



God and Modern Thought

God and Nietzsche

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Extract from The Antichrist (1895) Mark 9: 2–9, 14–27

Though I say it myself, my sermon this evening has an absolutely cracking title in a eighteenth century sort of way – but before I tell you what it is, let me just assure you that it is a long title for a not very long sermon: and the title is: ‘Nietzsche and Christianity; or, why Nietzsche went up mountains and Jesus went down them, and why this made Nietzsche really quite cross; or, why do we spoil Bible stories by stopping them in the middle?’

Nietzsche died, highly appropriately in 1900, at the dawn of the century in which his thought would be so important. He had been born 56 years before, but his active career was shorter than his 56 years, since in 1889 in Turin, at the age of only 44, he suffered a severe mental and physical collapse from which he never recovered. Time forbids that I should try to tell you of the extraordinary achievements of the short active life of this brilliant, highly-strung, intense, sickly and melancholic figure – if time allowed there would be many things to say of his profound insights into human psychology, characteristically delivered with sometimes teasing, sometimes coruscating wit. I will leave you to ponder, as an example, one of his many great one liners, which I particularly like: ‘nothing is rarer today than genuine hypocrisy’.¹

In the context of our series on God and Modern Thought, however, I can’t attempt a survey and appreciation of Nietzsche’s thought, but something altogether more modest – and that is simply to tell you why Nietzsche had it in for Christianity with a passion and a fury, indeed with such a passion and fury as to rather belie the impression his remarks sometimes give that he found Christianity really beneath contempt. In fact Nietzsche regarded Christianity as a calamity and a danger.

So what did Nietzsche have against Christianity? Nietzsche’s disdain for and attack upon Christianity was not aimed at its metaphysics and doctrine, but at its morals. Nietzsche was not concerned with the validity of proofs of the existence of God, or with doubts about the historical veracity of the stories from Gospels – what occupied his attention was rather the persistence of Christianity as a form of life, as a way of being in the world, in spite of the fact that, as he saw it, arguments for God from philosophy and history had long since failed to convince. What persisted was attraction to Christianity as a practical creed, as a way of life. And it was this way of life, this way of being human, which wasn’t exactly his cup of tea to put it mildly.

¹ *Twilight of the Idols*, in Hollingdale’s translation (Penguin Books, 1968), 77.

And that brings me to the mountains – since, in his difference with Christ over the proper direction of travel on mountains, what is at stake between Nietzsche and Christianity becomes clear.

Nietzsche liked going up mountains. He associated the thin air of the mountain peaks with the rarefied atmosphere in which the true philosopher dwelt. Striding over the mountain tops, Nietzsche was doing literally what he took himself to be doing figuratively in his philosophy, mounting to the heavens, where in the azure isolation of the skies, thousands of feet above those who dwelt down below, his thought surmounted and surpassed the thought of the foothills. (One of the chapters in his final work, *Ecce Homo*, is entitled, somewhat but not wholly ironically, 'Why I am so clever'.) In the clear thin air of the mental mountain peaks, occupying the high ground, Nietzsche could look down on the plains below and on its life – and in particular could look down on what count as values down there, the values especially of pity and compassion which Nietzsche associated above all with Christianity.

And what was wrong with these values? Well, so Nietzsche thought, they turned mankind against life – life in a rugged, full-blooded sense. In life lived in that sense, suffering, pain, loss, inequality and struggle, all would be accepted as merely part of the whole. But instead, in virtue of its Christian inspired values, humanity had constrained and curtailed its life. Morality says Nietzsche – meaning Christian morality – is 'the actual poisoner and calumniator of life'.² But on the mountain top, with 'moral judgment . . . beneath them',³ true sages see beyond these decadent values, as he would call them, to a better way of being human – in which compassion and pity and sympathy do not constrain the pursuit of individual human achievement, and where true nobility can express itself in vaunting self-actualization, and in self-love and pride at accomplishment, in joyful exultation in one's power and achievement. So it was that for Nietzsche, Cesare Borgia and Julius Caesar are, to a certain extent, heroes.

So Nietzsche went up mountains, but Jesus went down them. Well, Jesus went up them too – in the story of the transfiguration which we heard as our lesson. 'Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain.' But if Jesus went up the mountain, he doesn't dwell there, and his most important direction of travel in relation to the mountain is downwards, as we would know very well if readings of this story didn't stop as they usually do in the middle, and not continue through to the healing which is, in actual fact, an essential part of the same narrative.

Jesus has no intention of spending much time in the mountains – so there is certainly no need for the dwellings, booths or tabernacles which Peter proposes to build. And supposing the story isn't cut in half, you will know that Christ promptly heads down the mountain – and goes down as far as you can go. Far from the ethereal heights, far from the thin air of the sublime peaks, far from the majestic and glorious mountain tops, he goes down to a scene from low life. There is a child given to violent attacks. The gospel writers differ slightly in describing his symptoms – when he is taken with the attacks he is 'sore vexed' and throws himself into fire or water; so reports his father in Matthew's gospel.

² *Twilight*, 52.

