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Some Problems in Public Worship

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SOME PROBLEMS IN PUBLIC WORSHIP

THE Lord's Supper is the central act of Christian worship and it is a great loss to Protestants that the Reformation did not leave us with a Church life where it had its rightful place. Some of the Reformers battled hard to make it the chief service of Sunday, but lost the battle, and left us with a form of service which is not an adequate vehicle for Christian worship. Similarly the Church of England inherited a form of morning and evening prayer compiled from the Breviary, and, while the liturgical hours were an excellent form of devotion for the religious houses, who centred their worship in the Mass, a truncated form is not adequate as the central act of worship for Christians on a Sunday.

Our Baptist forebears therefore deserve great praise for having made the Communion central. In the early days of our movement in England they would not have thought of any form of morning service except the Lord's Supper. To our great impoverishment this tradition has been lost in most of our churches with the consequence that we are left with a serious situation in our Sunday worship.

The problem which caused the Communion service to lose its central place with us seems to have been that of the uncommitted worshipper. In early days the Communion was jealously guarded as the service of committed Christians. The pagan was, of course, outside and his attendance at Christian worship was unthinkable. Those under instruction, the catechumens, came to the first part of the service but had to leave before the actual Communion. The "Mass of the Catechumens" came to refer to a recognized part of the Mass and the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom still retains the break between the "Mass of the Catechumens" and the "Mass of the Faithful".

How simple the conduct of worship must have been then! The priest knew exactly what he was aiming at. The faithful had their Communion service, jealously guarded for them, alone; those under instruction had the first part of the service in which they heard the Scriptures read and heard the homily; and the pagans were preached to by purely mission efforts, nearly always in the open air.

Nowadays we have a sort of free-for-all in which we try to minister to the converted, convert the unconverted, teach the catechumens and attract the children all in one shapeless mass. No wonder that in our desperate efforts to do everything at once the converted often go away feeling that they have not been ministered to, the unconverted are not converted, those under instruction do not receive teaching and the children unconsciously feel that they are tolerated in a service which is really for grown-ups and in which they are given a talk and a hymn on sufferance.

This problem has led to the dropping of the Communion service as the central service or its retention as a sort of epilogue

to the "real" service. If we try to restore the Communion on Sunday mornings we shall find ourselves faced with the question of the uncommitted, the children, and the casual visitor. The Church of England has launched a "Parish Communion" movement, by which all the Parish are invited to a sung Communion with sermon at about 9.30 a.m. The service is sung by the whole congregation, books are provided which explain the liturgy simply, with a special children's edition, well illustrated. Those who wish to communicate do so, and the others feel that they are welcome and have a right to be there.

Our system could work well if it were adapted. Our ordinary service takes the place of the "Mass of the Catechumens" in which the Scriptures are read and the Word preached. Then comes the break at which the uncommitted withdraw, and those whose lives are committed to God in Christ enter into the full Communion. For these latter the first service has been the preparation for Communion, when they have heard the Word as a preparation for the Sacrament. Obviously in this case the first service must be shortened and pointed. It must be shortened because no one (certainly not the housewife) can worship with an eye upon the clock, and pointed because it must all point to and culminate in the Communion. In the first service we hear God's word challenging our lives, and in the Communion we respond to the challenge by giving ourselves to Him, "our *reasonable* service", because He gave Himself for us.

But what of the first service without the Communion? Here indeed we have a problem, because we have challenged our hearers through God's Word, and there is no opportunity for them to respond. Our ordinary form of service contains singularly little material in which a man can respond, and as all the Primary Sunday School teachers know, "No Impression without Expression". A remark of an Anglo-Catholic priest is always in my mind when I consider this aspect of our worship. He told me that he had been to a Baptist service and I enquired very curiously what he thought of it. His answer was devastating, for he replied that the minister had got between him and God. He went on to explain that he was used to a service in which the worshipper had the form of service before him and knew that he was expected to join in. Quite apart from the Psalms and Canticles, which gave the worshipper a greater direct part than the hymns alone, there were responses for him to make and prayers which were said all together. He complained that the Baptist service was a monologue by the minister and that the congregation sat back and listened respectfully, without even saying "Amen" to the prayers. He felt that he had no part in it except as an onlooker.

There is too much truth in that report for us to attribute it all to strangeness or prejudice. In how many churches do our people say "Amen" at the end of the prayers with unanimity and conviction? In how many churches is the Lord's Prayer said clearly and firmly?

