

THE MEDIÆVAL PARISH PRIEST.

BY H. P. PALMER, M.A.

THE mediæval clergyman of a parish, when he was a rector, received the entire ecclesiastical income of his cure, but when he was a vicar, the tithes on the corn crops, wool and wine, the most important part of the revenue, went to the monastery, cathedral, or collegiate church to which the rectory had been given. The parson, whether rector or vicar, might, in exceptional cases, be learned in the philosophy of his days, in Latin, in Canon Law, in liturgical knowledge. On the other hand, he might sink below the level of the bucolic clergy of the seventeenth century described by Macaulay. It was certainly the rule that the men of parts and ability gravitated into the Civil Service and were often rewarded with the highest posts in the Church. The parson of the parish might be a scion of the aristocracy, in which case advancement was a certainty; he might be the son of a serf, when it was at least a possibility. Indeed the ranks of the clergy were recruited from all orders and degrees of men. Most of them had picked up some little knowledge of Latin at the Cathedral, Guild, and Grammar Schools which were scattered through the country more widely than is usually supposed. The episcopate was of opinion that an insufficient number of the clergy went to the University, and Archbishop Chicheley, writing to the other bishops, deplored this fact, and suggested that preferment should be offered only to graduates.

The country clergyman was often, though by no means always, a man of small means and had to tend his cattle, feed his flock and look after his poultry to eke out his maintenance. He usually got on well with his congregation if he were not too exacting in the matter of his tithes. He was sometimes rather inclined to poaching, and a man, who, like one of the parsons described in the Paston Letters, stole swans, was unpopular with the magnates of his district.

The parson's every-day appearance was regulated by Canon Law. His hair must be cut close, his ears visible, and his tonsure must be of becoming width. His clerical coat or cassock must be neither too long nor too short, reaching, however, at least to the ankle. Many of the clergy set these regulations at defiance, at the cost of severe rebukes from their diocesan.

The "village preacher's modest mansion," smaller probably than that of a town incumbent, consisted of a hall, two rooms and a kitchen; there were also a dairy, stable, cattle-sheds, a garden, and some glebe. Here, then, the vicar lived and plied his many avocations. Let us hope that Halévy's description of a French curé of modern times could often be applied to him: "He loved his little church, his little village, his little parsonage. He was there alone in quietude, doing everything himself, constantly along roads and lanes, exposed to the sun, beaten by the wind and the rain. His body had hardened itself to fatigue, but his soul had remained sweet and tender. When the vicar mounted

the ladder to pale up his fruit-trees, he saw from the top of the wall the tombs over which he had said the last prayers and thrown the first offerings of earth. It was then that mentally he said a short prayer for the dead. He had a deep and a simple faith."

The patrons who appointed to vacant livings were the King, the Bishops, the Deans and Chapters of Cathedrals, Monasteries, Collegiate Churches and many members of the aristocracy. The income of a vicar depended on the original ordination (or arrangement) or on custom, and might be revised, and in fact often was revised, by the bishop. At an early period, payments were often made partly in kind; for this system full payment in money was eventually substituted. The ordination of St. Mary's Vicarage, Taunton, was originally determined by the fact that the patrons, the Prior and Chapter of the Augustinian Canons, lived less than half a mile from St. Mary's Church and goods could easily be delivered at the Vicarage. The Vicar of St. Mary's received weekly from the convent twenty-one loaves of bread, seven loaves made of choicer flour, twenty-eight loaves of fine wheaten flour, forty-two flagons of ordinary ale and seven flagons of a stronger brew. Towards meeting his other expenses, he was given fifteen marks yearly and the keep of his horse was provided. For the worthy sustentation of this animal, six loads of hay and seven bushels of oats were considered necessary. The Priory could not provide horse-shoes, but allowed the Vicar two shillings a year for this expense. As this sum, expressed in modern values, is about four pounds, we may judge that the Vicar and his steed were expected to do a good deal of travelling. The provision for the Vicar seems extremely liberal. Allowance, however, must be made for the fact that he had to maintain a resident curate. Even so, the Vicar's house must have been a paradise of cakes and ale.

