

with high ambition and great risk that *Behold the Man* is concerned. It is content to preach an unexceptionable sermon to the converted and it does so with no little skill and persuasion."

What a devastating conclusion! There surely is our danger—to preach unexceptionable sermons to the converted with no little skill and persuasion. Our task, then, as I conceive it, is to regain a true insight into the nature of the man to whom the Gospel is to be communicated, to grasp afresh the content and the dynamic of that Gospel, and to dedicate ourselves anew to the high ambition and great risk of proclaiming that Gospel in terms which men can understand and in forms which will bring meaning into the perplexity and confusion of the world in which they live.

The Everlasting Gospel in the Context of To-day

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THE subject for our thought in this concluding address is the problem which confronts us all to-day, the problem of evangelism in the context of our modern situation. In talking to His disciples our Lord once likened the Church to the leaven in the mass of the dough. There is a significant difference between the situation there envisaged and that with which we are faced in our modern world. For whereas the dough by the very law of its nature must respond to the action of the leaven, there is no such compulsion in the soul of man to respond to the Gospel when it is preached to him. That at least is how we feel about it. It was not the way our Lord felt. We to-day are conscious of the difficulty of response. Men and women exist in their thousands for whom, as we are tempted to feel, religion is a fourth dimension, something right outside their comprehension. Does that mean that to-day the message of the Gospel is out of date? Or does it mean that somehow or other we have allowed our view-point to be distorted? In order to answer that question I want to look first at the past and then at the present.

I

Look first at the past, at that wonderful picture of the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus which is presented to us in the Synoptic Gospels. What appears in that picture too clearly to be mistaken is that Jesus Christ came to the masses. His ministry was not in any sense a circumscribed ministry. It was not directed to any one section of the people. If we allow ourselves to imagine the scene as the Sermon on the Mount is delivered we see in the front ranks the eager faces of the disciples, and then, behind them, rank upon rank of

the common people. And, as He speaks, His words appeal not only to the disciples, but to all the people that are assembled there : to the Jews first, because of their essential training, but also to the pagans, as many as may have been present. And that is a picture of His whole ministry. A ministry directed to the whole of His people; a ministry understood, naturally, by the responsive Jews first, but as time went on extended even to the pagan, and welcomed eagerly by all alike.

It is a picture of the most astonishing faith discovered in the most unlikely places. A Roman centurion comes and Christ finds in him a faith that is lacking in the spiritually educated Jews. A Syro-Phoenician woman, without any special training but with profound human need, is discovered to possess the same rich faith. Christ said as He reflected upon the experience of His own ministry, " They shall come from the East and from the West and sit down in the Kingdom ". That was in fact a reflection of the response with which His ministry was greeted.

There is an even clearer indication of what I might call the cosmopolitan response to the preaching of the Gospel, and that is to be found in the parable of the Wedding Feast. There we are told that the people from whom we would expect an immediate response were dilatory in making that response, and found excuse after excuse. Then the King sent his servants out into the highways and hedges to compel the wayfarers to come in. The highways and the hedges ! That is a phrase which should challenge us to-day in our conception of the possibilities of evangelism. There was no despair of the masses in the mind of Jesus. Whatever may be the situation to-day, the situation as He saw it was a situation in which the masses might be expected to respond to Him. In His mind there was no separation between the bourgeoisie and the worker. He speaks to all alike because in all alike He sees the child of God. He goes in His ministry into the most unlikely places. He goes to publicans and sinners. He touches something deep within the little tax-gatherer Zacchaeus. He calls Levi from the seat of custom. There is something that responds to Him in the tough fisherman, Simon. And when they came to describe Him the epithet they used was ' friend of sinners '. It was the people who were satisfied with themselves and with things as they were who rejected Him. But " To all who confessed it has not sufficed, The absolution of Jesus Christ " ! They were conscious of needing pardon, and it was freely given to them.

The picture with which the Gospel confronts us, then, is a picture of the answer to the human cry, the *human* cry, not merely any sectional cry. The picture with which the Gospel confronts us is the answer to the human cry, ' Deliver us from evil '. And so it is that men and women conscious of sin, conscious of need, conscious of the evil, flock to Jesus. That is the picture we see in the Gospels.

II

Now I turn to the present. What I have tried to establish by our glance at the New Testament portrait is that there is no natural barrier between Christ and the soul of man. If the soul of man is the lock, Jesus Christ is the key that fits it. If there is any hindrance, that

hindrance is artificial. It is true that men are blinded by human passion, but human passions have never posed Christ with the insoluble problem. He knew what was in man, and He knew how to get over the problem posed by human passion. The problems of the modern situation are not problems due to any change in the soul of man. The evangel is still the good news.

