

Prophecy and the Book of Revelation

From Charge of the Right Rev. DAVID WILLIAMS to the Synod of Huron.

IT is natural in times of great convulsion, when the heavens and the earth are shaken, that men should go to the Scriptures for explanation of the dreadful times in which they live. Are these cataclysms part of the fulfilment of God's purposes? What is to be the end of them all? Is this the way by which righteousness shall be established in the earth?

Those who look to Scripture for encouragement and strength even in these dark days will not look in vain. Seeking truth and righteousness and brotherhood for men and nations, and holding steadfastly to our ideals whatever suffering and sacrifice may be our lot, we know from the Scriptures that, accepting our Cross, we are treading in the footsteps of the Son of Man and helping to establish His Kingdom. Being assured of this, it is the part of faith to leave the final issues in the hands of God, Who in His own time will over-rule all to the vindication of His sovereignty and the overthrow of His enemies. That is the attitude encouraged by the Scriptures as the true attitude for Christians. Those who have this attitude will find in the Scriptures light, encouragement and strength to face and to endure bravely and hopefully all suffering and sacrifice.

But there are some, perhaps many, who are not satisfied with this: who believe that they have in the Bible the revelation of God's plan in detail which they claim to be fulfilled in the events of this time. Old Testament prophecy and the Book of Revelation are their peculiar spheres of speculation. They find sure indications of a re-establishment of a Jewish Kingdom in Palestine and quote Old Testament prophecies to support their claim. By combining expressions in the Book of Daniel with like expressions in the Book of Revelation they calculate more or less definitely the time of the end of the world. And then from the midst of a series of symbolical visions in a symbolical Book, heedless of the inconsistency, they single out one chapter to which they give a literal and materialistic, not to say carnal, interpretation, by which Christ is to reign over a great earthly kingdom for a thousand years, a kingdom now about to be established. All these have received an impetus since the capture of Jerusalem by the British.

These speculations or vagaries are not confined to the late "Pastor" Russell and his Millennial Dawnists. They represent the logical positions of a considerable body of misguided, materialistic and fanciful expectations of prophecy and interpretations of the Bible, and held by others besides the followers of the late "Pastor" Russell. These are often good and devout people. It is not their goodness that is called in question, but their way of interpreting prophecy, which is unspiritual, materialistic, unwarranted by Scripture itself, and in the end mischievous.

Now, there are two facts or principles which are ignored by these people, but which are really subversive of their whole position.

First, the Old Testament prophecies, in so far as they were intended to have a fulfilment in the national history of God's ancient people, were fulfilled by the return of the Jews to Palestine from the Babylonish captivity, and in so far as they were spiritual ideals and promises of things to come, in so far as they were Messianic, they were fulfilled in Christ and His Kingdom, the Church. Christ is the Messiah

to Whom all prophecy pointed and the Church takes the place of Israel after the flesh, so that what is said of Israel, even to the name Israel, is applied to the Church of Christ. So that now the true Israel of God is not Israel after the flesh but the Israel after the spirit. Therefore, to build up expectations of a second return of the Jews to Palestine as necessary to the fulfilment of prophecy is to mistake fundamentally the nature and purpose of Old Testament prophecy in reference to Christ and His Church. It makes the spiritual fulfilment merely an episode, and the carnal and national restoration of the Jews the final culmination of prophecy, and elevates it to a position higher than the Incarnation and the founding of the Christian Church, which is unthinkable.

Then, secondly: The Book of Revelation is wholly misapplied when it is pressed to foretell certain detailed scenes which are to be established on earth thousands of years after the time the Book was written. To do so is to mistake fundamentally the nature and purpose of the Book as well as the nature and purpose of all prophecy.

It is worth while to consider for a few moments the nature of prophecy.

