

CHAPTER 17.

Christ set out on his Ministry, convinced that his vocation was to be the Messiah. At the time many people would have said he had fulfilled the messianic prophecies successfully. Apart from the charge of blasphemy, no-one accused him of wrongdoing, or sin in the vulgar sense. He had never used his extraordinary power other than to do good. And tradition says he was raised from the dead, which, if true, would seem to be the stamp of Divine approval. But 2000 years later, we have the advantage of being able to view his life and achievements in an historical perspective. And we can see that his Gospel is manifestly not striking a chord with the man in the street today; so much so that many people are saying that his Church is in its death-throes. It is not that the man in the street rejects the Gospel; he does not even understand it. So it is right to ask at least what has gone wrong; whether it was the original gospel that was flawed, in such a way that it could not adapt to changing conditions, or Church leaders who cannot preach the original Gospel in language intelligible to the ordinary man? Even the prophets modified their prophecies to meet the conditions of their age; the message was the same, but they were not plagiarists. There is great risk in repeating what Jesus said and did endlessly, because science, which is God's gift to man as Jesus was, has proved to a degree of probability that most people accept that everything in creation evolves.

In Jesus' day probably the idea of the permanence of substance was part of the air one breathed; no-one dared suggest a letter of the Law be changed. But modern physics has dispensed with substance; with the result that Plato's philosophy and the Church's theology, which thanks to Augustine was based on Plato or Neo-Platonism, are now seen to be flawed. And permanence has been modified by evolution. So can the Gospel remain unaffected?

Jesus was assisted by the prophetic tradition that led the Jews to expect a Messiah. We do not expect a Messiah nowadays; and if someone came along claiming to be one, he would

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be a figure of fun. Not so with Jesus; the Jews were expecting him, or someone very like him. So they listened to him. Now in fulfilling his vocation, Jesus could modify that tradition, but not reject it. He could accept the title of King; not of the House of David, because he claimed to be greater than David or Solomon, and yet confound the prophecies of a warrior-king. He could adopt the idea of the suffering servant, and reject the idea of the Gentiles paying homage to Israel, which features so largely in most of the prophets. But he could not abandon the idea that the Messiah would put everything right. John the Baptist said that the man who came after him would have a winnowing fan in his hand, and separate the good from the bad. The idea that the Messiah would only take mankind on the next step of his evolutionary progress would have been blasphemy to any Jew. It is not so to us; indeed to the man in the street, who has absorbed science without understanding it, this is common sense.

We have no prophetic tradition today. So what have we got to look forward to? The Church copes with the stark reality that our Messiah has not put everything right in two ways. Firstly, by telling the congregation every Sunday they are all miserable sinners, as hopelessly sunk in sin this week as they were last, so how can they possibly expect the kingdom of heaven to descend, and it is all their fault. Secondly, by claiming to look forward to the day of judgement, when the sheep will be separated from the goats. No preparations are being made for this coming in clouds and glory (except by the Jehovah's Witnesses); so it is a theoretical rather than a practical expectation. In the absence of any discipline of thought that looks to the future, it is hard to see what other excuses the clergy could advance for the kingdom of heaven being in such poor shape; unless of course they were to blame themselves. In the 19th century, liberal democracy and the search for justice seemed for a time to offer hope for the future; but this was dealt a shattering blow by the First World War. In the 20th Century, the good intentions and pious hopes of the inter-war years were utterly

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shattered by the Second World War, in which military thought reached the very highest intellectual level. So what hope for the future now?

In the Western world, the only discipline of thought we have that looks forward realistically with any degree of composure to a better world seems to be the philosophy of natural science with its theory of evolution. And it does not matter whether the mechanism is natural selection or survival of the fittest, or 1001 acts of creation along the way, it is still evolution. But if one embraces the hope that something better is destined to evolve from the present situation, it means that Christ, the Prince of Peace, only took us along the next stage of man's journey to the promised land. Much more remains to be done. And this is an uncomfortable message for those with traditional beliefs.

When you compare Jesus' teaching with that of the prophets, he is incomparable. Their message was fully understood in their day. So well understood and so resented, that many of them were killed; yet Zechariah is almost unintelligible to us today. In contrast the words of Jesus still have a blistering clarity. We may dislike what he said, but no-one can mistake his meaning. He must have healed many people; it is absurd to imagine the Gospels would have given his healings such prominence if they were all bogus. The detail and realism of the healing of the blind man who washed in the pool of Siloam defies invention; and the insolence of the man's answers to the Pharisees is almost mischievous in its humour. That was not invented. Yet it does Jesus no homage to say he was right about everything, and what he said cannot be improved upon. It is said of Isaac Newton that his Principia, his theory of gravitation, was the greatest act of scientific creative thought there has ever been; as it reads on the plinth of his statue, "qui genus humanum ingenio superavit". But it does no credit to Newton to dispute that Einstein's field theory is a better approximation to the truth than Newton's force theory of gravitation. Similarly it does no credit to Jesus to fail to recognise that the messianic prophesies demanded that as Messiah he would put everything right.

