

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE PARISH AND THE WORLD

THE parish has long been a byword for pettiness of interest and narrowness of mind. The proverbial sneer at 'the politics of the parish pump' holds up to derision the insignificance of parish affairs, and there is no more contemptuous comment on a man's intelligence and outlook than to call him parochially-minded. Parochialism denotes the narrowest type of intelligence, character, and citizenship.

There is truth in these strictures, but not the whole truth. If the parish, because of its limits, tends to produce pettiness of mind and narrowness of interest and outlook, it also provides, as the whole course of this study has gone to show, a field for the development of the highest virtues and for the exercise of the finest activities. It opens out upon wide horizons. It is indeed itself a microcosm, a little world faced with the same tasks and problems, the same needs and demands, the same facts and forces, as confront and challenge the great world beyond its bounds. The same loves and hates, the same hopes and fears, the same ambitions and passions, the same motives and mixed elements of human nature are at work within it as obtain in the world at large.

The stage is narrower, but the drama and the characters are as human as humanity itself.

The poem hangs on the berry-bush till comes the poet's eye,  
And the whole street is a masquerade when Shakespeare passes by.

Carlyle's dictum, 'Here or nowhere is thy America,' stresses a truth which applies to more than the boat-load of emigrants at Greenock, who were seeking their fortunes in the great new land in the west. So the parish is not to be judged by its mere size, but by its essential character. It may be anything but parochial. Historically it has occupied a central place and exercised a commanding influence in world affairs.

How far is it likely to retain its place and importance in human society? The answer would seem to be—just so long and in so far as it retains its age-long character as a distinct and self-conscious neighbourhood and community. It is its suitability and sufficiency as a neighbourhood, and as an organ of community life and service, that have given it its place and importance hitherto; and its usefulness for these purposes seems far from being exhausted.

It may well have a future, for Church purposes at least, even in urban communities which at present are congested and oversized. The process of centralization by which vast populations have swarmed into great towns and cities, and in which the parish has been largely submerged, would seem to have reached its term. The size of a civic, no less than of a human, body may become so swollen as to be a source and sign, not of health and vigour, but of unwieldiness and weakness. The sense of neighbourhood and community is apt to be dissipated, and the machinery of government and administration tends to break down under its own weight. There is in short an optimum size both of community and area fitted to produce the best type of community life.

In our own country a process of dispersal and redistribution of the population has set in, and is taking

place on a nation-wide scale. Large numbers of families have already been transferred from congested towns and cities to more healthy and favourable surroundings, and a further and larger movement in the same direction is being deliberately planned. In particular new communities are being envisaged, and a few have already come into existence, in the form of garden cities, satellite towns, and small-scale industrial estates.

It is intended that these new communities should be of manageable size, self-contained, and provided with institutions fitted to create and foster a true and full community life. The school, the public hall, the place of entertainment, the playing-field and the public park, and not least the church, will all be features of their communal equipment. In all the main essentials they will be parishes, even if they are never known by that name; true neighbourhoods, that is to say, in which the community idea and the community spirit will find a congenial soil in which to flourish and bear their characteristic fruit.

One actual proposal of the planning authorities is that their maximum population should not exceed 20,000, that their areas should be delimited, and that they should be created separate civil parishes with urban powers to be granted in due course. As has already been noted, plans are being prepared by the Church of Scotland to reorganize its agencies and methods along the old and well-tried parochial lines, to cope with modern conditions and difficulties in existing large towns and cities. These proposed new and self-contained communities, whether or not they be created 'separate civil parishes,' will certainly lend themselves to the creation of ecclesiastical parishes, in which the Church as a community centre will endeavour

to fulfil its historic role. Without the gracious influences and inspirations which flow from Christian worship and fellowship, Christian teaching, and the Christian spirit in action, there can be no community life at its highest and best.

In rural areas, where the parish still retains its original and essential character, it seems destined to receive a new lease of life. The countryside is beginning to fill up once more with a revival of rural crafts, the planting of new industries, and the provision of social and cultural agencies and other amenities which will give fresh interest and stimulus to country life. Villages, too, which for long have been tending to diminish, and from which young life has been drained for lack of occupation and opportunity, and of those larger activities and more varied attractions in which youthful ambitions and energies find scope and outlet, are bound to share in the reviving life of the countryside.

In every land, certainly in our own, though later in Scotland than south of the border, the village has for centuries been a salient feature of the social scheme; and with the surrounding countryside the main source from which the nation has replenished its vigour and renewed its life. It is hard to see from what other source fresh health and energy can be drawn. If any nation is to survive in strength it must have its roots in the soil, and village and countryside must retain a foremost place in the social and national economy. So long as that is the case the rural parish will continue to subserve its age-long purpose, with the church as its creative spiritual centre and as the characteristic feature of the rural scene.

The fundamental reason, however, why the parish is likely to endure is that it serves an essential purpose

in human society, and meets a universal human need. Man is not only incurably religious, he is also incurably social ; and an institution which ministers to both of these inborn human instincts has in it an indefinite power of survival. They can only be satisfied in community, and the parish is the simplest form of community life, a necessary link between the family and the nation, just as the nation itself is a necessary factor in the integration of mankind.

