

## The Local Church and the Gospel \*

THE responsibility of the local church in the task of communicating the Gospel. If you lack the impartiality of a B.B.C. news-reader, you can find four—at least four—quite distinct meanings in this title. There is the *responsibility* of the local church in the task of communicating the Gospel. There is the responsibility of the *local church* in the task of communicating the Gospel. There is the responsibility of the local church in the task of *communicating* the Gospel, and finally the responsibility of the local church in the task of communicating *the Gospel*. I would like to touch on all of these and to add what an extraordinary subject this is to be given! It is rather like being asked to talk on “The responsibility of a living man in the task of breathing the atmosphere that surrounds him”. The responsibility in that case is quite personal and quite clear—if he doesn’t, he is no longer a living man, he dies. So with the local church. Communicating the Gospel happens to be the sole reason for its existence, its means of existence, and the end of its existence. If it fails in this particular responsibility it is no longer a church, it can no longer *be* a church, and although some quite distinct function can be artificially maintained for centuries, and perhaps almost indefinitely, fulfilling a diminishing social need in a semi-civilised society—in our sense of the word life, it is dead. A church exists not for self-nourishment, nor yet for what we would have worship to mean; a church exists to communicate the Gospel, and worship is what we attain to when this begins to be achieved.

What then is the measure, the extent of this responsibility which is ours simply because of what we claim to be? It is a frightening and shaming responsibility—the responsibility of the church, local or mainline, that says to the world “What we revere above all else is truth”—and the truth we mean is the truth of our first adolescent acceptance; the responsibility of the church that says to the world “We *know* the answer to all the unique problems facing bewildered 20th century man”—and here we are in our life of visible fragmentation and retreat.

We might like to bring Christian beliefs to bear upon industrial unrest and wild-cat strikes, but first we have to come to terms with the fact that our own answer to any conditions with which we disagree is to withdraw, not our labour, but more seriously, our love. Throughout the history of the church the answer to dispute

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has been withdrawal and separation. We take upon ourselves the responsibility of saying we possess the key to life, we have come in touch with ultimate truth, we have found the reason for being. Would we with such apparent ease take upon ourselves the responsibility for a world that by some miracle *accepted* our claims, agreed to put into practice *our* practical interpretation of the laws of Christ, to live the quality of life abounding in our local churches, to accept these local churches' standards of diligence and integrity in the search after truth, to pattern its existence upon the local church's sense of purpose? Might we in the local church not be the first to wait for the impoverishment of human experience, to mourn the passing of scientific and technical advancement, the abandonment of exploration and discovery? We might also welcome the end of self-examination and mistrust. We'd be the first to talk of aimless existence. We'd be the first to shake our order papers and cry "Humbug". The responsibility with which I would like to face you is the responsibility that we might be taken seriously! And that is a responsibility that, like Christ himself, judges us for what we are. When we proclaim to mankind "Here is the Saviour of the world", and we let slip the fact that pride of place still matters to us, and success in the eyes of the world—this after Calvary!—we are judged. When we sing songs of glory about being on the winning side, and behave as though every discovery of Science and every change in our society strikes terror to our hearts; when we who are "conquerors in all things" behave like the last pockets of despairing resistance in the fair country of our Christian upbringing, surrounded by dark, incomprehensible, alien powers, we are judged. This responsibility of ours is not only to our true selves, to our basic human integrity, and not only to God, whom we publicly own (by being here) as the ultimate rhyme, rhythm and reason for our existence, but before the searching eye of God, to the world of this time in which we are privileged to be set down.

