

The Spiritual Problems of the Great War.

I.—THE CALL OF THE WAR.

SOME years ago, on the day that King Edward was struck down before his Coronation, I was riding on a bus down Fleet Street. Beside me was a stranger, who turned suddenly, and said: "If there's a God in Heaven, sir, He's speaking to the nation to-day." Such were his words, and they were beyond measure true. And now history is repeating itself, events even more startling are occurring, and God is undoubtedly speaking once more.

The war is in itself a clamant call, and the most urgent consideration of the moment is this: Are we, as a nation, going to heed it? I fear that we missed the call of the delayed Coronation. Are we going to miss this one now? Shall we be just the same when it is all over? In some ways this is impossible, but in the ways that matter most it is quite possible. Frankly I see very few signs that there is any likelihood of a *radical* change at all. Woe betide us if this be so, for if no change for the better come it means that we have had the call sounding and have failed to heed; that we have become harder than ever to the Divine warning.

I am candidly not one of those who think that because we have gone through a war we are necessarily thereby regenerated; no, regeneration means being "born from above" for nation as for individual, and war influences are not (all of them, at any rate) from that source.

Some features, however, are encouraging:

1. *The Call is universal.* Many a time events occur which move large sections of the community, but leave others cold. That is not so now; the war has an influence painfully widespread. By *financial changes* (stringency on one hand, prosperity on the other) the domestic life of the whole nation has been disturbed. By *public necessities* (lighting and drinking restrictions, for instance) the whole social life has been

upheaved. *By family bereavements* (and what family is without at least the danger of them?) the personal sense as to the perspective of temporal and eternal things has been altered. All this is to the good, and it means that whatever response be given (and therein lies the dubious problem), certainly every individual has had something put before him that ought to make him think.

Also it is all to the good that :

2. *The Call has been persistent.* What I mean is : it has not come on one of those waves of national enthusiasm that so soon die down. For instance, it has not (thank God) been engineered by a *press boom*. We know nowadays only too well how the press can stir the nation to take an interest in anything, from the shortage of medical students to Cabinet resignations. But the effect is short-lived ; it is swept away when the next sensation arises. Nor has it come to the nation as the result of a "*prophet in our midst.*" Personally, I am afraid of the modern prophet. He savours of an Egyptian Mahdi or a (late) gentleman from the Salt Lake, U.S.A. But in any case he has not arisen. No, the nearest approach has been an (ex-) Non-conformist minister "run" by the Sunday press, or a (very) secular journalist "run" by himself. In both cases, of course, much that was good has been said ; much that was well worth saying, but still one is thankful that the call has been really independent of such agencies to a large extent.

Again, it has not come as the result of terror following a series of *air-raids*. It is said by those who have lived for months in an atmosphere haunted by Zeppelins, that, after the first time, it is remarkable how little one is affected. Why, in some of our East Coast towns the children's new game is "Zepps," and not a thought of terror about it. So—this is what we are coming to—the call to the nation has not been through any one sensational item, or even one item at all. It has come to an unwilling people through the steady pressure of circumstances, through the gradual opening of our fast-closed eyes to the fact that England cannot always blunder through

successfully ; that one day she will blunder once too often. Yes, the hope for the future lies in this, that Providence is talking in the quiet piling up of unpleasant facts, in the steadily increasing consciousness that God will give no rest (and no victory) until these facts are faced.

This is, of course, God's usual way. In the days of old it was the circumstances (generally the unpleasant circumstances) in Israel's history that brought the nation to its knees, and gave the preacher his chance.

The nation is not yet indeed upon its knees, but it may be at least sufficiently broken to give us our chance. Pray God that we have power and insight to be able to take it !

What, then, is the Call itself ? What is it that God is articulating through the pressure of circumstances ?

It is a call both to nation and to Church, partly separate and partly involved one with another. This interweaving is to be noted, for in one sense all the Church is the nation, but in another sense, alas ! all the nation is *not* the Church. Still, they are bound up with each other for better or for worse, and the Church must, before all things, beware of a Pharisee attitude that would neglect its influence on the nation. That would be the last straw.