³ *Twilight*, 55. On morals at page 90: 'we modern men, with our thick padding of humanity which dislikes to give the slightest offence, would provide the contemporaries of Cesare Borgia with a side splitting comedy.'

In Mark we are told that that the boy shrieks, is thrown into convulsions, and foams at the mouth. Either way it is not pretty – if we saw it happening in the market place in Cambridge we would turn away in horror or revulsion, or with that most English of sentiments, embarrassment.

Jesus, however, summons the boy to him, and as he does so one of these attacks comes upon him. We would surely turn away; but Jesus turns to the boy's father and enquires of the boy's history and symptoms – and in turn, the father turns to Jesus with the simple plea, 'have pity on us'. You know what happens next – Jesus commands the spirit to leave the boy, and as it does it leaves him corpse-like, and the bystanders concluding that he is dead. And then we hear the conclusion to the story of the transfiguration – and the whole of the Gospel in one short sentence. 'But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand'.

What are we to make of this entire story? Of course the Son of God dwells on the mountain tops by right, and the transfiguration itself merely reveals who he truly is; but his supreme and higher glory is the glory which attaches to him in virtue of his choosing to come down the mountain. His true glory consists not in his dwelling above the plains and those who dwell there, but in his bringing glory down to the market place, to the base of the mountain where a base scene of pitiable suffering is transfigured by the act of healing. And as the story continues as it should to this great conclusion, we see the story's symmetry. For the Son given by the Father is his Father's true and glorious son just in giving back this son, this sick son, healed, to his earthly father. This is the meaning of the glory which envelops Christ on the mountainside, as he appears in dazzling light alongside the law in the person of Moses and the prophets in the person of Elijah. Freeing this boy from the captivity of an overpowering and evil spirit, lifting him up and enabling him to stand, Christ fulfils both the prophetic hope for liberty and the law's demand for righteousness. The glory of the mountain top may involve a dazzling transfiguration, but it merely prefigures the greater glory which will be revealed down on the ground.

Nietzsche went up mountains, but Jesus came down them – and Nietzsche had it in for Christianity just because, with this coming down, Jesus expressed a creed which Nietzsche thought corrupting of human greatness. For Nietzsche, nobility is found in living above and beyond the plains and their inhabitants; for Christ, it is found in living with and for them. For Nietzsche, destiny and magnificence lie in exultant striving, power and achievement. For Christ, true glory, true humanity, true human being is found not in lonely splendour and isolation, but in solidarity and in fellowship, even in fellowship, especially in fellowship, with the distressed, the diseased, the distracted and the distasteful.

Nietzsche had it in for Christianity – and in his relentless attacks upon it bore witness to his sense of Christianity's great potency. In all his late great works – in *Genealogy of Morals*, in *Ecce Homo*, in *The Antichrist* and elsewhere, whether in acerbic asides or whether in concentrated and sustained critique, he treated Christianity as if it really were a mortal foe of his counter creed – for him Christianity was not the weak and feeble thing that some 19th and 20th century thinkers supposed it to be, on account of the failure of various apologetic strategies, whether philosophical or historical. Nietzsche knew better – and he was of course right, since we could say in a manner of speaking, along with many contemporary commentators, that the last 75 years have seen the silent and surreptitious triumph of practical Christianity, the triumph of what is sometimes referred to as 'humanitarian reason', whereby, to put it very briefly, there is no pitiable

scene in the world which does not mobilize (to a greater or lesser extent), the mechanisms of global compassion, whether through the UN or some other relief agency. These humanitarian efforts may be patchy, sometimes inadequate, often unsuccessful – but that is not the point. The broader story, the bigger picture, is just that we moderns take compassion to be the very stuff of world-wide government.

Well yes and no, perhaps. Or let me put it another way, by saying that if Nietzsche saw in Christianity a mortal foe, and one of some power, let us return the compliment by seeing in his counter-creed a competitor which has not simply gone away. On this the last Sunday of an academic year, my mind turns especially to those of you who are leaving. For you will all be assailed by ideas in our culture which chip away at the practices of pity and compassion, thoughts of Nietzschean kind, which tell you that in the unconstrained pursuit of self-realisation and excellence, in the achievement of power and mastery, will your fulfilment lie. You will doubtless all excel – that's a Trinity thing. I know very well that Trinity students if they play tiddlywinks, will form a society to play extreme tiddlywinks, and will reckon to achieve Olympic standards within six months. And that is all well and good. But the thought you need to hold onto in a culture which pushes you to promote yourselves above all else, is just that excelling does not need to be for the sake of creating social and material difference – it doesn't need to be for the sake of getting on, or more to the point, for the sake of getting away from others. Excellence and achievement do not need to be valued at the cost of compassion and solidarity and pity; they too need to be governed by these values. The question is however, whether you will allow your pursuit of excellence to be so governed.

I think Nietzsche was right about Christianity in many respects – certainly in thinking that there is no simple and neat argument from philosophy or history which will compel you to set your path with Christ down the mountainside, and not just resolutely up it. Your only guide – though I shouldn't say 'only' since it is no mean thing – your guide should be the life and death of Christ. May Christ himself set our feet on the path on which he set his own, not away from the world but towards it, and towards it in pity, love and solidarity.