

Forms of Worship.

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THIS article is an attempt by an Anglican to express the meaning of that religious tradition out of which his own life has grown, and to interpret the mind of the Church of England in providing fixed forms of worship for her children. What is the meaning of the regular forms of service in the Book of Common Prayer? If *these* forms have value, are written or printed prayers necessarily and always better than "extempore" prayer? Again, is the repetition of forms of prayer liable to fetter the freedom of the Spirit, and their use to become a substitute for real communion with God? Clearly the consideration of these questions demands a study of the fundamental principles of Christian worship. Clearly also, as I have implied in my first sentence, an individual student of the subject does not stand on a pedestal apart, from which he might pronounce judgment as if from outside. He belongs of necessity to some particular tradition; and the fulness of wisdom in such a matter belongs not to any one particular tradition, but to the experience of the whole universal Church, which is wider and richer than that of any one tradition. The individual student must therefore seek to understand his own tradition, since it is only through it that he can learn something of the Church's universal mind; and he may do so in the confident hope that those who belong to other traditions will understand what he says, in the light of what their own tradition has taught them.⁽¹⁾

I.

England is divided into dioceses and parishes. Each diocese has its mother-church, the cathedral, and each parish has its parish church. The parishioners of each

⁽¹⁾ For what follows, I would refer in particular to that great theological classic, *The Kingdom of Christ*, by F. D. Maurice, especially the section on "Forms of Worship" (in Dent's Everyman edition, vol. ii. pp. 19-43), and the sections which precede and follow it.

parish have certain rights in their parish church; they normally come to it for baptisms and funerals, and they must come to it if they desire a church wedding, unless they get a special licence to be married elsewhere. The assumption of the parochial system is that the parish church is the centre and meeting-point of the Church of God in that place, and that the Sunday service is the formal meeting or assembly of the Church of God in that place. This principle is in many ways obscured in these days; partly by the fact that in the towns the parochial system has largely broken down, and many people, instead of attending their own parish church, go to some other which they like better; partly by the divisions of Christendom, which have brought into existence various other places of worship side by side with the parish church, so that its Sunday service is no longer the full assembly of the Christians in that place. Nevertheless the principle remains, and it is of fundamental importance.

The Sunday service is the meeting of the *ecclesia*, the Church of God. In this connection we are not to think of the *ecclesia* or assembly of democratic Athens, but rather of the Old Testament phrase, "the congregation of the children of Israel," the People of God met for worship. When the People of God according to the New Covenant meets for worship, what does it do? The Christians of the place have come together to worship God as His covenant-people, as the Body of Christ, proclaiming by this act that the world belongs to Him, and that He has called them to enter into a real relation with Him. Therefore in their worship they rehearse that on which the existence of the Church is founded, proclaiming the Mystery of God's saving work through Jesus Christ, and the Mystery of Grace, which is the fulfilment of God's saving work in the souls of men. The Scriptures are read in the Lessons, and expounded in the Sermon; God's praise is sung and prayer is made in Christ's name, in the Psalms and other acts of prayer; and, more or less frequently, the whole of the Mystery of salvation and of grace is summed up in the eucharistic Sacrament, in which the death of Christ is proclaimed according to His own institution, and the Christians are proclaimed to be sharers in His redemption, and as members of His Body, members also of one another.

So far, Catholics and Protestants—I speak of the old, historic Protestantism, not of the newer Liberal Protestantism—are at one. Catholic practice indeed makes the

sacramental act the centre of every Sunday's worship, where Protestantism emphasises the Sermon. But the original Protestants, at any rate, only put the Sermon in the chief place because it seemed to them to be the most direct way of reaching the heart of the Mystery of Grace, and because the Mass, robbed of the Communion of the people, seemed to them to be a merely outward and formal act. I am not saying that they were right ; but at any rate they were seeking to find there, in the preaching of the Word of God, some part of that same reality which the early Church had found in the sacramental act of sacrifice and communion. Here we may see a sign that the problem of Reunion is not insoluble.

