

for good or ill, is someone remote from their lives. That is concerned with behaviour, with morals. But belief comes before morals, since our behaviour, or at any rate our consciences, will depend on what we believe.

Nowadays, it seems that almost anything can be explained and given its scientific causes, and the pressure to discard God the creator is constant. Once we do that, there is no need for God the redeemer, because there is no such thing as sin, or goodness, in the Christian meaning of the words. Our Lord then becomes no more than he was to the superior Jews, a nuisance and a trouble-maker. Christianity is judged to be a cause of many of the world's problems.

We need to go back to the root of things and, in spite of the smiles it may cause, to learn again from the inspired word of God; to hear again the voice of God declaring, 'I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the house of bondage'; and to learn from the New Testament the way in which we were rescued, and who our rescuer is, and how he has taken us into his own house.



### FROM THE PEW

MICHAEL DE LA BEDOYERE

**T**HE picture is of a medium-sized church, well filled with mothers and fathers and children of all ages—a baby probably intent on also being heard, and dozens of very small children, restless, crawling about, biting father's ear and being shushed by mother. Besides the family groups there are young men and young girls, more or less aware of one another and the show they are putting up. As with the family groups, the old and the young may or may not have missals, a prayer-book, their rosary-beads. While one would hope that those who have come to Mass, armed with nothing more than their offering, are contemplatives who have passed beyond the stage of actually saying prayers and wondering whether mental prayer or the prayer of quiet is best suiting their spiritual progress, it is not, I think, uncharitable to assume that a high percentage are in church simply because Sunday Mass is an obligation under pain of mortal

sin, because it is the custom to which they have been brought up, or because of some more or less clear conviction that bodily presence at Sunday Mass, with an attempt now and then to remember what they are in church for, is an act of religion.

Such, I take it, is the preacher's normal congregation. Such is the preacher's opportunity. We do, of course, know that attendance at Mass with the right intention is supernaturally worth infinitely more than the words of even a preacher-genius capable, in a few minutes' talk, of riveting the attention of all—except the babies—on words calculated to raise minds from cooking the dinner or 'shall I see Jane this evening?' to Jacob's ladder pitched between Heaven and Bermondsey West. Almighty God, knowing his people, not to mention the preacher, has kindly arranged all that. Still, we must suppose that giving us so much, virtually gratis, he not only expects us to respond within the narrow limits of our feebleness, but that he will answer our small efforts by those disproportionate graces which will keep him close to us and us close to him both during Mass itself and those more difficult hours of the day and week when dissipation, worldliness, temptation and sin beset us. Doubtless, if the preacher could rouse us all to a sense of spiritual reality where the stupendous Sacrifice of the Mass is concerned, we might come to need his services less, the grace of the Mass itself helping us during the week. But that is unlikely to happen, and meanwhile we have to acknowledge that the preacher, whoever he may be, gifted or otherwise, holy man or one less holy, is given every Sunday morning the opportunity of waking up slumbering souls to what is happening in church and helping them to carry on another week as conscious Christians (however feeble) rather than as men and women indistinguishable to themselves or others from their fellow men and women who have darkened no church door for many years.

As one person out of that multitude of Catholics who go to Mass every Sunday I ought, I suppose, to have a tremendous amount to say as to what I and my fellow lay Catholics would find most spiritually beneficial from the one weekly sermon or instruction or talk which we are all likely to hear, namely the few minutes after the church notices have been read. Alas, I have not! All I have so far been made aware of in my mind, as I reflect on the subject, is the obvious disproportion between what any priest can manage to say in a few minutes, Sunday after Sunday, and

what I should personally need to hear said if the Sunday sermon were permanently to lift me up a step on that Jacob's Ladder. But perhaps indirectly I have been helped, since from now onwards, I shall try not to add my voice to those of my fellow parishioners who emerge from church saying, 'Gosh, what a rotten sermon!' And what follows is, autobiographically, true.

For very many years I used to look upon the sermon as a bore, always hoping against hope that the priest, having finished his notices, would feel too tired to embark on a sermon, however short. I suppose that today I do know a bit more about my religion and its implications than I used to and I suppose that I have more competence to judge the value of sermons, yet where once I dreaded the bad sermon and had little expectation of a good one, I now look forward to *any* sermon. In honesty I must also admit that I like short ones.

This may be due to the fact that I have come to learn (in middle life) something of the real meaning of the Mass—as distinguished from brief catechetical formulae—and realize that profiting from hearing the Word of God and other pastoral instruction is very much part of the full action of the Church, priest and priestly people, as 'my sacrifice and yours' is offered to the Eternal Father.

The sermon is, of course, only a part of this instruction which reaches us, or should reach us, even when no sermon is preached, through the reading of Scripture and the prayers of the Mass. Unfortunately, this has become in practice a very passive instruction. Those who have no Missal or do not trouble to read it receive no instruction whatever except for the reading in the common tongue of the Epistle and Gospel. Even at Sunday parish Masses this is not always done. Long notices may prove to be sufficient excuse for omitting the reading. A pastoral letter quite frequently means that most of the congregation will have no idea of what the Epistle and Gospel have to teach them. I have also noticed that in dioceses where the bishop insists on an instruction, however short, the omission of reading the Epistle and Gospel is frequently to be met with. Surely this is wrong.