The livings in England varied greatly in their income. Many were far in excess of a present value of a thousand a year, and a Paston letter, written in 1464, speaks of "good benefices and rich parsonages." There were also very poorly paid incumbencies with incomes of twenty shillings yearly or even of ten marks. Expressed in modern values, such livings were worth about forty pounds a year. These tiny incomes escaped taxation, which was normally exacted only from those which exceeded ten marks. A parson with a more competent salary found himself exposed in all directions to raids upon his resources. He was taxed, at varying intervals, by Convocation, on behalf of the Crown, with resulting demands for tenths of his income as subsidies and with tenths for Crusades, known as the "Saladin tithe" or the "Subsidy against the Saracens and Turks." There were also subsidies for the Pope, and irritating and frequently recurring charges for expenses of Papal Nuncios, who seem to have been as exacting as the "daughters of the horse-leech." The machinery for gathering in all these charges was set in motion by the bishop, who appointed collectors from among the regular and secular clergy. They had the utmost difficulty in obtaining the money. The Crown had to write again

and again to the bishops for arrears, expressing wonderment at the delay, often to be told that only trifling sums could be squeezed out of the delinquents. Edward II and his advisers, desperate men in a desperate case, condescended to every form of entreaty and cajolery.

The parson was also liable to procurations due to the Archbishop, the Bishop, or the Archdeacon on the occasions of their visitations. Grievous as were all these drains on his income, he had often to face still more serious charges. The parishioners, it is true, were liable for the upkeep of the main body of the church and for the original provision of the vestments, service-books, and ornaments, but the Vicar was compelled, in most cases, to face the cost of keeping the chancel in repair, as well as of maintaining in due order the necessaries when once they had been given. It is no wonder that the wind sometimes whistled through the broken glass of the chancel windows, that the roof leaked, that the canopy over the altar shocked those who saw it, that the vestments were old, thread-bare and moth-eaten, the pyx and font without locks, and the service-books torn or dog-eared. There were still further charges on the Vicar and these must have amounted to a good deal in the course of a year. It was his duty to pay for the processional candles, the incense and the bread and wine for the Eucharist at Easter and at other times. Moreover, the poor and suffering expected, and usually received, alms from him. He was charged with the duty of hospitality and did not always "eat his morsel by himself alone." In fact, there had been a primitive division of the tithe between the parson, the fabric fund of the church and the poor—the tradition of which always lingered.

Commissioners appointed by the Dean and Chapter of Exeter visited the churches belonging to them in 1330 and 1331, and they can hardly have been satisfied with what they found. At Clyst Hydon, for example, there was no surplice fit to be seen, the Missal was worn out, and the processional cross and all other ornaments were in bad order. At Buckerell the whole fabric of the church seemed tottering to its fall, while the service-books were superannuated and inadequate. Colyton was under the care of a leprous vicar, who insisted upon being present at the services. At Shute, a chapelry of his parish, there was no gradual, a bad antiphonal and a poor manual. At Perranzabuloe, where St. Perran died in 549, the inhabitants were in the habit of carrying, even to distant places, the supposed relics of the saint. In spite of the special sanctity of this church the visitors found much of which to complain. Surplices, funeral pall, ordinal and Paschal candlestick were past service, the pax-board was without its painting; and the font, the ivory pyx and vessel for consecrated oil were destitute of locks. Reliquary, lantern and nuptial veil were conspicuous by their absence, and the solitary little window in the chancel had no glass. At St. Breward, the parishioners collected one-tenth of the vicar's income, with which they were under obligation to repair the chancel and to provide the vestments

and books and to maintain them in good order. It may be mentioned that the bridal veil formed part of the belongings necessary to a church. The account given in Grandisson's register of the parlous condition of fabrics, chancels, ornaments, service-books and vestments may remind us that, at a later period, and especially just on the eve of the Reformation, great improvements were effected. Before Tudor days, Churchwardens became a recognized institution. In various ways, among them by their management of endowments of live stock such as cows, sheep, bees, and their sale of rings and clothing presented by parishioners, a regular income for current expenses was assured. Moreover, the Gild system was introduced into parochial life and was a great help to Vicar and Wardens. Gilds of "yonge men," "maydens," "hogglers," "tokers," "websters," brought in their annual contributions. No longer was there any difficulty in paying for such items as "4 tapyrs against Vitsonday," "mending of the clock," "the frair's fee for preaching," and in meeting many other working expenses trifling in themselves, but in the aggregate quite considerable. The personal popularity of the incumbent was certainly a determining factor in the rise or fall of voluntary contributions.

The tithes levied on the various products, animate or inanimate, of the lands or waters in the parish, gave the bulk of the clerical income. This, however, was considerably increased by marriage, churching and burial fees, as also by Easter dues, by oblations on Christmas Day and on the anniversary of the dedication of the church, and by special Masses offered for the souls of the dead. The mortuary, or second best beast of a deceased parishioner, was due only to rectors. Excellent arrangements were usually made by the bishops to provide for vicars incapacitated by age, illness or other disabilities from continuing their work; but the provision had in all cases to be taken from the income of the living.

