

CHAPTER VI

JUDGMENT AND MERCY

ANATOLE FRANCE, in a striking story, describes Pontius Pilate, grown old and obese, taking a summer cure at a Roman watering-place ; and, in answer to a friend, only recalling faintly and with difficulty the trial and execution of Jesus. To the political mind it was no more than a troublesome affair well and finally disposed of by throwing its cause to the yelping hounds that wanted Him for a prey. Even now, when we reflect, with some measure of detachment, upon the actual circumstances, it seems singular that the squalid and contemptible end of an obscure peasant in an obscure land should have become the master-fact of human history.

The truth is that the instinct of mankind discerns certain elements in this episode which are not to be measured by the common foot-rule of historical judgment. We seem to move here in a region of absolute moral values, where circumstances of time and place, of publicity and obscurity, of size and numbers, sink into a position of relative unimportance. The event is historical, but it is also super-historic. It moves on a plane of timelessness. The first but certainly the least thing that we say of the Cross is that it happened on a certain day at a certain place. The date of the Cross is not a particular day, but all time ; the local setting of the Cross is not Jerusalem, but the round earth. The Cross is the supreme moral crisis of the world, the epitome and symbol of its moral tragedy, and of its hope.