

EXPECTANCY AND FULFILMENT

By JOHN BLIGH

THE life of the Church on earth stretches from the first Advent to the second. We live, therefore, in an interim period: the Master has gone away, but will one day return; he has subdued the powers of evil, but not wholly; he has redeemed us in one sense, and yet we still 'look forward to the redemption of our bodies';¹ he has given us a foretaste or first instalment of the Spirit, but we are not yet wholly spiritualized;² he has made us God's sons in principle,³ but we still have to become God's sons;⁴ the Kingdom is among us,⁵ yet in a sense it is still to come;⁶ we are already saved – but only in hope.⁷ Our present spiritual condition is, therefore, one of partial fulfilment, of patient endurance soothed by hope – not an entirely comfortable condition, for we still remain subject to concupiscence, sinfulness, mediocrity and futility. St. Paul speaks of himself as 'groaning' in expectation of sonship; and in one place he sets so little store by the spiritual gifts of the present in comparison with those of the future that he says: 'If there is no resurrection from the dead, we are the most miserable of men.'⁸

Christian spirituality must accordingly be compounded of two elements: the sense of present possession, and the sense of unfulfilled expectancy. These two elements can be mixed in various proportions, and various types of spirituality will result according to the mixture. A spirituality which concentrates chiefly upon present possession of union with God in Christ may be called mystical, and one which concentrates rather upon the unfulfilled expectation may be called eschatological. Any spirituality which is orthodox must combine both elements: a purely mystical spirituality would have to deny the resurrection of the body, and a purely eschatological spirituality would have to deny the doctrine of intrinsic justification.

The earliest piety of the Church was predominantly eschatological. The preaching of St. John the Baptist, and of Christ at the

¹ Rom 8,23.

² Cor 1,22; 5,5.

³ Jn 1,12.

⁴ Mt 5,65; Rom 8,23

⁵ Mt 12,28.

⁶ Mt 6,10.

⁷ Rom 8,24.

⁸ 1 Cor 15,19.

beginning of his public ministry, is summed up by the evangelists in the sentence: 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!'¹ It was a cry of spiritual alarm: the Kingdom was about to break in on the world; those who repented and received Baptism would be saved; the impenitent would be rejected. To make ready for the coming of the Kingdom, what was needed was repentance and baptism. The coming of the Kingdom would be a judgement, separating the baptized from the unbaptized. Baptism was the seal of salvation, and the means of escaping from the impending Wrath.

In consequence of this preaching, the apostolic generation expected the End to come soon – how soon, they did not know,² but they hoped and prayed that it would come within their own lifetime. During St. Paul's second missionary journey, when he preached at Thessalonica, such a lively expectation of the Parousia was created in the minds of some of his converts, that they appear to have been shocked when some of their number died. In his first Epistle he writes to reassure them that Christians who die before the Parousia will be no worse off than those who survive; they will rise from the dead and will be the first to be with Christ:

We wish you to know the truth, brethren, about those who have fallen asleep in death, so that you will not grieve over them, as other men do who have no hope. If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then it is not difficult to believe that God will bring back to life with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. We tell you this on the word of the Lord: those of us who are still alive, who survive until the Lord's Coming, will have no advantage over those who have fallen asleep. A word of command, the voice of an archangel, the trumpet of God, and the Lord himself will come down from heaven! Then first of all those who have died in Christ will rise up; and afterwards those of us who are still alive and surviving will be swept aloft on clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we shall be with the Lord for ever. Remind one another of all this for your consolation.³

From the second Epistle to the Thessalonians we gather that some of the Christians of that church had given up their employment in expectation of a speedy end to the world.⁴ In this kind of atmosphere, the petition 'Thy Kingdom come' would be understood in the

¹ Mk 1,15 par.

² Cf. Mt 24,36.

³ 1 Thes 4,13–18.

