

## The Sunday Evening Service.

### I.

I TAKE it that the matter we want to discuss is this : Should the second service be different from morning worship, and if so, what differences are legitimate? Some recognise a difference between the atmospheres of the morning and evening services. Will the same form of service be suitable for both? What liberties may be taken in regard to the praise; and what should be the nature of the sermon or address? These are questions which it is legitimate to discuss, while, of course, we must bear in mind that the local circumstances of parish and congregation as well as the gifts of the minister must really be the decisive factors in the matter.

In 1923 the Church and Nation Committee conducted an inquiry into the possibilities of flexibility in the second service. They reported : " The view is generally expressed " that the evening service should be quite distinct from the " morning service, and should be of a simpler and less formal " character. One minister is speaking for many when he " writes: ' The evening service should be made as different " as possible from the morning, and the people should be " made to expect something new and interesting at the " service in the subjects of discourse, in the speakers, and " in the form of service.' "

It is perhaps significant that at that time (1923), no suggestions whatever were put forward as to the devotional part of the service save that one minister insisted very wisely that the place of devotions in the service must be maintained. And indeed it must. It will be a pity if in any experiment with the evening service, devotions be relegated to an inferior place.

But may we risk experiment with such a solemn matter as the prayers of the people? We ask this, recognising that any claim for the form of morning prayers as the only manner in which we may consider it fit and proper to approach God in our public worship, will itself be more bold than any experiment,

It is intensely interesting to note that at the present time the Church of England, bound as it is to a prayer-book, is intrigued with the discussion of fresh methods of public prayer. Experiments are being increasingly employed in many of their churches as additions to the recognised offices of morning and evening prayer, and apparently with the appreciation and encouragement of the people. We in the Church of Scotland watch this search for freedom not without real interest, but at the same time with keen searching of heart, for we have to confess that we ourselves, possessing this freedom, either refuse, or are afraid, to exercise it, so that to-day the services of our Church are much more rigid than those of the sister Church further south. One devout old lady—a member of the Church of England, residing in London—said not long ago to a Church of Scotland minister, “Our Vicar is doing such a delightful thing nowadays; instead of beginning the service with ‘Dearly beloved brethren,’ he simply says ‘Let us worship God’; and it is so nice.” In our service, “Let us worship God” has ceased to arrest the mind and the spirit of our people, and it might be well to try a change for a little while before we return to its use again.

In regard to the form of prayer, as a variant from the morning method, prayers, one or more of them, might be read; or, should prayers be read in the morning, they could be “free” in the evening. The method of “directed” prayer in which suggestions are made for supplication has many advantages. It is definite, more intimate, and tends to make the prayers of the people more real. The period of silence, too, which follows the suggested subject of prayer might help to create just that difference which would stir the imagination of the worshipper and supply a need, perhaps only felt unconsciously, of a more real spiritual expression.

I am strongly of opinion that at the evening service the *number of lessons read from Scripture should not be curtailed*. One regrets the increasing habit of cutting out the Old Testament Lesson at evening worship. There are many of our people who can only attend the second service, and in many places some of these good folk must be wondering whether the Church of Scotland has given up the Old Testament altogether. The devotional life is too closely related to the Bible for us to omit the reading of any one lesson at any time. Indeed, one might consider whether the difference at evening worship should not rather



be the *addition* of a third lesson—Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel. It is rather pitiful to learn that many ministers omit the reading of the Old Testament in the evening in order to have more time for their sermon! A greater inspiration!

An occasional short explanation of the lesson, either before or after reading, might serve a useful purpose. This was suggested at the Second Convention of Anglo-Catholic Priests in 1932 in a discussion of the evening service. But the suggestion was not new. It is enjoined in the Directory of Public Worship. The practice was discontinued owing to the fact that ministers could not give "*short*" explanations. One does often feel, however, that a brief explanatory introduction would be useful to the understanding of a lesson, particularly one taken from the Prophets.

Our ministers have been more ready to attempt variety in regard to the *praise portion of the service*. The report of the Church and Nation Committee already referred to says, "It is generally felt that heartier congregational singing is "one of the primary requirements to make this, (the "evening), a warm, bright, and more attractive service, "and this feeling has led one or two ministers to discontinue "the use of the Hymnary at the evening service, and to "introduce such collections as *The Mission Hymnbook*, "*Redemption Songs*, and Sankey's *Sacred Songs and Solos*."

