

The Retrospective Love of God.

BY THE REV. FRANCIS BARTLETT PROCTOR, M.A., VICAR OF WARTHILL, YORK.

I ne'er forsooth could have believed it true
That Death had slain such myriads of mankind.
DANTE: *Inferno* iii. 56.¹

PERHAPS the great outstanding word of the Gospel is that of Jn 3¹⁶—the golden text of the Bible—'God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life'; and its counterpart in the First Epistle, which tells us that 'God is love,' and adding, 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins,' 'and not for ours only,' it is previously stated, 'but also for the whole world.' There is a similar all-embracing and comprehensive word of the Lord Jesus, recorded by the same evangelist, 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.' Now the 'world' of the Gospel, the 'whole world' of the Epistle, and the 'all men' of the Great Magnetizer, indicate something that we think has undergone great obscurity since the apostle wrote; and the endeavour in this paper will be simply to draw attention to this obscurement.

The great facts that stand revealed in the passages quoted are perfectly obvious: ours is a lost world, peopled with innumerable souls, all exposed to the peril of 'perishing.' The compassionate love of God seeks to avert that peril; and His love was manifested in this, that He sent His only begotten Son to be a propitiation for the world's sin. And to guard against any sectarian possibility of limiting the scope of the divine compassion, it is expressly stated that it was adequate for the evil, coextensive with the whole need. We have these facts to fall back on when we preach the gospel; and the preacher ought surely to be very watchful over any limitations he may be tempted to impose on his message. The door of God's mercy is set wide open, and it is not for us to half-shut it, and talk about 'gates ajar,' when we go forth with our commission in His name, to do our share of preaching the gospel to 'every creature.'

When the peril the world was in had got to its worst; when the wisdom of this world failed to

¹ Bohn's translation.

find a remedy, and despaired of its desperate condition, then God 'in the fulness of time' sent His son. He showed what love could do: for 'where sin abounded grace superabounded.' And now the question is this: Seeing that the love of God in Christ was manifested very late in the history of the world, what are we to understand by 'the world' for which Christ died? Are we to limit it to the world since Christ, or does it comprehend that other larger half of the perishing world, who knew not the promises, who did not see what we see, nor hear what we are privileged to hear, who lived and sinned, and died without God, without Christ, without hope? In other words: Is the 'world' that St. John speaks of, the world B.C. as well as A.D.? Is the love of God meant to be retrospective as well as prospective? For it may be taken without saying that the conception that many good Christian people have of the world for which Christ died is the world of Christian times only—our world—an *αἰὼν* not *κόσμος*—without giving a moment's reflexion to the needs, and to the far more perilous condition of those who lived before there was any gospel that could be preached to them. In the latter case, are we not in danger of limiting the love of God to a smaller world than that for which His compassionate love had to find a remedy? or of making the kingdom of Christ a 'little kingdom,' as some of our countrymen are sometimes spoken of as 'little Englanders'? Does not the apostle preclude our falling into this mistake—may we say, of a narrow selfishness—when he of set purpose uses language calculated only to express the widest possible scope of the all-embracing love of God in Christ—a propitiation for our sin, and not for ours only, but for the 'WHOLE world?' The 'whole world' cannot be less than the whole (*κόσμος*); it cannot be a part or a section of the whole; it cannot be the Jewish as opposed to the Gentile world; it cannot be the world A.D. (*αἰὼν*) as opposed to the world B.C. Another apostle sets no bounds to the saving love of God, its 'length, breadth, depth, and height passeth knowledge'; its riches are 'unsearchable,' 'past finding out.' Everything that is said of it is calculated to make us pause before we

attempt ever so guardedly to set limits to the love of God in Christ for the world.

The history of opinion on this matter shows that for the first two or three Christian centuries the 'love of God' was interpreted in a retrospective as well as a present and prospective sense; and that it was the great Augustine who first thought scorn of that wider view, and did what he could to limit Catholic teaching on this subject. Notwithstanding the commanding authority of the great Western Doctor, there was a world to be saved before Christ, and 'Jesus seeks the lost, and the lost are to be sought also in the kingdom of the dead.'¹ Augustine's teaching imposed serious limitations and conditions inconsistent with the freeness and fulness of 'the gospel of the grace of God.' . . . 'The "coming salvation" must have had a retrospective effect upon those of bygone ages. The redemptive work of Christ looked back on the past as well as forward to the future.'² It is quite obvious that we of A.D. times and privileges are not 'the whole world' for which Christ died. The vast kingdom of the dead B.C. undoubtedly contained many of Christ's sheep; and the kingdom of the nether-world awaited its coming King. The claims upon our consideration of that larger half and kingdom of our fellow-men—with its human needs, its crying sins, with its darkness, its unalleviated hopelessness and despair—are, we think, imperative. We may believe that it stands altogether outside the redemptive work of Christ; and this may account for the slight amount of attention that has been given to the subject. But for one moment let us try and realize as well as we can something of the magnitude of that world of humankind which had passed away before Christ came.

