

THE GOD-WORLD-I TRIANGLE.

CHAPTER 4.

A CHRISTMAS MEDITATION.

When Jesus was born he cannot have had any conception of what his vocation was. And sadly, we have only one small glimpse of his spiritual development, before his baptism; and that is the story of his being in the Temple talking to the Elders for three days, while his parents looked for him in vain. At the time of his baptism, John the Baptist suggested that their roles ought to be reversed; but Jesus demurred. So evidently, both men had some idea of what his vocation was; but we get no hint of how that came about.

All we are told is that immediately afterwards Jesus felt strongly, maybe irresistibly, moved to go into the desert, and be alone. I know the feeling; I expect we all at some time have experienced a feeling, either to do something, or to refrain from doing something, which is almost compulsive or overwhelming. Once in the desert he had plenty of time to think, to work out what kind of a Messiah he should try to be. And at first he was not apparently thinking of a Kingdom. The first temptation was fair enough: to turn stones into bread. This may have been just a response to his physical hunger; or it may have been prompted by the thought that his Ministry would best reveal the Nature of God, by his being a glorified medico/social worker helping the victims of life to get back onto their feet. He would show that God cared for them, and invite them to show their appreciation by living lives acceptable to God. His Ministry would be a call to individuals.

But the other two temptations were so fantastic, that they must reflect the degree of danger that Jesus thought he was facing. And they reflect that he was thinking first in terms of Jewish society, and then in terms of a World conversion. He had progressed to thinking in terms of founding a “Kingdom”. And there was no earthly point in his preaching that “the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand”, unless he had a clear idea in his mind of what that kingdom would be like. So there is no harm in our doing the same. His was a Kingdom of Love; and the Romans could be relied on to maintain Law and Order. But the Romans have gone; they left over 1500 years ago, in case the clergy haven’t noticed. So our situation is different from that confronting Jesus, and is more like that facing Confucius. We have to maintain Law and Order. Now Confucius insisted that humaneness was the fundamental norm not only of human conduct, but of political and civilized government. Persuasion is better than coercion. Violence is the breakdown of politics; a good example removes the need for coercion. It is hardly sensible to kill those who have not “the Way”, (the Way of virtue),

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in order to uphold those who have the Way. But the Legalists thought that Confucian values are all very well for the few who are up to them, but the Ruler has to concern himself with the whole population; and that means coercion, because some people only understand the language of fear. In the Book of Lord Shang, war and killing are permissible so long as the aim is to abolish them! The Legalists were speaking a language, which is familiar to us today.

Anyone who remembers the Second World War knows that we escaped defeat by a hair's breadth; and the victory of Nazi tyranny would have been the end of everything worthwhile. Someone has to keep the secular world going. If you abolished the Law Courts, a kingdom of love would not descend. Within months the gangsters would get the upper hand, and you would have terror and chaos, as William Penn found in the early years of his administration of Pennsylvania. The Christian kingdom of love may be what the soul longs for in its relationship with God, but it fails to provide a way of life to those struggling to maintain a decent just society. The man-in-the-street sees this with crystal clarity, even if Church leaders are blind to it. So he goes off to the pub or his golf club, as his tastes lie.

So what is the answer? Professor Caird, in his *Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers*, his Gifford Lectures of 1900 & 1901, considered in his last chapter the effect of Greek thought on the Church. In particular he considered its effect on the debate in the early centuries of the Church about the relationship of human nature with the Divine nature. He says that in the Church this debate was necessarily limited to a consideration of the different conceptions of the personality of Christ. This had two disadvantages, he says; it was confined to the person of Christ alone, and never branched out to consider the personality of normal man; and it was a static rather than a dynamic unity. In other words, not a unity that provided a way of life, but rather a unity that was independent of process, or conduct. The Quaker idea of "that of God in everyman", which is exactly the same as the Jewish idea of "we have Abraham for our Father", is a good example of this defect; it is independent of conduct. A man only shares God's nature in acts of right conduct. He shares God's nature "briefly".

If you want a dynamic unity with God, it means accepting the uncomfortable privilege of co-operating with any real or mythical God, in order to help create a slightly better world. It means forgetting about your own salvation, so long as you can do a little to accomplish the salvation of society, or the world. In Christian parlance, it means co-operating either with the Risen Christ, or with the Almighty, the Creator himself, and leaving the historical Jesus some way behind, because the problem facing us is different from the problem that faced him. St. Paul most assuredly left the historical Jesus behind; he never mentions him, and only

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preached Christ crucified. In doing so, he saved Christianity from being an obscure Jewish sect that would probably have died out in a generation, and turned it into a world religion.

Albert Schweitzer did likewise. He was moved to write *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, one of the most famous theological texts of the modern era, in which he reviewed a hundred or more years of German theological scholarship, and concluded that Jesus was driven by his apocalyptic consciousness to his death, a forlorn death in which he felt forsaken by God. Schweitzer recognised in the second edition of his book that Jesus was one of those tremendous creative personalities in whom the eternal energies which move the world are revealed, who set world history in motion time and again, and who oblige mankind to follow the path to spiritual advancement. But Schweitzer also agreed with the view that Jesus was completely mistaken about the timing of his Second Coming, and possibly about its manner; and he himself then felt driven from the study of theology to practical love, and went to Lambarene as a doctor.

The disadvantages in being wedded to the past can easily be illustrated. When the Chinese began trading with other nations, they had to consider Charter-parties for the carriage of goods by sea. So they looked up to see what Confucius had to say about it. Now Confucius had probably never seen the sea, and does not mention Charter-parties in his *Analects*. So naturally what Confucius had to say was not much help. Going to the historical Jesus, to seek help in trying to help solve today's problems, is as foolish as that! So you have to go to a God who understands the modern world, as I have said. Of course if you are only thinking of yourself, and how you can scramble into heaven, then it may help to study in minute detail what the historic Jesus said. But my opinion is that if Jesus saved the world he did it by giving anyone with any character the courage to follow his example, and that means being willing to think things out for yourself, as well as teaching us that the divine love extends to the outcast and the forlorn. Another way of expressing it is to say, that it means continuing the Evolution, which Jesus fulfilled. And that, as Cranmer says, is an "inestimable benefit".