Lecture II

The New Testament

2 Cor. 4:6 – 'It is God, that said *Light shall shine out of darkness*,
Who shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge
of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ.'

1. Rigorism and Eschatology in the Teaching of Jesus

New Testament theology has scarcely as yet recovered from the shock administered to it by Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer some twenty-five to thirty years ago. The message of the gospel – so the theologians of the nineteenth century had persuaded themselves – was to all intents and purposes identical with that of modern civilization; a message of hard work, good fellowship, self-realization, and general kindliness; – a *humanist* message in fact. The duty of the Christian was to surround himself with an aura of tact and generosity, and so to make the lives of his less fortunate neighbours run more smoothly. As with the message, so also with the person of the Redeemer – it found its significance primarily as manifesting in actual fact the life thus adumbrated in the gospel. Against this whole theological outlook, with its this-worldly interpretation of the gospel and its humanitarian Jesus, Weiss and Schweitzer declared war. The lines of their attack are well known. They insisted primarily upon the 'eschatological fixed idea' of Jesus, – His apparently constant expectation of an apocalyptic coming of the kingdom of God either in His own lifetime, or (this perhaps at a later stage of His ministry) immediately after

His death – the death itself being the means of releasing the pent-up forces of salvation. They insisted, secondly, upon the ideas of rigorism, renunciation, and self-crucifixion as the essential element in our Lord's teaching. Schweitzer speaks of the 'inexhaustible reserves of world-renouncing, world-contemning sayings' in the gospels; and will not even accept the mitigated doctrine that 'for Jesus this world's goods are not evil, but are only to be given a secondary place.' 'The teaching of the historical Jesus,' he insists, 'was purely and exclusively world-renouncing.'

We noticed at an earlier stage that in the history of Christian ethics the phenomenon of *rigorism*, – the ideal of a consistent renunciation not merely of the ways of the world but of the joys and interests and ideals of the world as well (however innocent and laudable in themselves they may appear to be), – is of primary importance and difficulty. It is the merit of Weiss and Schweitzer, whatever their defects, to have brought theology back to the consciousness that this problem lies enshrined in all its fullness in the heart of Jesus' teaching. The Son of Man shall come as a householder, no doubt; and to the householder it is of importance that every talent he has left behind him should have been put out to use, and every servant supplied with nurture fitted to his needs. But He shall come as a reaper as well; and the reaper cares little what he destroys so that the grain be gathered in – the beauty of the fields is nothing to him, and vanishes with the coming of sickle, fan and fire. The world-accepting principles of Jesus are easy for us to embody in our code; the stark element of world-renunciation is supremely difficult, and we are only too ready to make shift with any expedient that will eliminate it. What has been gained for theology by the German eschatological school of enquiry is the general sense that renunciation, if it is to be eliminated from Christianity at all, cannot be eliminated from the historic teaching of the Lord.

It is not altogether clear at first sight why Schweitzer should bring the apocalyptic and the rigorist elements in

our Lord's teaching into such close relationship. In general, however, his thought seems to move along the following lines. It is of the essence of apocalyptic to despair of this world's order – to think that even the things that are best in it, its highest ideals, its noblest impulses, are dross and dust in the sight of God. For Him no course is possible except to sweep away all that exists, and introduce a new world wholly other from that which now is. And therefore (we should suppose) those who would inherit the new world must dissociate themselves entirely from the present one, adopting an attitude of uncompromising hostility towards the body, the mind, the emotions, – towards all that cements or beautifies social intercourse, – and pinning their hope wholly and entirely upon the kingdom which by the unmediated and catastrophic activity of God is soon to be.

This can be put more simply, if we say that both apocalyptic and asceticism are *dualist* in tone, and that it is natural therefore to expect to find them in conjunction. 'Dualism' is without doubt a word more easy to use than to expound. It expresses a temper, rather than a principle of thought; the temper which is prepared to acquiesce in the apparent contradictions of experience as though they were ultimate and insuperable. God and the universe, mind and matter, the one and the many, good and evil, soul and body, eternity and time, freedom and order – these are some of the antinomies presented to us in experience. Dualism says, 'Let it be so; we cannot reconcile them; we must find the best escape from a problem which has no solution. Good and evil, mind and matter, God and the universe, soul and body – there is no common term in any of these pairs of antitheses. Matter and mind cannot in the end coexist; the universe is incapable of redemption. If mind is to survive, it must escape from matter; if God is to survive, the universe must perish; if the soul is to see God, the body must be annihilated.'

Wherever, then, we find a doctrine of anything *irredeemable* – anything which has to be swept away before God's purposes can be secured – we are in the presence of

dualistic thought. On such a basis apocalyptic, with its despair of the existing world-order, is dualist beyond a doubt. Wherever, again, the earnest-minded seeker after God is found expressing relentless opposition towards whole classes of phenomena, interests, and worldly goods as such, and not merely towards the possibility of their misuse – wherever, in fact, ascetic rigorism is regarded as the only mode of salvation – there is to be seen dualism in practice. We have therefore a perfectly logical right to expect apocalyptic imagery and ascetic practices to go hand in hand – nothing could very well be more natural or appropriate. So Schweitzer seems to understand the situation. In his view, each of these two elements in our Lord's message reinforces the other, by pointing back to the dualist basis common to them both. Nothing is allowed to mar the seamless robe of the Saviour's teaching: it is coherent – and coherent in a rigorist sense – in all its parts.

