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The Kingdom of God and the Ethic of Jesus.

BY THE REVEREND A. B. D. ALEXANDER, D.D., LANGBANK.

FEW phrases occur more frequently in the Synoptic Gospels, and few indeed are found more often on the lips of Jesus, than that of the Kingdom of God.

The expression was not originated by Jesus. John the Baptist had already employed it as the note of his preaching. Indeed, the entire story of the Hebrews is coloured by this conception. In the days of their decline the thought of the restoration of the nation as the true Kingdom of God dominates their hopes and aspirations. But, as earthly institutions and agencies failed, the faith of the people became concentrated upon supernatural power. Might not God be expected to restore the Kingdom by heavenly intervention, thus vindicating His ancient people and establishing Israel once more in power by some direct manifestation of His favour? Hence, before the Advent of Jesus, there had grown up a mass of Apocalyptic literature, the object of which was to encourage the national expectation of a New Jerusalem which was to descend from Heaven in some miraculous way and supersede all earthly dominion. The new age was to be inaugurated by a Divine act. Of themselves the people were powerless to hasten its coming. They could only wait patiently till the set time was accomplished and God Himself put forth His arm.

A new school of Biblical interpretation has arisen whose object is to prove that Jesus was largely, if not wholly, influenced in His preaching of the Kingdom by the current Apocalyptic notions of His time. In common with the popular sentiment of His day our Lord believed, it is said, that the end of the world was at hand, and at the close of the present dispensation there would come suddenly and miraculously a new order—the Kingdom of Heaven—into which would be gathered the elect of God. The most prominent advocate of this view in Germany is Professor Johannes Weiss, who maintains that the teaching of Jesus is wholly eschatological. The kingdom which He predicts is supramundane. He did not inaugurate it; He only foretold its immediate advent. Consequently there is no ethics in Jesus' teaching. There is only what may be called an *Interim-Ethic*—an ethic of renunciation and watchfulness. It does not concern Christ to establish a code of morals for this life. All that He does, therefore, is to suggest

temporary or relative precepts for this transitory existence. He has little or no interest in the present. His vision is fixed upon the hereafter. He bids His followers detach themselves from this evil world and turn their gaze in faith upon that which is about to come.

A similar attitude in regard to New Testament criticism has been taken by the late George Tyrrell, the leader of the Modernist party in this country, in his remarkable book, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*, published in 1909. 'Of the nearness of the final catastrophe,' says this author, 'Jesus was convinced. . . . It might burst forth in a year; it could not delay beyond a generation. His work on earth was to prepare and hasten the Kingdom—to close the last chapter of human history. . . . In the kingdom men were to be as the angels of God; the moral struggle with all its conditions and occasions would be over, it would be rewarded by rest in glory, not by the glory of going on.'¹ There is no hint of a Kingdom of Christ—a reign of morality here upon earth to be brought about by the gradual spread of Christ's teaching and example. Jesus did not come to reveal a new ethics of this life, but the speedy advent of a new world in which ethics would be superseded. The morality of Jesus was but the passing condition, not the abiding substance of blessedness. Much of it is coloured by the immediate expectation of the end and is applicable only to a time of emergency. In such a crisis it would seem hardly worth while to assert a thousand claims which in normal circumstances could not be neglected.

The view of our Lord's teaching thus stated presents a problem which seems to resolve itself into two crucial questions: 1. Did Jesus expect a gradual coming of the Kingdom, or did He look for its immediate approach by some sudden act of God? 2. Did Jesus conceive of the Kingdom as a future state only, or as already existent upon the earth in virtue of His own Advent?

With regard to the *first* question: While it must be acknowledged that there are some sayings of Jesus which *do* suggest a sudden and miraculous coming of the Kingdom, these must be taken in connexion with many other passages, not less weighty and important, suggestive rather, of a gradual process—passages of profound ethical

¹ P. 48 f.

import which, it is hardly too much to say, must be regarded as shaping Christ's whole conception of human life and its purposes.

In respect of the *second* question : While there are undoubtedly not a few utterances which point to the future consummation of the Kingdom and to its supra-mundane character, these are not inconsistent with its immediate inauguration and gradual development ; on the contrary, they give emphasis and heightening to that aspect of it.

It would be impossible within the scope of this paper to deal adequately with the immense amount of literature which has already appeared upon this subject, but a few considerations may be advanced which, in our judgment, militate strongly against the Apocalyptic interpretation of Christ's teaching. At the outset it may be remarked that this view, as presented by its most prominent champions, would empty the Person and teaching of Jesus of their originality and universality, reducing the Son of Man to the level of a Jewish rhapsodist whose whole function was to incite His countrymen to look away from the present scene of duty towards some mystic future state of felicity which had no connexion with the actual world in which men lived and no real bearing upon their present character and moral discipline. It seems like a caricature to interpret the religion of the New Testament from this standpoint alone, to the exclusion of those directly ethical and spiritual principles in which its power and distinction so notably appear and upon which its finality and permanence depend. Christ spoke, indeed, the language of His time and race, and it was only natural that He should clothe His thoughts in the forms and figures which were then current. But to make the eschatology of the Gospels the master-key of Christ's teaching and message, and to see in Jesus nothing more than a Hebrew enthusiast announcing a Utopian dream, is to distort the perspective of His gospel and rob it of its breadth and unity. Nothing, indeed, is more unlike the serene and gracious personality of the Master as He moves about the villages of Galilee than this picture of nervous apprehension and morbid excitement in view of an approaching catastrophe which these writers have presented.

As a natural consequence of the eschatological character of Christ's teaching, it is contended that Jesus claimed for the moral precepts He uttered not an absolute, but merely a temporary value. The Kingdom was yet to come, therefore the rules of conduct which He announced could have no application beyond the brief interval that was to

elapse before the end of all things. Of course there is a sense in which it might be said that certain directions and rules suitable to particular circumstances and applicable only to some special cases would be naturally superseded, as having no meaning in a perfect state. But it is surely wholly inept to regard such special requirements and casual utterances as constituting the essence of our Lord's teaching. Yet even these sayings of Jesus—words by the way, passing and casual, as we might call them—all run back to the one ultimate demand of inward purity and spontaneous loyalty to the will of God, and are designed to illustrate the nature of the new order. It might be argued that the duty of forgiveness and the virtue of patience under wrong would cease when the injustices of this present world had disappeared. But behind the immediate need of manifesting forbearance and long-suffering there lay the deeper idea of thereby attaining to the Divine likeness. When the Kingdom comes in all its fullness, God's people will indeed share God's nature, and His spirit of love will possess them wholly. Even now by the exercise of these graces they are being gradually prepared for participation in the higher life of the heavenly Kingdom. These virtues, therefore, are not evanescent qualities which must pass away with this fleeting world. They are eternal elements of God Himself, and they must be inwrought into the character and become permanent features of the life of those who are striving to approximate to the ideal which Christ Himself has declared as true for all time : ' Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.'

Only by a violent dislocation of facts can one affirm that the moral maxims of Jesus are based upon an interim-ethic adapted merely to a transitory age. More correctly would they be described as universal and permanent—true for every world. In all the Gospels there are numerous explicit statements of our Lord which show that He Himself at least was confident that whatever catastrophe might overtake the outward fabric of the world His truth would remain unshaken. ' Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.' ' We cannot,' says Harnack, ' derive the ethical ideal of Jesus from the eschatological. There is nothing of an Interim-Ethic, nothing feverish and evanescent in humility, forgiveness, purity of heart, sacrifice or service ; yet these, and virtues like these, are pillars of Christian Ethics.' The habitual attitude of Jesus in the presence of the great problems of experience reveals a calmness of assurance and steadfastness of purpose far removed

from the temper of excitement and impatience in view of an abrupt and final change. The eschatological interpretation of the Gospels confuses colour with form, by-product with main intention, and finds the ethics of Jesus impracticable because it sees His moral utterances out of that perspective which gave them beauty and truth.

Not renunciation for its own sake but joy in life is the characteristic thing in Jesus' outlook. He does not encourage a spirit of anxious unrest or gloomy foreboding. He recognizes rather the preciousness and potency of the present life, calling men to a new righteousness and a noble sense of responsibility. So far from hinting that the duties which the various relations of life prescribe are not worthy of attention in view of the imminent distress, He counsels unwavering fidelity to the minutest details of daily service. The brevity of life is never urged by Him as a reason for laxity or indifference. It did not make Jesus Himself less zealous in His calling: it only spurred Him to greater ardour. 'I must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.' So far from allowing the uncertainty of the future to act as an opiate or to furnish an excuse for the apathy of fatalism, He ever bids men awake to the solemn realities of life. The message of Christianity, as taught by the Master and His apostles, is, that whether our existence on earth be short or long, its days ought to be nobly filled; and if the fashion of this world is passing away, then all the more earnestly must its opportunities and experiences be seized and consecrated to the service of God and the furtherance and fulfilment of His Kingdom among men.

The spirit of negative quietism and habitual detachment from the practical interests of life, pronounced by Tolstoy to be the proper attitude of Christian Faith, has no countenance in the teaching of Christ. It is true, indeed, that unworldliness, humility, lowliness of spirit, and all absence of self-seeking and masterful assertiveness, are essential marks of the Christian character and have a distinctive place in the ethics of the New Testament. But to identify such so-called 'passive virtues' with apathetic neutrality or light-hearted tolerance in regard to the world's vices and wrongs is wholly foreign to the spirit and example of our Lord. He was essentially a Reformer and a Revealer of the eternal values. No prophet could be more radical in His denunciations of existing evil or more insistent in His demands for absolute righteousness and purity. To confuse, therefore, Oriental passivity with the positive claim of Jesus

to vital decisions and unflinching ventures of faith; to single out a teaching of non-resistance as the core of the gospel, or to commend retreat from social obligations in the name of One who gladly shared them,—this is not only an impracticable discipleship but an historical perversion. It is to lift fragmentary utterances out of their immediate setting and elevate them into universal laws.

The question which presses with very real urgency upon the modern mind is, Can a man live in this present world and still be a Christian? Is it possible to participate in its business, to be involved in its social and political machinery and at the same time maintain a sober, righteous, and godly life? It hardly comes within the scope of this paper to discuss the various aspects of this question now. But it does seem relevant to the subject in hand to suggest that if Christian discipleship means that home and family ties, the tasks and burdens of business and daily toil are to be renounced as imperilling the soul's salvation, then the gospel of Christ has no real message for practical life, and nought to offer to earnest living men, save a counsel of retreat from the world's conflict and discipline.

Before concluding this paper it will be desirable to refer as briefly as possible to some particular passages in the Gospels which bear upon the question at issue.

It is clear that the problem of the Kingdom was one which was arousing considerable inquiry and discussion among those who had come into contact with Jesus and had listened to His Parables and Discourses. Jesus had said that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. But when and how would it come? On one occasion certain Pharisees asked when the Kingdom of God cometh? Knowing that His questioners had in view the establishment of an earthly monarchy and the restoration of the kingdom of Israel, Christ replied: 'The kingdom of God cometh not with observation.' The answer implies that all such expectations are erroneous, and based upon an imperfect conception of God's purpose. It will not come in the crude material form you expect it. It will be no spectacular or dramatic event. The Kingdom is indeed already here. It is in your midst. It must have been on some such occasion that many of the Parables referring to the Kingdom were spoken—especially those drawn from Nature, such as, the Parables of the Sower, the Tares, the Mustard-Seed, and the Leaven. The object is obviously to show that the sudden catastrophic notion of the coming of the Kingdom must give place to the deeper and

worthier idea of growth. Its progress was to be like the seed hidden in the earth, and growing day and night by its own inherent germinating force.

The conception underlying our Lord's teaching may be further gathered from St. Matthew's version of 'The Lord's Prayer,' where we are bidden to pray: 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.' The second clause indicates the way in which the Kingdom is to come. The Kingdom is God's rule which means the fulfilment of God's Will. Jesus came to establish God's sway upon the earth. In order to do so, the distinctive note of our Lord's ministry was to urge His hearers to live in accordance with the Divine Will; and the prayer which He taught His disciples requires of them and all future followers that they should consecrate their gifts along every line of effort for the fulfilment of God's Will. With the beginning of His preaching the Kingdom of God began—the assertion of the Divine sovereignty in and over the hearts and lives of men as distinguished from the kingdom of evil. It is no vague aspiration for some far-off perfect state. It is a prayer for the immediate hour, for the living practical present. Into this Kingdom those only may come who acknowledge God's sway, and are ready to do His Will. All such may be said to have 'Life,' in a distinctive sense. But the 'life' here and now is only the beginning of a life which is to last through all eternity. Here, indeed, the Kingdom is imperfect and incomplete. But it will be a growing Kingdom, and there will come a time when God's dominion will be universal and absolute and all who do God's Will shall inherit eternal life.¹

The Kingdom may be thus regarded as equivalent to practical Christianity. When our Lord began His ministry, by affirming 'the kingdom of heaven is at hand; repent, and believe the gospel,' His language may have been differently interpreted by different people. Some may have thought He meant that at last the yoke of Rome was to be cast off and the kingdom of their father David was to be established. Others may have construed His words as meaning: 'The day of the Lord is at hand.' The Son of Man is about to come in judgment, and a new heaven and a new earth will be immediately revealed. But obviously Jesus did not mean either of these things. He meant, I am come to teach you to fulfil God's Will, to implant in your hearts the Word of God. I am come to destroy the kingdom of evil upon the earth—

¹ See here how the teaching of the Synoptics comes into line with the Fourth Gospel.

not indeed by material force, or earthly might, but solely by the Spirit of God, working in and through men's hearts and lives. The Kingdom of which I speak will come not suddenly but slowly. Its growth will be gradual and inconspicuous. It will permeate the world as the leaven, and silently and unobtrusively pervade and transform the entire realm of human life.

It will be impossible here to examine in detail all the passages for which a purely Apocalyptic meaning has been claimed. Many of these lend themselves quite naturally to a figurative interpretation and are in harmony with our Lord's usage of parabolic and metaphorical language. There is, however, one example we may cite, since it has been stressed as a definite prophecy of the immediate catastrophic advent of the Kingdom. In Mk 9¹, Jesus says: 'Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.' In Mt 16²⁸, a more definite eschatological note has been struck by substituting the words: 'Till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.' This change of language suggests a tendency to modify the words in an eschatological sense. *There*, it is said, we have a clear and unmistakable announcement of the nearness of the 'Parousia.' But impartially regarded there is surely nothing in the mere form of words to enforce such a meaning. The coming of the Kingdom with power might quite as well refer to the Descent of the Holy Ghost, to the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit, to the inner spiritual power within the early Church, or it might even be taken to describe the progressive advance of Christianity throughout the world which had already begun to manifest its triumphant power over men's lives. Any of these interpretations may be regarded as in no way inconsistent with the general teaching of our Lord, and indeed more in harmony with what we know has actually taken place.

But the most decisive argument for the interpretation of Christ's teaching regarding the Kingdom of God which has been here maintained, is that it is in full accord with the rest of His Work and Words. It is in harmony with the new law of righteousness enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount and in agreement with Christ's ethical teaching throughout the Gospels. It implies a complete transformation of the Hebrew idea of righteousness; so radical and yet so positive that while in one sense it supersedes, in another it also fulfils the ancient law. It means nothing less

than a complete reconstruction of all human ideals, and ultimately an entire enrichment of all ethical and social conditions of earthly life. To what purpose, it has been asked,¹ would have been the ethical teaching of Jesus, if the end of all things was to come at once? It would have been, as one has said, a futile waste of labour. What would have been the use of propounding an absolute and universal ethic, adapted to the character and conditions of the whole world, and intended, for all men of all time and every race, if the moral principles and truths He proclaimed had admittedly only a temporary application, and were not fraught with ultimate and eternal values? We have misread the New Testament if we do not rise from its perusal with the conviction that the Redeemer came as a living man into a weary and distraught world, and by inculcating a living message of the Fatherhood of God and His Divine purpose for all mankind, gave a new inspiration and a spiritual elevation to the dreams and aspirations not only of those who were devoutly waiting

¹ See *The Life and Teaching of Jesus, the Christ*, by A. C. Headlam, D.D., Bishop of Gloucester, 1923, p. 264.

for the consolation of Israel, but to His own and every succeeding age. To interpret the Kingdom of God from a narrow Apocalyptic point of view, and to depict our Lord as the propounder of a merely temporary ethic, is surely to miss the spiritual insight, the originality and breadth of our Saviour's life and teaching.

If we sum up the meaning of the Kingdom of God as presented in the Gospels, three conceptions, not entirely separate from one another, but blending together, may be regarded as its essential elements. The first is the Kingdom, as a principle of life and conduct in men's hearts. As such it is not something which is to come in outward show, but something which is already here. The second is what is sometimes called the Christian Church, but is better described as Christianity, looked upon as a mighty progressive force in the world. The third is the Kingdom as the final consummation of all things. The Kingdom may thus be regarded in three aspects: as Present, Progressive, and Future—as a *Gift* immediately bestowed by Jesus; as a *Task* to be worked out in the history of the world; as a *Hope* to be consummated in the heavenly life.

The Historical Method and the Preacher.

BY PROFESSOR JOHN E. MCFADYEN, D.D., GLASGOW.

II.

HOMILETICS AND HISTORY.

Theophanies.

ANOTHER aspect of this problem for the preacher is created by the presence of theophanies and miracles in the narratives with which he deals, and by the existence of parallels revealed by the study of comparative folk-lore. As an illustration of this last source of perplexity may be mentioned the account of the birth of Sargon, king of Accad. 'My mother'—the inscription runs—'who was poor, conceived me and secretly gave birth to me; she placed me in a basket of reeds, she shut up the mouth of it with pitch, she abandoned me to the river, which did not overwhelm me. The river bore me away, and brought me to Akki, the drawer of water, who received me in the goodness of his

heart,' etc. No one can read this tale without wondering whether it has in any way affected the story of the birth of Moses. Again, in the earlier historical books of the Old Testament God or His angel frequently appears bodily upon the scene, speaking to men face to face as a man to his friends. Abraham in Gn 18 is visited by three supernatural wayfarers, one of whom is Jehovah Himself, and he entertains them hospitably. Their feet are washed, and they partake of 'the butter and milk, and the calf which Abraham had dressed.' Did these things happen as they are recorded or did they not? If they did, we shall have to revise pretty drastically our conception of God and to deny what reason and Scripture unite in affirming, that 'no man hath seen God at any time.' If they did not, then in what sense, if in any, is the preacher still free to use the narratives which record them?