The mediæval church bore imprinted upon it the clearest testimony to the belief that a mysterious change known as Transubstantiation was brought about in the Blessed Sacrament after consecration. If proof were needed, it is to be found in the fact that the reserved Sacrament enclosed within the ivory pyx hung under a canopy over the altar with a light ever burning before it. During the season of Lent the chancel was concealed by the "velum quadragesimale," a curtain parting it from the church. Throughout this period, moreover, the statuettes of the saints were veiled. When it was necessary to bear the Viaticum to the sick and agonizing, the priest was commanded to go on his way vested in surplice and stole and attended by a server carrying a light within a lantern and ringing a bell, to stir the devotion of the people. Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter, saw reason to complain that these regulations were completely ignored by many priests in his diocese. "We are heart-broken and horror-stricken," he says, "at such negligence."

In the case of a small parish, the parson probably had little or no help except that of a clerk. When he ministered to a village of some

size he was helped either by a curate or by the chantry priests attached to the church or to the parish. At North Curry, near Taunton, the vicar was assisted by the priest of a gild chantry, as well as by the priest of a private chantry. There was also at North Curry, as early as 1314, a mediæval sacristan, the record of whose duties was found in the "Liber Albus" at Wells by Hugo more than fifty years ago. It was his duty to knoll the bell at daybreak, matins and all the canonical hours, and to sound the ignitgium or curfew. He carried water and other necessaries to the clergy at Matins, Mass and Vespers, so that probably he had received "the first tonsure." He possessed the guardianship of the church, vestments, ornaments, relics and churchyard. In those days thieves were much in the habit of breaking through and stealing valuables from the churches. Consequently Domerham, the sacristan, and his successors slept in the building. His remuneration included common of pasture on North Curry Moor and a great Christmas feast, consisting of two loaves, one of wheaten, the other of barley bread, ale without stint, a dish of beef with mustard, a good dish of "waceroude," with half a hen and cheese. On the occasion of this feast, the sacristan was furnished with two candles, each half a foot in length. He was bidden to invite his friends to "this feast of reason and flow of soul," and they were all to drink ale merrily until the two candles, one after the other, were consumed. The expiring flicker of the second candle was perhaps coincident with the draining of the last drop of ale.

There is no doubt that the services in the greater provincial churches were frequent, and that on Sundays and festivals they were celebrated with great splendour. By ancient custom and an ordinance of Henry Chicheley, who occupied the see of Canterbury for nearly thirty years in the reign of Henry VI, it was determined that the nine priests of the church of St. Mary Magdalene at Taunton were under obligation to be present at all the principal services in their church. These priests consisted of the Vicar of the parish, his curate and seven chantry priests, in addition to whom probably there were two deacons and two sub-deacons. There are known also to have been two parish clerks, who are often alluded to in wills of the period.

The Vicar and priests of the church, vested in their surplices, were ordered to assemble daily at the time of the first Mass to be celebrated at the fifth or sixth hour in the morning, and alternately in the choir, to say Matins and the other Canonical Hours together. They were also then to be celebrating their own masses successively and in due order. The Mass of the Blessed Virgin was to be offered in the chapel dedicated to her honour daily, except on Sundays and on festivals, when it was to be sung in the choir by the Chaplain of her Chantry.

The beautiful Church of St. Mary's was seen at its best on these sacred days, when High Mass was celebrated with all its accompaniments of plaintive music, lights and ritual, at the High Altar. The beauty of the scene at the extremity of the church

must have been the greater for the dim obscurity of the nave and aisles of the venerable edifice. While the celebrant and his deacon stood before the altar, the other priests of the church were seated in the choir.

Visitors to Norman and Breton churches must often have noticed a large lectern standing in the choir and bearing the Musical Score. Round such a lectern were grouped the "clerks" and musicians of an English mediæval church, and they were doubtless supported by others sitting in the rood-loft or elsewhere. It can be imagined how impressive to our ancestors was the whole scene when the service was celebrated with devotion and reverence. They were in an atmosphere charged with awe and mystery—in their midst was the divine essence—the anointing spirit hovered over them, they sat in heavenly places.