⁴ Cf. 2 Thess 3,6–15.

eschatological sense, that is, as virtually equivalent to *Maranatha!*, 'Come, Lord Jesus!'¹

Eschatological prayer (or prayer for the speedy coming of the End) is explicitly commended in St. Luke: 'Be watchful and pray at all times that you may have strength to escape all that is to come, and to stand before the Son of Man'.² And the same type of prayer is commended, though perhaps less clearly, in the parable of the Unjust Judge³, the purpose of which is to encourage Christians to persevere in praying that the Son of Man will come and give them judgement against their enemies. The moral drawn from it is this: 'Will not God vindicate his own chosen ones who cry to him night and day, while he is slow to act for them? I tell you he will vindicate them without delay'.

As the years went on and there was no sign of the promised Return, disillusionment spread in some parts of the Church. There is a clear echo of it in the Second Epistle of St. Peter, where we hear of certain jeering cynics who say: 'What has become of his promised Return? Since the days when our fathers died,⁴ everything has been going on like this from the beginning of the world!'⁵ And the sadness and weariness of the faithful has perhaps left its echo in the parable of the Wise and Faithful servant in the words: 'My Lord is long a-coming!'⁶

How far and in what ways did the Christian teachers of the first century adapt their teaching to the delay of the Parousia? The more conservative teachers simply reiterated the primitive teaching with renewed emphasis: even if the Parousia is long delayed, still it may come any day and take you unawares! This is the method adopted in the second Epistle of Peter:

Do not forget this one thing, brethren, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as one day. The Lord's slowness to fulfil his promises is not the slowness that some think; it is the slowness of his patience with you: he does not want any of you to perish; he wants all of you to turn to repentance. The Day of the Lord will come as a thief,⁷ and the heavens will pass away with a roar of flame; the elements will be burnt and dissolved, and the earth and everything

¹ Cf. 1 Cor 16,22; Apoc 22,20.

² Lk 21,36.

³ Lk only 18,1-8.

⁴ I.e. since the generation of Moses cf Ps 44.

⁵ 2 Pet 3,3-4.

⁶ Mt 24,48; Lk 12,15.

⁷ Cf Mt 24,43; 1 Thess 5,2.

that has been done on it will not escape. When all the world is destined to dissolution in this way, what sort of men ought you to be? Men of holy life, devoted to God, eagerly awaiting¹ the Coming Day of God! On that day the heavens will disintegrate in fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But 'new heavens and a new earth' are promised us, and justice will have its home in them;² for so the Lord has promised.

Therefore, beloved brethren, because you cherish these expectations, make it your intention that the Lord will find you without spot or blemish and at peace. Recognise his patience as meant for your salvation. Our beloved brother Paul, with the wisdom that God has given him, has sent you a letter³ in which he sets forth this truth – as he does in all his letters. (Those letters contain some difficult passages,⁴ which ignorant and unreliable teachers distort, just as they distort the other Scriptures, to their own ruin.) So, beloved brethren, you are forewarned!⁵

Such an exhortation was perhaps sufficient to meet the spiritual needs of waverers in the middle 60's of the first century, but the admission that the Parousia may be delayed for a few thousand years really takes all the sting out of eschatological preaching. It is of no use to cry out: 'Repent, for the kingdom is perhaps less than a thousand years off!'

In St. Matthew's gospel, the hope that Christ will return within one generation has not been abandoned.⁶ The Church has indeed come to realize with perfect clarity that the manifestation of the Kingdom may be delayed for a very long time, that Baptism is no guarantee of sinlessness or of final salvation, and that Judgement will not merely separate the baptized from the unbaptized. But for

¹ The Greek may mean, not 'eagerly awaiting', but 'awaiting and hastening'. The Jews believed that sin delayed the coming of the Messiah whereas repentance would hasten it. This belief is also expressed by St. Peter in his sermon in Acts 3,19–20.

² The second cosmic catastrophe is needed for the same reason as the first, namely to destroy the corruption of sin. The new world to be created after the second catastrophe will be free from corruption.

