

Advent is the season when christians remind themselves that Christ is coming, that they are people primarily concerned with the world to come. It was fashionable a few years ago to contrast a 'this worldly' christianity with one that was said to be 'other worldly', and theologians were unlikely to get into the Sunday newspapers unless they opted for the former. The assumption behind the dichotomy was of two worlds side by side competing for our attention. Responsible, truly christian and 'relevant' theologians were concerned about this world, the one we see in front of us; old-fashioned christians were bothered instead about a shadowy world on the other side of the grave.

In fact, of course, for christians the world to come *is* this world, but this world radically transformed. Belief in the world to come is not the same as (though it may entail) belief in the survival of a temporarily disembodied soul. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is deeply mysterious, but whatever it implies empirically it means that it is these bodies, this world, that is to be transfigured through sharing in Christ's death and resurrection. Concern for the world to come is a particular kind of concern for this world — an acceptance of the world not just for what it is but for what it is, through the coming of Christ, to become.

We have to see christianity as *totally* other-worldly before we can understand its true relevance to this world. All our specifically religious activity, all our liturgical and sacramental life, is concerned with the world to come and takes its value from that world. If there is no world to come, or, to put it another way, if the world is not to come, then christianity is a piece of nonsense. It is an archaism which, as they say of the monarchy, is perpetuated merely because it is mistakenly believed to do no harm. However much transcendent significance may be found in, say, a piece of music, it has its ultimate value in this world as a human work of art. Conversely however much human beauty there may be in a great liturgy, its value is basically not in this world but in its statement of the claims of the world to come.

A man may calculate how much of his time and money he should spend at the theatre, at work, in canvassing, in working for the Samaritans, in the pub . . . all these things have their due place in the world. He cannot calculate how much time he should spend in

prayer. No man is under an obligation to pray for a certain time or to spend a certain proportion of his income on the upkeep of the liturgy, any more than he is under an obligation to laugh or to give presents to his friends. There is something seriously wrong with a man who never wants to do these things, but that is a different matter.

The potential heresy in what is called 'planned giving' or 'christian stewardship', is that a man has a duty to pay for the services provided by religion just as he has a duty to pay for those provided by the milkman or the orchestra. The matter is a little complicated because at a certain stage in the development of the church—or rather in the development of secular society—there are grounds for an obligation to support the church as one might support Oxfam or an orchestra. In the past the church has had to perform tasks in, for example, education and other social services which more properly belong to the secular society. It is foolish to blame the church for clinging to her own schools, hospitals etc. the defect was rather in the political community which did not yet recognise its own obligations towards people as people. But in any case so long as the church provides schools for your children there is evidently an obligation to support them. When, however, secular society comes of age and accepts its responsibility for providing a really humane education then the church as a separate institution can shake itself free of the burden of this worldly activity. The problem for England at the moment, of course, is not that catholic schools are inefficient but that the secular system in its present state of confusion about the meaning of education and its class-ridden structure does not seem ready to take over. But when political society does grow up (and we believe this can come only through a radical questioning of her present assumptions and structures) then the church can begin to appear for what she is, as concerned about the world to come and, so far as this world is concerned, perfectly useless and not worth a penny.

It is only when the church is seen like this that her importance for this world can be recognised. In the past she has too often been seen as having a purpose within the world; on the right there was the union of throne and altar, on the left there was social christianity. Her purpose however is not within this world but for it. Her task is threefold. Firstly to proclaim the future destiny of mankind, to show secular society where it is to go. In her sacramental life the church provides first of all a picture of the authentic relationship between men for which we are to work and to wait. Secondly to announce the Good News: this destiny is not merely an ideal of the indefinitely remote future, something that may or may not be achieved, but something that already exists as a new world constituted by the resurrection of Christ. Thirdly, and most importantly, in this proclamation to bring to bear upon the present the power of the future. In her sacramental statement of man's destiny, the

church makes Christ himself present calling us personally to unity in love, inciting us to the revolutionary overturning of our personality that we call faith, making us able to die to our old selves so that the new world can be born amongst us.

The church is meant to die, to wither away, in two senses. In the first place as secular society comes of age the church can cease to be a pseudo-state, an alternative to politics. Let us not imagine that this has yet happened but even when it does come about mankind will not yet have reached its goal; it will be merely, as it were in adolescence, starting work. When the secular city is established the church will no longer have to do political man's job for him. She can stick to her essential tasks of showing man what he himself can become through history and maintaining a communication between present and future that transcends history; the communication we can call either grace or prayer, without which man cannot bring his own work to fulfilment.

It is only when this work is done that the church can finally wither away and give place to the fullness of the kingdom, when we have 'come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself'.

H.Mc.C.

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