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A Way in the Desert: The Tasks and Temptations of the Modern Ministry.

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“The voice of one that crieth, prepare ye in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”—ISA. xl. 3 (R.V.).

SO to Israel in exile, uplifted by an undying hope, yet stricken with impotence which could look for help to none but God, the clear voice rang out its urgent call of appeal and promise. So also, centuries after, on the banks of Jordan, it spoke by the lips of John the son of Zacharias, to announce to the multitudes which thronged to hear him the coming of Christ. It is the ancient cry of the Ageless One which is always modern; like all His words to men, not the mere promulgation of a doctrine, but the declaration of an advent and a claim for man's co-operation in bringing it about. To the Babylonian exile it was a challenge to gird up his loins to welcome his redeeming God; and with a like demand it broke in upon the religious slumber of Jerusalem, as the Baptist called the spiritless Israel of his day to prepare to meet Messiah. And so to-day to men who come to undertake in Ordination the high duties and responsibilities of the Christian ministry, it speaks once more its imperative summons, to make straight in their own time a highway in the desert, and to prepare in their modern wilderness the way of the Lord.

I.

A way in the wilderness! A highway through the desert! Is this indeed a true description of the task and mission of the Church's ministry to-day? Or is it only reminiscent of what they were in bygone ages, whose flagrant contrasts and blatant antagonisms are strangely different from the smooth and featureless commonplaces of the modern world? Perhaps to some young man fresh from his theological college who comes to be

ordained there is some unreality, and even grandiloquence, about a view of his vocation which describes it thus. The parish he is going to work in, with its prosperous organizations and progressive activities—what has that to do with a wilderness? The well-bred congregations which will listen to his sermons might be, it is true, more sensitive than they are to the claims of their religion. But on the whole they are composed of excellent people, who will sometimes invite him to dine with them and otherwise make themselves pleasant. Or if he is designated to a slum parish, he anticipates no very formidable opposition—at least, nothing that he cannot face with the good, sturdy British pluck which has often served him well in his college games. If he does get run down or weary, a day or two on the golf-links will quickly put matters right, and he will soon be busy again in the duties of a profession which, if it has little of the heroic about it, and nothing of martyrdom, is at any rate a highly useful and civilizing influence in modern society, and worthy of all the training that has prepared him for it.

A few years ago such a forecast of ministerial life was possible even to more or less serious men. But there can be few now, and there will be fewer still in days that are coming, who do not realize that it is not with such thoughts as these that they dare undertake the office of priest or deacon of the English Church. It will not be long, my brothers, before you discover that beneath the familiar surface of modern conditions there is a heaving, seething life which will test your vocation to its very heart. Happy are you if you already know it, and cherish no expectation of, or desire for, the facile amenities of an uninspired clericalism which implies no sacrifices and contemplates nothing more aggressive than a respectable career.

For the task of the ministry of God's Word and Sacraments in the new age into which we are swiftly passing is a work which can only be attempted by men who know what it is to have received a real call from God. There is nothing petty or commonplace about the work to which you are being separated and set apart to-day. Yours is the high trust to serve the

Church in a time when scope and room are afforded for a fellowship of service with the highest and best that has been wrought for God and His Christ in ages past. I am thinking now not so much of the increasing strain of the parochial clergyman's work, though that often demands a real if unrecognized heroism worthy of the noblest Christian manhood. I am thinking rather of something which transcends all that is merely parochial, though it affects all our parishes, each of which is in its own degree and way a microcosm in which are stirring the forces which produce this wonderful modern world. We live so closely in touch with our age, and are so much its product, that most of us cannot feel its real complexity, and do not discern the extraordinary changes which are taking place before our very eyes. But those who see farthest tell us that it is pregnant with larger issues than any that have preceded it in the history of the Church. Its social changes signify the rapid passing away of an old order, and a steady set in the world's life towards a new order from which has vanished much that for ages has been taken for granted as permanent and unchanging. Not only religion itself, but the very foundations of common morality are seriously imperilled by tendencies which are at work in all departments of our life. Beyond the limits of European civilization, old nations like China, Japan, and India are being altogether transformed under the pressure of education and contact with the stream of western influences which are pouring in upon them; and new civilizations are swiftly being built up on the outskirts of our own Empire. If ever the voice rang clear to call men to prepare God's way in the desert, it rings out now for all who have ears to hear it!

