

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Chaucer's Churchfolk.

BY THE REV. HENRY ELLERSHAW, M.A.,

Professor of English Literature in the University of Durham.

EACH age has its own problems to settle, and each age is inclined to think that never before were the times so unruly and so far out of joint. Nowadays, for instance, the lawlessness and disregard for authority which are so characteristic seem far in excess of what has occurred before, and far more serious. The Church life, too, of our days is not without cause for anxiety. The faith once for all delivered to the saints seems not to satisfy those who profess to believe in it, and so one tries to whittle a bit off here, and another a bit off there, until the greatest difficulty exists in knowing what the connotation of the word "Christian" is in the mind of any of the individuals who use the term.

Still, though there are many things to disquiet us, we must not think that we have any monopoly of either social or Church problems. Our fathers had many to face, and, looking back, we shall see that they were neither simple nor trivial. If we consider the Churchfolk of Chaucer's time—that is, roughly, the second half of the fourteenth century—we shall find that, in spite of the picturesqueness of the age, we are not without much to be thankful for when we contrast our own period with his. History gives us plenty of information as to the character of those far-off days, and, without diving deep into diocesan and other records, anyone who cares for the older literature of his country may easily find material for forming an opinion. And it is unlikely that the opinion thus formed will be altered by subsequent study, for the more one goes into the history of the past, the more it seems that writers such as Chaucer have not misrepresented the state of society and the Church.

Among the personages assembled at the Tabard on that famous April day which marks the commencement of the

“Canterbury Tales” there are seven who are definitely connected with Church life, and, from what we read of them, some idea of the Church of the fourteenth century may be gained; and they may be taken as a fair sample. Chaucer is not the Juvenal of his age—Langland takes that part; he is rather the Horace, and the words of Persius applied to Horace we may well apply to Chaucer:

“Omne vafer vitium ridenti Flaccus amico
Tangit et admissus circum præcordia ludit.”

Chaucer is a man of the world; he knows its vices, its weaknesses, its foibles. There is, moreover, in his composition a spice of charity. He does not condemn—that he leaves to others—yet he is too clear-eyed not to see how far his time had gone astray. We must not suppose that he approved what he saw merely because he does not abuse society in good round terms; *that* we are not justified in asserting. There is no doubt that he held up the mirror to his age, and in it we see that he noted many of the faults which another sterner man with a less delicate perception would have passed over unnoticed, as well as the more flagrant offences which all could see. And it is because of this—because Chaucer had this penetrating glance for little things—that we may well believe him when he brands the grosser faults; and, recognizing his mild temper, may well believe the more highly coloured accounts which we get from contemporary sources.

We must not think that Chaucer is unfair because a quarter of his characters are connected closely with Church life. We must remember that, if it were the duty of Churchfolk “to goon on pilgrimages,” *a fortiori* it would be the duty of those who were in some definite capacity the *alumni* of the Church; and, further, compared to the population, the number of religious was much greater than it is now. It is pretty certain that Chaucer gives a not overdrawn account of a pilgrimage of his day, and the picture which he presents to us is such that we must feel the time for pilgrimages was almost over—if not

quite. There was a time, of course, when a pilgrimage was a solemn religious duty, but by Chaucer's day there was a change. For most people it consisted of a merry journey, with a visit to the shrine of some saint as its excuse, and an equally merry return. What should we think nowadays of a religious procession being headed by a bagpipe? Yet that was the instrument upon which the Millere was an accomplished performer :

“ A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne,
And therwithal he broghte us out of towne.”

And in a short time—by the end of the Knight's Tale—this noble leader of the rout acknowledges that the ale of Southwark has been too potent for him, and insists on telling a story which, to say the least, is indecorous. Indeed, the only pilgrim throughout the “ Tales ” whose behaviour is in accord with his office is the Poor Parson, and he, when he rebukes the host for swearing by “ Goddes bones,” earns the retort :

“ ‘ O, Jankyn, be ye there ?
I smelle a Loller in the wind,’ quod he.
‘ Nowe good men,’ quod our hoste, ‘ herkneth me ;
Abydith, for Goddes digne passioun,
For we shall han a predicacioun ;
This Loller here will prechen us somewhat.’ ”

Twenty-nine pilgrims were assembled at the Tabard, drawn from all grades of society—knighthood, the Church, medicine, law, trade, and agriculture, besides other callings which were represented, but with which we are not concerned. The first of Chaucer's characters which properly engages our attention is the Prioress. Her portrait is a dainty one. Named Madame Eglentyne, she was demure in her smiling, sang the office through her nose “ ful semely,” as Chaucer humorously puts it, and took pains to appear well-bred and of courtly manner. But though in many traits the account is delightful, can we believe in her sincerity to the ideal of her calling? There is much to show that the lady was more delicately worldly than deeply religious, and there is hardly a doubt that she thought more of

her manners than her beads. I wonder what interpretation she put on "Amor vincit omnia"!

