

purely ; we also, in God's name and all with a view to his glory, may separate ourselves from brethren who, though they are ignorant and narrow and suspicious, may nevertheless tremble at the word of God, and heartily long to know and do his will. *O hear the word of the Lord, ye that sin against the spirit of the Lord, by despising any of your fellows, however ignorant and weak they may be. If ye hate your brethren, and thrust them out for his Name's sake, saying, Let Jehovah be glorified ! He shall appear to their joy, and ye shall be ashamed.*

EDITOR.

## THE SECOND ADVENT.

ST. MATTHEW XXV. 5.

IF it be true that belief in the ministry of angels has to a great extent faded out of our modern Christianity, and if (as I have tried to shew in a former paper) an account can be given of that change which is quite consistent with a very deep and earnest faith, I believe that we may turn to another and even more important article of historical Christianity with something of the like feeling and of the like hope. And, surely, it is not necessary again to argue that it is well for us to face every change of this kind with the utmost honesty. To fling away any article of one's creed, or to hold it as an open question, just because doubts arise concerning it in the minds of others or in one's own, is a rashness and a folly. But when there has been a slow but very general fading away of beliefs, of feelings, or of expectations, which once were part and parcel of ordinary Christian faith, it is our obvious duty to look the matter in the face, and get, if possible, to the bottom of it.

We cannot afford to repeat creeds which we do not really believe; to retain among our religious stores long rows of empty jars of which the once fragrant contents have long since evaporated.

The subject of which I wish to treat is the Second Coming of Christ; or, rather, it is the *expectation* of that Second Coming. And there are, I think, three points which may be laid down without dispute as raising the problem we have to consider.

1. It was decidedly and emphatically a part of the teaching of Christ that He should come again. This is the least that can be said of it: it would be almost true that He made it the most prominent point of his teaching, and used his utmost power, both in direct statement and in parable, to fix the minds of his hearers on this above all other things. No "destructive criticism" can eliminate this element from the Gospels without utterly destroying their tissue; and, even if it were eliminated from the Gospels, it would be a second impossibility to extinguish its echoes and re-echoes from the Acts and the Epistles.

Some have had the hardihood to maintain that the expectation of the Second Advent was due to fraudulent devices of interested teachers, who held the people thereby in bondage—*how*, it is not easy to see. A theory so absolutely gratuitous is beneath contempt. All sane people will agree that, if our Lord is *not* coming again with glory, He was either a deceiver or deceived.

2. The expectation of the Second Advent was a very lively and prominent part of the faith of the early Christians. The earliest and least contested of the Epistles bear the strongest testimony to this fact.

That St. Paul, *e.g.*, preached the doctrine very forcibly at Thessalonica is abundantly evident from his Epistles addressed to the converts there. So strong was the impression made on them, that they neglected their business, and could scarcely think of anything else: they even took for granted that it would come to pass in their own lifetime. The other Epistles do not point to anything so extreme, but they all put forward the appearing of Christ as a matter of real and constant expectation.

3. The expectation of the Second Advent has altogether ceased to have any practical place among the feelings, motives, or anticipations which govern the Christian life. I say this with perfect confidence, and with the utmost broadness of statement. It is true of *all* Christian bodies, without distinction. It is part of a universal change which has been coming over our religion since the Apostles fell asleep, but especially since the birth of Science. I know that there is an *appearance* of really expecting the Day, of saying that the Judge is at the door. When the season of Advent comes round many thousands of preachers all over the world will exhort their congregations to be waiting and watching for that second coming of Christ "as a thief in the night." But neither preachers nor congregations will do anything of the sort. If they are good Christians they will be living in daily view of, and preparation for, their *own* departure; but the Second Coming of Christ will remain (as it has been for centuries) too utterly divorced from considerations of time to have any practical awakening effect.

There is a body of Christians who did really begin, not many years ago, by preaching and believing the

speedy—in fact, the immediate—coming of Christ. They preach it still; but I venture to say, without for a moment questioning their honesty, that they do not continue to believe it. What I mean is, that their belief in this speedy coming is only a dogma, an accepted article of their creed; it is not, nor can be, an actual expectation. To maintain *that* in very truth, it had been necessary for them to sever themselves from the business, the fashion, the pleasure, the daily life, of modern society—which they have not done.

