

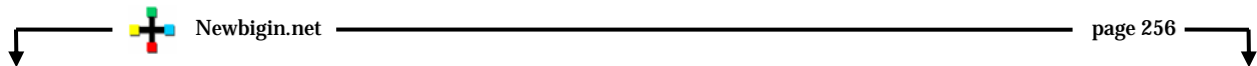


## The Church as a Servant Community

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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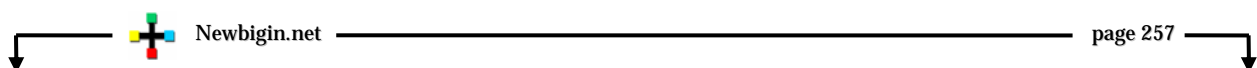


*\* This is part of an address (recorded on tape and transcribed) at the Consultation on Love and Justice in the World of Tomorrow, Madras, October, 1970, by the Rt. Rev. Lesslie Newbigin, the CSI Bishop of Madras.*

I think it would be right to say that this is the first conference of its kind in which we have asked all the Churches in South India together to think through what it means to speak of the Church as the servant Church, in the context of the India of tomorrow. Of course it may be said that it is not new: this is old stuff. The Church has been involved in social action all the time. Indeed is it not the case that when for some reason or other it is expedient for some public figure to say something nice about the Church, he always talks about our social service? But, if we are honest with ourselves, we do know that this praise has to be taken with a very large pinch of salt. We know that we cannot honestly say that the Church as a whole has been a servant Church.

I think that there are three things that we have got to say by way of radical criticism of the past. The first is that the social service activities which have carried our name, our schools and hospitals and orphanages and other institutions which have been run by Christian organisations of one kind or another, have not in general evoked the sacrificial service and giving of the ordinary Church members. In fact, I hope I am not being too hard if I say that these institutions have not evoked the sacrifice of our Church members but their cupidity. In other words, they have been regarded by most of our Church members as institutions which can be exploited for the private benefit of the Christian community, institutions where we can expect to get cheap education, free medical treatment, and free places for our children, and jobs for our nephews and nieces, rather than places through which we actually perform our service of love and justice to the community.

Two or three years ago, under the auspices of the Madras Christian Council for Social Service, we arranged to divide up the



648 registered slums in Madras city among the something like 80 Christian congregations: We allotted a certain number of slums to each congregation, and a joint letter went to the priest, presbyter, pastor, padre or whatever he is called, of every one of these congregations - signed by His Grace the Archbishop of Madras-Mylapore and myself as the Honorary Presidents of the Madras Christian Council - saying in very clear terms, 'Please regard these slums named below as your responsibility. Please go into these slums as a congregation. Please accept it as part of your job to care for people in these slums'. While a small number of congregations did respond to that appeal, I would not think that there were more than half-a-dozen out of the 80 or so in Madras city which could really be said to have responded. And even in those half-a-dozen congregations I would venture to guess that 90 per cent of the members never heard about what is being done in the neighbouring slums. We have not evoked response from the ordinary members of our churches; we have not created in their minds the sense that the Church is basically a servant community. And, as I have said before, even the institutions for which we are often praised, we must admit, have tended to evoke rather the cupidity than the sacrificial spirit of our members.

Secondly, I think that our institutions have been regarded more as institutions of prestige than as institutions of service. The reasons usually put forward for starting a new college or a hospital, or for keeping something going when, it is no longer needed, have nothing to do with the question of whether the community actually needs this service. It is a question of whether the Church can afford not to have this particular symbol of prestige in the community. And this is evidenced by the fact that so much of our educational efforts, at least in recent years, have been directed towards the privileged rather than towards the under-privileged.

And thirdly, our programmes have been perhaps to some extent instruments of charity, but not instruments of justice. I think our programmes in general have stopped short at the point where they could challenge the existing order. I don't think that is wholly true and not always true. I think there is no doubt that in an earlier period the action of Christian missions in going into the backward communities and starting schools

everywhere for them, was an action which challenged the existing order, which often created violence and strife and which did have the effect of producing more justice for the underprivileged. But I don't think that is typical of most of the services in which we have been involved. In so far as they have been a service, they have been a service of charity from the strong to the weak rather than a service of justice which challenged the distribution of wealth in the community.

