

## II

### CHRIST AND LIFE-IN-DEATH

YOU remember our soldier who, discussing life after death with his chaplain, blew out a match and asked, "Is that what happens to us?" What would Jesus have said? We do not know, for Jesus when questioned made it His practice to answer the questioner as well as the question. But in like instances Jesus seems to have given firm assurance of the Beyond—assurance, but no details. His recorded teaching provides no description of the hereafter, no particulars of flora, fauna, geography or history. Why this reticence? Was it because He would not distract us from present duty? Or because we could not have understood? A man born blind cannot comprehend the sight of Lake Louise, nor a man born deaf the wonder of the "Seventh Symphony." Perhaps earth has no faculties to comprehend heavenly things. Or was Jesus thus silent because He shared our human limitations, and did not know? For whatever reason, Jesus did not describe life after death except by implication.

But He was *assured* of the hereafter—and He gave assurance. Paul's words, though not written strictly on our topic, have caught both the silence and certitude of his Master: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him."<sup>16</sup> Jesus might have said to that soldier simply: "Believe in God!"—or, "I am the resurrection and the life."<sup>17</sup> Doubt as to the Beyond has driven a salient even into the Church, even into the ministry of the

Church. The doubt is understandable, and not necessarily unworthy. But it has parted company with the New Testament. For the mood of that Book is nowhere *in memoriam*: everywhere it is *Te Deum*: "Thou art the King of Glory: O Christ . . . We therefore pray Thee, help Thy servants: whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy precious blood. Make them to be numbered with Thy Saints in glory everlasting."<sup>18</sup> Jesus believed in eternal life.

## I

But His Gospel implies a sharp distinction between eternal life and immortality. The New Testament has no zeal for immortality. It shows no excitement over our not being mortal, over mere continuance of being. The Old Testament has its doctrine of immortality: Sheol, a realm of half-shadows where men live on and on in a pale replica of earthly life. That is not what men call heaven: it is only a bearable doom. Men of spirit shrank from it, as when Achilles said to Odysseus of a similar faith: "Don't speak to me of death! I would sooner be a hireling servant of the poorest peasant than the ruler of all the kingdoms of the dead."<sup>19</sup> Buddhism has a doctrine of immortality—an irrevocable wheel of birth and death and reincarnation; and, it is worth noting, that immortality is rightly regarded as a treadmill hell from which the Buddhist must find release through Nirvana. Incidentally, there is little to give substance to a doctrine of reincarnation, except our sense that we are under retribution: you and I have no memory of having been here before as sultan or gnat or camel driver. But the notion is interesting in that it underscores our contention that mere immortality might be a curse.

George Bernard Shaw is reported to have said that he could not endure being George Bernard Shaw forever. Other

people also would be dismayed—for both him and themselves. Maude Royden tells of a man who in discussing his own fear of immortality recited an epitaph which he had found on a tombstone in America :

Don't bother me now,  
Don't bother me never,  
I want to be dead  
For ever and ever.<sup>20</sup>

Every worthy man shrinks from mere continuance. The current pessimism, "There will always be wars," makes young people pause about parenthood: why breed sons and daughters to be bomb fodder? If the pessimism were to prevail, there might arise a cult of sterility or even of suicide. Uneasy peace and open war, uneasy peace and open war, as long as the ages roll, would be the Buddhist wheel in more cruel guise. Nirvana, the starving out of all desire, some deep oblivion, would be almost heaven by contrast. Bluntly: immortality needs redemption. Just as bluntly: Christ proposed to redeem it. He spoke, not of immortality, but of eternal life.

The New Testament says of Christ that He "brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel."<sup>21</sup> He led it from its shadows and despair. He broke the dreary circle. He wrought deliverance by His life, death, and resurrection. George Bernard Shaw must not "go on being George Bernard Shaw forever." There must not "always be wars." You and I must not live in dull continuance, either here or hereafter. Instead we must find, or receive, life—ongoing life, "from strength to strength."<sup>22</sup> It is the kind of life of which the New Testament can say, "Of His fullness have we all received, and grace for grace."<sup>23</sup> And there's the rub! There we are brought sharply to the real issue. *How* are we to be rid of our unworthiness? *How* can we gain assur-

ance of eternal life? *How* can we escape the treadmill of unworthiness, death, and expiatory reincarnation? Is there a Jacob's ladder let down from heaven by which we climb from unworthiness which is under judgment, through redemption, to resurrection and eternal life? Let us try to trace that road.