The fact is—and it is a psychological fact which holds true of men of all creeds and all temperaments—that there are only two ways in which a belief in the Second Advent can dwell in the human mind. It may be a real expectation; and then it must produce a certain amount of excitement, of speculation, of impatience, of “detachment” from the concerns of this world, as it did among the early Christians. Or, on the other hand, it may be a merely formal belief without expectation, as it is now. We think of the Second Advent as belonging to the absolutely vague and shadowy future. We have quite ceased to speculate when it will be, with the exception of a few to whom such speculation is a matter of intellectual enjoyment. We have removed the subject from practical contemplation. With human nature constituted as it is, it could not possibly be otherwise. The mind of man cannot be kept upon the strain of expectation for more than a very limited time; and this holds true of a body of people quite as much as of an individual. No emotion more quickly exhausts itself and expires through sheer inability to maintain itself at its first level. It is, *e.g.*, perfectly well known that those who live in earth-

quake-haunted countries never trouble themselves about the earthquake until it comes. They take such ordinary precautions as experience has taught them, but that is all. This is sometimes ascribed to a frivolous disposition; but, in truth, we ourselves should do just the same. If we were *sure* that the earthquake would come within a year, or a few years, we *might* expect it all the while; but if it were utterly uncertain when it would come, or whether it would come in our time at all, we simply *could* not keep alive the expectation of it in our minds. And so it is with the Second Advent. I doubt whether there is a single person who is really watching for it day by day. By far the greater number of ordinarily good people never seriously think of it at all; the end on which the eyes of their soul are fixed being their own departure, not *his* coming. And those of us who think, and strive to understand as much as we can of the ways of God, are for the most part persuaded that the world has a long, perhaps an enormously long, lease of existence before her yet. This, however, is a fresh element in the question—a positive element of expectation telling directly against the weakened expectation of which I have been speaking—and it requires separate consideration.

No one will doubt that modern life is actually founded throughout upon the tacit assumption that the present world will last; and few would deny that the assumption is reasonable. Everything in the past, especially as interpreted by geology and astronomy, points to the working out of God's plans and purposes through immense intervals of time. Everything in the present, so imperfect, unfinished, confused, and yet hopeful and pointing clearly to higher and better developments in

the future, seems to demand immense intervals of time to work itself fairly out to its legitimate consummation. Science, and scientific discovery, and scientific control of the forces of nature, are so amazing, on the whole so clearly benevolent and so certainly intended for us by the goodness of God, and yet are so obviously in their infancy still, that we cannot believe that the Most High would suddenly put a term to all human progress under present conditions. If so, why and wherefore did He permit the era of discovery and of conquest over nature to commence ?

For we must never forget that this "benevolence"—this hopeful aspect of the life of the race—which inevitably leads to such eager forecastings and discountings of the next century and of the further future, is strictly modern : it is hardly, if at all, more than three centuries old. And it is not (we must honestly confess) due to Christianity. It is probable that Christianity, on the whole, augmented the misery of man, and the wretchedness of his sojourn here, for ten centuries at least : not, of course, by making the hard conditions of life harder ; but by multiplying and intensifying the susceptibilities of men to suffering. Compare, *e. g.*, the capacity of mental torment of a Christian maiden, or a Christian father, with that of non - Christians. No one doubts that heathen and Mahometan men and women may suffer acutely ; but no one with any Christian feeling can well doubt that Christians may suffer more acutely in exact proportion to the depth and refinement of their Christian character. The very "gentleness of Christ," as reflected in his followers, becomes a source of poignant anguish to them in an ungentle world. And Christianity, while

it increased susceptibility to pain, did not diminish the amount of pain to be endured. Life under the heathen Roman Empire was a most wretched thing, and without hope of improvement. No one in his senses could have desired God to prolong the days of that decaying and degraded State. Yet its fall was worse than its continuance—a chaos of barbarian hordes, either heathen, or owning a nominal Christianity: who could desire that mankind should be perpetuated under such circumstances? And even when the seething chaos settled into some kind of order, and some sort of right grew out of stark unblushing might, yet was it no such world as even we, with our largely “modified” Christianity, could have endured to live in. The gentle and the holy shrunk into monastic houses, and left the world to brawlers and ruffians, liars and seducers. We say they did wrong; we say they should have leavened the world by their example in the world. It is, however, obvious that it is a question of degree. There is a degree of violence, of lewdness, and of injustice, which one would be justified in not daring to face oneself; which one would be more than justified in not permitting one’s children to face, if it were possible to avoid it. It was not heroic for men and women who sought the kingdom of God to retire into monasteries, and so to escape the dreadful trials and temptations of the outer world; but it was very natural and very excusable.

