

THE CHURCH SERVICE SOCIETY

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

22nd May, 1986

STANDING AT THE CROSS-ROADS

Earlier this year a group of eminent historians expressed profound concern at the small number of senior school pupils presently studying history. The result they feared could be a generation with an acutely diminished historical awareness and an ignorance of events and personalities of the past which every schoolboy used to know. There now seems to be a concentration on the present and a speculation about the future which lacks the wisdom which comes from the past, and which is largely ignorant of tradition. It suggests the emergence of a generation technologically advanced but philistine in outlook. Such observations might well provide us with some insight into the absence of so many young people from our pews these days. The Church and its practices may seem a mystery related to an age that is gone and about which they know nothing and care less.

Paradoxically there is throughout the land a renewed interest in the preservation of our heritage as a people, so that many young people are prepared to participate in ventures which sponsor the maintenance and restoration of old buildings, many of which are Churches. Churches as living centres of worship are not however necessarily seen as part of such projects. Clearly therefore the Church in all its denominations is faced with a real problem which is the need to present in worship the faith which has been handed down so that it can once again be today the source of vision that it was to previous generations.

It was in the 1960's that winds of change began to rise, the effect of a profound mutation in the mores of a post-war generation. About the same time there was also a ferment in theological thinking which somehow suited the mood of the day.

These in turn were reflected in attitudes to the worship of God in the sanctuary. Then in the mid-seventies we became conscious of an emphasis on an activism which sought greater involvement in social projects, political issues,

and a broadening out of the whole concept of ministry to take in the full membership of the Church in the sharing of missionary outreach in the community. There emerged also, perhaps by way of reaction to theological debate, a trend towards fundamentalism; a movement, charismatic in character, which crossed denominational frontiers, and which threatened to divide the Church into two camps. Meanwhile the more traditional forms of liturgical worship have been relegated to something less than a priority by many in the modern Church. A wide range of experiments and revision in the field has somehow failed to attract people to what was hoped would be more appropriate forms of worship for the times. It remains however the continuing purpose of a Society such as the Church Service Society to strive to maintain a sense of balance. The situation demands both patience and perseverance in the study and application of what is best in the tradition of the Church in relation to new ways of thinking. It provides for all that a healthy challenge and an opportunity to seek a real revival of worship in our day.

The late Pope Paul VI wrote in 1957 -

*"To link the sacred and the secular in such rapport  
that the first  
and the second  
is not altered but sanctified:  
this is the mystery  
of the Incarnation of God made man  
which liturgy prolongs."*

If this sums up our present and continuing remit the question then arises, 'where should we begin?'

An elderly minister to whom I had been an assistant once presented me with a number of books of old sermons written by distinguished preachers of a previous generation. On seeing my expression of disappointment he exhorted me by saying, "Read them, not in order to copy them, but rather 'to see how the masters did it'".

Perhaps therefore we could now do worse, as a first step, than look back to the the founders of our Society 'to see how the masters did it', as we seek for ourselves the way forward, standing as we do in this period of obvious transition in the life of the Church.

The Church Service Society came into being at a similar period of change, and it may just be that as we ponder our own roll for this latter end of the second millenium we should see it in terms of trying to do for the worship of the Church of Scotland what the founders did in their day. If this be so then our future as a Society should not only be along the lines of innovation but also by way of maintaining the high traditions already established and studying to apply them more faithfully.

In the 1860's there were two strands each representing powerful currents of feeling within the Church. There were those who preferred what they believed to be a very simple form of non-liturgical worship. At the same time there were others who sought a form that was on the whole more liturgical and more uniform. For the latter it was not so much the simplicity of the services but their lifelessness that concerned them, although they too recognised that such was a defect common to both liturgical and non-liturgical services. This Society was founded therefore in order to attempt what was described as "a true reconciliation of these feelings, namely a filling up of the "simple" order of worship valued by one, with the earnestness of devotional expression desired by the other". This was then achieved by preparing and collecting examples of prayers as full and as suggestive of earnest, fervent devotion as words can be, and binding them into the order of existing services.

The founders of the Society were men who knew their people and who took into account the character of the people. It was therefore thought appropriate that a plain and simple order of service was best suited to the constitution of the Church of Scotland and the genius of its people, and that while the study of Anglican tradition, for example, might well prove both profitable and helpful, their truer model was to be found the Reformed Churches of the Continent with whom we had a closer affinity.

