

Hunger and Famine—in Public Worship?

The Editor of "Life and Work" describes some of the features of a recent correspondence which will be of special interest to readers of the Annual.

THE Bible does not hesitate to use terms as strong as these—hunger and famine—about the Word of God. Dare we use such words about public worship—the way prepared for the meeting of God and man? Having read through a large correspondence recently in connection with a series of questions on this subject printed in *Life and Work* I am inclined to believe that we can. If these replies are in any way representative of the life of our Church to-day we have reason to be deeply concerned at certain facts, deeply thankful for others, and certainly the more deeply committed to the essential purpose for which the Church Service Society exists.

There is the evidence, first of all, of the hunger. That is what has moved me most—the evident indication that within our congregations, and beyond them, are large numbers of people of all ages who are earnestly seeking for a truer worship than many of our services yet afford. Almost ninety-five per cent. of the replies to the questions about the individual's active participation in worship, his sense of what it is we do, his awareness of being called to confession and to the hearing of the words of forgiveness, his conscious sharing in the acts of adoration and thanksgiving and intercession—almost ninety-five per cent. of these replies acknowledge that this participation is only fitful or entirely absent; yet all of them plainly desire it as an urgent need of their souls. Along with this goes the acknowledgment in other letters (probably fewer in proportion because they do not come from a situation which impels people to write) that, where our Church services are clearly directed towards the great acts of worship, there is a true sense of the presence of God and of oneness as His family. All this is something which this Society must find more than ordinarily significant.

We can scarcely deny that there is a famine of true worship in many places in this land if these replies are even

moderately representative, for the writers are quite obviously not casual "church-goers," expressing dissatisfaction because they do not find the sermon "to their mind," but serious and seeking people desiring to be led into the holy of holies and failing often to find the leading.

Their diagnosis of what is wrong is not captious criticism. "The services are too hurried—we have not time to understand what we are meant to be doing" "I find my whole mental effort being expended on trying to follow the line of thought of the minister's prayers" "I feel that I am only listening to the minister praying and not praying myself" "I find I have to listen hard to know what the prayer is about—and by that time the minister is on to another part of the prayer" "I am never aware that we are being called to a confession of sin in any part of the service" "The prayers are too long and wordy—I find I cannot enter into them as my own" "There is too much bustle and noise in our service for the still small voice to be heard" "As an old elder I am glad to think that something is being done to make our services more real—the ordinary Church service is somewhat drab and quite often monotonous" "I think I speak for the Church-goer who is going back again—it isn't easy to find the spiritual significance of the service" "I am a 'twicer' every Sunday, in the morning in my own church, in the evening in other churches ; but I haven't found yet what I am seeking" "I know we need the Church ; but I don't think the majority of us can just walk in and find what we've lost".

I was not altogether surprised at that evidence : but I was quite unprepared for the measure of agreement upon some of the things desired—and I think readers of this *Annual* will share my astonishment. About eighty-five per cent. of my correspondents welcomed the suggestion that the service should begin with a clearer acknowledgment of the presence of God ("beginning less casually", as one said) and a more definite act of homage on the part of the congregation, with physical action (such as standing for a short prayer of adoration) to arrest the mind of the worshippers. Almost the same percentage felt that we might with appropriateness stand for a prayer of thanksgiving and dedication ("around the Table", as it were) at the close of the service. A large number asked why we should not kneel for prayer. "Kneeling for prayer is universally practised throughout the world. I wonder if our way is

better. We need a conscious physical act of humility. To remain seated while addressing God in prayer seems difficult to justify"—an expression of view which would have gladdened the hearts of the founders of this Society.

There is virtual unanimity that it would be a great aid to worship if the prayers were divided more carefully into sections, with pauses between each petition or subject of intercession, so that the worshipper might have time and quietness to make the prayer his own. Many letters were in sympathy with the use of simple responses which could be said vocally or silently—provided that this is not hurried and made into "drill". A number suggested that the prayer of confession should be summed up in words which the congregation could learn by heart and repeat together, however simple the form might be ("If people could only be persuaded to say aloud with the minister, after he has said the general words of confession, even four words, 'We confess our sins', then a silence, and then a distinct declaration of God's forgiveness to the penitent, many a soul might be eased of its burden of guilt").

It will be a welcome sign to readers of this *Annual* that more than three-quarters of the correspondents feel that there ought to be something in every Sunday morning service to remind us of the Sacrament of the Holy Communion; that some part of the service should assist us to feel that we are, as it were, around the Lord's Table as His family, recalling His giving of Himself for us and to us, remembering in prayer our fellow Christians in need, the whole world of men for whom He died, and the Church invisible in the heavenly places; and offering ourselves to Him for His service "in thankfulness for all His mercy". Many have discovered that when the service culminates in this act a new depth and reality comes into their worship, and they "go in peace", more conscious of their calling and of the Father's blessing and commands. "But why", ask many of these letters, "why not more frequent Communion?"

Finally—and this too verifies my statement that these correspondents are not casual critics—there was a widespread desire expressed for more teaching upon worship. "Couldn't our evening services at certain seasons be 'schools of worship' in which we could be taught what these things mean as we do them?" "It is not, in the final issue, a matter of a change of service but also of the

tuition of the hearts of the worshippers ; we cannot use the silence unless one has learnt to pray ”.

It is difficult, of course, to estimate just how representative these letters are. They come from a wide variety of congregational and educational backgrounds : from elders and youth leaders, from people at the centre of the Church's life and from people who are probably not very prominent, from some who are finding their way back to church attendance and others who, often unintentionally, reveal how little the ordinary man understands of our services. Their chief limitation is that they represent the concerned people. What lies beyond them in the less concerned, the more casual, is anybody's guess. The most important question is : “ Would the answering of the needs and the desires of the more concerned be likely to help many of the more casual ? ” My answer is that nearly everything that has been suggested—and some of it is accomplished fact for those who are likely to be reading these words—is in the direction of making more plain and direct what we do when we are gathered together for the public worship of God ; it is a plea for making straight the highway appointed for our meeting with Him ; it is a cry of need from those who would call themselves, as we all should, learners ; and therefore it ought to be relevant to the needs of a very considerable number of our people who would never trouble themselves to write letters on this subject—of all, in fact, who are more than listeners to a sermon or upholders of a habit of church attendance, “ but denying the power thereof ”.

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