



CHRIST ON EARTH AGAIN

Signs that His Coming is Near

“All they preach about is Christ’s life— that’s basic Christianity, granted, but it does not preach about something that’s going to happen, something to look forward to, to give the young people something to base their religion on.” (“Teenage Religion” by Harold Loukes - page 159) So said one teenager in a classroom discussion on religion. And since youth’s outlook must be based on the future, on something to look forward to, then it is a valid, and a valuable, criticism of Christian preaching.

For we are all offered something to look forward to from other quarters. The television programme bearing the title “*Tomorrow’s World*”, for example, is an up-to-date account of technical progress which could revolutionize our lives. Amongst the most spectacular developments are those concerned either with nuclear power, which promises enough energy to run tomorrow’s machines, to speed production and increase leisure; or with research into new healing techniques such as the cure of cancer or the replacement of worn-out parts of the body. So, if the “population explosion” can be controlled and new food supplies harvested from the depths of the sea, we can look forward to a long life of enjoyable leisure in a world at peace.

But are these real hopes? If so, how far ahead will they be realized? In your lifetime, or that of the young people being invited to use their talents and skill in its achievement? If tomorrow’s world ever comes to us personally, will the new cure bring the new disease, or longer life even more problems for old folk? Will there ever be peace, or will the balance of fear be upset causing the dreaded nuclear war to break out?

In any case, it is just not true that Christianity “does not preach about something that is going to happen, something to look forward to.” Back in the first century, when Paul was in the university town of Athens preaching “basic Christianity” he was invited to explain his faith to a group of learned men. The intellectual atmosphere was probably not very much different from that of our own day. Some who heard him believed in a kind of salvation by science, yet had no real answer to the problems of human sickness and death.

Others believed that the world was subject to Fate, and would eventually be destroyed by fire, and with it the Supreme Being himself. In fact, there was so much doubt about

everything, God included, that ordinary people worshipped a variety of different things according to their fancy, but kept an altar to the Unknown God—the God who might or might not be there, they were not sure. We could *almost* say that the Greek words for Unknown God would be better translated as “The Agnostic’s God.” Not much to look forward to in this religion either.

To them Paul said: “The God who created the world and everything in it, and who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by men ... He created every race of men of one stock ... He fixed the epochs of their history and the limits of their territory. They were to seek God ... As for the times of ignorance, God has overlooked them; but now he commands all men, everywhere, to repent, because he has fixed the day on which he will have the world judged, and justly judged, by a man of his choosing; of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:22-31)

Not for Paul the idea that Christian preaching has no future in mind. His whole speech, which is worth reading, deals with God’s purpose in creating the world, and what will eventually happen to it. The careful reader will have noticed that He intends to intervene in men’s history in a dramatic way, as He has done in the past, and that the preaching of the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus has something to do with it.

The Christians of the first century all believed that Christ would one day be in the earth again. His first disciples had been shocked and disappointed to find that when he first came he was not going there and then to establish a new world order as the Old Testament prophets had said. They did not understand until much later the need for his death and resurrection in the redemption of the world. “How dull you are!” he had said to two of them after his resurrection, “How slow to believe all that the prophets said!” Then he began with Moses and all the prophets, and explained to them the passages which referred to himself in every part of the scriptures (Luke 24:25-27).

After that the disciples, who at the very moment when they saw Jesus go from them were promised that he would come again, preached the gospel of salvation in Christ, and urged men to believe it, to be baptized, to show their new faith by following his example in their own lives, and to await his return.

Let us now look at a “case history” of an early church, and see what was the relationship between the kind of people they were, their faith in Christ and their hope of “something to look forward to”. The Thessalonians were persecuted for their religion, and Paul, who had introduced them to Christianity, wrote one of his earliest letters to them to comfort and strengthen them in their faith. “The welcome you gave the message meant grave suffering for you, yet you rejoiced in the Holy Spirit; thus you have become a model for all believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.” Undoubtedly when men suffer for their faith they do not retain in it anything which seems to them unnecessary or unreasonable. Anyway, said Paul, “We call to mind, before our God and Father, how your faith has shown itself in action, your love in labour, and your hope of our Lord Jesus Christ in fortitude”. Here was “basic Christianity”, the life of Christ in his believers. But they had “turned from idols, to be servants of the living and true God, and *to wait expectantly for the appearance from heaven* of his Son Jesus, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus our deliverer from the

terrors of judgement to come” (1 Thessalonians 1).

