

The Nation and the Church.

BY F. W. GILPIN.

(Member of Standing Committee, Church Assembly).

I.

A SUBJECT embracing both the Nation and the Church is very wide indeed : it is world-wide and can even extend beyond the present world. Both the Scotch and English sections of the British nation have national churches with their roots deep in the history of the Scots and English peoples. The Church of England dates back beyond that June day in A.D. 1215 when in Magna Carta it was royally declared to be free ; beyond even the Synod of Whitby in A.D. 664 when certain religious customs and ceremonies which had been variously observed in the churches established by the northern and southern missions were brought into alignment. The Church of England was one long before the nation came under one ruler. No doubt because the clergy and their ecclesiastical leaders were the only educated people in the land the Church almost entirely dominated the State and, with certain exceptions, it had no great difficulty in persuading kings to do its will. "One State, one Church" was the natural outcome of this process of integration. Variations in forms of service which were the "use" in particular churches were discouraged until nation-wide identity of use was achieved in the Book of Common Prayer and "now from henceforth all the Whole Realm shall have but one Use." Outwardly at any rate, the Nation and the Church were both united and unified, and uniformity in forms of worship was secured.

Much has, however, happened since those days to disturb this identity and unity. Puritanism and Congregationalism challenged the authority of the Church of England and the growth of non-conformity was the result of their dissent. But these developments, like Methodism at a later date, were religious movements. The people still practised religious observance and filled the churches and chapels on the Lord's Day, although their religion was largely of a superficial character. Nor is it surprising that church attendance was customary among all classes of the community. Apart from their daily toil there was little else to do. Not many could read, concerts and other forms of entertainment were rare, and books, including the English Bible, were scarce. Ale houses provided the principal form of relaxation, but these were not regarded as rivals of places of worship, for men were often frequent patrons of both.

It was not until the industrial revolution at the beginning of last century that the drift from the Church really began. This was due to the rapid growth of new towns. Villages became large cities in a very short time, and people moved away from the sequestered countryside, where they were known intimately by all their neighbours, to the crowded large new towns where they were quite unknown. The change was complete. Not only was the quiet slow movement of the

countryside abandoned for the bustle and noise of factory and workshop, but the long hours of labour, as well as its soul-less nature, provided but little time for thought or religious feeling. Moreover, instead of working within sight and sound of the village church, which for so long had been the centre of their religious and social life, great numbers of people now lived in huge centres of population without a church. Instead of the familiar daily exchange of courtesies with the parson, they now very seldom saw one except on occasions of births, deaths and marriages.

It was conditions such as these that brought the Church Pastoral-Aid Society into being, and one trembles to think what would have been the state of religion in England to-day had that Society not been formed "for the purpose of benefiting the population of our own country by increasing the number of working clergymen in the Church of England." Since its foundation in 1836, the C.P.A.S. has been responsible for the formation of many new parishes and the provision and maintenance of a large number of clerical and lay workers.

In the meantime, however, other counter-attractions have created a disposition against church going. Increased means of transport, the cinema and Sunday games, have provided other ways of spending the week-end. Sunday, too, during two great wars has been used for munition making and for drilling of home guard and pre-service organisations. In many cases the habit of church going has not been recovered after disbandment. The growth of secular education has led to a reduction in religious instruction in schools and to a lamentable ignorance of the Bible and the services of the Church. Thus the source of Sunday School teachers has dried up and many one-time flourishing Sunday Schools have either been abandoned or are in a languishing condition. The falling birthrate has also had its effect upon the numbers of Sunday School scholars. Many of the clergy are disheartened by reason of their empty pews and have lost both vision and message, and congregations are in consequence listless and unresponsive. Thus the vicious circle is completely rounded.

II.

The present condition of the nation has been described as "pagan"; but, notwithstanding what has been said above, this would seem to be an exaggeration. Victory in the recent war could not have been achieved had this been a true description of our people, for in times of crisis they have repeatedly flocked to our churches. Following the example of His Majesty the King, they have joined in Days of Intercession, in a belief, however lightly held, that God is real, God is merciful and answers prayer. It may be that they "ignorantly worship" an "Unknown God": but they are prepared to recognise that God rightfully has a place in the life of the nation. There is no demand now on the part of "the man in the street" for disestablishment. The Church is one of those national institutions, like the monarchy, which all sections of the community agree in respecting. Unlike Lord Morley, they still spell "God" with a capital "G."

