THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

The Missionary Message of the New Testament

THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

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To

Sydney G. Morris

Pastor and Friend

In Gratitude and Affection

PREFACE

IT was during my first pastorate, at the Westgate Road Church, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1930-39) that I was led to discern the relevance and power of *The Book of the Revelation*. I felt a desire to share my thoughts with others, and this short book is the result.

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J. O. B.

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CHAPTER I

THE AUTHOR AND HIS BOOK

THE Second World War focussed the attention of the ordinary man on places whose existence he had almost forgotten, if indeed he had ever heard of them. Among them are the rocky islands of the Aegean Sea, off the mainland of Greece. The tides of war brought Leros and Chios and other islands of this group into the news. It was from one of them, Patmos, that at the end of the first century of the Christian era there flashed a message which has kindled hope and confidence in the hearts of men through the centuries. Its beams still shine across the stormy seas of the world's life, and bring fresh faith and courage to hard-pressed men.

Revelation is one of the most difficult books of the Bible for the ordinary reader and is generally regarded as a book of mystery. Yet it was certainly not so regarded by its first readers, otherwise it would have failed of its purpose. If ever a book was written with a clear purpose in view, this one was. It came at white heat from the heart and brain of a man who had a burning and vital message to deliver. The message had been given to him by God, but it was not for him alone : it was the message " which God gave

unto him, to shew unto his servants."[1] The author tells us his name was John. The full title of his book as we have it, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine,* is much later than the book itself. It is clear from the contents of *Revelation* that John was familiar with the churches in the Roman province of Asia to whom he writes, and that he had a position of authority among them.

John himself does not in the book claim to be an Apostle, but Justin Martyr, writing about A.D. 140, says, " a certain man, whose name was John, one of the Apostles of Christ, prophesied in a revelation which came to him " that believers should reign a thousand years in Jerusalem. Later Christian writers questioned the Apostolic authorship of the book, and attributed it to another John, " the Presbyter " or " the Elder," who lived in Asia Minor. One of the reasons why they did so was doubtless because the style and language and outlook of *Revelation* are so different from those of the *Gospel of St. John.* The names of great scholars can be cited in support of both these views of the authorship of *Revelation.* At present there can be no certainty in the matter. The important point to note is that the intrinsic spiritual authority and inspiration of the book are unaffected by the question as to who wrote it.

John tells us that he was in the Isle of Patmos when the message came to him. He

[1] Rev. i. 1.

was there as a "partaker . . . in the tribulations . . . which are in Jesus." [1] Patmos, a bleak island strip about ten miles long and six miles across, was, according to an old tradition, a kind of ancient concentration camp to which political and religious offenders were sent to labour in the mines or marble quarries of the island. That a stirring message of hope and faith should have come from such an unpromising spot as Patmos, and from a background of persecution, is itself an illustration of how God makes even the wrath of man to praise Him.

His book was probably written towards the end of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96), whom the historian Mommsen describes as "one of the most careful administrators who held the Imperial office." Emperors before his time had made some claim to divine honours, but Domitian went to the length of asserting that he was "Dominus et Deus"—Lord and God. The purpose of the claim was to strengthen his position as Emperor. No Christian, however patriotic, could join in ascribing to the Emperor a title which belonged only to God, and it is no surprise to learn that Christians were persecuted during the reign of Domitian. John himself, one of the sufferers, sees the present limited persecution as the clouds which herald the coming storm, and it is his

[1] Rev. i. 9.

desire to nerve his fellow-believers to face it before it breaks in its fury upon them.

There were, in addition, other strains which were testing the churches. Some of them, notably those at Smyrna and Philadelphia, had to endure considerable Jewish hostility. A severer and more general strain was imposed by the delay in the Lord's confidently expected Second Advent. "Surely, Lord, the day is near." The hope of His appearing had furnished an invigorating incentive to Christian living, but as time went by, and the hope was not fulfilled, there was a slackening of loyalty and consequent degeneration in the quality of Christian life and witness. False teaching had also invaded the churches and threatened their very existence. All these things were in John's mind as he addressed himself to the churches.

The assassination of Domitian in A.D. 96 forestalled any general persecution of Christians which he may have planned, and a period of peace came to the churches of Asia Minor. They survived the testing that the first years of Domitian's reign brought to them, for in the letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch in Syria, written while on his way to be martyred at Rome for his faith (probably about A.D. 108), they are reported as strong and vigorous. It would be difficult indeed, as we read the stirring call of John to his fellow-believers, a call reinforced by his own faithfulness, not to believe that it

evoked a response in the lives of some at least of his readers.

We must glance briefly at the contents of the book. After a short introduction, announcing the authority and purpose of the book, *Revelation* unfolds brief messages to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, concerned with things present and things to come. Trials of the severest kind awaited the churches, and they were spiritually unequal to them. The aim of the letters, which are examined more fully in our final chapter, was to summon the churches to a more vital faith, and to a deeper loyalty to their Lord, who is speaking to them in the circumstances of the time. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches."[1]

There follow descriptions of the glory of God as Creator, and of Christ as Redeemer, together with an exposition of what Christ has done for men (expounded in our second chapter).

Then comes the prophecy of things that will come to pass, described first in terms of the opening of seven seals. "When the Lamb has taken the roll from the hand of God He begins to undo the seals, and as He breaks them, one by one, angels come forth and execute the appointed judgments on the earth."[2] Four horsemen appear, who sym-

[1] Rev. ii. 7.
[2] E. F. Scott, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 65.

bolise conquest, strife, famine and death. Amid the unfolding judgments of God (expounded in our fourth chapter) we see the preservation of a small minority, made up of a hundred and forty-four thousand Jews, probably representing converts to Christianity and, in addition, " a great multitude which no man could number, out of every nation and of all tribes and peoples and tongues " [1] representing Gentile converts.

After a memorable description of the life of the redeemed in heaven (dealt with in our seventh chapter) and the announcement of " a silence in heaven about the space of half an hour," [2] comes a second series of woes, heralded by the blowing of seven trumpets, and followed by yet a third series. Their introduction is perhaps partly in order to enhance the impressiveness of the drama of judgment. " Just as when one is ascending the mountain the summit appears to be close, only to give place to a further height beyond itself, perhaps to disclose another when we approach it, so the author of this apocalypse presents these three successive series of woes, each promising to lead to the final scene of the drama, but serving only to hold the interest, and to prevent the journey from dragging." [3]

In the next section of *Revelation*, beginning at Chapter twelve, there are descriptions of

[1] Rev. vii. 9. [2] Rev. viii. 1.
[3] H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*, p. 121.

the opposing forces in a vast spiritual struggle (expounded in our third chapter). After the initial victory of Michael and his angels in a warfare staged in heaven, the struggle is continued upon earth by a dragon and his satellites, "a beast coming up out of the sea" [1] (the Roman Empire), and "another beast coming up out of the earth" [2] (the Roman Imperial priesthood). Despite the severity of the struggle the issue is never in doubt. The victory of God (the theme of our fifth chapter) is assured.

The proclamation of the fall of Babylon (Rome) is then made (Chapter fourteen), but before its detailed description comes there follows a further series of woes, discharged by seven angels, and in the form of plagues from seven bowls, preceded by an interlude describing the joyful worship of God's martyred saints, now gathered in heaven. John then proceeds to fill in the details of the fall of Babylon, culminating in Chapter eighteen, with its unforgettable word-picture of the ruin of a great city.

In the closing chapters of the book follow the binding of Satan, and descriptions of the Millenium and the New Jerusalem (dealt with in our sixth chapter). *Revelation* closes with solemn promises, warnings, and assurances.

If he has not recently done so, the reader should now read through the *Book of the Revelation*, noting especially chapters i-v, vii, xii, xiii,

[1] Rev. xiii. 1. [2] Rev. xiii. 11.

xviii-xxii, with which this book is particularly concerned, because they enshrine its essential and abiding message. If he feels, as he may well do, that *Revelation* is, for the most part, very difficult reading, let him not be discouraged, but go forward in the faith that there are certain great themes which our study will reveal, themes of abiding interest and significance, and closely related to the life of our own time. If in reverent quest we seek to understand the truth God has revealed through this book, He will not deny us His light. The promise, "And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart," [1] has its application to the study of Scripture as elsewhere in life.

The first readers of *Revelation* would be familiar with the visionary form in which John cast his book. It would take their minds back to another book of the same kind, *Daniel*, with its heroic story of resistance to the order that men should prostrate themselves before the golden image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. Many other books of this kind had been written since the close of the Old Testament canon. They were known as apocalypses, which means revelations. These books were products of bad times, times in which evil seemed to have got the upper hand, and in which men of faith were persecuted. The urge to write them came to men who had a profound con-

[1] Jer. xxix. 13.

viction that God was the living God. Although the world of their day might give the impression that evil was all-powerful, although the present was dark, and the immediate future, as they believed, still darker, these men were unshaken in their faith that " The Lord God omnipotent reigneth," and that He was in control of human history. They despaired of the situation from a human standpoint, but had a firm hope in God, and in His imminent intervention in history. Man's freedom moved within limits which God had ordained. It had no power to thwart in any final way the purpose of God for His creation.

The writers of these apocalypses did not send out their works under their own names. This fact has been connected by some scholars with the prevailing Jewish idea that the days of inspiration lay in the past. God, it was believed, had spoken His last word to man in the Law and the prophets. This would account for the fact that, in harmony with the recognised literary custom of the time, the writers of the apocalypses often published their writings under the names of notable prophets of the past like Isaiah, because they felt their kinship with them, or in order to arrest attention. Dr. H. H. Rowley, on the other hand, has suggested that the reason for the assumption of a pseudonym was in imitation of a practice begun in connection with the *Book of Daniel.*[1]

[1] H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*, p. 36.

However this may be, with the coming of Christ the inhibitions of the past were broken. Men knew that in His Son God had spoken as never before. They believed, moreover, that through the gift of the Holy Spirit God was still sending forth new light and truth to His servants. The writer of *Revelation* felt no need to conceal his identity under some great name of the past, and without hesitation attached his own name to his message to the churches.

A book written in this form had the advantage that, while those for whom it was intended would be able to understand it without much trouble, it would be largely unintelligible to the outsider. Again, the apocalyptic method, with its liberal use of symbolism and visions, enabled a writer like John to employ the language of denunciation against the Roman Empire, described under the title Babylon, in a way which would have been impossible if he had referred to it openly. Direct reference would certainly have meant immediate suppression of his book, and perhaps the exile or death of those who had been found reading it.

Although the original readers of *Revelation* were, for the most part, able to discern the significance of its visions, the key which they held in their hands was soon lost, and before long Christian readers of the book were asking themselves what John intended to convey through his visions. About eighty

years after *Revelation* was written a great Christian writer, Irenaeus, could do no more than guess what John meant when he said that the " mark of the beast was six hundred threescore and six." Since the time of Irenaeus readers of *Revelation* have offered varying interpretations of the significance of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, the scarlet beast, the 144,000, and the seven-headed dragon. The present study does not aim at providing a detailed exposition of the *Book of the Revelation*. Numerous commentaries which do this are already available. What we are concerned with is the exposition of the abiding missionary message of *Revelation* in its broad outlines.

We shall also see what other religions have to say about the great themes with which John deals. What does *Revelation* tell us of Christ, and of His significance for our human story? Is there any message for us in its vivid accounts of the titanic struggle which John describes? The theme of judgment is prominent in *Revelation*. That is a theme which has been soft-pedalled almost out of existence in the last fifty years of the Church's preaching and teaching. Is that gain or loss? Readers of *Revelation* cannot but notice how often the assurance of some great and final victory rings through the book. What is the victory to which John looks forward? Does it concern our faith and our lives to-day? Some of the most notable descriptions in this

book, so full of memorable pictures and sayings, are those of the New Jerusalem, the City of God. We too, after the years of endurance and suffering through which we have come, would fain see a city of God arising from the ruins of our civilisation. Maybe John, the inspired seer, can give us guidance in our quest. Again, all our human life comes at last face to face with death. Is there a life beyond death, and if so, how shall we think of it? The man who faces the possibility of imminent death, as John did, must of necessity think on these things, and he has given us the fruit of his thought. There is much about the Church in *Revelation*. What is a true church? What are the essential marks of its life? These are questions we have often discussed. For John too, this was a vital issue, and what he has to say conveys both illumination and warning for our time. His is a thrilling message, peculiarly relevant to such a time as ours, in which the ancient conflict between the totalitarian State and the Church of Christ has been revived, and, as in former days, Christian men have refused to give to Caesar what properly belongs only to God.

There is another question to which John devotes considerable space, and which links his book vitally to our day. It is the question of the limits of compromise.

He makes a number of references to the party of the Nicolaitans. This party seems

to have tried to effect from within the church what has been described as a " reasonable compromise with the established usages of Græco-Roman society." The Nicolaitans urged that being a Christian ought not to mean cutting oneself off from the social life of the time, and from the public festivals through which men expressed their civic fellowship and civic pride. It was, they suggested, only by sharing in the contemporary social and civic life that Christians could introduce the leaven of the Christian outlook and spirit into the communities of which they were a part. Moreover, to remain aloof might well engender such suspicions and eventual hostility to the cause of Christ as to bring about the suppression of the Church altogether. Surely the reasonable thing to do was to come to terms with current custom, without, of course, sacrificing any vital Christian principle. Such compromise would, however, have involved Christians in membership of societies which linked " their common meals with sacrificial rites, and met in buildings dedicated to a pagan deity." It would not have been a big step from this position to that of offering incense in honour of the Emperor, and of recognising his claim to be divine. With that step reached, idolatry would have been enthroned, and the Christian religion would have begun to disintegrate. With the clear-eyed insight of a man who has pondered deeply the significance of the

Christian faith John rejects without hesitation the Nicolaitans' appeal. The problem of the limits of compromise is one of those problems which, in the nature of things, must be continually arising in a world which has not accepted the Lordship of Christ. It faces the Christian in public life, as he attempts to apply the mind of Christ to civic and national affairs. In a different form it faces the Christian in the factory, the office, the workshop, in his contact with those who make no profession of loyalty to Christ. John's uncompromising treatment of the problem comes home with more relevance just now because of the felt need for a sharper and clearer witness on the part of Christians. The spearhead of the Church's thrust in our time is too often blunted by the fact that Christian witness in the common life of everyday work and relationships lacks those distinctive Christian features which our Lord had in mind when He spoke of His disciples as salt, and light, and a city set on a hill.

Revelation has sometimes been described as "A Tract for the Times." The phrase holds an important element of truth. We cannot doubt that in the forefront of John's mind were the churches in Asia Minor, their needs and dangers and opportunities. It was his purpose, under God's guidance, to raise them to a high sense of destiny, that in the testing days ahead they might not be found wanting. Nevertheless, he may well have had a wider

audience in view. Indeed, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he had. He knew that God had spoken to him, and that the message of his book was not of human devising, but of divine inspiration. It was that which prompted his solemn warning neither to add to his words nor to take any of them away. We need them all. We need his emphasis on the coming victory of God, that we, too, may hear " the distant triumph song." We need also his reminder of the eternal warfare which precedes victory, and of our place in it, and of those searching, sifting judgments of God of which he has so much to say. The living God still speaks through the words of His servant, and to-day, as in the days when men first eagerly heard or read the message of *Revelation*, it has power to rekindle faith and hope, and to renew the spirit of dedication.