First, then, to the nation, it is a call :

(a) *To acknowledge the fact of God.* It is the fact of God, of there being a Deity at all, that we must recover. At the moment we do not speak of the fact that God is revealed in Christ. To begin with, the nation has to relearn the perspective of the Universe, that it has a Centre, that this Centre is a PERSON, and not a mathematical point. Of course, a supposedly Christian nation could not stop there, but there it must, however, begin. England has not been a really Christian nation for years. It is better than France, better than Italy, better than Belgium or Serbia in this respect, but it is not really Christian. Certain principles (that happen to be Christian) are characteristic of England, such as Honesty, Liberty, Integrity, and so on.

But the great nations of Pagan times had at least some of these qualities, and the highly civilized Pagan nations of modern times can beat us on many such points. No, a Christian nation would put the things of Christ first; it would not be content with mere morality "touched" with Christian sentimentality. Much of our otherwise excellent philanthropy and social service fails to rise any higher than that, from the Christian standpoint. And even the war has done little to alter this. Before the war began, we were deploring our empty churches. Are they filled now? Before the war, we were grieving over Sunday desecration. Has it been altered since? Before the war we were apprehensive of the spirit of "lawlessness" breaking out among our young people. They would rush to picture-palaces, they would do just what they liked, and were resentful of any authority. Do you see signs of a radical change now? I wish before God I did, but I do not. And somewhere in the last analysis of things this is due to the lack of a realization of God, lack of true religion. I am not a pessimist, not at all. No student of the Bible who applies the fortunes of Israel to modern life could be pessimistic as to the ultimate end. But I am apprehensive, gravely so, lest England should have to undergo the chastening meted out to Israel, part of which lasts even unto this day. "Return unto God" is the call; "Rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn." "If with all your hearts ye truly seek Him, ye shall ever surely find Him, thus saith your God." Not pessimistic, therefore, but apprehensive, deeply, painfully apprehensive, that the call in this respect will not be answered adequately by the nation.

The second point in the Call is this: It is a call to the nation:

(b) *To standardize its aspirations.* Without any doubt many men and women have been thrilled with aims and aspirations unknown before. Lives lived formerly for self have become radiant with self-sacrifice; minds hitherto engrossed in the narrow circle of the home or the tennis-court have suddenly begun to study high politics, and to think in continents. It is

impossible to be small-minded when you have even to say : "Five millions a day!" It is impossible to be self-engrossed when the soldiers need comforters and sandbags! It is impossible to be self-centred when *your* soldier is far away in Salonica or the Cameroons! Why, the amount of geography you have learned has enlarged your outlook. And what new interest it has given to things! The Bible, for instance. Why, Genesis, after all, *must* be true, because in his last letter he said : "We are now in Mesopotamia, where the actual Garden of Eden was placed." And St. Paul's Epistles have become absorbingly interesting because the Vicar last Sunday said that "when we write to Salonica we are actually writing to the Thessalonica of St. Paul's day." Now, all this is most attractive, and one is not in any way laughing "up one's sleeve." No, so far from that, one commends the acuteness of the Vicar in linking up Scripture with present-day facts. But one asks : What is to become of all this when the war is over? When letters cease to be written to Salonica, will interest in the Epistles cease as well? When those in distant lands cease to require sandbags, will all interest in distant lands cease also? That is the point we have to deal with. We have to find some method of retaining attention on distant lands, diverting it from "Tommys" to much less picturesque "missionaries." We have to retain interest in the Bible, not because Mesopotamia is the Garden of Eden, but because in that Garden God gave the first promise of salvation.

So all this I call standardizing our aspirations. I mean the linking up of feelings that are called forth by temporary needs and fastening them on needs that are perennial.

But this will not happen if the nation—that is, the mass of individuals—drop back to the old worldliness and old pleasure-loving habits of the days that were before. There are those who say people will never go back to frivolity and superficiality after such an experience. Won't they? It is remarkable how quickly we can all do it unless we have some higher objective to occupy our minds.

