

## *The Voice that Wakes the Dead*

‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live.’ — JOHN v. 25.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN ORDINARY SELF-CENTRED, mundane existence, and the new career on which Christ launches the soul is the difference *between death and life*. That is the New Testament’s reiterated verdict. Without scruple or hesitation, those men lay hold of the most startling and dramatic metaphor within their reach, and use that to describe the difference Christ has made. ‘We know that we have passed from death unto life.’ Nor is that simply their unsupported testimony. It stands as Christ’s verdict too. ‘This my son was dead — and is alive!’

Now the question arises, Can such a use of language be justified? Take any two men today, the one a sincere Christian, the other avowedly irreligious. Clearly there is bound to be a discrepancy in their outlook and philosophy. But have we any right to say — as the New Testament says — that between these two men there is all the dissimilarity that there is between being alive and being dead? Is that anything more than random talk, a wild exaggeration, a fantastic overstatement bordering on caricature? Is it not, in fact, a libel and a slander to say that because a man prefers to rub along without religion and to order his existence in independence of God’s revelation in Christ, he is therefore dead? Does it not look as if those writers of the New Testament, carried away with the fervour of the newly converted, have allowed their rhetoric to outrun their logic?

That may be our first feeling. But maturer reflection will disclose that they are not after all romancing or being theatrical, not striving after effect nor lapsing into crude, naïve hyperbole: they are speaking sober truth. They are accurately transcribing experience. Ask any one who has deeply felt the liberating, vitalising touch of Christ upon his soul, and he will tell you — 'Only then did I begin to live!'

Consider, for one thing, the appalling aimlessness of so much human life in this modern world. The highroad of life that stretches from the cradle to the grave is full today of people wandering about with no sense of a direction or a goal. Hither and thither they keep rushing, restlessly preoccupied, driven to and fro by strong, conflicting hungers and instincts and desires, pursuing now one prize, now another, absorbed in money-making, love-making, war-making, peace-making, career-making — and yet, in spite of it all, dissatisfied, bored, unhappy. Why? Because the whole thing seems so senseless, un-coordinated, devoid of plan and purpose. And indeed, if a man has no ultimate scale of values to give integration to his life and meaning to his struggles; if deep within his secret heart there is no throne where certain regnant convictions hold unchallenged and commanding sway; if his spirit has never been stabbed awake to an eternal vista beyond the world of time and sense; if there is no recognition of a supreme controlling Hand which even out of the mistakes and tangles of this earth can weave the finished pattern of a perfect righteousness and love; if 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust' is the last word when the brief kaleidoscope of three-score years and ten is over, how pathetically hollow life becomes —

'Sad as the wind that sweeps across the ocean  
Telling to earth the sorrow of the sea,  
Vain is my strife, just empty idle motion,  
All that has been is all there is to be.'

Were the New Testament writers wrong in holding that such a

miserably aimless existence was not worthy of the name of life at all?

There is another kind of deadness besides that of aimlessness: the deadness of formality. 'I know thy works,' declares the Christ of the Revelation to the Church at Sardis; 'thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.' If you were to find a Church one day which had no expectancy in its prayers, no warmth and welcome in its fellowship, no fire or passion in its work for the Master, no feeling of being 'lost in wonder, love, and praise' before the mighty acts of redeeming grace, no hushed, awed sense of a divine presence in its sacraments, no kindled blaze of missionary ardour — what would you say of such a Church? You would say it was dead. And you would be right. It was G. K. Chesterton who vividly depicted the Church 'rushing through the ages as the winged thunderbolt of thought and everlasting enthusiasm; a thing without rival or resemblance, and still as new as it is old'. Alas, that the thunder should ever have been stolen, the winged and rushing spirit curbed and tamed and reduced to a harmless respectable docility: 'grimly spiritual persons' (to quote Lippmann's scathing phrase) 'devoted to the worship of sonorous generalities'. Was the New Testament wrong in nailing down formality in religion as enmity to Christ, the very negation and antithesis of the spirit of life?