## II

Who could deny, in our kind of world, that we are under judgment? Who could deny that the judgment is deserved? The tensions of our time are doubly hard to bear because they are in the realm, not alone of emotion and faith, but of conscience. In the words of a taxi driver who drove me downtown three weeks ago, "We had it coming to us." You may recall in A. J. Cronin's, *The Citadel*, the young doctor who, when politics defeated his health measures in a Welsh mining-town, forsook his ideals and began to live for money. After his wife's death he found in her handbag a faded snapshot of himself in those Galahad days, and also letters of gratitude from impoverished miners: she had kept these treasures through the years to remind her of the man he might have been. The truth was almost more than he could bear. In a drunken stupor, which yet could not drug his conscience, he would shout at himself: "You thought you could get away with it. You thought you *were* getting away with it. But by God! you weren't."<sup>24</sup> That mood is on every thoughtful man today.

There is no comfort in the plea that God's standards are impossibly high, and therefore must be broken; for we break the lower standards which we ourselves accept. We fail even in a decent kindness, or a decent honesty. The lie-detector recently applied to an average group apparently showed that most people steal, even if only in petty thieving; and their

jumpiness under the test proved that they knew the wrong. Is it "impossibly high" to resist removing the money from a handbag carelessly left in a public hall? As with people, so with groups. Recall the class disparities of wealth and poverty, the national pride that asserted "rights" and forgot duties, the racial arrogance. Recall the scrap iron sold to Japan to kill Chinese, the millions of dollars profit drained from New Guinea and Malaya with no commensurate regard for native populations, the shrewd sophisticated mammon-worship which no veneer of culture or added veneer of religion could ever disguise. "We had it coming to us," and it has come. We are under judgment.

Presumably death will be a clearer judgment. Every crisis is a judgment: the Greek word *crisis* means a sifting, a separating; and so, a judgment—and a sentence. Death is a crisis, the separating of self from body, with a balancing of the books. So the great and wise have taught—in ancient Egypt, that each man's heart is weighed in the scales; in Persia, that the soul passes over a bridge either to a house of song or to a precipice of doom; in Greece, where Plato held that every man must stand before God "naked soul to naked soul." So Jesus taught. We rightly call Him "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," but these adjectives do not trace the whole orbit of His mind. He said to certain reputable people of His day, "How can ye escape the damnation of hell?"<sup>125</sup>—a rebuke which polite little minds would deem unChristlike. Since each crisis on earth is a judgment, it is but rational to believe that at the death-crisis (when we are freed from the body, and the shadows of this earth are lifted) we shall see with new and piercing gaze, and be judged for the deeds "done in the flesh."

What will be the test and instrument of judgment? Ancient Egypt believed that the soul would be balanced in the

scales against the feather of truth. Christian faith has held that the heart of Christ is the test—not some feather of truth, but His life lived out in our workaday world. He Himself said that *He* would separate the sheep from the goats: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”<sup>26</sup> The New Testament says it: “The Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead.”<sup>27</sup> In sober fact, is He not the judgment of our present world? Rudyard Kipling, speaking to a graduating class at McGill University in Montreal, advised them not to care too much for money or power or fame; for, he said in effect, “Some day you will meet a man who cares for none of these things; and then, if that is all you possess, you will know how poor you are.”<sup>28</sup> Well, we have met that Man! One reason why we evade the thought of death is because death means judgment. That meaning comes by our own proper deduction; it comes also from death’s own strange impact. And we are not ready to be judged. Because we know that “death is the sacrament of sin,” we sidestep the idea of death: it is almost a comfort to pretend that we die like cattle. But pretenses—these scientific “escapes”!—must yield at length to spiritual fact.

## III

The real question is therefore: How can immortality be redeemed?—or, in different phrasing: How can mortal-immortal man be redeemed? “The sting of death is sin.” That is true in our psychology, and it is true in the holy will of God. How, then, can we remove the sin from our world, and thus remove the sting of death? *We* cannot remove it. That ought to be clear. On no issue is there greater need for straight thinking. So let us try to strike off the plain facts.