To-day, those who seem to be impervious to the message of the Gospel can be divided into three separate classes. First, there are those who are frankly hostile. They have to be! They are held in the grip of an ideal which is incompatible with Christianity. The Englishman is not naturally logical. Consequently the hostility of these people is considerably less clearly defined than it would be, for instance, in France. But just in so far as they are logical, they are hostile to Christianity. The God they worship is collective man. In the name of their God they are ready to destroy both the person and the family. They decry religion because they sincerely believe it panders to class distinction, and seeks to dope the down-trodden with the promise of 'pie in the sky'; and their message attracts because often it seems immediately relevant, while the Gospel as we present it seems remote. So they fall an easy prey to a false leadership.

That situation is not as new as it sometimes seems. We are told in a moving passage how Christ pitied the down-trodden crowd, seeing them as sheep without a shepherd. "I am the shepherd, the good one". These so-called shepherds are hirelings, and will fail at the crucial moment. But here is the important point. In the face of all this He did not despair. His verdict is the precise opposite. "The fields are ripe unto the harvest." The problem is not, where *we* place it, in the harvest, but in the scarcity of the labourers.

We need His judgment to-day. Our problem is not essentially in the unreadiness of the harvest. The men and women who people our crowded parishes or our country parishes, are not the product of civilization. That is the essential point which so many of our careful analyses ignore. Men and women have been created in their uniqueness by God. He alone can satisfy them. He alone can make them free. But oh, for labourers to confront them with that truth! So often, in their very hostility they are serving ideals which are Christian ideals, but somehow we have hidden that from them. Oh for labourers who can go and show it to them! With a harvest such as is waiting for us there is room for everything but despair.

Then there are the individualists. Again, the Gospel seems the supreme irrelevance. It speaks of life abundant, but in terms which seem to them a complete denial of it. They want to live, but they do not mean by life what the Gospel does. For them to live is to advance their private interests, to achieve a position of security, to establish their own and their family well-being, and under such categories they would subsume the meaning of existence.

Again, the situation is not new, but finds its exact parallel in the Gospel. Have you never felt how devastatingly up-to-date is the parable of the marriage invitation? One man says, "I'd like to come, but you see there is this important issue of my marriage". Another has a field to plough. Yet another has some business to

execute. They are utterly modern, even to their exquisite politeness when the vicar calls! You remember the end of *Quiet Wedding!* 'I pray thee have me excused.'

To them Christ comes with a different picture of life. Over against their ideas of security He speaks of a personality enriched in the conflict with circumstances. In the place of the money-making selfishness of cut-throat competition He offers a vocation from God. In the place of 'Each for self and the devil take the hindmost' He calls all men to join the choir of a restored humanity in fellowship with God and in brotherhood with man. That great consummation is worth something to achieve. The rewards it offers are richer than the petty gains of selfishness. If only these individualists could see that what Christ offers is implied already in the best of what they are seeking elsewhere! No one who has worked among them can fail to realize how true that is.

Finally, there are the unbelieving. They are attracted to Christ, but repelled by doctrine. They cannot kneel and say "My Lord and my God". How can we help them? For, often, they are very near to the Kingdom.

Some need just to live with Jesus, to let Him fill their thoughts. He says "I am the Way". He asks them to give Him the chance He needs. They must try trusting Him. They must take Him at His word, and give His way of life an honest trial. One at least who was able to do that was led to fall down at His feet and cry, "My Lord and my God".

III

Now let me add one last word. The greatest problem of all is in the quality of the labourers. The real hindrance to the Gospel is inadequate Christians. Every inadequate Christian gives a false picture of Christianity. The most deadly menace is the good church-goer whose life denies his profession. Again and again Christians are failing. There is an unworthy standard of life; charity in sixpences and cheating in pounds. There are those who cry "Lord! Lord!" But He must reply, "I know you not". Here, and not in the indifference of the masses, lies the greatest obstacle we have to overcome. Yet it is with a Church of such sinners, feeble as they are, that Christ has set out to conquer the world to-day as of old.

If to-day we shall do well to examine our technique, we shall do well also to remember that Christ has not changed His weapons. The weapons that will conquer the world of our day are the weapons that have already conquered it, and planted the Church in every land. They are the weapons of the first Apostles, sheer goodness and willingness for sacrifice. When people see the Gospel thus in action they will respond to-day as they have responded in every age; and against a Church with this equipment the very gates of hell shall not prevail.