

VIII

HOPE FOR TIME AND ETERNITY

HOPE.—It is sometimes denied that Hopefulness is a virtue, and it has been described as a mere matter of temperament. The older psychologists were accustomed to distinguish four temperaments—the sanguine, the melancholic, the choleric, and the phlegmatic. Of these the sanguine temperament was the constitutional basis of Hope. A more rational basis, however, must be claimed for the virtue even when it is admitted that some men find it more easy to cultivate Hope than others find it. It has its root in faith in God's goodness and man's goodness, and in the ultimate triumph of just causes. That faith is justified not only by the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, but by educated experience.

There are no texts that can be quoted in which our Lord enjoined the virtue of Hope. It was not apparently a word that was often on His lips. The nearest approach to an injunction of Hope was His repeated warning against over-anxiety, and His rebuke of worry. But His whole frame of mind was so instinct with Hopefulness that it may fairly be maintained that the virtue rests upon Him and His teaching more than upon any other stay. In two ways especially Christ vindicated the attitude of Hopefulness.

His view of human nature was consistently hopeful.

Not even the worst cases of depravity left Him in despair. Behind the haggard countenance of the felon and the wasted cheek of the street-woman Christ always discovered the unobliterated traces of Eden, the unfulfilled expectations of Paradise. To those upon whom Habit seemed to have laid an irresistible hold He said "Go and sin no more"; and His hope for them rekindled hope in themselves. To be believed in, to have great things expected of us, is one of the keenest spurs to effort; and this stimulus was constantly used by Christ. He was indeed under no illusions. He knew the Disciples as they were—slow, vacillating, easily discouraged; but He leant all the future of His Church upon them; and He was not disappointed. There could not have been a more conspicuous triumph of Hope.

In a second respect Christ's example of Hopefulness is striking and memorable. There is not a word recorded which hints that He ever despaired of His cause. The students of His life have disputed about the question whether He rested His hope consistently on one method of achieving success or on one ideal of success: but they have not ventured to say that it entered into His calculation that He might fail. Not a downhearted word escaped Him up to the end; and even when in most manifest ways He seemed powerless in the grip of enemies and the most pitiable of victims, He Himself marched as to an assured triumph—not indeed with martial tread, but with a self-mastery and a tender and compassionate frame towards those who ill-treated Him, which the more we think of it impresses itself on us the more.

The teaching of Jesus regarding the Future may most profitably be discussed under three heads:

1. His promises regarding the Kingdom of God ;
2. The implications of His title "Son of Man" ; and
3. His direct teaching regarding the future life of the redeemed and the judgement on the unworthy.

These subjects, however, lie so directly in the line of Biblical Theology that they are only suggested and not worked out now.

It would be easy to select from the writings of the Apostles a multitude of texts in which either the word Hope is used, or expression is given in other terms to such a frame. Such phrases are most common in St. Peter, who on account of them has been called the "Apostle of Hope" ; but these can be paralleled from every book of the New Testament. It has been rightly said that the New Testament is the most buoyant and exhilarating book in literature. It opens with the promise of a Redeemer : it closes with the promise of the consummation of His redemptive work when He comes again.

The Old Testament retains its hold upon the Christian mind mainly on account of its attitude of Hope. Prophecy had other elements in it, more characteristic than prediction ; but that element was assuredly in it as in all declaration of an ideal. The prophets were men of foresight as well as of insight. They lived upon the shall-be, and fed upon the future. After every possible explanation has been given of the direct reference of many prophetic oracles, there still remains the general sense that the Golden Age was being set in a day to come, and not in a day that was past. It may not be possible in all cases to justify the application to Jesus Christ of every oracle that has been called Messianic ; but it is no illusion that finds their trend and general suggestiveness summed up in

Him. Christ is the vindication of the Hope of Israel as He is Himself the ground of the Hope of the World.

The whole subject of our Lord's relation to Apocalyptic has received an unusual degree of attention from modern scholars. Discussion has been specially concentrated upon the twenty-fourth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, sometimes called "the little Apocalypse," but the apocalyptic colour of many other sayings of the Master has been recognised.

The tendency in recent years has been to exaggerate the apocalyptic element in our Lord's teaching. Sufficient allowance has not been made for the incapacity of those who reported His words to recognise their spirituality, and also for the unconscious inclination of the records to introduce their own conceptions of the future into the Lord's discourses. On the other hand, the Gospels are now recognised to be fundamentally trustworthy, and it is impossible entirely to eliminate the eschatological element from the teaching of Jesus.

Upon that element in His teaching it has to be remarked that His use of eschatological symbolism was such as to tend to make the symbolism disappear into ethical and present-day reference. His use of it was a great contribution to positive hopefulness. On the whole, He discouraged mere curiosity about the future, though He always promoted a forward outlook. Eschatology was to Him a means to an end—that end being the moral and spiritual transformation which we call communion with God.