CHAPTER II

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRIST

JOHN opens his book by affirming that the message he has to give has come to him through Jesus Christ. He closes it with a prayer that the grace of the same Lord Jesus Christ may be with His disciples. Throughout its pages Christ is the central and dominant figure.

An intense gratitude bound John to his Master. We hear its echoes in his ascription of praise "unto Him that loved us, and loosed us from our sins by His blood." [1] Here are the hidden springs of the personal devotion to Christ for which John was willing to endure the exile of Patmos. Mingled with this intense gratitude was a deep reverence and awe. When John thinks of Christ it is of the Risen and Exalted Lord.

> Clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and His hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and His eyes were as a flame of fire; and His feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and His voice as the sound of many waters.

[1] Rev. i. 5.

> And He had in His right hand seven stars; and out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and His countenance was as the sun shineth in His strength.[1]

In every age we need both these elements in Christian living. There must be the warm devotion of the disciple to his Master, and with that must go the sense of awe, the sense which prompted Peter to exclaim, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord."[2] For lack of the first, discipleship becomes formal and conventional; without the second, it is in danger of falling into an irreverent familiarity.

The significance of Christ for the Christian religion is different from that of any other founder of a living religion to the system which bears his name. Christianity without Jesus Christ is unthinkable. He is the Alpha and Omega of the Christian religion, as John puts it, "the beginning and the end."[3] The cause began with His appearing and calling men to follow Him. When, after He had withdrawn in visible presence from His disciples, they sought to express their faith, one of them, speaking for them all, wrote, "We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."[4]

These are words from the latest of the

[1] Rev. i. 13 ff.
[2] St. Luke v. 8.
[3] Rev. xxii. 13.
[4] St. John i. 14.

Gospels, but it is the same note which is struck in the earliest of them. Mark opens his Gospel with the ringing affirmation, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." When the apostles of Christ go out in obedience to their Master's command on their preaching mission, this is the burden of their sermons: "God hath made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified." [1] When the dying Stephen seals his faith with his death he cries, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." [2]

The source of this conviction that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is two-fold. It springs out of an experience of the power of Christ, recognised as the power of God, in the lives of His disciples, and also from the testimony of Jesus concerning Himself. It is not possible to doubt, with the New Testament before us, that Jesus thought of Himself as having a unique relation to God. He taught His disciples to pray to "Our Father," but the background of His own relationship to God was "My Father." As He thinks of the power He has to teach men of God, Jesus proclaims, "All things have been delivered unto Me of My Father." [3]

From time to time it has been suggested that it was the misguided piety of His disciples which was responsible for the idea that Jesus was the unique Son of God, and that in reality He was a great teacher, a notable

[1] Acts ii. 36. [2] Acts vii. 59. [3] St. Matthew xi. 27.

prophet, or a social reformer. All such attempts to account for Jesus in purely human categories break down in the presence of His own consciousness of Himself as the *Christ*, the Son of God.

It was not so with Buddha. "He was anxious not to attach a saving knowledge and practice of his disciples to his own person. What he proclaimed was not at all what Christ proclaimed, Himself, His own Person, 'Come to Me.' No! Buddha announced the saving truth, the rule . . . which man can grasp and realize in life . . . without any relation to Buddha himself. His doctrine and his order are independent of his person."[1] Buddha never claimed or permitted any kind of divine worship of himself. It is millions of his followers who have deified him, and given him a place in the vast array of their gods.

Consider, again, the position of Mohammed. He thought of himself simply as the herald and prophet of God. "According to his words in the *Koran*, he was only a man like the others, only a preacher, a warner . . . he had sinned and needed forgiveness. Everything supernatural must, according to strict Islam, as according to Mohammed himself, be separated from the person of the prophet."[2] An old tradition makes Mohammed say, "Praise me not as Jesus, the Son of Mary, was praised."

[1] Söderblom, *The Living God*, pp. 324-5.
[2] Op. cit. pp.326-7.

Since 1907, when the Dowager Empress of China raised him to an equality with Shang-Ti by Imperial Edict,[1] Confucius, the greatest religious figure in the history of China, has been worshipped by multitudes, but here is his own estimate of himself. "In letters I am perhaps equal to other men. But the character of the superior man carrying out in his conduct what he professes, is what I have not yet attained to."[2]

John, the writer of *Revelation*, is at one with the rest of the New Testament in ascribing divine honour to Christ as Son of God, but he has his own way of stating just what it is that Christ has done and is doing for men. He portrays Christ as Judge, and our next chapter will be solely concerned with this theme. He also thinks of Him as Revealer, Redeemer, and Victor.

Christ as Revealer

> And I saw in the right hand of Him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the back side, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon.[3]

[1] Soothill, *Three Religions of China*, p. 37.
[2] Quoted in Hume's *The World's Living Religions*, p. 113.
[3] Rev. v. 1-3.

John was especially concerned with the revealing of "the things which are to be hereafter," but his words have a wider reference. It is recorded of the poet F. W. H. Myers, that he was once asked what question he would put to the Sphinx if he had the chance to ask one question about life, and to receive an answer. He said, "I should ask whether the universe is friendly." It is a question to which everyone wants an answer. The armchair philosopher, sitting by the fireside, may find it a pleasant pastime to weigh the pros and cons of faith, and to pass judgment light-heartedly upon it. But men and women who have to face the demands and responsibilities of daily life need to know, if they can find out, whether life has any purpose behind it, and whether there is any goal to which it is moving. The unthinking man still sometimes describes himself glibly as an agnostic, as if it were something to be proud of, a mark of superior intelligence. But the thoughtful and discerning man knows what a wretched creed agnosticism is with which to face life. "Agnosticism," says Professor Malinowski, the anthropologist, "is a tragic and shattering frame of mind." No man can live purposefully and satisfyingly if he has a sneaking suspicion that life is a farce, lacking the depth and inspiration of any worthwhile goal.

What is true of the individual is true also of the nation. No nation can make its finest

and richest contribution to the life of mankind, or rise to the height of its destiny, unless it has a sense of mission to cleanse and inspire its common life. The necessity for such a revelation of the true and living God is the more urgent because men are so constructed that they find it impossible to live for long without a faith of some kind. Mr. H. G. Wells tells of a visit he paid to Russia some years ago, at the time when the Soviet Government was doing its best to banish the Christian religion from Russian life. Whilst he was there he saw a film of the life of Lenin. The impression it made upon him was that Lenin was being portrayed as almost a god-like figure, and that a veneration which was practically religious was being paid to him. The fact is that if a man does not worship the true and living God, he finds himself obliged to make a graven image of some kind, to invent a god to whom he can offer his worship and devotion.

Who can open the book of destiny and give to man a faith by which to live?

> And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon. And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.[1]

[1] Rev. v. 4-5.

Because Christ the Revealer has come, and has lifted the veil from the face of God our Maker, and has given us glimpses of His holy and gracious purposes, Christian men through the ages have rejoiced in triumphant faith. Mary Slessor tells of an African woman who said to her after she had spoken of God made known in Jesus Christ, "There, I always knew there was a God like that." We could never have known Him as we do but for Christ. "Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift." [1]

Christ as Redeemer

The Gospels bear witness with Paul that Christ "brought life and immortality to light," but they have a still greater message about Him, and John is one with them in that message. Christ is the Redeemer of the world.

> Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.[2]

When we speak of Christ as Redeemer, two things are implied. One is that He *did* something for us. William Paton in his book *The Faiths of Mankind* remarked that "It is appropriate that the Buddha should be always shown in meditation or as the teacher;

[1] 2 Cor. ix. 15. [2] Rev. v. 9.

but one wants to think of Jesus in characteristic *act*. In Him God is acting . . ." [1] That is the standpoint from which the evangelists all tell their story of Christ. For Mark in particular the Gospel story is pre-eminently one of action, the mighty acts of Christ in healing the sick, raising the dead, forgiving sins, suffering and dying and rising again. Christ's teaching has been a powerful leaven in the thinking of mankind, but His teaching has always been inseparably linked with the Teacher. His teaching is only a part of that mighty impact He made upon the world, which is marked by the difference between B.C. and A.D. in the reckoning of history.

In the second place, to speak of Christ as Redeemer implies a situation that calls for saving action. It was only if mankind was in a desperate plight that a Redeemer was needed.

Not all the great religions have so read the human situation. Confucianism, for instance, is optimistic in its findings on human nature—" the tendency of man's nature is good. There are none but have this tendency to good." [2] There is no recognition that man has fallen into such need that a Redeemer is called for to rescue him. There is recognition that man is not living as he ought to live, but the basic assumption of Confucianism is that man can reform himself. " What the

[1] William Paton, *The Faiths of Mankind*, p. 132.
[2] Hume, p. 119.

superior man seeks is in himself." [1] In consequence Confucianism teaches the need of self-control and social propriety, and of a just government, rather than of personal and social regeneration.

Attention has sometimes been called to the points of resemblance between the religion of Zarathushtra—the Eastern prophet who lived about 600 B.C.—and the Christian religion, but in their estimate of human need the two religions stand far apart. Zarathushtra was impelled by the social evils of his time to champion the oppressed, and plead for social righteousness. The evil against which Zarathushtra protested, however, was external. "He fought against outward enemies and their spiritual helpers, the thraldom of guilt and corruption were nothing to him . . . men must learn discipline, order, and labour, but we hear little of any renewal of the heart." [2]

Christ's reading of the human situation is plain. It is illustrated in His understanding of His own mission: "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost," [3] and in His discernment of the corruption of the heart of man by sin: "For out of the heart come forth evil thoughts." [4]

That is not a complete account of human nature, as we all thankfully recognize. Man

[1] Op. cit., p. 126.
[2] Söderblom, *The Living God*, pp. 210-11.
[3] St. Luke xix. 10.
[4] St. Matthew xv. 19.

was made in the image of God, and all man's sin, though it has corrupted every part of his life, has not completely obliterated what God created, otherwise life would be quite beyond enduring. For in that case, except among Christian people, the capacity for courage, self-sacrifice, and love, would have utterly disappeared. But though, in the mercy of God, the world has been preserved from such a fate, we have reached a time which calls for a fresh recognition of the gravity of man's plight, and of the complete inadequacy of a genial humanitarianism to meet his need. A short statement of the Church's faith issued by the Church of Scotland sums up the true state of man's affairs :

> Owing to their sinfulness, shown in their choice of evil, men are unable to fulfil the Divine purpose for which they were created, except as they receive the forgiveness and mighty help of God in Christ.[1]

" The forgiveness and mighty help of God in Christ "—that is what the Redeemer has brought into our desperate human situation by His incarnation, His teaching, His life, and His cross. It is this last element in the Saviour's ministry upon which John lays emphasis—

Thou wast slain.[2]

[1] Riddell, *What We Believe*, p. 222.
[2] Rev. v. 9.

We hear echoes of the same high theme all through his book. He himself was making sacrifices, heavy sacrifices, in a great cause, and the power which sustained him in faithful endurance was the remembrance of an infinitely greater sacrifice which had been offered by One Who loved us and gave Himself for us. It was this supreme sacrifice of Christ's which enabled Him to open the book of human destiny.

"No one can understand the final purpose of God except the Redeemer, for the final purpose of God is Redemption." It is also Christ's sacrifice which constitutes His supreme claim on men's lives.

Out of the sacrifice of Christ issues His power to redeem. Christianity not only differs from other religions in its diagnosis of human need, but also in the remedy it offers to meet the need. The difference is illustrated in a story told of the first President of the Chinese Republic — Yuan Shih-kai — who invited a Christian missionary to expound to him the message of Christ. The President thus summed up his impressions: "There appears to me no great difference between the teaching of Confucius and that of Christ in regard to what constitutes right conduct; the difference lies in the fact that according to your account Christ does not merely teach men what to do, but gives them power to do it."

Although other religions have not taken

so grave a view of man's need as the Christian religion does, it is interesting to see how their history reveals the truth of the Christian diagnosis. Dr. Sydney Cave, in his illuminating book *Christianity and Some Living Religions of the East*, has illustrated this theme. He points out that although Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, bade men save themselves, influential sects have arisen within Buddhism which teach their disciples to rely for salvation on the grace of divine beings. Mohammed emphasised his own limitations as a sinful man, but many of his followers believe that it is through his present intercession for them that they receive their forgiveness. In Hinduism the earlier teaching that redemption could be gained through insight has been followed by emphasis upon seeking the help of mythical gods. As Dr. Cave comments, "These developments are a witness to man's sense that he cannot save himself; if he has to win deliverance it must be through divine help."[1]

What the history of man's religious experience records is being abundantly confirmed in the life of our time. Schemes for human betterment, for instance, abound. We can thank God for all of them, but thoughtful men of many creeds and parties are at one in their recognition of the need of a dynamic which alone can give men the power to build a new world. Christ the Redeemer is the answer to this need.

[1] Dr. Sydney Cave, *Christianity and Some Living Religions of the East*, pp. 142-3.

Christ as Victor

We shall in a later chapter examine more fully the victorious confidence which is at the heart of the Christian faith, but a brief reference must be made at this point to John's conception of Christ as Victor. "The Lion that is of the tribe of Judah . . . hath overcome." [1] He has overcome all the forces of evil. It is this assurance, that the vital battle in the struggle between darkness and light has already been won by Christ, which enables John, though an exile for his faith, and writing, as he believes, on the eve of a relentless persecution of the Church, nevertheless to broadcast a message which breathes triumphant confidence, and of which the recurring theme is:

> Let the song go round the earth . . .
> Jesus Christ is King.

The thought of Christ as Victor has been recently revived by the Swedish Bishop Aulén in his book *Christus Victor*, in which he expounds the atonement of Christ as a divine conflict and victory. "Christ — Christus Victor—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself." As Bishop Aulén points out, there are many passages in the New Testament in

[1] Rev. v. 5.

which the theme of Christ's victory over the powers of evil is expounded. *Colossians* ii. 15 is an example, " having put off from Himself the principalities and the powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it (the Cross)."

In his announcement of the victory John brings together in what seems to be a striking contrast, descriptions of Christ as " the Lion " and as " a Lamb." [1] Both descriptions are Old Testament names for the Messiah. To us the lion suggests strength, and the lamb gentleness, but this contrast does not seem to have been in John's mind, for he also describes the Lamb as having seven horns, and the horn was symbolic of strength (1 *Sam.* ii. 10). The Lamb's seven horns symbolised therefore perfect strength. It is the idea of *sacrifice* which John introduces in his description of Christ as a Lamb. He may have been thinking of the paschal lamb in *Exodus*, or of the " lamb that is led to the slaughter " in *Isaiah* liii, or indeed of both. It is through sacrifice that Christ becomes the Victor.

Chapter v of *Revelation* closes with a description of adoration offered to Christ for what He is, and what He has done for men. The chorus of praise is led by the " four living creatures," the cherubim who uphold the throne of God. It is taken up by the four-and-twenty Elders, representing the Church and

[1] Rev. v. 5, 6.

the host of the redeemed. Nor is it confined to these. The poet's vision has a universal range, and he gathers into his great choir "every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea." Finally, the angelic host swells the hymn "Till the Universe rings from side to side with praise."