For with all its boasted progress, its wealth, its power over nature, its education, and its eager and expectant life, this is still the sinful and unsatisfied world for which Christ died. It has not outstripped Bethlehem, nor has it outgrown the need of the Cross. Rudolf Eucken,¹ in his recently translated work, "The Truth of Religion," tells us its inmost secret when he says:

¹ R. Eucken, "The Truth of Religion," chap. xvii.

“This is an age afflicted with an immense contradiction. Wonderfully great in its mastery of, and achievements within, the environing world, but, on the other hand, deplorably poor and insecure in regard to the problems of the inner life and the inner world. We are as poor in the midst of all the external plenty which surrounds us as if we were not the possessors of it at all.” It is still a world which cannot save itself, a world whose heart is weary and hungering for the Bread of Life. Among all its discoveries it has found out no new cure for its disease of sin, nor has it learned how to realize the purpose of its existence without the self-manifestation and redemption of God. It may build better houses, and educate its poor, and furnish itself with all the material contrivances which make living easy and pleasant and swift and free; it remains a world of human spirits which are restless till they rest in Him who made them in the image of Himself. Struggle though it may to do without Him, it sadly returns upon itself from every expedition into selfishness with a cry for the Eternal Love. And still, as in every preceding age of its long chequered story, it is waiting for the men who love, and think, and pray, waiting for the voices that will tell it the truth about itself, and prepare through the wilderness a highway for their God.

These are days when there is less and less room for an uninspired ministry without a sense of its dignity and mission. In the general landslide of establishment and authority a merely ornamental ministry can find no foothold at all. If the Church has a message, the world will listen; but there is no place in twentieth century society for the polite weaver of platitudes, who entrenches himself behind a set of shibboleths, which to the modern man are only the relics of a dead past. More than this, the priest whose faith is only a form or an inheritance will find it growingly difficult to maintain that faith in himself against the disintegrating forces of modern thought. He will probably end in losing it altogether if he does not rediscover in it God's eternal message to his own life, and through himself to the heart and life of his generation. That, and only

that, can transform him from the dumb formalist he tends to become into a true prophet of the Most High.

II.

And if the Christian ministry is thus forced to-day to attempt great tasks, it is compassed about with the great dangers which always attend them.

It has to be on its guard, first, against the temptation into which the poet Lowell felt that the lazy versifiers of his day were falling, the temptation to be

“A cunning rhymer
Who lies with idle elbow in the grass,
And fits his music, like a cunning timer,
To all men's prides and fancies as they pass.”¹

The parish priest is no longer pelted with the worldling's ridicule as in days gone by, because there are happily now very few incentives “to go into the Church,” as it was called, for an easy living. But he is daily face to face with the subtle temptation to become a mere secular official, a municipal figure and not a minister of God. There will be scores to congratulate him upon his excellent social service for everyone who will help him to remember that he is to tune his message to the passion music of Calvary. “Not too other-worldly, if you please, sir priest,” is the ominous warning of the many nowadays for whom salvation is decked out in the brave tinsel of mere material betterment, not dyed with redeeming blood and signed with the cross of sacrifice. The Christian ministry, it is true, alike in its origin and in its history, is steeped in ideals of social service. But St. Stephen and his brother deacons, if they were called to minister in the Portsmouth or Guildford of to-day, would quickly afford drastic evidence that their mission was energized by spiritual motives remote enough from the secular conceptions of the modern clergyman, who has never known what it is to be, as they were, filled with the Holy Ghost. To an apostle, social service was an expression of spiritual vocation;

¹ J. R. Lowell, “Ode.”

and it was as far removed from a purely materialistic socialism as the burning prayers of St. John the Baptist, kneeling under the stars at midnight in the desert to claim a message for his next day's preaching, were from the vain repetitions at the street corners of the Pharisee, who with proud look and high stomach came out from Jerusalem to hear him. To us of to-day social reform is becoming almost as fashionable as once was a certain type of obsolete Churchmanship; and for Christ's ministering servant to divorce it from its true spiritual associations is to enter upon a degeneration which is as certain as it must be fatal to his true vocation.

