

The Prophetic Church To-day: A Plea for Passion.

THE message of the Bible to-day is addressed to a secular age. It proclaims to men that the crisis through which they are passing cannot be understood within the ambit of their secularism. It is not primarily political or economic; it is cultural and religious. It is a crisis involving our understanding of the total meaning of existence. What we are seeking to resolve is not simply ways of living together, but the much deeper problem of what we are living for. Until we resolve this fundamental question secondary problems like politics and economics will remain unanswered, for they spring out of man's understanding of the place he occupies in the universe. To treat our crisis as a secular crisis is to fail to understand it. So proclaims the Bible.

The problem of modern man must not only be seen in its new aspect—the relation of the individual to industrialised society. It must also be seen in its old aspect—the relation of the human race to the universe. The individual to-day may in many quarters find his "chief end" in the service of the social machine, but the faith which gives this service meaning is simply the apotheosis of scientific mechanism. According to the proclamation of the Bible the human race is not a machine; it is a purposive organism, and what gives it purpose lies inside and outside itself. There is a supreme Being who created the individual for Himself. The possibilities of the individual transcend the possibilities of the social machine, and the race has potentialities which are not satisfied in any economic order.

Despite our preoccupation with the secular to-day, it is impossible to accept secular purpose as containing the whole truth regarding the potentialities of the individual. Men like Socrates, Plato, Isaiah, Jeremiah, St. Paul, St. Francis, Shakespeare, Luther, Beethoven, Bach, and even Karl Marx are hardly to be explained as deriving all their qualities from the social machine. To deny their significance as individuals in the interest of an economic rationalisation is to give up all serious thinking about the universe which produced them. What kind of universe is it, and what kind of people are we who find ourselves existing in it? "Man shall live by bread alone" denies too much. It denies the love, the beauty and the truth incarnate in the individual. We live in a universe which manifests "value." Our clue to Reality is this awareness of "value". The mystery involved in the purpose of existence is the mystery of "value".

There do exist for men absolutes beyond the State which afford self-authenticating satisfaction. These absolutes we call "goodness", "truth", and "beauty". They are qualities of Reality which we acknowledge as making a supreme demand on us and which alone afford us absolute satisfaction. If they have ultimate ground and are aspects of Something or Someone, then that Something or Someone is the true object of man's allegiance.

Now goodness cannot emanate from a thing. Rationality is a quality of the personal and beauty is a creation of mind, so if these "values" are valid for men, their ground is Being, Spirit or Person. We call this Being God. To deny God as the ground of absolute "values" is to deny our deepest experiences of satisfaction. Such denial has profound social consequences. It has led to the assertion of the group, the race, the State executive or "the leader" as the object of man's allegiance, or thrown the individual back on his own whims and caprices. None of these assertions seems to be the answer to modern man's quest for wholeness in himself or in society.

The social significance of worship is its assertion of God and therefore of the true dignity of man as spiritual being who finds satisfaction in "value". It is an assertion that needs resolutely to be made in the interests of common man and his actual and potential experience of life's supreme satisfactions. In asserting God we are asserting a mystery, but it is only through the assertion of this mystery that man can come to understand himself and recover true social fellowship.

Man traffics with mystery and his salvation and satisfaction lie in his awareness of it and in his response to it, for "value" is involved in this assertion and response.

He is appealed to by the wonder of the universe with its majestic glories of sunrise and sunset, the wide expanse of the sea and the magnificent contours of the eternal hills. There are the birds and the beasts and the flowers; there is human heroism and love and the awe of Jesus' Cross. When we meditate on these mysteries we realise we are living in a universe infinitely reverential whose purpose is deep in the heart of God.

In entering into mystery we find kinship with one another, and sharing experience as creatures of a Creator whose wisdom surpasses our understanding, we find a strange sense of comfort. We are satisfied by contact with spiritual "value".

Modern man in his pride and irreligion has largely cut himself off from the ground of "value" and blacked out the Supreme Subject of contemplation. In his denial of God he ceases to traffic with mystery. The result is he is spiritually lonely, for his ego-centricity is an eccentricity. He has turned away from his true spiritual centre which is God.

