

THE PRESENT CALL TO EVANGELISM.

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SOME twenty years ago, the Archbishop's Committee on Evangelism reported on the subject in the following words: "To evangelise is to present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Saviour, and to serve Him as their King in the fellowship of His Church. Will the Church of England rouse herself to this paramount obligation?"

The twenty years that have passed since that report was issued represent a period that may well be described as unique in its influence on the world. What has been their effect on religion? The War, with its terrific impact on life, launching mankind on an uncharted sea of national and international relationships; the great upheaval in thought and outlook, due partly to the War, and gaining ground through the weakening of older conventions; the vast advance in scientific discovery and invention by which possibilities unthought of have come within ordinary compass, have each had an effect on human life which can be seen in all its varied departments. In the realm of religion, the consequences can be clearly marked. We see an increased indifference to spiritual things, with the development of an outlook which tends to dispense with any ultimate authority except personal desire, while the world has before it the hitherto unknown spectacle of an entire Nation, as in Russia, being actively urged to a complete materialism through the denial of God. The challenging of many of the great religious convictions of the past, such as the sanctity of Sunday, the authority of the Bible, the duty of public worship and other recognised ideals, springs from a conception of life which looks upon it chiefly from the human aspect, and sees the special object of man to be concerned with a material purpose.

The English Nation has, in the past, had many religious privileges which have helped to make the character and ideals of its people. Freedom of worship, the possession of an open Bible, the influence of the English Sunday, with many other factors, have each contributed their share. To-day we have to face the situation that some of the prevailing tendencies, taken as a whole, cut at the foundations of religion. The cinema is one of the greatest inventions, with untold possibilities. What is its influence to-day? The deputation, headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Sir Charles Robertson, which waited upon the Prime Minister recently, made out a sufficient case for anxiety. Sir Charles Robertson showed that the independent censorship of films established in one district recently had found one quarter of the films submitted to it unsuitable on the grounds of "crime, cruelty, and

loose morality." Yet these were films suggested for Sunday showing! Twenty million people, we are told, go to the cinema each week, and amongst them a great proportion of the young. We can readily acknowledge the many excellent films shown, and yet have to ask, what will be the outcome of influences such as those referred to by the deputation in the years to come?

The outcome of present conditions can indeed be seen in many ways. There is the effect on family life where children grow up without even the outward religious sanctions of the past. The decline in Sunday School Scholars is one feature of this condition. The numbers now attending Sunday Schools are considerably reduced from those of years gone by. As we see the possible advent of organised Sunday games, the spread of the Sunday cinema, and similar activities, we know that the problem will not become easier. The drift of young life from organised religion is one of the most vital aspects of the problem, but it does not stand alone. An attitude to life which fails to see any higher spiritual authority than what is good in our own eyes, not only leads to an indifference to Christian claims and to disregard of the Church, but to a loosened tendency in every department of life. The lower moral tone and relaxed view of the marriage tie, the increase of the gambling instinct in all sections of life, the spread of false doctrines of Government and State, spring from the failure to hold a right view of God and of His Will for man. The extreme Communist theory necessitates the removal of the idea of God before it can be fully carried out.

We need not doubt that many of the changes in outlook and discovery that have arisen can, under God, produce beneficial results for mankind, nor can we fail to believe that God is more than ready to help His own creation into the true path. Yet for this He needs us! To the Christian, the recognition of the need is but the call to a new endeavour, and new endeavour is best stimulated by seeking the meaning of the outward facts. The power of forces of evil needs no emphasis, but God also "has not left Himself without a witness." The restlessness of the age and its thirst for new things, the dissatisfaction of soul so apparent, is an indication that men have not obtained what they seek. While the tragedy of present-day activities is that they so often lead people farther away from the true reality, yet the search after fuller life is a sign of man's need of God. If we but knew the thoughts of many around us, they would often reveal to us those who sadly struggle with the besetting sin, and feel the sense of a deep disillusionment. We have, too, the fact that those who move about the country express the opinion that there is, to some extent, a reaction from the indifference of the post-War years, and a desire for a truer and more satisfying life. Many a Parish Clergyman will endorse this in relation to his own people, and testify that, in spite of much that speaks of neglect of God, there is a seeking by many after something that will help to higher things. If the present must be regarded as a time for deep concern, we may see it also as a "Day

of Opportunity" which calls the Christian Church to make the things of God attractive and necessary to men, and to do so by showing that the life Christ offers has a fullness that answers man's every need.