In all this, the local church cannot be separated from the whole Church in our mind. When 20th century man dismisses the Church, he invariably dismisses his own personal experience of the local church. The Archbishop of Canterbury and his Holiness of Rome are not the great bogies to thinking man—the church at the corner of the street is the proof of the ecclesiastical pudding, indigestible . . . if seldom rich. When men say "The Church this, the Church that," in dogmatic terms, they mean the church of their experience, the church of their childhood, the church they are taken to by well-meaning friends, the church they drop into in an hour of desperation and searching. And they remember all their lives that when the world was falling about them, they were handed a printed leaflet, the Y.P.F. was holding a beetle drive, and the result of the Sale of Work was up on last year. Nothing wrong with these things in themselves—but in public worship we present a face of the local

church that is puzzling and strange to the outsider. Here are people sharing an un-get-at-able experience. They seem to know all the answers. They know the moves. They understand the technical language. What do Baptists stand for? The outsider might be forgiven for answering "Four hymns and the Benediction!". We are not as we seem, but a man lost in the struggle for human and moral survival resents the familiar confidence and assurance we outwardly display, and it is essential if we are to be a Church for Others that we present somewhere in the life of our local church the struggling community — which in our hearts we know ourselves to be — and the funny thing is that when we strip away the pretence of knowing all the answers, at once the outsider can identify himself with us.

In the body of a human child gasping for its first breath our faith has its beginning, and the human body has become the greatest single symbol of our corporate life — because life in a human body is the only one we happen to know. A human body is constantly changing, constantly being nourished, ridding itself of residue — life is endless change — and when we appear most arrogant and confident in the local church, it is often because we are panicked by the change and decay all around us, and we refuse to move another inch. We have an anchor. We stand on a rock. God is the same yesterday, today and forever — and He is, He's alive . . . and involved in the changing realities of his own creation. The Gospel it is our responsibility to communicate may be unchanging, but the doubt it seeks to dispel alters all the time. We cannot stand still. When a ship is sinking ten miles to port, an anchor is a spiritual encumbrance; if our feet are dry upon the rock of our salvation, the wounded feet of the Christ who saved us walk with those who struggle in the quick and sinking sands of life. To stand changeless in the midst of change is the one great mortal sin, for whenever we finally close our minds upon any subject, good or evil, to any situation of challenge and opportunity, we deny the image of the creative mind in which we are made. So easily "O happy day that fixed my choice" becomes "O happy day that fixed my mind tight shut", and the only possible interpretation of baptism is being raised from death to life, from dead certainty, to lively exploration, with a mind prized open by the unpossessable glory of God. When the world is a place of change and turmoil and bewilderment, this is when God can work. We are inclined to talk of the New Morality and the New Reformation, as interesting but suspect fashions in religious thinking — but there's no such thing as an old morality — there's the one we're used to — but morality is a living thing, and reformation — that misused term of historic event — has never been other than a continuing attitude of mind. It is ordered society, and ordered religious tra-

dition, and fixed laws, and closed minds, and above all, fear of change, that crucify Christ.

When we are thinking about the responsibilities of the local church, it is natural and right that we should think of our own local congregation, but it's a local church that has responsibilities in Selma, in Stanleyville, in Peking. A Czech writer I met last year gave up religion because the local church in Prague hadn't the courage to speak out against the Nazis' elimination of the Jews. Last year, in fact, I had the most unique experience of being an outsider visiting, incidentally to my work, communicant churches in twelve countries. I stood in Bethlehem, a mile and a half from the Shepherds' Fields, and solemnly sang "Away in a Manger". One thing you don't do in the Holy Land is go to church — it bears so little relation to the story of the man who walked the dusty roads you walk. A hundred yards from the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem, they sing "There is a green hill far away" — and you feel it really all has something to do with perpetuating the English way of life. On Good Friday, on the other hand, in Lenin-grad, I spent several hours in the Museum of Atheism — I would have one in every Christian country. There the myth of Christianity is bundled up with the legends of ancient Greece, and the household gods of Rome. There God ravages the world with flood and plague; there in a curiously moving blasphemy a mother with her child bows under the weight of the Nazarene's cross; there are the riches of the Church and the poverty of the peasant; there is Catholic martyr and Protestant victim of the Inquisition; there is Birmingham, Alabama and the Declaration of Human Rights; there is Hiroshima, Canon Collins, Hewlett Johnson — a brilliant presentation of historic facts that fail utterly to disprove God, but prove beyond question or protest the continuing crucifixion of Christ by those of us who have followed and failed. Three days later, at an Orthodox Eucharist, in a cathedral packed to overflowing, I spent an Easter Day I shall never forget, deeply moved by the utter devotion and courage of those with whom I shared my thanksgiving, all standing with me at a cost, and I remembered that it was because these people were acknowledged as our brothers that the Baptist Union of Scotland withdrew from the World Council of Churches. A week later in Moscow, again in the local church, 50 new members being received into the Baptist Church, and never have I eaten bread since but the broken Body is remembered in my mind. In Grocka, Yugoslavia — a tiny village and a disused church — and three old ladies kneeling among the hen-dirt. In Washington, at a fashionable down-town church, a sermon on "How to win Friends without really trying". In Boston, a night of desperation, trying to find a corner to worship God — first a Baptist church with violin solos and greetings to a pastor in the gallery who converted six people last week, and nary a mention