Such is the old conception of the Church service, as the assembly of the Church of God, met together to rehearse the Mystery on which the existence of the Church is based. But in these days of individualism, it has been crossed by another conception, which thinks first of the individual and his religious experiences. The " congregation " now comes to be thought of as a fortuitous aggregation of individuals, who attend, not the assembly of the Church, but a religious service, for the sake of the good which they individually hope to derive from it, much in the same way as they attend a concert in order to satisfy another need of their spiritual nature. But since there is now no need to trudge to the church in order to do this, many sit at home and hear the wireless.

The root of the old conception was the idea of a real relation of man to God : God had established His Covenant of salvation, and called men to enter into it. Hence the Church is regarded in the New Testament as the Bride of Christ, God's Family or Household, His spiritual Temple, Christ's Body ; in becoming reconciled to God men are brought into an organic relation with one another. But the newer conception lays all the emphasis on their self-realisation as individuals, and treats the Church as if it were just an organisation for providing religion for those who want it. But then, the Church cannot be fitted into such a scheme. We may give as an illustration the fact that for many members of the Group Movement certain large hotels have come to be associated with intense religious experiences. But they do not go to these hotels to be baptised, married, and buried ; they come to church. They come to church, on those great occasions, those turning-points of life and death, and the church service has great things to say to them if they have ears to listen, about the

relation of their life to the Eternal. They come to church, because in the nature of things the church building is more than a place set apart for religious experiences ; it is the House of God and the home of the people. It witnesses to a real relation of man to God.

II.

For the meeting of the Church on a Sunday morning, the Church of England provides a form of worship, consisting of Morning Prayer, Litany, and Holy Communion, with a Sermon. These are forms of "common prayer"; hence the title, the Book of Common Prayer; "common" is contrasted with "private." At other times, times of private prayer or of meetings of some group, it may well be that "free" prayer is more fitting, in order to express some thought that has been vividly apprehended on that occasion. But for the "common" service, a fixed form of worship may be held to be fitting for a variety of reasons. As it is the Church's act of worship, it is fitting that the same form of service, used in many places, should express the fact that the people are sharing in the worship of the whole Church. Again the needs of men of different ages and different races are, after all, much the same; nothing has happened to make the *Gloria in excelsis*, the *Te Deum*, or the General Confession out of date; rather, these classical forms of prayer express the universal needs of man. Then again, in praising God and confessing our sins, the use of those forms helps us to see that in thus worshipping and confessing we are joining in the common act of mankind redeemed to God. The sin that is to be confessed is in the first place the personal transgressions of each individual, but there is also the common guilt of all; the guilt of a civilisation in which two million people in one nation are unemployed rests on all in common, and is thus fittingly confessed in common. In public worship it is the Church that prays and confesses, in the name of Christ the Head of the Body; we share in it, as partakers of the common life which is in Him.

In such common prayer and praise the personality of the Minister is relatively unimportant; it is his part to suppress himself, and become simply the mouthpiece of the prayer of all. In reciting the prayers he must not be inaudible; on the other hand he offends even more if he is blatant and insists on giving the words an emphasis of his own. It is part of the value of forms of prayer that they provide for us

an escape from the subjectivity of this clergyman or that. In using them our minds are at peace, free to enter into the depths of meaning which they contain ; we have not to be constantly on the watch, constantly critical, to see whether the clergyman is expressing properly what needs to be expressed ; we are not hampered by the inevitable limitations of his mind and outlook.

It cannot be said, of course, that there is any necessary incompatibility between extempore prayer and the Church's solemn act of worship. Had it been so, the liturgies of the Church could hardly have taken shape at all. For the first three or four centuries of the Church's history there was liberty for extempore prayer, particularly in the central eucharistic prayer itself ; we find this, for instance, in Hippolytus (c. 215 A.D.) :

" It is not, to be sure, necessary for anyone to recite the exact words that we have prescribed, by learning to say them by heart in his thanksgiving to God ; but let each one pray according to his ability. If indeed he is able to pray competently with an elevated prayer, it is well. But even if he is only moderately able to pray and give praise, no one may forbid him ; only let him pray sound in the faith."⁽¹⁾

" Free prayer " is here permitted, not without certain misgivings. But when adequate and worthy forms of liturgy had appeared, there was evidently an advantage in making them obligatory. And not only so, but some of the ancient written forms, particularly among the Gallican rites, are so vapid and rhetorical that it is not surprising that they were superseded by the rite of the Roman Church.

