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The Church and the Docker

BY THE REV. J. W. ROXBURGH, M.A.

ALL experiences have their limitations. My experience of dockers is limited to one port, indeed to one part of one port. Generalizing on such an experience can be a dangerous practice, but what I have read, and what I have heard from others more well versed than I, leads me to dare to believe that my experience, for all its limitations, is not unique. And that is the reason why I am emboldened to attempt the dangerous.

The parish of St. Matthew, Bootle, in which I have been privileged to serve since 1950, is in many ways a typical "working class" parish. It has 14,000 people in it, none of whom live more than a mile from the Church and few of whom live in houses with gardens. The Church is on a busy main road, just under a mile from the dock gates. By no means all the men in the parish work on the docks, but certainly more work there than in any other industry. Inevitably, therefore, I am brought into close touch with dockers, and many have been the men who have opened up and allowed me to share their thoughts, their hopes and fears, and, as did Ezekiel of old, I have tried "to sit where they sit". In addition, for nearly all the years I have been in Bootle, we have held a Dockers' Forum every Wednesday dinner hour outside the gates of one of the largest docks on Merseyside. At this Forum a team of local clergy have made themselves available to answer whatever questions are thrown up to them. Sometimes the questions have been very much to the point, and lively meetings have resulted. Sometimes the questions have been few and the meetings have been quiet. But the result of these Forums has been that we have been able to get alongside the men and understand their outlook: and in return we hope they have begun to understand something of the love of God for them.

The present position of the docker cannot be understood properly until it is looked at historically. It was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that the labour situation in dockland gave any great cause for concern. But the great strike of 1889 focused attention on the plight of the docker for the first time. Before that date he had no Trades Union, no one to fight his case and no one to do anything for and with him except exploit him. Of course there were enlightened employers, and of course as often as not it was the docker's own fault that he was in a depressed condition, but the casual system of employment, whereby he had no security of employment, and no certainty of a job when one ship was finished (and no dole and no National Health Service) was a system that made for a "depressed" outlook on life.

Things are a good deal better now, with a Dock Labour Scheme that has largely ended casualization, and has brought with it a guaranteed

weekly fall back wage, even if there are no ships to be worked. But it has been a long and difficult struggle and the dockers remember how bitter the struggle has been. Indeed, they do not regard the struggle as over yet, for there are many ways in which they are looking for improvements in the scheme. And they still feel that society looks down on them. Apart from the men who work in the cleansing departments of our local authorities ("binmen" as we call them on Merseyside), dock workers are regarded as the lowest type of workers. Boys who leave school will normally try and do anything except work on the docks, and as often as not they only drift on to the dock estate when they have failed to be satisfied in other jobs. Rarely do we find dockers who want their sons to follow in their footsteps, though there is never a shortage of applicants for a "book" whenever vacancies occur. The situation is changing, but the "inferiority complex" still remains, and it will be a long time before dockers can forget their history, and can feel that the rest of society will welcome them as equals.

In all their struggles for their "rights", for recognition, and for a chance to have a "normal" outlook on life, the dockers feel that the Church has not been giving them the support that they feel it should have done. They saw in the past their employers driving to church in their finery while they themselves fought for a bare existence. They identified the Church with the ruling classes and felt that it was so concerned with preserving the status quo that it could not speak up for righteousness. They had a consciousness that they were not wanted in church, and that they were not respectable enough to join in public worship. So much of the Church's activity was geared to an otherworldly outlook, or to philanthropy at home and abroad amongst more congenial sufferers, that the dockers felt ignored, and cast off. In consequence, rightly or wrongly, the docker has for long enough been out of sympathy with an institution he feels has failed him, and has failed the Master it pretends to revere. Of course there are many exceptions to this generalization. Many dockers have always gone to church. Many of them to-day are fine Christians. But for all that we may feel the dockers have misunderstood the Church, and for all that we may regard their attitude as governed by their complex, by and large I believe we must appreciate that this is one of the main reasons why the dockers have been so dilatory in identifying themselves with the Church.

At the moment two thoughts govern the approach of the docker to the Church. The first is that it is largely thanks to the dockers themselves standing together that the improvements in pay and conditions have come about. They know that they have a long way to go yet, and that there is much that remains to be won before they can begin to be anything like satisfied. The way further victories will be won is the same that has held good in the past. Stand together and fight. The only thing that will break the bosses is tough, intransigent solidarity. The Church is therefore irrelevant to their primary material needs.

