

## The Sunday Evening Service.

### II.

LET us look first at the plain facts of the situation. (Having had no experience of conditions in country parishes, I have chiefly in view, in all that follows, church life in towns.) In every city there are one or two churches which are well attended both morning and evening. Sometimes this is due to a long-established tradition; sometimes to the exceptional gifts of the minister either in preaching or in personality; sometimes to rather questionable methods of publicity. So too, there are certain churches in working-class districts where "a long lie" is part of the accepted Sunday convention, and the evening service is much more popular than the morning. But in a large majority of town churches one may expect a reasonably good congregation at 11 o'clock; whereas one need not expect (or else one will certainly be disappointed) more than a small company gathered to worship at 6.30.

These are the plain facts. Probably to most of us ministers they are somewhat disturbing. They are disturbing at least to our vanity! For no man likes to think that all his eloquence can only attract sixty or seventy souls; or that he must address his carefully polished periods to ranks of empty pews. (The experience is in any case helpful in teaching many of us preachers humility.) But perhaps we are also vaguely disturbed by the question, suggested by a half empty church, whether the Gospel we have to preach has lost something of its power and appeal. Against that thought we must deliberately guard ourselves.

Perhaps it will throw some light on the situation, if we ask: What are the reasons for the decline of attendance at Evening Service?

(1) In the first place, there is the changed view of Sunday. The War shook and overturned many conventions, some good, some bad; among other things, the Victorian Sunday. This was inevitable. Men who had grown accustomed to the roar of guns all day and every day,

were hardly likely any longer to think Sabbath silence sacred and inviolable. Men and women who had worked for three years on Sundays in munition factories, could no longer be expected to believe that all Sunday activities were to be condemned. And those of the younger generation, who were children during those tumultuous years, grew up in a world of change and transition. The pre-war Scottish Sunday of silent streets, deserted golf courses, top hats and black gloves, and whole families walking as regularly and mechanically to church as on other days to business or school—was a convention, it may have been a beautiful convention. But it is shattered forever.

What is the modern post-war view of Sunday, as held by hundreds of ordinary professing Christians? The average church member, if asked to state his point of view quite frankly, would probably say something like this: "I consider Sunday as a day of rest from my ordinary occupations. I acknowledge my duty to use part of this day for the worship of God and the good of my own soul. I also regard it as an opportunity for being more with my family than on other days; for seeing something of my friends; and if the weather allows, for enjoying the beauties of Nature and the refreshment of the open air. I consider Sunday as one of the great blessings which Christian civilisation has given to the world."

This seems to me a fairly representative modern view of Sunday. I leave it to others to decide whether it is a better or a poorer view than that held by our grandfathers. It is at any rate obvious that it will have an effect on attendance at divine worship, especially in the evening.

(2) Another reason for the decline of the Evening Service is that there are many more interests and occupations possible as alternatives to church. Tea-rooms are open in many places. Sunday trains and 'buses make it possible to visit friends at a distance. Sunday evening concerts are becoming much more common. The wireless programmes doubtless offer people an added inducement to spend the evening indoors. And they can sometimes listen to a more beautiful service or a more inspiring sermon than they would find in their own Parish Church.

And so, taking into consideration the very different circumstances of our time, the changed outlook on Sunday, and the changed conditions of life: what I would suggest is that we have no right to assume that people are less religious to-day than they were fifty years ago. What *can*



be said is that those who are to be loyal to their faith and their church to-day, need more personal resolution, more strength of character, and more of the spirit of self-discipline than had they lived fifty years earlier.

But still the problem of the Evening Service remains. Let us face first the question : Should it be given up ?

To this question the present writer would answer with a categorical "No."

For one thing, there will always be some people who cannot come to church in the morning: working-class mothers with many household duties; girls and women in domestic service; men who work on a Saturday night shift and need the early part of the day for sleep. Again, there will always (thank God) be a certain number of really spiritually-minded people who like to worship in God's house morning and evening, some of them thinking the quiet and warmth and homeliness of the Evening Service even more helpful than the morning. I know both men and women who would feel it a real loss if they could not come in to their own church on Sunday evening for a last hour of prayer and praise.

But more than that. Sunday is the Lord's Day. We in the Church of Scotland have fewer services than our brethren in the Roman Catholic and Anglican Communion. We have no early services and few week-day services. Surely then, since the first great function of the Church is that of worship, the fulfilment of that duty demands that at least God's Day shall both begin and close with the sacrifice of prayers and praises in His sanctuary.

Have we not, in the past, permitted and even encouraged people to think that the chief object of attending Divine Service is to get comfort, help, and inspiration for their own spiritual life? and certainly they have a right to expect this. But surely we ought also to teach our people, and especially those of the younger generation, that there is another and more unselfish aspect in coming to church: they come to join in the great sacrifice of worship and praise and adoration which both the Church on earth and the Church in Heaven offers to God. And also by their faith and example, they strengthen their fellow-Christians. We greatly need less individualism, and a stronger *esprit de corps* in the practice of our religion.

