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A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

Marana tha.

BY THE REVEREND J. G. SIMPSON, D.D., CANON OF ST. PAUL'S.

'The Lord near.'—Ph 4^s.

If you look in your Bible for the words *Marana tha*, at the place from which I have just cited their English equivalent, you will fail to find them. They do occur in another of St. Paul's letters, at the end of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, where it is probable that nine out of ten people, who discover them, take them as part of a cabalistic curse pronounced by the apostle on the unbeliever. 'If any man loveth not the Lord, let him be anathema. Marana tha.'

There is a text in the Galatians in which the disappointed preacher is thought to damn his successful rivals with the word anathema. 'If any man proclaim unto you any gospel other than that which you received'—that is, if he does not agree with me, Paul—'let him be anathema.' In other words, 'Let him be damned.'

In his correspondence with the folk at Corinth, whom he has found every whit as plaguey as those to whom in a very bad temper he has just dashed off Galatians, he goes one better, rolling out a second combination of syllables, as if to make assurance doubly sure. If anathema is an oath, *anathema maranatha* is a big one, a missile of reinforced concrete with which to assail the heretic and misbeliever.

But this is quite wrong. And the use of the second of the two phrases in a context of entirely different import will make it plain. We miss the true significance, because in Corinthians St. Paul has left the words in the original tongue, while in Philippians he translates it by the words, 'The Lord near.' So in our English Bible it looks as though we had a statement of the apostle's own: 'The Lord is at hand.' But let us read the passage, as we ought to hear it, or at least to think of it.

'Rejoice in the Lord alway: again I will say, Rejoice. Let your forbearance be known to all men. Marana tha.'

What, then, is *Marana tha*? We have not gathered all we know about it when we have examined these two passages from St. Paul. In the New Testament it does not occur again. But there is a famous document carrying us back into the circle of those congregations of Hebrew Christians

which owed little or nothing to the teaching of the apostle of the Gentiles, and which exhibits rather the opposite pole of thought and feeling expressed in the General Epistle of James. It is called the Teaching of the Apostles. How important it was considered may be shown, not only by the fact that much of its contents reappears in other ancient writings, but by its citation late in the second century, as though it were part of the sacred Scriptures themselves. It ends with a strong anticipation of the Second Coming of the Lord. And it contains a prayer for use in the eucharistic worship of the Christian assemblies older than the most venerable of our liturgies. 'We give thanks to thee, Holy Father,' it begins, 'for thy holy Name, which thou hast caused to dwell in our hearts, and for the knowledge and faith and immortality which thou hast made known to us by Jesus thy Servant: to thee be the glory for ever.' So the prayer opens. And thus it ends, 'Marana tha. Amen.'

Even if other evidence were wanting, the words *Marana tha* alone, in this form of public prayer, would carry us at once into the atmosphere of that Palestinian church of the apostles which was already worshipping the Lord Christ before the Hellenistic Paul had begun to formulate his own experience of the exalted Nazarene. It is warm with the faith, the hope, the love of those Hebrew Christians who gave the right hand of fellowship to the man of Tarsus. For *Marana tha* is not Greek but Aramaic. That is why it must not be translated with the context in which it occurs, like a French phrase in an English book. It belongs to the language of the Palestinian Jews, the mother-tongue of Jesus. Like *Abba*, which from the same source passed into the usage of the fellowship, because it represented that experience of the Divine Fatherhood which radiated from Jesus to the members of His body, *Marana tha* became a watchword of the Christian communities, because it sounded the note of expectation which is part of the great chord of Christian faith, arousing the zeal and creating the patience which alike distinguish the Christian character.

Not only is this great watchword uttered by St. Paul, once in the original, and once in a recogniz-

able translation. Its echoes reverberate throughout the New Testament. It is as clear as anything can be that, far from being a misguided hope, destined to disappear with the inevitable lapse of years, which thus embedded itself in the life and worship of the Church, it belongs to the very structure of the catholic and apostolic experience of the Risen Christ. However little succeeding ages may have been able to apprehend its moral and religious import, no Christian creed ever was, or indeed ever could be, constructed without it. No celebration of Holy Communion has failed to anticipate its glad realization. At the Lord's Table we commemorate a finished work; we have fellowship with a present Saviour; we are the heralds of a coming King.

There are thus three elements in the primitive proclamation of the gospel as it is reflected for us in authentic outline in the Book of Acts, and as it appears in the witness of the Resurrection given by Peter and his company in the power of the Pentecostal Spirit. It was the expression of that faith centred in the personality of Jesus which was born in the Easter experiences of the Sepulchre and the Upper Room. All that had happened during the time that the Lord Jesus had gone out and in among them—His teaching, His example, His works of power, no longer discounted by the shameful death, but reinterpreted in the light of that Divine necessity of the Cross which sealed His prophetic message and closed His earthly labours—all this, the story of that life and death, was at once invested with present and powerful values for those whose faith fastened upon Jesus risen from the dead as the exalted, ever-living, and eternal Christ. It was this Jesus, who was crucified, that had been exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour.