The temptation to us modern clergy to exchange the high aims of ministry for what is lower and less exacting is real and pressing. But there is another danger to which we are specially prone, which arises, like that of which I have just spoken, from the increasing difficulties of our calling in modern life. We have to fear a mood like Hamlet's, which weakly bewails that "the times are out of joint," and bitterly resents "the spite that we were ever born to set them right." A young curate plunged into his work in the midst of a modern city, where every day he will meet either vigorous denials of his faith, or, worse still, a pre-occupation with other interests which will not stop to listen to his message, is tempted to play the coward as he thinks of a time when every decent Englishman accepted religion as part of the outfit of a complete gentleman, and the commonalty would as soon have denied the Church's claims as it would have questioned the right of the gentry to be richer and more fortunate than itself. He has come to his kingdom, but why is it that it is for such a time as this? What a wilderness of thought! What a desert of problems! What a poor, thin little voice he has; he can hardly make it heard at all amid the noise of the inhospitable world, which refuses all that he is anxious to give it! In the midst of it he feels like a pedlar at Christmas, who tramps the city streets and struggles to find buyers for his wares, knowing that he has nothing to offer which can compete with the garish attractions of the brilliant shop-windows that

win the ready attention of the passers-by. Perhaps he opens his Church papers and looks for strength in their evidence of common purpose and common faith. What he finds instead is a discussion about miracles, which he had thought were of the very essence of his creed. And here are men, with the same vocation to minister Christ's Gospel, who are resolving even the facts of his Lord's Virgin-birth and bodily resurrection into myth which has grown around the original Christian story. What is he to make of a modernism which struggles still to see in its tattered Gospels Christ's unutterable smile after it has ruthlessly evicted from them the Divine human face? Why this ebb and flow of opinion? Why this shaking of the heavens and the earth? How much more comfortable to live in a world where fundamentals were universally accepted, and the only work for the ministry would be to get them applied to experience! This welter of uncertainty, these multifarious claims to accomplish somehow all kinds of difficult work, this long, hard struggle to climb up the steep slope of duty, which sometimes seems strangely unreal, and veils itself except to the most earnest search for vision! "Oh, that I had wings like a dove, that I might fly away to some quiet sphere where there would be space and freedom and leisure to grow wise!"

III.

It is under conditions like these, and with such temptations, that the parish priest has to do his work to-day. Do I paint a stern and menacing picture, because I refuse to deck out the sphere of ministerial service in fine colours, and to give to the severe features of fact the insipid smile of unreality which soon disappears in the glare of experience? Dear brothers, it would indeed be a cynical task to describe the stress of your future if it were not that this is the background against which may shine all the brighter the glorious hopes and the magnificent promises of the ministry to which you are called. I need not now ask you to foresee or to think of what you will certainly learn to find out for yourselves, the great, the unspeakable rewards which do

come to the man who, in spite of all that threatens to daunt him, turns his face to the east and bravely performs his tasks. For the present I am more concerned to affirm that it is an experience never to be forgotten in a man's life when he begins to see something of the possibilities of his mission, by measuring them over against the magnitude of his difficulties. That is the experience which brings forth true prophecy, and awakens the voice which cries aloud for a way in the desert, and prepares through the wilderness a highway for God.