The idols of our day may not be in the same form as those of the Thessalonians, but they are there all the same. In fact, whatever person or thing we value more highly than God, or whatever we place our hope and trust in, is an idol—a “pop” idol, perhaps, or Mammon, the god of big business, or whatever else is worshipped. From all this we need to be converted, to wait for Christ.

In his ministry among the Thessalonians Paul certainly did not spare himself. It was a genuine sharing of all their hardships as well as a ministry of preaching and teaching. “As Christ’s own envoys we might have made our weight felt; but we were as gentle with you as a nurse caring fondly for her children. With such yearning love we chose to impart to you not only the gospel of God but our very selves, so dear had you become to us.” (1 Thessalonians 2:6-8)

This was true Christianity at work, and any man, whether he accepts all the teaching of Christ or not, has to admit it. What was Paul’s motive? Or, to use a common metaphor, what made him “tick”? Let him answer for himself: “For after all, what hope or joy or crown of pride is there for us, what indeed but you, *when we stand before our Lord Jesus at his coming?*” (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20) In other words his religion like theirs, was based on “something to look forward to, something that is going to happen”.

Life was a struggle for the Thessalonians, but not only because they were being persecuted for their faith. Their new outlook, that is their repentance after their conversion, meant that they were only too conscious of their failure to reach the high moral standard set them in Christ. They had to keep themselves from sexual immorality in a world which like ours was full of it, to maintain a standard of honesty in a society which like ours hardly understood the word; in short, they had to swim against the tide of the thought and outlook of their times. But knowledge of the saving grace of Christ and their determination to live as he had lived spurred them on, and they made some progress. How often though they must have longed to achieve perfection, to find themselves free from the struggle against weakness and frustration and those frequent lapses from their high standard. Would they ever be perfect? Yes, of this they were assured: but when? “May he make your hearts firm,” was Paul’s prayer for them “so that you may stand before our God and Father holy and faultless *when our Lord Jesus comes with all those who are his own.*” (1 Thessalonians 3:13)

One thing perplexed them, however, and it seems that they had asked Paul about it. In his reply he not only enlightened them, but showed us the vital distinction between salvation in Christ and salvation by science or other means. So important was the second coming of Christ in their lives that they eagerly looked forward to it. When some of their number died it seemed that they at any rate would not share in the happiness to come. Even so most people of our day are unlikely to live long enough to see the promised scientific new world; the nuclear war seems much nearer.

But the “something to look forward to” of the Christian religion was something of which not even death itself could rob the Thessalonians. Indeed, it was the fact of death which made Christ’s return all the more desirable.

“We want you not to remain in ignorance, brothers, ‘about those who sleep in death; you should not grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again; and so it will be for those who died as Christians; God will bring them to life with Jesus.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14) Then, in a vivid description of the Lord’s coming the Apostle shows that the very first act of Christ on earth again will be to raise the dead who sleep in him.

This fact alone should be sufficient to persuade men to make Christ’s second coming the object of their desire, as did the Thessalonians. For them it was the focal point of their hope—the reason for their conversion, the fulfilment of their life of fellowship together, the completion of their sanctification, their comfort in bereavement. But Christ on earth again will mean more than such an individual benefit. The Apostles in their preaching spoke of a time of universal restoration, even as Jesus had told his disciples of the world that is to be. (Acts 3:19-21; Matthew 19:28) Against the background of the world as we know it, with its problems and anxieties, its evil and suffering, the Apostle’s comment on the Christian hope is most revealing. “For the created universe waits with eager expectation for God’s sons to be revealed. It was made the victim of frustration, not by its own choice, but because of him who made it so: yet always there was hope, because the universe itself is to be freed from the shackles of mortality and enter upon the liberty and splendour of the children of God.” (Romans 8:19-22)

The time to come on earth is known in Scripture as the Kingdom of God, which means more than the process of personal submission of the individual to the will of God which has been going on from the days of the Thessalonians until our own. Christ’s return will mean the definite beginning of his universal reign. If his power can be exercised so decisively even over death, then there is no need to enlarge upon the good effects of his rule when “the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever”. Suffice it to say that the result will be far beyond the dreams of any political or social reformer, or the power of UNESCO or any organization of the United Nations. Not being dependent upon popular vote he makes no election promises to be broken when he comes to power. “The Son of God ... was never a blend of Yes and No. With him it was, and is Yes. He is the Yes pronounced upon God’s promises, ‘every one of them.” (2 Corinthians 1:19-20)