Our Lord was moved with compassion because He saw men as "sheep without a shepherd." The call to a definite Evangelism comes from the same need of human life to-day. And we can start from the knowledge that men not only need God, but, unless they have deliberately turned from Him, they dimly want Him even though not fully conscious of it. The message of Evangelism to-day is therefore a twofold one. It must seek to bring men to a realisation of the fact that life without God is not true life at all, and to lead them to see that the solution of all they need is the provision that God has made in Jesus Christ. All the philosophies of life have discovered no other solution than this, and the Church is therefore equipped for its task with the confidence that it has in the Gospel of Christ the Divinely appointed answer to man's call. It is this which has transformed the world in the past, uplifted men from sin and given the true incentive for life. St. Paul's motto is still the motto for every Evangelistic effort: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto Salvation." Sir Evan Spicer's recent letter to *The Times* reminded us that at least men know this to be the message that they need, and the only one that can give the power that will lift them to God. This does not mean that the great moral and social questions that call for our help are in any way overlooked, for the Gospel is "Good News" for every human problem, but it emphasises the fact that all such problems will be met more quickly, when lives are truly converted to God.

The concern of the ardent Evangelist to-day is not with his message, but rather with the mode of its presentation. How is the Church to bring home to the careless and indifferent and even to the seeking men and women the fact that it has just what is needed? There is a distinct place for the united witness to Christian truth, and against the false ideals of the age, but leaving this aside, and also the bigger Evangelistic efforts which God can still bless, as we see in the case of Mr. Lionel Fletcher's campaigns, how is the ordinary parochial Clergyman faced with the responsibility of his own people, and who knows he is called of God to do this very thing, to face the matter? In these days of shortage of Clergy and the money to pay them, it is difficult at times to avoid the view that little more can be done than to see that ordinary activities do not fail. No true Pastor acquiesces at heart in this position, for he knows it is not really fulfilling his commission to be a Minister of the Gospel, and he longs to buy up the opportunity that presents itself. What methods can the Vicar of an average Parish adopt as he faces the question of how to bring the Gospel home to his people, and sees himself as the Pastor of all within it, of whatever views or character they may be?

Canon Joynt in his latest book, *The Church's Real Work*, has

given us a review of the many opportunities which fall to the average Clergyman, and specially stresses the value of parochial visiting. The Church of England parochial system has, at times, been belittled, and it is true to say that, so far as congregations are concerned, it has lost its application, but as a means of bringing the Gospel home to the masses it still stands unrivalled. If it were possible for the Clergy to avail themselves of their greatest privilege—the accepted right to knock at every door and invite admittance for themselves to discuss the things of God—what might not be the outcome? Parochial visiting is the essence of the Church of England system. For the Evangelical School of thought it has especial significance in that it helps to make that definite friendly contact which we believe to be the true method of pastoral ministration. The interest in the home life, the quiet talk with husband and wife on spiritual things, the Christian advice on difficult problems, all can be a real form of Evangelism amongst our people. Such contact may often lead to a desire for further, and it may be private talk with the Clergyman on special needs, but it will certainly lead in many cases to a desire to “come to Church.” The Bishop of Winchester’s recent words have a wholesome warning: “I am sure that through the abandonment of visiting, the Church is losing hold in Parish after Parish. No beauty of ceremonial, no eloquence of preaching, can compensate for its lack.”

To quote the recent C.P.A.S. Report: “The Christian Church is charged with the responsibility of holding up before the Nation the ‘Ethic’ of the Christian Gospel, but the acceptance of this ‘Ethic’ will depend upon the number of individuals within the Nation who have definitely yielded themselves to the claims of Christ.” The Church can never execute its ministry to the individual unless it makes the full opportunity for personal contact. Such an ideal means a great deal of work that can never be shown, but from the point of our country and its spiritual needs, can we find a more valuable way of contact for the bringing of the message of Christ into the homes of our land?

