

Maran Atha.

AN ADDRESS ON THE SECOND COMING OF OUR LORD.

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THERE is scarcely any subject in respect of which the difference between the earliest and the present Christian-age is more signal than in regard to our Lord's Second Advent. This difference may be explained—may be to some extent inevitable; but it calls for serious inquiry. Where our religious temper, our prevalent mood of thought and feeling, is not that of the New Testament Church, the presumption is that we are wrong; and we are bound to 'try ourselves, whether we are in the faith' in this particular respect. In a remarkable sermon of J. H. Newman's, upon the Intermediate State, he touches on this point to the following effect: 'We are used in this day to look upon death as the point of victory and triumph for the saints. . . . Still, it will be found, on the whole, that death is not *the* object put forward in Scripture for hope to rest upon, but *the coming of Christ*. Now, if the sacred writers uniformly hold out Christ's coming, but we consider death as the close of all things, is it not plain that, in spite of our apparent agreement with them in formal statements of doctrine, there must be some hidden and undetected difference between them and ourselves, some unfounded notion on our part, some assumed premise, some lurking prejudice, some earthly temper, or some mere human principle? . . . It is our Saviour's usual custom, as well as His Apostles', to insist on two events chiefly, His first coming and His second,—our regeneration and our resurrection,—throwing into the background the prospect of our death, as if it were but a line of distinction (however momentous a one), not of division, in the extended course of our purification.' We should substitute for *purification* in the last sentence the larger term *redemption*; but, with this qualification, we must admit that the above passage is a true representation of the doctrine of the New Testament, and makes a just reflexion upon the prevailing attitude of Christians toward the Last Things. Our thoughts respecting them are practically bounded by our own death; and our horizon is limited, to a greater degree than in any previous epoch of the Church, to the existing world.

There are reasons for this absorption in the present, not altogether blameworthy. Let me allude to one or two of these. The present world has become in our times vastly more interesting, in every legitimate sense, than it was even a few generations ago. Science has thrown, within the last half century, a dazzling and sudden flood of light upon the world of nature; and we are witnesses of an *unveiling*, beyond all precedent, of the presence and glory of God in the material universe. At the same time, the human world has been brought under our gaze—by travel and traffic, by history and literature—in its magnitude, its seething life and shifting colours, its tragic situations and passionate wants, with overwhelming effect. 'All the ends of the earth' are crying to us at once; we are introduced to our fellow-men of every kindred and tongue and time, and have their acquaintance to make and our relations with them to adjust. The nearer horizon has been lighted up, and we find immensely more to be seen and studied in it than was previously conceived: can we wonder that the farther horizon has become to our preoccupied minds comparatively dim, that 'other-worldliness' is at a discount even in the Church, and that comparatively few of us '*mind* the things that are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God,' in the sense in which the first Christians, or even our own grandfathers, were used to do? If God is in truth 'working all things after the counsel of His will,' then He has determined the scientific and humanitarian trend of the times; and it is in vain for those who are untouched by these interests to cry out against them. The human mind is limited and cannot be absorbed in many things at once, nor learn all its lessons at one sitting; and until this mass of fresh knowledge and sympathies has been mastered and our eyes have grown familiar with the new lights that are flashing upon us, it is likely that 'Present-day Religion' will be in the ascendant.

The Church appears, in this respect, to have reverted for a while to the dispensation of Moses, under which Israel was filled with the sense of God's living presence amongst men and engaged

with the social and national duties of the hour, and the world beyond death receded into a shadowy distance, so that Egyptian thinkers were more interested in matters of eschatology than God's own people. But this phase of Christian thought will pass. The old home-sickness will return, and we shall feel again that we are 'strangers before God, and sojourners, and our days on the earth are as a shadow.' Science and philanthropy, in their amplest unfoldings and their noblest occupations, must weary the human heart at last and toss it back upon God and the eternal. Only for a moment can the children of God seem to forget the Father's house; only for the hour will the Bride of Christ, busy in preparing her wedding-robcs, be oblivious of the Bridegroom's coming. A richer earth gives promise and earnest of a grander heaven.

What has been said is some excuse for the neglect into which 'the promise of His coming' has fallen; it is only an excuse. This forgetfulness is a thing to be blamed, and to be corrected. The friends of Christ can never, surely, be indifferent to the hope so dear to Him and that so much occupied His last earthly thoughts. He spoke of Himself as the bridegroom going away for a little time, soon to return to claim His espoused; as the princely heir journeying to the Imperial Court where He will receive the crown-rights due to Him, and leaving his bondmen meanwhile in charge, then to come home in triumph with dominions to bestow on His faithful servants, who will 'enter into the joy of their Lord.' With the 'times and seasons' of His arrival they must not meddle, but the coming itself—how much they will count upon that! A loyal Christian man should reproach himself if he lets any day pass without some wishful thought of his Lord's return.