And here, perhaps, one ought not to evade the rather difficult question: Should the average church member be expected to attend church twice on Sundays? Certainly, very few do it nowadays. But what should be the attitude

and teaching of us ministers on this question? Are we to regard as more truly religious those who come twice? Are we to regard as, if not black, at least grey sheep, those who only come once?

We all know the arguments that can be given for coming once. And if we forget our personal stake in the issue, and our fear of preaching to empty pews, we must admit that many of these reasons *are* reasonable. There is the claim of family life. There is the value of leisure and a quiet evening indoors, for a man who is much out of doors all the week. There is the call of the country in Spring and Summer, and the spell which is in the loveliness of hills and far-stretching moors and open sky; and which does exert upon sensitive souls a healing and peace-giving influence. We must not be narrow, or professional, if we are to understand the point of view of the plain man in the street. And in spite of our carefully thought out sermon, prepared for delivery at 6.30 p.m., it is sometimes good to put ourselves in the position of the ordinary layman and ask ourselves, "What should I do to-night if I were he"?

My own feeling is this: (1) that we must teach it as the bounden duty of every Christian man and woman in sound health to come to the Lord's House for worship and prayer on the Lord's Day at least once. This, even if it means real sacrifice; because both the glory of God and the growth and health of their own souls require it.

(2) That the Church delights to worship God, and to send up to His throne morning and evening her thanksgivings and prayers; that she invites all those who are willing, to join in this offering of praise at the close of the day as well as at its opening; that, even though it is not an obligation, yet it is an act of love and loyalty which must bring great joy to the heart of our Lord, and great blessing to those who prefer the glory of His House to other pleasures and comforts.

In any case, if we could see every one of our members at Divine Service once on Sunday, our churches would be well-filled morning and evening. And often it would repay us to spend less thought on those who only come once, and more thought and prayer upon those who do not come at all.

As to the nature of evening worship, it is generally agreed that while the morning service should be more stately, elaborate, and comprehensive, the evening service should be shorter, simpler, and less formal. This does not



mean that it should be in any sense slovenly or lacking in either beauty or devotion. The demand often heard for a more popular type of service, which is usually described as "brief and bright," should be relentlessly ignored. "Bright" often means nothing more than secular. It ought to be "popular" in the best sense: that is, within the understanding of the humblest soul, and able to meet the simplest needs of the plain man reaching out after eternal things.

I should like to make a plea for dignity and homeliness to go hand in hand, especially at evening worship. Sometimes there is dignity without homeliness; and in too many churches there is homeliness without dignity. The combination is somewhat rare. And yet that is the kind of worship to which our Christian Faith points. Divine Service even in the smallest church should always be characterised by reverence, it should even have a touch of grandeur about it; since it leads us into the Presence of the most high God. But at the same time, it should be utterly natural, sincere, and intimate; since the God whom we worship is our Father in Heaven. Our worship would gain much both in reality and beauty if we could more often attain this balance of homeliness and reverence.

To turn to details. In the evening, which is often chiefly a service for hard-worked men and women, or for young people, the hymns should always be familiar; so that everyone can join in them. Sometimes a half-hour of informal hymn-singing beforehand creates a good atmosphere. The prayers should be simple and direct: perhaps with a preparatory sentence reminding the people of the value, purpose, and spirit of prayer. Bidding prayers and directed intercessions give both variety and reality. Instead of a read sermon, there should be a talk; if possible always close to everyday life and problems, and with homely illustrations such as our Lord loved to use.

The present writer finds it a help, both to himself and to others, to go into church sometimes before the service begins, simply in a cassock, and talk to the congregation about what they are being asked to do in worship. And also to go out to the porch directly after the Blessing; so as to be accessible to the people. These may seem small points; but they do help to get rid of the impression of "a great gulf fixed" between pulpit and pew! We ministers ought to give to those in the pews rather the sense that we are worshipping *with* them, than that we are simply *leading* them in worship.

In conclusion. Perhaps we are all inclined to lay too much stress on numbers ; and are tempted only to think a service worth while if two or three hundred persons are present. It is a fallacy from which it is very hard for most of us to escape. Nevertheless it *is* a fallacy. In spiritual things, numbers are never of the first importance. Our Saviour spoke some of His most wonderful words to a tiny handful of men and women. Thank God, it is not always upon the largest congregations that the greatest blessing is poured. It is not always in the most crowded churches that the Divine Presence is most clearly felt. Where two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, there He is with them. And often, when, in the quiet of the evening hour, a few score of ordinary people are met in God's house, the eternal world seems very close, and wonderful things may happen.

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