

CHAPTER XVI

JESUS CHRIST: A GENERAL SURVEY

To those who with me believe that Jesus Christ implanted in mankind the root of eternal life, I must begin by saying this: It cannot be my direct object to write this chapter so as to please you; and it may be my misfortune not to please you. For I must think that you, my fellow-Christians, have shared the lot of all men, even the best and wisest men, in all nations of the earth; and while attaining some truth, have mingled some error with it, even in your most formal utterances. From that error, you say, you were delivered not always, but in those choice moments, when your creeds were first accepted by the united Church, in its representative assemblies; and those creeds, being once true, are of course always true. That is your statement; I must think it overpresuming as a principle, though it might no doubt be correct as a fact; but the most ardent Christians propound it as a principle. Supposing, however, the unerringness of the Christian creeds not to be propounded as a principle, but the affirmation to be simply that the Christian creeds are entirely correct as facts, which is what more moderate Christians affirm; I am constrained to say that I cannot think that this affirmation holds. It is, however, a fair matter of argument whether the Christian creeds are entirely true or not; and I must try to show in the following pages the leading considerations which bear on this point.

The creed called the Nicene creed (though the appellation is not quite correct, but it may be adopted without serious mistake) is by far the most authoritative of the Christian creeds; it is true that the Eastern and Western Churches differ as to one expression in it; but that expression will not enter into the discussion of the present chapter. Putting the "Filioque" aside, the Nicene creed is the creed which commands the assent of all Christians in a degree in which no other creed does; it is the accepted Christianity of to-day. The disputed points

which I am to discuss are contained in it much more clearly than in the simpler creed which is called the Apostles' creed.

If the Nicene creed be true in its entirety, Jesus Christ was infinitely different, as regards the principal part of his being, and as regards origin also, from every other man. That in his intercourse with men during his life on earth he wore the likeness of a man is no doubt affirmed; and the Nicene creed, while affirming divine operations on his part over the whole universe before he became incarnate, does not explicitly say that he continued to act on this vast scale after his birth as a man, while his earthly life continued. Yet Athanasius, the principal defender (if not the principal author) of the Nicene creed, clearly implies this¹; and, in any case, the infinite difference between Jesus Christ and ourselves, even as regards his ordinary consciousness during his earthly life, is habitually affirmed by Christians, and must be understood to be a part of ordinary Christian belief. However often these statements, direct or implied, of the Nicene creed may have been made, however natural it may seem to Christians to make them, the ground for them does need to be carefully examined; nor is it without importance to inquire what their effect has been on the mind of Christians. If the divine government of the world is essentially bound up with the affirmations of the Nicene creed, the effects of that creed in promoting goodness and happiness among men ought to be clear.

Perhaps, at this point, I ought to give my own opinion, both on the negative and on the positive sides. I do not hold the clauses of the Nicene creed, which affirm the infinite difference between Jesus Christ and ourselves, to be founded on just grounds; nor do I believe them to have influenced human character for good. But the statement which is sometimes supposed to be the sole alternative to the statements of the Nicene creed, that Jesus Christ was merely an ordinary good man, does not appear to me to be true either. According to my reading of history, he was the man who first received, as his own proper inheritance, the Divine Spirit and Power in its fullness; and those who receive it after him have been helped by him either through his direct influence upon them, or by influences indirectly due to him; or, if they have stood altogether outside his influence (as is generally the case with Mohammedans), they have been unable

¹ See, as regards the opinions of Athanasius, the Appendix to chapter XXI of the present work.

to bring their goodness to permanent and ever-increasing fruitage. The progress of mankind is founded on him in a unique sense.

This makes him greater than his fellow-men; but it does not make him outside the range of comparison with them. An ancient Christian narrative still exists, which, though reference to the followers of Jesus was impossible in it, does involve a reference to his predecessors, and puts that reference under the most solemn possible sanction. The lost gospel of the Hebrews gave the account which I will now quote of what ensued after Jesus had been baptized:

It came to pass as the Lord ascended up out of the water, that the whole fountain of the Holy Spirit came down and rested upon him and said to him; "My son, in all the prophets I waited for thee till thou shouldst come and I might rest upon thee: for thou art my rest, thou art my firstborn son, who reignest for evermore." See Jerome on Isaiah xi. 1.

