

CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE CHURCH¹

DURING this week you have been listening to many speakers on many subjects concerned with the Christian life in the modern world. They have spoken to you about the Christian life in the home; in the school; in work in the factory, the field and the office; in citizenship and Home Affairs; in Foreign Affairs and international relations. It has not been my privilege to hear those speakers, nor to hear what you have been saying about it all among yourselves. But I know that those speakers have come to you from different 'denominations,' and from what I hear, I gather that they have nevertheless shown a pretty considerable measure of agreement about all these things. Perhaps you have been agreeably surprised; you had expected, perhaps, that they had all been anxious only to praise their own particular wares. Instead of which you have found, I believe, that about all these things they seem to think pretty much alike; and that instead of wanting to sell you their own rival goods you have found them all anxious only to be loyal and faithful to God and his Word and to love and serve their neighbour in and for God.

Now there can be no doubt that all this is a very good thing, and for it we must be very thankful to God. But the task which is set me this evening is—strange as it may seem—a much more delicate one. I have to speak to you about 'The Christian Life in the Church.' And that at once raises a question which perhaps has been haunting you all along. For whether you be churchgoers or non-churchgoers, I may well believe that you have had a feeling that, in spite of all this agreement about the Christian Life in the world, there is something wrong somewhere, a fly in the ointment, a skeleton in the cupboard; something perhaps a little bit rickety about this united platform. You have been hearing about 'the Christian challenge to the world'; but sooner or later we have got to face the fact that there is also the world's challenge to the Christians, and we cannot and dare not be satisfied and complacent until we have faced it boldly, and seen what there is to be said for it. Then we must openly and candidly confess where we may find ourselves to be amiss, and be determined, by God's grace, to amend in an effective way.

¹ An abridged reconstruction of an extempore address at the Rugby Christian Life Week on May 15th, 1943.

Let me put that challenge to you quite crudely and brutally, as I seem to hear it, and without attempting to be quite judicious and fair. It would run, I think, something like this :—

It's all very fine for you Christians to get together and tell us how to run our homes, our schools, our businesses and factories and offices and trades unions, our Home Affairs and our Foreign Affairs. But haven't you got a colossal nerve? Why don't you first of all mind *your own* business? You Christians seem to be agreed about everybody's business except your own; about everything except Christianity. Why don't you first of all take a look at *yourselves* and put your own house in order, get the beam out of your own eye? Just take a walk round Rugby or any other English town. What do you see? Anglican churches, R.C. churches, Methodist, Congregationalist, Baptist churches, Salvation Army citadels, Friends' meeting houses . . . What is the meaning of all this? How the Christians love one another! How they are united and agreed! Why should we take you seriously? Why should we be impressed by your agreement about how to run the world when you can't be agreed about how to run the Church? Physician, heal thyself . . .

Now, I am not saying that that challenge is completely fair. But I think we must be agreed that it is not wholly unreasonable, and that it does and should touch us on a very tender spot. And if we are truly Christian and loyal to the Gospel, I think we should see also that it is a very much more serious reproach to us than the outsider himself can see. For I think we have got to agree that the very fact that we present ourselves as representatives of different 'churches' and denominations is a confession of a grave failing on our part in loyalty to Christ and His Gospel.

For I think it must be admitted—and indeed boldly proclaimed—that the *primary* and *essential* concern of Christ and His Gospel is with none of those things concerning which we have shown ourselves to be largely agreed. On the contrary, He is insistent that they are all, however important, secondary and subordinate. Certainly it was not 'the happy home' that occupied the first place in His thought or His message: there was an occasion when He gave His own family the slip rather than neglect His Father's business; and He said that those who loved father or mother more than Him were not worthy of Him, that father and mother must sometimes be hated, and that loyalty to Him would break up homes and set their members one against the other. Certainly it was not economics: *Who has made me*, He asked, *a judge or a divider over you?* Certainly it was not politics or citizenship of any earthly city: *Render unto*

