

The Minister in the Service.

Address to the Members of the Church Service Society at its Annual Meeting, 29th May, 1934, by Thos. Marjoribanks, D.D., President, 1932-34.

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THE Church Service Society, along with the kindred Associations connected with the other branches of the now re-united Church of Scotland, has undoubtedly done a great work in helping to raise the services of the Sanctuary from the barren state into which they had fallen, to a level of greater reverence and dignity, and in enriching their worship by the help of material from the treasury of devotion representative of all ages of the Church. Regarded at first in many quarters with suspicion and distrust, it has long outgrown the perils of early years, and has triumphantly vindicated its usefulness as a teacher and guide. The only question now is whether it may not regard its original task as accomplished. Imitation is the sincerest flattery; and it is no more than the truth to say that practices which were put forward tentatively and with some misgiving by the Society have now long found their place in the authorised service books of the Church. While this is so, however, we believe that there is still work for such a Society to do. Its position has always been that of a pioneer; and if the main body of the army now occupies the positions which it originally held, there is surely the more need that it should continue to explore fresh ground. And the very fact of its not being directly subject to ecclesiastical control by the courts of the Church makes possible a freedom of outlook and an independence of judgment which are apt to be lacking in publications of a more official character. Moreover, we ought not to forget that one of the declared objects of this Society from the first was "the *study* of the liturgies—ancient and modern—of the Christian Church." Such study continues to yield valuable fruits; and one is glad to find in men such as Dr Maxwell, Dr McMillan, and others, worthy successors to such men as Sprott and Leishman, and Cooper and Wotherspoon, whom some of us remember as the liturgical

students of older days. The "Annual," too, which the Society has now published for the last five or six years, contains a series of papers, many of which are of permanent interest, whether as clearing up obscure matters of history or as ventilating ideas which may later take practical shape in the worship of the Church to be.

From time to time the Church Service Society has had the benefit of addresses from those who were experts in liturgical knowledge, and whose counsels were thus such as to carry weight with regard to the origin and development of the various practices followed in ordering the Church's worship. I can make no such claim, and my task must be a humbler one—to put before myself and my brethren in the ministry some thoughts regarding the place which a Minister should hold and the ideal at which he should aim in conducting Divine service. The very fact that in the Reformed Churches the Minister has less of an exceptional, more of a representative position, than in some other Communion, should make him not the less but the more anxious to be representative in the best sense, and not to fail those for whom he is the spokesman and the medium of expression.

Before speaking, however, of the place of the Minister in Divine service, it is necessary to ask in the first place what that service or worship is, and how much we are justified in including in it. Are we, for example, to regard the sermon or religious address as a part of worship or as something outside it? Most of us here will agree that the tendency in Scotland until recent years to regard the sermon as, if not the one and only, at least by far the most important feature of a Church service, and to speak of the opening exercises as the preliminary part, showed a deficient sense of proportion and an inadequate estimate of the value of devotion. At the other extreme we find those who, without necessarily depreciating the sermon as such, would at all events deny it a place in the service strictly so called. The question, no doubt, is partly one of words. We are rather lacking in a good word to express what we mean when Christians assemble for both devotion and instruction. "Worship" is, perhaps, too narrow a term; in a sense it is true, or almost true, that it does not include the sermon in its scope. "Service," again, is in some ways an unfortunate word, as it is one we use in a different connection to express the practical activities of the Christian life. The Germans have borrowed the Latin word *cultus*, which is

perhaps as good as any, but which we only have in its truncated form *cult*. Taking "worship" or "service," however, neither in too restricted nor in too wide a sense, as the purpose for which we meet when we come together as congregations of Christian people, it may, I think, be quite reasonably contended that Christian exhortation is a great and important part of worship.

That was a pertinent question which children in Israel were encouraged to ask of their parents—"What mean ye by this service?" All of us, even we whose business it is to conduct services and lead in public worship, are apt at times to let the meaning fade away in the routine of repetition; and you will forgive me if I say some things that are already quite familiar, by way of focussing our thoughts upon the subject.

Let us begin on familiar ground. Let us take a service such as we may find in any of our Churches, say on a Sunday morning. We find that it consists normally of four chief acts or parts—the singing of praise, the offering of prayer, the reading of the Bible, and the preaching of the word. To these may be added the offering for religious or charitable purposes, and the Benediction given by the Minister to the people before they depart. We also have, either every Sunday, or more probably at less frequent intervals, the celebration of Holy Communion, and from time to time the administration of Baptism in face of the congregation. These things, taken together, constitute a service or act of public Christian worship in the sense in which we generally use those terms.