It must not be thought that the words here attributed to the Holy Spirit are inconsistent with the better known utterance which we read in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are indeed more expanded; just as the words which the apostle Paul says that he heard at the moment of his conversion are more expanded in the twenty-sixth chapter of the Acts, than as given in the ninth and twenty-second chapters. Neither in this case, nor in the baptism of Jesus, must we think of the heavenly words as spoken to the outer ear. When this is understood, the relation of the prophets to their greater successor, as the gospel of the Hebrews puts it, is most touching and natural. The prophets had the divine inspiration, but not the divine rest; in Jesus rest was attained, a rest which all men might share. The prophets and Jesus are on the same plane; but Jesus has established that link which the prophets were in search of. I believe the gospel of the Hebrews to be perfectly correct in the whole narrative; but I say so in this place merely as defining my own position; I am not yet claiming my reader's assent to the view just stated.

It will, however, be a further explanation of the position here assigned to Jesus, if I add that he first of all men relied upon the divine method of government; which is government by attraction. Not by any compulsion did he seek to bind men to himself; nor, when his words are properly understood, by any terror (though I grant that this has often been thought—but an explanation will be given in the proper place); but by the mere exhibition of the beauty and strength inherent in

goodness. He felt assured, and persistently taught, that the good man always wins and does not lose by his goodness. This assurance, by a singular reversal of natural thought, some persons in modern times have thought an indication of selfishness, on the ground that the good man ought to be good whether he wins or loses by it. But it cannot be indifferent to the good man whether the world is rightly directed or not; and what do we mean by right direction, if not that each man shall receive that which his deeds deserve? Jesus assumed and taught that this was the case; that each man would receive that which his deeds deserve. But to assume this, meant to assume that there was a life after this life in the flesh—a life after death; for it is perfectly manifest that each man does not receive his deserts in this life—that here, in the life which we know, many men suffer undeservedly, and without recompense. Jesus then assumed that there would be a future life for men; and what is more, that the time was come for this to be manifested; and as it had not hitherto been manifested, he declared that it would be made manifest in himself. By what combination of inner instinct, reliance on the authorities which had preceded him, and perception of the state of the world in his own day, he made this peculiarly personal assertion, I must not here detail; the subject belongs to the direct narrative. But that he did make this assertion is an essential thing in him; and it was intimately connected with his assumption that right government consists in selection by attraction; like goes to like, the good to the good, and in the eternal kingdom of God it would be felt that he, Jesus, worthily represented the divine motives, and carried the Divine Spirit in himself, around which men would naturally gather, and to which they would assimilate themselves. He taught also that his spirit and his power would reach to the world of men, visible in the flesh, whom he left behind him, and especially to his disciples and friends; though how, and with what concomitants, this was to happen, was naturally an obscure point; and it was not to be expected that the details of his prediction should be as clear as the general purport of it. His predictions of the future in detail are indeed sometimes apparently inconsistent; but this, under the conditions, was inevitable.

The above is, I think, a fairly complete account, in brief, of the general position of Jesus, as understood by myself, and as it will be put forward in the present treatise; but I must

recur to the Nicene creed, which is the doctrine which holds the field at the present day. The Nicene creed, as I have said, places an infinite difference between Jesus and every other man; and the way in which it does so is by attributing to him a conscious eternal life before his life in the flesh; during which conscious eternal life he made all things which exist, animate or inanimate, expressing in this way the will of his Divine Father; and from this eternal pre-existent life he voluntarily came down, took a body in all respects like ours, being born of a human mother though not of a human father, and lived as a man among men; his difference from other men being completed (though this is a small thing compared to what has preceded) by the affirmation that on the third day after his violent death he rose again, that he ascended to heaven and sat on the right hand of God, and that he is about to return from thence as our judge. Looking at Christian belief with the eyes of the authors of the Nicene creed, we shall see that the points in the latter part of the above enumeration do not so absolutely differentiate Jesus from ourselves as the points in the former part of it; but his conscious divine pre-existence, his partnership from all eternity in the universal divine working, and his voluntary descent into a human body, do make him absolutely and infinitely different from ourselves.

It is now proper to remark that the scheme of belief presented to us in the Nicene creed has been received with real enthusiasm not only by Christian theologians, but by persons of singular ability and great freedom of thought, lay and not clerical, living in times which must be called modern, though of course not beyond the reach of ancient influences (as who would wish them to be?). The poet Milton in his later years did partly (by no means entirely) dissent from the Nicene creed; but his early poem *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* does so precisely express the doctrine of that creed, and in so lofty a style, that it will be well to quote its two opening stanzas (they are from the Introduction, not from the Ode):

This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heaven's Eternal King,
Of wedded Maid and Virgin Mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

That glorious form, that light unsufferable,
 And that far-beaming blaze of majesty,
 Wherewith he wont at Heaven's high council-table
 To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
 He laid aside; and here with us to be,
 Forsook the courts of everlasting day,
 And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

