

THE CHRIST THAT IS TO BE

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Notes of an Address given at the Queen's Hall, London, January 31, 1917.

I TAKE as the basis of that of which I desire to speak to you this evening the words :

“Ring out the darkness of the land.
Ring in the Christ that is to be.”

I feel them to be peculiarly appropriate to the present time. We are suffering in many ways—some physically, some mentally; but that which is worst, that which affects us all, is our sore perplexity. How has all this horror come about? When is it to end? What is to come after? we ask, and there is no answer. Everything is wrapped up in a great darkness. We know how paralysing physical darkness is. A child shut up alone in a dark room sees phantoms. They come near: they touch it. Wildly it cries out for help, striking blindly in every direction. The door opens, the light floods in, and it is ashamed of its fears.

The night of the soul, through which so many are passing now, is still more difficult to bear; and it is little wonder that men and women, like imprisoned children, are striking at shadows and crying out piteously for light.

“Ring out the darkness of the land.”

Let me recall to you the circumstances under which these words were written. They form a part of Tennyson's “In Memoriam,” the poem in which he paid noble tribute to the friend of his youth who had been taken away by death. The year of sorrow dies, and he hears the bells, coming and going, as if a door had shut between him and the sound, as they ring in the young year. And he hails them.

“Ring out wild bells to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty night,
The year is dying in the night,
Ring out, wild bells, and let it die.”

There rises before him a vision of the

world as it is and the world as it might be, and his soul goes out in aspiration that the evil things—“old shapes of foul disease, the civic slander and the spite”—may, on those flying bells, be rung out—that there may be rung in the valiant man and free: “The Christ that is to be.”

We shall see that for the coming of the Christ there must be preparation. Until the darkness passes, until light has shone upon the people, their spiritual sense is dead, they cannot perceive “the King in his Beauty.” It is written of the Word of the Father, when, clothed in the garment of flesh, He dwelt upon earth, “He came unto His own and His own received Him not.” Yet, even then, there were some who did perceive Him, and these became the channels through which the memory of that Life, divine in its beauty, the magic of those words of love and wisdom have come down to us along the ages.

The words “Christ that is to be” may be taken in two senses; and on both I desire to speak this evening. Darkness symbolises ignorance and error, sometimes wilful perversity. While the Soul of the Peoples is clouded by the spiritual darkness which these create, the Divine light is unperceived: the still small voice of the Christ is unheard. Let knowledge speak: let the light of Divine wisdom shine through the mists of illusion and the Peoples will see the network with which they are subtly surrounded: they will rend them asunder and stand forth valiant and free.

This is one point of view: the coming of the very Word of the Master into our midst, not in the form only of beautiful maxims heard piously in cathedrals and churches and forgotten almost before our feet have crossed their threshold; but as laws to be obeyed, as rules of action to be

observed, as regulations of our communal life.

"Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you," "Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect." Love not the world—meaning the little self and its interests. Rather: "Love as brethren. Be pitiful, be courteous, forgiving one another."

Can we imagine a world built up on *that*? If we can, we shall understand how all the complexities which now so sorely distress us will pass away. How everything will be easy and simple in the reconstruction of which we hear so much.

The other point of view, that with which I wish specially to deal, is the actual coming—the return, according to His own promise, of the great World-Teacher.

With this double thought before us, let us look back to the old story, so familiar to us all, of the coming to earth of the last Avatar, or World messenger: "The people that sat in darkness," it was said, "have seen a great light." It came from the Forerunner. In our familiarity with these ancient records we sometimes lose the strangeness, the dramatic power, of the incidents they narrate. To me there is something peculiarly striking in the figure of the wild prophet from the wilderness appearing suddenly amongst a people sunk in luxury on the one hand, in misery and apathy on the other, and, with his burning words awakening in them, so stinging a sense of evil committed that they throng to him in their multitudes to confess, to promise atonement, and to receive the purification of baptismal waters. Yet John was selfless: "I am a voice," he cried. "There cometh one after me."