It is spiritual loneliness that makes life burdensome and causes the kind of existence against which man rebels. This loneliness to-day is both personal and social. Men are not only facing life's mystery uncomforted, but their social purposes lack an adequate goal. Their social and racial mysticisms have cut them off from true mysticism—communion with Reality. They are living in an economic and political environment, not in an environment of spiritual "values". It is in the sharing of these "values" of goodness, truth, and beauty that we find our deepest and most satisfying communion with one another. Charles Kingsley in Oxford Street, London, stood looking into a shop window in which there was a display of stuffed humming birds. He was taken out of himself by the beauty of the shimmering sheen of their wings. Suddenly he heard a voice beside him exclaim: "Isn't that beautiful?" He turned and looked. It was a huge, brawny coal-heaver who was sharing the experience with him. It is through such contemplation we are brought into communion with one another deeper than that provided by the mundane concerns of economics and politics. Man's satisfactions transcend the secular and his significance lies in the fact that he can and does transcend it and finds his supremest satisfaction and truest communion with his fellows in the world of "value".

In Augustine's "Confessions" there is a passage in which he gives an account of a soliloquy with his mother, Monica. After his conversion they find themselves meditating together upon the mystery of existence. As their thoughts range beyond the sun and the moon and the stars and all created things, and they think of the pure Spirit Who is above all and in all, their souls are caught up into an ecstasy. Then touching, as it were, the hem of His garment for a moment, they descend to earth again with the consciousness that they too are spiritual beings and have found unalloyed communion with one another in the contemplation of the Divine.

It is to such communion worship calls us. Before it directs the truth of God to the details of our daily living and our political concerns, it call on us to contemplate the mystery and the majesty of the great Creator, and sets us meditating on His love in Christ. It is only as we are lifted above the world we are able to accept the world, knowing that we are not of the world but of God. Resting in His majesty, nowhere more awesome than in the love of the Cross, we are able to accept the details of life and to face its urgent issues with tranquil hearts, knowing that the world is the medium through which He works His will for us, but the world is in Him and its work will pass. He, the All-wise and All-adorable, abides. Not for the world were we made, but for Him, and for one another in Him.

In ignoring God we cut away the very basis of human fellowship. We assert self-mastery and forget that we are creatures and dependent beings. Pride in our own achievements takes the place of humility before the Creator and gratitude in the presence of the Redeemer. Worship becomes an irrelevance instead of that one act of recognition and response to which all our other activities are relevant. Modern secularism has been turning out a type of man who worships idols. He asserts his own masteries and his own creations because he thinks himself master and not creature in God's universe. Until we reverse that conception and put God's creation, His moral laws and His ineffability above our limited masteries and assert His worship as the supremest of our activities, there will be no satisfying sense of personal worth or achievement of social wholeness.

Modern man has forgotten he is a dependent being. He has largely forgotten his dependence on nature. For the most part living in an industrialised and urbanised society, he has lost contact with natural phenomena. In creating his own environment he forgets the "givenness" of his environment. The typical artisan's mind is a different mind from that of the typical shepherd or fisherman. It is the product of an industrial order in which, in men's ruthlessness to achieve their limited ends, beauty has largely been destroyed and mystery dissolved away. The drabness of his surroundings has turned the product of this industrial order into a restless, unsatisfied being. He is caged in his own creations.

Modern man also tends to forget he is dependent on his neighbour. He asserts himself or his class ignoring the human family. Only the acknowledgment of one's neighbour and the consciousness of the sorrows, frustrations and evils that visit one's neighbour feed one's sense of mystery. In ignoring mystery men cease to be sympathetic. The assertion of the claims of impersonal justice blinds men to the claims of personal love. The neighbour they ignore is not mainly engaged in wrestling with the problem of economic justice. He is wrestling with the imponderables of evil, suffering and sorrow. In men's push for material satisfactions, these imponderables are impatiently brushed aside. Life's main problems, which are regarded as economic and consequently political, can be resolved by state action. When we stop to share life with our neighbour, we find that this is not so. Life's main problems can be resolved only by personal sympathy and helpfulness. We share these problems in the worship of an understanding and succouring God.

Modern man has forgotten his dependence on God. In his assertion of the secular he tends to sink into a social functionary, dependent on the State and content to serve the State. He foregoes spiritual rights to claim economic rights, but on much current social philosophy it is difficult to assert them except at the right end of a Tommy-gun. His assertion is a desperate self-assertion. It is not the assertion of God. Until man asserts God and himself as a child of God, his claims for justice and freedom will be met by similar Tommy-guns. Nor will war, civil or otherwise, bring him the satisfaction that he seeks. For he is not created for economic satisfaction, but for the satisfaction of responding to and realising spiritual "value".

