

THE THOUGHT OF JESUS.

CHAPTER 14.

It was at this stage that the discussions came to an end, much to my regret. It was obvious there were going to be no more of them; so before their inspiration failed, I wrote the following essays which enquire into the thoughts Jesus may, or must, have had in his mind, before he decided on the form which his Ministry would take. And it was only gradually that I came to see that these essays substitute for the theology inspired by Plato, with its sonorous phrases, celestial concepts, and its false notion of absolute standards, an inquiry into the thoughts which were going on in Jesus' own mind? The two approaches are mutually exclusive; if you pursue the one, you exclude yourself from pursuing the other. Not only do I think it more sympathetic to investigate his thoughts, with a view obviously to comparing them with the thoughts in our own minds; but I think it is likely to yield more helpful results. More helpful, for example, to someone caught up in the Romeo and Juliet situation!

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Jesus Christ set out on his Ministry, convinced that his vocation was to save the world. The whole prophetic tradition of his people had taught men to expect the Messiah; and Jesus thought he was that man. So incidentally did others. Whether he was right or wrong, he most certainly could not afford to entertain too many doubts, once he had begun. No-one is fitted for high authority if he has too many doubts. He may have sometimes doubted what to do next; but it was not legitimate for him to doubt his vocation, until he was hanging on the cross, and it was all over for practical purposes.

It is difficult for anyone faced with this problem to know how to begin. How does one set about saving the world? The thoughts of a mere carpenter, or a mere professor, are hardly worth listening to. But the thoughts of a carpenter or a professor, who believes he has a vocation to save the world, are well worth listening to. Your thoughts are only focussed,

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when the prospect of having to put your thoughts and belief into practice is imminent. When you start to ask yourself the question, “What am I going to do about it?” then you start to think sensibly. Until then, thought is always in a measure fanciful. Someone once said, “I want young men about me, who can see visions and dream dreams; and I do not mind how wild their visions are, so long only as they have a touch of the Divine fire”. But their dreams and visions were going to be tested not only in debate, but in the workshop, the armaments factory, and in the army training area; because they were to be dreams of tank design and armoured warfare. So the dreamers could afford to be fanciful. Jesus could not. He had to do it all by himself! He had to begin with his vocation.

Few men have believed the world could be saved. Saving the world means solving the problem of evil; and then actually overcoming it. Criminologists admit that evil exists; but they avoid using the word in discussing their theories. Most people adopt the same device. But those who bypass the problem of evil, want to organize the world; not to save it. The best penal theory cannot eliminate crime; it can only contain it. War may avoid the complete triumph of evil; but it cannot overcome evil.

Even fewer have believed they could see how to do it. The Church says Jesus saved the world by dying on the cross. But how does that help? Theory is so subtle compared with experience. If we crucified him, it looks as if we are condemned, rather than saved. Or did he save us from those who did crucify him? Did he save us from the hypocrisy of Church leaders? And saved us from what? Would we have all gone to hell, if Jesus had not died? Was the Father angry with us for being what we could not help being? And did Jesus persuade him not to be angry? These questions verge on the fantastic. They tend to the conclusion that few men know what we have been saved from. Would Jesus have said to his disciples, “You are guilty of crucifying me, because sin like yours will land me there”? Peter may have denied him; but he did not crucify him, except in some theologian’s mind. The

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disciples fled; they did not bring about his death. How difficult it is even to discuss the problem, save with those with imagination enough to look through Jesus' own eyes.

Still fewer men can imagine what it would be like to have to save the world oneself. If you are one of those few, you must at least have a clear idea of what you would want to save the world from. One man may know that Jesus saved him from leading an insignificant life. But whilst this may be true for him, another man may say he was saved from hardness of heart and lack of charity, which poisoned all family intimacy. A third may say that without the indwelling spirit of God, he could not have conceived anything beyond a parochial existence. A fourth may be unable to see that he needs to be saved from anything; and only a Christian pedant able to find fault with his way of life. How do you reconcile a multitude of differing accounts? It is not easy: there are so many strands, that no theory can conceivably be adequate to accommodate them all. But through Jesus' own eyes things looked quite different. If one puts oneself into his shoes, even for a moment, it is obvious that he could not afford to fail. Failure would dishonour God; and there could be no second attempt. The only thing he could do was reveal the nature of God, and leave men to make of it what they would. He could not tailor his Ministry to the needs of individual men.

So how was he to behave? The means available to him largely dictated how he should behave. If he were simply to be a good man inspired by God, he would be doing no better than the prophets before him. God dwelt in them; they had to prophesy truthfully, not adding one word of their own, or the penalty was death. So he must not indulge in egotism for one single moment. He knew this was the rule for prophets; and he was amongst other things a prophet. Even if Christ was suddenly aware he had super-natural power, and had to decide how to use it, because all the temptations were concerned with the abuse of power; so had Elijah and Elisha according to tradition. The indwelling spirit of God was nothing new. The difference was that Christ announced, like John the Baptist, that the Kingdom of Heaven had

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come; whereas the prophets only said it would come. It had come, because as he explained to John, the blind received their sight, the lame walk, the lepers made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And the good news was of a return to the tradition of a theocratic kingdom, with himself as king, within the envelope of the Roman peace. He never challenged Rome; and the laws of his kingdom were laws of love, breach of which was only punished in the day of judgement.

