

THE LAYMAN WHO CANNOT GET
ANYWHERE

AND

THE PARSON WHO DOES NOT KNOW
WHERE HE IS GOING.

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The Victorian age is remote from us today. Perhaps in the Church we scarcely realise its remoteness. There is good reason for this. Its trappings are still our familiar surroundings in the Church. Most of the Church buildings we use were built in the last century and they have changed far less than our houses. Our formative institutions, too - the congregation, the theological college - were creations of last century. And our religious imagination is, to a great extent, based on their paintings, their stained-glass windows and their music and hymns. The 4.30 pm train from Olivet to Calvary still leaves from Platform 2 !

And we do not see them as they were. We think of the typical Victorian house as rather dark, overgrown with ivy and overshadowed by trees and bushes. We forget that to the Victorians it was a new house of light stone, and round it light and space and only a few young trees. We do not see its life in its freshness and its brashness, in its confidence and its blindness, in its love of novelty and fear of change. We think that we belong to it as to an old and confirmed world. Even some present-day politicians talk about preserving or recovering its manners and its teaching. As if we could!

For it is a world that is in some ways more remote and less intelligible than the world of New Testament times or the world of the Middle Ages. We can never see it clearly, for everything in it is distorted by the haze of

inherited or transmitted memories. The Church of New Testament times and after, with its lack of buildings, its absence of professional clergy and its refusal to have any part in the contemporary "establishment" is so foreign to us and so devoid of any inherited associations that we can imagine it with some clarity just because it is strange. The Church of the Middle Ages, with its hierarchy of authority and its conception of a static society has for us the quality of a dream with the fascination of the unattainable. We can see these patterns of Church life because they are different from our familiar patterns and therefore distinct. We think we are familiar with the Church of our grandparents and great-grandparents. We fail to notice that their world too is quite a different one from our own.

The immediate setting of our daily lives is radically changed. Our world is no longer the family, the village, or even the nation as it was in our great-grandparents' days. We no longer feel that we are set in clearly defined units and linked to other people in recognisable relationships. The family has no longer the wide but strictly defined boundaries of kin that it had last century. It is not now that wide society of uncles, aunts and cousins, on whom one had claims and whose claims one recognised, which was for many the limits of their social life. But it covered a wide area. It had the permanence and stability of a life that continued from generation to generation. Today the family in the pattern of parents and their children is a small, temporary unit that survives for one generation and then disappears to be succeeded by the small temporary families of the next generation. The family, therefore, ceases to be for most people the stable, unchanging background of their lives. A man today has lost the security of feeling that the family is there to fall back upon. He has lost the possible excitement of rebelling against it. The family has become a man's responsibility rather than his support.

In much the same way, the village or the town where he lives is no longer the self-contained area of a man's action and interest.

The nation is not the unquestioned certainty that it was to his grandparents. It no longer stands by itself in proud sovereignty.

GM Trevelyan and others have pointed out that our world has changed more in the last 100 years than it did in the previous 1,000.

What matters now is our relationship - international, industrial, social and political - with those with whom we have no personal contact but on whom our life depends. We have lost the self-confidence of the Victorians. We are sometimes tempted to call them, or some of them, sanctimonious or hypocritical. We cannot recover their confidence and their certainty. We are called to live life in utterly different circumstances and we don't know where to look for its plan.

Or perhaps we do. We in the Church know where we ought to look. We know that in the life of the Church and in our understanding of the Faith help is to be found. That is why there have sprung up throughout the world so many experiments in parishes and congregations, so many committees of varying kinds, so many lay-training institutes - all of which are seeking to find out how the people of the Church should be living in the world of today. Some of them are set in the ordinary, on-going life of the Church; some are on the fringe of the Church's life; some are right outside. All speak in differing terms of the life of the laity and of their task in the world. All are looking for new forms of obedience; new kinds of training. They all talk, to the mystifying of many others, as if they were searching for a new kind of layman, as if he were not to be found in the Church today. Sometimes they talk as if this layman who can see his obedience in the wider terms of the world today was only to be found outside the Church; as if the Church had become so clericalised that a real layman was hardly to be found in it; or as if he had to be a new creation.

