



GOD IN HIS SHIRT- SLEEVES

As many of my readers will know, I served in the Royal Engineers during the war. One of the jobs for which I was trained was bridge-building. We used that marvellous invention, the Bailey bridge. It consisted of steel panels which were joined together end to end on the ground. A span about twice as long as the width of the gap to be bridged was constructed, and then the whole massive structure was pushed out carefully on rollers over the gap until the front end reached the far bank. Unless, of course, someone had miscalculated - as happened on one memorable occasion. The soldiers were pushing the bridge out and the end had nearly reached the far bank - but not quite. The man in charge didn't notice in time that the bridge had reached its point of balance; and when he shouted the order to hold back it was too late. With gathering speed the structure took a nose dive, and twenty tons of steel crashed into the gap.

We clambered down into the hollow (it was a dry gap, not a river) to survey the damage, feeling utterly demoralized. What on earth were we to do? It was at that moment, when our morale was at rock bottom, that the Commanding Officer appeared. He stood at the edge of the gap surveying the scene. We waited for sentence to be pronounced. He spoke just two words: 'Rather irregular!' Then he whipped off his Sam Browne and tunic, donned a pair of borrowed denim overalls, and jumped down into the gap. Without a word of recrimination he began to lead us in the task of recovery, working as hard as any sapper. His presence with us transformed the situation. Our morale was restored. Together we laboured cheerfully until the task was done.

FROM THE RECTORY



That officer, whose name (if I ever knew it) is long forgotten, stands out in my memory as a great man. A lesser man would have stood on his dignity. This officer showed how big a man he was by his willingness to set aside his dignity and to identify with his men in their distress.

But there is another reason why I remember him; his action is a striking analogy of the self-abasement of God when he came into the world in Jesus. Here is a model of Christmas. St. Paul puts it well in his letter to the Philippians:

He who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal, but stripped himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born as mortal man

Christmas means that God is not just 'way up there', remote and condemning; he is here with us, saving. 'God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him'. Christmas shows us God in his shirt sleeves. Whatever hole we're in, God is right there with us in the hole, saying, 'How can we, together, redeem this situation and bring something really good out of it?'

The Christian God is pre-eminently the God whose nature is to save. Often he has been misrepresented, even in the Church, as a censorious God obsessed by rules and regulations, whose nature is to condemn. But he will not have it; and if we would find Him it must be in Jesus whose very name means saviour. There are two areas in which the Church is seeking to bear witness to the saving activity of God at the present time.



The first is the ministry of healing. During the last 50 years there has been a great resurgence of interest in the Church's ministry of healing. I myself was first introduced to this ministry 30 years ago by Father Jim Wilson. This ministry has been exercised for many years at Chesterfield Parish Church; and in our own parish there is a small group of people, now affiliated to the Guild of Health, who seek to pray for the sick. Yet this ministry is widely misunderstood and often confused with other systems of 'alternative medicine'. In order to discover more about the nature of this subject and to promote the ministry of healing in this district, a meeting has been arranged at St. Thomas' meeting room on Wednesday, February 8th at 10.30 a.m., when the speaker will be Julian Drewett, chairman of the Guild of Health. All are invited.

A second area in which the Church seeks to bear witness to the saving activity of God is marriage breakdown. In the past, the Church of England's attitude to marriage breakdown has often been less than sympathetic, if not censorious; and its attitude to the marriage of divorced persons has been unconstructive and even hypocritical. The Anglican Church has consistently refused in any circumstances to marry in Church anyone whose previous marriage has ended in divorce. In matters matrimonial, the Church of England has offered a judgmental God.

At last, however, there is a sign of change. Some time ago the General Synod, the Church's ruling body, decided in principle that the marriage of divorced persons in Church should, in some cases, be permitted. The actual procedure by which this should be done is proving much more difficult to work out, and there is much disagreement within the Church about the matter. But a new dispensation has begun; and the Church is at last shaking itself free from legalism to bear witness to a saving God who offers forgiveness to those who have failed and who can bring newness of life out of the hell of divorce.

Gill and I want to thank very much all those kind readers who sent us Christmas cards. We are sorry that we have not been able to reply to everyone individually, and hope that you will accept this acknowledgment.

Vyvyan Watts-Jones

LOOKING BACK

Church Army Captain Chas. Howlett, writing in the February magazine for 1933, commented " we are having a real spell of cold weather - it is a pity that this causes more unemployment, although it maybe beneficial to plumbers - and unemployment is still the great national problem. Whilst men are unemployed other things appeal to them in their moments of leisure, and not the least of these is Communism... This ungodly creed should be met with real action.

If only a real united effort could be made by the church, the tide of Communism would be changed."

Captain Howlett was obviously prepared to say what he felt, and relate the teaching of the Church to life's political problems of the 1930's. Thank God we still have churchmen who are prepared to do the same.

Looking further back, into the March, 1914 Parish Magazine, it is very obvious that the major fund raising activities were invariably teas of one sort or another, by all the many organisations connected with St. Thomas'. In this particular issue reporting on the annual parish tea were listed 195 contributors and apologising in advance if mistakes had been made, the editor promised to correct them the next month!



A doctor once declared: "I have been practising medicine for 30 years and I have prescribed many things. In the long run I have learnt that for most of what ails the human creature, the best medicine is love." "What if it doesn't work?" he was asked. "Double the dose," he replied.

CHRISTIAN UNITY is not just for the sake of Christians, but for the sake of the world.