What he could not do was believe merely that he should submit to the will of God; he had to decide how to act. And it is fair to say once he had begun, he acted with the most amazing consistency of purpose. Merely to submit to God's will, is to be bankrupt of any idea how to save the world; and it is best then not even to think of beginning. God does not rejoice in men behaving like submissive doormats; to do his will, you need the same ruthless fixity of purpose and tenacious mother-wit, as you do to accomplish any great action; and which I would say Jesus had. God does not want to be represented by men too frightened to act.

Jesus was spared any knowledge of science, both the terrifying scale of the Universe, which Pascal found appalling, and the amazing advances of science which have remoulded society. He decided to save the world by restoring men's faith in God.

He did the only thing he could do: demonstrate the power entrusted to him by God, and therefore his relationship with God, and hope that men would see that this same relationship should exist between God and the human soul, and willingly share in it.

Albert Schweitzer ends his book on J.S.Bach by agreeing with the view that an inner integrity is necessary to play Bach properly; not only in the main performers, but in every performer; not only technically but in spirit too; not only to start with, but throughout. It highlights the difference between Bach and his son. Dazzling, popular, and successful, C.P.E.Bach had no soul as compared with his father, which is obvious when one listens to his music. To maintain an absolute inner integrity is to think and act like a god, which explains

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why Bach's B minor Mass is one of the greatest Protestant works of art, and ensures its future. Without art religion dies: to which the Lollards eloquently bear witness.

Most men find such inner integrity beyond their powers. As the writer of Genesis saw, most men's hearts are inclined towards wickedness, and only have a flawed integrity. Without Jesus, in practice there is little hope for most of us having anything else; but with Jesus' indwelling spirit, there is the prospect of everyman having this integrity at least for a time. One way of describing his having saved the world is to say he enables men to overcome the limitations in themselves, which they see they could not possibly overcome without him. The great leaders of the world may have been able to do without Christ's indwelling spirit. Our leaders in the last War, Winston Churchill and General Brooke, broadly were religious men, General Brooke deeply so; but I do not think either was a regular church-goer. So maybe they had to cope without the "inestimable benefit" of his spirit; or maybe so much was at stake, they enjoyed it anyway despite the absence of the Church's blessing. Suffice it to say Christ did not go around saying he was a miserable sinner; he had no such doubts. Similarly leaders in war cannot afford to indulge in too much soul-searching, when one serious mistake can precipitate the catastrophe of defeat. Anyone who is in a position of authority knows this. If a religion insists on abject penitence without end, then it must remain a religion for the underdog, and influence authority only by cynical calculation.

Whereas if integrity is the guide, religion allows one's character to reach its full stature, without fault or flaw, though it does not necessarily do so. Better to allow one's character to reach its potential even if flawed, than submit to the yoke of the clergy; because no-one is fit for high authority if he has too many doubts, just as Jesus rode roughshod over the scruples of the Pharisees. And someone has to keep the secular world going. Long ago, in the Middle Ages, when the Roman Church tried to wield supreme power in Europe, it ended in a corruption so evil that it split the Church, and brought on the Thirty Years War. It is

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unlikely to be given such a chance again. Maybe many men are not so much evil as hopelessly inadequate to cope with life's problems, so they resort to evil in order to do so, as in Conrad's novel *Almayer's Folly*. They have to: or else give up. How can Christ save them from the consequences of their inadequacy? Through his example, he teaches them that God is prepared to come down to their level, and be not only their friend, but their companion through every vicissitude; He condescends almost to be their equal in every danger, in order to win their heart's devotion. I believe no other religion accepts or preaches that the Divine generosity extends so far. Not even the poet who wrote the 139th psalm went as far as this. Whether God achieves this by standing beside man, or by dwelling in man, hardly matters.

Does this companionship extend to War? The psalmist thought so, and wrote about the Lord of Hosts. What about Jesus, who spoke about turning the other cheek? The slaughter on the Somme in 1916, I believe, had many consequences. It destroyed respect for authority, and that includes the Church's authority. The men involved had splendid faces; I have some photographs. They were men who respected authority, and perhaps were better for it. But that respect was destroyed. In future a leader had to show he was competent, before he earned the respect of the men. How does a clergyman show he was competent? By taking a good service? By preaching well? By having sympathy and compassion for those suffering? Worthy as these virtues are, there is much more to life than this. But Jesus was different; the Gospels say he was able to heal. And this demonstration of his using his extraordinary power only for good, gave an authenticity to everything he did, and an authority to everything he said. Never mind that it does not seem possible to reproduce this today; it impressed the people he mixed with. If he were in the world today, I do not think his authority would be undermined by the slaughter on the Somme.

