

Editorial

When was the last time you met somebody whose main concern in life was to get closer to God? It may seem like a strange question to ask in a Church journal, but in the troubled times through which we are passing, it seems to be a particularly relevant one to ask. Recent debates in the Church, and notably all the fuss over the ordination of women, would give most outsiders the impression that God is dead, or that at the very least, He has retired from active service in the Church of England. This has been suspected for some time of course, and not only by radical theologians. Anyone who reads what the secular press is saying about the Church will soon realize that the uncommitted observer is often puzzled by the apparent lack of any connexion between the classic spiritual quest of the Christian, on the one hand, and church life on the other.

A random sampling of ecclesiastical pronouncements does nothing to enlighten us. Go to the institution of a new vicar, and listen to what the presiding bishop has to say. This is an occasion when many non-churchgoers are present, ranging from the vicar's teenage children to the local town councillors. How likely is it that the bishop will say anything at all about God? If that is an unfair question to ask, turn up at any church on a Sunday morning and listen to the sermon. Is there anything in it which brings you closer to God, or makes you more eager to meet Him? Do you go home from the service and fall on your knees in eager expectation that He will come into your life and confirm what you have just heard from the pulpit?

Secularization takes many forms, but lack of interest in meeting God is perhaps the most basic manifestation of it. Evangelicals were once known for their personal holiness, and even those who disliked them had to admit that they had a special quality which was to be respected, even if it sometimes appeared to be rather forbidding. Anglo-Catholics went from strength to strength, in spite of widespread opposition to their practices, as long as they held out that 'vision glorious' which attracted scores of men and women to a life of disciplined holiness. Only when that vision succumbed to a combination of arsenic and old lace did the glory finally depart.

Today we live in a Church in which holiness, the practice of the presence of God, is on the whole no longer understood. Of course there are pockets here and there—even in the darkest times, there are always the seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal. But if we look at the public face of the Church, we see a rather different picture. Ask most people whether they know of any prominent religious figures who strike them as 'holy' and they are liable to mention one (or more) of three figures—the Pope, Cardinal Hume and Mother Teresa. Not everyone will be

equally impressed by all of these, but there is little doubt that no prominent Anglican would be classed in their league.

Holiness of course is not a matter of prominence. It has always been true that God chooses the foolish and simple things of this world to shame the wise and powerful, and on that basis the Church of England can perhaps boast of an extra-special blessing, given that so many of the former have achieved recognition as the latter. But that is not really the point. The Church acquires the leadership which reflects its overall priorities and direction, and holiness is noticeably absent from that agenda. Having the right contacts is undoubtedly important for advancement in any society, but it is disturbing to find that in the Church of England, God does not seem to come into that category.

One of the saddest results of this is that spiritual things are abused, because nobody really knows how to handle them. The notion that the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit can be measured by a fixed series of extraordinary 'gifts' which the truly spiritual are meant to exhibit, is an indication of how far we have fallen from the Biblical vision in this matter. The gifts of the Spirit are a means to an end, which is the ability to cry 'Abba, Father!' from the depths of our heart and soul. We are filled with the Spirit in order that we may walk with God, not in order to be able to show off our latest acquisition in the spiritual realm. But today, even to talk this kind of language is suspect, because it carries with it certain hidden assumptions which send the appropriate signals to the elect.

At a somewhat humbler level, we have grown used to hearing Christians cover a multitude of sins with pious language. This has always been a problem in the Church, but the verbal diarrhoea of our time creates special conditions in which it can flourish. More and more, we seem to be confronted with an atmosphere in which the most blatant hypocrisy hides behind the concept of 'love' and in which the gift of interpretation is needed to decode what some of the more zealous brethren are actually saying. The recent habit of identifying one's own, highly debatable propositions with 'the will of God', an affliction which is not unknown, even in General Synod, is another unfortunate example of the same thing.

Of course, it is easy to pick holes, and no doubt the Church will always reflect the unworthiness of its members to be servants of the Living God, however much we may try to make it otherwise. Nevertheless, it seems that there are some searching questions which we could all ask ourselves, and which might serve as a useful checklist of our own spiritual health.

Do I have daily devotions, including Bible reading and prayer? Is my prayer life confined to intercession for immediate needs, or do I have a wider and deeper vision? Am I listening for God's voice in the sermons, readings and prayers which make up my worshipping life, or am I more concerned with other things, like the minutiae of doctrinal orthodoxy (important as that undoubtedly is in the proper context)? Finally, do I try to ensure that there is some correspondence between the things I say and

the things I actually do? Or have I fallen into a way of thinking and speaking which sounds good, but which ultimately bears no relation to real life?

Here are challenges for us all as we seek to meet God in the days ahead, and to dedicate ourselves ever more deeply to His service.

GERALD BRAY