

The Responsibility of the Church to the Nation

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(The Substance of a Paper read at a recent meeting of English Lay Churchmen.)

THE Encyclical Letter of the assembled Anglican Bishops at the last Lambeth Conference set forth a noble mission for the Church. "At the heart," they said, "of that conception of the Church which Christ our Lord has taught us is the thought of service." This is the exact antithesis to the anti-Christian position of that modern German philosophy which has so shocked us all.

And the same principle was impressively set forth by the Archbishop of York in his sermon at King George's Coronation. His text was, "I am among you as he that serveth," our Lord's own account of Himself. The King, said the Archbishop in effect, only desires to be the Servant of the Nation. How splendidly the King has risen no, not risen, *stooped*—to that position we all know. What has the Church done, what can the Church do, to occupy a similar one?

Well, let us thankfully acknowledge that by the grace of God the Church has done much. And yet the question that presses on my mind is this: Is there quite the same enthusiasm and energy in fulfilling duties and responsibilities as there certainly is in defending rights and privileges? Service—the service of God and man—the fulfilment of the responsibilities which the Divine Head of the Church has laid on her—that is essential to life. To neglect it is to die.

THE CHURCH'S DUTY: TO PREACH THE GOSPEL.

In fulfilling its duty to the nation, as the nation's ministering servant and as the Witness for God, the Church's first and greatest responsibility is to preach the Gospel, the glad Message from God that His Blessed Son by His Incarnation and Atonement and Resurrection has opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. Is that being done? I confess I am doubtful about it. My impression is that it is too often taken for granted that the fundamental truths of our Faith are familiar to our congregations, while vast numbers of churchgoers could not answer the question, What must a sinful man do to be saved? How many preachers are there who put that question straight and answer it clearly? How many are there who preach as if their people needed conversion? I do not wish to use that word conversion in any merely conventional sense. Let us take the broadest view of it. But whatever may be our particular theological dialect, surely repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ are of the essence of true religion; and I ask, What proportion of our worshippers week by week—to say nothing of outsiders—know experimentally of that repentance and that faith? I do say that if the Church is not setting forth both the need of the Gospel Message and the Message itself, it is failing in its duty to the nation.

TO DEFEND THE FAITH.

Then, secondly, there is the responsibility to contend for the Faith once delivered to the saints. There is, I think, much greater readiness to do this, at least on the part of some. Indeed, some seem to think there is no other duty. And assuredly it does need in the present day to be faithfully performed. But I am bound to say that it is often done in a way which many true upholders of the Faith cannot in conscience follow; and this by all parties in turn.

TO PROMOTE UNITY.

Thirdly, the Church is responsible to the nation to promote that unity among brethren, both within its own fold and outside it, which alone, as Christ Himself said, will make the world believe in Him.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS.

I might now refer to two branches of Christian effort on which the Lambeth Encyclical already cited laid special stress: Social Service and Foreign Missions. I deeply feel the importance of both, but I have no time to enlarge upon them, and the latter is to be set forth by another speaker. My desire now is to speak mainly upon the influence of the Church in public affairs. For the Church—and here I mean not the Church of England only, but the whole Christian body in the British Isles—has an opportunity at the present time such as it has never had before. I pray

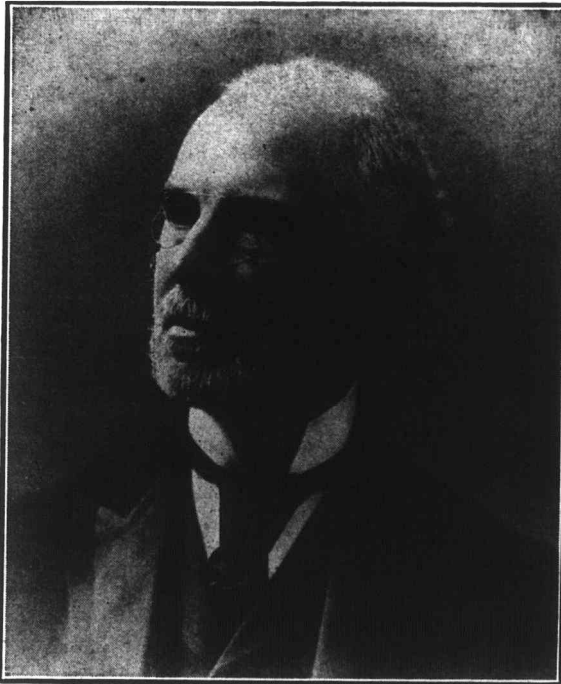
that it may not be missed. Lowell says, "Once to every man"—let me substitute "Church"—

"Once to every Church and nation comes the moment to decide In the strife of Truth with Falsehood for the good or evil side."

Thank God, the right choice has been taken now in the matter of the war. But the testing times are yet to come.

APPLICATION OF CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES.