Caesar . . . but to God the things that are God's. Certainly it was not the establishment of international justice by war: *When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, be not afraid . . . flee to the mountains.* Certainly it was no Plan for a future; no anxiety for the morrow: *Sufficient unto the day. . . . In the world you shall have tribulation.* He promised and sought no earthly utopia. His hearers had hoped to find in Him a support for their plans and theories and isms. In the long run He disappointed them all. He disappointed the Saducees, the broad-minded compromisers with the latest enlightened thought. But he also disappointed the Pharisees, the hide-bound traditionalists. He disappointed the quisling rulers who wanted to 'appease' the pagan army of occupation; but he also disappointed those who would have no truck with them. He disappointed the polite, Stoic Pilate with his contemptuous scepticism about truth; but he disappointed the superstitious Herod who wanted religion to be an affair of marvels and conjuring tricks. He disappointed the priests, the clergy. But he also disappointed the anti-clericals, the opponents of institutional religion—*Go show yourselves to the priests. . . . All things whatsoever they shall say to you, observe and do; but according to their works do ye not.* He disappointed the rulers; but He disappointed also the revolutionary masses who saw in Him a leader who would overthrow their corrupt power. He disappointed the rich—but also the poor. He disappointed His own most intimate friends and disciples, for He seemed to abandon them and frustrate all their hopes in Him by delivering Himself into the power of His enemies. Without fear or favour, without seeking to please, He walked the way set before Him and fulfilled the will of His Father without consideration of consequences for Himself. And for the rest: *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. . . .*

Seek ye first the Kingdom—the Reign, the Sovereignty—of God. That was what first and foremost He came to proclaim—and to bring. He came to bring us life, a new kind of life, eternal life, a life of communion with God. And that does not mean just 'pie in the sky,' a future reward; it means a life of communion with God here and now. It means living here and now in oneness with Him the Son of God through the life of the Spirit, whereby we too are truly sons of God and whereby God becomes in very deed Our Father. The Christian life means living the Christ-life, and living it *now*. Christ did not come, first of all, with a social programme or an economic programme, but to bring us divine life, whereby, one with

Him in His manhood, we might be caught up into the very life of the Holy Trinity together with Him. Christianity is not, first of all, a code of morals or a social plan; it is a matter of personal relationship with God; a family life of the children of God. It is in the world, but it is not of the world; and only then dare we call our home life Christian, our business life Christian, our political and economic life Christian, when it is motivated and grounded in this Christ-life of filial relationship to God through the inner life of the Spirit.

So we do not find, in the New Testament, anything about joint committees of 'churches,' or man-made united platforms of 'denominations,' to discuss and proclaim the nature of Christian life in the world. What we do find is the formation by Christ Himself of one family, one Church; and this family, this Church, is itself to be the witness and vehicle till the end of time of what He '*began* to do and to teach.' We see Him gathering around Him a little band of disciples to whom He progressively imparts His message that they may pass it on to others, to the ends of the world, till the end of time. Some of these He entrusts with His own authority and power, as He Himself had received it of the Father: *As the Father has sent me, so send I you.* To them He passes on the power to baptise, to forgive, to teach, to feed with His own sacrificed Body and Blood. He, the Good Shepherd, entrusts His lambs and sheep to Peter; and He promises this little flock the Kingdom.

That is what the Church was meant to be. It was to be the earthly family of those who accept the Word of God in Christ, and who are thereby living the divine life of children of God. This Church was the mystical body which was to continue 'what Jesus began to do and to teach' in the days of His Flesh, in the physical body which He took of Mary. It was to be both the vehicle and the vessel of divine life in the world. And before He died, He prayed for all them who should believe, 'that they may be one, as thou, Father, in me . . . that they may be one in us.' Nothing less than that, the unity of men in the One Divine Life of Father, Son and Spirit; in one family which would transcend all differences of race and place and time—*In one Spirit we were all baptised into one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, bond or free.* This unity in the Spirit is no man-made 'federation of churches,' no product of merely human kindness and amiability; it is a divinely-fashioned organism. Nor may we deceive ourselves by thinking of it *merely* as something interior and invisible; it is a very visible fellowship, as visible as was Christ Himself in the days of His flesh. We Catholics, especially, thank