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Surely he was shrewd enough to see that he could hardly claim to be the Messiah, and deny this demand; yet he must not allow himself to be trapped by it? His solution was the most extraordinary thing he ever did.

Of course he was familiar with the opinions current in his day. The Day of Judgement features frequently in the prophets; with them it meant that widows and orphans would receive equity, but the fat sheep who elbowed others out of the way would get their deserts. Jesus modified it; saying that if two women were grinding at the mill, one would be taken and the other left. Most of the Sermon on the Mount, I understand, was current thought in Middle Eastern sects; what Jesus did was to give it his incomparable authority. But the idea of eating a god's flesh to take on his spirit did not appear in the prophets. It came from the worship of Isis and Mithras, and further back from primitive tribal warfare. If you ate the flesh of your enemy or your god, you acquired his strength. Yet Jesus adopted this as the very core of his message. "In truth, in very truth I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you can have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood possesses eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. My flesh is real food; my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells continually in me and I dwell in him": John ch.6 v.53. I have quoted at length to show it was no idle remark; he repeated over and over again this most provocative idea. Many of his hearers were so disgusted when they heard it, that they departed, saying it was more than they could stomach. This was not invention either. No apologist writing a book, and trying to convince his readers that its hero was the Messiah, would invent a symbolism calculated to revolt them.

To an extent Jesus appears to have been caught by the prophesy that the Messiah would put everything right. He did say he would draw all men to himself, when he was lifted up from the earth. Now the cross moves many to tears; Isaac Watts' hymn "When I survey the wondrous cross" is sublime; but manifestly the cross only draws a small fraction of

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mankind to himself. He gave the impression he would return in power and glory within a comparatively short time, which was perhaps a sop to those who had been looking for a warrior king, or at least for dramatic results. But in the symbolism of eating and drinking his flesh and blood he was not caught by the messianic prophesies.

Why did he do it? What were his thoughts as he planned the last supper with his friends, and provoked the crowd in anticipation of it? In effect it was his funeral oration. No-one could eat his flesh if he were still alive, not even in the most symbolic sense. On one occasion apparently he told a group who believed in him that they were bent on killing him, and very nearly provoked them into doing it, by stoning him. No-one can say he did not look for trouble. And once he had uttered these thoughts, and called in aid the symbolism of the corn and wine gods of antiquity, he had to die. He may have known that a powerful faction in the religious authority were determined to kill him; but there must have been a reasonably powerful minority who wanted justice. Why did he want to turn a judicial murder by the High Priests and their supporters, backed by what was probably a small (and hired) mob, into a ritual sacrifice in which the whole world was condemned? Or was this a rationalization by his apologists after his death? We all know, that is those of us who have exercised even a small amount of authority responsibly know, that state-craft on the most modest scale demands a certain inhumanity of conduct. As Agamemnon found, it is impossible to conduct yourself responsibly in any office, without a willingness to be ruthless. Goethe's view, expressed at the end of Faust in the incident when the cottage of Philomen and Baucis is burned, was that in a scheme of development the consent of all those involved needed to be obtained. I entirely agree; if time and space allow, I think one should be willing to allow oneself to be frustrated. But they may not; and then it is irresponsible to hesitate. Most of us shrink from ruthlessness, if there is another way; but often there isn't. Then to fail to act only stores up trouble, chiefly for others, but possibly for oneself as well. Was this what Jesus meant: that the Almighty, the

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Creator, utterly rejected this interpretation of the code of public duty? Well, if you reject it, what do you put in its place, if you are not privileged with the Almighty's power?

One must not denigrate Jesus, because he made mistakes. The miracle is he made so few. But he did not put everything right; and it is no good pretending he did. On the other hand promising his own imminent return is trivial compared with his supreme promise that if anyone believed in him, his spirit, and the Father's spirit also, would dwell in the man. Surely this was the private version to his disciples, in the intimacy of the Last Discourses on the night before he died, of the version he gave in public: that a man must eat his flesh and drink his blood to have any part in him? The public version was given to all; and you do not open your heart to your enemy. What mockery he would have subjected himself to, if he had repeated the Last Discourses in public. Of course he used a metaphor which threw down a challenge to his enemies to kill him. Of course he used a metaphor which would remain valid when they had killed him. But was it true, or was it also a mistake? If true what does it mean?