Since the Apostolic age there has been an alternation of long periods of apathy respecting this matter with sudden crises of extreme excitement and alarm. And while at the present time the subject enters but little into the thoughts and aims of ordinary Christians, and scarcely forms part of their working faith, amongst limited circles of believers there is intense activity of mind upon the question, and a strained and almost feverish expectation of the Lord's near coming. From these circles there proceed bold calculations in prophetic chronology and sensational announcements, repeatedly falsified by the event. I am

old enough to remember the prognostications made about the time of the Crimean War by Dr. Cumming,—a Scottish divine of some learning and of very impressive eloquence,—and the immense vogue which for years they enjoyed, only to be thrown into the limbo of futile millenarian speculations. These endeavours, renewed with strange persistence, have served at least one purpose, to verify the solemn words of Jesus, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath appointed in His own right': words by which, as St. Augustine said, 'Omnes calculantium digitos resolvit'—'He puts down the fingers of all that count the times.'

These errors naturally excite a reaction in sober minds; they tend to aggravate, while they serve to excuse, the popular indifference. Many have come to look on the Second Advent as a theme for dreamers and fanatics, as a subject likely to turn the brain, and on which it is hardly possible to hold a sound and balanced judgment. Now, neither of the above states of mind is satisfactory: certainly not the first, the condition of practical unbelief, which ignores and dismisses from thought 'that blessed hope'; nor the second, in which it becomes matter of presumption, that goes beyond the rule of Scripture, while it divides the Church and diverts earnest Christians from the daily work of faith and love. It is right and needful for us to think much of the Lord's return; it is possible to think soberly about it, and according to the proportion of faith.

The two Syrian words, *Maràn athá*, at the end of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, give a characteristic expression to the love of His appearing felt by the people of Christ in the first ages. The sentence is properly retained untranslated, for it was as foreign to the ears of the original Greek readers as now to our own. It is in the Aramaic (Syrian) dialect, the mother tongue of Jesus and the primitive Church at Jerusalem, and was transmitted by them, like *Abba* and *Amen*, to their Gentile brethren. In the margin of the Revised Version the two words are rendered, 'Our Lord (*Mar-an*) cometh (*atha*)'; other scholars read it, 'Our Lord, O come!'¹ In the former case, they

¹ For a full philological discussion of *Maran atha*, see Kautzsch's *Grammatik des Biblisch-Aramäischen*, pp. 12, 174; and for a synopsis of its interpretation, Meyer's *Commentar*⁸ (Heinrici); also Edwards' and Ellicott's *Commentaries*, and the *Expositor's Greek Testament*.

are matched by the saying of Paul to the Philip-
pians, 'The Lord is at hand,' and by the words of
this epistle relating to the Last Supper, 'Ye pro-
claim the Lord's death, *till He come*'; on the
latter view, they are identical with the closing
prayer and sigh of the Apocalypse, and of all
Scripture, 'Come, Lord Jesus!' Some think, not
without probability, that *Maràn athá* served as a
kind of token, or secret password, amongst the
first Christians, who were often scattered by per-
secution and met under cover of night, and who
would need some signal by which to recognize
each other. In the Eucharistic Prayer of the
Didaché (10⁶) it stands as a closing liturgical
formula—*Maran atha, Amen*—apparently in the
sense of 1 Co 11¹⁵ ('till He come'); comp.
Rev 22²⁰.

St. Paul applies this solemn and mystic phrase,
in his concluding salutation to the Corinthians,
to seal the warning which he has just uttered to cold
and false hearts within the Church: 'If any loves
not the Lord, let him be anathema!—*Maran
atha!*' as much as to say, 'The Judge is at the
door, He who knows all hearts, and from whom
feigned love will receive its exposure and righteous
doom.' So this Apostolic token is a sign at once
of hope and dread, the brightest hope and the
darkest fear that the human mind can entertain.
It accompanies the Church's pilgrimage like the
pillar of cloud and fire attending the march of the
Israelites, which guided and cheered God's people,
while it shot dismay into the ranks of their
pursuers.

