

CAMBRIDGE, 4 NOVEMBER 1956

In the 9th Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke, verse 60, it is written "Jesus said unto him, 'Let the dead bury their dead.'"

My text is a saying of Jesus at first sight shockingly harsh and unintelligible. I do not know the ~~prevailing~~ opinion of critics, as to whether the corpse and the mourner in the story are any more than the circumstantial framework built up to introduce a pregnant aphorism. It is certain, however, and we as Christians have been specifically taught, that it was Our Lord's custom to speak in parables, and that it is our part to have "ears to hear" and to pick up an ^{implication} overtone. So it is not a remote conjecture that on the occasion of its use our text was not part of a discussion of the claims of filial piety, or of familial loyalty, but was a word in favour of what has come to be called a "forward looking" attitude; forcibly emphasizing Our Saviour's sense of its importance; and a warning against the common untrustful and defensive mood of religious tradition, which sometimes speaks as though it were always of more value to preserve the old, than to create what is new; as though the whole armour of God consisted only of defensive weapons; as though this creature Man at least were not made in the Creator's image, and ^{by that act} ~~thereby~~ destined to creative activity.

There has recently appeared in the Journal Antiquity an artist's reconstruction, following the findings of comparative

anatomists, of a species from South Africa of the genus called Australopithecus. He was unquestionably hominid, of our own family of beings, rather than pongid, as an ancestral form of the tailless apes would be called. He stood about 4ft. 6. His hip-joint was that of a biped capable of a free running gait; his head was poised on the vertebral column, not hanging forward like an ape's, against the tension of neck muscles behind. His forelimbs were free from locomotive duties. At this early stage of ~~creation~~, ^{the creative process} he could say of his Maker, as the Psalmist ~~did~~ ^{put it} later:

"Blessed be the Lord my strength; who teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight;" (Ps. 144.1)

His jaw was enormous, beneath an immense prognathous muzzle. Although he was already an athlete, he was still far from being a scholar, for the brain was ~~lamentably~~ ^{indeed} small, and the big tongue may have been incapable of articulate speech. So far as is known at present, he possessed neither fire nor artifacts, though he used natural clubs, like Samson's jawbone of an ass, and doubtless threw stones with force and effect.

It was a good thing that he had prowess in his hands and fingers, this pristine ancestor, for his species was probably never numerous, and on his survival hung the hope of the entire human race. He was surely worth "many sparrows". Yet precious as he must have seemed in his own time, had any of his race survived to our own day they ~~must have seemed~~ ^{would surely appear} in some respects

discreditable relatives; simply because we are used to something better. ^P Already, in the fossil remains of Pithecanthropus from Java and China, the jaws are smaller, and the brain-case has somewhat expanded, and in modern Man, called also sapiens, these processes have been carried much further, even in the earliest known specimen, that from Swanscombe in the hundred-foot gravel terrace of the Thames valley, which must be about 100,000 years old. A second ancient specimen of this modern type has been found in France, ^{in a cave at Fontchevade,} so that Western Europe may be the Garden of Eden of our own species.

In the General Confession of Morning Prayer, ^{the priest} ~~we~~ speak, in the authorized version of "our manifold sins and wickednesses". In these terms we publicly confess and repudiate them, and pray for forgiveness, and for aid in their removal. This phraseology was thought to be too strong by the authors of "the deposited book". And, indeed, it must be admitted that if we were to compare our conduct with that of the earlier species of our family, many of us I am sure would be found to be leading very decent lives. But that is not the basis of comparison; rather we are comparing our conduct with that which we know God requires of us individually, and if we are to do better, we cannot recognize our faults too forcibly and explicitly. We are praying not to be made good, in an absolute sense, if any absolute sense can have meaning, but to be made better, and this aim is always a

by the Grace of God

possibility within sight, and attainable, if earnestly aimed at.

In any system, morphological or ethical, involving progressive improvement there must always be, from the nature of the case, abundant evidence of imperfection or depravity. This, however, is not evidence of deterioration, or evidence against progressive amelioration, often as it is so represented. The standards are rising with the conduct, and this progress is merely retarded by turning our eyes backward in ethical matters, rather than forward to the fruits or consequences of our actions and intentions. In the tradition of Christian life in the family, a central preoccupation is the religious upbringing of children; by the rites of the Church, in Baptism and Confirmation, by religious communion and example in the home, generation after generation of devout and devoted parents have exerted themselves to bring each successive generation a little nearer to God, and to a clearer understanding of their duty. It is impossible to doubt that this loving care does indeed have a progressive effect, in making people better, and of better understanding in religion. To deny it indeed would be to deny efficacy alike to the Sacraments, to prayer, and to godliness of living. This is a denial which, I believe, no Christian can make.

The forward looking, or evolutionary, view I am indicating does not involve ignoring our cultural heritage, the sacred books, the saintly examples, the wise discourses, but in recognizing

that the circumstances in which the works of the past were compiled, or exemplary lives led, were sufficiently different from our own to ~~make us~~ ^{lead us to} ask sometimes if they were really discussing our ~~problems~~ ^{were}, or wholly relevant for our guidance. ^{To} ~~In~~ recognizing indeed that the best thought of our own time may have gone deeper and further than any past thinking. Important among these circumstances are advances in scientific knowledge opening out greatly changed views of the Cosmos, of matter and radiation, of reproduction, and of the scale of past time; but the most important change of all is that an ancient writer ~~may speak~~ ^{would not be exceptional} as though in these matters all were surely known, whereas we have become more conscious that in every field much more is yet to be found out, and that finality is not for us. If we receive the tradition of ancient thought with gratitude and admiration, as we ~~should~~ ^{ought}, it is because we perceive somewhat of the mists by which that thought was clouded, ^{and} because we are in some matters in a position to judge and evaluate, not merely to bow with abject and superstitious credulity.

We can recognize the primitive character of a faithful savage like Jephthah, just as we can see in Australopithecus human limbs, and a prehuman mouth; and, even as truly modern man stretches back, as the Swanscombe fragments show, to earlier ages than anyone would imagine, so perhaps the archaeological elucidation of the second millennium b.c. or further, will show elements or

strands of true religion among the sources of the religious thought of the Hebrews. Egyptians, Philistines, Hittites and Babylonians all perhaps had much to give, though doubtless often contaminated by antique and primitive admixture.

If Zeuner's radio-carbon dates are accepted, the walls of Jericho were nearly 5000 years old when Joshua saw them. It is scarcely to be believed that God was interested first in the Holy Land at this date, or that at this date the Holy Land first became interested in God. It is but reasonably charitable to suppose that there were in Jericho dutiful children, loyal wives, and devoted husbands and fathers; and these for many more generations than those which separate ourselves from the reign of King Solomon. It would be foolish to imagine that the people of Jericho were not careful to instruct their sons and daughters in the best wisdom they possessed about the nature of God, and the duty of Man. We may reasonably hope that our own ideas are better, at least for our own circumstances; ^{but, what matters is that we should} ~~and we may the more~~ constantly endeavour, and pray, that they shall become better still.

these
With respect to ^{these} earlier stages of Man's spiritual pilgrimage it not for us to speak with contempt or hatred.