One plain fact is that our wrong is against God. It is not

merely against ourselves, for we do not create ourselves either in body or soul. It is not merely against our neighbor, not merely "anti-social" as our jargon would have us believe, for our neighbor did not create himself either in body or soul. We sin against the created order, against the vital process—in short, against God. Any wrongdoer is for witness. A. J. Cronin's doctor manifestly sinned against himself, as he tragically found. Just as clearly he sinned against his neighbors all around the circle—against the wife who trusted him, against the miners whom he left to their undeserved poverty, against the wealthy hypocondriacs whom he coddled, even against the abortionist to whom he referred patients. But the deepest thrust of his transgression was against truth (which always seems as light as a feather, but is as heavy as the ultimate test), against honor, against that "Citadel" towards which the soul of man must aspire—against God. A friend reports overhearing a young gangster say to his more timid pal, "Spit on the sky, and knife him!" "Spit on the sky" is but a crude version of, "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight."<sup>29</sup>

Another fact follows, and is just as plain: God alone can forgive. He is most deeply wronged, all live in Him, and only He has power to remake the world which He has made. Does the fact need argument? If so, try how far you can succeed in the business of redemption. You cannot cleanse even your own memory, for it always eludes you. In Lloyd Douglas' story, the centurion whose spear had killed Christ could not forget. Years later he would brood, then lift his head, then say suddenly to some stranger, "Were *you* out there?"<sup>30</sup> You cannot renew your own will. How could you renew your will when you have only a sick will with which to work the renewal? You cannot cleanse the stream of history into which the poison of transgression is poured. There's an

item to ponder! The world's present tragedy came, not merely from our generation, but from the wicked blunders of the past. How far back would we need to go to find the beginning of the stain? Wrongdoing is always as long as history. A preacher looked at a blitzed city and said, "This is original sin." One of our cultivated modern fact-dodgers answered, "Must we believe that dreadful doctrine?" He answered, "Madam, a dreadful world cannot be explained except by a dreadful truth." Wrongdoing manifestly flows from one generation to another; and, in whatever mystery, it is as long as history. Furthermore, it is as wide as the world. No sin stands alone: it is always meshed with other sins to make an empire of wickedness. Who does the meshing? There's another mystery. But the fact remains: Hitler's sin is not alone; for he has his cronies, and his nation gave him at least a partial following, and other nations made his diatribes plausible by their intransigence—Great Britain by its blockade after the last armistice, for instance, and we by washing our hands of international duty. Wrongdoing is as long as history and as wide as the world. So we return to our question: Will anyone here undertake to cleanse history, or to take away the "sin of the world"? Only God can forgive, however much our partial forgivenesses may be needed as response. Only God can renew a world now sick unto death.

Here is the next plain fact (let us cleave to bluntness): God forgives, if at all, by coming to earth. How else? We must not say that He cannot know our need unless He comes to earth, for we are not God and cannot read His power. But it is sure that we could not know His pardon unless in some way He gives us a clear sign. Perhaps John Howard, if he had been God, would have known the degraded and cruel despair of the English jails of the eighteenth century without any need to visit them; but it is certain that the pris-



oners would not have known his concern unless he had come. Perhaps if God refused to share our life He would be less than God. We cannot tell: assuredly we do not deserve His presence. Perhaps He would be justified in cleansing the planet of all our stubborn breed. We do not know. But we do know that if salvation were by "turn of eye" in some far eternity, it would not be salvation for us: it would be merely outside our ken. In the Lexington School for the Deaf, in New York, children born deaf are taught to "hear" through their fingers. The teacher sits on a chair at their height. They put their fingers on the teacher's lips, teeth, and cheek. They feel the sound. Then they try to reproduce it by copying the movements. When they succeed, the teacher smiles. All illustrations of God must fall short, even as earth is short of heaven. But—must God not stoop, to let us put our hands on His face? How else could we know His love?