There was good reason for the Church in the very beginning to adopt the parish as its peculiar field ; and there is equally good reason why it has been planted in every land where the Church has found a foothold. It is as natural to-day, almost as indigenous, in the frozen north and in the sunny south, in the distant east and west and in the islands of the sea, as it was in Asia Minor and Egypt, in Europe and North Africa, in the early centuries of the Faith. It has survived because it was fitted to survive ; and it has spread because, with the Church at its heart, it has ministered in the simplest form to the deepest instincts and needs of humanity.

Stated comprehensively, the supreme contribution of the parish to the world, its basal function, has been to create and foster the community spirit, and to be a training ground in community life. This has always been its essential character, its historic role. All along it has been a community, a neighbourhood ; and one great task of the Church has been to give the community a soul, to translate neighbourhood into 'good neighbourhood,' and to inspire those gracious relationships and activities which are the fine fruits of the Gospel and the marks of a deepening and developing community life.

Not without reason have church and parish been wedded throughout the ages. For the Church stands for community. With it there came into the world a startlingly new conception of the community idea and the community spirit. It was itself a new community, a new society, the like of which had never been seen save as a dream and vision of prophetic minds ; and its mission in one aspect could be described as the creation of a world-community embracing ' all nations and kindreds and people and tongues.' Its was a mission of reconciliation, redemption, and the right relationship of man to God and of man to man. In it, as in its Lord, there was ' neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female,' but all were ' members one of another ' because ' members of the Body of Christ.' For the first time in history the community idea in its full and final significance found living embodiment and expression.

It began in the local Christian congregation and the community which it served, and these have been and must remain its primary organs ; but it was intended to grow and spread in ever-widening circles till it embraced mankind. One world-community, one family of God and household of the Faith, the brotherhood of man under the Lordship of Christ and the Fatherhood of God—that was the nature of the new society and that its ultimate aim. It contemplated a new world-order, informed and inhabited by the living presence and spirit of Christ ; and it had to begin and continue with the parish, the simplest form of human neighbourhood, if it was to permeate larger communities, and make ' a world of good neighbours ' out of the divided, alien, and mutually jealous and hostile nations and races of mankind.

Through the providence of God in history the idea of world-community has at last in our generation come within the sphere of practical politics. The whole world has now become a 'neighbourhood' as never before; and the main pre-occupation of the nations is to create an organization through which world-community may be fostered and world security and peace be assured. Mankind must learn to live in community, or perish. The League of Nations, the first gallant attempt to achieve this end, did little more than prepare the ground and point the way, and has handed on its task to its successor. Profiting by its weaknesses and mistakes, the United Nations now in being may, and it is to be fervently hoped will, prove more successful and enduring.

We do well, however, not to be over-confident, or even to pitch our immediate hopes too high. The weakness of such man-made institutions is that they are brought into being by external constraint, almost under duress; that they are directed to mainly material ends; and that they are liable to compromise on their own principles, and to break down under the strain of sharply conflicting interests and ideals. Before they can become organisms and not merely mechanical organizations they must grow a soul. There must be not merely 'one body' but 'one spirit'; and nothing but the authentic power of the Spirit of God can breathe into them the breath of life.

It is just here that the Church, with its reconciling and universal message and mission, comes into play. It is quite certain that no attempt at world-community can succeed, except in so far as it is based on Christian principles, and animated by that Christian spirit and example which it is the business of the Church to

provide. From the day of Pentecost onwards the creation of a world-community has been bound up with the mission of the Church, which is indeed itself a world-community, however imperfectly that aspect of its being and mission may have so far been realized. World-community is still its concern and its aim.

In two respects, in this connection, it has come sadly short of its high calling. In the first place, by its unhappy divisions, it has impaired and weakened its own communion, and so has presented to the world only a very imperfect witness and example of the community spirit and idea. In the second place, by its respect of persons, it has tended to perpetuate those differences and cleavages in human society which it was part of its mission and of its very nature to transcend. Christian fellowship is still a living force in the Church's life and work; but it lacks that ardour and enthusiasm which in the beginning, and in times of religious revival, bound its members so closely together to their Lord and all who bore His name. No longer is 'love of the brotherhood' a conspicuous mark of the Church and its members. No longer is the world, looking on with wonder, moved to exclaim, 'Behold, how these Christians love one another.'

In both of these respects the Church must recover its original spirit and character if it is to fulfil its mission of world reconciliation and communion. It must provide a working example of what a world-community may be—a body drawn from 'all nations and kindreds and people and tongues,' in which all are united in a common faith and love and loyalty, all bring their characteristic gifts to enrich the common life, and all 'endeavour to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.' This is no baseless vision, no pious dream.

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It is a description of what the Church was created to be, and of what, however imperfectly, it has in some measure achieved.