And, first, let us not shrink from openly applying Christian principles to public affairs. I want to see this done in Parliament, and in great official utterances. Sixty-four years ago—and I have a personal recollection of the incident—the then Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, opposed a motion for the withdrawal of a British squadron which was patrolling the West African coast to seize slave ships. I do not suppose that he was one whit more of a religious man than our statesmen of to-day, but he said: "Sir, this country has been blessed with great mercies this year. More than once we have thanked God for them" (alluding to Days of Prayer and Thanksgiving in connection with a visitation of cholera). "But if this nation were now to say that the cruel



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Picture taken during Dr. Stock's last visit to Canada which took place many years ago.

traffic in men should be revived, we could no longer have a right to expect those mercies. After all, it is the high Christian and moral character of a nation that is its main source of security and strength." Again, once when the Irish question was acute, John Bright appealed to the two leaders sitting opposite to one another, Gladstone and Disraeli, to put their heads together and find a solution; and he added, "Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness." I want to hear public men to-day speaking like Lord John Russell, and ready to quote Scripture reverently like John Bright. But the Church must set the example.

AVOIDANCE OF PARTISAN SPIRIT.

I suppose it would be the proper thing to say next that the Church should be above party; but I confess there seems to me a good deal of unreality in that cry. It rarely means that he who utters it will on some religious question vote against his own party. It generally means that some one on the other side is to leave his party and vote with him. Some fifty years ago, the then Vicar of Islington was appealing to a lay friend of mine to vote for A. B. because he was an earnest Christian man. "Religion before party," he said. "Well," said my friend, "I have a vote also in the next borough; shall I vote there for C. D.?"—who was also an earnest Christian. "Oh, no," said the Vicar, "he's on the wrong side; you should vote for E. F."—the said E. F. being a fast man about town who never darkened the doors of a church. The fact is that a conscientious party man honestly be-

lieves that his party, upon the whole, will best govern the country, and, even if they are advocating some measure affecting the Church of which he disapproves, he may truly believe that on a balance of considerations it would be for him a mistake to support the opposite side on account of this one difference. But Christian men can at least do this. They can do their utmost to discourage the partisan spirit which is so natural to us. They can remember for themselves, and remind others, that men opposed to them, even on questions of deepest moment, may yet be gentlemen and Christians. I was once telling a distinguished Evangelical clergyman, for whom I had the highest regard, about the House of Commons Prayer Meeting, of which Sir John Kennaway was a leading member. I said, "Both sides join in it." "Both sides!" he exclaimed; "there are no Christian men on the other side!" "Oh yes, I added, "there is one, there is A. B.," naming a mutual friend of his and mine.

EXPOSURE OF NATIONAL SINS.

It is plainly the Church's duty to be fearless in exposing the nation's own sins. What of our millions spent in drink? What of the "white slave traffic"? What of the Divorce Court? What of the greed of gain? What of the great industrial concerns built up on the ruins of a hundred smaller ones? What of sweating? What of the endless toil that tries in vain to earn a living wage? What of the gambling? Why are many pages in the society papers occupied with Stock Exchange affairs? and why does the circulation of halfpenny papers depend on the betting news they give? Is it not time that Christian men suspended their internal controversies, about which there will always be honest differences of opinion, and united to deal with these gigantic evils?

And looking abroad, let us not lay the flattering unction to our souls that we have perfectly clean hands in foreign affairs, or that the British Empire has been built up without grievous maltreatment of aboriginal populations. We denounced certain cruelties on the Congo at the very time when we were allowing our West African Colonies to be deluged with gin and rum. To-day, despite our tardy change of attitude on the opium traffic—due, not to the Church as a body, but to a little band of despised but praying men, and to Lord Morley's one speech which woke up the nation—the Shanghai traders, British subjects, are literally multiplying the opium shops in the foreign settlement while they are all closed in the native city. I will not pain you with the past doings of many of our fellow Britons in India and the Colonies. There has indeed been much noble conduct here and there in dealing with our subject peoples, especially on the part of the highest officials; and I do believe that there has been great and general improvement latterly. But truly we need to watch against the temptation to use Pharisaic language, "God we thank Thee that we are not as other nations . . . or even as this Kaiser!" Rather, in the words of the striking homily prefixed to the form for the Day of Prayer, "We need to repent . . . of arrogance as a people, of confidence in ourselves, of pride of possession."

INSISTENCE ON ACTIVE VIRTUES AND PASSIVE GRACES.

Let the Church persistently remind the nation that for the completeness of the Christian character both active virtues and passive graces are needed. Both are inculcated in the New Testament. We will not follow Bernhardt when he tells us that, "the desire for peace has rendered most civilized nations anæmic, and marks a decay of spiritual and political courage." Which means that the best, if not the only, way to foster manliness is to slaughter our fellow-men. But is war alone in fostering manliness? What of Captain Scott and his comrades dying in Antarctic snows? What of that "very gallant gentleman," as he was rightly called, Captain Oates, who quietly walked away to die alone if haply his death might help to save the others? And how many heroic acts are told us of lifeboat work, and of colliery explosions! Still, it is true that war does bring out the capacity of men not only for courage, but for self-sacrifice. Have you observed how many of the V.C.'s and D.S.O.'s have been conferred on men who risked their lives to save others? And when I recall the heroes of my younger days, Hedley Vicars and Havelock, and Henry Lawrence and Herbert Edwardes, and then the great American generals, Robert Lee and Stonewall Jackson, and then Gordon, and now add to them the venerated name of Roberts, I rejoice to think that our God can, as Nehemiah says, turn the curse even of war into a blessing.

But we must not forget the passive graces. Far more stress is in the New Testament laid