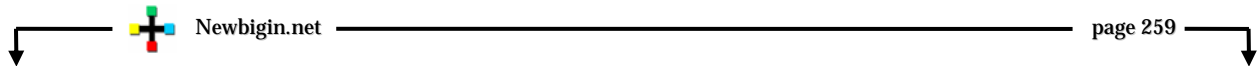
It seems to me that the basic task before us is to recover the sense in the ordinary life of the Church that the Church is itself a servant community, that if the incarnate Son of God manifested God's glory by taking the form of a slave, then the Church can never manifest that glory in any other way except by being itself in the form of a servant. And I think that really the only two things that I want to say in this keynote address are simply a development of that theme in two directions.

I want to say that it is not enough - it is not the purpose of this consultation as I see it - that we should simply discuss various programmes or projects or activities which are carried on, as it were on the periphery of the Church's life but which don't implicate every Church member in the ordinary life and worship of the congregation. The issue that we are dealing with here concerns the very essence of the Church at its heart, its life, its ministry, its liturgy, its congregational

order. The issue of love and justice takes us to the very heart of the Christian message itself. It involves the very centre of the dogma which we exist to proclaim.

## I

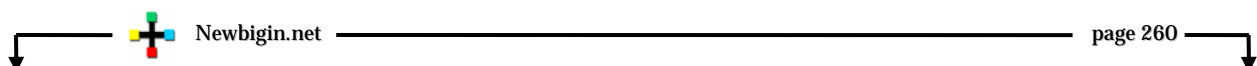
Let me begin with the first point. Let me begin with a little excursion into Church history on which I am no expert and on which I expect to be shot down at the question-time. But if I understand rightly, the primitive Church - I mean the Church of the first two or three centuries - had something here which we have lost. Let me illustrate it in these ways. It had as a very essential part of its ministry the office of the diaconate, a serving ministry which was not just a survival from the past as our diaconate is, but was a distinct ministry which was concerned with the care of the poor, of the widows, of the underprivileged.



That was the whole job of that ministry and through the ministry of the diaconate that concern was brought right into the very heart of the liturgy of the Church. Alongside of the preaching, and the teaching and the liturgy; and the sacraments and the pastoral care which we always think of as the central activities of the, Church, the things - without, which there is no Church, there was also, as an equally essential and integral part, the care of the poor. This was part of the whole ministry, in some respects nearer to the centre than the priesthood because there is clear evidence that in the primitive Church - the deacon stood nearer to the bishop than did the presbyter. This ministry of compassion to the poor was at the very heart of the Church's ministerial life.

And secondly, this concern penetrated into the very heart of the liturgy. It was the deacon, the social service agent of the Church, who was responsible for the intercessions. We have just a survival of this in our liturgies where the deacon gives biddings for intercession. That is just an archaeological survival. This reality was there then because this was the man who was visiting the homes, who was actually continuously in touch throughout the whole week with the poor, the sick, the underprivileged, and therefore he was the man who had to stand up at the time of the intercessions and give the subjects for intercession. He is brought into the heart of the liturgy at the point of the offering, where the holy elements are offered, the bread and the wine and the gifts of the people; it is the deacon who brings them because he is the agent of the Church's compassionate service. And finally after the liturgy is finished, it is the deacons who are responsible for taking the gifts of the people out and distributing them to those in need, so that this service of compassion is brought into the very heart of the liturgy itself which is the very living centre of the Church's life. It is nothing on the outskirts, nothing that could be dispensed with if necessary: it is in the very centre of the Church's life.

And thirdly, to put the, same thing really in another way: If you had asked the Christians of those first centuries the question, What constitutes the Church? Where is Christ to be met? I think, one would have received a very different answer from the kind of answer that is characteristic of the last four centuries of Christian history, at least in the West. In all the theological

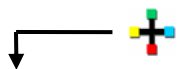


battles that have raged among the divided Churches of Christendom, when this question is raised, 'Where is Christ actually to be met now?' (in other words, 'Where is the Church?'), the answer has been given in such terms as, Where the word is truly preached; Where the sacraments are duly administered. Where there is a ministry in the valid succession from the apostles. Such answers as these are the characteristic answers. But one element which I think would have been an essential

part of the answer of a Christian in the first three centuries would be that Christ is present in the poor. And that I think is true to the New Testament as well as to the earliest traditions of the Church. The Church, therefore, is present where the poor are served in Christ's name. In that meeting, Christ is present.