And this same Jesus, so the first Christians believed, so the earliest preachers published, so the Church of all ages, now with a formal acquiescence, now with a fuller conviction of its meaning, has continued to affirm, was ordained to be the Judge of the living and the dead. And this, not because those, who so proclaimed Him, expected the Lord, whom they worshipped, to fulfil the crude and narrow hopes gathered about the person of Messiah in the fantastic speculations of Jewish apocalypse; but because the exalted Saviour of the Christian experience possessed an eternal and universal significance. The risen Jesus is an absolute personality, who lives and moves and has His being in the real, the ultimate, the eternal. There can be no

separation between our thoughts of God and our thoughts of Him.

Such was the experience which the first preachers of the gospel attempted to indicate, when, addressing their Jewish kinsfolk, they said 'Jesus is Messiah,' just as the author of the Fourth Gospel seeks to carry it to the minds of a yet wider circle of his contemporaries by the employment of a term current in the society to which he appeals, when he affirms that Jesus is the Word of God. In each case it is the experience and not the origin of the language used which determines its Christian connotation. Even in the New Testament itself, what was originally an official title of the King for whom Israel waited—Messiah or Christ—is barely distinguishable from a proper name of Jesus. And, as all subsequent ages have used it, Christ is nothing else. It is absorbed in something altogether vaster than the ideas of Hebrew apocalypse, which are nothing more than symbols of reality to the children of the Resurrection.

And, if this is true of Messiah King Himself, it is true also of the pageantry with which in the symbolism of apocalypse His coming in the Kingdom is to be heralded and attended. The trump, the clouds, the myriads of angels, the holy ones in their tens of thousands, the gathering of the elect from the four winds, the rending of tombs, the throne, the assize of the nations—all these, familiar to students of the old Jewish apocalypses, are, as we know, repeated in the New Testament in relation to the Second Coming of the Lord. They have furnished the imagination of Christendom, unable to appreciate the symbolism, with that picture of the Day of Judgment which has, perhaps, done more than anything else to banish the joyful hope of His appearing, that sustained the patience of the saints who cried *Marana tha*.

Now I will not venture to speculate how far a mind like that of St. Paul, for example, nurtured in the hopes and expectations of His Jewish forbears, was able to detach itself from the imagery in which even the higher hope of the Christian fellowship almost inevitably clothed itself. There were, as we know, not a few Christians in the succeeding age who lost themselves in barren and extravagant fancies of a millennial reign, which carried them far beyond the limits of the language actually employed by Scripture. There were members even of the apostolic brotherhoods who made the approach of the Day of the Lord an excuse for para-

sitic idleness. And, if St. Paul's personal abstention from married life was directed as much by the call of his missionary labours as by what he supposed to be the imminence of the End, the advice he offers to others is dictated by the consideration that the time is short. I am quite prepared to believe that men and women, who stood so near to the tremendous facts of the gospel story, as did the Christians of the Apostolic Age, were mistaken in their view of the immediacy of the Second Advent.

But, if you tell me that the teaching itself was bound up with this misapprehension, then I shall answer that you have entirely failed to grasp the essential character of Christianity, and to take account of the plain evidence of the New Testament. For Christianity, like all real things, is rooted in the ethical groundwork of the universe and broad-based upon the moral government of God. And the hope of a returning Saviour reposes upon no predictions of the future near or far. It is part of the great faith, which in Christ rests on the reconciling purpose of the Eternal.

If there is anything in the teaching of Jesus Himself on this momentous subject, which caught the imagination of His hearers and reappeared in their expectation of the final manifestation of the risen and exalted Christ, it is the simile in which He likens His return to the coming of a thief. St. Paul has it. And the Revelation of St. John the Divine. And that strange writing, to which we modern Christians are tempted to assign too little importance, the Second Epistle of Peter. It is this last which reminds us that God, with whom a thousand years are as one day, is not slack concerning His promise, if, according to our narrow notions of time, the Master tarry long.

He may come at midnight. He may come at the crowing of the cock. He may not come till the morning dawns. God never visits but He surprises. And they, whom that Day should not overtake as a thief, are not those who know what hour the thief will come. They are the porter who is in his lodge; the servants who are fulfilling the work of the hour, the task of the moment; the household whose loins are girt and whose lamps are burning.

This is the word of the Lord Himself, and it finds its echo in the teaching of the apostles. 'The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Let us walk honestly.' 'Work with your own hands, that you may walk honestly.' The sturdy morality of its issues is the surest witness to the fact that the

assurance, on which it rests, is itself a great moral conviction.

But there is a word of Christ, the most remarkable and significant of all His utterances concerning His own Advent, which makes it clear that in the mind of the Saviour Himself the certainty of His coming was the assurance of faith and not the information of omniscience. 'Of that day and that hour,' He says, 'no man knows. The angels do not know. No, not even the Son.' It is the Father's secret.