It is the one and only prayer in which our people can join, yet many churches have taken to singing it because they can't get their congregations to say it audibly. These considerations lead me to ask myself sometimes if our forms of service are not growing more priestly than those of the Catholics, who now have "dialogue Mass", in which, in many instances, the congregation say all the prayers together excepting only the prayer of consecration.

What then are the main problems in our form of worship as we face our congregations on Sunday? As I see them they are four:—

(1) To weld together a very mixed company of people into one worshipping whole and to prepare them for prayer.

(2) To pull them into the prayer so that they want to pray themselves and not merely listen to us praying.

(3) To provide adequate means by which they can respond to the challenge presented.

(4) To provide as much opportunity as possible for adoration, in which our service is characteristically weak.

Space will permit only short notes on each of these points.

(1) Our private prayers mostly fail before we have said a word. We do not realize what we are about to do and Who God is. To commence a service with prayer is often a meaningless thing because the congregation are not yet ready for prayer. A strong objective hymn of worship helps to bind them together, and to direct their thoughts away from themselves. Then try to ground their thoughts in the power of God and His ability to answer prayer. For example, suppose that the hymn has been B.C.H. No. 62: follow it up with Psalm cxxv, verses 1 and 2, and then Psalm cxxi, verses 1 and 2. Take plenty of time about it, so that it sinks in. Don't be afraid to say "Let us pray" before you read the verses, for, with heads bowed, the people will more readily regard the verses as part of the prayer, whereas read beforehand they may easily think of them as another kind of preliminary before the actual business starts. Or in the evening if you have started with B.C.H. No. 558, read St. Luke iv, verse 40, and after a pause follow it up with "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever". Then after a pause read verses 2 and 8 of the hymn.

(2) The most obvious way to get people to pray with you is by responses, but this necessitates a liturgy. The impromptu "When I say, 'Lord, hear our prayer', please reply 'And let our cry come unto Thee'" is an uneasy compromise which may lead to many nervous mistakes. It may, however, be used with a number of small disconnected intercessions, e.g., "We are asked to pray for . . . Lord, hear out prayer". Biddings are useful but can easily be overdone. Silence is the method best fitted to our form of service, but here we sometimes encounter a *damnosa hereditas* from the "old-fashioned prayer meeting" as it has come to be called. There

silence was so often looked on as an uneasy pause when nothing was doing, rather than a time to be busily used in prayer. To break the silence is a responsibility and not a duty. To train a congregation in the right use of silence, so that it becomes a living experience is one of the most valuable things we can do. "We pray for those who are ill in their homes and in our hospitals and institutions, especially those known to us by name. . . . And for all who nurse them and are anxious for them . . ." A time of quiet for individual prayer is always appreciated provided it is long enough to be of use and is not encroached on by the minister.

(3) In view of the scarcity of material by which our people can make their response, the Lord's Prayer should be carefully kept until the need for a response is felt. To use it at the beginning of the service is to lose an opportunity, for so early in the service it is almost certain to be said perfunctorily. Probably its best place is at the end of the second prayer when there has been an opportunity to build up a desire to respond. There are times when it might come better after the sermon. But by far the most usual channel of response for our people is in the hymns, and they should be chosen with the utmost care. Probably our form of service impels us to choose them liturgically, e.g. (a) worship, (b) children, (c) personal devotion, (d) invocation, generally to the Holy Spirit, (e) response to the sermon. It is often possible, however, to choose a hymn which will bring out a response to the thought of the Scripture lesson. The utmost effort should be made to choose the last hymn so that it can form a real response to what has been said in the sermon.

(4) The spirit of adoration is one of wordless looking, longing, and self-giving:—

"See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart,
Lost, all lost in wonder, at the God Thou art".

This mood can sometimes be suggested at the beginning of the service by the singing of, say, B.C.H. No. 29, followed by the reading of Revelation v, 11-13, followed by a prayer inspired by the majesty and wonder of God. Usually, however, this mood comes later in the service, and may close the second prayer: after the petitions have been dealt with it is easy to introduce some verses from Isaiah vi (say *1b*, *2a* and *3*) and then to follow on with "Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify Thy glorious name: evermore praising Thee and saying Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of Thy glory. Glory be to Thee, O Lord most high". This prepares for that particular silence, the silence of adoration.

DENIS LANT.