We are compelled, therefore, to make distinctions between various grades of forms of prayer. There is first the Scriptural element, which forms much the largest part of the Anglican as of the Roman service. There are liturgical forms which can be called classical, which have not merely the seal of official authority, but also that of the approbation of the Church's experience ; some of these old and tried forms have almost the universal and classical character of the Bible itself. Other prayers provided by authority for public use are brands fit only for burning.⁽²⁾ The printed prayers in devotional manuals, which are

⁽¹⁾ *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, ed. Easton (Cambridge, 1934). §10. 4, p. 40.

⁽²⁾ As, for instance, the Collect for St. Mary Magdalene, in the English Prayer Book of 1549 ; or, in the rejected Prayer Book of 1928, the prayer for the Peace of the World (No. 20 among the " Occasional Prayers "), and the fourth paragraph of the Intercession for the whole state of Christ's Church in the Alternative Order for Holy Communion.

intended simply as guides for private prayer, do not come into consideration here.

But then, is there not a danger lest the constant repetition of set forms of prayer Sunday by Sunday and day by day should kill the freedom of the Spirit, lest such prayer should be mechanical, formalistic, unspiritual, a substitute for real prayer? The clergy are ordered by the Prayer Book to say the services of Morning and Evening Prayer daily, either openly or privately; is not this to make the performance of a rule into a substitute for real communion with God?

Of course! How could one deny that this has been a danger and a besetting sin for Anglicans as for Roman Catholics? But it is also the ever-present danger of all institutional religion, Protestant no less than Catholic, that the Minister is liable to lose his grip on reality, and the layman to feel that by attending service on Sunday he has done his duty to God for the week.

Formalism is no doubt a danger; but let us see the other side. There is great value in a rule of prayer, whereby the waywardness and slothfulness of man is disciplined and controlled. Further, there is such a thing as *duty* to God; and in the performance of duty the relish or enjoyment which one gets out of it is irrelevant. Those for whom part of their service of God consists in sweeping rooms and washing plates do not always enjoy it. So it is with prayer. "He rides easily whom the grace of God carries," says à Kempis; but there are times when the going is hard. And just then the fact that one is joining in the Church's forms of prayer can be a great spiritual help. The service is the Church's prayer; for me, in my present state, it is above my head. Others perhaps are at this moment finding joy and consolation in it; I am not. But who am I, that I should expect to? I being what I am, not the most faithful nor the most devout, am I to be surprised if I seem unable to lift up my heart or find meaning in the words? At such times, it is a great thing if I have been allowed to perform my ordered duty, not as I would but as I can. The life of the Church goes on, the Lord goes on His way, the Spirit of God is not asleep; does it matter very much that I should be for the time being in the darkness? Perhaps just then I am being given a much needed lesson in humility. Like Adam and Eve, we would like to be as gods, knowing good and evil, knowing at each moment exactly where we are going and what God is doing with us.

But we are servants, not masters. What God really is doing with us matters far more than what we think He is doing ; and there is great spiritual danger for us in measuring the value of services and other acts of devotion by the enjoyment or help that we seem for the moment to get out of them.

III.

We have been considering some of the obvious difficulties which can be felt over the use of forms of prayer. We must now try to see something of the spirit of the liturgy. We will consider first the Psalms, the recitation of which takes a prominent place in the daily offices.

