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The Unfinished Task

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THE Church has at all times found it difficult to avoid the danger of settling down. It was so with the people of God under the old Covenant. It is so under the new dispensation.

This is the theme of the speech of Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles. The Jews believed themselves to have reached finality with the temple and the law. Stephen shows, remorselessly and point by point, that revelation has always been given in connection with pilgrimage, usually to a reluctant and resisting people. The temple itself was only an after-thought, and, if rightly understood, would have been seen as itself calling the people to a new stage of pilgrimage. In calling Israel out from the old and accustomed, Jesus was no traitor, but one who stood in the direct line of revelation, as it had always been communicated by His great predecessors.

The same theme is worked out in greater detail in the Epistle to the Hebrews. We cannot tell exactly what was the situation of the first readers of this letter. But it seems that they had supposed that the new Gospel brought by Jesus was something that could be held within the safe and well-established framework of the Jewish faith. The writer must tenderly but earnestly make it plain to them that it is not so. The call of Jesus is always to the new and the untried. Hence the emphasis throughout the epistle on obedience, on Abraham the great example, who went out not knowing whither he went, and in the end obtained the promises, but only as a reward for his faithfulness in pilgrimage. To like obedience we are all called; and this must always mean going out to Jesus without the camp, bearing His reproach.

This is not to say that real events do not happen in history, that there are no real stages in pilgrimage. The deliverance from Egypt was one such stage; it made a mob of slaves into a nation. The entrance into Canaan was another; it gave that nation a home. The error lies always in thinking that the stage that we have reached is the last, and that we have come to our rest.

If Israel had wisely reflected on its situation in Canaan, it could hardly have failed to understand that it was still in a state of pilgrimage, and very far from having reached its rest.

In the first place, it was situated amidst, and was destined to become the plaything of, immense powers outside the covenant of Jehovah: Assyria, Egypt, Egypt, Assyria. Such powers are moved by their own inner dynamic, very different from that of revelation, and apparently much more rapid in its operation. The people of God is played upon by the fluctuating strength and weakness of these peoples, and its outward destinies are determined by decisions it has itself had no hand in making.

Secondly, although Canaan is now the land of the chosen people,

¹ The Annual Sermon of the Church Missionary Society, preached on April 8th, 1957, in the Temple Church, London, E.C.4.

they are far from being its only inhabitants. Even when first possession has been taken, there are still the Philistines and the Sidonians on the borders, not to mention the children of the East, and the unassimilated remnant of older peoples in the midst. The chosen people has to fight hard for its own political integrity. It has to fight still harder for the integrity of its vocation as the people of God. The austere and all-demanding worship of Jehovah has to maintain an unequal struggle against the pleasant and alluring mysteries of the Baals, the givers of corn and wine and oil.

Even within itself the chosen people was not wholly at rest, and inner tensions were used to give it a deeper understanding of the revelation of God. Those of us who learned our theology a generation ago were brought up on the sharp antithesis of prophet and priest. One of the great gains of Old Testament study in recent years has been the realization that that antithesis was never very complete. Prophets prophesied at some of the ancient shrines of the people; priesthood and prophecy were united at least in the persons of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. And yet there are different approaches. There is a divergence between the type of mind that gladly rests on the ancient and the known, that can present its credentials in the form of descent from one of the chosen and consecrated families, and that rugged independence that can offer no credential except its own otherwise unauthenticated "Thus saith the Lord".

All these three types of tension can be illustrated continuously in the history also of the people of the new covenant.

The Church amid hostile forces

The Church has always lived surrounded by great imperial forces, which have moved in their own courses without regard to what the Church was thinking. Looking back, we think and speak of certain periods as periods in which the Church was at peace. But I suspect that very few ages have presented themselves under this guise to those who lived through them. If we disregard for the moment the northmen and the Tartars, dreadfully destructive invaders in their days, we cannot forget the threat from the Muslim world under which the whole of Christendom lived for a thousand years. A contemporary historian has rightly pointed out that in the sixteenth century the Emperor was bound to be far more concerned about the plans of the Turks than about the doings of his own Protestant and insubordinate subjects; and it is the fact that humanly speaking the Reformation was saved by the tricky willingness of the French king to form an alliance with the Muslims against the other great Christian power of the West.

What strikes one, reading the history of those long years, is the almost total failure on each side to enter into relations of anything but deadly hostility with the other. There were, of course, the great exceptions; but so little desire to understand, to respect consciences, to learn to live together even if agreement could not be reached. The bitter hatreds generated by the Crusades lie behind some of the perplexities that beset us in the present year of grace.