God that this is being increasingly understood. Karl Barth, most Protestant of contemporary Protestant divines, is very emphatic about this. 'We have no right,' he says, 'to explain the multiplicity of the Churches as a mark of the visible and empirical as contrasted with the ideal, invisible and essential Church; no right, because this distinction is foreign to the New Testament, and because, according to the New Testament, even in this respect the Church of Jesus Christ is but one . . . visible by tokens in the multitude of its confessed adherents, visible as a congregation with its office-bearers, visible as a ministry of Word and Sacrament.' And Barth is as emphatic as any Catholic could be that no man-made federation or committee or friendliness can be any substitute for what Christ in His love for man appointed and ordained. 'From this point of view,' he writes, 'I am not distressed by the well-known and widely regretted attitude of the Roman See towards (such movements). It was and is needful that someone somewhere should make a stand against the excessive claims of Church movements, and assert that the union of the Churches is a thing which cannot be manufactured, but must be found and confessed, in subordination to that already accomplished oneness of the Church which is in Christ Jesus' (*The Church and the Churches*, pp. 25, 47).

Such certainly is what Christ ordained and intended. I, as a Catholic, have very definite beliefs as to where and how that divinely ordained and visible unity is to be sought and found. This is neither the time nor the place to expound them. All I want to say now is that here is a problem which sooner or later we must face, and which we cannot escape. Whatever else we may do in the meanwhile, in the way of 'collaboration,' 'united witness,' 'Christian councils' and 'challenges' and the rest, cannot be anything but making the best of a bad job.

All this may seem very damping and discouraging. If we find it so, then there is some hope that we shall not be too pleased with ourselves about our achievements in such weeks as these. God forbid that I should belittle the value and importance of such a united gathering as this. A few years ago it would have been impossible; it would not be possible now without the blessing and guidance of God. But for that very reason we must not allow ourselves to be satisfied and complacent, so long as we lack the exterior as well as the interior fellowship of brotherhood in His one Church.

For when all is said and done; how can it be that we Christians, as Christians, can make our witness to the world? How can we,

as Christians, serve the world—in its home-life, educational-life, work-life, political-life? Only surely in the measure in which, with our Saviour and as living members of His Body, we ourselves impart to our fellows His life of filial relationship to God. For it is only in the Incarnate Word that the real meaning of human existence and human society is to be found. The great hopes of our fathers for a glorious man-made democratic society, where all would live in peace and harmony, and in Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, have all gone up in the smoke of war and revolution. And why? Because Liberty and Equality will destroy one another where there is no Brotherhood; and there can be no Brotherhood where there is no common recognition, in the unity of a world-wide family life, of a common Fatherhood. And there can be no common recognition of a common Fatherhood except in the Son—for *no man cometh to the Father except by me*. And we cannot say *Abba, Father* except in that one Spirit of His Son. And we cannot love God as our Father if we do not love our fellow men as our brothers—if we say we do, the gentle and loving disciple will tell us we are *liars*. (These things are all inseparable from one another). And we cannot truly love our brother in Christ just interiorly; only can we do so fully in the common life of the 'Beloved Community' which is His Church—His family, His assembly which He has called (the word *Ecclesia* means just that) from the ends of the earth.

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

The death of the Venerable and Very Reverend Father Vincent McNabb, O.P., on June 17th will be mourned by BLACKFRIARS and its readers with a particular grief. His was the first article in the first number of BLACKFRIARS in April, 1920, and he has continued with increasing energy and spirit to contribute regularly—there are in fact two articles of his awaiting publication. He was one of the chief pillars of the review and his loss removes this strong support. It is therefore hoped that before the year is out BLACKFRIARS will be able to honour his memory and express its gratitude with a memorial number to the great English Dominican.....REQUIESCAT IN PACE.