The liturgy is the prayer of the Church. When therefore the Psalms are recited in the service, they are not being used merely as personal religious poems, such as are some of the familiar hymns ; they are part of the common prayer, and therefore belong to the whole Body. This is the traditional interpretation of the use of the Psalms in church, which is given for instance by St. Augustine. The " I " of the Psalms is Christ, speaking in His own person, or in the members of His Body. To explain : In their original meaning, some at least of the Psalms were personal religious poems ; but by being collected together in a Psalter for liturgical use they acquired a wider meaning. It is now the voice of Israel, the People of God, speaking in them. The New Testament regards the whole Old Testament as written for Christ, as " fulfilled " in Him, as finding its full meaning in Him (cf. the use of Psalm xl. in Heb. x. 5-10). Thus the Psalms also are " fulfilled " in Christ, the Head of the New Israel. And as in becoming Christians we are incorporated into Christ, so that every good work that we can do is His work in us, so also every act of prayer, worship, or penitence, is His act in us. Thus the Psalms as used in church are His Psalms. Thus Ps. cxxx. (" Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord ") is annotated by Father R. M. Benson, " Christ calling to God out of the depths of human nature." That Psalm is not merely an individual prayer ; it expresses the voice of redeemed humanity, through the Second Adam, calling upon God.

It is not surprising that those who thus use the Psalms find them difficult to use ; the chief reason is that we constantly try to apply them to ourselves, and when this cannot be carried through, we give up trying to understand

them. But it is plain that the experience of the Psalms must necessarily be wider than that of any individual ; in their origin they are the work of many psalmists, in their Christian use the utterance of the many members of the Body. The answer to the difficulty is simple enough ; it is simply that one should be content to treat them as the prayer of the Church, and listen to the Church praying them ; to hear them in the mouth of one member of the Body or of another—it may be native Christians in Africa, or the faithful remnant in Germany or Russia, the sick, the unemployed, a young man in intellectual difficulties. Listen to the Church's prayer ; listen to Christ's prayer. When the inspired words of the Psalms are repeated in the service, it is the voice of Christ in His Church praying for those who do not know how to pray for themselves ; it is the voice of the members of His Body fulfilling the command, Bear ye one another's burdens.

I, therefore, as individualist and egoist, have no right to use the Psalms at all, nor any part in Christian prayer. The " I " that alone can pray in Christ's name is the " I " that has died to the individual self-life, and that has risen again with Christ to the common life which is in Him. The words " through Jesus Christ our Lord " are no mere pious formula ; they express the whole pith and substance of Christian prayer ; they include in themselves the Mystery of Salvation, the Mystery of Grace, and of the life of the Church—that is, not the Invisible Church, but the Visible Church militant here on earth, which, imperfect though it is, nevertheless *is* the Church of God.

The reading of the Scriptures forms an important part of the service. They have their importance, of course, for the sake of the moral lessons which they contain. But they have also deeper meaning, which is twofold. Firstly, the Church goes back over the *history* of God's dealings with man in the past, to see the historical perspective of his choice of Israel to be His People under the Old Covenant, fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. For this purpose the Scriptures are read, roughly, in historical order. At Septuagesima, nine weeks before Easter, we begin with the story of the Creation ; by Easter in the Sunday course, we have reached the Exodus, the type of the greater Exodus which he accomplished at Jerusalem. Secondly, the Scriptures are read as setting forth the Mystery of our redemption. In the liturgy, the past, present, and future are seen in one ;

the past facts of Christ's redeeming work, enacted once for all, are made present. Thus at Christmas we go with the Shepherds to Bethlehem to worship the new-born Saviour ; on Good Friday we stand under the Cross ; at Easter we share in the Resurrection. That which happened once for all in the past is in the liturgy, brought into the present ; or, rather, in the liturgy, we who live in the present are lifted up into eternity : " our citizenship is in heaven." Thus, when in the Gospel for Quinquagesima, the Sunday before Lent, we hear the Lord prophesying His Passion, and then see Him healing blind Bartimaeus, the meaning is that *we* are Bartimaeus. It is we who are blind to the meaning of His teaching about the Passion, about the finding of life through losing it for His sake, about the spiritual victory which can only be won through weakness ; and we pray that He will enlighten our blindness, that we may go with Him to Jerusalem, and tread with Him the Way of the Cross.

