

MYSTIC LIGHT

A Creed for Our Time

*“Christ, through Whom men attain the re-animation of the dying earth existence, is to this divine Being as the Son, born in eternity.”**

AND THOSE WHO do not welcome you—when you leave that city, shake off the dust from your feet, as witness unto them.” What does this strange instruction mean, given to the Twelve when they were sent out to preach and to heal? Would the disciples have been taught to do something meaningless and fruitless—expressing, as it seems, only a petulant resolve to have nothing more to do with the inhospitable city?

In the Gospels the smallest details, if we are willing to follow them up carefully, lead us into the mysteries of the evolution of the earth and of man—and so it is here. If we ask what dust is, then we are confronted with the fate of the earth. When life and form depart, dust is left. Every kind of dust originates from something that once had structure and that has crumbled, or rubbed away, has frayed or dissolved or has been broken. Just as the physicists today



Oil on canvas, 1896-97, Pascal Adolph Jean Dagnan-Bouveret
Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus

describe entropy, the irreversible loss of complexity in the Universe, so in the language of ancient wisdom Dust stands for the ultimate crumbling away of the world, and in particular of man’s dwelling-place, the earth.

When the earth was young, all its processes were more vigorous, its structure bolder. The age of the earth is sometimes greatly over-estimated by geologists, because it is assumed that processes—the forming of deposits, for example—have always gone on at the same speed. But the earth when more alive was also more plastic, like the bones of a child.

Today, the earth is growing middle-aged. But for the Christian who begins to understand what Christ means for the earth, there is comfort. And this was the ‘witness’ of the disciples to those who would not hear them: if the Gospel were rejected, men would have nothing to set against the decay of the earth. Without Christ, man and the earth would be held captive in the process that leads to dust. With Christ it would be possible to achieve a life of the soul strong enough not to be swept away, along with the crumbling substances, into disintegration; and further, the beings and substances of earth themselves would find new life through Him, and His work in man.

In order to approach the Christ, we need to turn our hearts in some measure to the general destiny of man and earth—to lift ourselves a little out of the

The first ecumenical statement of Christian faith, formulated in Rome around 180 A.D., amplified and ratified about 390 A.D., is known as The Apostles’ Creed. This Creed has been reconceived in view of the spiritual needs and understanding of the present time and constitutes part of the Act of the Consecration of Man, the service of the Christian Community. Reflections on the second of the Creed’s twelve statements are reprinted here with permission of Floris Books. © 1962 Christian Community Press, now Floris Books, Edinburgh.

**Reference is to the “Being” introduced in the Creed’s first sentence: “An almighty Being of God, spiritual-physical, is the Foundation of existence, of the heavens and of the earth, Who goes before His creatures like a Father.”*

personal, which claims each one of us so tenaciously. In hospitals, or wherever men of different nations or races meet in a common purpose—at every frontier, whether between peoples or between life and death, Christ is especially near. Thus it is that in the Creed, the second sentence begins with the help offered by Christ, through which it becomes possible for the earth to receive new life, and only after this speaks of His cosmic being, His relationship with the Father. Through our thoughts alone we could arrive at something like the description of the Ground of the World given in the first sentence of the Creed; though we need Christian experience to fill the word “Father” with the right content. But for the second sentence we need a feeling heart concerned with the destiny of the earth that we tread with our feet, transform with our hands. Does it grow old as we grow old?

One of the great tasks of our time is that of finding the right aims and uses for the second half of human life. But though we do waste the qualities of later life, as in another way we waste the qualities of youth, the difficulty really lies deeper. Into the heart of man as he grows older the dying-process of the earth is reflected and he does not know what to do about it. But there is at work in him as well a second youth, which he has to learn to take hold of and use with confidence. The “second youth” of the earth began with Christ’s deed; i.e. His incarnation, death and resurrection.

We share in the consequences of this renewal of the earth to some extent without any conscious effort on our side. But as the Gospels indicate, for example in the parable of the talents, if we do not use what comes in this way as gift of grace, we shall lose it. And indeed the new Paradise brought to men by Christ has for the most part become a lost country, of which legend speaks and men dream, but which they no longer seek to find with the full waking mind.

For the mind of today, influenced by the great panorama of time spread out by geologists and prehistorians, it has become very difficult to believe that God revealed Himself at a particular moment of the recent phase within the whole cosmic process that we think of as human history.

But why have there to be decline and death in the world at all? Why are they to be found at work

among the Father’s creatures? Death and dying are always signs that something in the world is no longer united with its original purpose. Were God everywhere equally and completely manifest, there could be no death; but there could also be no freedom for His creatures. The purpose of all things would shine out with overwhelming clarity from the mind of God.

In order that freedom grow up within creation, the purposes of God are veiled. A great heritage is given over by the Father to the realm of creatures. But sooner or later, as with the Prodigal Son, the longing awakens for a return to the Father. Man, having treated his heritage wastefully, diverting it from its true purpose, becomes aware of Death, which is both the consequence of misuse and the means of return.

Must freedom then awaken only to die? The freedom of the creature would be empty if it were impossible to find while on earth the purposes of God. They are brought to man by Christ in freedom, so that the earthly self-consciousness may not awaken only to find itself dark and empty, but may be filled. We find the Christ also as the Redeemer of time, through whom the years are not just a slow running-down in a grey world but can become window after window to let in the glory of God. Christ Himself is a being from beyond Time. His birth from the Father is a timeless one, in which there is no forgetfulness; of His heritage nothing is wasted. And yet He is free, for He is one with the Father’s freedom.

Over these things theology has labored through the centuries. Today it is no longer so important to work out sharply defined concepts; we need a developing imaginative picture which can lead us into the realm of vision. And though in conceptual form, the words of the Creed do lead us in the direction of such a picture. In the second sentence we are led first to consider Christ’s share in the destiny of the Earth; and then, lifting up our minds from the time-process to the eternal, to think of His perfect relationship with the Father. Because this relationship is perfect, we know through Him much about the Father that could not otherwise be known. Christ works continually as the Revealer of the works of the Father; or in the words of St. John’s Gospel: “He who has seen the Father has seen me.” □

—Adam Bittleston