The objects to which men bring their worship are not always worthy, but here worship is given to One Who in His own Person embodies sacrifice. He has freely offered up His own life that others may live. It is the glory of the self-sacrifice of Christ that is the theme of universal adoration.

> Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.[1]

To-day, as when John wrote his book, we need a Revealer who will unfold to us men the purpose of God, a Redeemer who will lift our poor lives up into the glory of that purpose, a Victor who will send us out into the world inspired by a victorious confidence. Christ was Revealer, Redeemer, and Victor to the men and women of the first century of our era, and because He abides unchanging in His Saviourhood, "no one who believes in Him . . . will ever be disappointed. No one."[2]

[1] Rev. v. 12.
[2] Romans x. 11 (Moffatt).

CHAPTER III

THE ETERNAL WARFARE

THE Book of Revelation is full of the idea that there can be no release for the Christian from the contest with evil in its manifold forms. Its atmosphere of conflict contrasts strangely with that of many religious gatherings. The well-known psychologist, Professor William James of Harvard University, author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, once spent a week at a religious conference, and came away depressed. Its excellent order, kindness and amiability created the illusion that the great spiritual struggles of humanity were over. It was, he says, with an immense feeling of relief that he went back into the everyday world, and renewed acquaintance with that element of struggle and intensity which is a fundamental characteristic of life.

John has much to say about the spiritual warfare which is to him the abiding accompaniment of human experience, especially in chapters xii-xiii, at which we must look in more detail. On a huge canvas, with the sky as background, he paints the figure of a woman who bears a son. Over against the woman is a dragon of immense strength and vast proportions, a symbol of the powers of darkness. By divine protection the child is

preserved, while the woman flees into the wilderness for safety.

The struggle between the woman and the dragon then gives place, for the time being, to more general warfare between the angelic hosts led by the archangel Michael, and the dragon and his satellites, ending with the expulsion of the latter from the courts of heaven. The dragon thereupon renews his struggle with the woman on earth with the aid of two powerful allies, one issuing from the sea, the other from the earth.

The present writer accepts the widely-held view that the woman symbolizes the Church, " the ideal community of God's people, first in its Jewish form in which it gave birth to Jesus, and then in its Christian form." It seems likely that the flight of the woman into the wilderness is connected with the flight of the early Christians from Jerusalem to the mountainous district of Pella (*St. Matt.* xxiv. 16). Michael had been traditionally regarded in Jewish thought as a warrior (*Daniel* xii. 1, *cf. Jude* 9), and his introduction here is probably part of John's design to show the magnitude of the struggle between good and evil. That battle is not limited to earthly experience. The struggle on earth is but one phase of a vast conflict which extends throughout the universe. Heaven itself has been a battlefield in the same conflict.

It is the warfare on earth which vitally links John's drama with the present experi-

ence of his readers—and with ours. They would probably take him to be thinking of the persecutions of Christians, begun by the infamous Nero in A.D. 64, when he wrote of the dragon persecuting the woman and "the rest of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and hold the testimony of Jesus." [1]

The beast from the sea would appropriately symbolize the Roman Empire, the sea being, of course, the Mediterranean, from the shores of which the Roman Empire rose to power. It is a forbidding and sinister representation of the Roman Empire which is given to us in the first half of *Revelation* xiii. A very different picture of it is given to us in St. Paul's well-known injunction in *Romans*: "Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power withstandeth the ordinance of God." [2]

When the Apostle Paul wrote, probably five or six years before the Neronian persecution broke out, there was no open conflict between the Empire and the Church. There was, however, a considerable amount of hostility to the Empire among Jews, continually inflamed by the presence of Roman officials and Roman troops in Palestine. Nor had the Empire any love for the Jews, who constituted one of their problems of govern-

[1] Rev. xii. 17. [2] Rom. xiii. 1, 2.

ment. The Jewish Christians carried over with them into the Christian Church some of their resentment. Paul saw the danger of the Church becoming associated in the minds of the authorities with Jewish hostility to Rome. He therefore repudiated the connection, and went on to expound the place and the claims of the State upon Christians. The point upon which he concentrated is the function of the State in maintaining law and order, and restraining the wrongdoer.

In this respect the Roman Empire certainly made a great contribution to the work of the early Church. It was the Empire which cleared the seas of pirates, and provided safety from brigands and robbers along its excellent roads. Without these benefits the work of the Christian missionaries would have been made vastly more difficult. Moreover, the aftermath of the liberation of Europe in our time has reminded us to what a wretched state of chaos and terror a country may be reduced by the lack of a government which commands the loyalty of the people. There is a solemn responsibility resting upon every Christian to uphold the dignity and authority of the State in every possible way, subject only to the demands of conscience, and duty to God. Even when persecution had broken out, the *First Epistle of Peter* proclaimed the necessity of loyalty to the Empire—

> Be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the

> king as supreme; or unto governors, as sent by him for vengeance on evil-doers and for praise to them that do well. For so is the will of God, that by well-doing ye should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: as free, and not using your freedom for a cloke of wickedness, but as bondservants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.[1]

Nevertheless, there is a higher loyalty—loyalty to God. Unless that is accorded its rightful place, loyalty to the State will become slavish and uncritical. The second world war has tragically underlined that truth. The State, although undoubtedly having a divine function to perform in the maintenance of the rule of law, and in the restraint of evil-doers, is itself a victim of man's sin. Its attitudes and actions therefore call for Christian scrutiny. Patriotism, if it be interpreted as "My country, right or wrong," is not the expression of Christian citizenship, but mere jingoism. The Christian patriot is one who views his country, so far as he can do so, in the light of his understanding of the mind of Christ, and so regards it with a loving but critical eye.

It is a fearful thing when the power of the State has become harnessed to evil and idolatrous designs. That was what had

[1] 1 Peter ii. 13-17.

happened at the time John was writing. In the interests, as it was thought, of the Empire, the Emperor was claiming the worship that Christians could only rightly offer to God. Readiness to worship the image of the Emperor became the test of patriotism. A letter from Pliny, one of the Roman Provincial Governors, to Trajan — Domitian's successor as Emperor—reveals the test in action. " As for those who said they neither were nor ever had been Christians, I thought it right to let them go, since they recited a prayer to the gods at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought into the court for the purpose, together with the images of the gods." [1]

The instrument for the propaganda of the cult of Emperor worship was the pagan imperial priesthood which had been set up, given authority to establish the new worship, and to secure conformity to it. It is this corrupted priesthood which John describes as " another beast coming up out of the earth " (*Rev.* xiii. 11). The city of Pergamum, the capital of the province of Asia, was the chief centre of the cult in that part of the Empire, and it is fitly described by John as " where Satan's throne is " (*Rev.* ii. 13).

We must not suppose that the attempt to establish Emperor worship was generally unpopular. In the year A.D. 23 the cities of

[1] Pliny, *Epp. X.*, xcvi.

Asia had obtained leave to erect in one of them a temple in honour of Tiberius, and three years later they all sent commissioners to Rome to plead their respective claims to furnish the site. "The Emperor," says Tacitus, "in order to turn away public attention from a scandal," frequently attended the Senate, and on several days listened to the ambassadors from Asia arguing as to which city should be the one where the temple was to be erected. Eleven cities were engaged in the contest, equally ambitious, but not equally important. Situated not far apart from one another they laid stress on their antiquity and their loyalty to Rome. . . . The Sardian advocates strove hard, pointing to the history of their town, its early treaty with Rome, the fertilising power of its streams, the wealth of the neighbourhood, and the excellence of the climate. The envoys from Smyrna, however, claimed a yet greater antiquity, a loyalty to Rome which stretched yet further back, and special services rendered to a Roman army in great straits. . . . So when the vote of the Senate was taken, Smyrna carried the day." [1] It was to Sardis and to Smyrna that John addressed two of the letters which are included in his book.

Before we examine the permanent significance of what John has to say about the eternal warfare there are one or two questions of interpretation which call for comment.

[1] C. Anderson Scott, *The Book of the Revelation*, pp. 68-9.

At the end of chapter xiii John speaks of the number of the beast, adding that " it is the number of a man : and his number is six hundred and sixty and six." Endless time and ingenuity have been spent in identifying the man indicated by this number. Among others, both the Pope and Martin Luther have been emphatically claimed for this role ! During the last century or two this or that contemporary figure has also been identified as 666. Irenaeus said a wise thing concerning such speculations. " It is more certain and less hazardous to await the fulfilment of the prophecy than to be making surmises." [1] If the figures were to be significant for John's first readers, they must clearly refer to someone known to them. There was a practice in the ancient world called " gematria " by which letters, each having a numerical value, were added together, the total being regarded as significant. According to this system, the name Nero Caesar represents numbers which yield a total of 666. What makes the reference suitable is that there was a widespread popular belief at the time that Nero, who had died in conditions surrounded by secrecy, had not really died, and would presently return to power at the head of an army to take vengeance on his enemies. There can be no certainty that 666 indicates Nero, but " the beast " would be aptly connected with the man who had originated the policy of

[1] *Against Heresies*, Book 5, Chap. xxx.

persecution, and had embodied in his own rule the oppression and cruelty associated with it.

Although the word " antichrist " does not occur in the *Book of the Revelation*, but in the *First and Second Epistles of John*, the idea has an important place in *Revelation*. The idea of antichrist certainly goes back to the earlier struggles of the Jewish people, notably to the days of Antiochus Epiphanes, King of Syria 175-164 B.C., who set himself to destroy the Jewish faith, and demanded that divine honours should be paid to him. Then, or later, the idea of an antichrist, someone who would seek to supplant God Himself in man's worship, became familiar in Jewish faith. In the earliest records of Christian faith, too, the idea of antichrist has its place. Paul refers to " a man of sin . . . setting himself forth as god " (2 *Thess.* ii. 3-4). John evidently identified antichrist not with one particular person, but with a number of violent enemies of the Christian faith in his own day. " Even now have there arisen many antichrists " (1 *John* ii. 18). In *Revelation* antichrist is linked with the Roman Empire and with Nero.

Antichrist has its contemporary as well as past manifestations. Recent events in Europe and Asia remind us that in modern, as in ancient times, evil ambition can take hold of and possess the minds and hearts of men, so that in very truth they become antichrists

in their own generation, men who set themselves—

> Against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.[1]

We cannot doubt that even as antichrists have arisen in the past, and in our own time, they will continue to rise and take their baleful part in human history, until "The kingdoms of this world are become the Kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever."[2]

Nor must we think that antichrist operates only in movements and individuals outside ourselves. It has its roots in those sinful inclinations which are the universal mark of mankind. Antichrist strives for the mastery in every life and in every society, even the Church of Christ. We have to fight the good fight with it in ourselves, in the Church, and in the world.

We must now try to discover the abiding significance of John's message concerning the eternal warfare. In one important respect we are well placed to do so. The troubled times in which we live have invested the idea of the Christian life as warfare with new vitality. Not so many years ago it was often remarked in books about the Christian life

[1] Psalm ii. 2-3. [2] Rev. xi. 15.

that there seemed something unreal in the singing of " Onward Christian soldiers " by a modern Christian congregation. Nowadays no congregation that is aware of the kind of world we are living in needs to be troubled on that score. But are our churches in general alive to the situation? They do not always give the impression of being a fighting force to the outsider. A writer of the political Left referred in a recent article to churches as " religious bodies, the purpose of which is to provide subjective comfort and consolation to their own members." Mr Middleton Murry says flatly, " There is so little in contemporary Christianity to command a young man's loyalty." We must not impatiently brush aside such judgments, but ask ourselves what truth there is in them. Even those most sympathetic to the churches feel their lack of something they urgently need if they are to carry out their great tasks. " If there is to be a new Christendom," says Dr. J. H. Oldham, " the Christian cause must have its storm troops, its adventurers of the spirit, its pioneers and martyrs." We can rejoice that on the continent of Europe there have been many such who have been revealed in the contemporary struggle between Christ and antichrist. The names of some, such as Bishop Berggrav in Norway, are well known. There have been many others both in Europe and in the Far East " who are perished as though they had not been." When the story of their

courage and endurance is told they will be seen to belong to that goodly fellowship of the prophets, that noble army of martyrs, without which the Christian religion would have perished from the earth long since.

If, however, we are to get to the heart of John's message, we must grasp the fact that the Christian warfare is not limited to a particularly unpleasant stretch of human history, but is a permanent characteristic of life. The element of struggle enters indeed into every part of experience and achievement. Winifred Holtby once confided to Lady Rhondda, "Every good piece of writing I have done that has given me in retrospect the slightest satisfaction has been after hours and hours of labour. I must retire into myself and fight and fight to get form and thought hammered together."

Multitudes have been inspired by Handel's masterpiece *Messiah*. It is well known that the whole oratorio was composed in twenty-four days. It is perhaps less well known that at the time Handel composed *Messiah* "his fortunes had reached their lowest ebb." [1] But it was out of this experience of struggle and suffering that *Messiah* came. Its wonderful melodies, its triumphant choruses, its serene arias, come to us out of a background of conflict. The warfare of which *Revelation* speaks arises from the fact that the world in which we live is out of joint, because it is

[1] Newman Flower, *George Frederick Handel*, p. 259.

out of harmony with God's will for it. There came a point in man's life when he left the Father's home, and wandered away into the far country, and he has not yet returned in penitence to his Father. It is plans of his own, including schemes for a human Utopia, which fill the horizon of his mind. He has not yet learned to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and to believe that if he does this all else will be added unto him. The sin of man has broken the mould of God's pattern for the world, but God, in His mercy, has not left man to his fate.

Oh, loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight,
And to the rescue came.

"To the fight"—John Henry Newman here strikes the same note as *Revelation*. Christ came not as the last figure in a succession of illuminating teachers, through whom God was unfolding to man the meaning of life, though He alone is "The Truth"; nor as the supreme example of how life should be lived, though He is that; but, primarily, to intervene with supreme power to save us from our sins. "Thou shalt call his name Jesus; for it is he that shall save his people from their sins" (*St. Matthew* i. 21). For Him, from the time when He began His public work until it ended, life was warfare. Immediately after His baptism Jesus grappled

in the wilderness with the temptations which sprang out of His office as God's Messiah. He was still only at the beginning of His public ministry when the voice of criticism began to be heard. Criticism grew into opposition, and opposition into determined hatred as the ministry proceeded. Nor was the temptation that came to Jesus in the wilderness a solitary experience. "Ye are they," He said to His disciples, "which have continued with me in my temptations."[1] The struggle continued to the end, and only closed with His death upon the Cross.

He who would follow Jesus must take his part in the same warfare. Discipleship is warfare on two fronts. There is the inner conflict of one's personal life. Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian, described faith as a *passion*. He was thinking of that fundamental change in outlook which comes when a man ceases to live to himself, making his own desires and their attainment the be-all and end-all of life, and offers himself to God. If a man genuinely does this it is not something easily accomplished. "It means a shaking of the whole existence which can be compared only to what we call *passion*." The apostle Paul goes further, and speaks of it as like dying to one life, and rising to another—

> We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as

[1] St. Luke xxii. 28.

> Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him by the likeness of his death, we shall be also by the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away, that so we should no longer be in bondage to sin; for he that hath died is justified from sin. But if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him; knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death no more hath dominion over him. For the death that he died, he died unto sin once, but the life that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Even so reckon ye also yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus.[1]

Nor is the warfare over when the great change has been made. Thomas à Kempis spoke for all Christians when he said, "Who hath a harder combat than he that laboureth to overcome himself?"