All this is no doubt due to pressure of time where many Sunday Masses have to be celebrated in order to meet the needs of our large urban congregations, a high proportion of whom take advantage of the easier fasting laws to go to Communion at Masses throughout the morning. One is bound to wonder

whether one day the solution will not have to be found in a far more extensive use of the vernacular in the instructional parts of the Mass.

As things are, there are churches today where a priest or lector reads the Epistle and Gospel in English while the celebrant reads the Latin quietly at the altar. In children's Masses and in others a priest will sometimes help the congregation by reading the Proper in English and parts of the Ordinary. So far as time allows he may otherwise help the congregation, for example, by reminding it of the commemorations of the living and of the dead. Abroad such methods of helping the people to understand what is going on, to learn and to pray and to act intelligently, are frequently met with.

The reader may well wonder why I am concentrating on the Mass, especially the Sunday Mass for the people, when my subject is preaching. But today sermons outside Mass are becoming rarer and congregations listening to them smaller. Nor is there much hope of a change. Evening Mass is likely to spread and distractions available to people, such as television, will keep the masses away. Apart from this, it seems to me logical to think of preaching as part and parcel of the Mass for the people and, consequently, to think of it as integrated with the Mass's liturgical instruction. The old practice—now not so common because of instructional courses—of basing the sermon on the Epistle and Gospel of the Sunday, or more usually the Gospel, is in harmony with this view of preaching.

The main question of preaching boils down therefore today to the best use of the five to ten minutes which the sequence of Masses in our urban districts allows. Even in rural districts the one or two priests available are likely to have to say two or even three Masses in widely separated chapels or halls, and this kind of short instruction is the most they can possibly manage. This, by the way, is a point which a congregation, presumably in a disposition of charity since it is hearing Mass, should not overlook. We can all imagine ourselves rivalling the balance, diction and ease of the television or radio speaker, but even were many priests naturally gifted in the spoken word or even carefully trained in the art of preaching, they alone have to carry the burden of preaching two or three times a morning in the course of the spiritual concentration on the Mass, possibly travelling and almost certainly expected

to show themselves to the people as they leave church. And it all has to be done, at best, on a cup of tea. Perhaps they could help us to more charitable thoughts about them by occasionally reminding us of the situation!

How best then to use the precious time for the benefit of us, the congregation? I suppose one would get as many answers to this question as there are people in church. Any one writer has to be humble enough to admit that he can really only speak for himself.

It seems to me logical that the Mass of the Sunday should itself be the preacher's text—not only the Gospel, but the Epistle, the Collect and other changing parts of the Mass. This is not so difficult as it seems, for there are excellent books available which in perhaps a couple of pages bring out the place of any particular Sunday Mass in the liturgical cycle and the special meaning and teaching of that Sunday's liturgy. No doubt this means that one year would be very similar to another, but there are surely endless variations on this rich theme. We are told that in a few years the liturgy will be revised in such a way as to bring more of Scripture into the Sunday Masses in a cycle of a number of years rather than the present annual cycle. The thought of this reminds of how much would be missed by congregations of the future if no vernacular were used or if the priests did not make the Church's enriched teaching the subject of their sermons and instructions. Surely it is possible for even a very busy priest to read the kind of book I have suggested—some modern missals also give excellent brief explanations of the special message of each Sunday Mass—and instruct in his own words and according to his own feelings on the theme thus easily put before him.

This would be all the easier, if the preacher endeavoured to apply the spirit of the Mass to the circumstances of his congregation's lives, locally, nationally and internationally. How very rarely does one hear from the pulpit references to world, national and local news—excepting in the last case the parish fête or whist drive or pools. How very rarely even to Church news, to a papal encyclical, to the persecution of our brethren, to our relations with other Christian communities. Perhaps I am prejudiced here, but each week the Catholic papers cover a great deal of relevant material to some of which at least the priest could surely refer as of spiritual importance to the Catholic, especially

the one who least realizes the fact that being a Catholic is being an actor in the continuing drama of God's love for man.

My point is that Catholics today have to live their Christian lives outside the four walls of the church and outside the sanctuary of their own homes into which, anyway, the press, radio and television penetrate. It is desirable not only that the preacher's message should be essentially one of spiritual direction, based on the Mass's liturgy, but that it should be spiritual direction with the windows open on the world in terms with which our Christian life has to be lived.

A small example will show what I mean. Two Masses remain vividly in my memory. In a commentated Mass in Paris, the priest at the pause for the commemorations of the living and the dead very briefly reminded us of the need for our prayers in the foreign mission field. It was Mission Sunday. I had forgotten until he mentioned it. The other was in the south of France. The priest spoke of a serious railway accident during the night not far away. It had been described on the radio, but not as yet in the papers. Somehow these topical and actual allusions made the Mass seem more real, more purposeful. We were there and then engaged on practical work.

An instruction, however short, on the spirit and teaching of that actual Mass, applied in a practical way to our jobs as Christians that day, that week, would surely give heart and inspiration even to those who come to church out of a sense of obligation and without bothering to bring a missal or even a rosary. It would awaken the somnolent and catch the attention of mothers and fathers intent on keeping their children quiet. As for those who feel rather smug because they have their missals and are conscientiously trying to participate in the Mass with their minds and bodies—well, perhaps a reminder that the fruits of their devotions are needed by others as well as by themselves would not be out of place and would be spiritually beneficial.

May I end by suggesting with all respect to those who must know much more about this subject than I do that what is wanted in our preaching today is not superior intelligence or the gift of the spoken word, but a little more constructive and, dare I say it, apostolic imagination.