The next plain fact follows plainly: God, if He should come to earth, would suffer. Here even men suffer. They hear the radio announcer's oily voice saying, as if giving the score of a football game, "Forty planes were shot down"; and they try to imagine the agonies of those five hundred men, plus the sorrows of five hundred homes. How God would suffer, sharing our life in such a world! His purity is far more sensitive than our network of nerves: every treachery, every dull selfishness, every cruelty and pride cuts with pain into His quivering holiness of love. An organist friend tells of a composer and his rebellious son. The lad would wait until his father was abed, and then would torture him by playing an unresolved chord (a "seventh"), ever repeated. The father could not stand it very long: he would come downstairs, and with his own hands bring the chord to finality and peace. Again, it is a poor picture of God. In love He must come downstairs into our brutal discords, to make the

music which we cannot forget, but which we cannot create. But at what pain!—like the pain of Calvary!

## IV

This sequence of plain facts brings us now to *the* fact. It is rational to believe, even as it is quickening to believe, that Jesus Christ is God come to our earth. Someone says, "That is not certain." It is certain enough for mind and heart, yet not so certain as to destroy the freedom and courage of our faith. Someone says, "Must we find salvation in an instanced Man? What about our general laws?" Well, what about them? When science has finished abstracting samenesses from a host of differences, the differences will still be different. Difference, such as the difference in people, is as profound a fact as sameness. Perhaps it is more profound: the universe would disappear if all things were the same thing. Science itself now acknowledges that the real mystery is in the event, because each event is an unpredictable newness. The phrase, "it came to pass," hides the secret wonder of the world.

Then why should not Jesus be *the* Event? We are constitutionally ignorant, and no truth is discovered unless it is first given. The truth about our life, this practical business of living, will not be found unless it also is given. Presumably it will be given in a life. Whose life? Our belief, ultimately, is not a belief in something, but a belief in someone; for any real belief enlists our emotion and the commitment of the will, as well as our mind. No man can genuinely love a blueprint, or rouse a crusade for an electric trip hammer. Belief becomes at last a personal trust. In whom? In someone (if we can find him!) who is of mankind, yet above mankind; who shares our life, yet has overcome its stain and transiency.

Then look at "this Jesus." His ethic abides. Call it rather

His flame of holiness. He is the world's conscience, and every crisis serves only to discover in His words some unsuspected depth of truth. He showed "no break with His past" (it is Harnack's phrase) : there were no unworthy shadows in His eyes, no evil fears to suck away the vigor of His soul. Sidney Lanier called Him the "crystal Christ"; and He would be our despair, a never-overtaken righteousness, but for His love. That love is a spiritual miracle: its purity was never debased, yet its vigil of tenderness was never broken. It was no mere spurt, no grand occasion set in dullness: it was a constant self-giving that would not think of self. He loved the least and the lowest, the weakest and the worst; and kept on loving them until the love brought Him to a Cross. He kept on even then, and died praying for those who wickedly slew Him. Rain once fell on Death Valley and the desert promptly blossomed as the rose: the compassion of Christ fell on our planet, and the flowers still grow—even though tanks roll over them.

He has other marks of God. They are veiled in flesh, lest we be blinded or coerced, but they are not hid. He is strangely at home in every land, with every race. Sometimes the people of other cultures refuse Him at our hands, but that is because our hands are unclean, not because of any lack in Him. Did not Gandhi say that he could not welcome Christ in the clothes of Birmingham? Those clothes have sometimes been all pockets—and set with spikes, but Christ is still "the desire of all nations." You may have seen Chinese Christmas cards: the mother is Chinese, and the Babe is Chinese, with tiny upraised lines for eyes. A missionary was showing pictures of Christ in the Sudanese jungle, where no white man had gone before him. He was depressed that day: the gospel seemed a hopeless venture. Suddenly a fifteen-year-old boy exclaimed, "My, oh my, what a man that

was!"<sup>31</sup> In every land Jesus takes new form, yet remains ever and only Jesus. It is as if universality had come alive in Him. He called himself "the son of man."