It is now universally acknowledged that all prophecy was meant to encourage and support in the first instance the people to whom it was addressed and not some future generation. I do not know of a single prophecy that was not so spoken. So the Book of Revelation was written to encourage the greatly harassed Church of the late Apostolic Age in the Roman Province of Asia. This Province, of which Ephesus was the capital, was the great centre of heathen learning and heathen worship throughout Western Asia. Large numbers of Jews had also settled in it who were bitter opponents of the Faith. Moreover, at this time the worship of the Emperor as Divine was being enforced throughout the whole Roman Empire. So that the Christians met with hostility and persecution from all three—heathen, Jews, and, worst of all, the Roman power, whose insistence upon the worship of the Emperor was peculiarly offensive to the Christians because it involved them in the terrible position of being branded as traitors if they refused it, and of denying Christ if they complied with it. The Book was written to encourage and sustain the Christians in their terrible position. Humanly speaking, the Book would not have been written were it not for this need. The encouragement is given by the revelation of things really as they are and how God's purpose is being worked out in spite of the rage and fury of their enemies. That is the essence of all prophecy. For prophecy is not prediction, but revelation, and only incidentally prediction. There may be prediction, but the prediction is the result of the revelation. While most men lived in a fog and became confused by the multitude of events as they passed by, the prophet was the man who had insight into what was happening, who saw what was important and what was trivial. He looked below the surface of events and saw what was the real and permanent trouble, what were the real and permanent issues, what God was at work doing there and then in the world. And because the prophet had this insight into events to see what was really Divinely being done, therefore the prophet had foresight also. He could tell what must be. He could tell that what God was doing must eventually come to pass. So, having insight, he had foresight. God's cause, God's people must be victorious. But in all this the aim of the prophet was to declare the will of God to the people of his own day and not to predict: to declare God's purpose to God's people in his own time, so that, encouraged and strengthened by the revelation they may be steadfast in their fidelity to God.

So the Book of Revelation was written in the first instance for the encouragement and support of the Infant Church in a time of great stress and persecution, and it does this by unfolding the final issues of the conflict in which the saints are engaged. It does not under-rate the magnitude of the conflict, but bids them to be courageous and steadfast, for however great and fierce their enemies, the final issue is already assured. Any interpretation of the Book that ignores or minimizes this aim violates the essential nature and purpose of all prophetic writing.

But now, while the Book of Revelation is thus prophetic in the true sense, it is, nevertheless, prophecy expressed in a peculiar way. It belongs to a class of literature that was not well-known until recently—the class called Apocalyptic, of which the Book of Daniel is the first clear example. This literature was abundant and popular before our Lord's advent and for some time after. It exercised a profound influence upon the Jews of that day and also upon the early Christians. Two points deserve attention:

(a) First, all Apocalyptic writers looked forward to the great Day of the Lord, the moment when God should vindicate Himself. They viewed this day as a catastrophe, an unveiling, a sudden manifestation of God or Christ, the vindicator of His way in human history, the destroyer of all that set itself against God. You see the giant forms of empires on their way to ruin. One by one they tower and are gone. All the various forms in which human pride or wilfulness seeks to build the structures of human life without God appear as gradually on their way to destruction; and on the background of them the true work of God, the establishment of His Kingdom and sovereignty appear as the true issue of human history.

(b) Then secondly, these forces which are at work in history are, in Apocalyptic literature, represented in forms of imagery as animals or men. In the Book of Daniel empires are depicted under the forms of living creatures, and the Kingdom of God under the human form,—"One like the Son of Man," and, as stated above, Daniel is only the first specimen of a great literature. In the whole of this literature the great forces which are at work in the world, good and evil, are generally represented under typical forms of imagery, forms of uncouth animals or the glorious human form, according as they are bad or good.

(c) So St. John, the great master of Apocalyptic literature, gathers all the fruit of those who had gone before him. He represents the great conflict between good and evil, under mysterious, imaginative, mystical types and forms. There is the sovereignty of God: It is the throne set in heaven and One sitting upon the throne amid forms of majestic light and power and splendour. There is the Lamb as it had been slain. There are the seven lamps which are the Seven Spirits. And there is the woman, glorious in her apparel. There is the Bride of Christ, the perfected humanity. And over against those forms there are forms of evil. There is Satan, the old serpent; there is the great beast of violence; there is the lamb-like beast of false prophecy. There is the woman, the harlot, in all her horror, over against the Bride of Christ. So we have these great forms representing the great conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil. All these are idealized and seen in their extreme development. But though the course of trial and suffering is prolonged from one judgment to another, yet the final issue of the conflict is never in doubt—for the conflict is already settled in heaven—in the eternal sphere, and it only remains to realize the victory on earth through patience and steadfastness and that victory will be achieved through the appearance