No, it was not Christianity, but that complex entity, Civilization— which has so many points of contact with Christianity, which gives and takes to and from it so freely, yet is so plainly diverse from it and independent of it—that has made this world the com-

paratively eligible home it is for the human race. Civilization, and its handmaid Science, have completely altered both the wishes and the expectations of mankind as to the duration of the world. Human life, looked at in the mass, and apart from the future fortunes of the individual, is raised to a level unspeakably higher than any one could have conceived three or four centuries ago. It is perfectly true that no common interests, no common triumphs, will ever compensate in the slightest degree for the failure of individual hope, or afford the least consolation when the shadow of death draws near; but it is also true that those common interests and common triumphs do exist on a grand and ever-growing scale, and that they must very largely affect the feelings and expectations of a Christian man. It is, I think, impossible to believe that the promise of the present, so rich, so manifold, so full of hope, should not be allowed time to realize itself. Surely there is a revelation of God in the history of Science, as well as in the facts of Nature! If those marvellous and beneficent powers and possibilities lay hid so many centuries; if now they are being so rapidly discovered and subdued to the service of man; we must surely argue that God not only meant them to be searched out (as we see) by man's keen intellect and patient inquiry, but also meant them to be used and improved for the benefit of the race through long tracts of time. For length of time is a necessity of Science for the future as well as for the past. No one would be content to think that Science, as applied to the advancement of the race and improvement of life, was in any later or less hopeful stage than that of vigorous youth with a practically unlimited career



before it. If the All-Father suffered his children to live in nakedness upon a storm-swept earth so many centuries, shall He cut short their dwelling when at last the wilderness has begun in part to blossom as the rose? We cannot but think of God in his relation to the human race as a whole, as well as in his relation to our individual souls.

These considerations will suffice to explain the fact that a positive expectation of the endurance of the present world has insensibly grown up in the mind of (perhaps) all thoughtful Christian people. Such an expectation is, of course, incompatible with a positive expectation of the Second Advent. As long as men did daily expect the end of all things, they could not possibly take any interest in the slow improvement of mundane existence. But, as I have shewn, the expectation of the Second Advent was one which, in the nature of things, could not last; delay was fatal to it as an active expectation, because the mind of man is constitutionally incapable of maintaining an active expectation for any length of time. The *belief* was not destroyed, because belief in a future event may exist quite apart from any considerations of time. It is quite easy to expect that the world will endure through ages of ages, perhaps beyond the arithmetic of man, and at the same time to believe that Christ will certainly come again, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God.

And now I would point out what I take to be a distinct intimation from our Lord's own lips of this universal failure of expectation of the Second Advent, which at first sight seems so singular. If He foretold it, there can be nothing in it which need stagger our

faith. The saying to which I refer forms part of the Parable of the Ten Virgins.

Need it be premised that that parable speaks to us, not of those vowed to a virgin life (as most<sup>1</sup> of the ancient commentators imagined), but of all professing Christians, all who are "called" to the marriage supper of the Lamb, whether "chosen" or not. Half of them were foolish, for they took, indeed, their lamps—their outward profession of holiness—and had no doubt some little oil of grace to start with; but they did not seek, and therefore did not receive, any abiding supply of the Holy Spirit, as did the others who were wise. But although there was this great and distinctive and (in its consequences) vital difference between them, yet, "while the bridegroom tarried, they *all* slumbered and slept"—the wise just as much as the foolish. Now, this has greatly puzzled the commentators, for it seems to be inconsistent with the character of the wise virgins: they did not expect to find *them* sleeping at such a time, when so much depended upon their being prepared. Many of them have therefore taken this sleep to be the sleep of death, which befalls all men, and reduces them to an apparent equality of unconsciousness. This, however, is inconsistent with the words used, with the scope of the parable, and with other Scriptures. "Sleep" is, indeed, often used in the sense of death, but not "slumber;" for the latter word denotes that drowsiness and nodding of the head which precedes actual, not metaphorical, sleep. Again,

<sup>1</sup> As far as I know, only Origen, with that deep, true, spiritual insight, which shines through all his eccentricities of speculation; and Jerome, with that strong common sense and scriptural learning which so generally kept his fanaticism in check, rise to the wider view which all modern commentators have long ago adopted.

death has no place in this parable at all, any more than it has in any of the eschatological discourses with which it is connected. Not death, but judgment, is the point to which the eye of faith is directed ; and to introduce a reference to death is to violate the simplest law of interpretation—the unity of the point of view. Again, to say that *all* Christians sleep in the sense of dying, is flatly to contradict St. Paul, who says that “ we shall *not* all sleep ; ” and the Creed, which asserts that Christ will come again to “ judge the *quick* and the dead.”