BACK TO CHRIST, then, is the call for the nation. Yes, it is a Christian nation—nominally, at least—and what should an erring Christian nation get back to but Christ? He can standardize their aspirations; he can satisfy the need for service. If it be true that people will be saying: "I must do something. I never can live an idle life after the joy that I have experienced in work," well, then, there is plenty waiting to be done. Are there not thousands in our slums who have not half a chance of decent existence? Are there not hundreds of thousands of children waiting to be taught the truth as it is in Jesus? Are there not millions of heathens who have never heard of Christ? Here is the call to the V.A.D. workers, to the civic guard, and special constables. Here is the call to those enlisted to enlist in the greater war, a war with no less arduous heroism and an even more glorious prize. But will they? Is it honestly to be counted on that they will thus strike out new lines? I wish I could think so, but—well, we shall hope for the best, especially if a revival of faith in Christ be seen in the immediate future.

But all this only reveals how much the future of the nation depends on the faithfulness of the Church. After all, the nation will not advance higher than the Church advances; at least, it is reasonable to suppose that religious ideals and experiences will always be the primary factor in national ideas and experiences. So the call to the Church is clear. It is:

1. *To re-instate Christ.* Christianity in its last analysis is Christ, and if the Christian Church is not true to Christ she is failing in her primary objective. But it is just here that discussion and divergence has taken place for years; it is about the Person and Office and (above all) the Deity of Christ that the weakening has been setting in. Surely it is time to recover what is, after all, the Catholic Faith. "And the Catholic Faith is this: that we worship One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity." But also, "furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation," that we "also rightly believe the Incarnation of our

Lord Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect man of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. . . . Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, inferior to the Father as touching His manhood." Damnatory clauses, notwithstanding—that is, the Catholic Faith; and, if so, the Church should get back to an experimental knowledge of it, so as to speak of it to the nation with something of the old authoritative conviction. If she did, if she reinstated Christ not merely in her creed, but in her experience and Message, then the nation would have some chance of regeneration; then the upper classes would not be so much enamoured of Christian Science, and the masses would not be so easily entangled in spiritualistic extravagance.

Back to Christ; reinstate Him in our preaching and in our lives. That is, I believe, the first note of the clamant call being made in the Church's ear.

Again, the Call is certainly for the Church:

2. *To recover the power of the Spirit.* For years the Church has been impotent, so far as the mass of the nation is concerned. Persons so different in view-point as "General" Booth and "Father" Dolling agreed heartily, if sadly, on that, and worked hard in their own way to overcome it. The general impression passing current in reviews, too, is that the Church is impotent as a factor in solving the problems of the race. If so, it is a terrible loss, for the power within the Church is the only power that can ultimately do the work. Of course, one by no means allows the first premise. The Church is not impotent in herself; no, she is more sane and more active than she was sixty years ago. You have only to contemplate the old fox-hunting parson to see the gulf between him and the modern strenuous, even over-strenuous, cleric. Where the Church has failed is in regard to its *impressing the fact on the country at large*. We have failed to "capture the attention" of the masses (as the psychologists put it). But remember that since the masses in question are British, there is not much imagination to capture. In other words, we have to develop, as well as retain, our hold on the imagination. We have in practice to impress

the average hard-headed Britisher that religion counts; that it is one of the things that matter. But in a nation of "shop-keepers" the impression needs demonstration; the power must be expressed in terms of results. Here is where the working of the Spirit comes in. You cannot tell whence it comes or whither it goes, but you can tell effects when you see them. Now the average Englishman is not concerned with metaphysics, but he is strong on what he calls "practical religion." So we need a demonstration of the spirit and of power—and "Ye shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost and shall be witnesses unto Me."

