

The Central Place of Christ in Christian Worship.

*Address to the Members of the Church Service Society at its
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THE subject of this Address is one that, so far as I know, has never before been treated of at a meeting of the Church Service Society, and yet it is cognate to its spirit and aims. For although the Society imposes no doctrinal conditions on its members, it has always been true in both its branches to the Catholic Faith of the Church, and has sought to give to our Lord the central place in worship that is His by right. And that is the place that has been given to Him, more or less, through all the Christian ages.

I.

In New Testament times the worship of the Christian community was at the first closely connected with the worship of the Jewish Temple and the Jewish Synagogue, and it derived various elements from both. From the Synagogue it retained the reading of the Law and the Prophets, probably with an exposition or homily based on these, and accompanied by acts of praise and prayer. And from the Temple it continued the use of the ancient Psalter which, for six hundred years, had been the accompaniment of the offerings upon God's Altar.

But Christian worship from the first received an entirely new orientation based upon two essential features in the experience of the first disciples.

One was their vital sense of the Presence of the Living Lord. In their worship they realised the fulfilment of His own promise, "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them." Even as on the first Easter evening He entered through closed doors and stood among them in His living power, so each time they met they knew that He was with them still, breathing upon them the power of His Spirit and uttering anew His

benediction, "Peace be unto you." So they worshipped as they lived in the continual assurance of His Presence, adoring Him as their Living Saviour and rejoicing always in the Lord.

And the other essential feature was due to the fact that the Lord Himself, the last night He spent with His disciples before He suffered, had instituted a new and sacred Rite in the Holy Sacrament of His Body and Blood, and had given them the commandment, "This do in remembrance of Me."

So it came about that the Apostles from the beginning, in obedience to their Lord's command, gave that Rite the chief place in their worship, and made it an act not only of remembrance of His Passion and Death, but of vital realisation of His Living Presence, the Presence of Him Who had not only died but had risen again, and was alive for evermore. On the first day of the week they made it their practice to meet together for the Breaking of Bread, and thus they blended the two thoughts and actions into one of showing the Lord's Death and declaring His Resurrection. No doubt they met every day for acts of united prayer, for prayer was the very atmosphere in which they lived and breathed. But on the Lord's Day, while there was praise and prayer and the reading of God's Word, the central act was the Lord's Supper, and the dominant notes of their worship were those of fellowship and adoration and joy.

It may be that in certain passages in the New Testament we still have fragments or echoes of the words they used or of the hymns they sang, as in the rhythmic language preserved in some of the Epistles or in the songs of adoration in the book of Revelation. And from all the references to the Holy Rite, direct and indirect, that we find in the various writings of the Sacred Book, I believe that to the hearts and minds of the first disciples the Lord's Supper had come to have the same rich content and the same wealth of meaning that it has had to devout souls throughout the centuries, and that in all its aspects it was the witness to the Glory of the Lord. It was the Memorial of Christ their Redeemer and of His sacrifice upon the Cross; it was the Communion with Christ their living Saviour and their fellowship through Him with one another; it was the receiving of Christ the Bread of Life, the food and nourishment of their souls; it was the pledge of loyalty to Christ as their Lord and Master; and it was the supreme act of worship and adoration of Christ as Lord of all. Thus

the cardinal distinction between Christian worship and every other kind that went before it was the central place given to Christ as Head over all unto His Church.

II.

In the centuries that succeeded the Apostolic age our sources of knowledge regarding the worship of the Church are comparatively meagre, but it is abundantly clear that the primitive practice was everywhere continued of giving the chief place to the Holy Communion in the worship of every Lord's Day.

Within seventy years after the Resurrection we find an allusion to such worship in the report by Pliny to the Emperor Trajan, in which he tells that the Christians gathered together before daybreak and sang hymns to Christ as God, and that at a later hour the same day they came together to eat bread, that is, for the Lord's Supper.

Some sixty years later Justin Martyr, in his defence of his brethren addressed to Marcus Aurelius, says that "On the Day of the Sun the Christians in each place gather together and first of all hear the writings of the Prophets and the memoirs of the Apostles read, and exhortation given; then all rise and offer prayers; thereafter bread and wine and water are brought in, and the Eucharistic Prayer is offered, in which praise and glory is given to the Father of the Universe through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; then all partake of the sacred elements, and they are carried by the deacons to those who are absent."

