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EDITORIAL

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

THE scope of this paper is defined by the title. We shall not consider the authenticity of the eschatological teaching in the Gospels, nor attempt to relate the parousia to its kindred themes, nor even try to define what is meant by the Second Coming in the light of the nature of eschatological symbolism. However we conceive the Second Coming of Christ, what is its significance to Christian thought?

For purposes of clarification I would concentrate attention on three assertions. The Second Coming of Christ means:—

1. THE END IS GOD. It could not be otherwise. The Lord of Creation presumably had a clear idea of His aim when He formed it: it was to embody His glory. The glory, alas, is smothered. The Bible's chief concern is to tell how the aboriginal divine purpose is fulfilled, or rather, to enable us to find our part in the fulfilment. Since this End is dependent on God's initiative, the Bible records God's comings for the salvation of men. "To Biblical writers, the living God is always a holy Presence", said Minear. "This Presence makes himself known, not so much as a constant spiritual stratosphere, but as an awesome, invasive power." Faith postulates that what God has begun He will surely complete. And so the Book of Revelation tells of the hour when the cry, "It is done", sounds forth in the new creation, when God is all in all (Rev. xxi, 6).

This is easy enough when one reads the Bible; it is another matter when one reads the daily paper. If in the last century the Kingdom of God seemed to be in sight, today an atomising hell seems closer at hand. We are very conscious of our adversaries. True, there are still some stalwarts who believe we can deal with them all and "bring in the day of brotherhood and end the night of wrong".

Church history, however, tells a different story, and has some significant comments on, "We wrestle not with flesh and blood . . ." We should by this time know our limitations.

The serious factor is not that missionaries have been thrown out of China, that relations are difficult in India and in Africa, but that the old-fashioned phenomena of sin are still with us; that there's not a human heart in which a "No" does not ascend to Almighty God a good many times a day, and the majority spend their lives in the wrong Kingdom all their days. We are so used to this situation, its gravity to a theistic view is realised only with effort. Anselm contended that wherever sin rears its head, the Godhead of God is

called in question. A power has appeared which limits God. As Heim points out, the size of the revolt is irrelevant, for it has the same importance as the greatest cosmic revolution which tears the planetary system out of its path. But realise the actual extent of sin and you see the enormity of the situation. Sin is destructive of the universe and an assault on the majesty of God. Faith is reasonable only if it can be believed that He will put an end to the position. A God powerless to deal with it would be no more God but a demon. Forsyth had the same idea when he urged that we could not worship a God Who was simply our faithful comrade, sharing a fate which bound us both. "He would not be a holy God. And we can worship no less." But we are not called on to worship a comrade. We are summoned by the Creator Who is Lord of history and of creation. He is to make *both* the scene of His glory. Such is our assurance in view of His coming.

2. THE END IS GOD IN CHRIST. God deals with His creatures through the mediation of His Son. As it was in the beginning, it is now and ever shall be—world with or without end. The Second Coming proclaims the faith that the God Who made this universe through His Son and redeemed it by his blood will transfigure it by his grace. As Cullmann puts it: "The hope of the New Testament can only be hope in the return of the Lord, if, as we have tried to show, the entire message of the New Testament culminates in Christ, Saviour of men and of the cosmos, beginning, middle and conclusion of the whole history of salvation from the first to the new creation. Christ, in being mediator in the past and present, must be that also in the future. To hope, according to the New Testament, can then only be to hope in his return." Indeed, on no other basis is it conceivable, at least in Christian theology, that this world will reach its appointed goal. The apostolic Church looked for a reunited universe only because it saw it summed up in *Christ* (Eph. i, 10), i.e., by the effective exercise of his grace and power. Such is also the faith of the Gospels. In them the Kingdom of God is fundamentally a dynamic concept—God sovereignly acting; but its presence is seen in the operation of that sovereignty in the Person and deeds of Christ. Its redemptive powers reached out to the world through the death and resurrection of that same Redeemer and the sending of His Spirit. Its universal sway must likewise come through Him. "If Christ is trustworthy, the only question worth asking is how far into the future his influence stretches", wrote Mackintosh. "It stretches out into the utmost reaches of eternity" is the only Christian answer. In Christian faith, eschatology is Christology; or there's no such thing as a Christian eschatology.

