is in some sense imminent, does not make any definite forecast as to the length of time remaining. On Rom. 13:11 Dr. Barrett suggests Paul is telling his readers that already a «significant proportion of the total interval» before the Parousia has elapsed (*op. cit.* p. 253). In fact Paul only says that the End is now nearer and refrains from speculating as to what proportion of the total period has elapsed.

The Epistle of James speaks of the End as near (5:7-9), but had the writer meant that it must certainly come within a definite number of years then his argument in 4:13-17 would rather have been, «you say 'to-day or to-morrow,' but you forget that the Parousia is to come in a year or two,» whereas he actually refutes arrogant planning by reference to man's transitoriness and God's sovereignty (vv. 14-15) without mentioning the Parousia. I Pet. 4:5 and 4:7, I Jn. 2:18 etc., and Rev. 1:1 etc., also refer to the End as «near» but refrain from speculating exactly how near it might be.

THE GOSPELS

The situation is the same, we suggest, in the gospels. Mk. 9:1 *par.* is well understood as being fulfilled in the Transfiguration (to which, in the tradition, it is firmly attached) which is itself a kind of prolepsis of the Parousia. This interpretation goes back to many early commentators, is still held by a number of scholars and certainly makes sense

both of Mk. 9:1 and of the Transfiguration. Mk. 13:30 must be understood in terms of the whole chapter and its construction: verses 5-23 speak of the signs of the End, verses 24-27 of the End itself: verses 28-31 refer back to the first block of material, the signs (saying when they will happen and providing an exhortatory parable), whilst verses 32-37 refer to the second block, the End itself (again speaking of when it will come and giving a parable warning to watch). All the signs of the End are to come within the lifetime of Christ's contemporaries, but the date of the End itself is left open. The evasive interpretations of «this generation» are quite unsatisfactory (as Beasley-Murray, *A Commentary on Mark 13*, pp. 99f. shows), and we do not say that Jesus goes back on His refusal elsewhere to give signs (cf. Mk. 8:12, Jn. 4:48) for His refusal to make faith easy is not to be confused with His exhortation to recognize the real meaning of historical events. Furthermore, the idea of a sudden Parousia is entirely compatible with that of preceding signs which the faithful can see as pointers to the End and which prevent them from being overtaken by its sudden arrival (like an unwatchful householder surprised by a night thief; I Th. 5:2ff., II Pet. 3:10, Rev. 3:3). In Mk. 14:62 Jesus draws a contrast between what is happening at that moment to the Messiah in His humble submission to the High Priest's sentence and what will at some future moment occur and reveal to the High Priest Jesus' true character. As the humble submission was about to be concluded, so the future revelation could occur at any moment; but there is no need to suppose that Jesus or the early Church necessarily expected the High Priest to live on to see this event.

The extraordinarily difficult saying in Mt. 10:23 has been understood by many as a reference to the early Church's (or

Jesus') confident belief that the Parousia would come within a few years (cf. e.g. W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfilment*, p. 63), but it may well be that Jesus is simply warning His disciples that their work of converting Israel would not be completed before the Parousia, that He is discouraging easy optimism or hasty martyrdom and anticipating the future failure of the Jewish mission: the Parousia would come before they succeeded in winning over the Jews!

REDACTION-CRITICISM

Much recent redactional criticism thinks to find within the N.T. evidence of the «initial embarrassment» felt by the Church at the Parousia's «unexpected» delay and to find attempts at coping with the acute difficulties which, it is said, arose from this delay. In fairness, however, it must be said that this methodology frequently tends to exaggeration. For instance, Conzelmann contrasts Lk. 21 with Mk. 13 (*The Theology of St. Luke*, pp. 110ff.) disclosing a series of what he calls conscious alterations of Mark in accord with Luke's own perspective whereby he tones down the early expectation and substitutes a theology of Heilsgeschichte. His review, taken as a whole, is impressive, but analysed individually the several so-called alterations are seen to be insignificant and the so-called shift of emphasis to be a fiction. (Interestingly, on at least two occasions, 13:6-9 and 18:1-8, Luke speaks both of delay and imminence where he might easily have omitted or altered but has not done so: but Conzelmann makes only fleeting mention of Lk. 13:6-9 and deals very unsatisfactorily with Lk. 18:1-8.) II Pet. 3 is often regarded as an attempt to answer the Parousia delay «crisis» by summoning all the old and some new arguments to account for the interval. But an analysis of the arguments in II Pet. 3 and a comparison of them with e.g. Mk. 13 and II Thess. 2 reveals that essentially no-

thing new or different is propounded. Some find in Jn. 21:20-23 another attempt to deal with the problem of the delay (cf. e.g. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 488), but there is really no need to suppose that Jesus had predicted anything for the unnamed disciple, only that (as we read) through Jesus' hypothetical statement some had mistakenly imagined that that disciple would not die.