That is in the middle of the second century; and fifty years later still, about the year 200, we have an outline of the Eucharistic Prayer in the writings of Hippolytus, who tells us that it contained thanksgiving for the Incarnation and the Redemption of our Lord, the Narrative of the Institution, the Memorial and Oblation of the Bread and the Cup, the Invocation of the Holy Spirit on the Sacrifice of the Church, the intercession for all Saints, and the Doxology presented "through Thy Servant Jesus Christ, through whom unto Thee be glory and honour for ever."

Thus through the centuries Christian worship grew and became more and more fixed and definite in form, until in the fourth and fifth centuries it was crystallised in those great Liturgies of the Church in which has been handed down the appointed service of the Lord's Day in every part

and portion of the Christian world. And that appointed service is the Holy Communion of the Lord and Saviour.

III.

These Liturgies are commonly divided into four great families, associated with the names of four Apostles or Apostolic men, and connected with four chief branches of the Ancient Church—the Greek over most of Eastern Europe; the Coptic in Egypt and adjacent lands; the Hispano-Gallican in Spain and Gaul and Celtic Britain; and the Roman in the rest of Western Europe. In these the earlier portion of the service varies endlessly, though in all are included the Epistle and Gospel, and in nearly all the Creed as witness to the Truth as it is in Jesus. But in the most sacred part, containing the great Thanksgiving, the Consecration, and the Communion itself, they are all to a wonderful degree the same, and they all in their pure and primitive form unite in language of inexpressible beauty in setting forth Christ as the supreme centre of the Church's devotion, and in exalting Him in His eternal glory and unchanging grace.

In the Eastern forms, as Dr Hislop in "Our Heritage in Public Worship" has made so clear, the emphasis is on the Mystery of the Incarnation, and in vivid symbol and ceremonial, each time the Sacrament is celebrated, the great drama of Redemption is set forth before the eyes of the worshipping people, and their hearts and minds are thrilled with the sense of the Unseen Presence in their midst.

In the Western forms the emphasis is rather on the Sacrifice of the Redeemer, and the central thought is that of Christ Crucified for men, the Adoration of the Lamb, as it had been slain, in the midst of the throne.

And in the purer ages of faith each had its strong appeal to the souls and lives of men, and each, in so far as it was truly understood, held up Christ the Eternal Lord as the very centre of Christian faith and Christian love.

IV.

It is interesting to note how far the worship and the prayers in these Liturgies are addressed to Christ, and how far to God the Father in the name of Christ. In the Liturgy of St. James, and in those of St. Chrysoston, and of St. Basil the Great, which formed the main stream of worship in the Eastern Church, the prayers are mostly presented

to the Father, but not infrequently prayers to the Saviour are intermingled with them. Thus, in the Prayer of the Incense near the beginning of the Liturgy of St. James, we read :

“ O Lord Jesus Christ, Word of God, Who didst offer Thyself a spotless sacrifice upon the Cross to God and the Father, Who didst kindle with the tongs the prophet's lips and take away his sin ; kindle also the hearts of us sinners, and purify us from every spot, and cause us to stand pure before Thy holy altar, that we may offer to Thee the sacrifice of praise.”

Similarly in the Nestorian Church of East Syria—a small community that still exists to-day—we find the Offertory prayer taking this form :

“ May Christ, Who was Crucified for our salvation, and gave us the precept that we should make commemoration of His Death and Resurrection, Himself receive this sacrifice from our unworthy hands, through His own grace and His tender mercies for ever.”

And still more remarkable, in one at least of the Coptic Liturgies, that of St. Basil of Alexandria, we find the Epiklesis itself, the Invocation of the Holy Ghost, addressed to the Saviour in these words :

“ We pray Thee, O Christ our God, to look on us unworthy sinners, and we beseech Thee by the good pleasure of Thy goodness that Thy Holy Spirit may come upon us and upon these gifts set before Thee, and sanctify them and make them holy unto Thy servants, that this bread may be the sacred body of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, and this cup the precious Blood of the New Testament of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, which is given for the remission of sins and life eternal unto them that receive it.”

