

II

THE PRESENT CRISIS¹

NOW and then in the long upward struggle of the human race, History has worked up to a grand climax—a Moment—that is, something momentous—a period fateful for the future.

At such times, obscure forces, which have long been at work beneath the surface to produce the crisis, are recognized and known. At such times issues which have been perhaps only dimly perceived become crystal clear. At such times the consequences of past decisions and deeds have had time to work themselves out in history, and the results are written in fire and blood that all may see and understand. At such times the future of the race for an indefinite period is in the balance, decisions are made which determine its course, and properly directed effort tips the scales for many years for good or for evil.

It was of such a period a century and a half ago in the life of France, when on the 14th of July, 1789, one of his nobles reported to King Louis XVI the capture of the Bastille and the King exclaimed, "Why, this is revolt!" and his friend had replied, "No, Sire, it is revolution!"—it was of this period that Wordsworth wrote:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven.

¹Baccalaureate sermon of the twenty-seventh annual commencement of the Rice Institute, delivered by the Rt. Rev. William Scarlett, D.D., LL.D., Bishop of Missouri, Protestant Episcopal Church, in the Court of the Chemistry Laboratories, at nine o'clock, Sunday morning, May 31, 1942.

And it was of such times in general that Jesus spoke so long ago: "There shall be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars, and upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity, . . . men's hearts failing them for fear and for looking after those things which are coming upon the earth. . . . When these things begin to come to pass, then look up and lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh."

And in such Moments of History "Doomsday is here." The Judgment Day returns to earth. Men have to know where they stand. They must enter the Valley of Decision, come to grips with its basic issues, arrive at a conclusion, and stand up and be counted. Seen in the long perspective of the ages, these are the thrilling periods of history: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive." And so it was, in September, 1792, when at last the troops of the new French Republic repulsed the attack of the Allies, that Goethe entered in his diary: "From this place and this day dates a new epoch in the history of the world, and you will be able to say, 'I was there.' " (It would be disconcerting, however, to have to say, "I was there, but I was wrong!")

And now in this year 1942 such a Day has come again to earth. For where in history can one discover a time more fateful than this twenty-eighth year of the Second Thirty Years' War of history? This is no mere boundary dispute. This is no struggle for the temporary advantage of one nation or another. This is no battle for a place in the sun, nor even for the ethnographic union of a people, the Germans, since that unity had already been completed after Munich without battle, had they been content to let it rest there. The challenge today is as deep as any that history reveals. Now everything is in the balance. In these scales is being decided the direction of the future for generations.

226 Twenty-Seventh Annual Commencement

In these scales is being determined what are to be the governing ideas which shall be taught to the youth of all lands. In these scales is being fixed even the faith of peoples. In a very definite sense this is a struggle for the world's soul.

For now two radically different points of view, two contradictory World Views—Weltanschauungen, as the Germans say—are in conflict: two opposite conceptions of the very structure of reality are at grips. One issues from the hard-earned experience and insights of the Race, and would continue its struggle along these upward lines—its long battle for the recognition of the dignity and significance of man; its bitter struggle for the freedom of the human spirit; its hard-won right to seek the truth and speak the truth; its aspirations after goodness as embodied in its codes and customs and humanitarian standards. And at the very heart of it, however we may have denied it in practice, however imperfectly we have as yet achieved it, is a profound reverence for the highest upreach its civilization has attained—all that centers around the name of Jesus Christ and that for which He stood and strove.

The other World View denies all this and would reverse the direction of Humanity's march. It burns books: truth is not Truth, but merely that which serves the purpose of the State. It rejects as weakness the humane code, so hardly achieved: "Many years ago," says Professor Macneile Dixon, "when lecturing to my class, I quoted a passage from Marlowe's drama *Tamburlaine*. In that play Babylon is captured and Tamburlaine orders that its citizens, bound hand and foot, be thrown into the city's lake. He is asked what is to be done with their wives and children and answers,

Drown them all, man, woman and child;
Leave not a Babylonian in the town!

The good lads in my audience were vastly amused by this

outburst. It was too preposterous. Such things did not happen. Only in the fevered brains of lunatic poets did such monsters exist. They know better now, those boys. After Rotterdam"—that deliberate, calculated mass-slaughter of the citizens of an undefended city—"the thesis needs no further demonstration."¹

This World View denies freedom, as the conquered peoples of Europe know full well. It denies the dignity and value and significance of human beings: ask the Jews of Europe, in their terrible and pitiable plight. It pours contempt on the best-loved figure of human history: "Everyone is either a German or a Christian," said Hitler. And there is a sharp dichotomy here, an "either or": one cannot be both. And if we substitute the word *Nazi* for the word *German*—"Everyone is either Nazi or Christian"—this too is true.