The kingdom of the dead B.C. was a vast kingdom. It contained the souls of all the dead who had lived and died from the Creation to Christ—we have no fixed data for that long period. There were those of the antediluvian world—from Adam to Noah; there were those who perished in the judgment of the Flood. Following them were the Hittite and the other great nations and kingdoms of antiquity, that followed in successive generations, with their large cities and huge populations, too numerous for mention. All we need to

¹ Dorner, *Christian Doctrine*, iv. p. 409. Clark's F. and T. Library.

² J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia*, p. 301.

grasp is the fact that they did exist, and formed an aggregate of human souls—lost, or capable of redemption—which no man can number. The catalogue of their sins is black, yet not blacker than the sins of modern nations and cities under the ameliorating influences of Christianity. The learned and brilliant Bishop of Worcester remarks on St. Paul's enumeration of the sins of the Gentiles: 'Nor is there a word which St. Paul says in this chapter which would not be true of our modern civilization in London, Paris, or New York . . . we look around on the life of our city, with its selfish and disgusting lusts, with its drunkenness, with its enervating luxury, with its selfish and dishonest commerce, with its grasping avarice so neglectful of the lives of those whom it makes its instruments.'³ As we read this we ask, Is London, or Paris, or New York to have its leaven of Churches dotted thickly all over the place, and its Salvation Army of evangelists ceaselessly at work among the masses, whilst the sinners of ancient Babylon and Egypt, and all the innumerable dead who lived aforetime would have no equivalent 'benefit of clergy' and of Christ? May we not hear Abraham pleading, as once he did, 'That be far from Thee.'

But what we are now concerned with is not so much the sinfulness, as the number of these ancient peoples, who stood in need of a Saviour before there was a Christ, and to ask whether or not the natural inference of Holy Scripture allows us to embrace all these as of 'the whole world' which Christ came to redeem. The barest reference to statistics, even the most superficial and imperfect, will serve to convince us that the world B.C. is indeed 'the majority.' We have no means of estimating what the population of that world was, except by a comparison with modern data. In 1882 the population of the earth was roughly estimated at 1,433,887,500.⁴ This, counting three generations in a century, when multiplied by nineteen centuries, would with all deductions make a total 'which no man could number' of souls which had come and gone in A.D. times. But our A.D. era is short in comparison with the B.C. millennia reaching far back—how far we know not, since Archbishop Ussher's '4004' has been ruled out of court—to the Creation; for evolution counts not by years, but by ages. We

³ Bishop Gore on Ro 1²⁰.

⁴ *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

can, however, form an estimate sufficient for our purpose to show that the population of the Old World—from Adam to Christ—amounted to a total of appalling magnitude. These, with few exceptions, must have lived and died in ignorance of God and salvation, utterly without hope. Few of them had any sense of sin—‘For sin is not reckoned where there is no law’—we are, of course, excluding Israel.

Here, then, we have a world of unknown magnitude, of uncertain millennia, a kingdom of the dead, in which myriads of Adam’s children were exposed to the same peril of ‘perishing’ unless a saving hand was extended to them as to us. Is it inconceivable that all these were of the ‘whole world’ which Christ came to save? For us to deny this would be to place ourselves in very objectionable company: e.g. Strauss remarked on the judgment of the Flood, ‘That the fact of vast masses of men, before Christ, dying without being brought into relationship to Christ, proves that the Christian revelation, because not universal, is not necessary to salvation.’ But before this can be urged as a valid argument against the Christian revelation, it will be necessary to strengthen it with an additional premise, namely, that there was for them no such possible experience as coming into relation with Christ in the kingdom of the Dead. It is just here that the New Testament Scriptures are decisive: ‘For to this end,’ it is expressly stated, ‘Christ both died and revived that He might be Lord both of the dead and the living.’ ‘Here, says Bishop Gore, St. Paul touches upon the descent into Hades, and indicates the purpose of it. For this end Christ died, that He might be the Lord of the dead. It might have been imagined that the dim realms of the dead were outside the jurisdiction of Christ—that the dead have no king—that the kingdom of redemption does not include them. To obviate such an opinion, to show the universality of His realm, Christ went down among the dead.’¹ And these dead were the B.C. dead. This would seem to be conclusive.