This same tendency that occurs in those Eastern Liturgies we find passing into the non-Roman forms of the West—into that great group which included the Mozarabic in Spain, the Gallican in France, and the Celtic in Ireland and Scotland.

In the Mozarabic form, in particular, of about fifty short prayers given in Bright's “ Ancient Collects ” there are fully thirty addressed to our Lord ; and while they have sometimes a florid character that is in contrast to the fine dignity of other Latin forms, they have a striking way of linking on the thought of the petition to some incident in the Saviour's life or some aspect of His work that might often be helpful to us in our private devotions.

For example, in a prayer for Christmastide we have :

“ O Christ, the Word of the most high Father, Who wast made Flesh to dwell among us ; enter into our hearts, we beseech Thee, that all we who have been redeemed by the mystery of Thine incarnation may remain united in the fellowship of perfect peace.”

For a day on which the thought is "Consider the lilies," we have :

"Make us, O Lord, to flourish like pure lilies in the courts of Thy House, and to show forth to the faithful the fragrance of good works and the example of a godly life ; through Thy mercy which is for evermore."

And when the Gospel is the Walk to Emmaus, we have :

"Jesus, our Master, do Thou meet us while we walk in the way and long to reach the Country, so that following Thy light we may keep the path of righteousness and never wander into the darkness of the night, whilst Thou, Who art the Way, the Truth, and the Life, art shining within us."

Between the Mozarabic and the Gallican Liturgies and the fragments that remain of the Celtic Rite, which was that used in the Ancient Scottish Church, there was evidently much in common—a warm devotional feeling, a rich imagination, and a profound sense of the Divine Presence. And these characteristics are all alike contained in this prayer of the Offering which gives expression to our own feelings and desires at the Holy Table of the Lord :

"Be Thou present, O Jesus our true Priest, be Thou present in our midst, as Thou wast in the midst of Thy disciples ; and bless this our offering, that we may partake of holy things from Thine own hand, O Holy Lord, Eternal Redeemer."

I do not quote these prayers as models of what our prayers in public worship should be. I believe that for the most part it is most fitting that the prayers of the sanctuary should be presented to God the Father in the Name of the Eternal Son. But they are tokens of the spirit that has inspired the devotion of the Church from the earliest days : and in them is struck what has been and ought to be the dominant note of Christian Worship throughout all time, the note of "Jesus in the midst."

V.

When we pass to the worship of the Roman Church, while this note is also dominant, the atmosphere and temperature in other respects are different. The language is more restrained, the ritual more rigid, and the mind of the worshipper more fixed on the thought of the Solemn Sacrifice that is being offered to God. Sacrifice is the constantly recurring note, often doubtless in a wrong or misleading way, since the Sacrifice of the Mass is so fatally confused with the one all-sufficient Sacrifice upon the Cross ; but the central conception is the Adoration of the Lamb, and Christ is still the centre of all. He is at once the

Sacrifice and the High Priest through Whom the Sacrifice is offered, and it is He Who at the heavenly Altar presents it to the Father, perfumed with the incense of His love.

Thus in the Roman Service of the Eucharist all the prayers, with the single exception of the *Agnus Dei*, are addressed to God the Father. And so it is likewise with the Collects, which are the distinctive contribution of the Roman Church to the devotion of Christendom, and which have the quality of putting into beautifully concise and perfect form the desires and longings of the human heart.

It is noteworthy, I think, that in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer there are eighty Collects, one for every Sunday and Holy Day of the Christian Year, most of them translated with singular felicity from the Latin, but of these eighty only two, for the third Sunday in Advent and the first in Lent, are addressed to Christ, and these two both date from the 16th century. Every one that has come down from ancient sources, whether from St. Leo, St. Gelasius, or St. Gregory, is addressed to God the Father, but every one has the ending, "*Per Christum Dominum nostrum.*"

But while there have been differences in practice between East and West, there has been no divergence in the supreme honour given to our Lord. In both alike there were accretions in the course of time, which gave an undue place to the Virgin and the Saints, and which tended towards carnal or materialistic views of the Saviour's Presence in the Sacrament: yet in spite of these things Christ Himself, the Divine and Heavenly Lord, has always the central place. And therein is contained the great catholic model and example of Christian prayer alike for the worship of the Sanctuary and the devotion of our hearts. Christ is its very centre. Round Him in His work of mediation and His revelation of eternal love it all revolves. And the wonderful thing about the central act of Christian worship, in spite of the errors and superstitions that gathered round it, is that, under every form and ritual, the glory shining through it is the glory of the Living Lord.