Moreover, there are patent signs that the Church is beginning to regain its unity and reintegrate its broken fragments. The same providence of God in history which has constrained the nations to create a world organization for their common security and peace has also been constraining the Church throughout the world to seek a common basis of faith and order for the accomplishment of its world task. The œcumenical movement, which was started little more than a generation ago, not of human foresight or design but in the inscrutable plan and purpose of God, is one of the most arresting signs of the times. Already in that brief period it has made almost phenomenal progress. It has gathered into its sweep all Orthodox and Protestant Churches throughout the world, gone far to reconcile their differences and bring to light their underlying unity of faith and order, and engaged them in a common effort the more effectively to discharge their world mission.

It is of capital significance that this movement has originated at precisely this juncture in human affairs, when world-community has become an urgent necessity if mankind is to survive. Faith can interpret this significant development in only one way—that God has been awakening and preparing His Church to confront its God-given task in its latest phase, and, not by word alone but by deed and example, to preach goodwill to the nations and lead them in the ways of community and peace.

In addition, however, to its visible and practical unity in confronting its world task, the Church must

recover that spirit of fellowship among its members which was so notable a mark of its life in the beginning, and in which lay one of its chief attractions to those that were without. 'Love of the brotherhood' must again become a glowing enthusiasm. All the more is this necessary because millions of people throughout the world have of recent years experienced just this kind of fellowship. Constrained by a great and common peril, for the second time within a generation many nations throughout the world have been moved to sink their differences, and to unite in defence of their common ideals, and indeed of their very existence. Their unity and enthusiasm were remarkable, and their fellowship a genuine brotherhood in arms ; and, although ancient and inveterate differences have already once more raised their heads, the fellowship enjoyed was too strong and pure a flame ever to be quite extinguished. The smoking flax must not be quenched. Only, it will take the gentleness and patience of Christ to coax it into a living flame.

Even more to the point, millions of men and women, especially of the younger generation, in the Second World War as in the first, discovered and experienced a joy and power of fellowship that transcended all differences of class and culture, of tradition and rank and race. It was fellowship in a great cause, kindled by devotion to noble ideals, and fostered into a pure and holy flame by the sharing of common dangers and hardships, common service and suffering and sacrifice. It is already in process of dissolution, now that the pressing need for it is over and its work is so far done ; but the men and women who experienced it and shared its power and glory will never be content with less. Moreover, apart from their awakened vision and desire,

the need for such a goodly fellowship remains, in face of no less towering tasks and problems and perils than those from which the world has recently emerged.

To meet these tasks and problems and perils the Church has just such a fellowship to offer to the world, if only it can rise to the height of its high calling. It is a fellowship of faith and hope and love, created and sustained by a divine Leader and Lord, and commissioned by Him to no less a task than the salvation of the world and the gathering into one of all nations. Even in its present weakness and imperfection it is a living and expanding world fellowship and force. Its very name is a challenge and inspiration to the universal human heart, and it is the repository of a reconciling and unifying power which is divine. For it is the 'Body of Christ,' and it is inhabited and empowered by the living Presence and Spirit of Christ, Who declared that 'the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' It is a deathless and undefeatable fellowship, because it is not a human but a divine creation, chosen and consecrated of God for the fulfilment of His eternal purpose. 'There is one body and one spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.'

Only, to meet the world's desperate need, and the challenge and opportunity of what is plainly a new era in human history, it must be revived in all its pristine and inherent power and beauty. Personal devotion to Christ and His cause must become once more its ruling passion, its unquenchable enthusiasm, its throbbing heart. 'Love of the brotherhood' must be born again of His Word Who said: 'This is My commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you. By this

shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye love one another.' 'Love to God and all men,' which shone from His cradle and blazed from His cross, must become once more its 'plea and gift and sign.' The Golden Rule must become in very deed and truth its law and rule of life. It must live up to its name, 'The Body of Christ,' enshrining His Spirit, following His steps Who went about continually doing good, learning to love in His great way, sharing His joy of the Cross, ever adventuring in faith as He blazed the trail, catching at the skirts of His flying garments Who is always ahead of man's noblest vision, leading His people out and on to that 'one, far-off, divine event to which the whole creation moves.' What that event may be in all its fulness no man knows; but it certainly includes a world in which all shall be 'citizens of that Rome where Christ is Roman,' sons and daughters of 'the Jerusalem which is above and free, and is the mother of us all.'

In this pilgrimage of the spirit of man parish and parish church, in their original and essential character, can hardly fail to have their place and part. For the life of man finds its meaning and fulfilment only in a community of persons, and it is among his immediate friends and neighbours that he must first catch the community spirit, and feel the joy and power of community life. Similarly, the local community finds its meaning and fulfilment in the wider community of the nation and the world. Apart from the fellowship of the Church, however, and the inspiration and constraint of the Gospel, neither can receive fulfilment. A good neighbour and a world of good neighbours are His creation alone, Who told the story of the Good Samaritan and Himself gave it imperishable life and power. John

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Wesley took the world for his parish, but it was in the parish church and rectory of Epworth that he received his first baptism and dedication to his world mission. And parish and parish church must ever remain the focus, the hearth and altar, of the Church's life, just because its parish is the world.