The essential difficulty is that it is impossible as a rule for the Clergy themselves to find time for a ministration of the Parish in this way. It may be that we need to discriminate more in the use of our time, yet, with every care, much cannot be accomplished personally, and this fact leads us to ask whether we have, as a whole, succeeded in training our laity for Evangelistic work so that they may at least assist the Clergy. Every organised parish has its District Visitors, Magazine Distributors, Cradle Roll Visitors, and other visiting groups. Why should there not be, either from these bodies, or through other chosen bands, Evangelistic visitors, who, with a periodical greeting from the Church, could at intervals visit the homes and establish friendly contact and open the way for the Christian message. This might be a work for earnest C.E.M.S. and Mothers’ Union members, which, if gradually persisted in, could not fail of some result. Cottage meetings, in which some earnest layman or woman worker can gather a few men and women

together for a talk, can prove of great use in this way. Informal gatherings for prayer, Bible study and discussion, all have their special possibilities.

Prebendary Carlile of the Church Army has been calling our attention to the great value in a Parish of a band of people linked together as Church members, through a definite Christian experience. Such an inner circle might well become an effective Evangelistic force, as well as provide means for the development of the lives of its members. Converted people must be brought out into some service if their growth is not to be stunted. This is especially the case with young people. We may find it necessary in Parish work to have Clubs and Guilds for helpful recreation for the young, but we miss our entire purpose if their Church contact is limited to this. From this wider circle, we must gather the inner circle, which, held together by such methods as those of the Christian Endeavour or similar type, will steadily realise that Christian experience should be expressed in service. But always must it be ours to lead by word and example if our people are to follow.

Of the ordinary Services and Organisations of a Parish, there is no call to speak, but as we survey them from time to time, we are bound to ask how far they are fulfilling their true purpose. Services can become stereotyped and the message lose its vitality, while Organisations may become the working of a machine. The constant question we have to face is whether it is all a channel for the Message of Christ to reach men's hearts, through the Holy Spirit's power. Lord Daryington has recently pointed out that in our Church Councils we are intended to have a body that works in spiritual co-operation with the Incumbent for the evangelisation of the Parish. The difficulties of this ideal are often apparent, but it is not therefore the less needful that we should seek to cultivate it.

One great encouragement to all who feel the call to Evangelism is the fact that the Church as a whole is realising that this is a supreme duty before it to-day. A timely contribution to the situation which promises to be of the greatest value to the Parochial Clergyman, is the scheme just issued by the Church Pastoral-Aid Society, whereby the Society, with its well-known motive of Evangelism as the aim, is prepared to assist in efforts made to promote an Evangelistic campaign. This assistance is to be given in the very ways which a Parish most needs to help it in its task, viz. : By week-ends for the deepening of spiritual life, training classes for workers, and Evangelistic Missions embracing a whole Parish and its organisations. Such a scheme will thankfully be utilised by many parishes in the coming months.

But no one who looks at the need and who knows the desire in some way to meet it, can fail to ask, " Who is sufficient for these things ? " There is nothing more necessary than that we should do so, for only then can we realise that " our sufficiency is of God." The characteristics of the present age might well seem to make the opportunity of the Church a perplexing one, for the activities

which oppose Christianity are both subtle and alert. Yet on the other hand we can rejoice in the fact that the Christian experience is being accepted and valued by many, and that there are many indications both at home and in the Mission field that God's purposes are being worked out. Man's need has always been God's opportunity, and God may even now be waiting to revive His work in our land and bring our Nation to a new knowledge of Himself.

If God is to work, what is requisite? There must be a Church fully alive to the work for which it is called, and whose members have a real desire to show by word and life the message of Christ to their fellows. As the Church's Ministers we must feel the burden on ourselves and the spirit that says "This one thing I do." But when this is so, there must still be the further realisation: "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit." The Church is the instrument, but the power is of God, and therefore the channel for the power must be created and kept open by prayer.

Has prayer, in its real sense, the place that it ought to have in the life of the Church? All the great religious movements of the days gone by have come in answer to two things, a definite desire on the part of God's servants for the salvation of others, and then the effectual earnest prayer that has opened the way for God's working. It is in such circumstances that God's power has been manifest in the past. In this way the C.M.S., C.P.A.S., and other kindred organisations came into being. If a wave of Evangelism and Revival is to come to our country we need to revive the place of prayer in our midst. The formation of prayer groups in each Parish, the bringing of the idea and necessity for prayer into every department of our work, and the definite calling upon God for His blessing on every effort will be our answer to God's "Prove me now." If the Church could gather its members together and in constant and united prayer wait upon God, as the infant Church did in its early days, can we doubt that God would hear and the way would be opened for His power to be manifested?

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In the event of a second edition of the book one or two of the Gaelic words might be corrected.