

IS THE WORLD GETTING BETTER?

by Lester J. Start

Undated

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:11. He hath made everything beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.

The scripture reading for this morning from the words of the man who wrote the second part of Isaiah presents a glorious and optimistic picture of the future age of the world when all men will be ruled by the will of God. It is a happy picture, a vision full of peace and plenty, when violence shall no more be heard in the land or destruction within its borders, when the walls and gates of the nations shall be called salvation and praise. It is a good thing, I believe, to think about this vision of a better world at a time when discouragement and defeatism so easily intrude themselves into our consciousness, at a time when we seem far from the ideals that we read in the great prophetic words of the Bible. Let us stop and think whether these prophetic voices are correct, whether the world is really improving as they predicted, or whether the modern prophets of gloom who see the collapse of the world at hand are nearer to the truth.

There have been many prophets of bloom in recent years, beginning with Oswald Spengler, who seem to take pleasure in predicting the decline of the west, the collapse of our western civilization. And the events of recent years involving the whole world in a bloody war seem to give support to their pessimistic predictions. The outbreak of this war in an America trained in pacifism was such a shock that many have concluded it means the end of all the values we have stood for, and see little or no hope for the future of the world. Unfortunately this attitude has been all too prevalent among the leaders of thought who should be able to provide positive leadership at a time when it is so sadly needed; it is especially unfortunate to see it among so many members of the clergy, who above all others should be able to see hope in the power of God to lead his children on the right path. But instead of exhibiting this faith, they meet together to decide that God can have no stake in this war, that by waging a war, even though we could not seem to be able to avoid it, and saw no other alternative, we have forfeited the interest and help of God and must struggle along blindly without Him. There can not possibly emerge anything good from such a horrible and wrong thing as war, and so we are left without hope in a grim struggle in the darkness. It is this attitude as much as anything else which supports the pessimistic idea that the world is being submerged in the mire of its own wickedness. It is this attitude which cannot accept the optimistic vision of the prophetic voices, and sees instead of improvement, a decline toward general destruction, that can see no progress toward good in the world.

This attitude disturbs me for several reasons. First of all it denies the promise of God as witnessed in the Bible, the promise of his constant care and help toward his kingdom, for all mankind, the promise of a redemptive power for man. Then it would deny the clear fact that through the centuries the world has been improving and progressing, through successive advances, as a spiral climbs upwards, not steadily, always in the same direction, but nevertheless upward. It would deny also to those young men who believe they are struggling for a purpose in

this war the hope of fulfilling their aims. But finally, this attitude seems wrong because it is working under the wrong conception of values. It is the disease of the idealist that he cannot see any values when the one he has his eye on is not in evidence. Thus because war destroys the ideal of pacifism, many can see no other values involved because this one has been neglected.

It is necessary to realize that it is the nature of things that all conceivable values cannot always be found at the same time. So Often one value will conflict with another so that when it appears, the other cannot be found at the same time. There is an incessant conflict of values in the world, and as values conflict with values, new ones appear. It is this process which makes for progress. There is an interesting passage in the book of Job which bears this out. Toward the end of the drama when God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, He talks over some of the problems involved in the process of creation. By making the ostrich swift of foot, she leaves her eggs to be trampled in the dust; and by giving the horse strength, he often destroys the smaller creatures. Thus by working for a certain value, others are neglected. This conflict of values is seen in the major decisions we are called upon to face in life. The hardest decisions occur when we must decide between two courses of action involving different values between which we must choose. We must so often remember that we cannot have our cake and eat it, and decide which we prefer doing, which value is the better for the time. Thus when war threatened on the horizon we had to decide between our love for peace and our desire for freedom. One value conflicted with the other and we had to make a choice. But the very fact that we made the choice points to a value we have in mind which we expect to attain and shows that all the values are not lost because we neglected one. The history of civilization has been a process of finding new values which better fulfill the destiny of mankind, and as the new values are found, old ones are sacrificed, or changed. This does not mean that ultimate ideals which Jesus taught the world will be outgrown; rather it emans that they will have new significance as we invest them with higher meanings. Thus the ideal of peace based upon strong national defenses and powerful economic superiority may be sacrificed for a peace based upon equal rights and opportunity for all in a brotherhood of nations. The ultimate ideal has not changed; but the basis for putting it to work has been changed; the immediate values are transmuted into something better, a progress which our soldiers assume as they work toward a definite goal.

This whole process of conflicting values is illustrated in the ideals and ambitions of men which change as they grow older. Through experience we become aware of higher values are are better able to judge between conflicting ones, and emerge with better ones. The world's progress does not depend upon piling up values, but bringing out new ones and new ways of attaining them. We expect progress to be smooth, but it all emerges from conflict.

Reformation

Science

Democracy

Social legislation

Thus we can hope for progress from the war if we recognize that the means of attaining our values change.