3. THE END IS GOD IN CHRIST ACTING IN ALMIGHTY POWER. So far we have traversed common ground. Little that has been said would arouse dissent. The difficulty for the modern mind begins when the implications of the Advent are faced, without recourse to a mythical

interpretation that dissolves its content. For does not the Coming imply that what God in Christ did not succeed in doing by the love of the Cross He will get done by the exercise of brute force? And is that not unthinkable? The writer of the "Epistle to Diognetus" asked: "Was he sent, think you, as any man might suppose, to establish a sovereignty, to inspire fear and terror? Not so. But in gentleness and meekness has He sent him, as a king might send his son who is a king. He sent him . . . as Saviour, using persuasion, not force; for *force is no attribute of God*". That sentiment has more than once been invoked to deny the possibility of the Advent. C. J. Cadoux, for example, believed that the Second Coming contradicted the Sermon on the Mount, the ministry of Jesus and His death on Golgotha. It reminds T. F. Glasson of a frustrated chess player who cannot win the game and so scatters the pieces on the floor.

Despite the plausibility of these contentions, I am convinced that they issue from a misunderstanding of our Lord's teaching. If one wanted a phrase with which to sum up the ministry of Jesus it would not be greatly amiss to describe it as a manifestation of *love with power*. It is a mistake to exaggerate either feature, but I must here call attention to the latter. Apart from the very ungentle behaviour of Jesus at the cleansing of the Temple, which, incidentally, with the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem formed his only public messianic self-declaration, what do we make of his urging the necessity of binding the Strong Man before his goods be plundered—a crucial parable for the messianic consciousness of Jesus (Mark iii, 27)? What of his casting out of demons by the finger of God, whereby men may know the presence of the Kingdom (Luke xi, 20)? What of his miracles—*dunamis*!—that revealed his exercise of the Kingdom of God (Matthew xi, 5)? What of his being marked out as Son of God with power by his resurrection from the dead (Rom. i, 4)? The proof of the kingdom in him was his unparalleled exercise of the power of God, and he rebuked his contemporaries for not realising it. Has Paul's word to the Corinthians ever been given due recognition? "The Kingdom of God is . . . in power" (1 Cor. iv, 20). Singularly enough, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is described as of a wind, rushing and violent—*biaios*, the word the writer to Diognetus said could not be associated with God! As to Glasson's illustration of the chess player, it surely moves in the wrong sphere of reference. The Temptation in the desert, Gethsemane, Golgotha and the Empty Tomb were not moves in a game politely played between the Almighty and the devil, but are more fitly likened to a battle. If you must use the image of a game of chess, it isn't that the board and chessmen are overturned at the end, but the other player was slung out of the room long ago for playing a dirty game! (See Rev. xii, 1-9.)

This raises, however, a question. If the battle was won, or the game concluded, at the cross and resurrection, what need is

there of a second Advent? Not uncommonly it has been answered: "None". At most the Advent serves to reveal the decisiveness of the victory won at the Cross. It throws light on a stage that earlier was too dimly lighted for the actors to be properly seen. Such seems to be the import of a typical statement of C. H. Dodd's, made some time ago: "Eschatology is not itself the substance of the Gospel, but a form under which the absolute value of the Gospel facts is asserted". And again: "Whatever may be said of the second advent of the Lord, the sense of the preparatory, the provisional, the incomplete, which is an inseparable element in all Old Testament prophecy, has no place in the New Testament. The Lord has come." Here is the characteristic exaggeration of the (undoubtedly valuable) concept of realised eschatology, indelibly associated with Professor Dodd. Certainly it is true that the redemptive obedience of Jesus on the Cross and his introduction of the new order by his resurrection partook of the finality of eternity; it is nevertheless true that what Heim called the *Machtfrage*, the question of power, was not settled by either of those twin-events. Sin is still very much in the world and death claims all. The Kingdom of God is everywhere limited in this universe. In this sense the work of Christ is just as certainly incomplete as it is valid for eternity; for by no mutation can the change from a universe of sin and death to the new creation of resurrection life be evolved, even under the direction of the Spirit; only the re-creative work of the Almighty Christ can bring about that. And that is what we await at the Second Coming. Happily, Professor Dodd appears to admit this now, from his more recent definition of the Advent as "the final disclosure of the power and righteousness of God and the end of history as we know it".

In conclusion, it should be apparent from the above that the significant element in the coming of Christ is not alone the unveiling of his Presence, though that in itself is enough to shake the universe; rather, that unveiling is to witness His final works of judgment and deliverance, his consummation of the Kingdom that shall know no end. How He is to accomplish this nor tongue nor pen can show. But the concluding words of the message from the Evanston assembly express our sentiment: "We do not know what is coming to us. But we know Who is coming. It is He Who meets us every day and Who will meet us at the end—Jesus Christ our Lord." And that is all that matters.

G. R. BEASLEY-MURRAY.

INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

THERE is a new emphasis today upon the content of Scripture. This emphasis is apparent both in Biblical scholarship and in the task of communicating the Gospel. The fresh appreciation of the content of Scripture within the Church is matched by the