The Second World War continued our education. We have tried appeasement, and it does not work. When Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland, the fire-brigade could have turned him

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back; his soldiers were deliberately not issued with ammunition. But success breeds success. When Munich loomed, two members of the German General Staff came to England, and said if we stood firm, they would have him out. They despised him. There is no certainty they could have kept their word. Unfortunately the appeasers had prevented us rearming; and it was very risky to call Hitler's bluff in 1938. If Britain had had three armoured divisions in France in 1940, they might have sealed off Guderian's breakthrough, and won the war for us. We had one armoured brigade, which counter-attacked in the correct place, but could do little. Nevertheless it shook the German High Command, and may have contributed to Hitler's order to stop his panzers for 48 hours. Without that order, the whole of the British Expeditionary Force would have been taken prisoner; and we should have had to make peace. It would have been impossible to continue the struggle having lost our army and most of our able generals. The appeasers brought us to the brink of admitting defeat to a tyrant, who would have ushered in a new dark age "made sinister by the light of perverted science". In the West we no longer listen to the appeasers with the same respect, although they still try to destroy us. Christ's gospel of non-resistance to violence made sense in the Roman Empire, but it makes none today. It would deliver us into an unspeakable slavery; and there are some who would deliver us into this slavery sooner than give up their cherished dogmas.

Does Christ add his voice to the siren voices of the appeasers; or does he accept that non-resistance to violence is an ideal, which cannot be realized today? One might think the short answer was to ask him in prayer; but people would come back with different answers. However if Christianity favours pacifism, not only has recent history shown this to be madness, but you exclude the vast bulk of the population from coming to church. Whatever unilateral disarmers say, the bulk of the population reject it. In Jesus' time the Roman peace held sway, and no-one in his senses tried to disturb it. Should what Jesus said in one set of

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circumstances be cited as authority for behaving in the same way in another? It is the road to catastrophe.

Whether in the legal world, or in life as a whole, every significant problem demands a completely fresh appraisal, and fresh solution. One only needs to recall how the Emperor Julian burned his boats on his Persian expedition, in imitation of Alexander the Great; the result cost him his life, and irretrievable disaster to the expedition. One must not follow slavishly the plans of others, however gifted they may have been. One must use one's own judgement to make a fresh appraisal of the situation as one sees it oneself, after taking all available advice. Besides you can never implement successfully the plan of another, unless you believe in it yourself. Taking the sayings of Jesus literally, and applying them to different circumstances 2000 years later, is the road to catastrophe.

Should one say then that Jesus gave no guidance on how to behave in the secular world today; but what he said about the kingdom of heaven is just as valid as ever? The trouble is that the public is very interested in what is happening today, and rightly so; even if they are cynical about politicians. This answer means that Jesus' gospel is no longer a way of life, because it no longer embraces the whole of a man's conduct, unless we are all to become monks in monasteries. This was the attitude of the Church at the break-up of the Roman Empire, but it led to the dark ages! More relevantly, it means there is no hope of Christianity competing with those religions which do embrace the whole of life, because men and women will find them more satisfying. And the result? English culture would be destroyed. What we long for in England is for a Christianity that embraces the whole of life, and enables a man or woman to make shrewd sensible decisions in their everyday conduct; and which therefore sustains an English way of life. We are not being offered this at the moment, because the clergy preach about what Jesus said and did 2000 years ago: not about what Jesus thought, and how he reached his decisions, which would be relevant to people's everyday conduct.

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Jesus' teaching repays careful study, as you would expect. In the first part of his Ministry, he was concerned to preach a way of life: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". But when Bethsaida and Capernaum did not repent, and he had denounced them as coming after Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgement, he set his face towards Jerusalem and death. He may always have known this was his fate; but he was human, and must have hoped against hope that the world would repent, and make his sacrifice unnecessary. After all, in Gethsemane he pleaded for his life. As Luther says, "No man feared death more". It was when he realized men would not repent that his Ministry became one of salvation after death, and he preached an other-worldly gospel. In the circumstances, he could do nothing else.

But to start with, he preached a way of life; and it must be remembered that after he set his face towards Jerusalem, he promised many times he would come back soon. Everything he said must be viewed in that context; and of course about that, he was hopelessly wrong. St. Paul was right to say we must put on the mind of Christ; and that means studying the thoughts in his mind, rather than paying too much attention to his exact words, particularly when the Gospel accounts may be far from accurate. One does not shut one's ears to Biblical criticism.

My own response to the uncertainty created by Christ's failure to come back soon, is not to look up into the sky, but to conclude that the Creator wants us to complete the salvation begun by Christ. He wants us to use our initiative and judgement as best we can. My own particular contribution is the idea is that some people should try to recreate between people the same relationship that is supposed to exist between God and the soul. Not a bad way to reconcile symbolically England and Germany after the last War. No need for us all to do it. But the supreme promise of Jesus the night before his Passion was that his spirit and the Father's spirit would dwell in anyone who believed. I can think of no better way of entering into his thoughts; and if it helps complete his salvation, so much the better.