What it does not mean is a facility for asking God to make up your mind for you. Has nobody noticed that in the story of the Temptations, Jesus never suggested that God gave him any answers? Jesus gave the answers himself. It is the same rule for us: we often have to answer our own prayers. So even if Jesus did mean that his God, and our God, rejected that interpretation of performing a public office responsibly, that does not mean we necessarily have to reach the same conclusion. And I for one emphatically repudiate the limitations he sought to impose on a man's vocation. Jesus is not the only access to the Creator, even if he is the only access to the benign fatherly side of the Creator; the Creator can arrange that a man has access to him in some other way, if he wants to. Furthermore the Creator can give a man a vocation to be employed in a public office, if he wants to. We can all indulge in wishful thinking; but that does not give another the prerogative to say we are wrong. You can either accept that when a man prays, he talks to God, as I gather Jews firmly believe; or you

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can lay down codes of behaviour which a man must keep, and deny that he has direct access to God. But you cannot do both. You either respect a man's ability to make up his own mind, or you don't. You cannot sometimes do one, and sometimes the other; or the man would go hysterical, like one of Pavlov's dogs.

But was his promise that his spirit and the Father's spirit would dwell in a man true, or only beautiful make-belief? Was he trying to escape from the trap of the Messiah having to put everything right, by saying that those who believed in him would achieve greater things than he had ever done? When you look at the history of the Church, it looks like make-belief. The power to heal vanishing after a generation; endless doctrinal disputes whether Jesus was equal to the Father, or subordinate, and when one side won persecution of the other; Crusades that extended the commercial empire of the Venetians, more than bringing God nearer to the common people; ritual and symbolism confused with miracle in the communion service itself; the sale of indulgences, and the bartering of Heaven for money. Where was Jesus in all this? One could be forgiven for thinking his promise make-belief.

John Ruesbroke, the medieval mystic, said that the perfect life was not the contemplative life, but was when a man had perfected his contemplation and then gone out to lead an ordinary life in the community. Surely he was right? If he was right, it means he rejected the idea that leading an ordinary life in the community is serving mammon. And if God's spirit dwells in a man, it means simply that the man must have the confidence to believe that his judgement is reliable, in matters with which he has sufficient experience. This is so, whether it is sailing the seas like Joshua Slocum, or being an advocate like Tom Erskine. And if the great Marquis of Montrose appreciated that to raise Scotland for the King, it was unrealistic to expect an army of saints; he must recruit seasoned warriors from the German wars, like Captain Dugald Dalgetty in Scott's novel, then no-one in his senses will contradict him. And if Field Marshall von Manstein wrote of the Russian battles, that inner

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knowledge is the most sure knowledge, even when deciding whether to place a panzer army here or there, no-one with any sense will contradict him. And if in Court you are faced with a dishonest witness, you use all your cunning to persuade him to tell stupid obvious lies of his own free will, and so undermine his credibility. So even if the spirit of the Almighty dwells in you, you must make up your own mind what to do on the basis of your trained instinct and experience, made more generous maybe by the still small voice of conscience. You have no-one to turn to. No harm in praying for guidance when you have the time; but the odds are you will have to answer your own prayers, as Jesus did. Anyone who has exercised authority knows the same; you must rely on your own inner judgement, even if it sometimes leads you astray. Did Jesus, the greatest religious genius who has ever lived, not understand this?

In my opinion he realized it only too well. One would be mad to set out to save the world, and be the longed for Messiah, unless one believed that God dwelt in one's soul, as well as outside it. Even if this belief were mistaken, one would still have to believe it. Often one has to act on the assumption that one's beliefs are true; and they cannot always be. One must sometime make a mistake. So with the indwelling spirit of God, one cannot prove to oneself that it dwells in oneself; you can only prove to others that it dwells in you.

If the relationship of the Creator to one of his creatures is so delicate, if to use the language of the psalmist God is nearer to the soul than one is oneself, have the clergy a teaching role in this regard. No, of course they haven't. A clergyman with even an ounce of intelligence would only presume to speak of his own experience, and of the general experience of mankind. In using this gruesome metaphor, I am sure Jesus was wanting men to have the confidence to say, "Christ is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, spirit of my spirit"; such a close intimacy, that it would be sheer impertinence for anybody else to lecture him about it. His opinion of the Pharisees was far from complimentary; and I feel sure he wanted to avoid so far as he could an elaborate system of theology being built up from what

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he had said, in his own Church. How little he knew of human nature in some ways; or is it more charitable to say he embodied the triumph of hope over experience.

