

CHAPTER 16.

Christ set out on his Ministry, convinced that his vocation was to be the Messiah; there was no doubt about it in his mind. Even when faced with the imminent prospect of arrest, trial, conviction, and crucifixion, he did not ask forgiveness for being such a fool as to get into his predicament; he asked to be spared the consequences of his deliberate conduct. All his temptations in the wilderness, which only he can have revealed for the Gospel writers to record, were concerned with his vocation; when he emerged from the wilderness he had no doubt, and the night before he died he had no doubt. When it was all over, that is to say after he had been crucified and if tradition is right been raised from the dead, he had no doubts either; indeed he claimed that all power in heaven and earth had been given to him. By then he should have known the truth, if Christian tradition has anything to be said for it.

Yet viewing history with an impartial eye, like that of H.A.L.Fisher, the historian, he does not seem to have done particularly well, or made good use of his power. A wonderful man who gave the most magnificent example of grace and truth in a human life; yet one who was hopelessly incompetent at organizing anything in the view of his contemporaries, and who rejected the basic understanding that if you want to improve the way society works you need the cooperation of secular men. His Gospel as preached by his disciples was one of personal salvation: a seat at the celestial banquet in another world. This may have been all right while Rome organized the secular world; but it is grossly inadequate when mankind is required to prevent society from degenerating into chaos.

Looking at the situation through Christ's own eyes, he had first to make sure of his vocation, or at least as sure of it as he could be. No-one is proof against self-delusion. On one view the first and second temptations were whether his vocation was genuine, or wishful thinking. The third, how he was to put this vocation into practice. It is possible he suddenly

THE THOUGHT OF JESUS further developed.

became aware that he had supernatural power, and that all the temptations were concerned with how he was to use this power, as Professor Seeley, regius professor at Cambridge, suggests. But whichever view is correct, the temptations were about the use, or abuse, of power. Since everything depended on his conviction that his vocation was genuine, and not wishful thinking, my opinion is that his temptations were more to do with his beliefs, than with his intentions. Even to start, he had to be sure of his vocation.

Whether he was right or wrong, he behaved with the most amazing consistency of purpose, once he had begun. So he was evidently satisfied either that it was his vocation, or that his only option was to act in the belief that it was truly his vocation. It was only on the cross that he had the luxury of doubting it; and then it was all over for practical purposes.

Was he right? Judging by the history of the world since, and the fact that no religion compares with his in its nobility, most people's answer (if they gave an answer) would be "Yes". That does not mean he was right about everything. And a scientist would say it does not even mean he was right about his vocation; that he was convinced it was genuine is not the same thing as its being genuine. What is truth? Is truth what God says is truth? Is there any truth outside God? Is there an objective truth? I would like to say "No, it is God who is truth". But what if the voice within, which one thinks is the voice of trained instinct and experience made wiser by the still small voice of conscience, promises and promises, and never fulfils? Is one like Job, who prostrated himself before the Almighty's lecture; or does one say the voice is somehow false? It is very unwise to enter a world of fantasy.

The decision, whether to opt for a seat at the celestial banquet or play an effective part in the affairs of the world, first came to a head with the downfall of the Roman Empire. In Britain, when "the Legions left", I understand little was changed, except that Rome washed its hands of Britain just as America did with South Vietnam. Left on its own, Britain became divided into four regions of local government. When the Saxons arrived, the potential leaders

THE THOUGHT OF JESUS further developed.

were in cloisters, and no-one with sufficient character rose to unite the whole country to resist. So Britain went down before the invaders, and Christianity was wiped out in England for 150 years, though not in Wales. Did the Risen Christ think this was an improvement? Were a few saintly souls worth the destruction of his Church and of the incomparable benefit it conferred on ordinary people? Or was this cloistered virtue a thoroughly selfish and irresponsible response to duty?

The brutal truth is that Western Civilization has flourished by taking what it wanted from Christianity: not by practising it. Even in as mundane a job as the Law, my experience is that evil will always triumph if you rely on Christian precepts. You need something much more robust, if you are to win good cases by honest means. What is true of the Law, I am sure is equally true of most other trades and professions. It is impossible to take any part in civic life, unless one has confidence in one's own inner judgement, and refuses to pay homage to a religion outside oneself. Religion has to be based on the indwelling spirit of God, or it is useless, except as a social accomplishment .