There is too much mediocre Christian living among us because we have failed to set before ourselves the goal of the apostle Paul, "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on, if so be that I may apprehend that for which

[1] Romans vi, 4-11.

also I was apprehended by Christ Jesus" (*Philippians* iii. 12). There is a good fight which all Christians are called to continue by God's grace, the fight with sin and self.

But it was mainly of the outer front of Christian warfare that John was thinking. Antichrist in the shape of the Emperor was bearing down upon his readers. They must take their part in the coming struggle as good soldiers of Christ Jesus. In different forms the struggle continues to this day. There is an intellectual front, where the battle is between the Christian faith and philosophies of life like scientific humanism or atheistic communism, in which both the existence and the necessity of God are denied. Sometimes the warfare takes subtler forms, and is between a purely individualistic interpretation of Christ's Gospel, as concerned only with the salvation of the individual, and with preparing us for the next life (as Rosenberg the Nazi writer claimed), and the claim that in the gospel God speaks to us about the whole vast field of human life, individual, social, national, and international.

There is a moral front where battles of temperance and social purity have to be waged, and the indications are that the battles on this front, which seemed to have been effectively won in the past, will have to be fought over again.

There is an ecclesiastical front, where the struggle is between a conception of the Church

that is more social than religious, which would reduce the Church to the level of a social club with a thin veneer of religion, and the doctrine of the Church which sees it as a society with a unique commission to do the work of Christ.

The Christian forces are ranged " against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places," [1] and it is only a vigorous realization of this warfare that can enable the Christian Church, and the individual Christian, to take their proper and militant part in the eternal warfare.

Kierkegaard, to whom reference has already been made, has helped our generation to a fresh understanding of this fact. In his day (he was born in 1813 in Copenhagen) the Church in Denmark was in comfortable alliance with the State. Personal religion was at a low ebb and, for the most part, found no more vigorous expression than mere respectability. " What use to preach the incarnation and agony of a dying God," cried Kierkegaard, with his sharp awareness of the battles waiting to be fought, " as an incentive . . . only to respectability ? " From the time when in his middle twenties he had his own vivid experience of meeting God in Christ, Kierkegaard devoted his life to exposing the shallowness and ineffectiveness of contem-

[1] Ephes. vi. 12.

porary Christianity in Denmark, and to pleading for a religion in which the Cross was central, not only in Christian theology, but also in the life of the individual Christian. We still need the rough vigour of his message.

To take one's part in the eternal warfare means self-discipline, and the giving of time and strength to the service of Christ, but any thought of self-sacrifice is swallowed up in the contemplation of the greatness of our calling.

When we think of the faithfulness and heroism of Christ's soldiers through the ages, of missionary pioneers like Carey and Livingstone, spiritual reformers like Wyclif and Luther, doughty champions of the oppressed like Wilberforce and Shaftesbury, we cannot but feel constrained to take our full part in the warfare in which they served.

There is a yet more powerful constraint, and, though John stresses the part which God's saints and martyrs have played in the eternal warfare, it is to the commanding figure of the Captain of the Host that he would lift the eyes of his readers, that they may hear His command, "Be thou faithful unto death."[1] Because it is He Who calls, His disciples must respond.

[1] Rev. ii. 10.

CHAPTER IV

THE JUDGMENTS OF GOD

"SERMONS on hell fire and divine anger have gone out of fashion," says a modern writer on *Revelation*.[1] The verdict cannot be disputed. The important question is whether anything vital has been lost in the changing presentation of the Christian message, and in the virtual elimination of the idea of divine judgment as an essential part of that message. One of the most discerning observers of our contemporary world goes so far as to say, "This is the black heart of the problem—the court of civilisation is without a judge."[2] It is because the conviction that there is a Judge of all the earth has largely disappeared from man's thinking that the human judgments of our time are so often based on expediency, and lack loyalty to great principles.

Revelation has a great deal to say about judgment. A substantial part of the book is almost entirely concerned with the judgments of God. This is not surprising when we remember the background of persecution against which it was written. Judgment is, however, a typical Biblical theme. The

[1] Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 286.
[2] Charles Morgan, *Reflections in a Mirror*, Vol. I, p. 224.

statement in *Psalm* vii. 11, "God is angry with the wicked every day" can be paralleled from many other books of the Old Testament. The judgment theme is also prominent in the New Testament. The first news Mark gives us of Christ's preaching is in these terms: "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel."[1] The call to repentance implies judgment. It was Jesus, too, Who said, "Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him."[2] There can be no doubt that the reference in this passage is to God; it is a summons to reverence for God, and wholesome fear of His judgments upon us. When the apostles went out to fulfil their divine commission to preach the gospel, the note of judgment was often heard in their sermons. "Repent ye therefore and turn again" was a characteristic appeal in the apostolic preaching. The Good News was there also, just as it was in the preaching of Jesus, but it was set in a framework of judgment.

We sometimes speak of the "swing of the pendulum" in describing a change that has taken place. The change of emphasis in preaching which led to the virtual disappearance of sermons on divine judgment was a swing of the pendulum, a reaction from what

[1] St. Mark i. 14-15. [2] St. Luke xii. 5.

was felt to be an unduly exaggerated insistence upon this aspect of the gospel. But the pendulum swung too far. In the field of Biblical scholarship an attempt was made to draw a sharp distinction between the God of the Old Testament and of the New Testament, and in the interpretation of the latter to expunge or explain away those passages which spoke forcefully of God's judgment. In Christian preaching the net result was to concentrate almost exclusively on the love of God. Since that love was not expounded as it is in the Bible, in terms of the love of a Holy God Whose face is set implacably against sin, it tended to become in the minds of its hearers a benevolent amiability rather than love; and it is not to be wondered at that the doctrine of forgiveness seemed to lose its old power to grip the minds and hearts of men. The theme of God's love can only evoke a deep and powerful response from the human heart if it is seen as a love of which we are totally unworthy, a love which seeks to rescue us from the inevitable judgments of a Holy God upon our shameful sins, so that we cry, with Bishop Andrewes,

> I appeal from the Tribunal of Thy Justice to the Throne of Thy Grace.[1]

If we do not first see ourselves under the judgment of God we cannot possibly feel overwhelmed by the love of God, and it is

[1] *The Devotions*, S.P.C.K. Edition, Vol. II, p. 102.

Christians who do feel overwhelmed by it who can alone interpret it to the world.

The pendulum has now begun to swing in the opposite direction. Theological teachers and preachers are alike recognising the folly of attempting to do God's work with a truncated gospel, shorn of much of its power because it is not the whole counsel of God to man. There is a fresh interest in those Christian teachers of the past, like Kierkegaard, who have had much to say upon the judgment of God. Karl Barth, another modern prophet of judgment, is one of the significant voices of our time. It may be conceded that both these men represent a violent swinging of the theological pendulum ; their colours are too consistently dark, there is too little of the good news of the gospel in their teaching, but if we recognise them for what they are, prophets of "a theology of correction," they will help us to recover a vital element in the Christian Gospel.

"God is angry with the wicked every day." There is an anger that good men feel which does not take away from their manhood, but is a notable expression of its quality. "One result of the new sense of reality which a man will learn in Christ's school should be a power of moral passion. Cruelty, meanness, dirt and insincerity will move him, as they moved our Lord, to flaming anger and indignation. 'No heart is pure that is not passionate.' A character incapable of

anger lacks one essential of true manhood." [1] Furthermore, the capacity for righteous anger contributes powerfully to the warfare against sin. The man who feels deeply the wickedness of some current practice, and who unites moral indignation with a capacity for action, is made of the stuff from which powerful preachers and great reformers come.

"When I am angry," said Luther, "I can pray well and preach well." No doubt it is true that anger, even righteous anger, is a perilous attitude in man. It may blind a man to his own sins. David had the capacity for such anger, and the prophet Nathan roused it in order to bring home David's own sin to him. It was not, however, until Nathan drove home his parable of the little ewe lamb, with the crushing indictment, "Thou art the man!" [2] that David was convicted by his own conscience. The heated and quite sincere denunciation of the sins of others may be an unconscious escape from being confronted with our own. Nevertheless, it would be an utterly cynical judgment to argue that this element makes worthless all man's moral judgments. There have been many good men who, although sharing in the general sinfulness of the race, have felt a noble anger at the sight of oppression and cruelty. Christ once sought to help His disciples' faith by arguing from the father's

[1] F. R. Barry, *A Philosophy from Prison*, p. 108.
[2] 2 Samuel xii. 7.

love of his children to God's love for His human children. Perhaps we may also see in the moral indignation of a good man an imperfect illustration of God's indignation with us when we choose evil instead of good, and especially when our sinful choices bring suffering to others.

There are important consequences of God's anger with sin. It is a radical defect in some of the non-Christian religions that they have no place for moral indignation. India has been a notable sufferer in this respect. It was not until William Carey landed in India that such evils as *sati*, the burning of widows as a supposed act of reverence for their husbands, was effectively attacked. The tolerance shown by Hinduism to social wrongs is, in the judgment of some authorities, rooted in its doctrine of *Karma*, which produces fatalism. It must also be remembered, however, that Hinduism does not conceive the Supreme Being as possessing personal character or moral responsibility. There can clearly be no place in such a system for the thought of God's indignation against the cruelty of man to man. The same weakness marks Buddhism. Here the lack of concern in the presence of injustice and cruelty has a number of causes, among them a miserable view of man, and the rejection of desire of any kind, save, perhaps, the desire for self-suppression. More fundamental, however, is its lack of an adequate idea of God. Though

the original atheism of Buddhism has been modified, nothing has been added which ascribes to its now numerous gods any concern for the ills which men suffer at the hands of one another.

The divine judgment on Rome, which is described in chapters xvii. and xviii. of *Revelation* occupies a large part of John's visions of judgment. Although he writes of "Babylon" there can be little doubt that he is thinking of Rome, "the city of seven hills" (*Rev.* xvii. 9), for Rome was at that time the spearhead of the world's hostility to the Christian Church. It was Rome which had been "drunk with the blood of the saints" in the persecution under Nero, thus described by the Roman historian Tacitus :—

> A vast multitude was convicted not so much of arson as of hatred of the human race. And they were not only put to death, but put to death with insult, in that they were either dressed up in the skins of beasts to perish by the worrying of dogs, or else put on crosses to be set on fire, and, when the daylight failed, to be burnt as lights by night.[1]

It was Rome which now, in the blasphemous and cruel designs of Domitian, threatened the very existence of the Church of Christ. We must not, however, suppose that John was blind to the fact that Rome

[1] Tacitus, *Annales*, xv. 44.

had made great positive contributions to the life of mankind. He gives us in his splendid, though necessarily sombre, lament over the city, a vivid description of Rome as the centre of the world's commerce.

> And the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her; for no man buyeth their merchandise any more; the merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and of pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet . . . and all manner of vessels of most precious wood, and of brass, and iron, and marble. . . . And every ship-master, and all the company in ships, and sailors, and as many as trade by sea, stood afar off, and cried when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, What city is like unto this great city! [1]

The Biblical judgment of civilisation, as of individuals, is moral and spiritual, and it is in that light that the divine judgment on Rome is expounded by John.

The time-setting in which he unfolds his theme raises a problem for the modern reader which must be faced. The judgment which he so vividly conceived to have fallen on Rome did not descend in his time. Rome endured for another three hundred years. The successor of Domitian was not anti-Christ, but Trajan. "Such a man was too

[1] Rev. xviii. 11 ff.

much of a Roman and too much of a soldier to be other than hostile to the Christians, yet too human and too practical to take pleasure in persecuting them, and rather disposed to leave them alone as much as he safely could." [1] Moreover, Rome itself eventually became, under the Emperor Constantine, the protectress of the Christian religion. What then are we to say in the light of these events of John's predictions of the speedy downfall of Rome? If we interpret them literally, we are bound to acknowledge that they were not fulfilled. We have however already seen that Apocalypse makes use of symbols which are not meant to be interpreted literally. John's use of numbers is an illustration. Dr. E. F. Scott argues that " it need not be supposed that he (John) looked for a literal fulfilment of his visions. Apocalyptic, by its nature, was the foreshadowing of facts by means of symbols, and the symbols were for the most part conventional." [2] However this may be, it is important to realise that the abiding value of apocalyptic is in its discernment of moral laws grounded in the righteousness of God. " Material force must yield in the end to spiritual; tyranny, however strongly entrenched, will defeat itself; the blood of martyrs will not cry to heaven in vain; the cause of Christ will be victorious."[3]

[1] Gwatkin, *Early Church History*, Vol. I, p. 128.
[2] E. F. Scott, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 52.
[3] E. F. Scott, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 55.

We may go on to ask, what was the cause of the irretrievable ruin which in the end overtook the Empire? Dr. T. R. Glover, in his book *The World of the New Testament,* in which he pays tribute to the great achievements of the Roman Empire, calls attention to its radical weaknesses, over-taxation, unnecessarily imposing a crushing burden on the people; and the curse of slavery. "To their crimes," wrote Juvenal of the Romans, "they owe their gardens, palaces, stables, and fine old plate."[1] It was, in a word, her sins which at the last brought Rome down to destruction. Rome became another illustration of the judgment of God on the civilisations which men build. We who live in days in which standards of honesty and of sex morality have alarmingly collapsed in the lives of great numbers of people in our own country may well give heed to John's solemn words on the theme of judgment. Our own western civilisation has, in these more recent years, revealed grave defects and radical weaknesses which, unless they are remedied, will bring us also down into destruction. The God Whose judgment fell in condemnation on Rome is the God of our time too, "the same yesterday, today, and for ever" in His righteous judgments of men and nations.

His judgments are abroad in the earth

[1] Juvenal, *Satires* I,, quoted in G. A. Smith's *The Book of the Twelve,* Vol. I., p. 145.

today. The red horse of war and the black horse of famine are no longer merely picturesque dramatizations found in *Revelation*. They remind us of the fearful times through which we have been passing. The four horsemen of the apocalypse — symbolising conquest, war, famine and pestilence—have indeed come to Europe.

> Fear God, and give glory to Him ; for the hour of his judgment is come.[1]

The judgment of God is exercised not only on the sinful world, but also on the Church, instrument though it is of God's saving purpose. The letters to the seven churches in chapters ii. and iii. have their notes of judgment. The churches are weighed in the balance, for the most part are found wanting, and are earnestly exhorted to repentance. We shall notice in our final chapter the essential appeal to the churches made in these letters. Here we call attention to the fact of judgment on the Church, and urge its importance. The Church comes under judgment, not only in spite of the fact that God has chosen to use it in the accomplishment of His divine purpose, but because it is so. " As many as I love, I reprove and chasten ; be zealous therefore, and repent." [2] John foresaw for the churches of his day a most severe testing, and felt a deep concern that they should be ready to meet it.

[1] Rev. xiv. 7. [2] Rev. iii. 19.

