

Present-Day Ideas and the Hope of Immortality.

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SOME months ago I was in conversation with a missionary then at home on furlough. Our talk started from discussion of a missionary exhibition at which we had both been working, and which had been remarkably successful, both in point of the number of visitors and the interest which it had aroused. I was therefore not a little startled at the very gloomy view which he appeared to take of the present missionary outlook in England. Mindful of the Pan-Anglican Congress, of the Day of Opportunity meetings, as well as of the growth of the Student Volunteer Missionary Union, I was not prepared to be told that actual work in the foreign field was not going forward. But my friend seemed only too correct in his declaration that the vastly increased interest in foreign missions of late years was bearing no proportionate fruit in offers for foreign service, or even in subscriptions to the Societies. But he went even further than that; he believed that all personal work of an evangelistic nature was less eagerly pursued than formerly, and he was prepared to support his disquieting assertion by assigning a definite cause for the facts which he had observed. English Christianity has, he held, lost its grasp of the doctrine of a future life, so that Christian people of to-day are unwilling to jeopard their lives for the sake of a visionary hereafter. Neither their own future nor that of those to whom the Word should be preached, is of sufficient interest to them to make it worth their while to risk all in this life with a view to the life to come. Most of us would be ready with arguments to urge against such a view; we might point out many undeniable instances of heroism and self-sacrifice where, as far as we can judge, no thought of bartering the present for the future entered into the case. But even while we argued we should be conscious that, however wrong the conclusions I have

mentioned might be, the main charge is true ; we have allowed the thought of the world to come to drop, if not entirely, yet too often, out of our calculations. Our missionaries do not now go out with the same urgent sense of the need of rescuing the perishing heathen as their predecessors in the work had ; and certainly they do not go with the hope of obtaining a heavenly reward in the place of all that they sacrifice here. We have heard men who almost apologized for those passages in the Gospels which speak of a reward at all ; we are inclined to think all hymns which are full of aspirations of heaven morbid ; we conceive it to be something ignoble to allow our hearts to dwell on, or our lips to speak of, the crown of life which He hath promised to all them that love Him. The situation is not a new one ; as far back as 1870 Ruskin complained of the difficulty of appealing to a belief in eternal life to any "average modern English company," for they "will forthwith tell you that what you say is very beautiful, but it is not practical." This, in a utilitarian age, is sufficient to account for the prevailing silence on the subject, but it becomes necessary to ask what it is that has made such an appeal seem so worthless from a practical point of view. What is it that has robbed the hope of immortality of its value for the man of to-day ?

The first cause which I would suggest is the inevitable focussing of interest upon this present life in a time when the present moment is always too crowded with cares and duties to allow of our thinking much of the future. We look back with envy on the less occupied lives of our forefathers, when the struggle for existence was less keen and the mind had time and sufficient quietude to look forward to a new and completer life hereafter. To-day we suffer, not from a monotony that welcomes the prospect of brighter interests in the world to come, but from a weariness of the day's too-frequent businesses and cares that indulges in the dim hope of an eternal dreamless rest. It would take too long to enumerate all the consequences of this new complexity of daily life ; individually it has meant that nervous irritability which craves for instant relief, making patience and

trust so hard for us. It has brought about that ubiquitous influence of materialistic thought that relegates the idea of unseen things being eternal to the schools of speculative philosophy. Socially it has resulted in a problem of such magnitude and urgency that we are forced to look rather for a solution in this present life than to preach contentment or resignation in the hope of redress in a world to come. So there has come about the undeniable shifting of the emphasis in respect of sin from the offence against the holiness of God, to that against the well-being of man. We think more to-day of the slavery of sin than of its guilt, more of its injury to us and those around us in our daily life than of its power to shut us out for ever from the presence and enjoyment of God.

In the second place, the Church has met this new situation inadequately. She has lost touch with the world because she has continued to preach an old-fashioned and unworthy other-worldliness. She has been too slow to claim the solution of social difficulties as her province. Some of her clergy have appeared to the world to be following blindly and selfishly a policy that made for their own interest and not at all for the interest of the flock committed to their care; others seem to have fled for refuge to an old and outworn theory of priestly rule, offering that as a cure for all evils; while too many of those who made it their boast that they represented the true evangelical tradition have withdrawn themselves from all interest in modern life, and have wasted their time in poring over speculative theories of interpretation of prophecy, or have alienated their flocks by a rigid puritanism which opposed the tendency of the day without satisfying the needs that underlay that tendency. Saddest of all, from too many a pulpit has sounded a message of Divine pardon and atonement, which has been robbed of its power because it began and ended in emotion, and was fortified neither by definite teaching nor by a challenge to Christian consistency and activity. What you say is very beautiful—the world has in very truth answered—but it is not practical.