We lose, also, in looking at ancient stories as a mere record of events. They are that; but they are more. To me the wild prophet from the wilderness is a symbol and representation of a great spiritual happening. We shall remember, as we look back, that others besides John had been looking for the salvation of God. Simeon and Anna in the temple—the old religious life reviving; the Wise Men, seeking the star. Hebrew woman-

hood represented in Mary the mother, pouring out their glorious *magnificat*: "He hath put down the mighty from their seat: he hath exalted the humble and meek."

On the other hand—and there are many analogies between those days and our own—there was the apparent triumph of wordly magnificence and glory. The Roman Empire dominated the world. Province after province of the peoples whom she proudly called Barbarians had been subjugated. From Britain and Gaul and Germania slaves had been brought by her warriors. There was then as now insane luxury, domination by the strong of the weak, arrogant assumption of superiority by physical force and contempt of humble labour. I sometimes imagine a real Prophet appearing at the Court of the Cæsars and telling the Emperor: "There has been born a child in one of the obscurest provinces of your Empire whose banners will wave where your eagles wave to-day, whose altars will be set up in your temples, whose name will be adored when you and your legions are forgotten."

Short shrift would such a Prophet have had. Yet it was precisely this that happened, explain the miracle as we may! Glancing back at the work of the Forerunner, and bearing in mind the ministry of the Lord Christ, I think we shall see that one of the contributing causes to these mysterious events was the awakening of a social conscience.

History tells us how, through the degeneracy of her children, Rome fell. She became effete: she could not hold her own: the provinces she had conquered fell away from her rule; and at last the Barbarians she had despised came knocking at the gates of the Imperial city.

Meanwhile, through the hope she held out and the appeal she made to the enslaved and the oppressed, the small, long-persecuted Christian Church gained power, finally the impossible happened. Over the young European world the new religion ruled: where the Roman eagles had waved was seen the Banner of the Cross.

Then came the ages of Faith, when men and women brought their love and devotion and skill, their sense of Beauty and their genius, to the service of the Lord whom they loved. We may think of the Middle Ages as barbarous, as primitive, as lacking in breadth of vision and initiative: we may be glad we did not live in those days. Judge that wonderful age by the relics it has left behind—by its architecture, its painting, its wood-carving, its sculpture. Remember that all this was given to the House of God, which was in truth the House of the People; and then ask: Shall we, when our age has passed away, leave such priceless treasures behind us? I think not.

Think, further, of the great truth that lies at the base of all religion—the Brotherhood of Man. The most cursory glance at the ecclesiastical and economic history of that time will be sufficient to show us that the mediæval conception of Brotherhood was far in advance of that generally received now. Monasteries and abbeys, as we gather from such writers as Sir Thomas More, were in England the homes and hostels of the poor. Vagrancy and its penalties arose when the Religious Brotherhoods were dispersed and their lands and dwellings given to private owners. According to ecclesiastical law, the exaction of usury which, in those days, meant taking interest for money, was a mortal sin. The tithe which the Church exacted was divided into three parts: one went to the support of the clergy, another to the festivals of the church, the third (of which the People were robbed at the Reformation) was actually the property of the poor, who could claim help in time of distress.

To the Middle Ages also belong those Industrial Brotherhoods, the Art and Craft Guilds. Into the history of these, which is extraordinarily fascinating, I cannot enter. It is sufficient to say that we find in them a real and true Democracy of Labour. No man could be a master until he learned the craft, and each craft-brother, with those who might be dependent upon him, was cared for and protected by the Guild.

To relate how the Feudal system passed away and how Capitalism took its place would be too long a story. In the last decades of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century there came about the Industrial Revolution, through which machines took the place of hands. Then the master became the employer. There grew up companies, syndicates, federations of capital, things as soulless as the materials with which they dealt, and the man, once Guild-brother and Craftsman, became a hand, as a cog in the mighty machine that was grinding out his life. With this the building up of great fortunes. And now—what rules? What made, what supports, the War that is tearing the nations to pieces? We all know. It is money. The War has to be financed. If it had not been for the big money-men who have built ships and made guns, and prepared munitions; if it had not been for the huge sums they have been able to lend, on terms profitable to themselves, to the respective States, the War could not have begun, and it could not go on.

