

'The Signs of the Church'. Cambridge Sermons. London: MacMillan and Co., 1875.

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pp. 126-128

For now, where are our "signs?" Ask the great masses of the English working-classes what they think of the Church of England, and what will be their answer? They will tell you, not that they are hostile to the Church, not that they are the enemies of Christianity; but that "Christianity and Church are to them names of no interest; they are for the rich. To the poor the Gospel brings no good news." By quoting certain Bible texts, you may attempt to prove certain theological dogmas to them; but the dogmas have no life for them; and they do not recognize the Bible as an authority. Again, you may attempt to terrify them with the fear of death, of future judgement, and of everlasting torment: but in these terms they do not believe, nor, if they did believe them, could such a message be a Gospel. Lastly, you may attempt more legitimately to preach Christ's Gospel as a Gospel, that is, as a Good News: but this you will find hard. "What," they will ask, "has the Church done for us? What has it done for the poor, the struggling and oppressed, during the last quarter of a century? Was it the Church that extinguished negro slavery? Was it the Church that forwarded or suggested the Factory Acts? Has the Church ever suggested a similar protection for children employed in agriculture? Did the Church help to get us cheap bread by removing the Corn Laws? Did it lend a hand to liberty by aiding political reform five-and-thirty years ago? In the contests between capitalists and labourers, has the Church ever sided but with the rich? Has the Church done anything to help emigration, to give a fair chance to co-operative experiments, or even to encourage economy by suggesting state security, for the accumulations of the poor? Religion, it is true, has played an important part in connection with education, and sect has vied with sect in establishing schools for the purpose of propagating denominational doctrines; but what is the connection most familiar to all of us between religion and education? is not religion our great obstacle? Is not religion, in connection with education, best known through the well-known phrase *the religious difficulty*?" And all this but represents the calmer and more tranquil feelings of the poorer classes, but another phase of feeling, far more bitter and desperate and let us hope far more rare, is described in some words that lately appeared in the public journals as the last expression of a despairing suicide. "It is of no use speaking to me about the Bible, for I don't believe in it. Why don't the rich keep to it better, if it is true? No, they do not believe in it, but pay men to preach to the poor, to frighten them from stealing from the rich."