of God; out into the night past astonished deacons, and across the road to a Congregational church, Brimstone Corner, a missionary conference and the main speaker of the evening a little man who sits on the top of the Andes, broadcasting the Gospel to the world — even behind the Iron Curtain, he claimed — and I thought of some of the intelligent and reasonable friends I had made in Eastern Europe, about whose life and society he knew absolutely nothing, and I wondered if he had ever looked at the life of Our Lord, and seen how little theorising on mountain-tops was there, and how much involvement in real situations. Into the night again, and across the road, but pause on the steps here. A notice outside an Episcopal Church — THIS IS OUR CHURCH — and God and I walked away. I went to my hotel room, switched on the telly and in the middle of the red light area of Boston, watched a lecture from Harvard on Government in the emergent African nations. This was God's business, and here were some of the realistic implications of the Kingdom. In Philadelphia, a service for nurses from the city's hospitals, and young doctors, and a sermon on the preacher's experiences among the sick. In Madison Avenue, New York, a sermon on Our Rights, being subservient to other people's rights, being subservient to God's rights, and inside the church building, within five minutes of the blessing, a lady in a large straw hat barging past six people in a queue to shake hands with the minister and thank him for his beautiful message. And at last, in Riverside, the Gospel was preached fearlessly and honestly — and every word invalidated by that great Rockefeller Cathedral and the slums of Haarlem outside its walls. And in case you think I'm tilting at the Americans, a vicar in England said only a few weeks ago that he objected to pet animals being buried in his churchyard — not because they were animals, but because they hadn't been baptised. And if you think I'm tilting at the Church of England — a Baptist church said to a friend of mine, please will you come and be a deacon, but I'm sorry we can't receive your wife. She was brought up in the wrong kind of church. And that's people not pets!

I hope you'll see the relevance of all this. It's pointless, frankly, finding new methods of saying things to the world, when again and again and again we make nonsense of what we say by what we do. At last we are *concerned* about pitching the church into the world, where the church has been since the church began. "I'll tell you why the Christian is so ineffectual in the world today," a man said to me a couple of days ago, "He's too nice a guy!" The Christian executive, the Christian tradesman, the Christian artist, the Christian artisan, knows as he leaves his bed each morning that before the sun goes down someone will hate him or despise him or laugh at him for the decisions he's had to make that day. Here we are concerned with understanding the world when the thorniest

problem (I use the word with meaning), the thorniest, crowning problem that besets the local church is understanding the people with whom we nominally "have communion".

The responsibilities of the local church in the task of communicating the Gospel. What is the Gospel of the local church? If you were to ask someone in the street what good news he had heard coming from any local church in the last so many years, what do you think might have stuck in his mind? There are to be no more licences in this district! Television is filling the minds of the young with filth. Mission? Yes, but how? The slum-dwellers have moved from our doors. Good News? A lady missionary telling us about an African pastor who left "full-time Christian service" to become the headmaster of a secondary school in Congo. "Pray for him," she said. I do and I bless him for having a sense of priorities.