VI.

And yet—while the glory is clear to those who have had hearts and minds to see and apprehend it—one cannot help asking what the religious and spiritual value of such worship has been and is to the millions of more or less

unlearned and ignorant people by whom it has been offered. Alike in the Divine Service of the Eastern Church, in the Mass of the Roman Church, and in the sung Eucharist in thousands of Anglican Churches to-day, the worship, when reverently and devoutly rendered, is solemn and impressive, and creates an atmosphere of mystery and a very real sense of contact with the Unseen. But one wonders whether something important and essential is not lacking to make it what Christian Worship ought to be. One wonders whether the Apostles, if they came back to earth and entered such churches, would find much in common or anything in common between the elaborate ritual that has developed round it and the simple Lord's Supper as they observed it in their day. And one wonders whether it is not from the sense of something lacking that devout worshippers frequent the early celebration in which the pomp and pageantry are absent, and find in that a fellowship with one another and a fellowship with Christ Himself, for which sub-consciously their souls are seeking.

Perhaps it was from a similar feeling that the people in later mediaeval times sought to express themselves in other forms of worship, and that Services like the simple Prone in the vernacular, or the Litany, in which simple hearts could have a part that they could understand, became so loved by the people. In many minds no doubt there was revulsion from the corruptions connected with the Mass, from the sale of indulgencies and other practices associated with it, and the degrading traffic in Masses for the Dead. But it was partly also, I believe, because the Mass had become so much of a mystery, and its true meaning so little understood, that many failed to find what they longed for in the Holy Eucharist itself, and sought for it in other forms.

Here I should like to insert a section on the history and place of Litanies in the Church, which is very interesting to me and is closely related to my subject. But the subject is so large that it would require a paper to itself, and I only make reference in passing to one very simple and beautiful Litany that for many centuries was used and loved in our own land—the Litany of Dunkeld—which concludes with these noble words :

“ Christ conquereth ; Christ reigneth ; Christ ruleth :
O Christ, grant us Thy peace :
O Christ, fill us with joy and peace :
O Christ, grant us life and salvation.”

In this way these forms of worship gave high honour to our Lord ; and it may be that by their very simplicity they turned the devotion of the people back to Christ, and prepared for the great awakening that was to come.

VII.

When the Reformation dawned on Western Europe it could not but have a profound influence on worship, but it was an influence that varied considerably in different lands. In the Anglican and Lutheran Churches the task undertaken by the Reformers was chiefly to translate the ancient liturgy into the vernacular, but in doing so they sought to cleanse it from what they regarded as accretions and corruptions ; and from the process it came forth undoubtedly purer, but in some respects impoverished in fulness and beauty, yet deepened also in its spiritual insight and appeal.

In the Reformed Churches the treatment was much more drastic. Calvin claimed that his Service Book was, " according to the ancient forms," but what remained of these forms after several recensions was comparatively small so far as the language went. But it was his express intention and desire to make the Lord's Supper the chief act of worship on every Lord's Day, as it had been in the days of the Apostles, and to restore its character as a Communion Service and not chiefly a ceremonial Act of Adoration. In this aim, as we know, he was obstructed by the civil powers, and he had to be content with a monthly Communion instead of a weekly one, but he sought to strike a Eucharistic note in the Morning Service of every Sunday, and though it fell short of its culminating act, it was meant to suggest at least that Christian worship leads up to and has its crown at the Table of the Lord.