Modern man needs to be brought into contact with beauty again, to have his sympathy aroused for his neighbour and to hear again the work of God spoken into his own loneliness, the word of the Creator to the creature, and of the Saviour to the lost. He needs to hear again of God's sovereign majesty and of His infinite condescension and succour. He needs to be spoken to as a person and not as a social functionary, receiving the divine proclamation, "Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak to thee". Hearing and obeying the divine word, he will recover dignity and, with dignity, respect for his fellow man, and the power to persevere to ways of social health again. For the body politic is sick to-day with a sickness unto death of man's spirit, and it cannot be healed or renewed by politics or economics. We must hear above the voices of the secular the voices of the spiritual, for they alone can call us to health again. Our morbidity is the outcome of our self-assertion and our pride. The fever that has broken out into world-wide strife has been nourished by a ruthless exploitation of nature and the average person's lack of reverence for his natural environment. It has been inflamed by his ignorance of his neighbour as one called forth on a mysterious spiritual pilgrimage whose dignity is to be respected and whose weakness needs constant sympathy and help. It has been brought to a crisis by his contempt for a religion which alone puts absolute purpose into personal and social activity. Modern man strikes at God and asserts his mastery, only to find that he is crucifying Christ again. "Insomuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me".

The answer to our crisis is the Bible answer of God's majesty and succour revealed in the works of nature and of grace; yet how are we to bring secular man to listen to that answer? To assert our own competence is simply to assert the self-confident spirit of secularism. God alone can bring man to Himself. "When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness". The Church is God's Church, not our Church. It is here to declare that God is spirit and that man is spirit, and God is judging man and calling him to Himself as the supreme Subject

of his worship and his service. God is Subject and man is object, which is an awe-inspiring thought.

In this task the Church must mainly make God's call to man through a relevant theology. It must put God in the centre of the problems of man's existence and activities. Every man needs the assurance of light and truth. In the midst of life's confusion and perplexity, the Church must proclaim Jesus as God's way and truth and life, and not only proclaim Him to men, but afford men strength for the life of response in which they constantly need recovery and restoration. The ordinary man is not an originator but a follower, and he needs to be reassured, encouraged and brought forward. He depends on the Church for a true account of spiritual reality and for encouragement to act on it. Then in action he himself will know.

The Church must consistently unfold the doctrine that leads to right action. Its chief function in the name of God is a prophetic and teaching function. The purpose of the prophet is to reveal and evoke. The Church must proclaim God's holy sovereignty and man's sinfulness, the choice offered to him between life and death and the succour that is available to him in his struggles and "lostness". It must proclaim a saving theology, because it is the Church of the Saviour and He is speaking to sinful men. The realities the ambassador of God must see are God and the human soul and the soul of the needy neighbour, and seeing these realities, it must proclaim that which reconciles them all—the spirit of Jesus Christ.

The Church proclaims God to the natural man and would do well to study the strenuous efforts of Jesus towards this end. When we think of Jesus' parables, His miracles, and His Cross, we realise the ingenuities of His loving heart and the strategies of God unfolded in His mind and spirit. Moreover, when we think of the type of convert with whom Paul wrestled and sent letter after letter, we realise that the natural man does not easily become spiritual man, and it is the total dedication of spiritual man that is needed for God's redeeming task. This task is to proclaim an incarnate God and to arouse men to meditation and response. The Church exists to placard Christ before the eyes of men in His holiness, truth and saving activity. It carried out its prophetic task by bringing man to God through his contemplation of and his response to the incarnate Son.

The prophetic Church must throw open the full fact of Christ for men's contemplation. It must proclaim Him as God's answer to their bewilderment and as His succour in their need. It is a light shining in darkness : it is a voice proclaiming the accomplishment of the humanly impossible—the reconciliation of sinful man to a holy God. In itself as a worshipping body it is life brought out of death.

In this task of speaking the word of God the Church must use all the voices which man can understand. Just as a foreign missionary has to humble and discipline himself to speak the language of the native population, so the Church must speak the language of those to whom it addresses its message. This language is not the vernacular, but the language of beauty ; for this is the language of God which the ordinary man best understands. There is the beauty of music, the beauty of art, the beauty of symbolism and the beauty of ritual. They all make "value" come alive to men.