The Church preaches that Christ overcame sin and death once for all upon the cross; which the secular man would say he manifestly did not do. Men still fear death, as children fear to go into the dark. Evil is still rampant not only in the world of affairs, and in every trade and profession, but in religion as well. He may have given some men the power and grace to resist evil, when they meet it in their lives; he may have enabled some men to fear death as little as their beds. But he did not do it for everyone, and it is no good pretending that he did. Probably Christ achieved both less and more, than he is commonly credited with doing; and it is the Church that has been trapped by the messianic prophecies into a completely unrealistic assessment of his achievements.

I accept that creeds and theology are necessary for an historic Church to survive; though Jesus' promise to return soon may have blinded him to this elementary truth. But both are suspect. Every Sunday clergy and congregation read out from the prayer book what they say they believe. No-one seems to recognize the element of farce in having to open a book to discover what it is one believes. But all clergy do it; I have watched and listened thousands of times. I only remember two exceptions; one was a chaplain at Kings College, Cambridge, the other a curate at Warcop near Appleby. They knew the service by heart, and obviously so. Furthermore it is unlikely that any member of the congregation selected at random will agree with more than a few of the propositions in the creeds. Either his experience will not be wide enough to cover more than one or two; or if it is wide enough, his experience is likely to be different from the creed's draftsmen's, 1700 years ago. I expect most people recite the creeds without thinking of their experience; but they might as well be reciting a nursery rhyme. The idea that absolute truth and beauty and the sonorous interrelation of the persons of the Trinity in the Nicene creed sit majestically in some Platonic heaven is fantasy. Truth and beauty have

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meaning in the imagination, and nowhere else. And it requires a refined telepathy to discover whether your idea of truth and beauty is the same as mine; just as no-one knows if the impact of light on the mind, its colour and vividness, is the same for one person as for another.

One of the rewards of theology too is that it enables someone with only a little religious experience to talk as though he had rather a lot. Theology can be a mask for the charlatan and the impostor, and one meets them everywhere. Both creeds and a theological structure therefore put a premium on insincerity; but it is a necessary premium to pay to maintain a Church with any sort of coherence. With too open an acceptance or insistence that everyone's beliefs are in fact different from everyone else's, however true – and you would have not a Church, but a debating society. But there it is; there is the same compromise with evil both inside the Church and outside in any trade or profession. The only scheme that seems to me to avoid this compromise is the one Jesus suggested; namely a return to the theocracy of ancient Israel, and then only for a short time, between his crucifixion and his coming again within the lifetime of some of those present. For better or worse, life was created to be more complicated than Jesus thought; and for us compromise is inevitable, as it was for Agamemnon. My solution is to try to ensure that the Divine inscrutable mystery is a lifelong companion, provided He is willing; then he can share the decisions I agonize over.

As I have said, the only discipline of thought I know of that looks forward realistically to a better world is the philosophy of Natural Science. Whatever you say about Christ's second coming, the C.of E. does not look forward to it realistically. So from an evolutionary perspective, what was Christ's ministry all about? We can see very clearly the impact on life once man had replaced the dinosaurs. They were a dead end, and had to be eliminated somehow before man could safely appear. Many of them were small, but some were so vast and terrible that, had man appeared, there would have been no chance of his holding his own. But once out of the way, man was able to appear along with the mammals, and flourish. And

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with man came thought, tools, language. But it was not enough, and the religion of primitive man was mostly anthropomorphic. The Jews alone were radically different; for many centuries they believed in the one true God, a righteous god. Then gradually a few men in other races too began to believe in the one true God, behind the polytheism of the common people. The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, the noblest of the Roman Emperors, makes this abundantly clear. Nor did Jesus introduce the idea of the sacramental union between God and man; it was in the religions of Isis and Mithras. What Jesus did by his example was to teach man that he could enter into the creativeness of God, provided he was willing to use this power only to do good. In an obscure way, he freed man from himself; from being obsessed with himself, whether it was with his own brilliance or with his own wretchedness. Evil is both much worse and more insidious than is commonly experienced; and at the same time less prevalent. There are many good people; and it is a mistake to call them miserable sinners. Not everyone is as bad this week, as they were last!

Erasmus translates the beginning of John's Gospel as, "In the beginning was the conversation", suggesting in his imagination that creation was brought into being by the interplay of two minds. Jesus enlarged this conversation to include the mind of man; the man in whom God's spirit dwells can converse with the Almighty. He has the assurance to do so, just as the psalmist had a complete assurance when addressing his God.

When the communion is between God and man, there is the possibility of creating a new heaven and a new earth; when the communion is between men, there is the possibility of untold adventures, both good and bad. For solitary man there is only the prospect of reaching a dead end eventually.