Some time ago a popular London daily newspaper humorously described a session of the Church Assembly and accompanied its

article by a picture which shewed several members of the senior House apparently asleep. The reporter, however, ended on a serious note by saying "this is not only the Church of England, but it is the Church of the English people." The people may not be enthusiastic in their churchmanship, but there can be no doubt that they value the Church and desire its preservation. It may be true to say, as one Bishop did when preaching at a recent institution service, that "England has once more become a mission field"; but the home missionary does not have to minister to a hostile people. Indeed, the people like to think that near the parish church there is a parsonage house where they can call in time of trouble and be sure of sympathy and some measure of practical help. The parochial system gives all parishioners a claim upon the parson and, as every incumbent knows, the parishioners do avail themselves of his help. There are many in England to-day who would echo the words of George Borrow in his preface to *Lavengro*, in which he gives the chief reason for belonging to the Church of England "because of all churches calling themselves Christian ones I believe there is none so good, so well founded upon Scripture, or whose ministers are, upon the whole, so well read in the Book from which they preach, or so versed in general learning, so useful in their immediate neighbourhoods, or so unwilling to persuade people of other denominations for matters of doctrine." Borrow adds: "In the communion of this Church, and with the religious consolation of its ministers, I wish and hope to live and die, and in its and their defence will at all times be ready, if required, to speak, though humbly, and to fight, though feebly, against enemies, whether carnal or spiritual."

There are thousands of laymen today who would unhesitatingly identify themselves with Borrow in this matter. Without the support of the laity the clergy become but a small select body of people with but little influence upon the nation. Yet in a number of parishes the Parochial Church Councils, set up by Statute, are regarded at the best as a necessary nuisance, and the assistance of laymen in the conduct of services is unwelcome. A wrong impression is given of the position of the laity by the loose way in which men are stated to be "going into the Church" at ordination. Even in the Church Assembly speakers have been known to refer to ordinands in this way.

In speaking of the Nation and the Church we must be clear what we mean by the Church. I imagine that all present at this Conference would agree that the Church is the whole body of believers in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who came into the world to save sinners. In the Church of England we recognise the three-fold order of the Ministry, bishops, priests and deacons, who have their proper functions assigned to them, and we look to those ministers for leadership in matters of religion, faith and morals. It is not sufficient, however, for these ministers merely to perform certain ceremonies or to go through the motions of conducting certain services. Just as a service of Holy Communion is invalid unless there be some to communicate with the minister, so other services are of little value unless they are rendered with the co-operation of the people. The Book of Common Prayer gives the congregation ample opportunity of sharing in liturgical

worship; just as it was for the Nation at large that Henry VIII ordered Archbishop Cranmer to prepare the Litany, so that all the people, in their own language, could take vocal part in praying for deliverance from the Nation's enemies as well as from pestilence and famine. That noble example has been followed on several occasions by our good King George VI: when the nation was in dire straits, he called upon the people to join him in public prayer and dedication. And the Nation followed the King to church as the Christian Norsemen, in Bjornson's epic, followed Olaf Haraldson, the first Christian King of Norway.

III.

During the present century there has been noticeable a growing cleavage between the clergy (as representing the Church) and the general public. This cleavage has been due to several causes.

(1) In mining areas, particularly, a form of communism is strongly and loudly opposed to all sections of society which do not accept its dogmas. The clergy, who by training, as well as by their daily lives of devotion and association, are as a class of a very different outlook, are regarded with undisguised hostility. But such hostility is not marked in other sections of the community.

(2) Business people for the most part regard the clergy with good humoured toleration. The general feeling among them is that the clergy are running a type of business which has nothing to do with their own. So they leave the clergy and their churches to those who feel a need for their services. There is no real point of contact. On such occasions as baptisms, burials and marriages they unhesitatingly utilise the church's ministrations as they would resort to a doctor in time of sickness or call upon the assistance of a plumber to repair a burst pipe.

(3) Professional people have much in common with the clergy. Their education has been to a great extent on the same lines and they have many mutual friends and interests. It is not surprising, therefore, that the professional classes are largely represented in the Church Assembly and other representative church organisations. They also are found, though to a smaller degree, in the ranks of Diocesan Readers. It would indubitably make for greater appreciation of the work of Readers if more men of this class were licensed. Men with a message, qualified to present it effectively, will be listened to, whether they be from the ranks of the clergy or of the laity. Dr. Winnington-Ingram, late Bishop of London, once said that he looked forward to the day when he could walk up the aisle of St. Paul's Cathedral in company with Readers including an admiral, a general, a doctor and a lawyer.