What one World View has found Good—truth, freedom, justice, the dignity of man, Christ and His values of the spirit, the struggle toward world unity and toward equality—to the other is Evil. What one has deemed the very essence of Evil—cruelty, brutality, slavery, falsehood, racialism—by the other is exalted to the level of Good. So that the Old Issue arises again:

Give no heed to bondsmen masking war with peace.
Suffer not the old King here or overseas.
They that beg us barter—wait his yielding mood—
Pledge the years we hold in trust—pawn our brother's blood—
Howso' great their clamour, whatsoe'er their claim,
Suffer not the old King under any name!

All our fathers died to loose he shall bind again.

So, once again Doomsday is here. And we have to make a choice. And this does not mean simply that we have to

¹And now comes Lidice! (Author's note, June 11, 1942).

228 Twenty-Seventh Annual Commencement

make a choice regarding this war. That is of course determined, fixed. The war must be prosecuted and won or there is no use talking of a choice. It has sometimes been said that wars settle nothing: never could there be a more fatal mistake. Once wars have started, they settle a great deal. The Civil War "settled" whether this land was to be one nation or two. And this war will "settle" which of the two conflicting World Views will have the opportunity to reshape the world in the immediate future.

But the choice goes far beyond this. The nihilism of which we complain is not confined to the enemy. The line of separation between these two World Views does not simply run between the belligerents, with our enemies on one side, and ourselves and allies on the other: the line cuts through all lands. And deterioration had long since set in in our world. By the evils which Hitler represents in an extravagant and grotesque form, a mirror is held before our eyes that we may see clearly to what a pass the sins of our own civilization logically lead. And it is against "the barbarian in our own hearts" we have to fight. "I shall fight for Man. Against Man's enemies—but against myself as well."¹

For if God has a controversy with His people it is because we are all selfish men: because our main preoccupation is with ourselves: because our reaction to every new proposal is a personal one, "How will this affect *me*, *my* wealth, *my* position, *my* future?" rather than "How will it further the general good of men?": forgetting that once it was said, "He that saveth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life shall find it."

If God has a controversy with His people it is because there has been in our world too little concern for our

¹Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Flight to Arras* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), p. 252.

brotherman, too little recognition that his fate is bound up in ours, and ours in his, even unto the least; so that for years in the United States, for example, millions were allowed to experience the greatest shock that human nature can receive, the shock of being useless, without any great concern on the part of many of us: forgetting that word of old, "We are members one of another, and if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it." A plain fact of the last ten years is that Hitler climbed to power on the backs of the unemployed in Germany, and it was this frustration, this sense of uselessness, in millions of lives which made his way easy.

If God has a controversy with His people it is because there has been in our world too little corporate sense; too little conviction of human solidarity and interdependence—too little conviction that the world has now become one, for better or for worse; that whatever happens anywhere now, in the end if not in the beginning happens to us: and that we must therefore organize our world accordingly. But lacking this, the great White Race which has a genius for organization has not even been able to organize itself, to say nothing of the world, and is now slowly bleeding itself white in a vast civil war, while Asia lifts its head and looks about.

If God has a controversy with His people it is because there has been too little recognition of our common humanity, and of our common destiny, along with the colored peoples of the earth—the people of Ethiopia, and of India, of Japan and China and Thailand and Burma, our own Negroes: too convenient an assumption that we are not our brother's keeper, no matter what suffering and death is rained upon other peoples. "We are only a small race," said the daughter of the Emperor of Ethiopia as the Italians were marching in, "but I am seventeen and its leading

230 Twenty-Seventh Annual Commencement

daughter, and I know, as you know, that if mankind lets armies and gas destroy my country and people, civilization will be destroyed too. We have a common cause, you and I." And so in times of crisis these old skeletons of past neglect come stalking out of the closets of the world to haunt us and trouble our peace. It is said of one of the foremost world leaders that he has a curious blind spot: when he speaks of Humanity what he really means is the White Race—forgetting that it has been said, "Ye are all brethren."

If God has a controversy with His people it is because the present crisis is deeper still and touches the loss even of faith itself. Man has lost his former spiritual significance, and History is deprived of its spiritual meaning, and both have become simply part of an immense biological process, full of sound, full of fury, but *signifying* nothing. So that millions of people, especially among the young, having been deprived of any sense of profound meaning in life became easy prey to the new Barbarian who knows nothing but hate, to whom nothing is sacred, nothing is holy.