Why is this ?

Why, when so many of the people of the Church feel this urgent need, are they so helpless to do anything ?

Why is there no revolt, no breakthrough, as there was repeatedly in the Middle Ages and finally at the Reformation ?

Why are the lay movements inside the Church so respectable, so slow, so largely sponsored by the clergy ?

Undoubtably the reason for this paralysis of the Church - and in particular for this inactivity of the laity - is our blindness to the world

around us, our lack of understanding of the Faith and of the resources at our disposal and, when we do have glimmerings of understanding, our pathetic cowardice. Undoubtably it is a failure of faith and hope and love. But it is also because we do not see the Church as the instrument of the action of faith and hope and love. We think of the Church as static and above the flux of events. We have inherited a concept of the Church as concerned solely with the private and domestic side of life. We have come to think it strange that the Church should be actively engaged in, and not merely critically concerned with, the public, political, industrial life of the world. And we have developed a pattern of life, particularly in the local church, which expresses this private, domestic side and excludes all concern with the public aspects of life. The result is that when men and women are painfully aware of the new demands thrust upon them (such as: the threat of nuclear war; the fragility of the environment; the threat of the collapse of the monetary system; the spiralling level of unemployment) and even begin to glimpse a new vision of the meaning of the Christian Faith, they find themselves set in a pattern of Church life that seems to preclude any kind of action.

As an example of this: one weekday in my Church some 10 years ago, we had a service for World Peace with slides, music, protest songs, CND stickers around the place. The service concluded and we all had coffee in the vestibule. I had a typically astringent and perceptive remark from George Macleod scrawled on a postcard which read:

"After a service for peace what do you mean by having
coffee ?

You should have marched to the Town Hall and left a bomb
on the steps!"

This pattern of Church life has now become so fixed, and it has been fixed now for such a long time, that men and women do not realise that it is relatively new, that there have been in the past other patterns and that members of the Church have not always been so frustrated as they are today. The layman has become so clericalised in a way unknown in any previous age. The minister is more bewildered and uncertain of his job than in any other previous age.

This has happened quite unconsciously through the development of this new pattern of life in the local Church. The pattern is common throughout the industrialised parts of western Europe and of America, but it is foreign to the Church in Asia and Africa, even though western missionaries did their best to introduce it. It is common to all denominations, whatever their theology and whatever their doctrine of the Church. Study the parish magazines of all the Churches we know. Look at what is particular and local - the notices of meetings and events in the parish. Listen to the announcements of forthcoming events in the parish as intimated in Church services. Or study the notice boards outside the Church - assuming that they are up-to-date ! They may announce the events under different names but they are the same things - womens' meetings, youth organisations.

Many people criticise this pattern because they find it inadequate and unsatisfying. But they don't do anything to change it because they think this is the unchanging and unchangeable way of Church life. We forget that it is comparatively recent in the history of the Christian Church.

In the remoter rural areas, for example in the Western Isles or the far north of Scotland, you will still find parishes that do not know this pattern, where there is no church hall because there never are any week-night meetings for young people, or adults or any Sunday School. It is not, as visitors sometimes think, that church life has decayed and nothing is left. It is that these parishes have preserved the pattern of Church life that was set up in England and Scotland at the Reformation and continued for over 200 years; when the Church building was open only on Sundays, for the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Sacrament, because daily worship was "Family Prayers" and the life of the Church was in the homes of the people.

The only possible name to give to this common, now almost universal, pattern of Church life in Britain today is "congregational". It is the life that congregates round the Church building. It was out of that realisation that sprang so much of the experiment at Halton in Leeds in the 1950s as well as the writing of the book "Building a New Church" (F.W.Bakewell, Independent Press) which gave the impetus to many ministers of the Congregational Church in England to begin "The House Group System".