Clearly then, to my mind at least, the reference is to the universal failure of active expectation of the Second Advent among all Christians, good and bad. The bridegroom tarried ; his return was delayed far beyond the expectation of those who had to wait for his approach. And who does not know how suddenly and imperiously an excited expectation, after long delay, turns to drowsiness and sleep ? One may see it exemplified in the most striking way in the case of a little child, but it holds true of us all. Neither mind nor body can stand the strain of eager expectation for long together ; sleep comes as a tyrant who may not be gain-said, albeit a beneficent tyrant on the whole. This was why those wise virgins also slumbered and slept ; and no one need blame them. Their lamps burnt on, well filled with oil, and ready to be turned up at any moment : they would not be any the less ready to meet the bridegroom when he *did* come, because they slumbered while he tarried.

It is the same with us. We are not expecting the Bridegroom ; it would be hypocrisy to say that we are. Consciously, or unconsciously, we think, we act, we

speculate, we forecast, we live as citizens of this world, on the tacit assumption that the world is going on, and will go on. We are all asleep; and we are asleep because He has tarried so long, so much longer than there was any reason to expect. When we were told to go forth to meet Him, He spoke as if He were coming again almost immediately, but it has not proved to be so; and since He has delayed thus long, it is impossible even to guess how much longer it may be. We cannot keep our minds on the strain, our expectations on the stretch: what we *can* do, is to have our lamps burning and filled with oil, so as to be ready at any moment when they may be wanted.

Such may surely be the legitimate attitude of a faithful soul with regard to the Second Advent. It is an attitude singularly liable to misconception, because it is one of slumber. To any person who did not understand, or did not make allowance for, the unalterable facts of our mental nature, and the inevitable and quite innocent consequences of those facts, this attitude of slumber would suggest only sloth, unconcern, or unbelief. Such, no doubt, is what suggests itself to the mind of an unbeliever, when he sees professing Christians quite as much as infidels entirely unexpectant of the end of all things. But the suggestion is wholly superficial and false. It is true that they are not living in view of Christ's coming, but they are living in view of their own departure. It is true they are not in a state of expectation, but they are in a state of preparedness. There is neither harm nor danger in their slumber, so long as their lamps are replenished with oil: the fear is, not lest they should fail to be awakened

then, but lest they should have failed to supply their lamps now.

It remains to account, if we can, for the language of our Lord, who certainly gave men the *impression* that his return would be very speedy.

It might be lawful, though it would be perilous, to assert that He did not Himself know, save in a general way; and that his tender solicitude for "his own" caused Him to hurry over in thought and word the period of his absence from them. Certainly He distinctly stated that He did not know the exact time of his return. Still, the fact remains that the first Christians were permitted to draw from our Lord's words the natural inference that his coming again was very near.

I make bold to say that the mistake, if such it can be called, was both natural and beneficent. Natural, because when dear friends part, they instinctively dwell not on the interval of separation, but upon the hour of reunion. It is always possible to regard a vague stretch of time as either long or short, and on such occasions we wish to regard it, and we do regard it, in its shortness, not in its length—in the shortness it will have when it is past, not in the length it will have while it is present. I should not be afraid to think that this natural instinct of love and tenderness coloured both the words of Christ and the impressions of the disciples.

Beneficent, again, was the expectation, in those days, of the speedy end of all things. Had the disciples been plainly told *then*, when human life was so painful and liable to such exquisite torments, that the

world would last so many, many, centuries—how much more dreadful it would have been, how much more hard to reconcile with the love and justice of God! They could not foresee the infinite improvement of the world, as a habitation for the human race, which God had in store. They only knew it was devoured by cruel tyrants, and defiled by unbridled lusts; and that the very most they could do by the grace of God, was to endure to the end, and so be saved. To prolong such a state of things seemed sheer cruelty, and to change it did not seem to be within the counsels of God. How beneficently, then, came to the help of their patience the ardent expectation of the speedy coming of Him who should restore all things!

We have only, then, to say about the prophecies of the Second Advent what we have to say about so much of the Old Testament—that time was a necessary element in their interpretation. To each age they yielded up a meaning, and always a beneficent meaning, but not to each age exactly the same meaning. God's revelation of Himself in history has modified, not his revelation of Himself in Scripture, but our understanding of it. But it must not be supposed that the earlier understanding, because superseded, was therefore false. It lacked *some* elements of truth, but it was actually more beneficent for those days than if it had possessed them. An active expectation of the Second Advent was possible, and was useful, to the early Christians: it is impossible, and it would be mischievous, to us.

RAYNER WINTERBOTHAM.