But there is a third condition, beyond aimlessness and formality, which the New Testament describes as death. 'You were dead in trespasses and sins,' declares Paul. We know that in the realm of organic nature, faculties and capacities which are left lying idle and unused inevitably atrophy and decay. So in the region of the soul. Let a man neglect conscience long enough, and conscience will cease to speak. Let him persistently disregard his potentiality for the unseen and eternal, his faculty for God, and little by little that potentiality will be eliminated, that faculty will contract and shrivel up and dwindle away. Let him abandon himself to evil thoughts and habits, and gradually the whole spiritual universe will take its revenge by rendering him insensitive and blind to higher things, incapable of appreciating

the beauty of holiness or of discerning the reality of God, 'Verily,' said Jesus, in one deep, solemnising verdict, 'they have their reward' — they get what they have set their hearts upon, they end up chained to the worthless things they have chosen. They are imprisoned, helpless, and in the dark. 'To be carnally minded is death.'<sup>3</sup>

What then is to be done? Take these three conditions of deadness we have observed: how is man to tackle the crucial problem — the restoring of life? A soul haunted by the aimlessness of existence may seek release by plunging ever more deeply into the whirl of this world's distractions, endeavouring to give vividness and variety and meaning to its experience by adding on one new sensation after another. That was the way taken by Francis of Assisi in his youth: but there was no salvation there. A Church dead in formality may think to resuscitate life by multiplying organisations, by working out elaborate programmes, by increasing the intricacy and efficacy of the machine. That is what every age of the ebb-tide of faith has tried: but never has there been salvation there. A man dead in trespasses and sins may seek to save his soul by a frenzy of legal righteousness, covering over the inward radical corruption with a veneer of good works and human merit and self-approval. That was the way Paul took, and Augustine, and Luther: but with one voice they cry to us today that there is no salvation there. The fact is, there is still one point at which man, in spite of all his other wonderful achievements, stands helpless and baffled and defeated: he cannot create life. Not all the labours of his hands, not all the ingenuity of his brain, not all the passion of his heart, can work the everlasting miracle of revivification and renaissance. He may roll away the stone from the grave: he can't wake the dead. Yet nothing else will satisfy.

'Tis life, whereof our nerves are scant,  
Oh life, not death, for which we pant;  
More life, and fuller, that I want.'<sup>3</sup>

Is that quest doomed for ever?



The answer is here: 'The hour cometh, and now is, when the dead *shall hear a voice*.' At the coming of the sound of a voice, an aimless world, a formal Church, a sin-entombed soul, will stand up and live!

How often the hearing of a voice has been decisive! I think of Samuel, when the evening hymn was hushed and the temple courts were dark, and suddenly the voice of the Lord God rang through the silence of the shrine and called the child by name; of Isaiah, startled and arrested and challenged to the very depths of his being by a voice from above the altar, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' of the great persecutor of the Church lying prostrate on the Damascus road in the blinding glory, while the whole world seemed reverberating with a cry, 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?' of St. Augustine in the garden at Milan, when the voice of one unseen was heard chanting and repeating 'Take up and read, take up and read', and he opened his Scriptures and was converted; of St. Joan in the village of Domrémy, listening to her blessed angel voices, like bells at evening pealing; of Martin Luther, when into his troubled soul there broke like trumpet tones the cry, 'Play the man! Fear not death. There is a life beyond.' How often the hearing of a voice has changed the whole aspect of the world!

'The hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear a voice.' But which voice? The world is full of clamorous, conflicting voices. To whose voice must we hearken now?

Some would tell us that what we need for our regenerating is the voice of the scientist. Is that true? Let us indeed thank that voice for all it has told us of the majesty and marvel of the universe; but let us also remember, as Reinhold Niebuhr has put it, that 'science can sharpen the fangs of ferocity as much as it can alleviate human pain'. It has 'won for us powers', declares C. E. M. Joad, 'fit for the gods, yet we bring to their use the mentality of schoolboys or savages'. And Aldous Huxley, in that deeply significant book *Ends and Means*, is even more outspoken: 'We are living now, not in the delicious intoxication induced by the early successes of science, but in a rather grisly morning-after, when it has become apparent that what tri-

umphant science has done hitherto is to improve the means for achieving unimproved or actually deteriorated ends.' No, the voice of science may tell us of a thousand mysteries: it cannot smite death with resurrection!