There is another mark. It is more than breathtaking when we ponder it. We have said that only God can forgive sins, because sin is against God; and because its agelong world-wide empire is beyond man's power to redeem. Yet Jesus forgave sins, and people knew themselves forgiven. This double fact would not be possible with any forgiveness you and I might offer. You and I, visiting the local jail or the war-criminals of Europe, could not pronounce pardon; for we also, after our own measure, are "in the same condemnation." If we did say, "Thy sins be forgiven thee," it is quite unlikely that our clients would know themselves forgiven. We can forgive to our degree injury done to us (and we should), but we cannot forgive sin. That is God's burden; and, besides, we need to be forgiven. But Jesus forgave. Some shallow mind once disputed with Carlyle this "aleness" in Jesus, saying jauntily, "Why, I can use the words Jesus used, 'I and my Father are one.'" "Yes," came the crushing reply, "but Jesus got the world to believe Him."<sup>32</sup> The Pharisees recoiled when they heard Jesus forgive. They knew that ultimate pardon is the prerogative of God. They said instantly of Jesus: "This man blasphemeth." They were right, unless—unless He and His Father *are* one, unless God is in Him, "reconciling the world unto Himself."

God must come to earth (we have said) to forgive sins: otherwise we could not know ourselves forgiven. God would suffer if God should come. "If"? Christian faith holds that Christ deleted the "if." It is Christian faith that God does thus forgive sins. *He* stirs the penitence, provides the sacrifice of love, and answers the prayer. The endless circle of sin and penalty is broken. The curse of immortality is lifted.

The sting of death is drawn. The cross of Christ, His suffering in uttermost love, is the act by which God identifies Himself with our dark need. We can say of the crimson setting of His life what the oriental poet said when his friend rode up from that fading sky, but we can say it with poignant and perfect truth: "Praise to the Almighty: the sun has risen in the west!"

v

But suppose that Sun *did* set! Suppose Jesus died like a match blown out! Then the sting of death, which is sin, would not be removed. The sin might then be in God; for a God Who could extinguish His life, which alone of all lives was lived in prayer, would not be Godlike. In any event, our redemption also would be blown out like a match. Death then would have a double sting—God's mockery being added to our wickedness. The universe then would be impeached; for it would be careful of its dust and careless of its virtue—like some vandal who smeared and slashed a painting but saved all the threads of the canvas. It is not enough that Jesus should be judgment and redemption: there is no hope unless He is also resurrection. When the revolutionists in France discussed the making of a new philosophical religion, Talleyrand, it is reported, advised them, "The matter is simple: you have only to get yourself crucified, and then at your own time rise from the dead, and you will have no trouble."<sup>33</sup> Being Talleyrand, his tests were still shallow. It is *not* enough to be crucified and rise. Many men have been crucified, who, even if they had risen, would have been a returning threat rather than salvation. Talleyrand should have said, "You have only to incarnate Holy Love, get yourself crucified, and then rise from the dead." But he was right about the rising from the dead. Did Jesus rise?

We must apply the proper tests. Some critics say that the

record is not consistent and that it is too scant. But affidavits would not help us. A victrola record in accurate transcript would not be enough: we could still doubt its authenticity. The recapturing of His voice by radio would not be enough: it would be in Aramaic, and we could not be sure that it was His voice. We would be thrown on the mercy of voice detectives and linguistic critics. Why do we foolishly try to establish evidence through the letter which "killeth," instead of through the "spirit which maketh alive"?

The disciples were changed men. That fact remains, and only obduracy could question it. Within three days their hopelessness was changed to hope, their cowardice to a valor that braved both angry mobs and lonely death, their dimness of vision to piercing sight. The change can be labelled "wishful thinking," but the label cannot be made to stick. There are forty million deaths each year on our planet, and Jesus died on a gallows: the odds are too great for any mere "illusion." Besides, this faith in the resurrection of Jesus has been a fountain-head of martyred nobleness, and mere illusions do not have that issue. Besides, the early Christians have none of the marks of people suffering from illusions: they are not bedraggled, not incapable of ordered and creative life: they are radiant and regnant. To accept a tiny explanation of a vast event is perhaps the worst kind of incredulity; and for the scientific mind to dismiss as illusion the seminal fact of Christian origins is the renunciation of any true science. Middleton Murry, even in his more sceptic days, was compelled to admit: "The conviction of the continued life of Jesus . . . is the reality behind the conflicting . . . stories of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Of the reality of this conviction, of the reality of the experience that created this conviction, we cannot doubt."<sup>34</sup>

The experience has persisted in the history of the Church.