There are two reflexions brought home to us
by this watchword, upon which it may be worth
our while to dwell: First, *the certainty and actuality
of the event*; secondly, *the complete uncertainty of
its date*.

1. 'The day of the Lord *will come*.' This is
the most sure and glorious of our unfulfilled anti-
cipations. The whole New Testament rings with
its announcement. It stands in the forefront of
all the ancient creeds: 'He shall come again
with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead.'
It is the burden of the prophecies of Jesus. He
is pledged to a definite and visible return to this
earth, in language than which none can be found
more express and positive. St. Paul appeals to
this expectation as to the most solemn and
unquestioned of Christian certainties, when he

charges St. Timothy 'before God, and Christ
Jesus, who is to judge the living and dead, and by
His manifestation and His kingdom'; he writes
to his Gentile converts as those who 'turned to
God from idols, to serve a God living and true,
and to wait for His Son from the heavens.' This
'waiting' is one half of their religion. St. Peter's
First Epistle glows with the same prospect from
beginning to end; it is written by the light of the
dawn of the Great Day. And the Apostle John,
although he says in his Gospel and Epistles less
about the future than others and more about the
present possession of eternal life, yet exhorts his
readers to the same effect: 'And now, little
children, abide in Him, that if He be manifested,
we may have confidence and not be ashamed be-
fore Him at His coming.' Throughout the Book
of Revelation Jesus is heard proclaiming, 'Surely
I come quickly,' and His Church echoes, 'Amen!
Come, Lord Jesus!' Universal Christendom de-
clares in its *Te Deum* every Lord's Day, 'We
believe that Thou shalt come to be our Judge';
she accepts the message of the angels recorded as
given at His visible departure: 'This Jesus who was
received up from you into heaven, shall so come
in like manner as ye beheld Him go into heaven.'

If there is any truth in divine prophecy, any
reliance to be placed on the explicit word of Christ
and His apostles, any meaning in the yearnings
and fond or fearful 'looking for' of the ages
since, then it is certain that Jesus Christ will
return to this world from which He ascended to
heaven; He will come back again in manifest
glory, to raise the dead, to judge the nations, to
gather the redeemed to Himself and make them
partners in His endless reign. Attempts are made,
and by some professed theologians, to resolve the
promises of Christ and the hopes of the apostles
on this point into symbols and highly coloured
pictures of the spiritual progress of Christianity.
But the assertions made upon the two subjects
are quite distinct; and the identification can only
be effected by setting aside the meaning of the
plainest words, and by assuming that those who
delivered the New Testament predictions were
entirely mistaken. All prophecy that has been
fulfilled is a pledge of this fulfilment; all that
Christ has done and suffered, all that has been
thus far realised in the establishment of His king-
dom on earth, gives assurance that the sublime
consummation will take place. We may differ, and

are likely to differ till the end of time, upon the details of prophetic interpretation and the train of events connected with the Second Advent of our Redeemer. This difference must not detract from our agreement respecting the great Return itself, nor break the unanimity with which we join in the catholic cry, 'Come, Lord Jesus!' On His trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin, and virtually before the whole world, He has said it: 'Ye shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven.'

2. Now, in the second place, *the uncertainty of the time* does not diminish in anywise the certainty of the Advent, nor derogate from its sovereign importance. Nay, as our Lord appears to intimate, it rather belongs to the transcendent glory of the Advent, to the majesty of the occasion, that this veil should hang over it. We gaze on it as upon the mountain peak of revelation, swathed in clouds and conversant with eternity. That summit is hidden from our eyes; 'the Father hath set it within His own prerogative.' The awful 'hour' belongs to the secrets of Omniscience, and is guarded by the lightnings that are about the Throne.

That the hour of His coming should be undisclosed is a thing proper to the relations of such a Master and such servants, and befits a state of faith and patience. It promotes vigilance, and feeds expectancy; it is the test of loyalty and diligence. To know that *the Lord cometh* is enough for servants who love His appearing. They will feel that His plans are too large and deep for them to grasp in their evolution, His movements are too vast to be mapped out and arranged in peddling 'schemes' and apocalyptic time-tables. Whether it be at the first watch or at midnight or at the cock-crowing, *He is coming*, and He must find us watching and busy at our post. The dishonest servant may presume on the doubtfulness and lateness of the hour, giving the rein to his self-indulgence and his tyranny, while he says in his heart, 'My lord delayeth his coming.' But the effect of delay and of the uncertain date upon the true men of Christ's house is precisely the opposite of this. Let it be in ten or in ten thousand years, or in the next ten minutes, that is *His* affair, and not mine or yours; your part and mine is to be always ready, prepared to open the door and greet the Master on the instant, whenever it shall please Him to come to His own.