THE FUTURE.—Almost every modern book, even among those which represent the most dogmatic schools, takes a reticent and restrained attitude to the mysteries

of the future, very different from that in which an older theology delighted. Hardly anything in literature is more outrageous than the liberty which Jonathan Edwards and the theologians of New England allowed themselves in their description of the condition of the lost. And a book which once used to be found in almost every cottage in Scotland, Boston's *Fourfold State*, vies with the New England theologians in its lurid visions of an unsaved world. Good and kind and godly men seemed to be seized with the spirit of the Grand Inquisitor when they told of the sufferings of unhappy sinful men.

In the theology of Anglicanism, Pearson's *Exposition of the Creed* has been as influential as any book. The ghastly and passionless lucidity of statement with which, in his chapter on the "Life Everlasting," Pearson states the case of the lost almost takes our breath away.

Rome can show a literature of horror upon this subject which neither Geneva or Canterbury can match. Perhaps the most celebrated sermon of the most celebrated preacher of France, the great Massillon, was on the subject of "The Fewness of the Elect." "The way of death," he cried, "is the way of the many; the saints are always singular." Then follows a passage of almost unexampled eloquence. Jesus comes to Judgement. The great congregation which the preacher addressed must be divided into two parts according to their character. The throne is set. Rank, beauty, power, fame are swept away. Four classes are left—the sinners who will not be converted; those who, having been converted, fall away; the sinners who put conversion off; those who think they are converted and are not. Then, with streaming eyes and broken voice, the great orator asked, "Lord, how many here to-day

will be saved?" Old people are familiar with such a strain of preaching, the echo of a past age. But if one takes almost any modern book of Divinity one finds in it a note more subdued, a suggestion of difficulty and mystery in the matter, which our ancestors, with their forensic attitude to life, and their metallic legalism, hardly seemed to realise.

If any one makes this comparison between the treatment of the doctrine of the last things in the days of our forefathers and in modern times, he will not fail to come to this conclusion—that we are much less confident in our definitions than men once thought they had a right to be.

A second conclusion will also be formed in our minds, namely, that ours is the only age in which a real Eschatology, or doctrine of the last things, could be formed. It is the latest doctrine in logical order of all the Christian truths. It comes at the end of all theological treatises, as at the end of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed and of the great Protestant Confessions of Faith. The historical order of the development of Christian doctrine has been the same as the logical order. Christian Theology begins in the second century with the work of apologetics and the vindication of all religion against paganism. Then, just as in the text-books, the minds of men passed to the study of the great doctrines concerning God—the Trinity and so forth. These doctrines being settled, the Church turned, under the leadership of St. Augustine, to what is called Anthropology, the doctrine of man's nature and the relation to it of sin and grace. In due order there came next the questions about the divine and human natures of our Lord—what is called Christology. That led almost of necessity to the question which St.

Anselm and the men of his time discussed, *Cur Deus homo?* Why was God made man? What is the Atonement? This is the doctrine technically known as Soteriology. Then the Reformers found the Christian faith waiting for another question, 'How does Christ's sacrifice benefit man? How does the Spirit apply to us the blessings Christ has purchased?' Justification, Adoption, Sanctification became the watchwords of the Reformation time. The circle of Christian doctrine is thus completed—all but one remaining theme, the things that shall be hereafter.

From the earliest days there had been theories and dreams and doctrines concerning the last things; and the mediævalists were even more dogmatic on the matter than we can be; but it has come to those upon whom the ends of the world have fallen to construct a real Eschatology or doctrine of the Hereafter, free from childish imaginations, and informed with that knowledge of the roots of character which only a later time could bring.

Any true doctrine concerning the future of souls must take account of considerations which only in comparatively recent years have met with an adequate recognition. They are such as these:—It becomes increasingly evident that a judgement upon character can only be made after fair allowance both for the surroundings in which it is developed and for the start in life with which it was handicapped. Heredity and environment introduce problems which a judge of the Old Bailey type cannot recognise; for human justice is a clumsy instrument; but which must enormously affect any really valuable estimate of character. Then, again, we begin to realise that a third part of the human race die in infancy. This life has neither been

an education nor a probation for them. They have had no time either to be tried or trained. Any doctrine of the future that is worth holding must find some room for their development in character. A parent once spoke of his possible meeting with his daughter in Heaven. She had died in early infancy, and he pictured the change which the years must have made—if there be years in Heaven—and he fancied himself saying to her, "O my beloved child, dead so many years ago, can this indeed be you?" Imagination is baffled by such thoughts. But that any worthy doctrine of the Hereafter must make place for them, and for all that they imply of a discipline and growth beyond the veil, we can have no doubt at all.

The whole question of the Heathen presents a similar problem to modern minds. The world is now so connected and organised that the problem weighs on us with an insistence that our forefathers hardly felt. It is not enough to cast the great majority of the human race upon the "uncovenanted mercies of God." Our sons and daughters meet heathen people every day, in Africa, in China, in India; let our race prejudice be what it will, we know that these people are human souls, each bearing his own destiny as we. The whole question is bewildering in its hugeness and complexity for us. It staggers faith. But no doctrine of a future world will ever gain hold on the best hearts which has not a place in it for the redemption of the heathen, and their learning of the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord—our Lord and theirs.

Such considerations as these must enter into any doctrine of the Hereafter that is to appeal to the instincts which Christ Himself has trained in us. Holding them as the essential conditions of any complete view

of the subject, we are prepared to seek for the guidance of Scripture on the whole question of the last things. We must not, however, look for such guidance in that part of revelation which we call "prophecy" in the sense of prediction. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself seems to have been intentionally vague and indefinite in His forecasts of the time to be. And the language of His followers must be read with caution; so much of it is pictorial and symbolical and apocalyptic—the work of impressionist painters and not the matter-of-fact descriptions of a guide-book. Some people deal with sacred literature in a way that shows that they do not even guess what literature means. They read a book like Revelation as unintelligently as the man who, after finishing *Paradise Lost*, asked what it proved. We shall not even approach a right notion of the world to come unless we recognise that all the language about Gehenna and burning pits and gnawing worms and golden streets and ivory gates in which the Revelation delights is the language of impassioned poetry, in what connection with bald realities we cannot know. If we are to deal in symbols at all the picture of the Father's House is better than the dizzy grandeurs of the streets of gold. Even that Father's House is too big for most people—though one knows that the Great God must have things great. But the sooner we realise that there is practically nothing told us about the things which shall be hereafter except in imaginative and pictorial way, the sooner we shall be delivered from the least profitable, if perhaps the most seductive, of all speculations—that which seeks for definite ideas regarding the life of Spirits beyond. Long ago people were excited over an American book called *The Gates*

Ajar, which attempted a description of Heaven. Many know the very attractive pictures of the world beyond which Mrs. Oliphant wrote in *The Little Pilgrim through the Unseen*. Even a great preacher like Canon Liddon attempted the same task in a sermon on "The First Five Minutes after Death." But one cannot read any such efforts without the strongest conviction that they are away from the spirit of the New Testament—from that reticence concerning all the matter which the Wisest Teacher in His wisdom deemed to be best for us.

Our guide to a doctrine of the Hereafter is not in definite predictions, but in the Scriptural view of man's nature and of God's nature—in a right understanding of what the Bible has taught concerning Man and God.

First : Let us master the Bible doctrine of Man, and the conviction grows upon us that much of current thinking about the future belittles man's dignity and robs him of what is noblest and most characteristic, namely, his free activity and the maintenance of will or choice. We have always been taught that he is not a being meant only to enjoy or only to suffer ; the life of mere sensation is the lowest level on which a man can live. He is a free volitional responsible being made in the image of God. If we take away freedom and rob him of the power of doing good or evil any longer, and of the moral strain that makes existence more than a torpid consciousness, we are claiming for him an immortality indeed, but it is at the cost of all that makes immortality venerable and to be desired. Thus it must be held that growth and change are of the essence of a right view of the Life Beyond. The good will get better : in the long years approximating slowly to the Ideal which has always gleamed before

them from afar. And the unawakened souls—to whom life was but a dream—will be stirred into thought, realisation, purposefulness; and the chances they never had below will then be fully within their power. And, though it seems hard in some ways to think it, if man be still man, it is honourable to his nature to believe that the bad may become worse and ever worse, the shadows lasting beside the light. “Universalists” and preachers of what is called the “larger hope” can be as dogmatic as any New England Puritan concerning what they do not know. But, unless will is to be destroyed and personality to cease, it is hard to discover why compulsory goodness should be found Beyond any more than here. Thus we must put much value on a right view of man, if we are to frame a whole doctrine of the last things.

A right view of God, the view which our Saviour gave, adds all that we need in order to think of the future sanely and yet hopefully and with joy. God is Love and our Father. If retribution hereafter be necessary and inevitable as it is here, then there will be retribution. But God does not therefore cease to be God and our Father. Deism is no more true there than here. You cannot part God from His world and from His children on earth. Neither can you banish Him from the Beyond. And if the Loving Father be there nothing can be utterly amiss even with the least worthy of the souls He made. We must constantly realise the future under the idea which Christ loved, that of a *Kingdom of God*, rather than under the harsh notions of bargaining and forfeiting which our forefathers affected and called the “Covenants” of “Works” and “Grace.” There or here, God is God;

not outside of life and aloof from men, but close inwound with all, the light by which we see, the love that warms our hearts, the very life by which we live at all.

I dimly guess from blessings known
Of greater out of sight,
And with the chastised Psalmist own
His judgements too are right.

I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death
His mercy underlies.

And so beside the silent sea
I wait the muffled oar ;
No harm from Him can come to me
On ocean or on shore.

I know not where His islands lift
Their froned palms in air ;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.

O Lord God most holy, O Lord most mighty, O
holy and merciful Saviour, Thou most worthy Judge
Eternal, suffer us not at our last hour for any pains of
death to fall from Thee.