All this hardly needs explanation to us who have to learn to live in

a Christendom threatened as it has not been threatened for a thousand years. The alien powers move in their courses ; it is they who seem to have the initiative, and not the Church, or the nations which still in a measure claim the name of Christian. Of Communism so much has been written and spoken that we are a little weary of the subject. It is more recently that we have come to understand the part played in our world to-day by the renewal of the ancient religions of the East. The missionary expectation of a hundred years ago that under the combined influence of the Gospel and of western culture these religions would fold up and disappear has not been fulfilled. Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam have all taken on a new lease of life. All, in combination with the new nationalism, are playing a leading part in the formation of the lives of the new Asian nations. All have made acquaintance with the Gospel, have borrowed some elements from it, have rejected it, and now claim in express terms to be superior to it. It would be a grave mistake to imagine that, because these faiths often display themselves in alliance with nationalism, they are merely sacral forms of national pride and enthusiasm. They are that, but they are something more ; they are systems in which millions of men believe that they find a rich and satisfying inner life. Here I may cite some words written recently by one of the wisest of our Anglican bishops, Bishop Norman Binsted, of the Philippines :

“ The driving impulse behind these strivings is none other than the Spirit of God. I dare to believe that God is fanning afresh the spark of religious interest implanted in human hearts at creation, and that it is evidence of a new opportunity God is giving the Christian world to proclaim the Gospel.”

It is essential that the Church should not repeat to-day the mistake made in the period of the Crusades. We must guard against speaking too often of hostile forces, threats to Christendom, and so on. In one sense we are justified in doing so ; the Cross claims an exclusive allegiance, and where the word of the Cross is heard, no other word can have place. But the Church cannot understand its task in the world of the nations to-day unless it is prepared to substitute for the psychology of aggression or of self-defence the psychology of interested inquiry and sympathy.

How much do we know of these other systems of thought, and of the real sources of their spiritual hold on the minds of men to-day ? Of Communism we know a good deal. Many Christian scholars have devoted themselves to the dreary task of reading Marx and Lenin and Stalin, and have made available for us the outlines of that now outworn and self-contradictory system. There is no Christian answer to Communism, in the sense of plain question and plain answer ; but at least we can begin to see some of the things that the Church ought not to have done in the past, and some of the things that we ought to be doing to-day. But do we know as much of these other systems, as they really exist and are lived to-day ? I doubt it. Great Christian scholars in the nineteenth century elucidated for us the classical forms of these faiths. But where are their successors ? It can almost be said that a wide knowledge of the classical literature of these faiths is

a handicap, when it comes to wrestling with present-day experience, amorphous as to a large extent it is. What do contemporary Buddhists read? How do they say their prayers? What is it that gives that essentially unreligious system its religious hold on the minds of men, and has apparently brought about to-day a great renewal of missionary zeal? I wonder whether we really know. I cannot imagine any more urgent and exciting part of the unfinished task of the Church to-day than the effort to penetrate the mind of these great religions in their contemporary form, and to make known to the Christian world what is certainly there waiting to be known.

Christianity and the world of thought

We turn to the continuing existence of non-Christian zones within the Christian world. Almost all the nations of the so-called Christian West were rather rapidly and superficially converted. It may be doubted whether, especially in rural areas, that conversion ever went down to the roots of being and thinking. However that may be, it is certain that all over the western world in our time, large sections of the population have escaped altogether from the sphere of Christian influence. It is not my intention to establish a comparison between our worthy fellow-citizens who do not come to Church and the Hivites and the Jebusites of the Old Testament. I am thinking at the moment of the related but far graver problem that so many areas of thought have escaped from the sphere of Christian categories and Christian relatedness.

Seventy years ago our minds would immediately have turned to the alleged conflict between religion and physical science. In these quieter days, when we are so much more restrained than our uninhibited Victorian grand-parents, we tend to forget the extreme virulence of the assault launched by Victorian science on religion of every kind, and to wonder whether the Christian apologists of those days were not unduly alarmed. They were not. But times have changed. With a better delimitation of frontiers, with the admirable efforts of a number of distinguished Christian theologians to understand what the physical scientists are talking about, with a rather greater humility on the part of the scientists, who now see that the things they know something about are very much fewer than the things they know nothing about, we seem almost to be approaching that relationship of mutual illumination, which should be the natural relationship between two distinct domains of truth.

We may congratulate ourselves that so many of our most eminent historians are convinced Christians, and that some of them have paid attention to elucidating the relationship between History and Christianity.