This congregational pattern began to appear in Britain some 150 years ago and became established in the towns a 100 years ago. Sunday Schools were not started to teach the children of the Church. They were for those who had not the benefit of the family life of the Church. Dr Andrew Herron in his book "Record Apart" hints at this where he recalls the work done in Springburn. In conversation he told me that my grandmother did not send my father, nor his six brothers and sisters to Sunday School. This would have indicated that her home was without Christian teaching. Nor did she go to a weeknight meeting (though she started one !), and the only weeknight meeting my Grandfather went to was the Kirk Session (he was Session Clerk !). The only other meeting my grandmother went to was "The Dorcas Society" which sewed clothes for the poor and heathen. At the same time, George Macleod began in Govan at the time of the Depression, and simulataneously my grandfather and George Macleod held meetings in the two great Glasgow parishes of Springburnhill and Govan for those outside the Church or for the depressed in the Church. Though it should be noted that the Springburnhill Kirk Session did attempt to block my grandfather's suggestion that the Church's premises should be open during the week for the unemployed railway-workers saying:

"They will dirty the floors with their boots !"

To us today this seems a parody of the life of a congregation. Since the IInd World War there has been a shift of direction : from a philanthropic concern with those outside to a direct concern with the obedience of those inside. This change has demanded a revolution in attitude. And on the face of it, it may seem to be a turning back of the clock. Surely it was better to be concerned with the relief of the needy in society round about, even if it were done patronisingly, and with the evangelisation of the rest of the world, even if the activity of the congregation was limited to raising money to get other people to do the work, than to be occupied with dances, table-tennis, "lantern-slide shows" and whist.

The trouble has been, not that we are beginning to be concerned with the week-day life of the members of the Church, but that we have kept the programme but not the passion of a previous age. There is certainly grave dissatisfaction in most places with the inadequacy of congregational life. Wherever discussion on this question takes place, there is agreement that the congregation must develop from the nursery school stage at which it seems

stuck at the moment, to some kind of adult, responsible life. But advance is blocked by one thing.

Without deliberate planning and certainly without any nefarious scheming on the part of the clergy, the congregation has developed a structure that depends entirely on the minister. The life of the congregation has grown up round him and depends on him and it does not matter whether he is called "priest" or "rector", "pastor" or "minister". His central position has determined the organisations and activities of the congregation and the nature of its spiritual life. This is seen as being so natural that most people will say that it is only right; that is why we have ministers at all; that is their job; for this they are trained. But for all that, this is what is crippling the life of the Church.

The congregational pattern of church life is dependent on the minister in a way that was unknown before this century. The life of the Church of the first three centuries was not dependent on the professional ministry. The lay life of the Church in the later Middle Ages was so abandoned and bereft of spiritual content that the laity rose in revolt.

In the development of what I call the "congregational" pattern of Church life the minister has changed from being the one ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacraments to being in addition the director of the work and the activities of a congregation. While we now begin to see the weakness of the pattern we have to remember the past achievements in keeping the middle class in Britain in the Church (at the cost of making the Church middle class. But how much worse off would we have been if the middle class were not in !).

The minister is not running a factory, but his position in the local church is not unlike that of managing director. His relationship with his people is not confined to one activity of their lives but has to do with the whole range of their activities and hopes. On the other hand he is not with them five days a week for eight hours a day. He sees them intermittently in their leisure time. It would therefore seem that the number with whom he can have personal contact would be much smaller than in the case of the average factory manager. An example of an exception to this is, of course, the work done in the Canongate on Edinburgh's Royal Mile by both Dr Warr, when Minister of St Giles, and Dr Ronald Selby Wright at the Canongate Kirk with their two

boys' clubs numbering over 500. But, as Dr Ronald says with his customary disarming frankness, "those were run for the unchurched".