In the third place, one must mention very briefly the general tendency of modern theology. What the German student has painfully extracted from the Gospels in his patient but continuous search for truth, the doubter or the rationalist in England has seized upon as a verified and complete statement of the facts, with the result that Jesus Christ has been presented to the men of this generation as the last and the greatest of the Prophets, then as the Founder, but not the Finisher, of modern moral teaching. A recent skit on the features of modern England, when gibing at the craving for epitomized literature, suggested that the Bible might be reduced to two words, "Be good"; in very truth, this is all that the Bible means to thousands of men and women; but the fault is at least in part that of the Church, which has not faithfully taught men what the Bible reveals of the secret of goodness. Can we blame men for the very loose thinking that has sprung up in our midst since someone was bold enough to doubt the doctrine of Eternal Punishment? They have lost a superstitious fear, without gaining a saving knowledge of God. Unconsciously they have degraded His Fatherhood into camaraderie, His love into good-nature, and have supposed that a denial of everlasting woe involved the abandonment of any theory of future punishment.

Thus the consideration of the life to come is beset on two sides. We forget the future in the present, and the failure of our efforts to mend the present evils leads us to trust in a beneficent but vague power that is somehow bringing things to rights. Too easily, then, life becomes a game, grim or careless, according to the mood of the player. It is too harassing a game to take seriously. As far as we are concerned, it is generally a losing game, so we play it with a smiling face, believing ourselves the sport of gods who will perhaps step in, as in the old Greek drama, and put things to rights when the situation has become intolerable. And if there are no gods to watch, why, then we must make the best or worst of it according to our temperament.

Now, all this is too obviously opposed to the consensus of

New Testament teaching for it to be necessary to elaborate the point. Perhaps in no case is the difference between the old and new dispensations more distinctly shown than in the change effected in the minds of devout men as to hopes of future bliss and glory. Whereas the Prophets loved to speak of a redeemed Zion and transfigured Judah, with God Himself present, regnant, honoured, and known of all men, with the nations hurrying to Jerusalem to find there the God of the whole earth, the unanimous voice of the writers of the New Testament is that of our citizenship in heaven; and even if a New Jerusalem is spoken of, it is one that is entirely unlike the earthly and historical city of David.

Now this has been recognized by a comparatively new school of theologians, who hold what is called the "eschatological" theory of the meaning of the phrase "The Kingdom of Heaven." We are not, it is contended, to interpret this phrase of any earthly state or condition of being; it refers to "a good time coming," but not in this life. It is, in fact, a continuation of the old Messianic hope, but completely metamorphosed. It is that hope purged of its materialism and worldliness and presented anew in a metaphysical and spiritual form. There is, no doubt, a great deal to recommend this view. It presents a reasonable coherence between the Old and New Testaments, while sufficiently exhibiting the difference between the tempers of the two dispensations. It also presents an interpretation of the phrase that would have been exceedingly natural and welcome at the beginning of the Christian era, when men who acknowledged the Name of Christ carried their lives in their hands, and could only look forward to some future time, some new dispensation for the fulfilment of their hopes in Christ. Indeed, we can see in the writings of St. Paul the influence of such a looking forward. The keynote of the Epistles to the Thessalonians is, "So shall we be for ever with the Lord," a thought necessarily of great encouragement to the persecuted Apostle of the Gentiles. The thought recurs in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, "To be present in the body is to be absent from

the Lord ;” and again in Philippians the Apostle declares that “To depart and be with Christ is far better.” If ever any man might be led by sorrow and persecution in this life to look for peace and comfort in the next, it was St. Paul. Does this, then, explain the difference between the language of the New Testament and our indifference to the hope of the world to come? Is the eschatological emphasis of the first century entirely the product of trial and persecution, in much the same way as the Jewish Apocalypses were composed in times of stress and storm? It is clear, indeed, that the Revelation of St. John was written to cheer and encourage men who were face to face with fierce persecution, but does that fact really supply the whole answer to the question, Whence this insistence on the future life in the New Testament? For if it does, we may go on to say: The New Testament necessarily looks forward with eager hope to the world to come, because it was written by men who had suffered, to men who were about to suffer persecution, but with the passing of the fiery trial the need of any urgent presentment of such a hope passes away too.

At any rate, before accepting such an answer, it were well to look at another interpretation given to that phrase, “The Kingdom of Heaven.” The traditional interpretation regards the phrase as expressive of a change not of circumstance but of character; the Kingdom of Heaven is within you; it is alien, not from sorrow, but from sin. It was the strong sense that Christ is the Saviour from sin, not only from its presence in the world to come, but from its power in this present life, that forced this view of the Kingdom to gain support. Men felt themselves already transferred into a new Kingdom that was indeed a Kingdom of God, a Kingdom, however, the privileges of which they were only beginning to realize and enjoy. Nay, the more their experience of its blessings grew, the more they longed for the full enjoyment of them. Still sin hampered them, still they knew that their true selves were unrealized, but they were upheld by the assurance that He who had begun a

good work in them would complete it to the end. Little wonder that they looked eagerly for the day of the Lord, and would "sometimes haply lift tired eyes to heaven; 'Is that His cloud?'"

