

# THE MARKS OF A LIVING CHURCH

## "Little Private Groups or Cells are Forming Themselves"

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"The Christian Church was meant to be a creative, redemptive force in the life of the world."

To-day we all take it for granted that we can't leave the very poor to starve, that aged and sick people must be cared for, and that children must receive some sort of schooling. But we owe this largely to the pioneer work of groups of Christians in the remote past—particularly monks and nuns—who undertook it voluntarily when few people bothered about it. The example they set has gradually raised the whole standard of social behaviour. It is still low enough in all conscience; but at least people have recognised to this extent that they are their brothers' keepers and that they can't simply let the weak go to the wall. Why did the monks do what they did? I suppose it was because the love of Christ constrained them. They found they could not love God, and their fellow-monks as themselves, and then sit down to their dinner, while leaving the poor people outside their gates to die of hunger. Just because they were sincere in their religion their eyes were opened to a social responsibility to which other people were blind.

But though to relieve people in trouble is a Christian duty, it is not enough. The Christian must go on to ask himself why they are in trouble, whether it is through somebody's fault and so can be prevented, above all whether it is through a fault in which he himself shares; and this is likely to produce unpleasantness. In the Middle Ages, if a city merchant or a feudal baron heard that a set of monks were giving alms or shelter to the poor, I expect he mildly approved, though he had no intention of doing anything of the sort himself. But if the monks had threatened the merchant's profits or the baron's power, it would have been a very different story; and probably they would have been knocked on the head.

### THE PROPHETS OF ISRAEL

Yet the prophets of Israel because

they were the servants of God had constantly found themselves obliged to expose unjust kings and landlords, and to champion the poor and oppressed; and that is why they were stoned. So in our own country it was because of their strong Christian convictions that Wilberforce and his friends devoted their lives to the overthrow of the slave-trade and Lord Shaftesbury devoted his life to preventing the exploitation of children in factories. Any genuine Christian must have something of this flaming indignation against cruelty and injustice and readiness to go into battle against them and to take the consequences, even if it means treading on the toes of powerful persons.

But, if so, how few of us are genuine Christians! What, do you suppose, does any intelligent agnostic think of us? Does he often say, "Though I can't share their beliefs, I respect these people, for I recognise that they are a great force making for a better world?" Does he really take us seriously at all? Herod took John the Baptist seriously, and Hitler takes Pastor Niemoller seriously; and so they put them in prison. But nobody wants to put most of us in prison: we have been too content to take colour from our surroundings. So now that the world is in this ghastly mess and people desperately want a Gospel, they mostly don't expect to get it from the Christian Church, which, I fear, they regard as a back number. We have indeed left undone those things which we ought to have done; and if we are now even to get a hearing we must begin by admitting frankly our grievous fault.

### ANGRY CONTEMPT

I believe there is a further reason for the angry contempt with which so many people—and particularly the younger people—regard any claim of the Christian Church. "No doubt," they say, "it would be a nicer world if nations would behave as the Covenant of the League dictates, and if individuals would obey the Ten

Commandments—let alone the Sermon on the Mount. But the fact is that they don't and won't. To adjure Europe to-day, to try the Christian way of life, is like the bleating of sheep in the face of brutal realities."

Now there was a rosy optimism, common in Victorian times, which proclaimed that every day and in every way the world is getting better and better; that nearly everyone is a decent fellow at heart, and that with a little more scientific discovery and a little more education, we may all hope to arrive before long at the millennium and then to live happily ever after. But the Christian view is the very opposite of this. In the deep disillusion of to-day, there is nothing strange to Christians. They should not be surprised that horrible things are happening to a civilisation which has tried to organise its life in practical forgetfulness of God. They know that the evil tendencies of human nature are desperately strong; and that they are like the legendary monster which Hercules fought—it had many heads, and; as fast as he struck off one, two new ones grew forth in its place. We have constantly repeated in church that we are miserable sinners, but we have not been in bitter earnest about it. We have forgotten that this is the confession not only of special classes of people, like thieves, and prostitutes and murderers, but equally of bishops and judges, and ministers of the Crown—in fact, all of us. Perhaps we have seen ourselves as St. George slaying the dragon. And we have felt a glow when we have repeated Blake's splendid lines:

"I will not cease from mental fight  
Nor shall the sword sleep in my hand,  
Till we have built Jerusalem

In England's green and pleasant land."  
But we are not really in the least like St. George and we are utterly unfit and impotent to build Jerusalem here or anywhere else. We are unable of ourselves to do any good thing. Before we can have a better social order, we must be changed men, and we shrink from the cost. Yet to work such a change in us is precisely what Christ offers, if only we will let Him.

The reformer then who takes an unduly sanguine view of human nature and expects quick returns at a moderate outlay is no Christian. He is guilty of what is called "wishful thinking," and of an unconscious refusal to face disagreeable facts.