After Milton, let me quote Tennyson. The stanzas which form the introduction to *In Memoriam* are not so precise in their detail as Milton's stanzas; but they are absolutely from the same point of view, and are specially notable as coming from a poet who was peculiarly interested in natural science. Here are his first five stanzas:

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
 Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
 By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
 Believing where we cannot prove;
 Thine are these orbs of light and shade;
 Thou madest Life in man and brute;
 Thou madest Death; and lo, thy foot
 Is on the skull which thou hast made.
 Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:
 Thou madest man, he knows not why;
 He thinks he was not made to die;
 And thou hast made him: thou art just.
 Thou seemest human and divine,
 The highest, holiest manhood, thou:
 Our wills are ours, we know not how;
 Our wills are ours, to make them thine.
 Our little systems have their day;
 They have their day and cease to be:
 They are but broken lights of thee,
 And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

With equal force and conviction does Browning, in his poem of *Christmas Eve* express the same doctrine, or at any rate imply it. Very wrong would it be to underrate the force of that against which one is arguing; and it is a serious fault to deny the sincerity of feelings which, nevertheless, one may think mistaken. I do recognise the sincerity of Milton, Tennyson, and Browning, and the sincerity of many Christians, who, without being able to express themselves with the force of those great poets, have felt the same. Where there is sincerity, there is generally underlying truth, though not always truth in the precise terms.

Far better known than even Milton and Tennyson and Browning are some sentences in the New Testament, generally

and justly interpreted as implying a doctrine closely akin to that of the Nicene creed (even if not quite identical with it). The following sentence from the fourth gospel appears there as if spoken by Jesus himself; but it is doubtful if the author of the gospel really meant this, and it is in any case a sentence which a critical reader will attribute, with hardly a doubt, to the evangelist himself.

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life. John iii. 16.

When the whole tenor of the fourth gospel is considered, the words "only begotten Son" in this verse must be interpreted as meaning one who lived consciously in heaven before his earthly life; and the word "gave" implies the incarnation of that "only begotten Son." The crucifixion could not have been out of the mind of the evangelist in writing the verse, but it is not prominent. It is more prominent in the following verse of the apostle Paul:

If God is for us, who is against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things? Romans viii. 31, 32.

It cannot be doubted that the crucifixion is here in Paul's mind; but if we consider the general tenor of his writings, we must say that the incarnation is not absent, and with it the divine pre-existence of Jesus. The most explicit affirmation of the incarnation in Paul's writings is that in the epistle to the Philippians (which I hold to be genuine) chapter ii. 5-8:

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, counted it not a prize to be on an equality with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross.

This is definite in a way in which the passage from the "Romans" is not so; but the same meaning can hardly be absent from the passage in the "Romans," and it is felt to be more forcible in the "Romans," because the feelings of the Divine Father himself are also brought in there.

Now what am I to say to these passages? It is necessary to remind the reader that the real crux of the argument has not yet been reached; the contents of the gospels have to be weighed before the end of the argument is reached. Still, at the stage at which I now stand, what is to be said of affirmations

manifestly sincere, made by such great authorities as those whom I have quoted, and which nevertheless I am opposing?

I answer, that all these great authorities—the apostles even more than the poets—had the whole world before their eyes, the whole infinite world, and were trying to interpret it in its height and in its depth. We must not find fault with them for doing so; we must not say, “It is a mistake for men to attempt something so obviously beyond their powers.” A full solution of what this infinite world means may not be attainable by us; none the less ought we to try to win the best solution which our limited means allow. The eternal existence of Divine Love, the assurance that that love had touched human nature, and was leading human nature through many trials and sufferings towards an immortal existence, this the apostles held, and this we may hold. But when Paul and John tried to fit this large belief into history as they knew it, and especially when they tried to show how Jesus of Nazareth, by whom they had both been so ineffaceably stirred and kindled, was related to the divine purposes and to the eternal world-progress, it must not be thought unnatural if in some respects they went wrong. It may be said, “Yes, in their philosophy perhaps; but as witnesses of plain facts they cannot be held to have gone wrong, without grave imputation upon their honour.” This reply at once brings the whole New Testament before us, and especially the question of miracles. The fourth gospel, generally accredited to the apostle John, distinctly bases the belief in Jesus as the Christ on his miracle-working power, even as the book of Deuteronomy had based the Israelite belief in Jehovah on the miracles of the Exodus and of Mount Sinai. What are we to say to the fourth gospel? And what are we to say to the other gospels, in which the belief in the importance of miracles, though not so openly proclaimed as in the fourth gospel, is evidently inherent?