As for the Monk, there is no disguising the fact that Chaucer saw that his demeanour was in utter opposition to his calling; and how slyly he expresses this opinion!

"This ilke Monk leet olde thynges pace,
 And heeld after the newe world the space.
 He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen
 That seith that hunters beth nat hooly men,
 Ne that a Monk whan he is recchelees
 Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees.

* * * *

But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre;
 And I seyde his opinioun was good
 What sholde he studie and make hymselfen wood,
 Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
 Or swynken with his handes and labour
 As Austyn bit? how shall the world be served?"

That this case was no isolated one we learn from the Visitation which William of Wykeham held of the monastery at Selborne in 1387. In the Bishop's directions for a reformation we find, under Articles 9, 11, and 29, the very offences reprov'd which Chaucer notes.¹

But, however much the Monk may have transgressed the rules of his order, he seems to have been free from the gross offences of which there is little doubt the Frere was guilty; for the latter, using the influence due to his position, appears to have taken advantage of many of the young women with whom he made acquaintance. He was a licensed beggar, merry and unprincipled, hail-fellow-well-met with all the countrymen of his district, and, moreover, on friendly terms in the town with women of position. The secret of his influence probably lay in this, that he asserted he had power of confession in excess of that possessed by the parish priest.² Further, his penance

¹ This document may be easily consulted, as it forms Appendix iii. to White's "Selborne."

² We know that such powers were given in special cases to the friars; see, e.g., Surtees, vol. cix., p. 304, where we read that Urban IV. had given power to the Carmelites to hear confessions and impose penance—"nisi forte talia com[m]iserint propter quae sedes Apostolica sit merito consulenda."

was easy where he had plenty of good food. Well known at the tavern, he cared little for the poor, and would even take a farthing from a widow without a shoe to her foot, such a shameless beggar was he! He was worldly wise, and as for being a *poor* Frere—no one less :

“ He was not lyk a cloysterer
With a thredbare cope, as is a poure scoler,
But he was lyk a maister, or a pope ;
Of double worstede was his semy cope,
That rounded as a belle out of the presse.”

What Chaucer has to say is emphasized by Gower in the “*Vox Clamantis*,” Books iii. and iv. ; and what we learn from the Prologue is amplified in the mouth of the Summoner when that worthy comes before us.

A much pleasanter character is that of the Clerk of Oxenford. He had studied long, was lean, and “looked holwe.” His garments showed his poverty, “for he hadde geten hym yet no benefice.” Yet, apparently, he preferred poverty to the sacrifice of principle, for the poet goes on to tell us that “ne was so worldly for to have office”—that is, some unclerical employment. A wise man, he preferred twenty books to rich robes or a musical instrument. With grateful mind he used to pray for the souls of such as aided him in his search after knowledge. Money, thought, and time were all lavished on learning, and Chaucer surely depicts the true scholar in the words with which he concludes his sketch :

“ And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche.”

In passing, however, it may be noticed that, although it seems a common idea that in pre-Reformation days the Bible was but little known, this was hardly the fact. In Middle English literature there are plenty of references to it, and Chaucer himself was not ignorant of it. Indeed, from the description of the Doctour of Phisik, we should be led to the inference that to be ignorant of the Bible denoted a careless or ungodly liver. We are told of the Doctour that—

“ His studie was but litel on the Bible.”

This would be a thing hardly worth noticing unless it were contrary to popular usage and expectation.

The best-known personage among the Canterbury Pilgrims is certainly the parish priest—the “Poure Persoun” of a town. Nor can any praise be too high for the delicacy of the portrait or the worthiness of the subject. The Parson was poor, holy in thought and work, and a learned man moreover: and of these qualifications none is more needed in our own days than the last, though there are folk who prefer a football-player as a parson. In every aspect of the priestly life the Parson was Christ's true servant—“he was a shepherd, and nought a mercenarie”:

“This noble ensample to his sheepe he yaf,
That firste he wroghte and afterward he taughte.
Out of the gospel he tho wordes caughte,
And this figure he added eek therto,
That if gold ruste what shal iren do.”