³ If 2 Pet was sent, like 1 Pet, to Asia Minor (cf. 2 Pet 3,1), and if Romans was an encyclical letter sent to other churches besides that of Rome, the letter referred to here may be Romans (cf. Rom 2,4). Otherwise it will be a letter which has not survived.

⁴ St. Paul himself appears to have thought that his letters were quite straightforward (cf. 2 Cor 1,13). The distortions which Peter has in mind may be misunderstandings of Paul's doctrines of predestination and of freedom from the Law.

⁵ 2 Pet 3,8–17.

⁶ Cf 24,34.

all that, St. Matthew insists, as St. Peter does, that Christ may return at any time:

At the coming of the Son of Man there will be a repetition of what happened in the time of Noah. Just as in the days before the Flood there was eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day when Noah went into the ark, and men were quite unconcerned until the Flood came and swept them all away. The same will happen at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be working in a field, one will be taken, and one will be left; two women will be grinding at the hand-mill, one will be taken and one will be left. Watch, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming!¹

This parable may originally have been used by our Lord to impress upon his hearers the necessity of preparing for the coming of the Kingdom by repentance and baptism. In St. Matthew's gospel it is addressed to those who have already been baptized into the Church to warn them to be ready for the Second Coming.

St. Matthew goes on to give a parable which deals explicitly with the delay of the Parousia, of the Faithful and Prudent Servant:

How does a servant show himself faithful and foreseeing, when his master has put him over his household to give them their food at the right time? Blessed is the servant whose master comes and finds him at his task! I tell you truly he will put him in charge of all his property. But if a man shows himself a bad servant, and says in his heart, 'My master is a long time coming', and begins to beat his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with drunkards, his master will come on a day when he is not expected, and at an hour that is not foreseen, and will cut short his life and send him to share the fate of the hypocrites, where there will be weepings and gnashing of teeth'.²

This parable shows, among other things, what is meant by Christian vigilance: it is not just a matter of waiting patiently and keeping the commandments, but also of carrying out a task allotted by the Master. The parable is applicable in the first place to those, who, like

¹ Mt 24,37-42.

² 24,45-51. The theme of the delay of the Parousia is also touched on in the parable of the Ten Virgins (cf. Mt 25,5): the Bridegroom comes upon them like a thief in the night, and some are not ready; and in the parable of the Talents, where the Master returns, not indeed unexpectedly, but 'after a long time' (45,19).

the Apostles, have received a special charge in Christ's household, but also to all Christians in their measure, since all have an allotted task or 'vocation' of some kind.¹ They are shown what it means to fail in fidelity: it means to forget that one is a slave or a servant, and behave like an irresponsible master. The greatest temptation of a slave in the ancient world must have been jealousy – to see others who happened to have been born free and wealthy enjoying the possession of a wife, children, land, money, security, to recognize that those are the good things of life – but not for slaves! Jealousy breeds resentment, and resentment infidelity. It is not impossible for infidelity to arise in the household of God in this way.

The parable of the Faithful and Prudent Servant could be taken, and has sometimes been taken, as embodying a complete *Weltanschauung*: the situation of a Christian in this world is precisely that of a servant whose Master was here, but has gone away, and will one day return. The servant has his allotted task, which he must fulfil loyally, patiently and hopefully, not expecting any reward or consolation until the day, perhaps far distant, when the Master will return. There is a great deal of truth in this picture, but fortunately it is not the whole truth. No one parable contains the whole truth about the Kingdom. A spirituality based on this parable alone, would be a thorough-going eschatological spirituality, a caretaker-spirituality, a very bleak and comfortless spirituality.