If it were announced from the pulpits of Christendom, and believed, that by the year's end Christ would come again, that the clock of time would stop with the expiring century, that the material fabric of the earth would be dissolved, and the thrones of the Last Judgment would be immediately set up, what an inconceivable effect the message would produce, what consternation in all political, commercial, and scientific circles, and in the minds of millions of professing Christians! Yet, I think, the purest faith would be little affected by the news. Nothing would be added to its certainty, nothing taken away from its composure. To the true Christian heart, as to the Lord of its love, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. While He delays, every hour is an age; when He is come, the ages will seem but an hour.

In view of 'the eternal things,' how insignificant is the mere length and lapse of time. Calvary is but of yesterday. The Cross is no less potent to ourselves than it was to our Protestant forefathers, or to the Church of the apostolic first-born. *There He is*, 'the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world,'—the Lamb slain till the world's last hour of doom! He has 'offered one sacrifice for sins *for ever*,' and the healing stream 'still flows as fresh as ever from the Saviour's wounded side.' As we contemplate the grand everlasting facts of redeeming love, time with its revolving suns and its historic dynasties 'removes as a scroll when it is rolled up'; there are but two objects in the universe—Christ crucified and my sinful soul, meeting in the embrace of faith. The certainty, the sufficiency of the event—these are all I want. 'He loved me, He gave up Himself for me'; the blood was shed, the sacrifice was made—that suffices, that saves, that stands for ever! So it is when we look backward to the First Coming, across the breadth of nineteen centuries; and so it is when we look forward to the Second Coming—how many months or ages distant, as men count time, none can tell. He will come again, He will stand in the latter day upon the earth: that is enough for me. I shall see the King in His beauty—see the very face of Jesus. I shall see Him coming in the clouds and sitting on the throne of judgment. He shall wear the crown, with every knee bending before Him, where once He bore the cross and heard the shout, 'Away with Him!' *When I*

care not, if only once it shall be! The splendid certainty of the fact fills my hope and vision of the future; and the near and distant seem as one. In this loftiness of faith the first believers said, 'The coming of the Lord *draweth nigh*'; nor were they wrong. He died for my sins; He will come again to judge me, and to save me into His everlasting kingdom: the one assurance implies the other, which is never to be separated from it, —'future and past subsisting now.' The Second Advent is the complement of the First; it is the other limb of that stupendous arch of revelation and redemption, which spans the history of mankind. 'As Christ was once offered to bear the sin of many, so shall He appear the second time, without sin, unto salvation.'

Seen from this standpoint, our individual decease is but a fugitive circumstance, a mere passage from one room to another in the house of many mansions, where, alike on this side or on that side the veil, we await the coming of the Son of Man. By this hope death is shorn of its terrors; it is swallowed up in Christ's victory. The entire pathway of our future being, far as it may stretch, is illuminated by this magnificent expectation. In its glory the gloom of the grave vanishes; death becomes a welcome sleep, preparing for a serene and glorious dawn. The event, when it comes, will be worthy of its antecedents

and grander for the long delay. Then the yield of the toiling ages will be gathered and brought home, the fruit of the labour and sorrow of the Son of God—all that has been redeemed from this evil world by blood and tears, by mortal agonies and cleansing fires, through boundless expenditure of grace and unsearchable depths of wisdom. Then the harvest of the earth will be reaped, and the travail of His soul presented to the Father with infinite satisfaction by the Son of His love. Of all the strange scenes of the world's story, and the mysteries here transpiring that 'angels desire to look into,' this will be the climax, the glory of glories and height of heights in the ascent of our race through Christ—'the day of the Lord.'

For this day and hour, known to neither man nor angel, He waits, and 'sits expecting'; His Church waits, and the buried nations of the dead are waiting. The great tide of time moves with a quickening pace, a swifter rush and swirl in its current, toward this fateful unseen point, where it will break at an instant and leap into the gulf of eternity. The Lord sitteth above the water-floods; He sitteth King for ever. He guides their courses and manages their fury with a sure hand. He knows and will choose His hour, keeping His counsel to the end. 'The vision is yet for the appointed time, and it hasteth toward the end, and shall not lie: though it tarry, wait for it.'

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¹ *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*. Begründet von J. J. Herzog. In dritter verbesserter und vermehrter Auflage herausgegeben von Professor D. Albert Hauck. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs.