CHAPTER NINE

THE EARLY CHURCH'S NEAR EXPECTATION OF THE PAROUSIA

That the early church certainly thought of the Parousia as (in some sense) near has become evident in our examination of those passages in which a delimited expectation is often understood—wrongly, in our opinion—to be present. The perspective of I Thess. 4, 13f. (cf. I Cor. 15, 51) is that of watchful expectancy, not of certainty that the Parousia will not occur for centuries or millennia.\(^1\) II Thess. 2, 7 speaks of τό μυστήριον τῆς ἀνομίας already at work (ἡδη ἐνεργεῖται), stamping the present with the character of the End.\(^2\) The apparent stability and permanency of the world and its institutions are called in question (cf. I Cor. 7, 31). Paul can speak of an 'earnest expectation' (ἀποκαραδοκία) (Phil. 1, 20, Rom. 8, 19),\(^3\) and of 'groaning' (στενάξω) (II Cor. 5, 2, Rom. 8, 23), showing the intensity and earnestness of hope. Expressions such as ἐν ταῖς ἑσχαταις ἡμέραις,\(^4\) ἐπ' ἑσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων,\(^5\) ἐπ' ἑσχάτου τοῦ χρόνου,\(^6\) and ἑσχάτη ἡρα\(^7\) designate the present in its unique relationship to the End. Paul characterises the present as a dawn (Rom. 13, 11f.) and Christians as those 'on whom the end of the ages has come' (I Cor. 10, 11); he maintains that ὁ κόσμος ἔγγυς (Phil. 4, 5). The present generation must experience all the signs (political, cosmic and personal) of the End (cf. Mk. 13, 28ff. par.), signifying

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1 Cullmann, Early Church, p. 152, says 'no one reckoned on the period between the ascension and the return of the Master lasting for centuries.' Certainly they did not write from the perspective that the period prior to the End would definitely be very long.


3 Delling, in T.W.N.T. I, p. 392, makes no allusion to the Christological basis of this earnest hope. But Phil. 1, 20f. has in mind the perfection of salvation in Christ, and Rom. 8, 18ff. has the 'revealing of the sons of God' (8, 17) as the object of creation's ἀποκαραδοκία.


7 Cf. I Jn. 2, 18.
that the Parousia of Jesus is not far distant. The End comes 'quickly' (ταχύ) (Rev. 22, 7; 12; 20, cf. Heb. 10, 37).

Significantly, this belief that the Parousia is not far off appears to persist even in those parts of the New Testament where it is often said that near-expectation is missing. Here we mention first, the Epistle to the Ephesians. Many conclude that here all hope of a speedy End has been subsumed under the concepts of catholicity and of the 'summing up of all things in Christ' (cf. 1, 10; 1, 23; 4, 14f.) ¹ But the expression in 5, 16 εξυγοράζομενοι τὸν καιρόν suggests that the hope of a speedy End is not entirely lacking; the verb εξυγοράζομαι seems to imply urgency,⁶ and this because αἱ ἡμέραι πονηραί εἰσιν and because the present God-given opportunity for repentance and faith is not unlimited but has its determined measure.

Secondly, we draw attention to Jn. 14, 19; 16, 16f., where, we suggest, it is correct to understand a near-expectation of the Parousia in the expression μικρὸν . . . μικρόν. Clearly John’s peculiar methodology must be borne in mind ³ and this, surely, allows us to draw out of the theme of ‘departure—return’ in chapters 13—17 not solely the thought of Jesus’ departure in death and his return at the Resurrection,⁴ nor solely the thought of his departure in the Ascension and ‘coming’ in the Spirit,⁶ but also the thought of his departure and absence in this interim and his return at the Parousia; the Evangelist is likely to have had in mind the situation of the disciples in the last hours before the Passion, and the situation of his readers.⁵ In this case, μικρόν has relevance for the expectation

³ Cf. Barrett, John, p. 409, 'Most of this language is marked by a studied ambiguity . . .'
⁴ As in Murray, Jesus according to St. John, pp. 280f; Strachan, Fourth Gospel, p. 296; Bernard, John, pp. 512f.; Tasker, John, pp. 182ff.