

Deut XXVI. 5. A Syrian ready to perish was my father

A university, as you all know, is a society for the pursuit of learning. You will be expected, while you are here, to make yourselves, or to start making yourselves into what the Middle Ages called clerics: into philosophers, scientists, scholars, critics, or historians. And at first sight this seems to be an odd thing to do during a great war. What is the use of beginning a task which we have so little chance of finishing? Or, even if we ourselves should happen not to be interrupted by death or military service, why should we - indeed how can we - continue to take an interest in these placid occupations when the lives of our friends and the liberties of Europe are in the balance? Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?

Now it seems to me that we shall not be able to answer these questions until we have put them by the side of certain other questions which every Christian ought to have asked himself in peacetime. I spoke just now of fiddling while Rome burns. But to a Christian the true tragedy of Nero must be not that he fiddled while the city was on fire but that he fiddled on the brink of hell. You must forgive me for ~~using~~ ^{this} crude monosyllable. I know that many wiser and better Christians than I in these days do not like to mention heaven and hell even in a pulpit. I know, too, that nearly all the references to this subject in the New Testament come from a single source. But then that source is our Lord Himself. People will tell you it is St. Paul but that is because they are ignorant. ~~These~~ ^{These overwhelming} ~~terrible~~ ^{are} doctrines ^{of} dominical. ~~They are~~ ^{They are} not really removable from the teaching of Christ or of His church. If we do not believe ^{it}, our presence here in church is great tomfoolery. If we do, we must sometime overcome our spiritual prudery and mention ~~it~~ ^{them}.

The moment we do so we can see that every ~~off~~ ^{Christian} who comes to a university must at all times face a question compared with which the questions raised by the war are relatively unimportant. He must ask himself how it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or to hell, to spend any ^{fraction} of the little time ~~which~~ ^{which} allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology. If human culture can stand up to that, it can stand up to anything. To admit that we can retain our interest in learning under the shadow of these eternal issues, but not under the shadow of a European war, would be to admit