Objection may well be raised to this stress on solidarity in view of the recent series of dock strikes. Solidarity is a strange thing. It has

never meant that the workers are united amongst themselves, but always that in adversity they hold together, especially against the employer. Squabbling and petty jealousies are tremendously rife, but the code of solidarity which has condemned strike breakers to permanent black listing as "scabs", and has sought to maintain the "one out all out" rule, is a code that dockers are loath to break. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the pros and cons of the unofficial strikes, and the breakdown of communication within the Transport and General Workers' Union which led to the "Blue Union" being able to draw so many dissidents to itself. But solidarity, for all that the events of the last months may have seemed to have ended it, is still a very real, an emotional, rallying cry. And nothing has happened to make the dockers think otherwise than that solidarity has won them their material advances.

The second is that, since material needs come first, these must be satisfied first. More money is the great cry. So the search is for overtime, especially for Sunday work with its double time rates, and for night work—Saturday night in particular with quadruple time (lovingly referred to as the Golden Nugget). To achieve this extra money all kinds of "dodges" are engaged in—to miss the eye of the "putter on" at the control pen when a "five o'clock only" ship comes in, and to catch his eye when an overtime ship requires manning. The whole approach to work is so seared by the scar of self-interest, springing out of a materialistic approach to life, that the docker is amazed that anyone should think Christianity is important. The Church is the optional extra that he will bother about when his basic material needs have been met—only they will never be fully met, so he will never have time to bother about spiritual and therefore unessential needs.

Yet in spite of all this, I believe that the Church has got an opportunity with the docker in this generation that it has never had before. The gulf has been so deep and has persisted for so long that dockland is almost like a virgin mission field for the Church. And slowly, ever so slowly, the realization is coming that the Church is a broader fellowship than it has previously been conceived as being, and has perhaps begun to learn the lessons that the dockers felt needed to be learnt. The great need before the Church in its approach to dockers, and indeed to industrial workers generally, is to make them feel that they are wanted, to sympathize with them in what they feel are their legitimate grievances and requirements, and to let them see that they are loved. It is a question of the Church grasping afresh the meaning of the Incarnation. The Son of God became identified with humanity at its ordinary level and there brought transformation. Becoming identified with struggling humanity is no easy task for the Church today, but unless it seeks to do it, it is being unfaithful to its Lord. God so loved that He gave. So must the Church.

That is the basic and fundamental requirement for the Church in its work in industrial societies. But this has to be worked out in practical terms, and several points must therefore be stressed.

The dockers, and men who work in gangs in other industries too, are less conscious of their individuality than people who work on their own.

They tend to think not for themselves but in the group. They cannot do their work without the co-operation of the rest of the gang, and indeed their very lives often depend on the "togetherness" of the gang. Consequently dockers as a social group tend to hold together and to behave in the same kind of way. Of course there is no alternative to the Gospel of Jesus Christ being a personal Gospel, and one that demands personal decision: there is, and can be, no alternative to the personal receiving of this Gospel by faith. But the Gospel is the good news of God's saving activity for all men, and it is as the fellowship aspect of the Gospel is stressed and the appeal made not just for one here and one there, but for the whole gang to trust Christ, that the response will, I believe, most readily be given. Each generation is called to rethink the application of the Gospel in its own particular setting, and we dare not therefore just accept glibly the pattern of presentation that a former generation had thought out and successfully applied. It is because I am convinced that the industrial "group worker" of to-day has little concern for a purely individual message of salvation that I lay emphasis on the fact that we must concentrate on groups more than individuals. After all, was that not Christ's own method in His own day, when so far as we can tell, "togetherness" was not as strong a class concept as it is to-day, but more a national and family concept? The fishermen He called came from the same port, from, in some cases, the same ships or at least neighbouring ones. They were not taken individually out of their fellowship, but were called individually into a fellowship where their old togetherness could be the basis of a larger togetherness. That, I am convinced, is a realization that the Church has not always had, and one I believe it must have. It is as the appeal is made to the group that the individual within the group will be won. The docker has been told outside most dock gates, most dinner hours, by people of all denominations and none (often none) that he is a sinner who needs saving by accepting Christ. He just is not interested in it. It is to him pious nonsense. And unless we can wrap up this great central fact of the Gospel in a form in which he can take it, he will, it seems, continue to reject it utterly. Hence the reason I stress so strongly the "gang" approach. But I have no illusions about the difficulties, especially, as on Merseyside, where there are so many Roman Catholics. I lay down only the principle.

