

PRISONER in the PULPIT

AS I stood in the whitewashed aisle of St. Mary's Church, Harlington, Bedfordshire, I wondered just who prevents Christianity from being a more dynamic progressive force.

Is it the parson in the pulpit? Or the people in the pews?

This 13th century church has no priest at all. The Reverend Jack Strong has been sacked because a handful of older people in the village did not like his idea of what a parson should be.

Jack Strong went out to work. He drew only 5s. a week of his £800 a year stipend, and instead earned £11 a week as a full-time meter checker at a Luton factory.

Dignity

He is one of six "worker priests" who want to identify the Church with working men, to abolish false ideas of dignity, and to preach without suspicion of personal gain.

But St. Mary's, or an influential part of it, wanted a predictable priest. One to call on old ladies and smile at

Why can't a parson go out to work?

asks JACK LUCAS

garden fetes.

So out went Jack Strong. The Bishop of St. Albans said his experiment as a worker priest was not satisfactory.

The Archdeacon of Bedford, the Ven. Basil Snell, who handled the matter for the Bishop, told me: "Mr. Strong did very well as far as his time allowed.

"I have nothing against a worker priest. I think he can do enormous good.

"But any man must be weary after working all day in a factory, and it is a question of whether he can do two jobs. I think if the parish had been smaller, the experiment might have continued."

I have been talking to the villagers of Harlington, which clings round a hill dominated by St. Mary's. They are divided over the issue. But 99 are on Jack Strong's side, and

one on the other.

Sadly, I found many folk ready to talk volumes but few who would identify themselves. In Harlington many people still touch their forelocks, figuratively, to the squire class.

But ruddy-faced Bert Baker, a member of the Parochial Church Council and former churchwarden, told me bluntly: "It's politics, not religion, that has split this village. Jack Strong used to tell people that Jesus Christ was a Socialist. Some did not like it."

One old couple told me that Jack Strong was hardly seen in the village on weekdays, except when he walked to the station to go to work at 7 a.m., and walked back up the hill at 6 p.m. Others say differently.

The tall, 47-year-old priest often spent his lunch break visiting parishioners in hospi-

● OPEN-NECK SHIRT, DENIM WORKING TROUSERS—AND A BIBLE IN HIS HAND. THIS IS JACK STRONG, THE WORKER-PRIEST WHO WAS SACKED.



tal at Luton. He was allowed time off for weddings and funerals. He was a shop steward, too, which scandalised some of Harlington's bigots.

"I heard him speak at a British Legion do," one woman told me. "Disgusting. He brought politics into it. A priest who goes out to work is like a mother who goes out to work. It is not proper."

there," they hinted, so I went to the forbidding-looking "big house" opposite the church.

The lady of the manor, white-haired Mrs. Gertrude Tabor, reclined on a sofa, taking afternoon tea off fragile china. "I wouldn't dream of telling you anything," she said.

Eventually she thawed enough to admit: "I am utterly against priests going out to work. I thought at first he was going as an evangelist but he does not put a word across to the other men. Nothing at all!

"He never visited, you know. Why, when I came here 50 years ago the vicar's wife told me to make the vicarage my second home. The vicar would visit people and they would go to his church. It was known as repaying the call."

What part did the lady of the manor play in Jack Strong's removal? She was not saying. But Mr. Strong was not in the habit of popping into the Manor House, and Mrs. Tabor did not go to his church. Plenty of people liked Jack Strong, but they lived in ordinary houses. Now he has gone to find work in Blackburn.

He says: "I do not blame the Bishop. He can only act on whatever advice he has been given. But I do say that the Bishop, in this case, must have been very remote from the true events in the parish, otherwise he would not have insisted on my leaving.

"I have always done my duty in visiting the sick, the lonely and the needy. My wife and I are still completely baffled as to the true reason for our dismissal."

It is an unhappy story.

Time makes some things respectable. There is now a stained-glass window in St. Mary's Church in memory of John Bunyan.

Jack Strong does not want a stained-glass window. Only a pulpit.

But he does not want to be locked in it all week. Whether or not you agree with him, the events at Harlington are disturbing to those people who want a living, experimenting Church.

Arrested

Jack Strong is not the first preacher to get into trouble in Harlington. John Bunyan was arrested there for field preaching in 1660 and was held prisoner in the Manor House overnight.

Strangely, it was to the Manor House that many villagers directed me. "Ask up