They must keep the lamps of faith and of loyalty to Christ burning in a dark age. That is the role for which the Lord of the Church has cast them. If they fail here the reason for their existence has gone. "Thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead" is God's judgment on the church in Sardis.[1] John sees that the churches must be real churches if they are to endure through the coming storm. He therefore summons them to their work in bracing words of judgment. We cannot doubt that his words had not a little to do with the future of the churches in Asia, and were responsible in some measure for the vigour they displayed, to which the letters of Ignatius bear witness.

In our time, it is perhaps the greatness of the Church's opportunity, seen in the background of the world's spiritual need, which is in the forefront of our minds. We shall not, however, rise to the height of that opportunity save as we discern that "He that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand"[2] is among us too, seeking by His searching judgment to purify the life of the Church, and to make the light of its witness bright and clear.

The judgments of God, which are constantly being worked out in contemporary history, come to their climax in the last

[1] Rev. iii. 1. [2] Rev. i. 16.

judgment, the great assize of history, which John thus describes :—

> And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.[1]

It is a vision which is found in other forms in the Old Testament, elsewhere in the New Testament, and in the more ancient religions of Babylonia, Persia and Greece, as if God would write upon the minds and hearts of men in every generation the profound truth of judgment. When men cease to believe that there is a divine judgment which is operative in human affairs, which conserves good and destroys evil, they lose that sense of personal responsibility which is the indispensable basis of life for the individual and for society alike. When men no longer see the vision of God, and are searched by His judgment, they grope in their self-chosen darkness. "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil." [2]

[1] Rev. xx. 11, 12. [2] St. John iii. 19.

Writers on *Revelation* have sometimes commented disappointedly on its preoccupation with the theme of judgment, and have called attention to its harshness of tone, and its lack of tenderness towards the sinful. "Where," they ask, "is the generous sympathy with a nation that knows not God which is found in the book of *Jonah*? Where is the tenderness that shines through the parable of the prodigal son, and the magnanimity of the Master's exhortation to His disciples to pray for their enemies? Is Jesus the implacable judge of *Revelation*, or is He 'the friend of publicans and sinners' whom Luke so movingly portrays?" The absence of some glorious gospel notes from *Revelation* may be admitted. John is doubtless much concerned with the announcement of the doom of wicked men, and of an Empire which has become the spear-head of a satanic attack upon the Church of God. His vehemence and intensity are, however, never mere vindictiveness, but the expression of a passionate devotion to righteousness, a passion for lack of which the modern world sinks too often into expediency and even cynicism, in its political judgments and actions.

We must not fall into the exaggeration which has overtaken some who have written on *Revelation*. If John reveals something of the sternness with which His Lord spoke before him, he manifests also something of His tenderness. The severity of his con-

demnation of the Church at Laodicea is succeeded by one of the tenderest invitations recorded in Scripture, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock." [1] Moreover, the man who could write words which have comforted mourners of every Christian generation can hardly be conceived as inhuman in his lack of sympathy. John's concern with judgment sprang, of course, out of the situation in which he wrote, and in our time, in which we have witnessed a terrible resurgence of evil in the world, we may be thankful for his powerful insistence upon the fact of judgment.

> Salvation, and glory, and power, unto the Lord our God: for true and righteous are his judgments.[2]

[1] Rev. iii. 20. [2] Rev. xix. 1-2.

CHAPTER V

THE VICTORY OF GOD

And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.[1]

WHAT a triumph of faith is enshrined in this victorious chant! Although John is himself in exile, and the powerful Roman Empire is setting its face against the Church, he is unfaltering in his confidence that the final victory will be with God. He not only endures, but triumphs, through the faith which enables him to see "Him who is invisible." It was in the power of the same victorious faith that Augustine, the famous Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote his great book *The City of God* at the very time when the Roman Empire was dissolving. Rome had been sacked by Alaric the Goth only a year or two before the book was begun. Augustine died in 430 while the Vandals were besieging Hippo. Yet amid the ruin of a great Empire, and the uncertainties of the future, he discerned the towers of the abiding City of God.

In vain the surges' angry shock,
In vain the drifting sands;
Unharmed upon the eternal Rock
The Eternal City stands.

[1] Rev. xix. 6.

John is sure of the coming victory of God. By means of the infra-red process the photographer can make the details of the distant landscape stand out clearly. So it is with John. God has given him a vision of the coming triumph of His purpose, and he sees present events in its brilliant light. He pictures a vast final battle between antichrist, who has arrayed his utmost strength, and Christ, together with His people, and symbolically describes the scene as Harmageddon, "The Hill of Victory." It is possible that John was thinking of some actual place, and if so, it may well have been the plain of Esdraelon, "the classic battleground of Scripture," scene of the great victory over Sisera, recorded in *Judges* v. which was in his mind. Antichrist and his forces are overwhelmingly defeated, and the battle ends in a rout.

This assurance of the victory of God is not, of course, peculiar to *Revelation*. It is a recurring motif in the great symphony of Scripture. We hear its music in the words of the Prophet of the Exile :—

> So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth : it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.[1]

[1] Isaiah lv. 11.

Its triumphant notes are heard throughout the New Testament. St. Luke tells us that when the seventy returned from their mission, and reported their success in the words, "Lord, even the devils are subject unto us in Thy name," the Master, in a vivid phrase, declared, "I beheld Satan fall as lightning from heaven." [1]

It is illuminating to compare and contrast the assurance of the victory of God, which is at the heart of Christian faith, with the viewpoint of other religions on the outcome of the struggle between good and evil. Hinduism expounds in its doctrine of *Karma* an impersonal law of justice. *Karma* visits retribution on the individual by assigning an appropriate form of reincarnation to him, the divine judgment on his life. It might appear from this that in a sense Hinduism teaches the triumph of righteousness. The vital difference between this teaching and that of the Christian faith is at once seen when it is remembered that in Hinduism no personal character or moral responsibility is attributed to God, and no real sin to man, but only ignorance and the violation of caste. The Hindu seeks deliverance, not from sin, but from *Karma*.

Mohammed undoubtedly possessed an immensely strong personal conviction of the existence of an omnipotent God, the sovereign ruler of the world, which his followers have

[1] St. Luke x. 18.

inherited from him. God's controlling power is absolute, and the victory of His will is, therefore, assured. It can, however, hardly be described as the victory of righteousness. Allah is quite arbitrary in the exercise of his power. He does what pleases him, and predestines all things, including belief or unbelief. How different is this picture of God, which has been described as "an Arab Sheikh glorified and magnified to cosmic proportions," from that which is given to us in the Bible, a picture of God as acting always in the interests of His righteous purposes, "with whom is no variableness, neither shadow that is cast by turning." [1]

Zarathushtra had his own doctrine of the fulfilment of history. It was a fundamental part of his teaching that there would be a dividing judgment which would apportion punishment for the wicked, and reward for the righteous. Zarathushtra taught the existence of a Supreme Being, Ahura Mazda, the source of truth and goodness. Alongside him, conceived to have existed from the beginning of things, was Ahriman, the supreme hostile spirit. The two wage unceasing warfare. In the end, Ahriman and his satellites will be destroyed, and Ahura Mazda will reign in undisputed sovereignty. Here, it seems, is a clearly stated affirmation of the victory of righteousness. Yet the affirmation, set in the general system that Zarathushtra created,

[1] James i. 17.

has only a pathetic, because antiquarian, interest. What is the actual influence of Zarathushtra's burning conviction in the lives of those who claim to be his followers to-day? All the fire has gone, and only the ashes of a formal and lifeless creed remain. For the modern disciples of Zarathushtra do not think of themselves as possessing a gospel for the world. They are strangers to the missionary passion which might seem to be the natural accompaniment of their founder's conviction of the triumph of righteousness, and seem instead to desire only to perpetuate that insular pride which has become their most marked characteristic.

What is the content of the Christian idea of the victory of God? It certainly includes the conviction that God controls human history in the interests of His divine purpose. There is no difficulty in this conception when we think of the man who consciously desires to do the will of God. He brings his offering of life and service to God, and God takes it and weaves it into the pattern of His will.

Those who consciously desire to do the will of God are, however, only a minority, sometimes a very small minority. What of the rest? The faith which the Bible expounds is that the divine purpose takes hold of their lives too, even though they do not know God. An outstanding Biblical illustration of this fact is the career of Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire. After he had conquered

Babylon Cyrus became the liberator of the exiled Hebrew people, for he allowed some of them, at any rate, to return to Palestine. The reason he did so was not because he had embraced the Hebrew faith, for he was a worshipper of the gods of Babylon. His more liberal policy in regard to exiles seems to have been inspired by a recognition that it would strengthen his empire. The Bible view of his action is, however, that although Cyrus does not know God, he is nevertheless God's instrument. "He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure." [1]

The Bible goes further, and claims that even those whose policies are cruel and oppressive are used by God. It is not that their policies are approved by God, much less inspired by Him, but He will use even their evil to further His good. No ancient tyranny was more ruthless than that of the Assyrians, no conquerors ever treated their captives more barbarously. Yet Isaiah pictures God addressing Assyria in these terms: "O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation." [2] God will use the Assyrians as the instrument with which He chastises nations for their sins, though Assyria herself will presently fall under the judgment of which she is the instrument. The present writer recalls how, when he first heard this view of divine providence expounded, he recoiled from it.

[1] Isaiah xliv. 28. [2] Isaiah x. 5.

It seemed impossible to suppose that God could use the ruthless and hated Assyrians in furthering His will. Continued reflection has, however, brought him to see that it is a magnificent faith which the Bible teaches us in this matter. God is continually taking hold, not only of the good which He enables men to do, but of their evil deeds and their disobediences to Him, and making them to serve His eternal purpose.

The victory of God involves, as Dr. H. H. Rowley has pointed out, a further element, the most important element of all in the human situation. God is not only continually taking hold of human actions in the interests of His purpose, but is Himself constantly exercising a divine initiative for the attainment of His will.[1] The Bible unfolds the divine strategy. God effects the deliverance of the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt, not only because of their misery, but because He has chosen them to be the agent of His will. "I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God."[2] When the great Hebrew prophets of the eighth century speak to men it is in the consciousness that they are not expressing merely human opinions, but are uttering the eternal truth of God. He has called them into His service, and they cannot but speak the words He has given to them. So when Amos is charged

[1] H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*, p. 142.
[2] Exodus vi. 7.

with being a professional prophet he replies: "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit: and the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel." [1] The prophets point behind themselves to the divine initiative. But it was in Jesus Christ that God's initiative found its grandest and fullest expression. All that had gone before was a preparation for Him. It is as John contemplates the Saviour's life and death and resurrection that he grasps with firm hand the certainty that the unceasing struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, will end in the complete victory of God's purposes in Him.

If, however, it is true that the triumph of God's righteous purpose is assured, what need is there for any human effort to bring it about? Is not the nerve of personal effort cut by this assertion of the certainty of victory? It is one of the paradoxes of Christian experience that it is not. The very reverse is the case. Christian men in all ages have found faith in the ultimate victory of God's righteous purpose, not a drug sapping their sense of personal responsibility in the central struggle of the universe, but a powerful incentive to Christian life and service. There have been men who though they have not believed in the victory of God, have yet

[1] Amos vii 14, 15.

striven nobly for the triumph of the right, but, as the late Dr. Edwyn Bevan wrote in his Gifford Lectures, *Symbolism and Belief*, "If you determine to live by the faith that the Ground of the universe is Spirit, and that the values which man recognises are the revelations of that Spirit's character, there is likely to be more buoyancy and drive in your fight for goodness and truth and beauty in the world around you, and in yourself, against all the things which militate for wrong and falsehood and ugliness." [1] John, the author of *Revelation*, is himself an illustration of how a Christian man may combine a strong conviction of the victory of God with an equally strong sense of personal responsibility for taking one's part in the struggle of the ages. He is sure of the coming victory, but that does not mean that those who believe in God have not some part, and a vital part, to play in the drama which moves to its triumphant climax. There was the same union of assured faith and of responsible action in the life of Oliver Cromwell. In one of his letters to Fairfax, penned in difficult days, he writes: "But this is our comfort, God is in heaven and He doth what pleases Him; His, and only His, counsels shall stand, whatever the designs of men and the fury of the people be." So far from his conviction of God's control of history undermining his capacity for vigorous action, it was its very mainspring. Both

[1] Dr. Edwyn Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief*, p. 376.

John and Cromwell believed that the individual had a part to play in the fulfilment of the purpose of God.

Here again, a contrast between Christian and non-Christian religions is illuminating. In the religion of Mohammed the only role open to men is the passive one of submission to the omnipotent rule of Allah. In Hinduism it is only by a process of negation, of abstaining from effort and desire, that the individual has any prospect of achieving the impersonality he has been taught to regard as the goal of life. It seems probable that the reason why Zoroastrianism failed to produce a warm interest in the salvation of the man outside the company of its disciples, is the failure to rouse the individual disciple to a conviction of the part he has to play in the struggle between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. In the Christian religion the individual has a vital role. The victory of God is not conceived as being achieved independently of the lives of those who are disciples of Christ, and of the Church. John specifically includes the "patience and faith of the saints" as among the elements through which the final triumph is brought about. The battle is against Christ "and against His army."[1] In the letters to the seven churches he appeals to his readers, with the greatest possible sense of urgency, to take their place among the ranks of Christ's faithful soldiers. "Be thou faithful unto

[1] Rev. xix. 19.

death, and I will give thee the crown of life." [1] John's faith in the certainty of the victory of God in no way impairs his sense of the importance of what the individual does with his life.

How greatly we need to recover this vital sense of the value of individual lives! For lack of it, vast numbers of men and women drift aimlessly through life. Yet so essential is it to the individual to be able to believe that his life matters, that men and women, once they realise that their lives are purposeless, will eagerly grasp at any creed which promises them significance. In so doing, they are but seeking the fulfilment of a fundamental urge of their being, the feeling of being valued and worthwhile. Hitler appealed to this basic need, and offered its satisfaction in the devotion of the individual to the Nazi State. His appeal found an eager response from those who felt that here was a faith which gave them what they craved for—a sense of significance. It is clear that in Russia vast numbers of individuals have found what Berdyaeff describes as "a mystic joy in their submergence in the collective." They have found a new significance for their individual lives in the contribution which they are conscious of making to a common purpose, and in the sense they have that the community needs their service. We in Britain have certainly something to learn from this. It

[1] Rev. ii. 10.

has been well said that " the spiritual failure of industrial civilization has not been its economic consequences, but the fact that millions of people have felt that the community did not care what happened to them." Nevertheless, because man is fundamentally a spiritual creation made by God, and so made that only in God's service can he find his perfect fulfilment and freedom, no destiny that leaves out God can bring him an abiding and satisfying sense of significance. This is the truth our rootless age so urgently needs to learn.

Man only enters into the fulness of life when he lives in the conviction that there is some part he is playing in the purpose of the God who made him. " There were times," wrote Tolstoy of himself, " when I felt I had become the agent of the divine will. Often I was so impure, so filled with personal passions, that the light of this truth was obscured by my darkness, but at times the truth passed through me, and these were the happiest moments of my life." It is not only the man of genius to whom that glad conviction can come, but all those, whatever walk of life is theirs, who rejoice in the forgiving love of God, which has made them, though unworthy, inheritors of His Kingdom.