Is the Church praying for the Holy Spirit? Would she really like the results if He came in power? It would mean the uprooting of many doctrines and practices that would not stand the test. It would mean a recovery of the old ideals (if not the old methods) of poverty and chastity, of service and self-sacrifice. And we are not all prepared for that. Some preachers are not prepared to preach Christ as the "only way"; some churchgoers are not prepared to go to church to meet God rather than their fellow-creatures. Some workers are not prepared to become efficient and expert at their work—to put the same thoroughness into Christ's work that they put into their own business.

There is no greater need for the nation than a revived Church, and no greater power available than the power of the Holy Ghost.

Then, in conclusion, all this must crystallize in active service. So the final sounding of the Call is for the Church:

3. *To co-operate with God.* It is a truism that we are fellow-labourers with God. It is a thought unimpressive only by its familiarity that when Christ left this earth, He left the work of evangelizing the nations to us. The Kingdom of Heaven is God's main plan and objective. He is (honestly) more concerned with the Kingdom of Heaven than with the British Empire. Not that he thinks little of that, and if a world-wide Empire can further His purposes, as the Roman roads furthered the activity of St. Paul, well and good. But not otherwise.

God has no interest, as such, in the mere extension of territory ruled by us ; God has no interest, as such, in the fact that on the said Empire the "sun never sets." No, God's main objective is the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingship of Christ, bringing *every race* under the sway of His Person and work.

Has the nation grasped this ? Has the Church within the nation grasped this ? Largely, it has not.

There are forty millions of people in Britain. How many are interested in the extension of the Kingdom to all nations ? Say half a million, and it leaves thirty-nine and a half million of this Christian land practically indifferent to the full range of the Mission of Christ. I hope it is not harsh to say it, but I verily believe that the mass of Britishers care less about the extension of the Kingdom of Heaven than they do about a halfpenny an hour in wages or a game of Sunday golf.

And the Church herself — the half million, I mean, of whom we spoke ? Some are gloriously keen, and the keeping up of the funds for Missionary work during the strain of war is a splendid testimony to their zeal. But how many of the church-going class really desire to extend the Kingdom ? As far as the slums are concerned, the number is pretty numerous, but as to the dark places of heathenism, it is patent that the majority care very little at all. Why, in some churches the announcement of a missionary sermon to be preached next Sunday is the signal for abstention all round ; in other churches the giving out of the text is the signal for "lights out." Grant that people are burdened with claims, grant that missionary sermons are sometimes dull (though personally I have not found them so), still the awful thought is that the people *do not care*. People who profess and call themselves Christians care little or nothing for the plans and purposes of Christ. Can God bless such a Church or such a nation ? "Them that honour Me I will honour ; they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed."

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how oft would I—and ye would not !"

But a godly remnant remains in England all the same. Yes, at the worst there are those (not inconsiderable in numbers, though fractional compared with the nation or even with the Church) who have not bowed the knee to Baal. These are holding on with magnificent daring, and the hope of the nation lies with them. To such the Call comes quietly, persistently, after the manner of the "still small voice." Go on with your work for God; go on calmly, prayerfully, imperturbably, in spite of counter claims and distracting duties (themselves imperative to be done as well). To some among such, some who are wavering just a little between the conflicting duties, there comes surely but insistently the Word: "Will ye also go away; will the rush of temporary needs divert your attention from the permanent ones?"

Indeed to all God's children comes the word of Him whose we are and whom we serve; the word of call to fresh consecration: "Lovest thou Me?" Lovest thou Me *more than these?*

And what shall the answer be? Shall each of us, like Peter (full of sorrow for much of past denial of our Lord), cry, "Yea, Lord, Thou knowest all things. Thou knowest that I love Thee." "I" on one hand, "Thee" on the other—and between them LOVE binding them in one.

If that be so for each Christian man and woman, then there is no fear for either Church or nation. Then the Divine Lord will overlook past failures, and will commission us afresh; then the Chief Shepherd will again say to each of us: "Feed My sheep," "Tend my lambs," and will again renew unto us that promise of power by which alone we can regenerate the nation—the "power of the Holy Ghost," which is in itself the dynamic energy of Almighty God.

L. GEORGE BUCHANAN.