The Parable of the Faithful Servant was a much more accurate description of the situation of a Christian of St. Matthew's own generation than it is of ours. The Master had gone away within Matthew's own lifetime, and his return was hoped for within the same lifetime. Our situation is rather that of a slave born within the household after the Master's departure; he grows up and is allotted a task by those whom the Master left in charge; he is told that the Master may return before he dies, but that in all probability he will live out his whole life without seeing the Master's return. We no longer expect Christ to come to meet us this side of the grave: rather, we expect to go to meet him on the other side of it. It is significant that none of the parables of the Gospel has been modified to teach the lesson of *preparedness for death*.² The universality and certainty of death, which became a commonplace with Christian preachers of

¹ Cf. 1 Cor. 12,4–11.

² The idea is implicit in Lk's parables of the Unjust Steward (16,1–9) and of the Rich Fool (12,16–20), which, however, as they stand, are primarily exhortations to supernatural prudence.

later centuries, is not mentioned in the New Testament.¹ It is not possible to confront people simultaneously with a warning of the inevitability of death and with the possibility of Christ's Return while they are still alive.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is no longer content simply to reiterate the eschatological message of the Synoptic tradition. He seeks to reconcile his readers to the prospect of living out their lives and dying without seeing the promised Return. One of the most moving passages in the New Testament is his eleventh chapter, in which the faith of the great figures of the Old Testament who died without seeing the fulfilment of God's promises is set forth as an example to Christians who live and die without seeing the fulfilment of Christ's promises:

Faith means setting one's heart on the world that we hope for; it means being convinced of the reality of the world that we do not see. It was through this virtue that the men of old won their renown . . .

Thanks to his faith, Noah was saved, when, forewarned of perils as yet unseen, out of reverence for God he built the Ark for the safety of his family. Through this act of faith he proved the whole world to be wrong, and became heir to the justice that comes through faith.

Thanks to his faith, Abraham obeyed the call when bidden to go as an exile to the land which he was destined to receive as his inheritance; he left home without knowing where he was going. His faith made him content to live as a stranger in the promised land, as if it belonged to others; he lived in tents with Isaac and Jacob, joint-heirs with him in the same promise; for he was looking forward to the city with firm foundations, of which God was to be architect and builder. It was through faith, too, that Sara received power to conceive, although past the age – because she believed that the One who had made her the promise would be true to his word. And thus from one man and one where bodily vigour was exhausted, there came a posterity as numerous as the stars of heaven, countless as the sand on the seashore.

All these patriarchs still believed even at their deaths, although they had not received the promised blessings. Having

¹ Cf. 1 Cor 15, 51–54.

but seen and hailed them from afar, they confessed themselves to be strangers and aliens on this earth.¹

The list of patriarchs culminates in Christ, the author and finisher of our faith, who had to pass through death before he could take his seat at the right hand of God's throne.² The Christian is no longer exhorted to be on the watch for the Lord's Return at any moment; he is recommended to fix his eyes on the far distance, to imitate the indomitable fidelity of the patriarchs, and to face death with the same confidence as Christ showed. It is an appeal to all that is best in a man, because a man is never more of a man than when, in obedience to God's call, he leaves home without knowing where he is going.

In the Gospel according to St. John, the eschatological message of the Church has been rethought and reformulated. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body at the Last Day is of course retained,³ but there is no description of the Parousia or of the signs which will precede the Second Coming. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the element of present fulfilment: eternal life is a present possession,⁴ the Spirit is already given to us;⁵ the Judgement itself is anticipated in the present;⁶ and so indeed is the Parousia.⁷ This shift of emphasis from the position of St. Matthew to that of St. John has been called the shift from 'futuristic eschatology' to 'realized eschatology'.⁸ The latter is not an entirely suitable phrase, since St. John does not teach that the last things (or *eschata*) are already *fully* realized; but it is useful in so far as it directs attention to the extent to which St. John differs from the Synoptics in this matter.