In answer to these questions, I must begin by saying that that caution which we invariably use when we meet with a miraculous narrative in an ordinary history must certainly not be laid aside when we are considering the Biblical miracles. A historian may be accepted by us as trustworthy in ordinary events; but when he relates a miracle, we generally simply pass it by as not credible. We do not trouble ourselves to ask why it should be disbelieved; we take the liberty of disbelieving it without any hesitation. Thus, we give a general belief to

the narrative of the Persian wars by Herodotus; but when the historian tells us how Apollo defended¹ his temple at Delphi by rolling great crags on the assailing Persians, and by sending two supernatural heroes to pursue the enemy in their flight, we assume that that is not an exact account of what happened. When the ecclesiastical historian Socrates tells us what happened at the council of Nicæa, we believe him; but when he tells us² that the nation of the Iberi were converted to Christianity by a miracle wrought through the prayer of a female slave, a great pillar raising itself from the ground and standing upright in the air at some distance above its base, on which it finally settled down, we consider him credulous and mistaken. Similarly we accept Bede's account of the mission of Augustine and of the synod of Whitby; but when he tells us³ how the stone sarcophagus, which had been prepared to contain the body of the pious king Sebba, being found too small, miraculously enlarged itself to the necessary size, we do not think ourselves bound to regard that as true history. We exercise a natural discrimination; it does not seem necessary to argue so plain a matter.

Is there any reason why we should treat the gospels in any different way from that in which we treat the three eminent historians just quoted? In respect of one class of miracles, the miracles of healing, there is some reason. To deny that Jesus attempted to heal the sick, the blind, and the deaf, is so fundamentally destructive to the gospel records that it is very difficult to imagine what remains when this is gone; and again, to say that Jesus attempted to heal, but was entirely unsuccessful in doing so, is to attribute a blindness to his followers too great to be probable. The gospels may exaggerate; but a fair regard to probabilities compels us to say that Jesus did work remarkable cures. But it must be added that such cures are not unknown at the present day, though rare; the characteristic point being that they are cures worked through faith. Moreover it is very clear in the gospels that Jesus did not hold himself to be unique in performing works of healing; it is recorded that on one occasion he found fault with his disciples because they were unable to heal an epileptic boy, declaring⁴ their inability to be due to their want of faith; and the spirit of his teaching invariably is that, not as any peculiar sign pertaining to himself alone, but as a general part of the divine beneficence, the healing of

¹ viii. 37-39.³ Bede, *Hist. Eccles.* iv. 11.² Socrates, *Hist. Eccles.* i. 20.⁴ Matthew xvii. 14-20.

the natural defects and sicknesses of men shall follow the establishment of the kingdom of heaven upon earth. To this he looks forward; this he declares to have begun in his own day; but it is by no means his intention to say that this shall terminate in his own day. In saying this, it will be well for me to refer to the most remarkable assertion by Jesus of his own deeds which the three earlier gospels contain (the fourth gospel, which has more of the idealistic element in it, must be treated separately); this is his reply to the messengers whom John the Baptist had sent to make the inquiry of him whether he were the Christ (for this is the real meaning of the phrase "he that cometh"). His reply runs thus:

Go your way and tell John the things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good tidings preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me. Matthew xi. 4-6.

This reply is likely to have been an abridged version of what was really said, but there is no reason to doubt its substantial truth. The principal points to remark on, for understanding its purport, are these: first, beneficence, and not wonder, is the main theme on which Jesus is laying stress; this is clear from the clause in which his affirmation of his deeds culminates: "the poor have good tidings preached to them"; and also he recognises that people may be offended in him, which shows that his deeds would not necessarily silence criticism at once. These points being taken into account, and the intrinsic improbability of a literal raising of the dead being also borne in mind, a metaphorical rather than a literal meaning may fairly be assigned to the words, "the dead are raised up." That Jesus did speak of "the dead" in a metaphorical sense, we see from his saying, "Let the dead bury their dead"; and also it is not easy to think that he gave his apostles a general instruction to "raise the dead" literally; and the instruction "raise the dead" is found in Matthew x. 8, as part of his address to the apostles when he sent them out on their first missionary journey. When all allowances are made, it is not to be denied that Jesus claimed to do some things which may well excite our wonder; but this, up to a certain point, should not be deemed incredible.

The case is quite altered when we come to such miracles as the creation of loaves and fishes, the walking on the sea, the turning of water into wine, or the raising of Lazarus. There