Nevertheless, as applied at least to the Jewish background of the teaching of Jesus, the suggested systematization breaks down. In this matter, as in so many others, religion refused to be bound by logic. In the whole range of Jewish apocalyptic there is little or nothing of an ascetic character. Judaism, indeed, was too deeply committed to the doctrine of the goodness of all God's creation, and the divine authority for peopling the world and reaping the fruits of the earth, to admit any large element of asceticism or self-mortification into its constitution, even when it thought of the coming Day of the Lord. 'A man will have to give account on the judgment-day,' so ran a famous saying, 'of every good thing which he refused to enjoy when he might have done so.' Poverty was regarded as the natural concomitant of sin, wealth of righteousness. Fasts, penitential discipline, mourning customs, of course, there were; but even these were to be practised in moderation. The great disaster of the fall of Jerusalem might have seemed to call for unusual manifestations of grief; but even here optimism triumphed. Rabbi Joshua ben Chananja would not allow it to divert the ordinary course of life more

than a hair's breadth. 'Whitewash your houses as before,' he said, 'leaving only a small piece bare, in memory of Jerusalem; prepare your meals as before, omitting just one slight dainty in memory of Jerusalem; let your women adorn themselves as before, leaving off just one trinket for Jerusalem's sake.'

It seems scarcely possible, therefore, to cite the eschatology of Judaism as a theological basis for the ascetic element in Jesus' teaching. In so far as they suggested such a chain of causation, Weiss and Schweitzer spoke without book. The conclusion is of the first importance, since it tends to increase rather than to diminish the urgency of the question which they raised. The ascetic outlook of the gospels is seen to stand out of any recognizable relation with contemporary Judaism. The passages about turning the other cheek, about taking no thought for the morrow, about laying up no treasure on earth, about forsaking parents and possessions, about bearing the cross, are foreign to the genius of the race. The spirit which pervades them constitutes an erratic block in the teaching of Jesus whose provenance – other than in His direct intuition of supernatural truth – must for the moment remain unknown. And therefore we are finally prohibited from treating it, as many have been tempted to do, as a mere conventional borrowing of current ideas which can be discarded by the critic as soon as they are recognized.

The passages just instanced are, indeed, conclusive in so far as they express the sterner side of Jesus' thought. But His teaching has another side. An array of texts could be quoted which endorse the legitimacy of earthly joys and ideals, and proclaim or imply the permanent value of natural beauty, domestic happiness and civil order. The very employment of parables from nature and human life implies a real community of character between the earthly type and its heavenly archetype. Even 'evil' parents, Jesus says, give good gifts to their children, and in so doing evince the presence of a divine spark within. The Lord Who would have us forgive to seventy times seven

betrays by that same demand the conviction that no sinner is utterly lost before the day of judgment – there must still be some possibility for good in a soul to which forgiveness still can have a meaning. The spirit of a *pastor* – the spirit of making allowances and discriminations, the spirit of tolerance, the patience which can overlook constant lapses and still find something to love in the sinner who has fallen time and again, the optimism which seeks for goodness and messages from heaven even in the most humble and everyday surroundings – this, no less than the evangelistic temper, is a spirit which we must ascribe to the Jesus of the gospels.

It is essential for Christian ethics that it should attempt to find the truth about this amazing conjunction . of the two ideals of rigorism and humanism in our Lord's outlook. The two points of view lie side by side in the gospel; neither can be eliminated, yet no clue to their reconciliation is expressed. It may in the end appear that asceticism – although not in itself a necessary or actual development from apocalyptic – is indeed based upon a deep theological dualism whose importance is only emphasized (as Schweitzer suggests) by the fact that apocalyptic, embodying the same dualistic principle, is conjoined with it in the gospels. This principle again may show itself so intractable as to render impossible any synthesis between it and the admitted humanism of much of Jesus' teaching. If that prove to be the case, the Christian moralist will have forced upon him the invidious task of deciding which of the two elements is to be attributed to the Lord Himself, and which discarded as an alien excrescence. These questions lie at the very heart of Christian ethics, but any attempt to solve them must come at the end rather than at the beginning of our enquiry. We shall be in a better position to return to the problem when we have considered what Christian theology has had to say about it in the process of its development. That the phenomenon set going two streams of interpretation in the Church from the very outset – one which found in loyal acceptance and temperate

use of the things of this world its ideal for life, and one which demanded their uncompromising renunciation – is sufficiently clear from the data of the New Testament itself. It is to be seen at work even in the transmission and interpretation of the words of the Lord.

2. New Testament Variations

(a) The Synoptists

An illustration of the diversity of ethical views in the synoptic tradition presents itself in connexion with the story of the young man with great possessions. As the narrative stands in St Mark's gospel, it shows clear traces of editorial revision in the interests of the less rigorist view. The significant verses[1] run as follows in the Revised Version:

(23) 'And Jesus looked round about and saith unto His disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God. (24) And the disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answereth again and saith unto them, Children, how hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God. (25) It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. (26) And they were astonished exceedingly, saying unto Him, Then who can be saved?'

Even on the surface the words 'for them that trust in riches' present a difficulty. The context, if they are removed, implies throughout that the *mere possession of riches* is a disability or barrier for entrance into the kingdom. This phrase, however, modifies the meaning, and throws the emphasis upon *trust in* rather than upon *possession of* riches. Yet the following verses ignore the mitigation. Verse 25 insists once again upon the danger of mere possession; verse 26 raises the disciples' amazement to the highest possible pitch. We are led inevitably to consider the words 'for them that trust in riches' to be an insertion; and this doubt as to their authenticity becomes a certainty

1. Mk. 10:23-26.