It was not his wont to leave his flock and run

“To Londoun unto Seint Paules
To seken hym a chaunterie for soules.”

But it is impossible to render the portrait in other than Chaucer's colours, so let those who list turn to the Prologue:

“A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys;
He waited after no pompe and reverence,
Ne maked him a spiced conscience,
But Cristes loore and his Apostles twelve,
He taughte, and first he folwed it hym selve.”¹

In the few lines which follow we have sketched the Christian labourer. He was a Plowman, and the brother of the Parson. We learn:

“A trewe swynkere and a good was he,
Lyvyng in pees and parfit charitee,
God loved he best, with al his hoole herte,

¹ The line “ne maked him a spiced conscience” is generally misinterpreted. The mistake arises from giving conscience a different meaning here from that which is given to the word when used (twice) of the Prioress. We are told by some that the Parson had not a scrupulous conscience. *That is just what he had.* If not, the lines which follow are nonsense. If conscience be taken in the sense of *feelings*, then *spiced conscience* means touchy feelings, and that gives the true sense and makes the passage consistent.

At alle tymes, thogh him gamed or smerte,
And thanne his neighebore right as hymselfe."

From the heights of holy living the poet takes us to the depths in the picture which he gives us of the Somonour and the Pardoner. The Summoner was a drunkard and a debauchee, with a fiery-red face covered with knobs and pimples, which terrified children. His ignorance was colossal; when drunk, Latin was his only talk :

" A fewe termes hadde he, two or thre
That he had lerned out of som decree
* * * * *
But whoso koude in oother thing hym grope,
Thanne hadde he spent al his philosophie."

Further, he would teach the sinner to be in no awe of the curse of the Archdeacon, unless his soul was in his purse; in that case, the Archdeacon was someone to be afraid of, for he had the power of inflicting fines on the misdoers. Thus, truly "Pers is the Ercedekenes helle"—that is, his place of punishment. This reprobate Summoner has under his jurisdiction the young folk of the diocese, and what could be expected to eventuate from the influence of such a guide, with his parrot-cry of "Questio quid juris"?

His Comrade, who was such another as himself, rode with head uncovered save for a cap, and with eyes glaring like a hare's. On his lap before him lay his wallet, brim full of pardons all hot from Rome. Among his baggage he had a pillow-slip, which he asserted was our Lady's veil; and, in addition to this precious treasure, he said he had a piece of the sail of the vessel in which St. Peter was when he attempted to leave it and meet our Lord as He walked on the sea. Moreover, he had a Cross of latten full of stones, and pigs' bones in a glass, which he told the country-folk were relics; and, with these beguiling the people, he got in a day more money than the Parson could collect in a couple of months. In church he seemed a noble ecclesiastic, who could read well a lesson or 'storie'—that is, the series of lessons at mattins which took its

name from the first respond. But what he did best of all was to sing the offertory—this, by the way, was not the same thing as the collection. His object here seems to have been, by singing lustily the *offertorium*, to get his voice into good order for the sermon, that with clear and well-modulated tones he might the better persuade his hearers to open their purses.

Such are Chaucer's Churchfolk, and it might be thought that his estimate of them was uncharitable if we had been obliged to take his word alone. But, as a matter of fact, we need do no such thing. What he says is re-echoed and amplified by Gower, Langland, and Wiclif, to mention only well-known names, and what they say is confirmed by plenty of good documentary authority. If we extend our view and pass beyond our own country, we find that what furnished grounds of complaint here furnished grounds of complaint also elsewhere. On all hands we are confronted by a mass of evidence which goes to show that at this time, brilliant and splendid as it was in many respects, there was a real declension in Church life, and that all countries were affected by the blight. It is true that there must have been, in all classes of the religious, figures as noble as that of the Poor Parson; but the point is that the complaints against the Church were world-wide, and it is not likely that this phenomenon could have made its appearance without cause. And we must remember, further, that these complaints were made in many cases by those who were by no means enemies of the Church—take Langland as an instance. We are often tempted to look back with regret upon the Middle Ages, but, when we inquire more nearly into things, we have reason to thank God that we live in the days we do, and not least that the English Church to-day, in spite of its dissensions, has advanced to a general level nearer to that ideal which the Poor Parson holds up to us across the centuries.

