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The Message of the War to the Clergy.

TO the Christian Church, and to every individual member of it, this war brings a supreme challenge to repent, and it cannot be too often repeated that Christian repentance is not only or mainly regret for the past, but is that change of outlook which will bring a better future. And if we are told, as we are told by the world-weary, that the war shows how little human nature changes though outward forms and institutions take new shapes ; if we are tempted in darker hours to believe that "the struggle nought availeth," yet we know, thank God! that it is not true. Christ is risen and is present to give power to His disciples : it is no exaggeration to say, "I can do all things in Christ which strengtheneth me" : it is no blind faith which tells us we can bring out of our treasure things old and new. Whether we will or no, this war is changing the whole face of the world—for better or for worse. The ultimate effects depend supremely on the efforts and prayers of the Christian Church. If the risk is immeasurable, so is the hope. To all men surely it now stands revealed what civilization means with God left out ; what is the certain outcome of human greed and falsehood and materialism. And to the Church comes the cry, "Where is your faith, your power? Why have you slept or quarrelled, while the Devil did his work in the world? Awake, and Christ shall give the light." When the war is over, there will probably be a time of reaction from its pain and struggle : but this only means that we need the power and grace of Christ tenfold "lest we forget."

If this is the supreme message of the war to us all, it is especially so to the clergy, who are the ministers or servants of Christ's Church in a special sense. They above all need a simpler and a humbler heart, with penitence and faith ever renewed in daily waiting on Christ. But environment lays its clutch on us all : and it is not out of place to ask what may be done outwardly to make their ministry more effective in the changing conditions of our times and how they may fit in better alongside the lay priests of the Church : the "return to Christ," the inward renewal, stands first ; but outward influences are also very strong.

Institutional religion is the most conservative of all forces.

The Church of England is like one of our old Cambridge Colleges, with buildings of various dates down to the seventeenth century ; rich with the beauty of age and long tradition, speaking ever of the hopes and fears and consolations of men long ago, and of the unfailing inspiration which they found in Christ Jesus ; but, for all that, buildings which would be strangely incongruous and out of place, if they were needed as industrial centres of manufactures. Some years ago a shrewd Hindu, who was studying the effects of Christianity on the life of European states, came to see me. I asked him what was his impression of the Church of England. "Oh," he said, "it's impressive : but of course it is entirely feudal." Yes, "feudal" is the word that hits off our weaknesses. Thank God the last fifty years have witnessed an enormous improvement in the general standard of the Clergy, as seen in their deeper sense of responsibility, their new interest in the "social problem," and in the general level of their spiritual life. Yet, in spite of all, we seem to see an ever-widening gulf between Clergy and Laity, which most emphatically is not due to a growth of unspirituality in the latter. Its chief cause is to be sought in the feudal ideas which still prevail in our beloved Church. While the times have grown more democratic, our organization has almost stood still : whatever advance has been made, has been in spite of our rules and formulæ—almost in defiance of them. Our whole constitution recalls the ages when God was regarded as the great feudal Overlord—and the earthly King as His representative ; and the Clergy, as subordinate feudal chiefs in their parishes, bearing a sway which is almost absolute in its sphere as long as it conforms to articles and formulæ which themselves breathe the spirit of a mediaeval conception of religion. Trust your man more, and your system less, I say : then if he prove unworthy of your trust, remove him. On the one hand, give him freedom—freedom in the interpretation of dogma and articles of belief, and freedom in liturgical usage and its adaptation to modern needs. On the other hand, take stricter measures to restrain individual vagaries, and to see that his freedom is exercised in loyalty to the Bishops as well as in consideration of the wishes of the congregation.

It may be thought that this plea savours of Nonconformity. Possibly so : but we have much, very much to learn from the Nonconformists. I am not pleading for the ultra-democratic, sectional

system of the Congregationalists ; but for something that lies between that and the ultra-feudalism of the Church of England. Surely we are right in supposing that the great lesson of the last three hundred years has been this, that God Himself rules not as an Absolute King, but as the Father of His people. If that be true even of Him, how much more should it be true of sinful and ignorant men. Has not God revealed to us just the great outlines of His Holy Will and its foundation in His heart of love, while He leaves us to interpret these in action, to apply them to the everchanging circumstances of life ? So alone does man, the individual and the race alike, gain the strength of a son, and climb from height to height in the evolution of history. The Holy Spirit does indeed guide us, as Christ promised : but it is in a large freedom, which develops individuality ; not in a rigid rule which crushes it.

But enough of general principles. Let me try to sketch in rough outline the sort of change which I believe to be vital if the Church of England is to be the Church of England after the War.

I.

First, as to the feudal overlordship of the Clergy : here, far above all other abuses, stands out that incredible iniquity popularly known as the " Parson's Freehold " : for it is surely incredible that, when a Priest is once instituted to a Parish he is still wellnigh as absolute in things parochial as the Tudor monarchs were in matters of state. He must indeed read services on Sunday, sleep so many nights in his Parish, and avoid preaching extreme heresy. But he may be incompetent or tyrannical ; he may be unspiritual and worldly ; he may even be drunken or vicious ; but as long as he does not parade his vices in public, no one can touch him—neither Bishop, nor Parishioners, nor any one else. The wonder is that there is not more abuse of this freehold ; but there are tragedies enough, God knows. The only apology ever offered for this state of things, is that it leaves a clergyman free to attack evils in his Parish without fear of consequences. But it is a freedom dearly bought. Is there any other department of modern life where such a position is tolerated ? Yet there are many in which an official is reasonably free to attack abuses. The same excuse is put forward to cover another evil in our Church system—an evil not indeed comparable to that mentioned above, yet sufficiently intolerable.

imaginable, including even Sadducees with their disbelief in the very existence of the spiritual; and yet our Lord never uttered a word of disapproval.

Trust your man, I say again, and not your system. Give him a large and a wise liberty, as long as you secure his respect for the rights of the Laity and his obedience to the rule of the Bishops (neither of which is secured at present). Give him some freedom in liturgical usage—freedom to change a lesson in the Lectionary which is unsuitable, or to drop the use of the imprecatory Psalms with their appalling savagery; freedom to pray at a public service, simply and naturally in his own words, for some need revealed by the passing week.

III.

Finally let me make two points, briefly but most earnestly. First, when this War is over, and men, who have faced death day by day, come home, there will be no room for unreality in worship—for the wearisome drone of monotoned prayer, for the æsthetic quaintness of a mediaeval survival, for the recital of a liturgy as a mechanical “office” at such a pace that even the educated cannot echo the petitions. If our Church is to meet their needs, humbug and cant must vanish; we must be simpler, more real, more straight, more brotherly, more large-minded and large-hearted.

And lastly, we *must* have reunion in Christendom. It is surely no longer tolerable that bodies of Christians, equally devout, equally effective in missionary work (which is the supreme test) loving one Father, serving one Lord and Saviour, inspired by one Holy Spirit, should go on thwarting each other while the tide of unbelief and wickedness rises unchecked. We *must* have reunion, or the world will find a larger Christianity without us: we *can* have it, giving up nothing that we hold dear except our exclusiveness, if we are equally ready to allow others to give up nothing which they in their turn hold dear; if we admit what the facts of history have proved, that our distinctive beliefs are of the “*bene esse*” of Christianity, not of its “*esse*”; if we allow the Church of England to stand on the basis of its own sweet-reasonableness and not on the basis of mediaeval compulsion. We can have unity on such terms—not uniformity—as the family of God: “Sirs, ye are all brethren.” “Whosoever shall do the will of My Father which is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.”

C. T. WOOD.