The incontrovertible fact that the Church has been unworthy does not dissipate, but rather deepens, the wonder. I have long known that one of the best "proofs" of the inspiration of the Scriptures, including the New Testament scriptures, is that it has withstood the blunderings of generations of blundering preachers like me. Preachers have choked the spring of the Christian story by their dullness, by their false dogmatism, and (worse) by their unworthiness; but the spring still flows, and its life-giving river is "for the healing of the nations." The whole Church likewise has failed in both courage and truth, but still the river flows. When other "gospels," such as scientific materialism or the Nazi "new order," are found to be but broken cisterns, men grope their way back to the living spring. The head of the Russian Orthodox churches in America, speaking recently in Boston, admitted that his church in Russia had grown "too rich, too soft." Said he, "When the revolution took away our wealth we had to find our souls. . . . Now the Russian Church has returned to God."<sup>35</sup> Always the Church has found that renewal of life, not by merit, but by a continuing resurrection.

This experience of life in Christ continues in our day. A novel is published entitled, *Christ in Concrete*.<sup>36</sup> Concrete is a proper token of our age: it reminds us of networks of roads, Maginot Lines, and New York skyscrapers. But what has the Christ of Galilee to do with concrete? Everything, for we cannot drive Him into exile. Choose at random any one of a hundred hymns—"O Jesus, Thou art standing outside the fast-closed door," if you will—and it testifies to His presence. We do not sing thus of any man, even the noblest. We do not sing hymns to men: "O Washington, thou standest outside the fast-closed door." We write *essays* or poems *about* men: we sing *hymns to* Jesus. The difference, however

subtle, is a great divide. Nor can the hymns be dismissed as "sentimental." They can be made sentimental; but, even then, they are also cauterizing and convicting; and thus have the accent of reality. This secret knowledge that Christ is still with us, "the Shadowy Third," despite our waywardness, is the saving awareness of our age; and the practice of His presence is perhaps the distinctive Christian experience. Middleton Murry has said again that the art of life is this: "We shall look like men, on the man Jesus. He will stand our scrutiny. Keep we our heads as high as we can, they shall be bowed at the last."<sup>37</sup>

## VI

Let us grant that, when all evidence has been gathered, there must be on our part an act of faith. Why not? Contingents are discovered only by an act of faith, such as piloted the ship, "Santa Maria," or that other ship, "The Mayflower." The victories of science are won only by faith: we have insulin because men *believed* that diabetes could be stayed. Would we wish God's revealings in Christ to be so sure that we could not possibly doubt? Our freedom would be gone; and not even God can save us by destroying us. If Christ fell on the mind like unremitting lightning, we would not be redeemed: our mind would be shrivelled in fire, and by that same token Christ would not be Christ. There is in Him enough assurance for our faith, but not so much as would destroy our faith. The liberty of our soul is still honored. Christ knocks at our door: He does not pick the lock and force an entry. We must make our venture—in life, at risk, and with courageous joy. Those who make it receive the certitude. The sceptic asked the saint when Christ would come. "Go ask Him," said the saint; "He is at the city gate." The sceptic went, and asked, "When will you come?" "To-



day," said Christ. But Christ did not come that day or the next. He did not come until the sceptic remembered that the word "today" had its sequel in the Bible: "Today, if ye will hear *His voice, harden not your heart.*"<sup>38</sup>

Death is the sign of our ignorance, our finitude, our sin. Immortality itself would be no comfort, but grievous discomfort, if the sin were not removed. That release in its turn would be a mockery, if there were no eternal life. We need judgment, and redemption, and resurrection. The redemption without resurrection would be merely an *Unfinished Symphony*. This lecture has set forth the faith that Christ is Judgment—we know through Him why we are troubled in conscience; that Christ is Redemption—by Him the dread circle of sin and penalty is broken; that Christ is Resurrection—by Him the cleft of the grave is bridged. For our tragic sense of death-in-life He gives His promise of life-in-death—life in *His* death and in *His* victory over death.