It is well that those in charge of the Church's worship and doctrine should be those specially set apart and prepared for the purpose, but it is important to remove the impression in the minds of many people that the clergy regard themselves as a superior race and that behind the barrier of "the parson's freehold" they can entrench themselves under the modern version of the plea known as "benefit of clergy."

The clergy, however, had a great opportunity during the recent war to shew that they were good citizens, and splendidly they used that opportunity. Apart from active service with A.R.P., a great many found themselves sharing with their parishioners the deadly peril of air raids, and rendering practical help as well as giving sympathy to the sufferers and confidence to the timid. Undoubtedly the prestige and influence of the clergy were appreciably advanced by such heroic examples in particularly vulnerable areas and in times of national disaster and anxiety.

The nation needs as ministers of its National Church not only those who hold the Christian Faith in all sincerity and are able to preach that faith acceptably and effectively, but it needs as its spiritual leaders and mentors men who, having had experience in other walks of life—with all their particular cares and claims—know the difficulties of the parishioners and are able to help them to find peace and comfort.

In the Manchester Art Gallery was to be seen a few years ago a picture by Geraldine Hodgson entitled "The search for peace." It depicted, in a series of panels, various ways in which men sought peace. One panel revealed a boy awakened from his slumbers by an alarm clock, another shewed a man in his study disturbed by a noisy son; but the central panel portrayed a group of clergymen being addressed by a man dressed as a layman. The active co-operation of the laity is essential to a revival of true religion throughout the country. "Power," said Lord Acton, "corrupts and absolute power absolutely corrupts": and the clergy must be prepared for an extension of lay influence in all that makes for the good of the parish.

IV.

For many centuries the laity have been associated with the clergy in the oversight of the material affairs of parishes; for churchwardens and sidesmen (or bedesmen) have had considerable responsibility of a statutory character in the administration of church finance and charitable gifts, as well as the care of the fabric of church buildings. The passing of the Parochial Church Councils Powers Measure, with the approval of Parliament and the Crown, went a great deal further. It set up in practically every parish in the country a Church Council whose primary duty was

"to co-operate with the incumbent in the initiation, conduct and development of church work, both within the parish and outside."

It was a long time before the powers of these Councils were realised, and it is doubtful whether it is yet appreciated generally how great are the responsibilities and influence which membership of them involves. Nevertheless these bodies exist and their interest and usefulness are developing.

It was said of the earlier followers of Our Lord that they "turned the world upside down"; and it might well be that the thousands of parochial church councils throughout the land will have a great part in the re-conversion of England. For the call to evangelism comes from the laity. It was in the House of Laity that the matter

was first considered and it was as the result of the discussions in the Lay House that it was brought before the full Church Assembly.

After the war of 1914-18 there was a widespread feeling that the Church had failed to maintain its position and influence, and a Mission of Repentance and Hope was inaugurated to recover the lost ground. That Mission did not appear to have been very successful, and its want of success may have been due to its having been engineered from the top. The hope arising from the present campaign lies in its having been prompted by the expressed needs of the laity. In the city of Birmingham, for instance, large gatherings of lay people have been held, week after week, to consider this important subject. They have been organised by an influential committee of laymen under the chairmanship of a City Councillor and the secretaryship of a prominent businessman who is a member of the Church Assembly. These gatherings have received considerable attention in the Press. Each meeting has been preceded by a well attended gathering for prayer. In the diocese of Gloucester all the six representatives in the House of Laity have issued a circular letter to church councils throughout the diocese urging consideration of the matter, and there is evidence of the keen interest which has thus been engendered. Several special meetings are being held every week in various parts of the diocese to discuss ways and means of putting into operation at least some of the proposals outlined in the Report of the Archbishops' Commission. These discussions are usually preceded by an address from one of the six representatives. In a number of parishes further meetings are being arranged and discussion groups are being formed.

One of the recommendations submitted by the signatories of the letter is that members should "exercise individual witness in daily lives and contacts as God may lead them to do in answer to prayer." In one parish, presided over by a Canon of the Cathedral, two young couples undertook to pray regularly for every other young couple in that parish.