In this hope, then, lies the reconciliation between the sure belief that the heart of the Gospel is contained in these words: "We know that He was manifested to take away sin," and the equally certain fact that in this life sin never wholly loses its grasp on any one of us. The reconciliation lies in the fact that thus we are promised that which every one of us instinctively desires, yet so few of us can express—viz., the ultimate realization of ourselves, the deliverance from all within us that we feel to be contrary to our best and so most real longings. This self-realization is impossible in the warring of flesh and Spirit within us; we yearn for a new life that will make it actual. Many nowadays, indeed, profess to be offended at our Lord's frank appeal to this instinct of self-realization, but mistakenly. His promises of reward to faithful disciples, His parables of the Kingdom, are all addressed to men who were longing for something denied them in this life, who yearned for satisfaction, but had never found it. To those who have learned the depths of their spiritual poverty, as to those who have endured persecution, is the Kingdom promised. It was St. Paul's heart's desire thus to be delivered from this awful guilt and slavery of sin: "Oh wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death?" A world of experience lies behind that phrase: "the sting of death is sin." St. Paul learnt to glory in tribulation; he turned psalms of agonized appeal into pæans of triumphant faith; but ever his cry to the end was still for that satisfaction, that self-realization, which was involved in the consummation of the heavenly citizenship, "whence we look for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body," and again, "I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of—*Righteousness*." The same truth may be gathered from the letters to the Seven Churches. It is for

faithfulness in the face of error and infidelity rather than persecution that final blessedness is promised. Those who overcome as Christ overcame, "shall sit with Him on His throne . . . and they shall walk with Him in white, for they are worthy."

In this presentation of the Christian hope of immortality lies the solution of many difficulties of our own day. It satisfies that need for moral and ethical teaching which has led many to a position of disgust and contempt for an Evangelicalism that seemed to have no message for daily life, but only a too vivid apprehension of the almost physical horrors or joys of the life after death, for it preaches an immortality that takes account of the eternity of character. On the other hand, it avoids the crudities of the theology that explains Jesus as a visionary self-deceived Messiah, expecting almost hourly an immediate Parousia. It leaves room for His ethical teaching, not merely as an "interims ethik," but as the necessary preparation for those who would enter the Kingdom. It reconciles the two apparently contradictory features of the Kingdom, which is presented as at once future and present. On this interpretation we can see how St. John could write the words, "Beloved, now are we the children of God," and then go on to add, "and it is not yet manifest what we shall be." The practical bearing of it is further made clear by the words, "And everyone that hath this hope set on Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure."

Once again this view of the life eternal affords a most necessary corrective to that type of social teaching which, naturally not content for a future life to right the wrong, preaches a kind of earthly paradise. Such an earthly paradise all too easily becomes a garden of Cain, where every man, taught to think first of his own rights and the wrongs inflicted upon him by a regardless society, learns to fight, not for character but for place, not to serve but to tyrannize over, and, it may be, in the end to murder his brother. We must not too harshly blame men whose socialism is a policy of getting rather than giving. The instinct for self-realization is universal; we

do despite to our human nature if we forget or ignore it. Without the recognition of it our preaching of the beauty and the duty of self-sacrifice is an empty waste of high-sounding words. "What you say," once again the world will answer, "is very beautiful, but it is not practical." Even Christ, who pleased not Himself, endured, so we read, the Cross, despising the shame for the joy that was set before Him. The disciple is not above his Master, though to him to live is Christ—yes, though he be made already "to sit at His right hand in the heavenly places," though he joy to be "offered upon the sacrifice and service of" his converts' "faith." Yet for him, too, there remains the hope of the resurrection from the dead, if by any means he may attain unto it, for he is "sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is an earnest of his inheritance unto the redemption of God's own possession, unto the praise of His glory."



"We spend our years as a tale that is told."—PSALM xc. 9.

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ANOTHER volume closed, and every sheet
 Is crowded with the record of a day—
 A strange commingling of the grave and gay :
 Laughter and tears, woes, triumph and defeat,
 Sin's stains and all-sufficient cleansing meet ;
 Traces of guidance sought, but Self's own way,
 Writ large, points out the track which led astray,
 And bruised, ere he returned, the pilgrim's feet.
 A wondrous story shall this tale unfold,
 When edited by Him who can discern
 Self's efforts midst His own most precious gold.¹
 What stands the test of fire we, too, must learn,
 When, in that day, His judgment we uphold
 And joy to let our worthless stubble burn.

¹ I Cor. iii. 13-15.