

The Children's Sermon

THERE is a growing uneasiness in my mind which I venture to ventilate in these pages, that the children's sermon is gradually undermining the worship of our Church. That may seem an extreme statement, but, if I may judge from my correspondence, many share my disquiet.

I do not propose to argue for or against the children's sermon,—a great deal can be said on both sides. Where it is an established custom it is often difficult to depart from it; and where the minister favours it, he will not depart from it.

But if it is to be used, could it not find such a position in the service that it will not interrupt or supplant the reading of Holy Scripture, or be a barrier to devotion? That should be possible everywhere. Yet more and more one finds that the place given to it is usually after the Old Testament Lesson (sometimes before or instead of it); and, when the children's sermon is finished, a children's hymn is sung and the children leave the church. Then you get an order like this—I give one I have actually seen used, and it is typical of what happens in many of our churches.

Psalm in metre

Scripture Sentences

Prayers: Adoration, Confession, Supplication,

Lord's Prayer

Old Testament Lesson

Children's Sermon

Children's Hymn

Organ music while children leave the church to go to their Sunday

School classes

Intimations

Offerings and Dedication

Paraphrase or Hymn

New Testament Lesson

Prayers: 'Thanksgiving and Intercession

Hymn

Sermon

(Prayer)

Hymn

The Benediction

I wonder if it would be humanly possible to devise a more disordered and meaningless 'order' of service? It is

weak and meandering to begin with, and the children's sermon and hymn have completed the havoc.

Could we not do better? And could not the members of our Society at least set an example? Let us look at the whole question.

First let us clear the ground: the children are either present for the whole service, or we have some scheme whereby they remain for the first part of the service, and then go on to their Sunday School classes while the service proceeds. If the children remain throughout the service, so far as it affects them their sermon may come anywhere, and there is certainly no need to set it preposterously between the Scripture Lessons. If the children go out to classes, presumably they must not remain too long. But we might surely seize the opportunity to teach the children to worship with the Christian family, and let them leave at a natural break in the service. Then they can go direct to their lessons when they reach the Sunday School, and after their lessons conclude, let us say, with the Lord's Prayer (preceded perhaps by a very brief intercession) and a psalm or hymn.

Another preliminary point, as I see it, is this: it is not necessary that the acts of worship in the church should be down to the level of a child's full comprehension. A child understands much, and misunderstands much; and that is precisely a child's experience in all things in the world where it lives. Its comprehension will grow; meantime, it loves to take part in an act of worship shared by adults, even though it does not understand everything that is said and done. It feels that it is a full member of the family, and it plays its full part. This can be further increased by teaching it to say (not sing) the *Amens* at the end of each part of the prayers. The child then has to listen to know when to come in—it can be taught the familiar conclusions in the Sunday School—and as it listens it learns actively to pray, instead of forming the bad habit of allowing its mind to wander away to other things during the prayers—a habit all too common among our church-folk to-day. But the *Amens* must be said to achieve this; if they are sung, the organ sounds the note, pulls back wandering attention, and the choir gives the lead. But if they are said, all must listen to what the minister is saying, for the cue comes from the minister, not from the organist. Further, by breaking up the prayers in this way, they become more comprehensible to everyone, children and

adults alike. Children love to take an active part in the service if they are allowed to do so.

That, then, it appears to me, clears the ground. Our purpose in having the children at the service is to teach them to worship as members of the family of God. Let us then keep them there long enough to learn to play their part; and incidentally to hear lessons from the New Testament as well as from the Old Testament. Are they never to be allowed to hear the New Testament read in church? Are they never to hear the words of our Lord proclaimed there?

How then would we order the service? It does not seem to me difficult to contrive. We can follow the *Book of Common Order*, preferably, I should say, the alternative service for Sunday mornings; and we may usefully simplify it even further. Something like this:

Psalm or Hymn

Scripture Sentences (while all remain standing)

Prayers: Adoration, Confession and Prayer for Pardon, Supplication

Hymn of praise or invocation

Scripture Readings:

Old Testament

Hymn, Paraphrase or Prose Psalm

New Testament: Epistle and Gospel

The Creed

Hymn

Children's Sermon

Children's Hymn

During the last verse of the hymn the children leave the church, singing as they go.

Intimations

Invocation or collect

Sermon

Ascription of Praise

Offerings

Prayers: Thanksgiving, Supplication or Dedication (related to sermon), Intercessions (not too long or detailed), Communion of Saints, the Lord's Prayer

Hymn or Paraphrase

The Benediction

The hymn between the Lessons is not essential: Lessons can be read effectively in one group if the new Lectionary in the *Book of Common Order* is followed; the change from Old Testament, to Epistle, to Gospel, provides in itself the necessary variety. One unbroken 'corpus' of Holy Scripture can be very impressive.

By such a method the children would not be kept in the church for longer than half an hour, yet they would learn to take part in the worship of the family, and would hear

the great portions of Holy Scripture read week by week and year by year. They would miss the intercessions, but these could be supplied at the end of their classes in the Sunday School, and could be perhaps adjusted to their needs by making use of some of the little litanies in the children's services in the *Book of Common Order*.

I do not suggest that this is a perfect solution, for there is no perfect solution. But I am sure that it is better than many of the expedients devised; at least it is logical; the break comes at a natural point; and the children do take part in a coherent act of worship. The whole act of worship is not dislocated. The only alteration is to insert, before the sermon, a children's sermon. For the 'children's hymn' need not by any means always be a 'hymn for the young',—there are other fine general hymns the children can learn, and will love to sing. Children like to be treated as adults in church, and not always to be talked down to. It is also important that they should early become familiarly acquainted with the great hymns and psalms of the Church, so that they will not find them strange when they reach the age where they attend the whole service.

Let us at least give all this closer consideration than seems general among us at the moment. There is much to gain, and certainly nothing to lose.

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