It would seem that the church, and this means *always* the church in the local situation, has first to re-appraise and digest the Good News itself, and the Good News is this. "We are on the Lord's Side, Saviour we are Thine," but God has never been the God of only His chosen race. He is the God of the Egyptians drowning in the sea — the God of the Communist guerilla in Viet-nam — the God of perverts and prostitutes and drug peddlers we do not care to dwell upon, and because He is the God of sinners, in His infinite mercy He is our God too, we who commit the unforgivable sin of trying to possess Him for our own.

The major responsibility facing the local church is the responsibility of interpreting the mind of Christ to the world — the motives, the attitudes and the tensions of Christ, as well as the teaching with which we have become blindly familiar. What was the one thing that made Christ angry and ruthless? It was when the Church for Others — the Gentiles' court of the Temple — was cluttered with religious busy-bodies, with the perks and sidelines of religious authority. He whipped them from the House of God as He seeks to cleanse our minds of the irrelevances of our religious conviction. A man who was once a Communist said to me a week or two ago, "What attracted me to Christianity was that the end of it all is defeat". And one finds oneself recoiling from the inbred horror of that word. No! No! No! Triumph and victory and "casting down our golden crowns upon the glassy sea" — but when we are pre-occupied with triumph, we are attempting the impossible task of communicating with a world that has lost the taste for victory. Some of us call this cynicism — those of us old campaigners who have been fighting battles since the cradle; some of us might call it growing up; some of us might call it the dough rising round the lump of leaven, the seed sprouting through the field, the kingdom bursting out all over. The world today despises the top dog, the smug, the dogmatic, the tycoon, the dictator, the glutton, the dominating teacher, the strict father, the condescending

politician, the bully. The world today increasingly champions the underdog, the hungry, the coloured, the under-developed, the emergent, the doubter of old traditions, the artistic revolutionary, the humbug-buster, the honest doubter, and suddenly the old lines of communication have gone.

Preaching in a world that is tired of being talked at poses new questions. Into what spiritual temptations do we pitchfork our ministers when we force them to proclaim the faith without fear of contradiction? We are in urgent need at all levels of our local church life of frank and open discussion concerning the dynamic issues of our time. We must studiously and intelligently investigate with fresh minds Christ's dealings with people. God so loved the world that He gave, and we live in a world that patently resents charity. It is the responsibility of the local church to teach the world to receive gracefully, to share (and I mean this in quite practical terms) to have all things in common — all things, food, financial resources, physical effort, ideas, the tensions of daily work, the joy of our faith and the absolute misery of repeated defeat, our concern for each other as persons, our family name.

Jesus knew that at a table we are all basically reduced to human beings, dependent on food and drink. It is not up to us to have loftier ideas. When we feel ourselves called to the "dignity of a preacher", remember Jesus took off his coat and washed twelve pairs of dirty feet. The world of our time is perhaps readier than any other to associate itself with deeds and not words. Don't let anyone tell you other — it's an exciting time to be alive. It's not the twilight — it's the dawn!

The crowning son of heaven

Thinks we can make a morning.

Not by old measures. Expedience and self-preservation

Can rot as they will. Lord, where we fail as men,

We fail as deeds of time.

Dark and cold we may be, but this

Is no winter now. The frozen misery

Of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;

The thunder is the thunder of the floes,

The thaw, the flood, the upstart Spring.

Thank God our time is now when wrong

Comes up to face us everywhere.

Affairs are now soul size.

The enterprise

Is exploration into God.

It takes

So many thousand years to wake,

But will you wake for pity's sake?\*

TOM FLEMING.

\* Christopher Fry: *A Sleep of Prisoners*.