

XVI. - The Course of the Centuries.

You yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come upon us like a thief in the night.

We pray you not to be moved hastily, as if the day of Christ were at hand.

1 THESS. 5:2 and 2 THESS. 2:2.

In conclusion to the first part of our appeal for the Kingship of Christ, there remains for us the one question to be answered, whether in fact the Scriptures give us the right to make such a long period of time for the working out of the Kingship of Christ.

Scripture gives us the right to presuppose such a lengthy historical process for the working out of the Kingship of Christ, which is already running over twenty centuries, and which can still be fulfilled centuries from now.

We showed that the honoring of Christ's Kingship, especially in our civilized circles, suffered damage and painfully declined, so much so that in our leading circles hardly anyone cares about that Kingship anymore, and it lost its high significance even in Christian circles. We then traced the reasons for this renunciation of the Kingship of Christ, pointing successively to the decline of the sense of dependence due to the power mankind had won over Nature, and to the enormous increase and expansion of our knowledge. We pointed out how the stream of religious life itself, on the whole, rippled feebly and, in part, even got bogged down by the overstrained restlessness of life, as a result of faster communication and the drawing of the whole world into the circle of our human action. And in the end, we emphasized how, at this lowering of the stream of the life of piety, the spirit emerged from the depths to take possession of the leadership of the spirits, to establish a throne in the great cities of the world, to establish the worship of Mammon, and to cover the inner emptiness of the soul that resulted from this under the glory of Art.

As was only natural, the Christian people, faced with this unholy development of life, have been extremely hostile to it. Deploring the diminution of our dependence on the power of Nature, it tried to banish science and withdrew from the great life movement in order to continue its devout life in isolation and quietness. Thus, it seemed as if the power of Nature, the power of science, the richer economic development and the treasures of art were to be left to the world that lies in evil, and as if Christendom had nothing else to do but to lament on the ruins of Zion's

walls and to await the return of Christ and the end of things. In this way they thought they could go about freely, and lay all the blame for the course of things on the evil world. But it was precisely in this respect that our attempt was made to expose the untenability. We showed how we should rather have compassion on those many wretched people who, having drifted with the tide, were no longer able to grasp faith. We showed how Christianity in our own circle was also guilty of a loss of faith, and how the high and all-embracing significance of the Kingship of Christ had sunk to far too low a level among us. In order to make us understand this, we went back to man's kingship, which, instituted by Divine creation, had been lost in the fall, but was destined to be resurrected in the kingship of the Son of Man, and showed how Satan had meanwhile set himself up as the ruler of the world, in order to thwart Christ's kingship by the resurrection of man's false kingship. But also, how the Christ had dethroned the ruler of this world in His death and resurrection, and now, seated at God's right hand, had assumed the reign not only over His Church and over His elect, but also over the peoples and nations, over the whole development of human life, both spiritual and material; And how, as a result, in the increase of our power over Nature and in the wonderful blossoming of science, a result had to be greeted, not only by His will, but also by His work and brought about under His rule. We have already explained this by pointing out the spiritual effect which, although hidden behind all things visible, nevertheless governs the course of things.

This implies, hence the last question which remained to be answered in this connection, that a long historical process, far from falling away from Christianity, is rather demanded by it. The awareness of this, however, has reached professing Christendom only very faintly. The idea that the history of the world stands on its own, and that in the midst of this strange history of the world, the Church of Christ was continuing her pilgrimage, constantly persecuted, threatened and hindered by the world, and at times lured into infidelity by her wealth, was all too prevalent, and therefore yearned in her spiritual heart for the final salvation that will come only with the return of Christ to judgment. This longing is then continually manifested in the appearance of eschatological sects, i.e., groups that make the doctrine of Jesus' Second Coming the chapter of their creed, while the Church in her wider dimensions does not deny this Second Coming, but, in her satisfaction with her present state, almost completely loses sight of it and forgets it.

In view of this it must be acknowledged that in Scripture two apparently mutually exclusive conceptions run parallel. On the one hand there is the idea that the

generation then still alive was already awaiting the return of Christ, and on the other hand there is the entirely different idea of a lengthy historical process that must precede the coming of Christ in judgment. Even among the Apostles, both ideas ran side by side. The Apostle Paul in particular had a premonition that he himself would experience the return of the Lord. From 1 Cor. 15:51, 52 it appears that for a moment he counted himself among those who would not see death, but who at the moment of Jesus' return would enter into glory without dying. And what is even more evident is that in the revelations that were given to the apostle John on the island of Pathmos, the Christ himself speaks out: Behold, I come quickly, to the church in Philadelphia, adding: Keep what ye have, lest any man take your crown. And what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians to Thessalonica: "You yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night," may not be an indication of time, yet it could hardly make any other impression than that the return of Christ was very near. It is impossible to dismiss this proposition from apostolic literature. It is clear, in more than one way, that in the early years of the Church's rise people often imagined no other way than that Christ would return from heaven and settle the final struggle, and it is equally clear that more than one apostle cherished the same expectation.