A word of warning is necessary here. Reformation, cleansing, purification, justice—all these imply judgement. It is certain that if all things that offend are to be rooted out from the earth and “all shadows from the truth will fall”, then people also will be judged by those same standards when God will “have the world judged, and justly judged, by a man of his choosing.” The “basic Christianity” of the Sermon on the Mount envisages the same “that day” when the quality of a man’s obedience to God will be assessed. (Matthew 7:21-23)

But some will say, “We’ve heard all this before. People have been talking of a good time coming for centuries. The Thessalonians were sure that Christ would come in their day, but he didn’t.” True, but it is significant that in the last letter he ever wrote the inspired Apostle Paul was just as emphatic on the subject as he had been so many years before in his letter to Thessalonica. Though at the point of death, he was still

able to say, “And now the prize awaits me, the garland of righteousness which the Lord, the all-just Judge, will award me on that great Day; and it is not for me alone, but for all who have set their hearts on his coming appearance.” (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

There have been landmarks in the purpose of God which have enabled men to follow its development. It is frequently said in Scripture, for example, that it was in “due time” or in the “fulness of time” that Christ was born. A study of the contemporary political and social background would show just how ripe the time was. Amongst Christ’s own people there was a sense of expectancy, and in the Graeco-Roman world there was a great longing for peace, stability and a deliverance from human bondage. One of the great Roman poets gave expression to this general feeling in a poem which vaguely reminds us of the words in which Isaiah spoke of all nations benefiting from the righteous rule of the Lord, (Isaiah 11) but applied in this instance, to someone else.

So, it was at the appropriate time that “the grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all mankind; and by it we are disciplined to renounce godless ways and worldly desires, and to live a life of temperance, honesty, and godliness in the present age, looking forward to the happy fulfilment of our hopes when the splendour of our great God and Saviour Christ Jesus will appear.” (Titus 2:11-13)

In any case, the fact that men would grow more sceptical with the passage of time was not unforeseen. “Note this first,” said Peter, writing in the second half of the first century, “In the last days there will come men who scoff at religion and live self-indulgent lives, and they will say: ‘Where now is the promise of his coming? Our fathers have been laid to their rest, but still everything continues exactly as it has always been since the world began.’ In taking this view they lose sight of the fact that there were heavens and earth long ago, created by God’s word out of water and with water; and by water that first world was destroyed, the water of the deluge. And the present heavens and earth, again by God’s word, have been kept in store for burning; they are being reserved until the day of judgement when the godless will be destroyed.”

“And here is one point, my friends, which you must not lose sight of: with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. It is not that the Lord is slow in fulfilling his promise, as some suppose, but that he is very patient with you, because it is not his will for any to be lost, but for all to come to repentance. But the Day of the Lord will come; it will come, unexpected as a thief. On that day the heavens will disappear with a great rushing sound, the elements will disintegrate in flames, and the earth with all that is in it will be laid bare.” (2 Peter 3:3-10)

This most interesting passage reminds us of several important things. The lesson of the Flood illustrates the nature of the judgement to come; it involved the complete removal of an existing civilization, leaving the fabric of the earth intact. In the same way will the whole present way of life be swept away, to leave an earth which, like the earth after the Deluge, will bring forth her fruits abundantly for the proper enjoyment of mankind. Interesting too to note that the vivid language of vision employed by Peter is almost the language of modern nuclear physics!

Again we note the fundamental difference between the thought expressed by Peter

and the current thought of some of the philosophers such as Paul had met in Athens—or for that matter the gloomy predictions of some of our own contemporaries who fear a nuclear disaster. As Paul had declared, far from God being Himself a victim of the destruction of the universe He is in complete control, and since Scripture is everywhere plain that His purpose does not involve the end of human life or the final devastation of this planet—in fact, the contrary—then obviously it is the purification of human life, that is envisaged here.