Prophecy! That is our supreme need, and such a world as this in which you are pledged to minister is the very wheel on which God shapes His prophets, and moulds them for their work. Yes, believe me, though we need much in the Church to-day, there is nothing we need so much as a prophetic ministry. Not an order of self-satisfied dogmatists who ape infallibility, and skim over the surface of the burning, aching human problems with easy solutions which have nothing in them but the evidences of prejudice and pride. Not this, but men who have travelled far into the tangled forests of life, and following still the kindly light that led them "o'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent," have found that it has broadened into a vision of the face of God; men who have felt in themselves the awful loneliness of the last silence, and have heard that silence broken by the voice of Christ; men who having shuddered amid the bewilderment of a material world-process have turned with a cry of despairing appeal to the Eternal Spirit which uprose within them, and have learned how to sing *Veni, Creator*, to Him who has done in their own souls the work of illumination for which He came at Pentecost to fill the Church; men to whom the holy name of "Father" is not a picturesque description of the unknowable Power behind creation, but the sacrament of an eternal heart, and the Son not a Greek ideal of Godhead, but the everlasting utterance of incarnate grace and truth, and the Spirit not an influence of unintelligible deity, but a divine Life-Giver and Comforter and Friend; men to whom atonement is the last best word of an infinite readiness and ability to save,

and justification by faith as real and as deep an experience as the poignant tragedy of their own sin; men, in a word, who have been taught in the strong conviction of faith to cry with St. John, “*ἐγνώκαμεν καὶ πεπιστεύκαμεν τὴν ἀγάπην*—We know and have believed the love.” Ah! for such as these what a sphere lies open in the world which we clergy find throbbing and wistfully inquiring behind the thin veil which conceals it from eyes that have never learned to see it! If we could but attain to that clear vision it would transform the drudgery of a barren and ineffective service into the rich and potent ministry of the true prophet of God.

“If we could but attain to it.” With this I close, but not in the subjunctive mood.

It is not the literary and historical criticism of Sir William Ramsay and others which is doing most, though it has done much, to confirm for faith the history of the Acts of the Apostles as the true story of the earliest life of the Church. It is rather our sense, as we read that book in full view of modern thought, that it embodies, as only a true story could, the new, divine life of the Christian society when first it was filled with the Holy Ghost. It is the evidence which it offers to us still of the inrush of the Spirit into human lives, making new men and women, and kindling in them a fire of devotion and a clearness of vision which are just the power that we sadly lack to-day. Look at the Church in her glorious childhood, with the dew of heaven's morning on her brow, and the smile of God's youth in her eyes. What a quest she is bent upon! What power she wields! What an elasticity there is in her step, and what blows she strikes at the strongholds of sin! What a faith she has in the exalted Christ! Where did she get it, and can we get it too? The Church is a feeble and weary old man now, compared with the sublime Church of the first days. Can we win back that splendid youth? Can we learn again the secret that made her once so invincible as she went forth to serve her Lord? Aye, we may learn it as the Apostles and earliest Christians learned

it, in a new experience of the power that already worketh in us, the power of the Holy Ghost.

Down, then, with all those self-built fences that keep Him out of your soul! Fling wide every chamber of your being, that He may enter in! God holds the keys of your unknown future. Where and how He will call you to serve Him He alone knows. It may be that all your life through you will be an obscure parish priest. Perhaps there is that in you which He may shape to larger ministries, and use to rule a diocese or to speak on a large scale to your fellow-men. It matters not. What matters is your consecration of yourself to Him. Shake off the clinging fetters of your unbelief. This is St. Thomas's Day, the birthday of a doubter's faith, and there come back to the memories of many sons of Cambridge the words of Prince Lee to one of her greatest teachers: "*μη φοβοῦ μόνον πίστευε*. Ah, Westcott, mark that *μόνον*." Make the great Scholar-Bishop's answer your own: "*Κύριε, πιστεύω· βοήθει μου τῇ ἀπιστίᾳ*—Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief."¹ Here, above you and within you, already in possession but with more still to give, God waits to equip you for your service. Lift up your heart, accept the unspeakable gift, and then go forth, humble but courageous and believing, out into the great world which awaits your work. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

¹ See "B. F. Westcott," by A. Westcott, i. 249.