But just as surely as we say this, just as surely is it counterbalanced by the fact that alongside this expectation there is a constantly breaking one, a completely different conception, which, without specifying a number of centuries, very clearly demands a lengthy historical process that will have to precede Jesus' return. It is already remarkable that Jesus himself, as soon as the young people wanted to press him to give some more details about the glorious establishment of his Kingdom, always refused them. The Father has placed the times and occasions in his own power," and neither the angels nor the Son know anything about this. The Lord even explicitly warns that false Christs will arise after his passing, claiming that the day of Christ has already come, and in connection with this Christ exhorts his Church not to listen to these false rumors, pointing out that great world events must still precede before the end of days can come. His parable of the leaven even points to a long process. The leaven is placed in the three measures of puree; then the process of leavening begins; and this process must take its historical course until the leavening of the three measures of puree is complete. In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul, who at first had a premonition that he was yet to experience the great day, has a premonition of his approaching dissolution; he even longs for it. For me," he writes, "this would be the best thing in the world. And he

hopes for a short continuation of his life only for the sake of the Church. Already in 2 Cor. 5:1 he expresses it: "We know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle is broken, we have a building of God eternal in the heavens," and he adds: Sighing within ourselves, we desire to be clothed with our dwelling place from heaven." There are no more than three years between them. The first letter to the church in Corinth dates from no earlier than 54, the second from no later than 57. It is therefore not acceptable to imagine that the apostle passed from one presentation to the other during this interval, precisely in the years of his most vigorous activity. To his mind the two stood side by side with equal justice. And, what is especially remarkable, to the Church of Thessalonica, which he had just founded on his return from his prison at Philippi, he writes in one letter: The coming of Christ will be like a thief in the night," and in the other, that a whole historical process will have to precede Christ's return; that the struggle between Christ and Satan will have to be fought out beforehand over its whole length and breadth, until finally, in the last attempt of despair, Satan will embody himself in the "man of sin", and that this is not possible for the time being, since there is a power that prevents it. On this basis he expressly warns against the expectation that we should regard the Lord's return as imminent. Whoever says and pretends that, is misleading the congregation. First the apostasy must come, and before that the man of sin must be revealed. Already when he was in Thessalonica, he had warned the believers there against this false expectation. There is a hidden iniquity. There is a hidden demonic power working against Christ's Church to destroy it. But the full revelation of this demonic power has yet to come. This can only come later. There is an irresistible power that will prevent it from fully breaking through and make it impossible.

It is thus clearly evident that the two motives worked in tandem in Christ's church from the very beginning. On the one hand, there was a sense of the immediacy of Jesus' return and, on the other, a clear understanding that, oh, so much would have to precede that day of days; that a historical process of struggle between Christ and Satan had begun; and that the Last Day could not come until that process was completely over.

To those who live in time, and measure everything according to time-space, this seems contradictory; but this contradiction is naturally given by the contrast between time and eternity. The psalmist expressed this contradiction in the significant words: "A thousand years are with the Lord as one day, and one day as a thousand years"; and in the Revelation that fell upon John at Pathmos, time and eternity stand side by side and opposite one another in the same way, when on the

one hand it is said: "Behold, I am coming quickly", and when on the other hand the historical process that was about to take place, is rescinded.

on the other hand, the historical process that was about to take place is represented in a book with seven seals, which contains the things to come, the fullness of which will only be able to unfold itself successively in the course of centuries. In eternity, and in everything that expresses eternity, there is no time and no measure of time. In the eternal everything is immediately present. It is, as the name Jehovah indicates, something that is, was and will be. All distinctions of time-space fall away here. The past, the present and the future merge into the one eternal. That is why in Revelation the scenes that will take place in the course of history are summarized in groups, according to their different types, as meaningful representations of what will not occur only once, but will be repeated over and over again in the course of centuries, each time in a different form, but in one fundamental type, until the end comes and the final act is accomplished. Therefore, although one had the perfect right to see the fulfilment of one of these seven seals in every major period of history, one would be mistaken to limit these seven seals to this one period, as if everything had ended with it. The whole of the Revelations of John is dioramic, as it is called. There is an undulation of history in these seven seals, but an undulation that continues through the centuries, and each time returns to the same basis, be it also under a changed light effect.

