

## EMPTYING OURSELVES

I remember a rainy May evening in 1970. I had suffered a broken leg in an argument with a car in the January and was still on crutches. And my "O" levels (yes, they did still call them that!) were looming. As a treat, my father decided to take me to Hillsborough to see Sheffield Wednesday's last game of the season. They had struggled all season against relegation, and now had to win this last game, at home against Manchester City who had nothing to gain from the match, being firmly esconced in mid-table. My father organised the loan of a wheel-chair and a place at the pitch-side, a dream position for a young boy. But, to cut a long story short, despite a marked lack of ambition by the visitors, Wednesday contrived to lose the game and were relegated from the top flight. Great was the grief and anguish after the game. And it was not to end there, because Wednesday were eventually to drop to the old Division 3 before they employed Jack Charlton as manager and began the climb upwards again.

Looking back on things now, I can see that relegation was necessary. If they had just clung on, as other clubs did, they would ever have been able to build for the future. They would have been condemned to "forever live at this poor dyng rate." The post-Busby Manchester United were relegated in similar circumstances, and from that experience built their current success. Maybe the same is true of political parties. Maybe Labour had to lose in 1979 in order to rebuild for future electoral success, and maybe the Conservative defeat in 1997 fulfilled the same function for them. But despite the fact that the theme of death and resurrection is all-pervasive in the New Testament, have we really learnt this lesson in the church. Remember what St Paul said of Christ, "he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself." If this is what Christ did, should we not follow his example? But what does it mean to "empty ourselves"?

Actually emptying ourselves is not something we are very good at. We like to hold on to what we have, and (if possible) to extend our empire. We expend a great deal of effort to "get into" schools; to get our share of any civic services that are going; to build networks so that our voices get heard in the corridors of power; we want our places on committees and our opportunity to "address the nation" on important issues. What we never do is to ask how effective these things are in furthering the work of the kingdom. How many children listen to assemblies or compulsory RE lessons (or whatever they call the subject today)? How much good does it do the church to have a seat on official committees and a voice in the corridors of power.? Does anyone respond to the Christian message who would not otherwise do so? Are our national and municipal policies more Christian because we are there, or are the powers that be merely using us to get their own message across? On the other hand, how many schoolchildren are put off religion for life because they have been forced against their will to learn the subject or to participate in an act of Christian worship? How much is the Church being used by those who have an interest in preserving a particular notion of what it means to be British? And how many people will never listen to us because our "voice in the corridors of power" means they think of us as part of the establishment, rather than speaking a prophetic message to it? Surely, when people have such a hunger for religion they will delve into Eastern mysticism, ancient pagan religions, and all kinds of wierd modern sects, but not turn to Christianity, we must be given pause for thought. And I can't believe it's because all these religions are getting their act together and we aren't. That thought just beggars belief! More likely it is due to the fact that Christianity is associated with authority and the establishment in this country, whereas the other religions are not. Where Christianity has been anti-establishment (e.g. In the former communist Eastern Bloc), it has been popular.

What, then, ought to be the Church's position. In some places, it is not a matter of having to fight to get into schools or to make one's voice heard in the corridors of power: the expectation is there automatically. Even where the local church or its minister does not wish to be part of the establishment, the strong expectation of the community militates against it. And, when all is said and done, it is not for Christ's servants to pass up any opportunity to preach the gospel. To disappoint a whole community could do the kingdom an even greater disservice. Long term, however, I believe we should begin the inexorable process of disestablishment. Please note, I am not just talking about the Church of England here. In the more enlightened ecumenical climate that exists today, some of the trappings of establishment have been shared with the Roman Catholic Church and the Free Churches: chaplaincies, committee places, assemblies and the like. It cannot be assumed that in the issue of the establishment of the Church, that it is only the Church of England that is concerned. Many Free Church voices against Establishment have historically given the impression that the only thing they saw wrong in the practice is that their particular church was not the Established Church. That is not my position. I believe the whole idea of having an established church, and

all that goes with it, should be given up. That is, the church should be seen, publicly and willingly, to give up its rights and privileges. That, I believe, is one way the Church can be seen to be emulating its Master. He "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself." By giving up seats in the House of Lords, compulsory worship and the teaching of religion (note, I did not say there should be no teaching of religion, merely that it should not be compulsory), and the right to be considered the official religion of the nation, we would be engaging in a public act of humility, showing both our independence of the powers that be and also our willingness to confront them in the name of Christ.

But how is the Church to get its voice heard in political circles? Through the involvement of individual Christians in politics. How are our children to learn about Christianity? Through lessons that are not compulsory through Act of Parliament, taught by teachers qualified in the subject, through voluntary Christian societies run in lunch hours, and through Sunday School or after-school children's clubs at church (Jews send their children to Sabbath school and Muslim children attend Koranic school, how come parents who want their children to learn about their Christian heritage will not send them to Sunday School?) How do we provide chaplaincy to hospitals, prisons, industry and the forces? By voluntary agreement with the bodies concerned, and by making use of individual Christians involved in those areas. This means a great deal more responsibility is placed on the shoulders of lay people at a time when pressures are mounting up on every side. But I can see no other alternative that will work. It is only when individual Christian lay people get alongside their friends and contacts, instead of leaving the work of ministry to "the professionals", and when we as Christians take responsibility for sharing the Christian gospel with our friends and neighbours, instead of assuming the schools will do that job for us, that people will start listening to what we have to say.