Bonhoeffer was saying, before he was murdered by the Nazis in April 1945, that mankind had come of age. If he was right, you now have to preach to adults who are capable of making up their own minds, and whose opinions may be much better informed than the preacher's. Your only authority now is the eloquent authority of persuasion and example. To persuade, you must believe every word you speak; which means that your beliefs must be the fruit of your experience, and not a dogma learned by rote. To be an example, you need to have had power which ultimately you have used for good. Jesus remains the most persuasive example, because after all he had no official position during his three years Ministry; but that does not mean one takes everything he said literally, or that one is excused from using one's own judgement and discretion.

THE THOUGHT OF JESUS further developed.

Even Albert Schweitzer thought Jesus made mistakes. He was hopelessly wrong if he foretold his second coming within the lifetime of some of those present. He is recorded as having done so; the legend of his imminent return lasted a long time, and it must have sprung from something he said. So it looks as though he did say it. Far be it from me to denigrate the possibility that he will return in clouds and glory; but the fact stares us in the face that he may have been hopelessly wrong about that too. It looks more likely that any second coming will be an outpouring of spiritual power which will overshadow Pentecost, as Pentecost overshadowed what went before it. Traditionally the gospel healings have been exalted into a proof that Jesus was God. But nowadays the many stories of the gospel healings are taken rather as proof that the Gospels are largely fantasy, because no-one can reproduce them. Only if they can be reproduced in part at least, will the Gospels once again be restored in popular imagination. If they are, then men may believe that the spirit of God was in Jesus, whether or not he was immortal in the flesh, and however many mistakes he made.

If that is what he was, immortal in the flesh, then most assuredly we should follow him through thick and thin. But suppose we did, and men and women found themselves to be immortal; what would they do? It would be unthinkable for them just to enjoy themselves, and do as they pleased; they would become diabolical in no time. That is what happens when you are so arrogant as to think God will serve your convenience. The only thing they could do would be to build the New Jerusalem. But could they do it? Just consider for one moment the publication "Putting Asunder", the product of a committee of the Church of England, which was meant to offer wise advice to the secular world on marriage and divorce. It was a shambles; and I explain why in my book. The C.of E. is in no position to offer advice to the secular world; and perhaps literal immortality in this world is a consummation best avoided. Perhaps the idea of immortality in this world should be limited to the quality of a man's

THE THOUGHT OF JESUS further developed.

actions, which is what I argue for at great length in my book. The willingness to die, that another may live.

As the Church's authority has crumbled, and its guidance proved less and less wise, so secular wisdom has taken over, probably for the best. So one is tempted to ask if the Church has any role left, other than providing consolation to the losers? I think the answer probably is, "Not until the next step in man's evolution is taken". We are very much in the position of Judaism in the generation before John the Baptist. The Pharisees had performed their task; they had preserved the faith, brilliantly during the rebellion of the Maccabees, and afterwards during the generations when there was no prophet. But they were quite incapable of taking Judaism further towards the promised land; in other words, incapable of turning Judaism into the world religion for which the Roman Empire was waiting. It needed Jesus to begin that process; and in doing so, he was remarkably ungracious towards the Pharisees. And it needed St. Paul to finish it; and he was every inch a Pharisee. Ironically the opposition of the Pharisees to Jesus was strikingly similar to the opposition of Fabius to Scipio. Yet Fabius had saved Rome from Hannibal, though he was incapable of defeating him; and Scipio understood how to defeat him, but in a way Fabius thought was madness! Now in its turn, Jesus' Church has come to the end of a cul-de-sac, inasmuch as it has lost credibility with the bulk of the population; and we must seek the next step forward.

Who must seek it? Anyone and everyone; or only someone with a sense of vocation, even though he might be deceiving himself about his having one? How does one make sure of avoiding self-deception? There is no way of making sure. We all let our imaginations run away with us from time to time. The Quakers believe there is something of God in everyman, though the spirit may shine more brightly in some than in others; most Christians believe that all men are made in the image of God, although most men desecrate that image until it is unrecognisable. Does this mean we are all supposed to aim at being replicas of Jesus? Of

THE THOUGHT OF JESUS further developed.

course not! The gifts we have been given by Providence, and the spirit vouchsafed to us, are infinitely varied. And we have to make the best of what we are given, and bring the spirit within us to such a nobility of stature and maturity as it is capable of reaching. Can God predict the outcome, when man cannot? Are all our lives predestined, as Calvin thought? I doubt it. Why cannot God, who can do all things, avoid knowing the outcome: so as to be the companion of man? For myself I would prefer a companion, to a tyrant; which is how many people regard him, as a companion.