And so Doomsday is here. And we have to choose. And the choice is quite explicit. The Russian philosopher Berdyaev has said, "The hour has struck when after terrible struggle, after an unprecedented de-Christianization of the world, and its passage through all the results of that process, Christianity will again be revealed in its pure form. Then it will be clear what Christianity stands for and what it stands against. Christianity will again become the one and final refuge of man. When this purifying process is finished it will be seen that Christianity stands for man, and for humanity, for the value and dignity of personality, for freedom, for social justice, for the Brotherhood of men and nations, for enlightenment and truth, for the creation of a new and better life. And it will be clear that only Christianity stands for these things."

The most hopeful feature of our present situation is that there are multitudes of people, more I believe than ever before in history, who under the merciless, shattering hammer blows of events now realize that there must be a reorientation of our point of view, and who are prepared for the great changes which must take place. There is an old Polish proverb: "I am born not of earth but of the pain that molded me." And it is out of the frightful ordeal to which our age has been subjected that a change has come over the thinking of men. At least we know now that to pursue the old paths is to plunge deeper, ever deeper, into disaster. After the last war, that almost mythical figure out of Arabian Nights, Lawrence of Arabia, wrote bitterly in his memoirs: "When we achieved and the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took from us our victory and remade it in the likeness of the former world they knew. Youth could win, but had not learned to keep, and was pitifully weak against age. We stammered that we had worked for a new heaven and a new earth. They thanked us kindly, and made their peace."

But now we have reached the stage where we shall have to discover a more profound approach to our problems, lift ourselves to a new level of thinking and acting if there is to be an end to the vicious circle. Why was Sir Stafford Cripps sent to India? Not simply because of his sheer ability, and because behind him is a record as a lawyer as brilliant and as exceedingly able as that of any other member of the British bar: but also because Sir Stafford Cripps is a profoundly religious man, a deeply convinced Christian person who could therefore be counted upon to approach the people of India with no sense whatever of superiority or condescension, but recognizing in the Indian a man and a brother "for whom also Christ died," his equal in the sight of God, entitled to equal opportunity to freedom and to

232 Twenty-Seventh Annual Commencement

justice and to equality of opportunity in the development of his gifts. And where indeed are we to find the solution of the color question except on such a level, where we can see this problem in its most universal terms—if I may dare to put it so, try to see this problem through the eyes of God, Who looks at man not in terms of the color of his skin or his nationality or his economic class, but sees us all as human souls feebly groping toward the light, each with his gifts and potentialities, each entitled to equal opportunity for self-development. On such a level an atmosphere would be created in which apparently insoluble problems would break down and become capable of solution. More books, more brains, more education, more science, these will not save this world: the world now needs Something which will lift us above our tensions and animosities and divisions, Something we can all believe in and trust in common, Something which will bind us together and set us working together in a common cause. And only in God, in Whom all men live and move and have their being, Whose all-sustaining beauty runs through all and doth all unite, Whose holy will is for the good of all, do we find that unity of spirit which is the very bond of peace and common endeavor.

And now in this year 1942 Doomsday is here. And we have to choose. At least we know we can no longer be neutral in this whole matter—half for Christ, half against Christ—miniature statesmen of the world, tiny Bismarcks, for example—a man who in his private life was a pious, evangelical Christian gentleman, but who deliberately saw to it that Christ had nothing to say about the foreign policy of his government, thereby accelerating the *descensus averni*, the descent into hell of the human race. And the choice has become quite explicit: either the pagan world which Mr. Hitler offers us, with its denial of those values which the

race has found precious, or else a world which heads more explicitly than ever before in Christ's direction.

There is a new world to be built. There is possible now a world worth fighting for: a unified world, a more just world, a more equal world. Winning the war will not of itself produce such a high order: but it will give us the chance to create such a better world. And the very severity and intensity and depth of the Tragedy in which we are now involved requires that there be a determined goal worthy of so great a sacrifice. There is a hymn one hears frequently in the Cathedrals of England, which haunts a man for days:

Earth might be fair and all men glad and wise.
Age after age their tragic empires rise,
Built while they dream and in the dreaming weep;
Would man but wake from out his haunted sleep
Earth might be fair and all men glad and wise.

And then the last verse:

Peals forth in joy man's old, undaunted cry,
Earth *shall* be fair and all her folk be one!

To such an end let us dedicate ourselves, all that we have,
all that we are.

WILLIAM SCARLETT.