Without exaggeration and without recourse to acute textual surgery of an unwarranted and unscientific kind, it is difficult to conclude otherwise than that the N.T. in all its parts, though in varying degrees, regards the Parousia as near at hand but that this nearness is not delimited and that there is no attempt to speculate as to when exactly it will arrive. Which leaves us with this problem: if the N.T. writers and the early Church as a whole (with the exception of a few fringe members) did not regard the Parousia as near in the sense that it would certainly come within a set number of years, in what sense did they regard it as near? This is the question to which we now turn.

THE «NEARNESS» OF THE PAROUSIA

The problem of the nearness of the Parousia is ultimately bound up with the problem of the Incarnation itself and the problem of revelation. Within the ministry of Christ twin pressures can be observed which, if not in conflict, stand in considerable tension with one another. On the one hand there stands an eschatological pressure, a need to appear in the glory and in the role appropriate to His divinity. The demons involuntarily confess this divinity (Mk. 1:24,34), the Transfiguration scene momentarily parts the curtain to give a glimpse of Christ's proper glory, the disciples are led to an awareness (however temporary and limited) of His true status, whilst on particular occasions the

bat-kôl declares His divine Sonship (cf. Mk. 1:9ff., 9:2ff.). It belongs to the person of Christ as Son of God that He should be acknowledged, that His presence among men should be recognised for the eschatological event that it is. There is, so to speak, a divine necessity towards revelation. But there is another pressure at work which stems from the gracious purpose of God allowing men the possibility of faith. This pressure tends toward veiling, clothing Christ's presence on earth in such a way that men should not be overwhelmed by the glory of His majesty but should be allowed the possibility of a free response of faith (cf. further O. Borchert, *The Original Jesus*, p. 398, and more recently, T. F. Torrance, «A Study in N.T. Communication» in *S.J.T.* III, 1950, pp. 298ff.). It was for the gracious purpose of redeeming mankind and allowing him to respond to this redemption that Christ was «found in fashion as a man,» that He «humbled himself and became obedient unto death.»

REVEALING AND VEILING

These two elements in the life and ministry of Jesus can be traced out in His teaching and in His behaviour. He was at pains to speak so as both to reveal and to veil, to give enough light to lead to faith, but not so much light as to destroy the possibility of faith. Hence the parable became His special teaching method and was particularly suited to His purposes. Furthermore, His behaviour both revealed His true nature (the blind man of Jn. 9 drew the right conclusion as to Jesus' person from His healing; cf. Jn. 9:31ff.) and yet, also, veiled it, for He was the one who had nowhere to lay His head, who suffered at the hands of men and who died on a cross. There have been (and still are) those who wish to find only one of these elements in Christ's life and teaching. Schweitzer practically abandoned the grace motif in

favour of the eschatological (or, in his view, the apocalyptic) and in the end made sense of Christ's life only really in terms of its exemplary quality. Dodd, on the other hand (in company with many others), stressed the grace character to the practical exclusion of the eschatological, re-interpreting the parables which appear to speak of a future eschatological denouement in terms of the judgment upon the Jews brought by the presence of their Messiah amongst them, and treating other eschatological sayings as the work of Jesus' followers who misunderstood His true purpose and character. «Monist» thinking (the unnecessary «either/or») often misleads and in this case is surely quite mistaken. It is necessary to acknowledge both eschatological and grace elements in Christ's life and work for He was the *real* presence of God amongst men (and therefore revelation and glory belonged to Him) and yet He was the *gracious* presence of God amongst men (and therefore hiddenness was appropriate to Him).

But not only are both elements to be found in Christ's life and work: they are also to be found in Christ's outlook upon the future that lay ahead for His disciples. Try as some scholars might, it appears impossible to exclude from Jesus' outlook the thought of a future interval between His own death and resurrection on the one hand and the Parousia on the other. Yet, try as other scholars do, it is also impossible to exclude from Jesus' outlook the thought of a future Parousia, a return of the Son of Man in His proper glory. The one aspect of this expectation is of a piece with the grace element running through His life and work: the time for repentance and faith is to continue for a period (not, as II Pet. 3:9 points out, because God has forgotten His promises, but because He is patient and His purpose of grace embraces all mankind). But the other element corresponds to the eschatological motif in Christ's life, for

it looks to the unveiling of Him who was and is the Eschatos, to the revelation of Christ in glory.