Come back to our prayer, "Ring out the darkness of the land!" Ah! Is there any hope of the darkness rising? If so, in what direction are we to look?

I look where they looked, the men of old time—Isaiah, John, the Christ. I find my hope in the awakening of a Social conscience. We are beginning to be ashamed of the things we see around us. The man and the woman exploited; the woman robbed of her honour and her joy; the child deprived of the gladness of youth; the toil-worn, the weary, the oppressed: these are crying out to us, and we cannot be deaf to their voice. It has been said well: "The physical misery of the world's disinherited is becoming the spiritual misery of the world's heritors."

Again, I find hope in the spirit not only of our fighters, but of those who refuse to fight. From the prison-cell and the Labour-camp as from the battle-field there comes no word of bitterness or hatred.

There is hope to be found in the falling down of barriers, in the breaking-up of conventions, prejudices, boasted superiorities—those that have made the dark-

ness in which we have lived and moved. Gradually there is coming to the birth a new Humanity that will not know fraud or force or fear; but will let love—the common bond—draw and hold its component parts together.

“Ring in the Christ that is to be.” In the depth of our perplexity, in the heart of our darkness, we, like those of old time, to whom the Forerunner came, are looking for a great light: we are expecting the very Lord of light and love, who, in words that could not be mistaken, told His children that He would come again.

Why should it seem so strange? It is no new thing. Over and over again in the world's history, when the need of Humanity was great, the World-Teacher has come. Thoth, in Egypt, Zoroaster in Persia, Pythagoras in Greece, Vyasa, Buddha, Krishna in India, our own Christ in Palestine. One truth, with many aspects, They have brought. Light, Purity, Beauty, Law, Wisdom, Brotherhood, Unity. These are the different facets of the Light: even as within the pure white sun-ray are enclosed the colours of the rainbow—colours we see now, and colours our sense eyes are not able yet to perceive. So with the truth these have brought. May it not be that one of the causes of our sorrow is that we want another facet of the Light?

To those who are able to look behind the veil there are signs which herald His coming. We who live in the rough and tumble of the world have only our love, our intuition, our feeling of the world's supreme necessity.

I speak to those who love the Master—to those to whom the story of that pure and perfect Life, the words of beauty and wisdom which he spoke, are dear; and I ask them to remember His own words.

“I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you.” “I will come again and receive you unto Myself. Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world”—or dispensation.

The early Church believed He would soon come. Over and over again, by precept and by parable, He told them that the times were in the Father's hands,

that what they had to do was to watch—to be as those who are waiting for their Lord.

But whether we look for the Christ in the New Order, or as the Great Teacher, if we would be true to ourselves and to Humanity, we must prepare for His coming.

Do we ask how? In our Order of the Star the way is made plain. Devotion first: that is more than ordinary love, or rather, it is love lifted up into so high a region that all the self in it is purged away. In the *Imitation* by Thomas à Kempis this love-passion is exquisitely summed up.

“It” (love) “feeleth no burdens, thinketh nothing of dangers, would willingly do more than it can do, believeth not in impossibilities, because it knoweth that it can and may do all things.”

And Steadfastness. That is specially wanted now. Not only by indifference, not only by opposition, but by scorn—which is much harder to bear—those who cling tenaciously to the present order would wreck our faith and kill our joy. Steadfastness, poise, balance—will enable us to resist; and there is no tonic like work. Let us each do a little more than we thought yesterday we could do. So will the muscles of the will grow strong.

Finally, whether to-morrow or a few years hence, or to a generation far away along the tides of time, He will come. And to us it should be the same. Our duty is to prepare: our joy and our privilege to be always ready.

“It may be in the evening, when the work of the day is done,

And we have time to sit in the gloaming and watch the setting sun,

While the long, bright day dies slowly over the sea.

And the air grows quiet and holy with thought of Me.

When you hear the village children running along the street,

Amid their thronging footsteps you may catch the sound of My feet.

Therefore I tell you, watch by the light of the evening star.

While the room is growing dusky, as the clouds afar.

Let the door be on the latch in your home.

For it may be through the gloaming I will come.”