Shall we hearken, then, to the voice of the moralist, the philosopher? His voice will tell us of the road to beauty, truth, and goodness. He will set out before us in full and accurate detail a map of the perfect life, a diagram of the ideal world. But what is the use of a map to a man in a dungeon as deep as the grave? What is the good of knowing the road if we have not got the power or the vitality to walk? The moralist can fashion an ethic or promulgate a code. But confront him with Ezekiel's problem of the dry bones in the valley of death, and he is helpless: he cannot regiment them into a marching army, nor breathe into their deadness the breath of life.

Will the voice of the Church, then, do it? Here in the midst of life, thrusting the eternal issues upon a confused, uproarious world distracted between Vanity Fair and Armageddon, making its voice stormy in the ears of each new generation as it proclaims that man shall not live by bread alone, stands this strange fact, the Church. And sad will be the world's fate if ever the Church should cease to care for the souls of men, or the voice of the Church cry aloud no longer in pleading and in challenge. Yet I do not find that Peter and John, encountering a poor cripple at the gate of the temple, cried — 'In the name of the Church, rise up and walk.' I do not find Horatius Bonar, in his great hymn, exclaiming — 'I heard the voice of the Church say, "I am this dark world's Light."' Let the Church speak out fearlessly by all means: but it is going to take another voice than that to bring Lazarus out of the grave in newness of life!

Are all the voices, then, that keep crying through the darkness and confusion of this tragic world powerless to help man at the point of his most urgent need? One other voice there is, and its sound is as the sound of many waters. 'The hour cometh when the dead shall hear *the voice of the Son of God.*' This is the

voice, the only voice, which can echo down into the dark deeps where my spirit lies dead in its aimlessness, formality, and sin. 'Hark, my soul, it is the Lord!'

Turn over the pages of your Gospels, and see the wonderful works of grace effected by that voice of Jesus. It speaks, and all is done. It cries 'Let there be light', and light appears. Now it rings forth in challenge to an evil spirit, 'Come out of the man!' — and in an instant the demoniac is gentle as a child. Now it shouts above the furious thunder of the storm, 'Peace, be still!' — and immediately there is a great calm. Now it cries imperiously into the echoing cavern of the grave, 'Lazarus, come forth!' — and the dead man steps out into the light, and lives. Truly, 'never man spake like this Man', nor was any voice heard like this since the making of the world.

Have you ever listened to its tones? Sometimes it is a still small voice, like music far away, a whisper of hope when all is dark, to comfort and encourage and chase the shadows from your soul. Sometimes it is a trumpet-call, a battle-cry, a voice no longer gentle and appealing, but masterful and mighty and impassioned: 'Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light!' Sometimes it murmurs, 'Come, wearily soul, come unto Me, and rest.' Sometimes it blazes forth, castigating all lethargy and comfortable complacency, 'Son of man, gird on thine armour, and fight! Rise up, O man of God!'

But whatever its tones, it tells of life made new. 'The dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; *and they that hear shall live.*' Out of their tomb you will see them coming, the imprisoned souls long dead in aimlessness, dead in formality, dead in sin — out into the sudden sunshine of the morning, rejoicing in the rich, invigorating tide of strange vitality which now floods all their being, and walking in the light of the Lord. Henry Drummond, at one of his great student meetings in Edinburgh, read a letter he had received from a man who had made utter shipwreck of life, a letter full of hopelessness and bitterness, a terrible revelation of a sunk and ruined soul. It was anonymous, signed with the one word 'Thanatos' — Death. And Drummond

(as he afterwards confessed) felt then that if ever a man was irretrievably lost it was the writer of that letter. But there was another night, a year or two later, when Drummond was facing a student gathering again. He reminded them of the story he had told of the man who was a moral, social, and spiritual wreck; and then went on, 'Gentlemen, I have in my pocket tonight a letter from "Thanatos", which he sent me this week, and he says he is at last a changed man — a new creature in Christ Jesus.' Yes, the voice of Jesus is a Resurrection trumpet, and the gift of God is life.