“Since the whole universe is to break up in this way, think what sort of people you ought to be, what devout and dedicated lives you should live! Look eagerly for the coming of the Day of God and work to hasten it on; that day will set the heavens ablaze until they fall apart, and will melt the elements in flames. But we have his promise, and look forward to new heavens and a new earth, the home of justice.” (2 Peter 3:11-13)

Again, Peter’s phrase “unexpected as a thief” is most expressive. We know that robberies, accidents, catastrophes happen—*but always to someone else!* We do not *really* think this, of course, otherwise the insurance companies would not do so well; but disaster is always unexpected when it comes. The coming of the Lord will be like that, and it is just as unwise to declare that because he has not yet come he never will come as to leave the front door open all night because there never have been burglars in our district. In fact, Jesus himself gave the same sign of his coming as Peter used. The days of Noah were days when men were preoccupied with food and drink and sexual matters until the great crisis in human morality which could only be resolved by the judgement of the Flood. Sodom, also, the city where Lot dwelt, became a byword for degeneracy—the home of violence and gross immorality. “As things were in Noah’s days, so will they be in the days of the Son of Man. They ate and drank and married, until the day that Noah went into the ark and the flood came and made an end of them all. As things were in Lot’s days, also: they ate and drank; they bought and sold; they planted and built; but the day that Lot went out from Sodom, it rained fire and sulphur from heaven and made an end of them all—it will be like that on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.” (Luke 17:26-30)

There is no need to produce statistics to point the parallel. “You must face the fact: the final age of this world is to be a time of troubles. Men will love nothing but money and self; they will be arrogant, boastful and abusive; with no respect for parents, no gratitude, no piety, no natural affection; they will be implacable in their hatreds, scandal-mongers, intemperate and fierce, strangers to all goodness, traitors, adventurers, swollen with self-importance. They will be men who put pleasure in the place of God, men who preserve the outward form of religion, but are a standing denial of its reality.” (2 Timothy 3:1-5) The antediluvians and the men of Sodom likewise had “never had it so good”.

“A time of troubles.” That is the theme of another great prophecy of Christ about his second coming. In Luke 21 he is answering his disciples’ question aroused by his warning of the impending destruction of Jerusalem. “Master”, they asked, “when will it all come about? What will be the sign when it is due to happen?” In tracing the subsequent course of events he told them that there would be warning signs of imminent disaster which would lead some men to make premature forecasts. “Do not fall into a panic. These things are bound to happen first; but the end does not follow

immediately.” The fall of Jerusalem followed, as he had said, and the land of Israel was to lie desolate and Jerusalem be “trampled down by foreigners until their day has run its course.” (Luke 21:7-9; 21:24)

The history of Israel has always been an accurate time-gauge for the development of the purpose of God, since His promises have always been closely connected with their destiny, and their continued survival under persecution is a standing witness to the reliability of the Bible as His word. In modern times we have seen how that the day of the foreigners in this land subjected to invasion and domination for centuries has nearly run its course. Modern Israel’s development is testimony to this, and within the last two generations the fact that the Lord’s words are intended to be taken literally has been made very clear.

But when we couple this with the other great sign of this chapter, then the certainty that our days are the most significant of all days in the divine scheme is underlined. Together with the resurgence of the ancient nation, to be compared with the awakening of the trees which heralds the advent of spring, Christ associated a time of distress and perplexity when “nations will stand helpless ... men will faint with terror at the thought of all that is coming upon the world.” (Luke 21:25-33)

Again, there is no need to add to this description of a world adrift. The triumph and the tragedy of man are only too apparent in a world in which he can “put a girdle round the earth” in a satellite but cannot stop violence in his streets.

Which way do we turn then, for “something to look forward to, to give the young people (or anybody else, for that matter) something to base their religion on”? There can only be one answer—to basic Christianity. It is something to base a life upon as well as something to look forward to, for personal self-fulfilment, for comfort in sorrow, for happy reunions, and above all for the sake of the whole world, which “groans and travails in pain together until now”.

Let the last word be with Paul writing to his beloved Thessalonians. “About dates and times, my friends, we need not write to you, for you know perfectly well that the Day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night. While they are talking of peace and security, all at once calamity is upon them, sudden as the pangs that come upon a woman with child; and there will be no escape. But you, my friends, are not in the dark, that the day should overtake you like a thief ... May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy in every part, and keep you sound in spirit, soul, and body, without fault *when our Lord Jesus Christ comes*. He who calls you is to be trusted; he will do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:1-4; 5:23-24)

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References: All New Testament references are taken from the New English Bible.



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