THE REVELATION OF CHRIST'S ACHIEVEMENT

Thus the Parousia in the N.T. is both Christocentric and revelational. It is Christocentric in as much as the Parousia is but the revelation of that which has already happened in principle in Christ, though in a mysterious and hidden manner. In Christ, God's final judgment is already enacted, judgment of man's sin is brought to a head in its fullness and finality on the cross (cf. esp. II Cor. 5:14, Gal. 3:10). In Christ, God's promised blessing of the righteous is also enacted though the «righteous» now is narrowed to the one, representative Son of Man (cf. esp. Acts 5:31, Rom. 3:24, Eph. 1:3). And in Christ the subjugation of all that rebels against God has also been enacted, a subjugation already in evidence in Jesus' exorcisms and healings but specially effected through the cross and resurrection (cf. Acts 2:36, Eph. 1:20ff., Phil. 2:9). The Parousia, as the revelation of that which has thus already happened in Christ, must necessarily be Christocentric and it is not surprising that interpretations of the Parousia in terms of Pentecost, the fall of Jerusalem or the mission of the Church all fall short of the N.T.'s real affirmation. But the Parousia is also revelational, for all that has occurred already in Christ has happened in the deepest hiddenness, in the mystery of the Incarnation, the passion and cross and resurrection, and it demands as a matter of urgent necessity to be made unambiguously evident. This hiddenness was appropriate in as much as God's purpose in Christ was one of grace: but it is intolerable in as much as God was *really* in Christ, it is unthinkable that the true character of that which has happened in Christ should not be universally revealed. Properly speaking, the Parousia

belongs to the complex of events involved in the Incarnation as the unveiling of that which has already happened in Christ. Herein lies, we suggest, the essence of the N.T.'s insistence upon the nearness of the Parousia. The Parousia is near, not because it must necessarily come within a set number of years but because, however long it might delay on account of God's patience and purpose of grace, it remains that which necessarily belongs to what has already happened in Christ, as it is the unveiling of the mystery of the Incarnation and the revelation of the glory of Christ.

THE EARLY CHURCH

The two elements in Christ's life and outlook on the future, which though not in conflict certainly stand in tension, recur in the life of the early Church. There is found an eschatological element, an awareness of the changed situation, an acknowledgement that the present is the «last hour» (I Jn. 2:18, cf. Acts 2:17, II Tim. 3:1, Heb. 1:2, I Pet. 1:20, etc.), the End must come «quickly» (Rev. 22:7, 12:20, cf. Heb. 10:37); there is a realisation that through the faith-union with Christ the Church already partakes of the blessings of the End, in Christ Christians have already passed from death into life (I Jn. 3:14). There is, at the same time, the awareness that still outstanding is the revelation of that which is true already only «in Christ,» the recognition that this delays for a season only on account of God's gracious purpose for man and that therefore the Church must undertake the proclamation of the gospel as a matter of urgency and as the specific task of the Church in the present. It is the Spirit who unites these two elements, for as He is the *arrabôn* and the *aparchê* of the End and speaks of eschatology, He is also the one who inspires, directs and sustains the Christian mission, witnessing to and through the disciples and so speaks of grace,

It is, surely, of vital importance to the Church of to-day that we recover this sense of duality in Christ's ministry and in the life of the Church itself. For it is as we recognise and understand these two elements in tension that we discern the true urgency of our present situation, the need to abandon all irrelevant «churchy» concerns in favour of whole-hearted commitment to the mission to which Christ calls, in which the Spirit leads and for which the End delays. In this recognition we make sense both of the N.T.'s promise of the Parousia and of the continued delay of that which was and remains «near.» Whilst we might long for the End to come quickly (cf. I Cor. 16:22, Rev. 22:20) and know that it is imminent, there is also point in being thankful that it delays and that we still have time for repentance and faith and time to preach the gospel.

The real meaning of the Parousia in the N.T. is that it is the revelation of that which has already happened in Christ: the real meaning of the nearness of the Parousia is that this revelation belongs necessarily to the incarnate events of Christ and is absolutely of a piece with His life, death, resurrection and ascension: and the real meaning of the delay of the Parousia is that this revelation, though imminent, is held back in the interests of grace, allowing for a while the Church's mission and the continuing possibility of faith.