Parishioners, many of them greatly attached to the services of the church, naturally expected that the ministering priests should show their own appreciation of them. Those of the parish of St. Mary were deeply pained to report to Bishop Bekynton, at his primary visitation held in 1427, that the priests of the church seemed to have no sense of the solemnity of the occasion at any of the services. On the contrary, instead of being in their places at the early services, they were wandering aimlessly about the church or strolling in the churchyard. Even at High Mass itself, some of the priests vexed the congregation by peering through the windows or round the pillars of the church, satisfied with catching fragments and snatches of the service. The parishioners declared in their representations to the Bishop that they had remonstrated with the Vicar and the other priests in vain; nothing could induce them to perform their duties faithfully. The Bishop, in a missive approving the action of the parishioners, threatened with immediate citation before him and with excommunication, priests who had thus "crept, intruded and climbed into the fold," only to betray their trust, unless they immediately proceeded to keep the rules which governed the conduct of the services.

The functions of the mediæval vicar were mainly Sacramental or concerned with the other services of the church. It was also his duty to hear the confessions of his parishioners, some of whom were much more remiss than others in approaching the priest for this purpose. Due confession and penance were, however, obligatory at the beginning of the season of Lent, in preparation for the Easter communion. It then became a task of the utmost urgency to the parson to shrive his flock. Confessions were to be absolute self-revelations. "Men were exhorted to remember," in the words of a discourse of the period, "the shame that is to come at the day of doom to them that be not penitent in this present life, for all the creatures in heaven, and in earth, and in hell, shall see all that they hid in this world." This function of confessing and absolving was fenced in by numerous restrictions. The parish priest had no power to absolve in certain cases, known as reserved cases. These included violations of the rights and

liberties of the cathedral church, perjuries at Assizes or elsewhere, where death or disherison resulted from the crime, homicide, assaults on priests, and violation of the persons of nuns. These cases were dealt with by confessors nominated and armed with this special power by the bishop. There was moreover an annual selection of confessors in the different rural deaneries for the lay people. Such permission to confess to others than the parish priest was doubtless granted to relieve the minds of those who, for some personal reason, were unwilling to confess to their parish priest. Special Confessors were also chosen for the clergy. Friars of all the different orders received episcopal license to hear confessions. If the literature of the period may be trusted, many of them were pleasant confessors to deal with. The picture drawn by Chaucer of a friar represents him as "an easy man to give penance," and as recommending "silver to the poor friar" as a sure means of atonement for sin. The parson's office as confessor and his natural jealousy of interference must often have made him resentful of the intrusions of others on his domain.

The friars were not the only visitors who taxed the pecuniary resources of the vicar's congregation and possibly his own patience. Brethren of the Hospital of the Holy Spirit at Rome might arrive, armed with papal and diocesan authority and ask the alms of his people. These brethren were forbidden by the bishop to exhibit relics or any similar "trash" (*frivola*). Such foreign visitors were not unusual, but there might sometimes be a little variation. An English monastery in difficulties about raising funds for a new church, might be empowered to lay their unanswerable case before the people and see what their eloquence would bring in.

Preaching in the Middle Ages never occupied the position it has held since the Reformation, and the parish priest did not preach nearly so often as in the days when a sermon is described by Shakespeare as a "saw" drowned in the winter season with "coughing." By a constitution of Archbishop Peckham, the clergyman of every parish was bidden to instruct the people four times a year in the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the seven works of mercy, the seven mortal sins and the seven sacraments. That bishops had to remind every parish about this rule through the rural deans, would appear to show that it was not always obeyed. Such preaching as there was was probably catechetical rather than in the form of a connected discourse. It should be added that the Friars were often engaged as "special preachers" and received substantial fees amounting in some cases to as much as eight guineas expressed in modern values.

It is obvious that a teacher of religion should himself live a life illustrative of his doctrine. Existing documents prove that the character of many benefited clergy left much to be desired. Concubinage was frequent, but far worse than this were the numerous cases of adultery and incontinence which prevailed. These are attested by the registers of Archbishop Peckham and other prelates and were usually very lightly punished. Grosstête, Bishop of Lincoln, complained in 1244 of priests who did not say the Canonical

Hours, or, if they said them, did so without devotion or sign of devotion, kept concubines, committed perjury, and were much in evidence at Miracle plays and May Day celebrations. Moreover, although they would not do their duty themselves, they declined to allow others to do it for them. They refused to permit the friars to preach in their churches, or to hear confessions. On the other hand, they admitted hirelings to their pulpits, preachers, to use the Bishop's own words, "who only preach such sermons as may best bring in money."