Some may say that this comparison of the Church with the organisation of industry is not only wrong but also unfortunate. They may say that the relationship of the minister to his people is quite different. The purpose of his relationship is indeed quite different, but is the fact of the present organisation of the Church not surprisingly parallel - at least with inefficient industry ? Is there not much that the Church can learn from industry ? Would we not learn that the congregation cannot be run in dependence on one man - at least if we look for development and results ?

The dependence of the local church on one man is generally emphasised by the organisation of the Church. The minister (by whatever name you call him) is held to be responsible for the welfare of those committed to his charge. This is interpreted as an individual, personal responsibility. It is his responsibility to God - but then we are all responsible to God for our brothers. He is responsible to his superior - be it church court, moderator or bishop. However he sees his task, whether he sees it in terms of liturgy and prayer or of the pastoral care of his people, he knows that he must be aware of and approve of all that goes on in 'his' (sic) church and that he must bear the responsibility. The last thing he wants to have to admit is that something is going on among his people of which he knows nothing. He is afraid of anything happening of which he would not approve. He knows that it is he who will have to bear the criticism. Ignorance will not be taken as an excuse. However able the minister, however streamlined his organisation, there is a limit to what one man can know and do. It is safer to see that nothing new or open to question is allowed to happen - safest of all to make sure that nothing happens (except that the dead are buried !).

This is an ineffective way of running any organisation. No factory - no regiment, could survive if conducted on this system of the authoritative rule of one man. For a church which is a body of people called into the life and work of Jesus Christ it is disastrous. Behind this way of thinking is the picture of the minister as a pastor and of the people as his flock. The image of the "pastor" goes back to the Old Testament; but those who make much today of the pastoral responsibility of the minister forget that in the Old Testament the shepherd is the model not of the priest but of the ruler, and

in Israel there was only One Shepherd and that the sheep of the pasture were men.

The new concept of the minister as the little king of a little kingdom is an affront to the faith and to the intelligence of the members of the Church and a constant frustration to individuals and groups in the Church who want to be more active in their obedience and even to make experiments. The layman comes to feel that the Church is ruled by the clergy and that the exercise of his gifts is not to be encouraged. Those laymen who feel that the position is intolerable and that there is little scope for the contribution of their abilities and interests find that there is little they can do but fade out. They may hope for a change when the parson goes. They may set out on a quest for a different kind of Church. But in the end they give up and join the huge army of the "lapsed".

Those who remain do so because this is what they like, or, if they sometimes wish it were otherwise, they don't imagine it could be. So the 'loyal' part of the congregation likes and upholds the centrality of the minister. And however much a minister may strive for other things, he yet likes to feel that he is appreciated. He has lost the position he used to have in the community, now, having sunk into a social equality with others, he is apt to find the justification of his position in the dependence of others upon him. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, speaking to an inter-denominational group of clergy in my church 10 years ago, drew our attention to the desire of the minister at home to be the prima donna of his local church. The desire to hold the stage and shine, not only as a leader of worship but as an organiser or as a pastor to whom people come with their troubles, appeals, he said, to a man's ambition - and to the quelling of the inner suspicion that his ministry as servant should be something different. But does he often suspect that his position is crippling the growth of the Church ?

This centrality of the minister has had another and yet more dangerous result. The minister has been adopted as the pattern and the example of the piety of the laity. At the Reformation the division between the laity and clergy was broken down, or at least, the scandal of it. There was seen to be a religious life for the laity. His sphere of Christian obedience was seen to be in his family and work. Vocation became a secular thing with the Christian vocation of a king, a soldier or a lawyer. This was held until the

Industrial Revolution. In the 17th and 18th centuries the English and Scottish parish ministers were prepared to teach their parishoners their jobs. They would tell them how they ought to act as soldiers, lawyers, farmers and so on. He expected them to do as he told them and felt himself well qualified to tell them what their Christian duty was in their various occupations. The Church continued to speak of vocation in terms of the older professions. Those in the newer occupations of industry and commerce were left without guidance as to how they should behave in their work. So today the Church member who is in industry, be he employer or employee, shop steward or director, has received from the Church no teaching or training as to how he should do his job. He finds that what he hears in church has little relevance to what he does in his job. He is often uncomfortably aware of this, so that he tends not to come to church.