What I am trying to stress is that we are dealing here with something which is not, as it were, one of the possible activities of the Church. We cannot say: 'A Church may or may not be active in social service'. A congregation cannot say: 'This Church is not interested in social service: it is interested in something else.' It is not this kind of question that we are dealing with. We are dealing with a question which concerns the integrity of the Church itself, its fundamental character as a Church. It is not something which can be, as it were, left to boards and committees, even though they may have their place. It is a question whether the Church in its fundamental character is a servant Church; whether it is possible to have in any valid sense a Christian congregation, or a Christian liturgy, or a Christian ministry in which this concern for the poor is not integrally involved.

Many of our Churches have been having much argument in recent years about the diaconate. There has been a recognition in most of our Churches that even where we have people called deacons they are in fact not deacons in any classical or valid sense, that the office of the diaconate in our Churches is largely a survival from the past and in substance is simply a period of probation before ordination to the priesthood or the presbyterate. And one has heard many arguments about this which go round and round and end up where they began. I have participated in many such arguments. I think that we have not faced the fact that the basic reason why we have not got a valid diaconate is because we have not got a valid *diakonia*, because we in fact are not, as a Church, doing the things which the diaconate existed to do, and

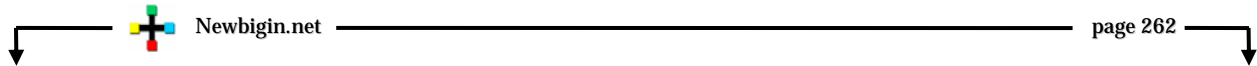


that we shall not have a valid diaconate in the Church until this fundamental reformation in the very structure of the Church itself takes place.

I noticed in Fr Volken's paper a plea for a professional social worker in each parish. Would we not be raising the issue in a more fundamental sphere if we said 'a deacon who is a professionally trained social worker in each parish', someone who is not on the periphery of the parish but somebody who as the social worker, is an essential part of the ministry of the parish without which it does, not have a full ministry in the proper ecclesiastical sense of the word. It is - if I may be allowed to say so - that in the setting up of this Centre\* here, one of the hopes that some of us have had, is that- it might be a pointer in the direction of the recovery of a genuine diaconate. As you know, the students who are residing here are receiving both a professional training as social workers in the Madras School of Social Work and also some theological orientation with it, and our hope is that through this we might begin to create a new cadre of workers who would be both thoroughly professionally competent as social workers and also prepared to perform, their service as social workers within the ministry of the Church as an integral part of it, with a full theological understanding of what is involved in the diaconate. This may be some time hence; but personally it is my very earnest hope that this Consultation itself may lead to some thinking along these lines in the Churches and that we may feel our way towards the point where we really do have a valid diaconate which would be both professionally competent in relation to the realities of the society in which we live and to the realities of contemporary human life, and would also be an instrument through which the Church recovers something of its own authentic nature as a servant community.

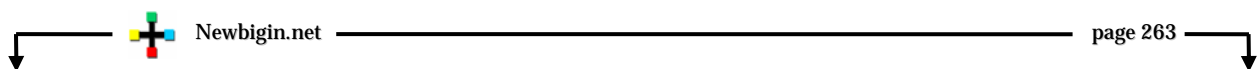
## II

Now I come to the second part, which is also on this fundamental theme, namely that we are dealing with the nature of the Church itself and not with any peripheral issue - the theme as given to us is 'Love and Justice'. How do we relate these two things? What is the relation between love and justice in the life