Could anything be more impressive than a disclaimer like that? The Son does not know. He has said it. It is just the sort of statement, like the startling question we call the Fourth Word from the Cross, that would never have been attributed to Jesus if He had not actually made it. It has set people speculating, as we know, on the limitation of our Lord's knowledge, and how it may be reconciled with His divine claim. But that, I confess, is not what interests me. I accept Christ as God on the facts of His redeeming work, nor am I concerned to harmonize the facts with preconceived notions of divinity. No. What I see in such an affirmation as this, negative though its form be, is the Lord's unclouded consciousness of His own Sonship. He stands in an inalienable relation to the Father, the object of His love, the form of His manifestation, the mediator of His reconciling purpose. It was insight, conviction, faith, which even at that moment were driving Him forward to the shameful Cross, not as a martyrdom to be endured, but as a work to be accomplished. It was that same faith, that same unfaltering conviction of His own personality, that same insight into eternal reality, which assured Him, not of the day and hour, but of the certainty of His final revelation in glory.

And it was this, and not an interpretation of the apocalyptic utterances of Jesus, the confusion of which as reported in the evangelic narrative, is the surest witness to the inadequacy of the human medium through which they have been transmitted, which made *Marana tha* as inseparable from the worship of Jesus as the communion of His Body and Blood and the Commemoration of His reconciling Death. Comes He at midnight? At cock-crow? In the morning? That is neither here nor there. He comes. On earth He is crucified. Ay, is still crucified after the Passion. 'His pale face on the Cross' still sees the sights of Golgotha in a

world of sin. But He is risen. He is exalted. Our life is hid with Christ in God. We are citizens of heaven. 'Behold he cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see him.'

This is the secret of what always seems to me the most amazing paradox on God's earth, the zeal of the Christian fellowship, renewing its youth from age to age in proclaiming the gospel to the whole creation. This is, no doubt, the marching orders of the Church. But it is only by maintaining an unremitting propaganda that the Church lives at all. To those acquainted with the facts, Christian missions are, and never more so than in our own time, the romance of history.

The conversion of the whole earth is the wildest dream, contradicted by the experience of each successive generation. What greater irony than the thought of Christian Europe as the pledge of a regenerate world! Such a world as this has never had a place in the philosophy of Christians. Take the short view, prevalent in apostolic times. The apostles never inscribed upon their banner, 'The world for Christ in this generation.' Or take the long view, that many ages of evolution still await an infant race, on which some of our modern teachers insist as though it were, not a paralysing but an inspiring outlook. What compensation were a Christian community commensurate at some far distant date with the round globe itself for the millions who will have lived and died, to borrow the Pauline phrase, 'without God and without hope in the world!'

But the prospect the New Testament sets before us is more sombre still. 'When the Son of man cometh,' said Jesus, 'shall he find faith on the

earth?' The apparent pessimism lurking in this question is caught up by the apostolic writers, one after another. The Manchester view of progress has no justification in Christian thought. Nor has a world of perplexity, in which the sea and the waves roar and men's hearts fail for fear, any message of despair for those who have sounded the depth of Christian hope. The long distance evolutionism of the present day may be true. It is a subject on which I offer no opinion. But true or not true, it is irrelevant to the issues of the gospel. The only end of the world, of which we as Christians know anything, is the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour—at midnight, at cock-crow, or in the morning.

That is the spirit of missions. At one time men may speak of saving souls from the fires of hell, at another of winning the world for God, at another of spreading a Christian civilization, at another of evoking from new nations fresh interpretations of the one Christ. None of these reasons is sufficient. None can explain that mighty impulse which rolls on through centuries of witness. It is the Advent hope of the Evangelical Prophet that inspires the preachers of the reconciling word, and makes their feet beautiful upon the mountains. 'In the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'

'The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And he that heareth, let him say, Come. And he that is athirst, let him come: he that will, let him take the water of life freely.'

'He that testifieth these things saith, Yea: I come quickly. Amen: Come, Lord Jesus.'
Marana tha!

Recent Foreign Theology.

The Boehme Tercentenary.

On the 17th of November 1624, Jacob Boehme (*Anglice*, Behmen) died in his fiftieth year. The last words of this 'inspired shoemaker,' whom Hegel called 'a man with a mighty mind,' were 'I go to-day to be with my Redeemer, and my King in Paradise.'

Reports of the Tercentenary celebrations at

Görlitz in Silesia, where Boehme lived and died, tell of the honour done to the memory of the man who, in his lifetime, was denounced as a fanatical heretic from the pulpit of the St. Peter's Church, silenced for seven years by the Town Council, and persecuted by his fellow-citizens. It is good to read of the Guild of Shoemakers, the civic dignitaries, and the Lutheran clergy joining with students of his philosophy in praise of a self-taught seer