Thus, when the Scriptures are read in the liturgy, the context is different from that of private devotional reading. The Church is met for worship ; the lessons form part of the rehearsal of the Mystery of faith. As we have said, the history of God's works in the past is commemorated, and it is also contemplated *sub specie aeternitatis*. Or we may say, the Church that is met for worship is the Church universal in this particular place ; now a Prophet, now an Apostle stands up in the midst of the Church, to speak his word of witness ; but in the reading of the Gospel we hear the Lord Himself, Who stands in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, the Master in His own House.

We must say a word also about the Sermon in this context ; for it is an integral part of the liturgy. In the Church's act of worship it is not fitting for the preacher to advance his own ideas, as his own ; nor yet to attempt an intellectually adequate definition of theological doctrine. The function of the Sermon is to put into words the approach of the people to God, setting forth the same Mystery of Salvation and of grace, which the other parts of the service express in other ways. Without the Sermon the worship of the people is in danger of becoming formalistic. In the preacher's words the Church's confession of faith becomes not merely formal and liturgical, but personal ; what they express is that we, here and now, believe the things that we say, and set them forth, however unworthily, in our own words. For it is the experience of every preacher that the

congregation has quite a big part in the preaching of his sermon.¹

Finally, it is in the eucharistic sacrament that the whole meaning of everything is summed up. Here Christ, through whom all prayer is made because He is the Head of the Body, is manifested as the Shepherd of the Flock, the Head of the family presiding at His own Table, and at the same time the Bread of Life ; as the Priest of His own Sacrifice, and at the same time the sacrificial victim. And when according to His institution the Memorial has been made of His Death and His Resurrection, of His Messianic mission fulfilled in the opening of the Kingdom of heaven to all believers, the members of His Church are seen in the communion as united with Him that their life may be with Him and through Him an oblation to God. In the drama of the eucharistic action they are not spectators merely but actors ; not merely assistants at the sacrifice but themselves offered up in it.

IV.

Such, we would say, is the spiritual reality which the Church's classical forms of worship express. Their expression of it may be partly obscured by the unworthiness of the Minister, but is in no way dependent on his worthiness. Just as the Mystery of Grace in the Scriptures may be obscured by an unworthy expositor, but is not created by the worthy expositor—for it was there before him, and it is his part simply to show to the people the treasures which are there—so, the reality of the Divine presence in the Church and the Church's prayer is not created by our worthiness or our response ; for the Church is not formed out of the individuals who compose it, but it—or rather she—forms them, bringing them to birth as their mother.

"The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life." These words apply in their original context to the written commandment of God itself ; they apply to all forms, and not least to the Scriptures. Apart from the Holy Spirit, the Bible words are dead words ; we may study them with the latest commentators, but they convey to our mind no word of God till the Holy Spirit comes to reveal the treasure which is there. The other side of the picture is that, apart

(¹) In this paragraph I am speaking only of the Sermon as a part of the common worship. I am not denying that there are other sorts of sermon, hortatory, instructional, doctrinal, which have their right place on other occasions.

from the letter, the Spirit has nothing on which to grip ; thus religious fervour, cut off from the Bible, becomes a vain fanaticism. The letter without the Spirit is like an electric bulb with no current. But the current needs the bulb if it is to give light.

So it is with the forms of the Church and the liturgy. Apart from the Spirit, Who is the *Agape* of God shed abroad in our hearts, these forms of the Ministry and of common worship are dry bones, very many in the midst of the valley, and very dry. These forms—Bible, creeds, prayers, all the external side of the Church—are like bodies, waiting for the breath of life from God to enter into them. Man needs them, for he has a twofold nature of body and spirit ; and when the spirit of man is deprived of forms altogether, it is left helpless in its naked subjectivity, seeking in vain to find its way to the Eternal.

Because of man's twofold nature, the method of his redemption was the Incarnation of the Word ; and the forms of the Church, Bible, Creeds, Sacraments, outward order, derive their meaning from the historical Coming which happened once for all, and therefore has an application to all men at all times and places. For this reason it can be right for forms of worship to be fixed and unchanging, because there is a Holy Spirit who can fill them with ever new meaning.

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