On 1 Pet 3¹⁰ and 4⁶, in which the above sceptical argument is completely overthrown, Dr. Chase says: ‘The two passages taken together appear unquestionably to assert that at the supreme crisis of redemption the Redeemer Himself proclaimed the gospel to the dead, those who perished

¹ Bishop Gore on Ro 14⁹.

in the Flood being particularly specified, and that therefore such blessings of the gospel as are not confined to this earthly order were offered to them.’²

O, the generations old, o’er whom no church-bell tolled,
Christless, lifting up blind eyes to the silence of the
skies—

For the innumerable dead is my soul disquieted.

Still Thy love, O Christ arisen, yearns to reach all souls
in prison;

Down beneath the shame and loss sinks the plumed
of Thy Cross;

Never yet abyss was found deeper than Thy Cross could
sound.

Moreover, have we any right to pass judgment after our own standards and privileges on these bruised and broken reeds of a former dispensation? This is, at least, a case of the ‘many stripes and few stripes.’ We need not assume that all these numberless ones were cast away because God could get no music out of them, and the end of existence was utterly unattainable. It may have been so, but we do not know, for instance, that the antediluvians were finally dealt with and judged in the overwhelming calamity of the Flood. Who knows what repentances, what calling upon God, what laying hold of the skirts of His mercy there may have been at the last awful moment—in *articulo mortis*—when escape was impossible? What, too, about the multitudes of children who could not discern between their right hand and their left, all involved in the like calamity? Can we think that that was their last judgment? Browning has finely said—

He fixed thee mid the dance

Of plastic circumstance,

This Present thou forsooth wouldst fain arrest;

Machinery just meant

To give thy soul its bent;

Try thee, and turn thee forth *sufficiently* impressed.³

Here the poet teaches something of the great issues that hang upon opportunity and environment. And if these, of whom we speak, realized the lack of finality in their brief span of life, and felt the insatiable hunger that, as Augustine teaches, every created soul feels after its Creator, would not that be a ‘sufficient impress,’ and qualify for the glad reception of Him, in whom ‘all fulness dwells,’ when ultimately He should present Himself to them? This much, at least, we can all readily

² *The Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. 1 PETER.

³ Rabbi Ben-Ezra.

admit: 'This world is a place where God slowly tunes His instruments which shall hereafter send forth the sweetest music. Men stupidly take God's tuning of the instruments for the concert itself; and then they exclaim, that it is a very poor thing, and a great failure.'¹

The question as to the localization of these numberless dead asked in the solemn question, 'A man dies and where is he?' cannot be discussed now. They are somewhere in the universe of God—in some Sheol, Hades, or Gehenna, as is variously stated in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. Now, however, we are mainly anxious to ascertain 'what saith the Scripture' about the dead who passed into that unseen world before Christ came? We again emphasize the statement 'Before Christ,' because with the Coming of Christ, and the setting up of His kingdom, the Old World came to an end—it went out in catastrophe in the year 70 A.D. That, too, was the judgment of the Old World, the winding-up of its affairs; and the Beginning of the New World (*αἰὼν*), 'Behold,' said the Saviour-King, 'I make all things new.' And, as has been well said, 'Christianity is the absolutely teleological religion, pointing to a definite decision in the future in reference to individuals and the whole. In the Old Testament Christianity is the essential contents of eschatology. One might think that after Christianity appeared prophecy is at an end, everything is fulfilled. *And this was the expectation both of the prophets and the apostles, namely, that the End, the consummation of the world, will come with the Messiah. Nay, that the Messiah will, first of all, execute judgment, and that the revealing of His power will be the first thing.*'²

What then follows as to those myriads of the dead before that final act? We learn from Scripture that these lead a shadowy existence in an under-world, distinct from the grave. In passages too numerous to mention, this fact is ever insisted on: the dead are gathered to their fathers, and live a ghostly life somewhere, which was contemplated as 'loss' and not gain; and for this reason even the godly, as in the case of Hezekiah, dreaded it. More modern notions have favoured the idea that the uncovenanted and uncircumcised dead are annihilated; others hold to the notion of a universal restoration of the whole human race. But the

Old Testament knows nothing of either theory. When a man dies his body is given back to the earth, and his spirit returns to the God who gave it. Existence after death is never in doubt, but is always understood as a matter of course. Except in the case of the covenanted nation they knew nothing of the promises, nothing of the hope of Israel, and had but the dimmest expectation of a coming Messiah—the 'desire of all nations' was instinctive.

The question we are endeavouring to answer is, What was the fate of these dead B.C.—these 'Christless, lifting up blind eyes'? Did the 'whole world'—the *κόσμος*, as the totality of all men living in the world³—which Christ came to save, include them? Are we not permitted to believe that the compassionate love of God was both retrospective and prospective? was for the *κόσμος*, not for an *αἰὼν*? In other words, that the 'quick and the dead' of A.D. times have no advantages in which the B.C. dead did not participate. If so, then it follows that the dead of the Old World—from Adam to Christ—would not be judged until in some way they had been brought into relation to Christ, and could have an opportunity of accepting or rejecting Him.

