

P41110 12/19

Men and Affairs

Christian Prayer from South Africa

Alan Paton, author of *Cry, the Beloved Country* and other books about South Africa, is held in high honour by Christians in this country because of his resolute opposition, at great cost, to his country's policy of apartheid. He received the Freedom House Award in New York in 1960, only to find that afterwards his passport was confiscated. In 1968 the Liberal Party of which he was President was outlawed.

He describes the dilemma facing anti-apartheid Christians. If anyone wishes to worship in a church in an African locality, he must have a permit and this is granted only for some special occasion. If he defies the regulation at the bidding of Christian love, 'he might find himself house-arrested, or banned from attending any meeting, or limited to some small area, or banished to some remote area, or detained without trial for a period that might be extended for ever'.

Out of this desperate situation Mr. Paton has written a small book of 'meditations', by which his own faith and courage have been sustained. It is called *Instrument of Thy Peace* (Fontana; 5s.). Malcolm Muggeridge in a foreword describes it as 'a devotional work of exceptional quality', and indeed it is a moving experience to meditate through it. It is a book one will turn to again and again.

The book is a tribute to the great inspiration the author has found from the life of St. Francis of Assisi to whom he feels 'in an unrepayable debt'. The meditations are in fact based on the famous Prayer of St. Francis, which so vividly expresses his nature:

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is sadness, joy;
Where there is darkness, light.
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as
to console
not so much to be understood, as to under-
stand;
not so much to be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.

Paton writes: 'When I pray this prayer, my melancholy is dispelled, my self pity comes to an end, my faith is restored . . . Life is no longer nasty, mean, brutish, and short, but becomes the time

that we need to make it less nasty and mean.' St. Francis asks nothing for himself, only that 'his whole life shall be an instrument in God's hand'. So a Christian, encountering hatred, injury, despair and sadness, must seek to allow himself to be made 'the bearer of love, the pardoner, the bringer of hope, the comforter of those who grieve'. Each phrase in the prayer is the theme of one meditation, with quotations added from other writers, and a prayer to conclude it.

We find here and there illuminating insights into the author's own personal faith. He regrets that Christianity is 'so entangled with dogma and doctrine and creed', instead of concentrating on the two great commandments of Jesus. The one central fact of faith to which he clings is that 'God is love and if I love I am a child of God, and if I am unloving I know not God'. Gifts by themselves are not a true expression of love, unless we give ourselves as well. 'When we give ourselves, not seeking gratitude, we are often overwhelmed by the response in some other person who at that moment gives himself to us. It is in that moment that God is; it is in that place that God is.'

For the sake of helping others we need to find some spiritual blessings ourselves. Only with God's peace in our hearts can we mediate peace to others. 'If we are over-anxious, we cannot be of much help to others.' One of his own prayers is: 'Make me more joyful than I am, especially if this is needed for the sake of others'. *For the sake of others.* This is dominating note in St. Francis's Prayer, and is the note that controls all Paton's book. He longs to be an instrument of God's peace, and when this comes true 'I have already entered eternal life'. 'Heaven to me is here, and whatever else it may be, I can know it now, so far as I am the instrument of that peace.'

What does one say of political action under such severe restrictions? His political aim is 'to create that kind of society in which hatred will die away, because where there is hope, purpose and recognition then hatred does die away'.

C. L. M.

We greatly regret that Prof. Barclay has been prevented by illness from contributing his page this month.

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