It is when we turn to what is to-day in some ways the most important field of study of all that the picture becomes gravely dark. The modern science of economics is scarcely a century old. Several of the great pioneers in that field were earnest Christians. William Cunningham was not only the first scientific historian of English Industry and Commerce; he was also the maintainer of a somewhat pugilistic and highly orthodox Christian faith. Professor Marshall, though not

himself a Christian, lived in that bland Victorian afternoon, when it was supposed that Christian virtues and principles could survive without their roots in Christian dogma. To him, economics was eminently one of the moral sciences. This century has changed all that. To-day very few are the Christians who venture on to the Himalayan heights of modern economics. As a result, I can only echo the words of a distinguished Christian economist, who wrote recently that "the various themes which have almost become a matter of Anglican orthodoxy, are based on a deep-seated ignorance of economic history and analysis. . . . The tradition of present-day writers has been built up in a series of writings where ignorance of economic theory and institutions is only matched by the arrogance of the denunciation of, and contempt for, those who have this knowledge. . . . Where nonsense takes the place of sense, and parades itself in the garb of knowledge, some sort of protest is required" (D. L. Munby, in *Theology*, March, 1957, p. 92). Where knowledge is lacking, we tend to take refuge in mythology; the Christian mythology of economics is one of the most remarkable products of our century.

This reference is far from being out of place in the Annual Sermon of a missionary society. As *The Times* correctly reminded us in the last week in March, in all the Asian and African countries there is something that presents itself as even more urgent and insurgent than nationalism, and that is economic planning. It may be thought that some of these nations, like the Churches, have their own peculiar economic mythologies. What is certain is that Christians in all these countries are caught up in these processes of rapid development; it is their business to remain sober while others are intoxicated with the new wine of independence. How can they do this unless they have accurate knowledge and understanding of economic principles to guide them? To what extent are the Christian thinkers of the West equipped to supply them with the help and guidance that they so sorely need?

We spoke of the creative tensions in Israel, through which progress in revelation came about. But such progress is possible only if there is a genuine tension—only if the priests's lips keep knowledge, so that they can seek the law at his mouth; only if the prophet is like the scribe instructed unto the kingdom of heaven, who brings forth from his treasures things new and old. We may be thankful that in the Anglican Churches party strife is much less odious and much less futile than it was two or three generations ago. But it remains true that within the Church there will always be different apprehensions of Christian truth, and that knowledge is enriched when these remain in genuinely fruitful tension with one another.

We may note in the Evangelical tradition certain similarities to the prophetic tradition in Israel. For just about a century, from the 1730s till the death of Charles Simeon in 1836, evangelical preaching, with its insistence on the reality of revelation, on the direct confrontation between God and the sinner, on the witness of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer, on the obligation to holiness and witness resting on every Christian, was the prophetic voice of England. Then the situation changed; and for just on a century the evangelical voice, with a few notable exceptions, seemed to be speaking not in the

tones of the coming age but in the accents of fifty years ago. For this there were various reasons ; but one among them was unquestionably the neglect of sound learning in favour of good works. Some years ago I was planning a course of lectures on the makers of modern English religion. I had to include a Roman Catholic and a Unitarian—I could not find a single Evangelical name that demanded inclusion in my list.

We may be thankful that in our time things have changed again. Just in the last quarter of a century evangelical writers have begun to take their proper place in the ranks of scholars. It is still true that for illumination on the Old Testament we have to look mainly to the Baptists ; and for light on large stretches of our own religious history to two eminent Roman Catholic scholars. What we have so far seen of evangelical production, on the highest levels of scholarship, is hardly more than an introduction full of promise. There is still much land to be possessed, still a task not merely unfinished but hardly begun.

This, once again, is no irrelevance in a missionary sermon. We are all, I trust, agreed that theological training is the highest priority of all in the service that the older Churches can render to the younger. What kind of Christian understanding are the students in these many seminaries going to acquire ? What are they going to pass on in their preaching ? If we take seriously the inheritance of the great evangelical fathers, we shall see that devotion to sound learning is the indispensable hyphen between a living faith in Christ and good works done in His name.

The calling to pioneer evangelism

We have not yet exhausted our parallel between the ancient people of God and the situation of the Church to-day. From the earliest times it had been borne in on Israel that its vocation was not for itself but for others. In times of national pride and self-sufficiency this was often forgotten ; but it came back, as the ancient sagas of the patriarchs were re-written, and as the second Isaiah rose to the heights of spiritual understanding that make him incomparable even in the glorious literature of the Old Testament. Yet even at its highest the vision of Israel fell short of the fulness of what God had in store for His people. The centre is still Jerusalem. " And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob . . . for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." " Yea, many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favour of the Lord." The moment the resurrection is past, the movement changes—not now towards Jerusalem, but out from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth. When we go to the furthest shore and to the remotest forest, we go to meet One who is already there before us to make us welcome when we come.

The first generation of Christians caught the sense of this outward movement, and began to put it into effect. But the initial impulse was gradually lost, and the whole panorama of Church History up till

the present day can be summed up under the rubric "Disobedient Churches and an unfinished task". It is the melancholy fact that there are more people in the world to-day who have never heard the name of Jesus Christ than there were on the day of Pentecost. It would not be right either to rely too much on statistical methods of reckoning, or to overlook the wonderful blessing that has been accorded to the skimpy efforts of the Churches to turn themselves into missionary Churches. But, if we take a serious view of Church History and of the world situation, we are bound to recognize that the present situation is this—not that the evangelization of the world has been accomplished, but that we have to-day reached the stage at which for the first time the evangelization of the world could be seriously taken in hand.