of the Community Service Centre, Madras, and teaching and worship of the Church? I suppose everyone here has read of the recent action of the World Council of Churches in giving away about a quarter of its very meagre reserve funds, a sum of \$200,000, to be placed at the disposal of organisations which are fighting racism. The money has not been given to buy guns or bombs but it has been given to organisations which may, on certain occasions, use guns and bombs. It has been given to organisations which are actively fighting against intolerable oppressive racist regimes. This action of the World Council has caused tremendous shock waves throughout the world and it has been commented on in the secular press throughout the whole world. I think it may prove, in the history of the Church, to have been a very very crucial decision indeed, because it brings to a sharp focus an issue which Christians cannot evade facing, namely, whether the pursuit of social justice, whether out loyalty to both love and justice requires, permits, or forbids, the support of violence directed against the established powers. The main Christian tradition, in which certainly our social work has stood, has been that the pursuit of justice should go up to but not beyond, the point where force is used against the established order. This has created the impression by and large, that the Church is an organisation which is on the side of the powers that be, on the side of those who are in control of the political and economic and social orders. And the Church has created the impression that our social work is an exercise of compassion at its best within a structure which it does not challenge. In other words, it is an exercise on the part of those who are in power and don't intend to give up their power on behalf of those who are the victims of that power. It is therefore action which has a very fundamental ambiguity at its heart.

There is a very sharp contrast here between the main Christian tradition in the field of social action and the main Christian tradition in the field of international affairs. The pacifist position in inter-national affairs has always been that of a very small minority. The main Christian tradition has, in one form or another, supported the idea of a just war and that, of course, is because the main Christian tradition has accepted the necessity for a political order - a political order which involves coercion as part of its very nature, an order which is concretised in specific states, nation states, empires, whatever they may be. And the



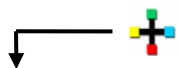
main Christian tradition has, therefore, accepted the concept of a just war.

Now the traditional Christian reverence for the established order is not without grounds. Order, even an unjust order, and all orders are to some extent unjust, generally produces less injustice than do anarchy and chaos. This duality is very beautifully expressed for us in the double story of the institution of the kingship in the books of Samuel in the Old Testament: As we know, there are two quite different stories regarding the institution of the kingship. In one of these stories the emphasis was placed entirely upon the injustice of the monarchy against the common people, or the way that the king will use his power to exploit the ordinary 'common people.' In the other story the emphasis is laid upon the fact that the monarchy is the only way of protecting the common man against the ravages, the intolerable injustices which ensue in society whenever man

does what is right in his own eyes and the strong are free to exploit the weak as they wish. Obviously human history provides grounds for both these positions. Nevertheless it seems to me that the main Christian tradition is illogical if it sanctions the 'just war' but refuses, under any circumstances to sanction the just revolution. It seems to me that the possibility of a just revolution cannot be ruled out *a priori* on the grounds of the main Christian tradition. And I say that this recent action of the World Council of Churches will compel Christians everywhere to come down on one side or other of this dilemma. And for that I think we should be grateful, because it is a dilemma that we ought not to escape.

It seems to me that we must recognise that, with few exceptions which I shall speak of in a moment, our social work has not had the effect of putting us decisively on the side of the oppressed. I don't think that the Church creates in the mind of anybody the impression of a society which is basically on the side of the oppressed, on the side of the exploited. It creates the impression of being a society which accepts, and is content to benefit from the established order, and at the same-time to reach out the hand of charity as far as possible to those who are the victims of that order.

Now I say that there are exceptions. I have referred to some. I have never forgotten the searing experiences in my own ministry



when the rioting broke out between the Pallas and the Maruvas in the Veerambal area of Ramnad district, where the struggle of the depressed community to shake off the last remnants of the feudal power of the dominant community erupted in burning, and shooting in which the Christian congregations were very heavily involved both as victims and as aggressors. In that situation one, had to struggle with the problem of love and justice in a very agonising way.

But open or hidden, that issue of the relation of love and justice is one that we cannot evade and which lies at the very centre of our thinking about our social task. Have, we not reached a point where we must somehow find ways by which the Church as a corporate body, in its ordinary life, its liturgy, its ministry, its congregational fellowship can be recognizably a body which is on the side of the oppressed, the rural share-cropper, the coolie, shockingly exploited - as he is in the present feudal structure of our village society? But it is tremendously important that our theme speaks both of love and justice. The demand for justice is the popular theme at present. As Mr Zachariah said in his Bible Study, this has come to be regarded as the key theme for our time. Whether it is the key theme is another question, but it has come to be regarded as the key issue of our time. Christian social thinking does not talk much about love at the present time because of the fear that love is a substitute for justice or a cover for injustice. And yet, the demand for justice without compassion, without that world of freely chosen relationships of which Mr Zachariah spoke, without reconciliation - produces in the end new injustices which may be, worse than the injustices which were to be destroyed.

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