The Nation consists overwhelmingly of lay people—people who are nominally, at any rate, lay members of the Church of England. If those people could catch something of the enthusiasm of the early Church, and in the Spirit of Pentecost seek to inspire others with a like enthusiasm the churches of the land would once more be regularly filled with a devout body of worshippers.

We must no longer be satisfied with a nominal adherence to the Christian Faith or with clergy who are so fully occupied with pastoral duties and the routine conduct of services that they have no time to evangelise the masses. We need to-day thousands of clergy and laity who are enthusiastic evangelists, able to point men to Christ and to persuade them that Christ alone can satisfy the deepest needs of mankind. Members of Christ's Church must be His ambassadors, completely loyal to Him and fully able to represent Him effectively to those outside and to draw them into His Kingdom.

In a Middlesex church there is a monument to a certain duchess testifying to her many virtues. Side by side with her numerous virtuous characteristics it sets down the limits beyond which she was careful not to go. In the list appears the inscription: "She was

religious, but not enthusiastic." The Church comprises too many such people to-day and, in consequence, its message is uncertain and its witness feeble.

The following utterance of Archbishop William Temple in this connection should prove of particular interest :

"The evangelization of England is a work that cannot be done by the clergy alone, it can only be done to a very small extent by the clergy at all. There can be no widespread evangelisation of England unless the work is undertaken by the lay people of the Church."

V.

National disaster as well as crisis in private life has more than once produced a call to evangelism. In the Old Testament we read of the prophet Isaiah hearing the call in such circumstances. His well known response was "Here am I, send me." In the New Testament we read of the remarkable conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road. His immediate response to the challenge of Christ Himself was "Lord, what wilt Thou have me do?" And it resulted in his becoming a chosen vessel and missionary to the Gentile World. What magnificent and far-reaching results proceeded from an individual response in each of those two cases !

Is it too much to hope that the crisis through which our country has not yet fully emerged may yet produce religious leaders of the type of Isaiah and St. Paul? Surely it is within the power of the Holy Spirit to enthuse hundreds of such men,—men who have "seen visions" and are prepared to spend and be spent in Christ's service. "Make religion the business of your everyday life," were the last words of Livingstone's old Sunday School teacher, David Hogg.

Readers of *The Reproach of Islam* will remember that the phenomenal growth of Mahomedanism is said to have been due to the fact that "every Moslem is a missionary." If but one in ten of the nearly 200,000 young persons confirmed every year were truly converted and keen for evangelism, the Church would soon rejoice in a glorious "come-back" and regain its influence in the Nation.

The English Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, with their witness to the universal love of God and to the way of approach to Him, are the immeasurable gifts of the Church to the Nation. The cleansing and saving power of the Blood of our Blessed Redeemer to which they testify are as effective to-day as when they were first produced.

Many things are being planned by secular authority for the reconstruction of the country after the devastation and disturbance wrought by the war. But true prosperity and real happiness can never be achieved unless the Nation, as a whole, is brought back to a conscious need of God and a willingness to serve Him. That is the task of the Christian Church in our land. That is a tremendous task, indeed, but the true follower of Christ dare not be pessimistic as to its achievement.

St. John, notwithstanding the terrible state of the world towards the end of the first century of the Christian era, was inspired to write :

" This is the Victory that overcometh the World, even our faith " (1 John v. 4). Since his day empires and kingdoms have come and gone, social systems have had their day and ceased to be ; but the Faith which St. John and his fellow believers held is the Faith which inspires us to-day. Let the Church in complete confidence in its Leader raise aloft its Victory V with courage and hope.

When the Goths descended upon Rome and destroyed it, leaving it a flaming and smoking ruin, crowds of people assembled on the surrounding hills to view the work of devastation. Among them was an old man who stood silently looking upon the scene. After a while he turned himself and went away to devote the remaining fifteen years of his life to writing a book. What was the title of his book ? The story of a great disaster ? Or the end of a noble city ? No ! The title of the book was *Concerning the City of God*, and the writer was St. Augustine. The duty of the Church to-day is not to stand silently looking upon a naughty and ruined world, but to pray and plan with a purpose for the rebuilding of the new Jerusalem in England's fair and pleasant land, until England is in a real sense a Christian country and the English Nation once more a people of God.