We stand here before the mystery, because everything that withdraws into the eternal, presents itself as the eternal, and lifts us up into the eternal, can make no other impression than that of the mystery on those who live in time and calculate according to time. We cannot detach ourselves from the idea of time. This follows naturally from our finite existence. But too often we imagine our immortal existence hereafter as an existence that will extend over an endless number of centuries. Even to the Lord our God we convey this idea of time, as often as we think of His counsel as having been established for a whole series of centuries, and now being fulfilled in bits and pieces. And yet we know that this cannot be right, because it amounts to an attribution to the Eternal of something that belongs only to our human existence. Every attempt to free ourselves from this concept of time and this awareness of the finite, fails, and only in moments of holy tension and in the glow of soul-strengthening prayer can we experience sensations that tear us away from the power of time and raise us up as if in higher consciousness.

Since Christ is now enthroned as our King in the eternal, and we are still living in time, it cannot and must not be the case that His return will also keep alive in us the longing for the unravelling of things, that it must at one time shine upon us in the light of the eternal, and then appear to us as if it were imminent: And yet another time, engaged in the course of time, presents itself to us as the great historical process, which the struggle between Christ and Satan, and thus also the development of the Church, and the liberation of the whole life of mankind through the influence of the Gospel, will pass through. The return of Christ raises an expectation that glimmers in the present with the brilliance of the eternal, and yet at the same time sends its sparks of fire into the distant future, across a history of centuries. Practically speaking, this means that a Church of Christ that distances itself from the day of the Lord, and empathizes with the thought that that day will only come after centuries have passed, completely lapses into the that emanates from the promise of the Lord's return, slackens inwardly, and starts to imagine that their future lies here on earth

But also, conversely, that a Church of Christ, which expects the coming of the Lord to come every morning and evening, gives up all quiet action and ceases to be active, renounces its duty and calling, and ends up burying itself under overwrought reflections. One can see this in the powerful popular churches in all countries, in whose preaching even the return of the Lord no longer constitutes a fixed ingredient, and among whose members the hope of Jesus' return no longer kindles a spark of inspiration. And the other is to be found in all eschatological sects and fanatics who join together in small groups, and among whom the strength for the struggle of the Christian principle against the demonic power of the world has been completely lost. First, they live in excitement. They wait, they yearn. If not this year, the year after that will be the end. And when every expectation is disappointed, and it still takes years and years, and still nothing comes, then the overexcitement gives way to despondency, and their entire faith expires. The holy art of preaching and the holy art of the personal soul life therefore remains now, as it was in the days of the Apostles, to do justice to both in the mystery of the Word and in the mystery of the soul: On the one hand, the words: Behold, I come quickly; on the other hand, the words: First the apostasy must come and the man of sin be revealed.

To this end the false separation must fall, as if the Kingship of Christ only concerned His Church and not likewise the life and historical course of the life of the world. Only in a later series of these Articles will it be possible to draw the line

between Providence and the Kingship of Christ. The only thing that now provokes protest is the idea that has had such a pernicious effect on the honoring of Christ as our God-anointed King, as if Christ, seated at God's right hand, were the powerful protector of his Church, but as if the historical process of the life of the world took place outside of him. His statement: "All power is given to me in heaven and on earth" contradicts this idea and is, historically and practically, absurd. The Church and the world are not two hermetically sealed spheres of life. The Church is in the world. It has an influence on the world and, conversely, the world has an influence on it. Every century changes the face of human life, and with every new form in which human life appears, the Church has the vocation to understand how to reckon with this changed situation, to direct its word accordingly, to change its action accordingly. Always the one unchanging Evangélie, always the one selfsame Body of Christ, but speaking for each century the language that this new century needs. Therefore, the reign of King Jesus over His Church is inconceivable, unless His royal rule also extends over the life of the world, inasmuch as a spiritual power is at work in that life of the world, which allows itself partly to be illuminated by the light emanating from God's Church, and partly -subjects itself as a demonic power against Christ. In connection with this it has now been demonstrated that the new form in which world life now appears, insofar as it contains good precious elements, is due to the reign of King Jesus, and insofar as unholy powers are at work in it, it is kept in check by King Jesus and fought against. That is why the Church of Christ has nothing to fear, no matter how much modern development may oppose the faith. Provided that it understands the signs of the times, repents its own guilt, and raises the honour of Jesus' Kingship again, the developments of our time will not harm God's cause, but serve the honour of our King.