Have you found the life which is life indeed — not just the bleak monotony of an aimless, purposeless existence, not the dust and ashes of a formal creed where the fire of faith has flickered and gone out, not the misery of moral mediocrity and a cowed and hopeless resignation to the hectoring tyranny of sin — but the glorious discovery of what it means to be victoriously, dynamically, spiritually alive? There is a poem by G. K. Chesterton, called *The Convert*, in which with startling daring he seeks to imagine the first thoughts and feelings of a man literally taken out of the tomb by Jesus and recalled to earth from the world beyond the grave.

'After one moment when I bowed my head  
And the whole world turned over and came upright,  
And I came out where the old road shone white,  
I walked the ways and heard what all men said,  
The sages have a hundred maps to give  
That trace their crawling cosmos like a tree,  
They rattle reason out through many a sieve  
That stores the sand and lets the gold go free:  
And all these things are less than dust to me  
Because my name is Lazarus and I live.'

And that, if you will believe it, is what the Lord Christ can accomplish still — change our whole scale of values for ever, resurrect our spirits from their encircling gloom, and bring from our ransomed souls the cry, 'I was blind, and now I see! I



was lost, and I am found. I was dead, and behold, I live — all glory, Christ, to Thee — I live!’

Will you believe it? Or are you still, like Nicodemus, haunted by the question, ‘How can these things be?’ ‘It would be so wonderful if it were true: but I don’t see how it is ever going to happen.’ But is not the answer to that perplexity lying here before you? ‘The dead shall hear the voice’ — not of the great Teacher, not of the Jesus of the Galilean road, not of the Man who walked this way before us — ‘the voice of *the Son of God*’, the voice (that is) of death’s Conqueror, of One who ever since the dawning of the first Easter day has held all Resurrection power in His keeping, and reigns the Lord of life for ever. Read the very next words following our text, and you will find that made explicit: ‘For as the Father hath life in Himself, so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself.’ Don’t you see now how Christ achieves the seemingly impossible? He can give you life, by imparting Himself to you, by coming into you, by making His dwelling with you: for He *is* life. That is the secret. If Shakespeare were in you, what poetry you could write! If Beethoven were in you, what music you could compose! If Christ were in you, what a life you could live! If? There need be no if about it. You can’t have an indwelling Shakespeare or Beethoven. You *can* have an indwelling Christ. You can say with Paul, ‘I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’ Then indeed the dead soul has heard the voice of Resurrection. Then your spirit has cast off all its bonds and come alive! Then

‘From the ground there blossoms red  
Life that shall endless be.’

‘The hour cometh,’ said Jesus. When will it come? Have we to tarry for some far-off, divine, incalculable event? Have we to loiter helpless till the next nation-wide revival goes sweeping through the land? Have we to wait perhaps till the hour of our departure sets us free? ‘The hour cometh’ — if only we knew when! There is a brief entry in John Wesley’s *Journal*, amaz-

ingly significant when you consider the date, Sunday, April 2nd, 1738. Those were the days when Wesley's heart was as yet unkindled by the fire from heaven. Here is the entry. 'Easter Day. — I preached in our College chapel on, "The hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live"': and then this plaintive note, 'I see the promise; but it is afar off.' No wind of God was blowing then, no breath of Paradise to stir his poor dead soul to life. 'The hour cometh: but,' said Wesley sadly, gazing down the dim vistas of the trackless years, 'it is afar off.' Was it? You turn a few pages of the *Journal*, and suddenly, just seven weeks later, the fire from heaven falls! Afar off? 'The hour cometh — and now is!'

We glorify the past, and say, 'O had I lived in that great day when Christ was really here!' We dream of the far future, and say 'O that we might have lived to see the glory that our children's children will behold, when Christ comes again into His own!' But why dwell regretfully upon an age that is gone, or envy wistfully an age that is not yet born? Christ is here! The Lord and Giver of life is here. The hour cometh — and now is! 'Today, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your heart.' Today reach out hands of faith, and pray, 'Jesus, think on me! Thou ever-present Saviour, whose name is Resurrection and life, speak with the voice that wakes the dead: shatter the silence, pierce the gloom of my lost worthless soul.' And He will work in you the everlasting miracle, the mightiest of all His mighty acts: and you will know the thrill that ran through the morning stars at creation's dawn — because your name is Lazarus and you live!