The battle of the Church is the battle for the soul of man, who was made for goodness, truth and beauty and the purpose of worship is the supernatural apprehension of and response to Him Who is the ground of these "values" which meet him in his experience. There is much in God which is mysterious. Worship should heighten this sense of mystery, for only so is it relevant to our experience of life. It does its work best when it deepens the mystery of God, for mystery is evocative. Courage, sympathy, helpfulness and faith all spring out of it. There is mystery in beauty. Our Churches should invite man to meditate and these invitations to meditation can best be supplied by the silent ministrations of art. There should also be in worship a triumphing in Christ's victory over the evils of sin and death and that again should be proclaimed not by word only, but by picture and by symbol, if man's imaginative faculty, which is his capacity for personal wholeness and sympathy with others, is to be stirred to respond. Our bare Churches evoke no apprehension of this victory. They throw the questing spirit back on itself and inhibit gratitude and adoration. So often they are not Shekinahs manifesting the power and glory

of God in nature and in grace. It is good to hear the riches of the gospel. It is just as good to see them. If our Church buildings are erected and furnished in response to the gospel, they are houses of faith in the supernatural, which is what the full gospel reveals to man. They must proclaim the supernatural, the "mighty acts" of God. They are not meant to be buildings in which a frustrated and bewildered soul, uttering his cry in the dark, might feel there was no answer. We do not worship an unknown God.

When we learn to build and furnish Churches in the interests of a full Christian theology, we will begin to do seriously what we are still only toying with, setting forth the revelation of God's "mighty acts" with all the power of art, and not by word of mouth alone. The House of God exists for man's spiritual re-creation. It is what God wants to do in it that is of primary importance, and God wants to speak to every needy soul words of inspiration, understanding, pardon, encouragement and love. Like our Lord we must use all the strategies of a loving heart to speak these words.

We believe God speaks to us through His Word, but that does not simply mean through the reading of the Bible or through the minister's exposition on a Sunday, but also through the whole environment which His Word creates—the environment of an enlightened community who know clearly and proclaim boldly what they believe, not only in word, but in symbol, picture and architecture. God's Word must be represented and applied to believers in the very environment of their worship, enlarging their consciousness of all the elements of the Gospel which they are invited to appropriate. It is through contemplation that the worshipper is satisfied and stimulated. In a way listening to preaching is contemplation and may be very satisfying and stimulating. At the same time the elements of contemplation should be in the environment of worship itself. This environment, if it does not suggest a richer environment of goodness, beauty and truth than the average man knows in his mundane experience is lacking in the fullness of God. If it contain no element of the mystery of beauty it is untrue to the ineffability of God. If it be afraid to assert the symbol of Christ's Cross, it simply refuses to speak God's saving Word in the way that some can receive it. It is failing to offer fully to the individual the contemplation of the ineffable holiness and beauty and love of God and be a medium to him of God's blessedness and comfort.

The supreme expression of sacramental worship is the type of worship ordained by Christ Himself, modelled on the practice of His own people, where things seen were used as symbols of things invisible. The Roman Catholics have elevated it into the complexities of the Mass. Some Protestants have tended the other way and have been inclined to make its meaning too thin and obvious. Yet we do feel in its acted ritual the challenge and the succour of things unseen, and our Lord in the elements is brought near to us in a way to which few are insensible. We see in and beyond the material the heart of God.

If we are dependent on spiritual aristocrats for formulating the theology of the Church, we are also dependent on artists, architects, as well as preachers, for presenting that theology. They too can be spiritual aristocrats and have a passion for the proclamation of the Evangel. They also, in their own language, can speak God's language which is that of encouragement and comfort. Hands as well as lips can speak the language of God, as any father knows. The Church must speak God's Word through every voice given to it. Passion to speak that Word must not possess the preacher only, but the whole worshipping community in the environment it creates for all it invites to come and for all who follow after. In the name of the Crucified the Church must break through the inhibitions that hinder God speaking to men, and proclaim the goodness, truth and beauty that are in its Lord through all the powers that God has given to His servants. It must proclaim the Gospel through every avenue by which the soul can receive it. The work which it exists to do is God's work and so God speaks to us. So the Church must speak. When the Church speaks the full language of the soul, the soul will know it is being spoken to. When it speaks with a full passion in a world in which all men's faculties are being quickened and their need for God is desperate, it will speak the language of revival.