The man of whom we are thinking is a member of the Church. He wants to live as a Christian and he takes this to mean that he must demonstrate his Christian obedience in his life with his family, in the way he treats his neighbours in his leisuretime activities and in his social contacts and in his participation in the worship and life of the Church. And here the minister is of peculiar significance. In the area of social contacts and family life and service in the neighbourhood the minister can be regarded as an example. The Church member sees the minister as one who honestly tries to live as he preaches and who is not encumbered by the frustration of activities where his creed does not run. So the minister becomes the model for the member of the Church. The piety of the laity is based on the piety of the clergy. And the more sincere and humble the parson - is the fimer is his hold of his example on his people - and therefore the more dangerous. For the minister cannot follow the layman into the strains, responsibilities and temptations that belong to industrial life.

Today the layman, especially the more religious layman, thinks it better for the minister not to meddle in politics. The minister does not wish to identify himself with controversy. He does not wish to indentify himself with one particular section of his people. He may tell his people that it is their duty to take politics seriously, to join a political party and not to be afraid of their opinions. But his example is more effective than his words. Detachment from political action has come to be regarded, in some quarters, as a Christian virtue. This has been disastrous for the

country - and for the Church. It has been interesting to note what the Church of England made of David Shepherd's book. If anyone was qualified to speak about the poor, then it was the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool.

Earlier I said that this minister-centred concept of the congregation grew up without anyone planning it. Most clergy want to see their people develop initiative and responsibility. Most of the laity would repudiate any desire to become "little ministers". (Though maybe in setting up what is known as the "Auxiliary Ministry" or "Non-Stipendiary Ministry" we are in danger of falling into that trap.) The institution as it has developed has forced them into this position - and, what is more important - has affected the relationship of clergy and laity in a dangerous way. It has put the parson in a position of dominance inside the congregation and set him on a pedestal of example hitherto unknown. Often the parson is acutely uncomfortable in this position. He would rather be doing other things. He may find relief in preaching another way from the pulpit. But he is held in this position by the structure of the organisation. He is held in this position by the people on whom the congregation most depends for its continuing life, who feel that this life depends on him being in that position. He is often irritated by them. And because of his position he is uneasy with those others whom he would like to see as the active laymen and women of the Church, but who, for all their liking for the minister personally, can find no sense in the minister-orientated Church. And the laymen are uncomfortable, even those who are quite happy with this pattern of Church life. They have lost the independence and zest of their Victorian forebears. The layman has become the shadow of the minister. He knows that he should be doing something else, something of his own. But he does not know what it is and no one will tell him.

The relationship of minister and layman has become half industrial and half pastoral. The minister is the boss who knows the rules and holds the authority. He is also pastor of the flock. Each relationship implies superiority. The combination is uncomfortable for both sides. Some ministers of course, are trapped. They are not qualified to do anything else outside the Church by the time they realise their mistake. And so, to cover their embarrassment, they move every six years to a new acre of God's ground.

Somehow the minister and the layman have to break out from this

imprisoning pattern. The layman has to find what is his own peculiar task in the world. He has to find the form of his own vocation in the Church as well as the meaning of vocation in his work in the world. The clergy can and must help in this. How they will do so is their peculiar problem.

How the layman finds the heart to revolt is quite another matter.

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THE HOLY MAN

He is a bird round which a trap is closed,
A leaking ship unfit for a wild sea,
An empty vessel and a withered tree,
Who lays aside God's wishes unimposed.
He is the sun's bright rays, pure gold and fine,
A silver chalice overfilled with wine,
Holy and happy, beautiful in love -
Who does the will of God in Heav'n above.

(From "Ancient Irish Lyrics", VIIIth - XIIth
Century, Emerald, Belfast, 1955 -
published in "Celtic Christianity [Ecology & Holiness]"
- Floris Classics, 1982)

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