The report, it should be added, was made prior to the introduction of the Revised Hymnary, which, by its inclusion of a judicious selection of mission hymns, and its added list of hymns in other sections of the book suitable for mission services, has rendered unnecessary the use of such books as those just mentioned.

Then we find ourselves with the problem of musical services. The general experience is that they increase attendances. This may be due in some cases to the excellence of the music, in others merely to loyalty on the part of the congregation to the choir. The value of praise services will be found to lie in their special nature. There are seasons of the year, such as Christmas and Easter and Harvest Thanksgiving, when the natural expression of the spirit is in a richer and more special form of praise; but all attempts to make a service of praise a frequent occurrence, (such as a monthly service), will be found to defeat their own purpose and will tend to reduce the big occasions for praise to the ordinary.

The nature of the *sermon* at the evening service must also be considered. This will depend on what we have in mind. There are churches where a sermon on definitely evangelistic lines will best meet the needs. The most crudely evangelical address I ever heard was delivered at an evening service in an Anglican Church in Cambridge. But the church was crowded and the whole service was marked by a great liveliness.

On the other hand, the sermon may be instructional. In my first parish, Professor W. P. Paterson advised me to cease taking a rather large Bible class which met after the evening service. It was a Bible class for young people of the age of eighteen years of age and upwards. "You will find," he said, "that these young folks are not coming to the evening service," as I was indeed beginning to discover. They were more loyal to their class at eight o'clock, than they were to the service at six-thirty. Dr Paterson's advice was to follow his method in his first parish which was to give at the evening service the kind of address one would give to the Bible class. He found the older people liked this because there was insufficient instruction, as a rule, from the pulpit. The attendances at the evening services increased by the number of young people who were no longer divided between two loyalties. It is true that we overcrowd the Sunday for our diligent young folks who do our church work in Sunday Schools, &c., and who are anxious to attend the services and their Bible Class as well. For a young minister also, the preparation of the Bible class address is generally an added burden which, too often, quite frankly, he is unable to carry. Much is to be gained and little to be lost by advocating this method of one of the greatest teachers in our church.

I have always set myself against the intimation of strange and *catchy titles for sermons* which savour too much of the sensational. In the past they have been used by certain preachers with beneficial results, but such cases are very few and most exceptional. A glance through the Church advertisements in the Saturday evening newspapers leaves one wondering where in all the earth any message of God and God's love can be found in some of the announced topics for sermons the next day. If they succeed in attracting people to the service, they also raise another problem,—the problem of holding this strange congregation from Sunday evening to Sunday evening. It can only be done in one way—by an increasing note of sensationalism in the title, and the end of that is disillusionment.



The Church and Nation inquiry resulted in the discovery of the popularity of *lantern services*. One city minister reported that a derelict evening service had been increased to an attendance of 700. "The attractions are pictures, "a sacred solo, and simple straight Gospel preaching." A country minister crowded his hall once a month by the same means.

A *new form of evening service* has been coming into vogue within recent years. Some topic, previously announced, is dealt with at the service, and members of the congregation are invited to adjourn to the hall where sometimes tea is served, and then a full and free discussion follows upon the subject of the address. The general experience has been that this is very successful at first, but ceases to attract. There is the difficulty of sustaining interest in suitable topics, and the discussion tends to fall into the hands of a few who are not always the most interesting people. The minister may find himself more drawn to give points for discussion than to declare the unsearchable riches of Christ.

In conclusion, it appears that variety is useful and in most cases necessary, and that ministers and people should experiment and continue to experiment. What brings good results to-day may fail twelve months hence. One minister wrote: "We have an orchestra about twice a winter, and the church is packed at these services; but "if we had it every Sunday I believe the novelty would "wear off, and it would make no difference in the end." This will be the experience of any experimenter. So we must change and keep on changing. It is our duty to make the evening service attractive, always remembering that it is a service in which we desire to direct all our worship to the majesty of God, and to set forth the salvation He hath wrought for us through His Son. If the evening service is a problem, it is a problem which can only be solved by experimentation.

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This paper and the one which follows were prepared as introductory to a discussion of the subject at a conference of the Society on February 20th, 1934.