The inference that we draw from Holy Scripture is that the world of the dead B.C. were not judged, but were awaiting judgment—kept waiting all that long time until their Judge should be appointed: as St. Paul speaks of a day, near at hand, when the dead should be judged by Jesus Christ 'according to my gospel.'⁴ Seeing that every human soul survives, it may be that 'no soul reaches the crucial point of its probation'⁵ till it has come into contact with Christ. The knowledge of Jesus Christ is, perhaps, the condition of final judgment for every soul. He who does not believe in the Son has not life; but not to believe implies a position to decide for or against Christ, and this cannot be applied to all.

It is here that we should recall the Saviour's declaration, 'If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin; but now they have no cloak for their sin.'⁶ . . . St. Paul, on the dissipation of agnosticism, standing in the very centre and capital of pagan idolatry, surveys the past, 'God suffered all nations to walk in their own ways,' and not only so, but He withheld direct revelation from the majority, abandoning them to the light of nature. Then he adds the remarkable words which ought to form a portion of almost

¹ Crawford—successor of F. D. Maurice.

² Dorner's *Christian Doctrine*, iv. p. 376.

³ Trench, *Synonyms*.

⁵ Godet.

⁴ Ro 2¹⁶.

⁶ Jn 15²².

every sermon, 'But the times of this ignorance God winked at—R.V., overlooked; *i.e.* clearly in the sense of not bringing the world into final judgment solely on the basis of their ignorant heathenism—overlooking their offence, and failing to punish them.' . . . 'If the ignorant millions who had died in heathenism were to be consigned to hell—as Xavier taught the Japanese that they would be—it could not have been said that God had hidden His eyes from, or overlooked, or winked at, or passed by their ignorance.'¹ In view of this, the belief sometimes held, that the dead B.C. were outside the scheme of salvation, cannot possibly be entertained. God is represented in the Old Testament as dealing tenderly and mercifully with ignorant sinners. He teaches Jonah a lesson of compassion towards the ignorant multitudes in Nineveh, 'Should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are sixty thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left?'² Is it inconceivable that, as to-day the Church is sending missionaries to heathen countries, so God has found means of sending missionaries to these ignorant heathen of the past? What did F. D. Maurice mean on his deathbed, when told that his earthly ministry was over, by replying, 'If I may not preach here, I may preach in other worlds,' unless he believed that there was mission work to be done among the dead?

God's name and character, His infinite pity and compassion, are all on the side of mercy; and are all opposed to the accepted view; and are all, we think, strong arguments for believing that the dead B.C. would have, in some way or other, the benefits of Christ's Atonement brought home to them equally with ourselves. The inference of the Scriptures all tends that way. And if Moses and Aaron were punished for their failure in honouring God's infinite patience and compassion towards stiffnecked sinners, do we not need to take heed

¹ E. White on Ac 17^{14, 16}.

² Jonah 4¹¹.

lest we, too, sin in like manner; or break the Third Commandment (as is done by many teachers) by taking God's Name—'His new best name of Love'—in vain, when we represent Him as falling short of all that His name implies,³ or as failing to act up to His character? There is surely room for pause here. The poet Heine, who died jesting, is said to have 'kept his most wonderful *mot* for the last: "*Dieu me pardonnera,*" he said, "*C'est son métier.*"' 'Was there ever a more wicked speech uttered,' asks the late Dean Farrar, 'than that of Napoleon the First, when Prince Metternich told him that his plan would cost the lives of a hundred thousand men; and he haughtily replied, "A hundred thousand men! What are a hundred thousand men to me?" Metternich walked to the window and flung it open, exclaiming with indignation, "Sire, let all Europe hear that atrocious sentiment." As we read, we are tempted to ask whether some good people do not worship a God like that?

The present Bishop of Chester, Dr. F. Jayne, is responsible for the following story, which will make a suitable pendant to what has been here said: A Welsh colliers' Bible class had chosen the Epistle to the Romans for their subject of study and discussion, and before tackling the doctrine of Predestination in the eighth and ninth chapters,—'On whom He will He hath mercy, and whom He will He hardeneth,'—one of the class said, by way of caution, 'Mind, boys, whichever way you take it, keep the character of God clean.' Whole shelves of theology, adds the Bishop, could not furnish a more golden maxim. And this, too, is a needed caution for us as we try to pierce the gloom hanging over the fate of those myriads who died, not in faith, B.C. We whose business it is to make mention of the Lord, must keep 'the character of God clean,' and free our minds of prejudice.

³ Ex 34^{6, 7}.