It gives a man a sure foothold in life when, as he looks out across the face of the world, he rests by faith in the certainty that amid the rise and fall of nations, and the inter-

national cataclysms of his time, God's unchanging purpose of righteousness endures, and marches on to its ultimate triumph. In August 1779, the combined fleets of France and Spain lay at the mouth of Plymouth Harbour. There was no fleet to oppose them, and hardly any garrison to resist a landing. Yet no landing was made. When the news was told to John Wesley, who was at Taunton, he exclaimed, "The bridle of God was in their teeth." [1] It was the word of a man who saw behind human events the hand of God.

John was sustained in exile and inspired in leadership by the assurance God had given him of the coming victory. What was it that enabled him to grasp this certainty of faith? We cannot doubt that his own faithfulness was a vital element in the situation. Here was a man who "for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" [2] was willing to suffer exile. He was obedient to the heavenly vision of his duty as a Christian, and it was this response of his loyalty which made it possible for him to discern, by faith, the victory of God. The same confidence has been God's gift to His faithful servants in every age. When he was sixty-two William Carey, who had then been in India for thirty years, sent a message to a young missionary just beginning his work in India. Carey had in the previous year lost both his eldest son,

[1] Quoted in Pearce Carey's *Samuel Pearce*, p. 55.
[2] Rev. i. 9.

and a most valued colleague and friend. His work was harassed by tensions with younger fellow-workers in India, and with the Baptist Missionary Society authorities in England. At the time of writing Carey had been ill for some weeks with a serious injury. Yet he was able to write :

> " . . . remember that God has declared that His word shall accomplish that for which it is sent ; . . . that when He pleases, He can as easily remove the present seemingly formidable obstacles as we can move the smallest particles of dust. Be not discouraged, but look constantly to the great recompense of reward." [1]

The assurance of the victory of God is a fundamental element in Christian experience, but we can only enter into it, and know its joy and power, as we offer ourselves to God for the service of His will.

[1] E. A. Payne, *The First Generation*, p. 16.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEW JERUSALEM AND THE NEW ORDER

WHEN Edward Burne-Jones, the great English artist, was a child, he used to play at building a city of stones, which he called "Jerusalem." The description of the city in the *Book of the Revelation* had evidently laid hold of the child. His nurse rebuked him for profanity in calling his childish creation "Jerusalem," and the rebuke sank deeply into his mind. To him the new Jerusalem was no mere vision, but a city to be built on earth. The memorable word-pictures which are given to us in John's vision of the new Jerusalem in ch. xxi. are most often understood by the ordinary reader to refer to life after death. But that was not what was in John's mind. He was thinking of an actual Jerusalem, the City of God established in our world. As a Jew, his mind would be stored with treasured memories of the place of Jerusalem in his nation's history. "Build thou the walls of Jerusalem" [1] had been the plea of the lovers of Jerusalem to God in the grievous days of the Exile. Nehemiah, away in the Persian Court, could find no satisfaction in his own favoured position while he knew that "the

[1] Psalm li. 18.

wall of Jerusalem also is broken down and the gates thereof are burned with fire." [1] He lived for the day when Jerusalem would again be the joy and pride of its inhabitants, and the story of his own part in the rebuilding of the city is one of the most fascinating chapters in the records of Hebrew history. John, the poet and the visionary, looking out across the world in which men had built great cities, sees, in vision, another kind of city, not Rome, symbol of man's achievements and of man's sins, not even Jerusalem —sacred city as it was to the Jew—but a "new" Jerusalem, the Holy City, God's dwelling-place with His people on earth.

It is a dazzling picture John gives to us in his description of the new Jerusalem—the city of pure gold "like unto pure glass," with its twelve gates, and its many precious stones glistening in the supernatural light of God's glory. We cannot conceive such a city. Nor does John wish us to understand his descriptions in the terms of a slavish literalism. It is important for those who are left cold by pearly gates and streets of gold to remember this. John's description would represent to the oriental mind all that was most beautiful.[2] His words are those of the artist who uses symbolism as his medium. This is clear when we reflect on what John tells us of the measurements of the new Jerusalem, "and the length

[1] Nehemiah i. 3.
[2] I owe this point to my friend, the Rev. Edward Shillito, M.A.

thereof is as great as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs; the length and the breadth and the height thereof are equal." [1] The city is thus a perfect cube. John may have had in mind the Holy of Holies in Hebrew religion, where God's presence was believed to be manifested, for that was also a perfect cube. In the new Jerusalem, too, God's presence will be manifest.[2]

We have heard much in recent years of "a New Order," and of those "new Jerusalems" man seeks after and desires to build. John's vision is, therefore, extraordinarily relevant to our time.

Although we cannot press the details of his description, it is noteworthy that John thinks of the new Jerusalem as a beautiful city. A river and the main thoroughfare run parallel through the city, and between them are trees of life. "Whenever a man finds himself within this city, he is within reach both of the river, and of the tree of life." It was in a pleasant garden that God set Adam and Eve, and here, too, the City of God has the aspect of a garden. There are some words of Charles Morgan which may be fittingly quoted here:

> In all the plans that are made for the life we are to lead, how seldom is there evidence of any wish in the planner that

[1] Rev. xxi. 16. [2] Rev. xxi. 3.

> that life shall be enjoyed! That it shall be safe—yes; that it shall be instructed, rationed, equalized, rubbed smooth, supplied with dustless corners and chromium-plated taps, but that there shall be grace, or charm, or quiet, or gaiety, or sweetness, or light in it, there is among the sterner planners neither hope nor desire. Utility and sameness are their guiding stars. [1]

John is a poet and an artist, and he sees colour and fragrance, sweetness and light, as God's gifts to man, and these have their place in the new Jerusalem. As we think of the drab and depressing aspect of many of our industrial towns, with little or nothing in them to lift the mind and elevate the spirit of man, we may well hope that the architects of the future may be familiar with John's portrayal of the City of God.

"I saw no temple therein." [2] The Temple in Jerusalem had been the National Shrine, the symbol of God's presence. There had been a time when the Temple was so much a part of the religious life of the Jewish people that without it they would have felt utterly at a loss. With the coming of the Exile and the rise of the synagogue, the Temple lost its dominating place in the religious life of the nation. Nevertheless, it continued to be regarded by the Jew with veneration. The

[1] *Reflections in a Mirror*, Vol. I, p. 93.
[2] Rev. xxi. 22.

Feast of the Passover and the Unleavened Bread (*St. Mark* xiv. 1), in commemoration of the time when the Israelites left Egypt, still held a great place in the national life, and Jerusalem was crowded with the pilgrims making their way to the Temple for these national festivals. At the time *Revelation* was written the Temple was in ruins. In consequence, there was a daily prayer which was offered by Jews, "Restore Thou the sacrificial service to the Holy of Holies of Thy House." Our Lord Himself does not seem to have regarded the Temple as an essential part of the religious life of His nation. It is not recorded that He ever joined in its worship. In the conversation with the woman of Samaria, the Master looks beyond the worship that is associated with a particular place. "Neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem shall ye worship the Father." [1] So, here, John describes a city which has no need of a temple, because the New Jerusalem is itself one vast temple. "God is no longer anywhere because He is felt to be everywhere." The passage is not, of course, to be taken as suggesting that church buildings are, here and now, unnecessary. Our Lord was Himself a regular worshipper in the synagogue (*St. Luke* iv. 16). It does, however, hold before our eyes a vision of a time in which God's glory will have so interpenetrated every part of life that there will be no need of buildings

[1] St. John iv. 21.

set apart for worship. We may find it difficult to grasp such a thought, but the positive side of John's great vision, the hallowing of all things, the pervading of every part of our common life by God's glory, is an ideal which has attracted Christian men of every generation. It is an ideal which is challenging many a Christian conscience in our own time, compelling men to look critically at our acquisitive society, and to ask what is happening to individuality in our mass production systems. The great painter, Fra Angelico, never began a picture without invoking Divine guidance and blessing upon his work, but we must frankly face the fact that there are people in our modern world who are engaged in such work that, even if they had the desire to view it as service offered to God, could not possibly do so, for the work itself stands condemned under the scrutiny of Christian examination as not worth doing. John's vision of a completely Christian society is as stimulating and searching to-day as when it was first given to us, and is itself an illustration of the Word of God that abideth for ever.

Again, the conception of citizenship that John gives us in his picture of the perfect community carries its message to our age. It is inevitable that there should be among us much discussion of ways and means concerning social reconstruction, but we hear far too little about the citizens for whom the

new world is being planned. We do not sufficiently remember that a nation is made up of individuals, and it is the quality of their lives, the presence or absence in them of faith and courage, and the capacity for unselfish action, which makes the nation what it is. John does not forget these moral and spiritual factors. "He that overcometh shall inherit these things."[1] "And there shall in no wise enter into it anything unclean or he that maketh an abomination and a lie."[2] Karl Mannheim records in his book *Man and Society* how he and a group of friends spent an evening thinking over what might be achieved if society were properly planned. As the conversation went on the company grew optimistic about the prospects. Then someone asked, "But who is to plan the planners?" That is the point. A redeemed society demands redeemed men. We had better recognise that there never can be any genuine "New Order" which ignores the moral and spiritual basis of society.

> And I saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.[3]

It is here that John issues his sharpest challenge to our generation. Many who are concerned with the achievement of a new social order freely admit the necessity, if not of faith, certainly of courage and unselfishness

[1] Rev. xxi. 7. [2] Rev. xxi. 27. [3] Rev. xxi. 2.

in the citizens of the future. But they put their trust in those citizens, and in them alone. They believe that man is capable of building an ideal society, and regard the introduction of God into the discussion as irrelevant. Such a view ignores, of course, the fact of sin, and man's consequent need of moral and spiritual regeneration. It ignores, too, the source of man's aspirations. The plain fact is that we men and women of the twentieth century owe these aspirations largely to the Old Testament Prophets. Isaiah, Amos and Micah, who gave to the world these visions of a new and better order, never supposed for a moment that they were the creation of their own thinking. "Thus saith the Lord" was their watchword, and the essential foundation of their inspired messages. God is the only giver of all those visions of better things which both disturb and inspire the heart of man. Moreover, He is the only giver of the endurance and unselfish action which can alone create "the City of God." "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom." [1]

There is a part for man to play, and John does not forget that. He does not conceive of man as sitting with folded hands, waiting for the New Jerusalem to appear; man has to take his share in the Divine purpose by faith and endurance and toil. The founda-

[1] St. Luke xii. 32.

tion, however, of all human achievement is, in his view, the upward look to Him who is the Giver of every good and perfect gift. "The glory of God is the splendour of the New Jerusalem." That is a truth our generation sorely needs to learn.

> And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season. And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.[1]

In these words, John introduces the conception of the Millennium, the reign of Christ for a thousand years. It is usually assumed that he had a reign on earth in mind. John does not specifically say where the

[1] Rev. xx. 1-4.

reign is to be exercised. It is not the first time we read in the Bible of such a reign. "And in the days of those kings shall the God of Heaven set up a Kingdom which shall never be destroyed . . . and it shall stand for ever."[1] Here, it will be noted, the Kingdom that is to be set up is an everlasting Kingdom. As time passed, it came to be believed that the Kingdom of the Messiah would not last for ever, but would be for a limited period, and would lead up to the consummation of all things. One Jewish non-biblical book puts the period of the Messiah's reign as a thousand years, another at four hundred years.

In the New Testament the idea of a Millennium is set forth clearly only in *Revelation*. After the victory of the Messiah and His army over the Beast and his army, Satan himself will be cast into an abyss, and kept there for a thousand years. The martyr saints then rise in resurrection, and share Christ's reign for this period. At its close, Satan is released for a time. Then comes the last conflict with the powers of evil, the final resurrection and judgment, ending in the destruction of all evil, death and Hades themselves being cast into a lake of fire.

The reference to a period of a thousand years is probably not intended to be interpreted literally, for throughout the book

[1] Daniel ii. 44.

numbers are employed symbolically. (Chap. ii. 10 is an obvious example.) By a thousand years John may intend, as some commentators have suggested, to indicate completeness. Satan will be completely bound. In *Ezekiel* xxxix. 9 the number seven is used in this sense. "And they shall make fires of them (the weapons of their enemies) seven years." The meaning clearly is that the weapons will be completely destroyed. Alternatively, John may be thinking of an indefinite but lengthy period of time.

Augustine taught that the thousand years was not to be understood literally, but as having reference to the history of the Christian Church from the first advent of Christ to the final conflict and victory. On this view, the Millennium is now taking place, and Satan lacks the power to arrest the progress of the Kingdom of God. Augustine connected the Millennium with the passage in *St. Mark* iii. 27 in which the Lord had spoken of the binding of the strong man by a stronger. The Millennium is the binding of the strong man, Satan. This interpretation has its difficulties, of which the gravest is the fact that there seems little in the contemporary scene to support the view that Satan is bound in impotence. It seems more in accord with the facts to suppose that he is still "as a roaring lion, walking about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 *Peter* v. 8).

The essence of the idea of the Millennium

is that there will come a time in which Christ will reign in undisputed sovereignty in the earth. The reader may ask, " Why this idea of a limited period in which Christ reigns, and during which Satan and the forces of evil are powerless? Why should the victory not be complete and final? " The rest of the New Testament suggests that it is. Why should Satan " be loosed out of his prison . . . to deceive the nations "? [1] Probably one reason for the introduction of the idea was that it was a part of the framework of Jewish apocalyptic in which John was working. He takes hold of this idea of a reign of the Messiah on the earth, which was in the air when he wrote, and links it with the theme of the spiritual triumph of Christ, which, as we know, was so much in his mind. Once we realise that what he expounds is not a rigid historical scheme, in which his figures are to be interpreted literally, but a prophecy of the victorious reign of Christ in the earth, to be succeeded by the complete and final victory of His cause, realised in a realm beyond our space-time world, we are free to appreciate the significance of the idea of a reign of Christ in this world. It answers to a deep desire in our own hearts to see Christ's Lordship being fully exercised in our world, the world in which He has so often been denied, the world which crucified Him. When we sing the lines, " Thy Kingdom come, O

[1] Rev. xx. 7, 8.

God, Thy rule, O Christ, begin," it is our Saviour's rule in this world, with its darkness and oppression, that is in our minds. Something vital would be lost to Christian faith if the hope of Christ's victorious reign *in this world* perished. " Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done *on earth,* as it is in Heaven,"[1] is the prayer the Saviour taught His disciples to pray. The prayer looks forward to the day of its fulfilment, and John enshrines this sure hope in his vision of the Millennium. When shall these things be? " It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power."[2] It is sufficient for us to know that the hope we have been given is one of those sure words of prophecy which God has spoken to His people.

Revelation does not come to its climax in the vision of the reign of Christ in our world. It is a great hope, this hope of the Kingdom on earth, but in itself it cannot satisfy the deepest aspirations God has given us. What of those who once toiled for the Kingdom when they were here upon earth, but who have now passed to other scenes? This world is too limited a sphere in which to see the fulness of the Saviour's triumph. The earthly stage is too small. It must be in some more spacious setting, in which all His people, " the great crowd of witnesses,"

[1] St. Matthew vi. 10.
[2] Acts i. 7.

the martyrs, the missionaries, the saints, the disciples of every generation, have their part, in which the vastness of the Divine purpose comes to its climax. So John points us beyond this world to that which is to come.