In this connection it is interesting to note the effect Billy Graham has had on the dockers. Harringay last year and Kelvin Hall this year gave us plenty of questions at our Forums, and Billy Graham was certainly a good starting off point for presenting the Gospel. But—and I write as Chairman of one of the Relay Crusades—we got few dockers and industrial workers to come and hear him. We had an above the average response to the appeal in the Bootle Relays, but I do not know of any dockers who went into the counselling room. Billy Graham drew the teenagers, the women, the men in individualistic jobs, but as far as Bootle is concerned, he did not touch the "gang" worker. The fact that he was an American was a point against him that the docker as a group could not, or would not, forgive. But the relays were not the medium he could warm to. And so experience

forces me to have to say that even Billy Graham and what might be called the "Billy Graham technique" is not the answer to the problem of the gulf between Church and worker.

This leads on to the second point—the Church's conception of its own organization. There is a widespread recognition of the fact that in the last fifty years there has been a revolution in this conception. At the end of the last century the Church was to all intents and purposes the clergy. With occasional controlling hands extended by churchwardens, it was the clergy who did all the running of the Church. They took advice when they felt they needed it, but for the most part they ruled as benevolent despots. The parish was the great unit of Church life, and within each parish the incumbent reigned supreme. How different is the situation to-day! The rediscovery of the place of the laity in the Church has been one of the great, the really great, advances of this century. Our Church Assemblies and Church Councils have curbed the power of the clergy, and enabled the Church to begin to think of itself as a team. There are many who believe that the current shortage of ordination candidates is God's way of saying to the Church that He wants it to extend this team idea. There have been times when we have talked of "the good old days when there were six curates in the parish". Soon we shall be thanking God that such "good old days" are over, for the laity could never have been given a chance under the old set up.

Much has been written of late on the place of the laity in evangelism. But much of this is merely paying lip service to a currently popular "line". There will be need to be much more "letting go" on the part of the clergy, and a much more radical rethinking of the organization of all the work of the Church before the teamwork that is widely spoken of as an ideal becomes a fact. One of the practical applications here could be in the stressing of the vocation of a Christian to lay service. For instance, it is all very well for our group of clergy to run a forum for dockers. We are well received and respected—strangely enough because of the fact that we have University degrees. But we stand essentially outside the parry and thrust of dock life. What are required are Christians to go into the docks as ordinary dock labourers, living as such, enduring all the mental, physical and spiritual temptations of such. They will need to go with no sense of superiority, and no humanitarian motives of "doing good". They will need to go to show by their lives that Christianity works. They will need to enter fully into Trades Union activity—out of real conviction that this is right and not just as a matter of expediency—and to rise to the top in their Union, where they can exert so much influence for good. Such Christians must be recognized as doing, in their own way, just as valuable a piece of full time service as the clergy, and they must be given no less a say in the affairs of the Church.

Nowadays what so often happens when a docker becomes a Christian is that he finds his work very uncongenial, and he tends to seek employment elsewhere. Failing that, he finds that he spends his money differently, and has more available for his home. In consequence he tends to move out into a "better" neighbourhood. It is easy to sympathize with his desires, but in so behaving he is creating a barrier

between himself and his "mates" that makes him less able to be an effective and telling witness for Jesus Christ. Consequently, only people with a very real sense of vocation can continue to "sit where they sit", and that is why the Church must recognize such a vocation as just as valued a vocation as the ministry—and perhaps even more so, for it will be a much more difficult one to perform.

One other practical consideration must be mentioned. If it is the "togetherness" aspect of Christianity that makes most appeal to the industrial worker then one of the stumbling blocks that will need to be dealt with is the individuality of the present parochial system, in which each Vicar stands apart from all his neighbours whenever he wants to. I have already suggested (article, "Evangelism in Modern Industrial England," *Churchman* 1952) that a team system could be introduced in industrial area parishes, whereby under the general direction of a supervisory Vicar, all the clergy, while maintaining their own parish churches, could work, pray, plan as a group, and be known and seen as so doing. The work of reorganization would be small: the spiritual gain immeasurable. Again I do not want to underestimate the difficulties. These are obvious to all. But I believe profoundly that certain areas could be so organized, and at an early date.

It is idle to pretend that we have been cheered by what we found existing in dockland. The number of practising Church members we have met has been very small. We dare not sit down complacently under the challenging situation that the one group the Church has failed conspicuously to win to Christ is the one group that is concentrating in its own hands economic and political power. Our old approach just has not worked, and much of our present activity is not working either. The only aspect of tradition we cannot question is the Gospel. Everything else must come under fire, and what is irrelevant and unproductive must be eliminated. The hour is too pressing to approach this subject with any complacency. The alternative to facing this issue is terrible to contemplate. Win the docker and his ilk in this generation and we shall see God working a mighty miracle. Fail to win him and we may never have any more opportunities. Just that is the challenge of the modern industrial situation.