The text in which the 'realized eschatology' is most clearly set forth is in the 14th chapter, the beginning of the Farewell Discourses. It has often been pointed out that these Discourses in St. John occupy the place given to the eschatological discourse in the Synoptic Gospels: the Public Ministry is over; before his Parousia Jesus speaks privately to his disciples. In the Synoptics he speaks of the Second Coming and of the Signs of its approach.⁹ In St. John, he says nothing about the Parousia but speaks of his own speedy return to dwell in the Church through the gift of the Spirit:

¹ Heb 11,1,7-13.

² Cf. Heb 12,2.

³ Cf. Jn 5,29; 6,40; 44 etc.

⁴ Cf. Jn 3,36; 4,14; 5,24; etc.

⁵ Cf. Jn 7,38; 14,30; 20,22.

⁶ Jn 3,19; 12,31.

⁷ Cf. Jn 14,21,23.

⁸ The phrases were introduced by C. H. Dodd in *The Parables of the Gospel* (London 1935) and *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge 1954).

⁹ Mk 13 par.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I shall ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete to remain with you for ever, the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You will know him because he will make his home with you and be in your midst. I shall not leave you orphans; I shall come back to you. A little while, and the world will see me no more; but you will see me; because I live, you too shall live. On that day you will know that I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I in you. He who has my commandments and observes them – he is the man who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him and reveal myself to him.¹

This is a very different picture of the situation of believers from that suggested by the parable of the Faithful and Prudent Servant. The Master has not gone away and left his household orphans. He left them for only 'a little while' and then returned to be with them. The world cannot see him, but those who possess the gift of the Spirit are aware that he is permanently in the midst of his flock. He is not revealed to their bodily eyes; but to the eyes of their heart and soul he is ever present. So far from being distant, like the absent householder, he dwells in his own and they in him, as he in his Father, and his Father in him.

In the last sentence of the above quotation, the Greek word (*emphanisô*) translated 'reveal', is closely akin to the word 'Epiphany', which in the later Pauline letters is used as a synopsis for 'Parousia'.² Christ is, therefore, saying that within a short while those who love him, and only those who love him, will see his Parousia. This provokes from the apostle Judas (not the Iscariot) the exclamation: 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?'³ Christ does not give him a direct answer; but a further explanation of the epiphany: 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home with him'.⁴

After this, the promise of the Holy Spirit is reiterated: 'Such are the words which I have spoken to you, while I have been with you. The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, whom the Father will send in my

¹ Jn 14,15–21.

² Cf. 1 Tim 6,14; 2 Tim 1,10; 4,1,8; Tit 2,13.

³ Jn 14,22.

⁴ Jn 14,23.

name, will explain to you and bring back to your minds all that I have said to you'.¹ In the light of the preceding context, these verses seem to mean that the 'realized eschatology' of verses 21-24 are a correct interpretation of Christ's promises. St. John is well aware that false opinions are current about the proximity of the End;² the eschatology he has just set forth is a true explication of the teaching of Christ'.³

Just as a complete theology of the Redemption is not to be found ready made in any one book of the New Testament, so too a complete Christian spirituality is not to be found ready made in any one book. Each of the sacred writers wrote, first and foremost, to meet the spiritual needs of his own time and of his own chosen readership. Our situation today is different, and our needs are different. The delay of the Parousia is no longer a scandal to us. The sword of Damocles has hung over the Church for about 1930 years, and we are used to living with it. But even so, the fact remains that we live in the interim period between Christ's two epiphanies. We have therefore something to learn from each of the sacred writers examined in the foregoing pages. Probably there is no one ideal combination of the eschatological and mystical elements which we find in the different books. May it not be that the development of eschatological expectation in the life of the Church is recapitulated, in some manner, in the spiritual development of every individual – that is, an initial burst of apocalyptic enthusiasm or 'first fervour', followed by a long pull of fidelity in the spirit of the Epistle to the Hebrews, maturing gradually into a Johannine awareness of the presence of the Trinity within us?