CHAPTER VII

BEYOND DEATH

EDWARD GIBBON, the famous author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, gave it as his opinion that one of the chief reasons why the Christian faith spread across the world so rapidly was because of its message of life beyond death. Contemporary religions had nothing satisfying to say to the common man on that issue.

Heaven used to occupy a much larger place in the thought of Christian men than it does to-day. A glance at an old hymn book and at a contemporary one makes that clear. Though allowance must be made for the not unworthy modern fear of dogmatism regarding what is essentially a mattter of faith, and also for reaction from imagery that was sometimes crude, we are too much inclined to assume that we are in advance of our fathers in this matter. How often we have said, or heard it said, " Christianity is for this life, and not merely for the next." We have an idea that there is something rather morbid in thinking much about heaven. Certainly our present conception of Christianity as a religion for this world has its good side. Christ's message concerns this life, as well as that which is to come. It may

be, however, that our fathers had a better grasp of things than we have in giving the thought of heaven so important a place in their religious outlook. No doubt their long hours of work and the harshness of their lives had something to do with their looking forward to the life of heaven. Even so, it was a sound judgment to set this life, as they did, in the vast background of eternity. The span of a man's life on earth is but threescore and ten years, a little longer sometimes, perhaps often shorter. It is a brief span if we view it in an eternal setting. Perhaps, too, we are less interested in heaven than our fathers were because we are not as good and as truly religious as they were. We are more easily satisfied with this world and what it has to offer. But they, like the apostle Paul, looked forward eagerly to a life of freedom from sin, and of perfect communion with God.

We speak of the realms of the blest,
That country so bright and so fair,
And oft are its glories confessed ;
But what must it be to be there !

No doubt the present tepid interest in heaven is due in part to the idea that it is a very dull place, especially if you are not musical ! Ideas of this kind are due to too literal a reading of the Scriptures, and to a lack of religious imagination. John writes as an inspired poet. God speaks to us in him through the mind of a man who

thinks in pictures. If we dwell upon his pictures of heaven we shall find them full of interest. It is no dull and monotonous existence that John has in mind, but a rich and satisfying life, the gift of a gracious God to His people.

One fact stands out sharp and clear as we think of heaven. It is Christ, and Christ alone, Who has brought immortality as well as life to light in the grandeur and fullness of His truth. Other religions have had their teaching on this theme, but what they have to say pales before the splendour of the Christian revelation.

Heaven for the Mohammedan is " a boon to be earned by correct observance " instead of the continuance and expansion of the fellowship of believers with God in Christ, as it is in the Christian religion. Moreover, the Mohammedan paradise is pictured predominantly in terms of pleasure for the senses.

> In gardens of pleasure . . . and gold-weft couches . . . . Around them shall go eternal youths, with goblets and ewers and a cup of flowing wine. No headaches shall they feel therefrom, nor shall their wits be dimmed ! And fruits such as they deem the best, and flesh of fowl as they desire, and bright and large-eyed maids like hidden pearls, a reward for that which they have done.[1]

[1] Hume, *The World's Living Religions*, p. 227.

How different all this is from the vision of God which is the greatest promise of the Christian faith. "The pure in heart shall see God." [1]

The Hindu hopes for nothing in the life beyond save his own escape, through the discipline of abstention from all effort and desire, into a state of impersonality. For the Buddhist it is the same. Nirvana is his goal. Nirvana is his highest happiness. There has sometimes been discussion as to whether Nirvana means the complete annihilation of one's personality. It is certainly a negative condition of existence, the life of a ghost. Buddha himself seems to have looked forward to the death of personality altogether in the life beyond.

> Those whose minds are disgusted with a future existence, the wise who have destroyed the seeds of existence, and whose desires do not increase, go out like this lamp.[2]

The practice of ancestor worship has a central place in Confucianism, but the ancestors are not conceived to be what we should judge to be genuinely alive in the world beyond death. It is a somewhat shadowy existence which is ascribed to them, one that is not actively desired by the living. They continue in existence, living close to

[1] St. Matthew v. 8.
[2] Op. cit., p. 72.

their former homes and their graves, that is all. The Confucian has no hope that, if he practises his religion faithfully, it will lead him into a larger life beyond death. Everyone, it seems, is at death reduced to the same level of ghostly existence, however he has lived on earth.

What are the thoughts of heaven to which John introduces us? The reader cannot but be at once arrested by the happiness which plays like sunlight over the heavenly life as John describes it.

> And a voice came out of the throne, saying, Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great. . . . Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him.[1]

John describes the heavenly life as a marriage banquet. "Blessed are they who are bidden to the marriage supper of the Lamb."[2] The marriage is between Christ the Lord and His people, those who have served Him on earth, and now rejoice with Him in glory. The idea has its roots in the Old Testament, where Yahweh is spoken of as the husband of Israel, and was employed by Jesus in His description of the Kingdom as a wedding-feast (*St. Matthew* xxii. 1-14) and Himself as the Bridegroom (*St. Mark* ii. 19).

Marriage, on its highest levels, is essentially

[1] Rev. xix. 5, 7. [2] Rev. xix. 9.

a close partnership of mind and heart and will between two persons, a partnership, moreover, which grows and deepens with the passing of the years. There is a point of contact here with the thought behind the passage in *St. John's Gospel* in which the Master speaks of the many mansions in the Father's house.[1] The word "mansion" is derived from "mansiones" in the Latin translation of Jerome, which is used of resting-places on a road. So it may be that we have here the idea of resting-places in the soul's pilgrimage towards the fullness of the vision of God. As Bishop Westcott puts it, "The contrasted notions of repose and progress are combined in this vision of the future."

One of the marks of a happy partnership in marriage is the harmony of the home. John expresses this aspect of the life of heaven in terms of music. It could not have been better expressed. We listen to a great orchestra playing one of the symphonies of Beethoven. Each of the players has his own personality and instrument, yet the grand effect is one of unity amid rich diversity, every member contributing to the grand harmony in sound. John speaks more than once of the place of the harp in the music of heaven. It is an instrument which richly conveys the conception of harmony. Modern music is often singularly lacking in harmony,

[1] St. John xiv. 2.

or so it seems to those who have been accustomed to the harmony that runs through the music of the great masters. The discords of modern music are an expression, whether deliberate or unintended, in terms of sound, of the discordant age in which we live. Our discords are the outcome of our failure to harmonize our human aspirations with the will of God. We cannot have a harmonious world save on God's terms. In the life of heaven the aspirations and wills of His servants are united to God, and the outflow of this unity is that harmony which John, as poet, symbolized in the language of music.

The heaven which John conceives is also a scene of triumph.

> After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds and people and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.

> And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.[1]

It is a striking picture this, of those who stand victorious before the throne of God, the palms in their hands symbolizing their triumph. John was thinking probably of those who had already been martyred for their faith, and of those who in the future would endure martyrdom for Christ's sake. It is an intensely moving story, this story of the men and women who, faced with the threat of torture and death, yet refused to deny their Lord. Humanly speaking, they by their sacrifice saved the Christian religion from extinction, and in so doing preserved for their successors many lesser but precious liberties. Among such faithful witnesses was Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who died as a Christian martyr in A.D. 155. When he was himself on his way to a martyr's death, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, had said to Polycarp, "Stand like an anvil," and he loyally fulfilled this role. Persecution had broken out at Smyrna, and eleven Christians were tortured and killed. Presently the

[1] Rev. vii. 9-14.

crowd, filled with the lust for blood, demanded the arrest and punishment of the aged Polycarp. He refused to try to escape, ordered food to be given to those who had come to arrest him, and in due course was brought to the great amphitheatre. Amid the deafening clamour Polycarp heard a heavenly voice saying to him, "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." The Emperor's representative called upon him to swear by the genius of Cæsar, and to disown his faith by cursing Christ. "Curse Christ! Four-score years and six have I served Him, and He never did me wrong: how then can I revile my King, my Saviour?" That day Polycarp was burned at the stake for loyalty to Christ.

"They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."[1] It may be that John is here still thinking, as some commentators have suggested, of the experience of martyrdom and subsequent victory, but on the other hand, it may well be, and this seems to be the more natural interpretation, that he is thinking of the experience of inward cleansing which the martyrs have undergone. The blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed them from all sin (1 *John* i. 7). If so, the passage touches the lives of all Christians. We, too, have begun to walk in the way of Christ, but long stretches of the road to perfection still lie ahead of us. Sometimes we are sad at heart as we think

[1] Rev. vii. 14.

how little we have progressed towards Christ-likeness. But if we press on, knowing that as yet we have not fully apprehended that for which we were apprehended, God will not deny us the deep desire of our hearts to be conformed to the image of our Lord, and to love God with a love that is free from self-love. "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."[1] We, too, at the last, shall stand with the immortal throng in the company of those who have been cleansed from their sin by the Saviour's blood.

The victory of the individual over his own temptations and sins cannot of itself give us the triumphant scene John depicts. There is a further element in the situation which completes the picture. ". . . they cry, Salvation unto our God which sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb."[2] Originally this word salvation meant deliverance from the enemy, but with the coming of Christ it acquired a more universal meaning, as having reference to the complete victory of His cause. So the cry of the redeemed, "Salvation unto our God," hails the triumphant fulfilment of those holy and gracious designs of which God has given us glimpses in the life and teaching of His Christ. In his great novel *The Brothers Karamazoff*, Dostoievsky puts into the mouth of one of his characters words which express the desire of the individual

[1] St. Matthew v. 6. [2] Rev. vii. 10.

man to share in the triumph of God's purpose. "Surely I have not suffered simply that I . . . may manure the soil of the future harmony for somebody else. I want to see with my own eyes the hind lie down with the lamb . . . I want to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been about."

Once a man has entered upon the new life that is in Christ, he cannot but be stirred by this triumphant picture of things that are to be.

Service is one of the slogans of our time, and no idea of heaven which excluded it would fully satisfy us. Nor is the thought of service in the life beyond merely a passing phase of contemporary thought. It answers to a natural desire in the heart of the Christian man to be allowed to continue the service that he has been offering to God whilst on earth. Our Lord taught His disciples to think of the divine reward for service faithfully rendered as the conferring of greater opportunities.

> Who, then, is the faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath set over his household, to give them their food in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Verily I say unto you, that he will set him over all he hath.[1]

Whether we think of a life of rich promise which is brought to an end by death before the promise can be fulfilled, or of a life in

[1] St. Matthew xxiv. 45-47.

which there has been a steady growth through the years in Christian insight and power, we feel it impossible to suppose that death will close the door of opportunity to serve God.

When we enquire as to the scope of this heavenly service, we have frankly to admit that we are in the realm of speculation, save in one respect. "And they serve him day and night in his temple."[1] The temple is God's presence.

> And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God the Almighty, and the Lamb, are the temple thereof.[2]

Although the service probably has a wider reference, worship has such a large place in the description of the life of heaven in the *Book of Revelation* that there can be no doubt that John intended to give it prominence, and so to remind his readers of its importance in their earthly life.

What is involved in Christian worship here on earth? Among its elements is the affirmation of God as Creator, "Maker of heaven and earth and all that in them is." The affirmation can be made in a short sentence, but how far-reaching its implications are for the life of man. If we believe that God created the earth, we must regard it with reverence as the work of His hands. One of the economic problems which man is creating for himself springs from his misuse

[1] Rev. vii. 15. [2] Rev. xxi. 22.

of the soil. In America particularly, the virgin soil of the prairie has been ruthlessly exploited with a view to making as much money as possible out of it in the shortest possible time. "Crop after crop of wheat has been raised, and the fertility of the soil recklessly exhausted, so that it cannot resist being eroded by water and blown away by wind. The result is the formation of deserts such as the 'dust-bowl' in America; in other countries we are told that the process is far advanced."[1] Such misuse of the soil would be impossible to men to whom God was Creator, and Sovereign Lord of nature.

It is, however, with the revelation of God which has come to us in Jesus Christ that Christian worship is chiefly concerned. It is the ascription of worth-ship to the God Who has so revealed Himself, and the offering of man's response to the unveiling of His holy and gracious character and purposes. The character of the God we have seen in Christ is the foundation of Christian worship. How vital and relevant that is to an age in which the appeal has been made to men to take as the foundations of their life their supposed racial superiority, or the supremacy of the State. In the democracies it is the peril of the worship of money, and the power it gives, against which men need to be preserved. Christian worship directs man's thoughts away from himself and his schemes to the

[1] Hebert, *The Form of the Church*, p. 25.

God Who made him, delivering him from idolatry, and giving him spacious horizons in which to set his common life.

It is important also to mark the kind of personal aspirations which Christian worship encourages in the individual. In the worship in which he shares there is set before the Christian man, in Scripture, and prayer, and hymn, the character of Christ, not only as God's supreme manifestation of Himself, but also as the embodiment of God's will for us. It is impossible to exaggerate the transforming effect in the lives of multitudes of men and women of being brought face to face in Christian worship with the pattern of life lived out by Jesus Christ our Lord. There is a searching, sifting quality in Christian worship because of the background in which it sets man and his world. "In Thy light shall we see light." That is an insight we much need today, and it can only come in Christian worship, in which man comes to an understanding of himself, his sins, his needs, and his destiny in the will of God.

Once more, Christian worship is not only the outgoing of the spirit of man in adoration to God, it is communion with God in the power of the Holy Spirit. We have not entered into the heart of Christian worship until we have pondered those amazing words, "But the hour cometh and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: *for the Father seeketh*

such to worship Him." [1] There is therefore in Christian worship not only the manifestation of man to God, but of God to man, as He who is ever seeking us comes and lifts us up into the heavenly places through His Holy Spirit. How often men and women have gone on their way rejoicing in these mercies as they have left the sanctuary.

There is, of course, a contrast between worship as we know it here upon earth, rich though it so often is in the power to cleanse and inspire, and the worship of heaven. Worship, as we now know it, though it is the most spiritual of all man's attitudes and acts, does not escape the infection of his sin. With us, the harmony is incomplete, the service partial, the consecration defective. But when God's disciplines have had their perfect way with us, and have purified and transfigured our lives, our worship will be lifted to those heights of harmony, of triumph and of adoration which John describes in his vision of heaven.

The hidden springs of worship are found in the deep thankfulness of the heart for all that God is, and for what He has done for man in Christ His Son. It is because John writes out of a heart overflowing with gratitude that he gives so central a place to worship.

> Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever.[2]

[1] St. John iv. 23. [2] Rev. vii. 12.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NATURE AND WORK OF THE CHURCH

THE *Revelation* is concerned with the Church from first to last. It was written to nerve and encourage the Church in its time of testing, present and to come, and to rekindle its sense of urgency in the discharge of its great commission. In the course of his book, John singles out seven particular churches in the western half of Asia Minor, and directs a message to each of them. It is the " angel of the church " who is addressed. The idea of guardian angels is found both in the Old Testament (*Daniel* x. 13, 20) and in the New (*St. Matthew* xviii. 10, 11). In John's use of the term, the angel seems to be identified with the church and its character, and is best understood as its spiritual counterpart, sharing both its glory and its shame.

The churches addressed are regarded in the main in a somewhat different light from that which obtains in the rest of the book, notably the latter part of it. There the Church is set over against the Empire, the two institutions being sharply contrasted. One represents light, the other darkness. Here, words both of praise and blame are spoken to the churches. The difference is designed, for in these introductory chapters

the Church is viewed primarily in the light of God's ideal for it, while in the latter part of *Revelation* the Church is seen as the people of God, face to face with the satanic power of the persecuting Roman Empire.