In 1867 there was published the 'Euchologion' which set forth in its Introduction the method by which the Society should proceed. The first part of the work consisted of the compilation of forms for special services - namely for the two Sacraments, the celebration of marriage, and

the burial of the dead. The second part was to "search for and disentangle from all superstitious accretions or sectional peculiarities, the prayers of the faithful in all denominations of the Catholic Church, and to gather these, not into a manual of Devotion like the Anglican Prayer Book, but into a magazine of prayer to which all ministers might have access, and from which each might draw, "even as from a living fountain".

From all this it is I believe possible to perceive the fundamental principles of our Society, and to recapture something of the spirit which gave the impetus to a movement that was destined to revive and profoundly influence the worship of the Church of Scotland.

1. There emerged for instance a renewed awareness of the Church of Scotland as part of the Church Catholic and in particular of a sense of affinity with other Reformed Churches. Thus while retaining our sense of identity as the Church of Scotland, many of the inhibitions were removed and the way opened up for drawing upon the great liturgical traditions of Christendom. The effect was a recognisable enrichment of the quality of worship in our Church.
2. Then again there was the reference to 'searching for and disentangling from all superstitious accretions of sectional peculiarities the prayers of the Church Catholic'. This of course is the business of the Church "semper reformanda", constantly to be re-forming and updating what has been handed down to it. As I see it this is a continuing obligation laid upon this Society, and the Church at large. To this end we have in our publication, now called "The Record", the means of publishing new concepts of worship while still exploring the essential merits and importance of traditional forms. We have also a considerable treasury of literature available for research. What may now be needed however is a more outgoing policy lest we be seen to be an exclusive group speaking mainly to ourselves.
3. Reflecting then upon such conclusions it might seem that a natural way forward would be to consider now the possibility of broadening the base of our Society, which presently is restricted by constitution to the Church of Scotland, even although many of our best

members and members of Council are from other denominations. We live after all in a new climate of ecumenical understanding and should welcome such development. There is also a whole new range of liturgical material developed in recent years in other churches of value and interest to us all.

4. Meanwhile within the Church of Scotland, as in other churches too no doubt, there is a growing concern, on the lines of what I said at the beginning, about a moving away from much that is significant in the best tradition of the Church's worship and one cannot but be alarmed at the prospect. It seems to me to be entirely consonant with the spirit of our founders therefore that we should see it as our mission to create a renewed interest in the subject and to do all we can to present our material in the most effective and attractive way we can. I believe that the time is ripe for such an endeavour and that it would be welcomed particularly by many of our younger clergy who seem sometimes to be in a quandary about styles and standards of worship required in what is sometimes referred to as a "post-Christian era".
5. In addition to all this, while our main concern is with public worship, we cannot neglect the worship of God in private devotions. Compared with the Roman Catholic Church we suffer something of a dearth of material for personal use. It has of course been pointed out that unlike the Methodists we tend to undervalue our Church Hymnary for such a purpose. My late mentor, John Wilson Baird of St Machars, Aberdeen, frequently lamented the lack of some form of literature which could be put into the hands of new communicants at a Service of Confirmation and Admission to assist them in their prayers and to relate to the scriptures. I suggested that he might be just the one to produce it, but alas that did not come to pass. In this connection it seems to me that something along the lines of H J Wotherspoon's "Kyrie Eleison", printed in 1890, or John Baillie's "Diary of Private Prayer" (1936), is now overdue. Perhaps then in the not too distant future the Council of the Society might give some further consideration to this subject.

For most of us who have been life-long members of the

Society the worship of God in Church is seen as the first priority of the Christian ministry. As such we have been indebted over the years to this Society as a body which has provided the encouragement, inspiration and comfort that comes from a fellowship of kindred spirits. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit may it long continue to do so.

In the words of the prophet:- *"Stop at the cross-roads; look for the ancient paths; ask, "where is the way that leads to what is good?"*  
*"Then take that way, and you will find rest for your souls".*

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us all.

W B R MacMillan

#### A DIP IN THE ARCHIVES

Addressing the Annual Meeting on 30th May, 1878 the Chairman, Sir James Fergusson, said,

"In this age we seem to be emerging from a long period of stolid contentment with the perfunctory, and, I might almost say, the barbarous. Perhaps there is no country in the world where there is so much attachment to, or at least contentment with, routine, as there is in Scotland. We pride ourselves on our freedom, and yet we are slaves, if not to forms, to a want of forms, and often where there is the greatest absence of forms there is a wearisome monotony of repetition."