Certainly, after the lapse of more than nineteen centuries, it no longer seems legitimate to cry alarm spiritual by telling people that any day now the End may come; and in fact the Church has ceased to use that type of appeal in her preaching. The cry *Maranatha!* is no longer prominent in our liturgical prayers. We do indeed, especially in Advent, call upon Christ to come: *O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae*, we sit in darkness and in the shadow of death; come, O Rising Sun, O Splendour of Light Eternal, O Son of Justice, and shed your glory upon us! But most of us interpret this in a spiritual rather than in a strictly eschatological sense.⁴

We reflect that between the first prophecy recorded in Genesis⁵ and

¹ 14,25-26.

² Cf 21,23.

³ Cf. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 406.

⁴ Cf. the collect for the first Sunday of Advent, which does the same.

⁵ Gen 3,15.

its fulfilment there was a lapse of something like three hundred and fifty thousand years according to the computations of anthropologists; perhaps, therefore, the interval between the two epiphanies will be equally long. A spirituality based on the apprehension that Christ may return any day and find us unready seems unreal.

Yet the exhortation to live in a state of constant readiness is even more appropriate and justifiable now than it was in the time of the Apostles. Such are the dangers that surround us, that we need to be ready at every moment for that encounter with our Master at which our eternal fate will be sealed. Nobody in the apostolic generation, with the possible exception of the Roman gladiators, was in such constant danger of violent death as we all are today. There is danger on the roads, danger on the railways, danger in the air, danger on the seas and danger under the seas; death on the rocket-bases, death in patrolling aircraft, death in the submarines. . . . There is even danger of total and catastrophic warfare starting by accident. If we do not expect the End to come in our own lifetime through direct divine intervention, we cannot rule out the possibility that nuclear warfare will blow up the planet. A state of readiness is more necessary now than it ever was before; and to make this the first principle of one's spiritual life is perfectly reasonable.

But while we realize that the End may come so suddenly that we shall not even hear the bang, we have to plan our lives on the supposition that there will be no such bang. With the author of Hebrews, we must face the prospect of living out our seventy years, or eighty if we are strong, without seeing the fulfilment of the promises. From him we can learn to admire the heroic quality of faith and acquire a sense of solidarity with the patriarchs and with Christ.

St. John brings our minds back from the distant future to the present. Even though we should walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we have no cause to fear, because Christ is with us. And indeed it is especially while walking through the valley of the shadow of death that the saints of all the ages have been most conscious of the presence of the Spirit and of the divine companionship: 'You are in me, and I in you'.

This life's at best, if justly scanned,
A tedious walk by the other's strand,
With, here and there cast up, a piece
Of coral or of ambergris,
Which, boasted of abroad, we ignore
The burden of the barren shore.

So wrote Coventry Patmore.¹ We know the mood, but we also know its falsity. Our consolation, while we await our passage to the other shore, is not a piece of coral or of ambergris. Nor are we mere care-takers. 'See, I stand at your door and knock! If anyone listens to my voice and opens the door, I will come inside and share a meal with him, and he with me. As for the man who conquers, I shall make him sit beside me on my throne, just as I too, when I had conquered, took my seat beside my father on his throne. If you have ears to hear with, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches!'²

All these thoughts are gathered to a unity for us in the liturgy, when we 'proclaim the Lord's death in expectation of his coming'.³ Through his presence at the Eucharistic table which is an anticipation of the heavenly Banquet, we are given contact with his first coming in the past and with his last coming in the future. 'The memory of his Passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us'. This marvellous interaction of the dimensions of time is set forth in the passage of the Epistle of Titus which is read at Midnight Mass:

The grace of God has shone forth, bringing salvation to all mankind, teaching us to renounce impiety and worldly desires, and to live temperate, just and holy lives in this present world, whilst we look forward to our blessed hope, the shining forth of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who offered himself for us, to ransom us from all iniquity, and to purify for himself a people of his own, devoted to honourable conduct.⁴

¹ *Love's Victories*, Book 1, ix.

² Apoc 3,19-22.

³ 1 Cor 11,26.

⁴ Tit 2,11-14.