Now when we examine those acts we find that certain of them are—primarily at least—addressed to God; while certain others are—primarily at least—addressed to the people. Thus prayer and praise, and also the offering of our substance, are acts addressed to the Most High; while reading and preaching, and also the Blessing, are acts addressed to the people. Part of the service, in short, consists in something given to God—prayer and praise; while part consists in something got from God—the hearing of His word. A service is not complete unless it contains something of both these elements—something given to God, something got from God. Even in a simple service, such as family worship, or ministration in a sick room, there is, or should be, the two-fold idea represented by reading and prayer. In the one, God speaks, we listen; in the other, we speak, God listens. And in the Sacraments

we have both sides of the relation represented. While they signify and seal the bestowal of a gift from God to man, at the same time they include the act of consecration—life dedicated and offered to the service of God.

The various acts of Christian worship, then, may be said to sort themselves out as belonging predominantly to either the giving or the receiving side of worship. This twofold aspect of worship is an important thing to realise, and I should like to quote what is said of it by the late Dr Oswald Dykes in words far better than any I could give you of my own :—

“ It may be taken for granted, I suppose, that the root idea in religion, at least in all its higher stages, is union or reunion with the Divine, and that it is this, therefore, which men have everywhere sought by worship to realise, it may be, to restore, but at all events to express. The radical thought which remains constant under every cult is some sort of intercourse or commerce with the Supreme. Men draw near to the presence of their God, first that they may offer such gifts, believed to be acceptable, as it is in their power to present ; and next, that they may receive from the Divine Power benefits which they are conscious of needing. Both the giving and the receiving may be of the rudest or the most earthly kind. The transaction may descend in unethical religions to the level of a bargain, or even of a bribe or of a spell. It may also be transfigured, as in Christianity, into the loving, confiding fellowship of a reconciled child with his heavenly Father, whose moral approval is the best of boons, and to whose moral designs he can lend the co-operation of a son. But always the end aimed at is a bond of amity, which shall embrace the worshipped and the worshipper in one—each giving to the other of his own in a mutual passage or interchange of goodwill. This is worship.”

For the particular application of this principle to Christian worship we may quote the words of Luther :—

“ The substance of worship is that our dear Lord speaks with us through His Holy Word, and we in return speak with Him through prayer and song of praise.”

We need not, of course, make the distinction between the two sides of worship too hard and fast. We were rightly warned, in an address to this Society by Professor Welch a few years ago, against speaking about the devotional part and the teaching part of the service as though these served no common purpose. And the unifying principle which he took as including both is that the service is in all its parts an act of faith. People give God thanks in praise because they know what He has been to them, and they pray to Him Who has promised His Presence where two or three are met in His Name.

In estimating, however, the part which the Minister fulfils in the due performance of Divine service, it will

make for clearness, if, without making the division already indicated too absolute, we treat separately the two elements in worship which that division involves. For the Minister, while not a mediator in the sacerdotal sense, may be called in a sense a Medium through whom, ordinarily though not exclusively, intercourse is held between a congregation and the God whom they worship. There are two verses from the Pentateuch which always seem to me to express, for us no less than for Israel, the function of the Holy Ministry on the one side and on the other. We have the one side in the words of Jethro to Moses—"Be thou for the people to Godward, that thou mayest bring the causes unto God." And we have the other in the instruction also given to Moses—"Go thou near, and hear what the Lord our God shall say; and speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it and do it." And we find the latter counsel practically translated into New Testament language in the words, "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."

These two sentences may at all events serve as mottoes indicating the two-fold function of the Holy Ministry for all time, as acting on the one hand for the people to God, and on the other for God to the people.

"Be thou for the people to Godward, that thou mayest bring the causes unto God." It is strange, when we reflect on it, that in our Church, which has been almost ultra-suspicious of anything approaching sacerdotal assumptions in the ministry, there is more of the service left to the Minister than in almost any other. In prayer his is often the only audible voice; and not only so, but should he so choose, the prayers may be all of his own composition, nor is he likely to be officially interfered with even should his petitions take a form which the worshippers can neither understand nor follow. Again, while the congregation have the opportunity of raising their voices in songs of praise, it is for the most part the Minister who selects those songs; and the choice may be so restricted or so one-sided as to do little more than reflect his own particular point of view, and be devoid of all breadth or balance. Such being the possibilities, such the depths to which our service may sink, it surely becomes us to put before ourselves very definitely the reminder that we are speaking with and for the people: that our prayer and praise are those of the