Why were these seven churches chosen for special mention? Their number, a symbol of completeness in Scripture, may indicate that they are thought of as representative of the whole Church of Christ. Confirmation of this is found in the fact that each of the seven letters contains a general call, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches."

We cannot now discover exactly why John chose these particular churches, but it is not difficult to find reasons for his doing so. They were all in places which stood on the circular road running through the most important part of the province of Asia, and each of them was also an important communications centre. Ephesus, for instance, was the greatest trading city of the province, and had an important harbour. It had also been a great Christian centre since the days of Paul. Pergamum, which was regarded on account of its position as the capital of the province, as a royal city, dominated, from the rocky hill on which it stood, the broad plain below. Laodicea was not only of great importance because of its wool trade, but also as a centre of banking, owing to its strategic position on the trade route from

the East. The seven churches were well-known, and as John thought of them it may have seemed to him that their problems were representative. So he speaks to each of them in their individual situation, and yet the individual messages are appropriate to a wider audience, to all, indeed, who have ears to hear.

If we examine the seven letters we find that John stresses certain marks of a true Christian church. If the church lacks them, it is in danger, as John warns his readers, of extinction. What he has to say on these matters shares the timeless quality of so much of the rest of the book, and has its pertinence for to-day.

It is by its loyalty to Christ its Lord that a church stands or falls, and throughout these letters John applies this test. The church in Philadelphia is praised because, though it was not strong, it did not deny its Master amid the trials and persecutions of the time. "I know thy works . . . that thou hast a little power and didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name."[1] The church in Sardis is condemned because it failed almost entirely to exhibit loyalty to Christ. "I know thy works, that thou hast a name, that thou livest, and thou art dead."[2] In his address to the church at Smyrna, John makes the earnest appeal, "Be faithful, though you have to die for it."[3]

[1] Rev. iii. 8. [2] Rev. iii. 1. [3] Rev. ii. 10 (Moffatt).

There is virtue, great virtue, in holding one's ground in hard times. These seven churches all faced difficult situations, and John is concerned that they should not retreat, but offer a steadfast front. How often it has been the dogged loyalty of the Church in a period of trial which has made possible the great advances of the future. The story of the work of the Baptist Missionary Society in Congo has been immortalized by the steadfastness of its pioneers, the men and women who laboured for seven years without a convert, but who remained at their posts in the unshakable conviction that inasmuch as their labour was in the Lord, it was not in vain. The wonderful story of the progress and consolidation of the Church in Congo must ever be viewed in the background of the untiring loyalty of those who led the way.

There was continual pressure on the loyalty of the seven churches in Asia. We have already noted it in the cult of Emperor worship. It must have been particularly severe in the city of Pergamum, the chief centre of the State religion in that part of the Roman Empire. A temple had been built there in 29 B.C. in honour of the "divine Augustus." What made the pressure unusually difficult to resist was the fact that Augustus had befriended the city in a time of need. We can imagine how the refusal of the Christians of Pergamum to join in giving

divine honours to the Emperor would be represented as a mark of ingratitude, as well as of failure in patriotism.

There was also bitter Jewish hostility to the Church, and the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia seem especially to have suffered in this way. "I know thy tribulation . . . and the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." [1] Jewish hostility was doubtless due both to the Christian claim that the Church was now the true Israel of God, the inheritor of His promises to His ancient people, and to the threat which the Gospel offered to the political hopes of Jewish nationalism.

The prevailing moral atmosphere in which a church is set may make its work very difficult. The people of Sardis were notorious for their luxury and licentiousness, and the moral atmosphere was poisoned. The church was not immune from this surrounding infection. At Laodicea it was the enervation caused by prosperity and civic pride which undermined the vigour and loyalty of the church, and made it complacent.

Moreover, there was the pressure of sub-Christian groups within the church, like the Nicolaitans, with their plea for what they regarded as a reasonable compromise with the customs of the time, and the acceptance by Christians of membership in the trade

[1] Rev. ii. 9.

guilds, linked though they were to pagan practices.

It is not surprising, when we contemplate the trials of the seven churches, that John gives so large a place to loyalty. "To him that overcometh" is one of the watchwords of these letters, and is repeated in each of them. When we recollect that the churches probably included in their membership many who had passed direct from paganism, and who came into the Church with an entirely pagan background, we can appreciate how difficult it must have been for them to be loyal.

There is one aspect of loyalty to Christ which John stresses, and which has its relevance to our own situation. It is loyalty to the truth as it is in Christ. At the time these letters were written, the Church's faith had not, of course, been defined by the great creeds. Those who were gifted as teachers and preachers had considerable influence within the Church, and it was evidently possible for a woman like Jezebel, referred to in the letter to Thyatira,[1] to lead many astray by her false teaching. The church at Pergamum was also in danger in the same way. One of the reasons for the weakness of the modern Church is its lack of theological conviction. The Christian faith has become, for many folk in the churches what the Bishop of Chelmsford has described as "a

[1] Rev. ii. 20.

good-tempered, easy-going kindliness based on a vague theism, with a mild acquiescence in the excellence of the teaching of Christ, combined with a very dubious acquaintance with the teaching itself." [1] No church can be strong in which such a watery version of the Christian religion takes the place of clear-cut conviction, based on the massive affirmations of the Bible. Fortunately, there are signs that the need for a more virile and soundly based theology is being realised. There is a fresh interest in theological enquiry. The day of the topical sermon is passing. The future will be with those churches which can offer to men a firm faith, rooted and grounded in those mighty acts of God which the Bible unfolds.

The Church must, however, not only be soundly orthodox in its theology, but possessed by the spirit of its Lord. The church at Ephesus was zealous for orthodoxy, but failed grievously in love. "But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love." [2] The passage can be understood in one of two ways. It might refer to the church's relation to Christ, and indicate a cooling of its first fine enthusiasm. This is an all too familiar happening in the life of any society.

[1] Quoted in Canon Peter Green's *The Seven Golden Candlesticks*, p. 45.

[2] Rev. ii. 4.

Another interpretation of the passage is that it refers to the lack of brotherly love in the church. Dr. Moffatt so understands it. "But I have this against you: you have given up loving one another as you did at first." This view is powerfully supported by the character of the church at Ephesus that is revealed in Paul's letter to the church there. The Apostle finds it necessary to appeal to the members of the Ephesian church to show forbearance to one another, to be zealous to preserve the unity of the Spirit among themselves, and to put away "all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and railing . . . with all malice." [1] He reminds them that it is only as they are rooted and grounded in love that they will be able to grasp, with all the saints, the breadth and length and depth and height of the love of Christ.

Our Lord set great store by brotherly love among His disciples. "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another." [2] It is the possession of brotherly love which makes possible the growth of Christian insight into the wealth of God's love for man in Christ. It is the same quality which can alone enable a church to make a Christian impact upon the community. Many a church would enter upon a new era of fruitfulness if it took to heart the solemn words of the Lord of the Church, first spoken to the

[1] Ephesians iv. 31. [2] St. John xiii. 34.

church at Ephesus, "But I have this against you: you have given up loving one another."

The severest of the seven letters is that addressed to the church in Laodicea (*Revelation* iii. 14-22). The city was famous for the glossy black wool of its sheep, and for the cloth manufactured from it. It was also a well-known centre of medicine, and in the exhortation to buy "eyesalve to anoint thine eyes, that thou mayest see," there is evidently a reference to some special treatment of this kind available at Laodicea. The city was extremely wealthy, and when destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60, refrained from petitioning the Emperor for help, as other great Asian cities had done, since it was able, out of its own resources, to find the money for re-building. The arrogant temper of the city had made its way into the church. "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing." The church is condemned unsparingly on the ground of its lukewarmness. "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." This is the Lord's judgment on a complacent and self-satisfied church.

It is a condition which has not disappeared from church life. The complacency of the Laodicean church probably arose from its

ample financial resources. There was money to meet every need. But beneath the veneer of material prosperity there was a desolating spiritual poverty, to which the church was blind. Are churches to-day altogether free from the tendency to rest content with a balanced budget? Are there no churches which have gained for themselves the unenviable reputation of being lukewarm, incapable, apparently, of warm-hearted and sacrificial devotion to the Saviour's cause? The threat of lukewarmness is present in every church, indeed, and in every individual disciple, and John's words, interpreting the mind of the Lord, are, like so many other words of his, relevant today.

There is one other aspect of the Church's life with which John is concerned. It is evangelism. The revelation God gave to him was given for an evangelistic purpose, that he might shew it " unto his servants." The likelihood of the outbreak of immediate and intense persecution was uppermost in his mind, and he is concerned, first and foremost, to brace the churches to meet the onslaught. It is not, therefore, surprising if evangelism does not come into the picture more than it does. Nevertheless, as John thinks of the church in Philadelphia, with its commanding geographical position, the main mass of Asia Minor spread out before the city, he exclaims, " I have set before thee a door, opened."

To speak of an open door was one of the Apostle Paul's ways of indicating a missionary opportunity. The intention of the founder of the city of Philadelphia had been to make it a centre of Græco-Asiatic civilization, for the spread of the Greek language and of Greek customs and manners. It could thus be described as a missionary city, from a secular standpoint. The church, too, must be missionary, and make the fullest use of its opportunities. A church which holds in trust the Gospel of Christ, Christ the Revealer of God, Christ the Redeemer of the world, Christ in Whom God's purposes of righteousness will, at the last, be triumphant, cannot but be a missionary society. We may thankfully recognize the extent to which its missionary obligation has come home to the Church, notably through the work of William Carey. There is, however, no room for complacency on this score. The money contributed for missionary work, though large in the aggregate, is often pitifully little in relation to the resources of the churches from which it comes. How much remains to be done before the churches in general have a lively sense of missionary responsibility for work at home and overseas.

It was to the need for evangelism in its own neighbourhood that John directed the church at Philadelphia. His words are apposite to the situation in contemporary Britain. Various statistics are given from

time to time regarding the percentage of the British population who are in effective touch with the Church. The figure is certainly low, and there is no evidence that it is rising. Even the fearful times through which we have passed as a nation in these last years have not improved the situation. A former Japanese premier, who was himself not a Christian, gave it as his judgment that as a nation we owe all that is best in our national life to Jesus Christ. The verdict is true. But we have been for too long living on our inherited spiritual capital, on the faith of our fathers. Our own spiritual assets as a nation are getting dangerously low, for we are failing to replenish them by our own faith in God, and devotion to His will. With the end of the war in Europe a perhaps unprecedented opportunity for moral and spiritual leadership confronts Britain. Can we rise to it? We shall certainly not be able to do so with a population which knows little at first hand of the power of the gospel of Christ. Attention has been called more than once recently to the fact that we face a missionary situation at home as well as abroad. Britain is itself a mission field to-day. Our churches need to brace themselves for a supreme effort in evangelism, recognising that to them, too, the Lord announces, "I have set before thee a door, opened."

It is a moving appeal John makes to the churches. They have a unique work to do.

Let them rise to the height of their great opportunity. John's appeal is all the weightier when it is viewed in the light of his realistic judgment of the churches as they are—weak, divided, compromising. Their shortcomings, however, only throw into bolder relief the greatness of the Church of Christ, and the uniqueness of its mission.

Although John directs an individual message to each of the seven churches, the thought of the larger Church of Christ, of which they form a part, is never far from his mind. We who live to-day are compelled to think of the Church in its universal, its ecumenical aspect, embracing as it does believers gathered from all the nations. It is remarkable that John, living at a time when the Church was still in its infancy, thinks in the same terms. He loves to dwell on the universal character of the Church's fellowship, springing out of the universal redemption Christ has wrought. Christ has redeemed us "out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation" (v. 9). The everlasting Gospel is for "every nation, and kindred, and tongue and people" (xiv. 6). The great multitude which stands in heaven before the throne and before the Lamb is "of all nations, and kindreds, and people and tongues" (vii. 9).

On any human reckoning the Church of John's day had poor prospects indeed, faced as it was by the hostile might of the Roman

Empire. But behind the Church John sees the Church's Lord, " his countenance . . . as the sun shineth in his strength." [1] His presence with His people makes all the difference. In our time, too, despite the magnificent witness of some churches and Christians, the Church of Christ as a whole seems pitifully inadequate to discharge the tremendous tasks with which it is confronted in our generation. But if the Church is faithful to its Master's commission, it can safely leave all else to Him.

Nothing could be more relevant to our contemporary situation than the message of *Revelation*. It was written in a time of crisis, and we live in such a time. The fact of divine judgment stands out sharply to the eye of faith in the pattern of current events, now as then. We are still in the throes of that eternal warfare of which we read in *Revelation*, and from which there is no discharge. We can only take our part manfully in the struggle if we are sustained, as John was, by a sure confidence in the coming victory of God. Christians ought to sympathize wholeheartedly with every striving after a richer life for the common people of all the lands, but they have also a unique responsibility to affirm that man cannot live by bread alone, and that there can be no enduring " New Order " that is not shaped according to the pattern of the New Jerusalem. Death is still a major fact of human experience, and only

[1] Rev. i. 16.

the faith which John expounds can triumph over it. Above all, the paramount need is still for One who will come with supernatural power into our human situation and make all things new. It is the same Christ of whom John wrote who is alone able to fulfil that role, who can save us and lift us to God, and our destiny in Him. There can be no better prayer for us than the one with which he closes his book, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

But the prayer must be linked with the sense of urgency which runs all through this book. This final prayer has nothing of mere passive acquiescence in it. It is an impassioned cry of the heart from a man who sees clearly that it is only as Christ comes into His own in human life that there is any hope for man. Here John is at one with the sense of urgency which marks the whole of the New Testament, and which flashes out in such a passage as "See that ye refuse not him that speaketh." [1]

Moreover, as we have seen in our study of *Revelation*, the intensity of the prayer must be linked with the intensity, springing out of its sense of urgency, of the witness and service of the Church. The Church is not to sit with folded hands and await the advent of the Lord. It is to give itself to the discharge of its divine commission with a passionate self-giving, the fruit of its realization that the

[1] Hebrews xii. 25.

days are fraught with great issues, that " the night cometh, when no man can work," [1] and that " now is the accepted time, behold, now is the day of salvation." [2]

There have been periods within the lifetime of many readers of this book in which such a sense of urgency has been thought to be unreal, even by many Christians, but no one can think so today, in this atomic age which casts its threatening shadows over the future of our race. The times in which we live do but expose more clearly the fundamental realism and sanity of that sense of urgency which burns and glows like a hidden fire through the words of *Revelation*.

" He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches." [3]

[1] St. John ix. 4.
[2] 2 Cor. vi. 2.
[3] Rev. ii. 7.

Suggestions for further reading

"THE RELEVANCE OF APOCALYPTIC"
H. H. ROWLEY — Lutterworth Press

"THE CENTURY BIBLE" (REVELATION)
C. ANDERSON SCOTT — Thos. Nelson & Sons

"THE BOOK OF REVELATION"
E. F. SCOTT — S.C.M.P.

"THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES"
W. M. RAMSAY — Hodder & Stoughton

McLagan & Cumming Ltd., *Printers*, Edinburgh.