In this he was followed by Knox, in whose " Book of Common Order " we can trace at every point the influence of Calvin. The basis of Reformed worship that clearly stands out in both is the Revelation of God in His Holy Word, and its aim was to appeal to the intellect of men and scarcely at all to the emotions, with the result that it tended to be hard in its spirit as well as bare in its outward form. The Prayers in Knox's Book in fact are not only of inordinate length and dullness, but are often ponderous and controversial in their language, and even in the Service of the Lord's Supper they are lacking in devotional feeling

and spiritual tone, and fail to bring home the sense of the Presence of the Living Lord that should lie at the heart of all Christian devotion.

But the great central contribution of the Reformation to Worship, apart from the work of any individual Reformer, was the awakening of the Christian conscience to the apprehension of the righteousness and holiness of God, the renewed and deepened sense of the sinfulness of sin, and of the need of reconciliation and pardon through the redeeming work of Christ. Therefore, in the forefront of every Service Book, with the exception of one which only lived for three years, was placed the Confession of Sin and the Absolution or Prayer for Pardon ; and if we are to be true to the practice and principles of the reformers, I believe it should have that place still in our worship. For we come to God, not in our own worthiness, but through the merits of our Redeemer : we come as pilgrims with travel-stained feet, needing to have the stains washed off, and we must look to Him in His infinite love and mercy to reveal to us each time we come the cleansing and renewing power of Christ.

Thus as the centre of the Reformed theology was Christ in Whom men have redemption through His Blood, so the centre of the Reformed worship was Christ the one Mediator between God and Man and the one true Priest through Whom alone men draw near to the mercy seat and by Whom their prayers and praises are presented at the Throne of Grace.

VIII.

In Scotland the Worship as established by Knox remained much the same for eighty years until the foolish and ill-judged attempts of king and ecclesiastics to force a new form on an unwilling people—which, however excellent in itself, was entirely alien to the spirit of the nation—threw the Church into endless confusion and turmoil. But when at last the Westminster Divines, having remodelled the Creed of the Church, took in hand to re-shape its worship also, there emerged in 1644, largely under the guidance of George Gillespie, the Directory of Public Worship, which was true to the central principles of the Reformation and to the central place of Christ in faith and in devotion, and which had the makings in it of a noble form.

It is interesting to know that in the very year the Directory was adopted, much of it was put into the actual

form of a Book of Prayers for use at Sea, which was placed on board every ship in British waters. And if a book like that had only been recommended for common use in the Churches or even if the Directory itself had been loyally accepted and used as a guide in the Church's prayers, the story of the following 200 years might have been very different from what it was. But instead of that every man did what was right in his own eyes, and the Worship of the Scottish Church in the 18th century became to a large extent a pitifully bleak and barren thing.

No doubt there were men with great gifts of prayer who lifted their people to high levels, and others with a deep devotion to Christ who took them "far ben" into the things of God, but such were the exception, not the rule. These higher levels were attained most of all at the Sacramental Seasons, and some of the Communion addresses that have been preserved reveal a depth of tenderness and devotion hard to excel, which must have had an echo in the prayers. But the Lord's Supper, which the Second Book of Discipline decreed should be held monthly in towns and quarterly in the country, and which the Directory enjoined should be administered "frequently," had become more and more rare in its observance—in many churches only once a year—and the long stretches between one Sacrament and another were marked by a type of worship that was often dreary and unspiritual to a degree.

With every revival of religion, of course, there came a breath of better things, as the Spirit moved upon the face of the Churches; but the full restoration of a true conception of worship as a united act of offering to God by a Christian congregation gathered together for that purpose in the name of Christ, dates, it seems to me, from little more than seventy years ago, and has only slowly been gaining ground amongst us.

IX.

One notable step towards this restoration was the movement that began in 1863 to provide, in the form of a hymn book, a fuller and richer vehicle of praise than the metrical Psalms. As far back as 1794, I think it was, there had been a collection of 231 hymns and paraphrases made by the Relief Church in Scotland, and a second collection for the same Church appeared in 1833. There had also been an extensive use of hymns amongst the Congregational and Wesleyan Communities, but the books they used were of

English origin. The first Scottish Book of a generally accepted kind was the Hymn-book of the United Presbyterian Church, containing 468 hymns and 23 doxologies, published in 1852. Next came the Scottish Hymnal, approved by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1861, followed in a few years by the hymn books of other branches of the Scottish Church; and the hymns, not supplanting the old psalms (which God forbid that they should ever do), but taking their place alongside them in nearly every service, gave a new note to the worship of God's House to the praise and glory of Christ the Lord.