congregation, and, through it, of the Church. It surely follows that our prayers should be in language easily understood, varying, so far as may be, with the average intellectual and spiritual capacity of those who worship with us. It follows, too, that we should try to banish from them all those elements which may be described as "conceits"—pretentious phrases or words out of harmony with the traditions of the Holy Day and Holy Place. It follows also that the blessings for which we pray should be in the main those for which our Lord asked His disciples to pray—the hallowing of God's name, the coming of His kingdom, the doing of His will, the provision of our daily bread, the forgiveness of our sins, guidance through the perils of life, and deliverance from its evils. And it is surely right that judicious use should be made of those prayers which have been consecrated by long use and proved of real value, and which link us not only with the company of the faithful throughout the world, but with the greater company of the redeemed in heaven.

To remember that we are thus speaking for and with the people is no easy task, and it is one we are all apt to forget. It is all-important for the ministry of the sanctuary that we should preserve our contact with the people, that we should know what they want, what they are talking and thinking about, and wherein they are wrong. Many a time does a thought which fails to become clear or convincing in the study shine with a new light when presented in concrete form in the parish. S. Peter, so long as he remained on the housetop, could only doubt "in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean." It only became clear to him when he went down in response to the messengers who came to ask his help.

And now a word on the other side of the Minister's part in worship, for which we have taken the motto, "Go thou near, and hear what the Lord our God shall say; and speak then unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee: we will hear it and do it." The Minister must be able to say "This is the message which we have heard of Him, and declare unto you." Nay more, his message is to be no mere message; he must be able to say, "We are witnesses of these things." There ought to be on his face something analogous to the glory on that of Moses when he came down from the Mount. Men should be able to take knowledge of him, as of the Apostles, that he has been with Jesus. This fellowship is no easy matter.

There are a hundred things that militate against it. Our very familiarity with sacred things is apt to breed, if not contempt, at least indifference. The multitude and variety of our duties and interruptions is apt to crowd the quiet hour of devotion out of the day. The fact that we are not bound down by office hours tends in many cases to a slipshod way of arranging our time, and to allowing minor things to invade our Holy of Holies. And when this happens, everything suffers. Nothing can flow out where nothing has flowed in. We need constantly to lay to heart the words "Go thou near," and to remember that what we say to our people should be something that has been first said to us.

It must further be remembered that the Minister is not merely the exponent of his own religious experience, but of the faith of the Church he represents. Preaching has been well defined as that continuous and public testimony which the Church is always giving, through discourses by her official members, to her own living faith in Christ, as rooted in and sustained by the written Word of God. The preacher is not speaking merely as an individual; he is commissioned to declare the Church's faith. There must thus be in his preaching a combination of the official and the personal. The truth he proclaims, if one may use a metaphor, is not a solid mass but a living stream, which, though unchanging in its essential quality, takes shape from the human vessel which it fills. Yet one must always come back to this as the essential thing—that we speak what has been spoken to us, and testify to what we have seen. It is not enough that the theme of each discourse be derived from words of Scripture. The Quakers and other mystics did good service in reminding us that even the written Word of God needs illumination from the light that shines within the soul.

As has already been said, the distinction between the two sides of worship cannot be made an absolute one. The acts of praise and prayer, though of course primarily addressed to God, make for edification as well as adoration. We are told to *teach and admonish one another* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. In Isaiah's vision it is said of the seraphim that "one cried *unto another*, and said, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts.'" And on the other hand the lessons and sermon, in addition to their didactic function, should be regarded as offerings to God. The late Dr Cooper never wrote a sermon without inscribing on it the words, "*Ad majorem Dei gloriam.*" And the ascription

with which it is our practice to conclude lessons as well as sermon reminds us that they too have their Godward aspect ; that if all things come of Him, we should give to Him of His own.

One might follow this thought of the doubly representative place of the Minister into the most solemn ordinance of all, the celebration of Holy Communion. He does what Christ did—takes, blesses, breaks, and gives ; while, along with his fellow-communicants, he receives and partakes, sharing with others the communion of the Body and Blood.

The thoughts I have ventured to express this afternoon may possibly seem to you very elementary and commonplace. My apology is that I wanted to put before my brethren, as before myself, the need of realising, more than we sometimes do, that the Minister, in conducting the services of the sanctuary, is in a double sense representative—the people's spokesman to God, and God's spokesman to the people. The sense of this two-fold responsibility should have its bearing not only on the architecture and furnishing of our Churches, and on the forms and accompaniments of our worship, but most of all upon ourselves, whose duty it is to speak God's words to the people, and to bring their needs before Him.