It is for this reason particularly tragic that the message of Whitby, 1947, has fallen on deaf ears in almost every part of the Church. That Conference affirmed that the primary need of the hour was the setting up of pioneer Christian work in every area of the world in which the Gospel has not yet been preached. This was no utterance of cheerful optimism in the reaction after the end of the second world war. It was a carefully weighed and responsible judgment. The statement did not say that it was the duty of the *Western* Churches to establish such pioneer work everywhere. The Conference was very well aware of the dangers looming up on every side, and saw clearly that in many areas only the Christian of national origin could hope to be an acceptable evangelist. Having recognized this, it laid the duty solidly on the shoulders of all the Churches together, in the Partnership of obedience.

There has been no sign that this concept has dominated our missionary thinking, as it should have done, over the last ten years. There have been certain improvements in methods of consultation, some small extensions, usually by the so-called faith missions, into areas hitherto unreached. There has been no sign whatever of any attempt really to think strategically of the situation as a whole, really to consider how the resources of the Churches could best be deployed in face of the changing needs and opportunities of the present hour.

One who speaks in such terms is always in danger of being accused of thinking in the categories of fifty years ago, and of living on a survival of nineteenth century optimism. I do not believe that it is a question of optimism or pessimism. I believe that it is a question of a certain theological apprehension of the Gospel. Speaking last year to a fine group of young Americans who have become interested in missionary questions, I said to them, "The trouble is that you do not really believe in salvation and damnation". They agreed that this was probably true. You cannot really believe in one without believing in the other. Perhaps the anæmia of much of our missionary effort and of our appeals to the Churches is traceable back to this theological source. Universalism is the most fashionable heresy of the day. We must admit that it can quote one or two passages of the New Testament in its support; and we shall gladly admit that the wisdom of God is far beyond our imagining, that He may have ways of bringing His erring children home of which we know nothing. This

does not alter the fact that the Gospels always take the view that decisions taken in time have consequences in eternity. Man is presented with a Yes and with a No ; and all eternity depends on the choice that he makes. There are many dark areas in this doctrine, and many from which our minds gladly turn away. We must avoid the dogmatism into which perhaps our fathers were rather too ready to fall. But it is hard to avoid the impression that, as many Christians view the problem to-day, it really does not matter very much whether the Gospel is preached to the many millions of the non-Christians or not. After all, there are so many of them, and they are far away, and God can presumably take care of them. We shall not begin to get fire into our missionary talking, we shall not begin to put fire into our Churches, until we recover the sense that it matters very much indeed. We are agreed that we cannot resuscitate the lost slogan, "The Evangelization of the World in this Generation". Who will find for us the words in which to convey to this generation of young people what those words meant seventy and sixty years ago ?

To be possessed by a sense of the urgency of the missionary cause does not necessarily lead to absorption in febrile and restless activity. There have, of course, been many examples of missionary effort entered into without due thought and planning ; they have usually led to nothing, and God has not been glorified in them. We do not find any such restlessness in the life of our Lord Himself ; on the contrary, what is impressed on the Gospels, sometimes to the perplexity of interpreters, is the strictness of the limits that He imposed upon Himself, in His determination to accomplish His mission first to the house of Israel. St. Paul's rapid changes of plan to meet the needs of varying situations did occasionally expose him to the charge of levity, a charge indignantly repudiated ; but in his life too, we see for the most part the quiet and steady development of a strategic plan. But all through there is a sense of earnestness and urgency ; there are things that must be done, and there is no time to waste. There is a seriousness, which is natural and inseparable part of the Gospel.

Perhaps this seriousness has something to do with the fact that the Gospel does take time so seriously. There are *kairoi*, times and seasons that God has marked out ; and, if we miss the *kairos*, it will never come again, though no *kairos* is the last, until the last and final winding up of all things. To preach the Gospel is always a serious thing. What is it that God would have said in this unrepeatable instant of His time ? This may be the very last time that I shall have the opportunity to preach the Gospel. This may be the very last time that you, my hearers, have the opportunity to hear the word spoken. It is true that we should always speak as dying men to dying men. This does not mean that we should call in emotion to strengthen our otherwise feeble speech. It does mean that we should attempt to recover the seriousness of the Gospel, and to carry out our daily tasks in the spirit of Him who was willing to walk to-day and to-morrow and the third day, and to go steadfastly up to Jerusalem to accomplish that mission that had been given into His hands by the Father.