It is worthy of note how many of the hymns in our hymn books are purely and entirely to His praise. Of the 700 in the Revised Church Hymnary, 23 are addressed to the Holy Trinity, 147 to God the Father, 19 to the Holy Spirit, while 241 are directly addressed to our Lord, and fully 200 more have as their theme some aspect of His life or work or His redeeming grace. That is to say, when we deduct those hymns that are of the nature of meditative or hortatory poems, nearly four-fifths of the hymns we sing are sung to the glory of our Lord.

And this note of glory to him that became dominant in the praise of the Church was likewise struck in the prayers. It is remarkable that in 1863, shortly after the first hymn book was issued, a first step was taken by Dr Sprott, of North Berwick, towards the formation of a Society to study ancient forms of prayers and to compile books of Divine Service, not to take the place of free prayer in the Church, but to be a help and guide in the devotions of the sanctuary. And four years later, in 1867, the first edition of *Euchologion*, the Book of Common Order of the Church Service Society, was issued from the press. In the course of time that book was followed by other publications of the kind in the other parts of the Church, and through them there has been an influence at work, often unconsciously felt, which has tended to make the prayers of the House of God more reverent, more orderly, and, I believe, more truly to the praise and glory of Christ.

It is seen in the forms for ordinary Sunday Services in almost all these books of devotion in which each constituent part is offered and presented at the throne of grace in the name and through the meditation of the Saviour.

And it is seen most of all in the Celebration of the Crowning Act of Christian Worship at the Table of the Lord, the order and language of which have been brought back in some

measure at least to the ancient forms of the Church of God : and the rich and inexhaustible meaning of that Central Rite of our Holy Faith is revealed more clearly and solemnly to each worshipper's heart.

X.

Not yet have we learned how to give the Holy Communion its true place in our worship ; and to our shame we must confess that, as regards the frequency of the Sacrament, there is no part of the Catholic Church more remote from the practice of the early days than the Church of Scotland and her daughter Churches across the seas. And one of the great problems which we have to face and to solve in the future is how to return to something more akin to primitive tradition and to Apostolic ways.

It will not be solved, I believe, by adopting the practice of the Roman Church or of the Anglo-Catholics in virtually separating the Eucharist as an act of worship from the Communion as an act of fellowship. Nor will it be solved by forsaking the Scottish ways of great solemn Sacramental Seasons. For there is a vast impressiveness and a rich religious value in the infrequent Communion, the quarterly or half-yearly celebration with its throng of worshippers and its hush of deep solemnity ; and we should never be willing to abandon that, but earnestly strive to retain and honour it as a high day in the life of every congregation.

But if the Lord's Supper is not only a Memorial but the most blessed means of grace to Christian people and the closest act of fellowship with Christ, the Church should be ready to provide for her faithful children more frequent access to the Table of the Lord. And I believe it may best be done, not by departing from the special seasons, though it were good to assimilate them when it is possible to the great anniversaries of the Christian Year, but by having more frequent smaller celebrations at an earlier hour on the Lord's Day or following the ordinary Sunday service, when those whose hearts are hungering and thirsting for their Saviour may feed upon the Bread of Life.

But while the Holy Communion must ever be regarded as the Crown of Worship, and while I believe that nothing else can be a substitute for it or an equivalent to it, we must endeavour to carry more of its essential spirit into all the services in the House of God. That essential spirit is the Presence of the Living Lord. And while it is at His Table

that He comes nearest to us and feeds us with the richest of His spiritual food, we must feel and know, and must strive to make our people feel and know, that He is present always. What we need to realise in our worship far more vitally than we do is that every time the church bells ring it is the summons to us and to God's people in every place to join with our great High Priest Who presents the incense of our prayers upon the heavenly altar, and that, just as truly as to His assembled Disciples at the first great Easter-tide, Jesus Himself comes amongst us in His living power and stands in the midst.

For Christ must be the centre of all ; and to Him, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, must be all the glory and all the praise.

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