As is only too well known, gross abuses have existed in the post-Reformation church in connection with appointments to livings. Yet these, scandalous as they have been, are utterly eclipsed by those prevalent in the mediæval church. In the reign of Henry III, pluralism reached an appalling height. The son of the Earl of Gloucester held thirty benefices. Giffard, Archbishop of York, declared that William Percy held many churches, although not in priest's orders, and that he ran after the Court, and filled many offices forbidden by Canon Law. Pope John XXII, by a constitution known as "Execrabilis" from its opening word, strove to remedy the evil by declaring void all the benefices, save one, held by a Pluralist. The result was temporary confusion. Many villages were left without a priest, others with an alien "who knew not the bleat of his flock." Even after this drastic measure, pluralism continued to flourish, though with clipped wings, licenses of plurality were granted, and, even in the days of Henry VII, we find priests in possession of several livings. The holding of church preferment by aliens was an abuse which Edward III made great efforts to suppress—it was still an outstanding evil at the time of the Reformation.

The appointment to livings of minors, acolytes and sub-deacons unable to take up parochial work, and sometimes receiving both the cost of their early education and its continuance at Oxford, Paris, or Rome from the ecclesiastical income of their parishes, was as harmful as it was common. Thus Everic de Orchard was nominated in 1411, while still a child, to the rectory of Orchard Portman. He was placed for six years under the tutorship of the Vicar of Stoke-sub-Hamdon, who had also to arrange for the services of the church. Such a bestowal of a living on a child required a papal dispensation and cannot fairly be said to have been common. The "license to study," which followed Everic's six years of private tuition, did not need the Pope's intervention. It was granted by the Bishop, doubtless when the juvenile rector had reached the age of fourteen and could become an acolyte. For this license he had to say a hundred Psalters. "Licenses to study," with the absence involved, were sometimes granted for a period extending from three to seven years. More usually, however, they were annual, but were constantly renewed year after year. Capes quotes the case of a family called Pykesleigh, beneficed in the diocese of Bath and Wells. Three brothers of this name, all in minor orders, were continually asking for and obtaining renewals

of "licenses to study." It is needless to multiply instances. The episcopal registers teem with them, but the granting of a license to the rector of Curry Rivel at the prayer of no less a person than the Black Prince deserves to be noticed. de Drokensford, Bishop of Bath and Wells, a man far too easily wheedled into giving "licenses to study," found reason to complain that the absentees often abused their privilege, wandered about and behaved unseemly, while "the care of souls was neglected, the services deteriorated, and hospitality perished." The absenteeism of the parochial clergy was increased by licenses given them to enter, sometimes for a year, into the households of families of rank or even into those of Abbots and other dignitaries. The spiritual duties of these roaming clergy were undertaken by members of a class of clergy known as "Capellani." These men were the more illiterate members of the clerical profession. These "shreds of the linen vestment of Aaron" were the ill-paid hacks of the wealthy mediæval church; they sometimes had only the income of Goldsmith's Vicar of Auburn without possessing his virtues. One such chaplain figures in the visitation of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter already referred to. He seems to have been the Don Juan of his district, and as may well be imagined, the equipment of his church was but "a beggarly account of empty boxes." This chaplain must have shared the opinion expressed in a line quoted in *Piers the Ploughman*, "Omnis iniquitas quantum ad misericordiam Dei, est quasi scintilla in medio maris."¹ Many of the clergy were illiterate. They were sometimes examined on being appointed to livings, and, if they knew little or nothing, a curate was nominated by the bishop and the vicar went on his travels in pursuit of knowledge. It is impossible to enter at greater length into the many causes which crippled the efficiency of the church and made parsons lesser lights than they should have been. It may, however, be added that the system under which the bishops were often great ministers of state, and rarely, sometimes never, entered their dioceses, was in every way injurious to priests and people. Under this system the ceremonial duties were performed by a suffragan, while the corrective and judicial powers rested with the absent bishop's official. Thus personal pastoral sympathy and influence were lost, the bishops' manor-houses tumbled into ruin, and worse than all, their flocks were lost in the wilderness, by them neglected and unfed.

Great blemishes then there were in the English parochial system. The Church was unquestionably "an ambassador in bonds." Yet this must not blind us to the fact that not a few of the parish priests, like Chaucer's "poor parson of a town," lived a "life unspotted from the world." Such men were not mere exponents of a doctrine often intricate and obscure, nor were they only the priests of a ceremonial religion. On the contrary, they tried to be, and actually were, "able Ministers of the New Testament, not of the letter, but of the spirit, for the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life."

¹ All iniquity is to God's mercy but as a sunbeam on ocean's bosom.