

A Voice from the Pew.

I HAVE been asked, presumably as an average layman, to express my views regarding church services. I take a wide interpretation of this remit ; I speak for no one but myself ; I have the misfortune to be utterly unmusical ; and in this article, owing to exigencies of space, I must sacrifice elaboration to brevity. Not all of my suggestions will prove acceptable to members of this Society.

When the minister enters, the congregation should stand till he is in the pulpit. This is the practice in a few churches, and is universal in the Army. In the street I wave to my padre as a friend, but in church he is the ambassador of God, and entitled to the respect due to the representative of his Sovereign.

The service may well begin with a very short prayer, but no more than a few sentences, which helps to turn our thoughts from the secular to the sacred. It is apt to be followed by a rather noisy irruption of late-comers, who might well enter less obtrusively during the singing of the first psalm, if they cannot cultivate punctuality. The metrical psalms and the paraphrases, with their familiar tunes, though many are by no means good poetry, are so woven into our Scottish nature that they well deserve to retain their place, though hymns, with their greater applicability to special subjects, are now so familiar that the choice may well range through the whole hymn book. The chant of a prose psalm is, I understand, musically superior to the metrical. There is no reason why it should not be used, though it certainly requires a considerable time before an average congregation can join in this act of praise with any confidence.

The two principal prayers should not exceed an absolute maximum of five minutes each ; some, though I am not one of them, would limit the duration still further. Towards the end of a long prayer concentration begins to fail ; and indeed, when prayers are habitually long, thoughts tend to wander in anticipation, even from the beginning. I wonder whether ministers appreciate how the anticipation of long prayers may reduce the pleasant anticipation of a service ? Prayers are now sometimes read, and I see no objection to this practice, provided that they are delivered reverently, and not with the rapidity or in a voice which suggests reading. Presumably, in any case, the minister would have prepared his prayers beforehand, and perhaps memorised them. The objection to a liturgy or responses is that the sentences and prayers become so familiar that they tend to be formal and perfunctory. In most churches the congregation joins in the Lord's Prayer ; to me it is more seemly and reverent when repeated by the minister alone.

The reading of Holy Scripture depends upon the reader. Young and comparatively inexperienced readers may make elocutionary mistakes, putting pauses at wrong places and the emphasis on unimportant words. The reading of a chapter requires careful study, and a well-read chapter may be an absolute revelation of its meaning. There may, perhaps, be a tendency sometimes to repeat too often the same passages, however beautiful.

What Scot could not talk for hours about the sermon ? *Quot homines, tot sententiae !* Should it be read, or delivered from full notes, from few notes or with none ? Strange as it may appear to some, I prefer the read sermon, on the assumption, of course, that the minister is not tied to his papers, can look his congregation in the face, and can convey the impression of a sincere appeal at the moment, and not of an essay transplanted from the study table. My reason is not that of the beadle that, when a minister has a written discourse and has finished what he meant to say, he stops ; while, without papers, that desirable consummation is not inevitable ! But rather that the writing of a sermon crystallises thought, secures sequence of argument and condensation, with elimination of the irrelevant or unnecessary, and results in the apt word and the well-turned sentence which add to the beauty and impressiveness of the whole. Most people, I imagine, with some experience of after-dinner speaking and of lecturing to students, in both cases without notes, feel that there must be in the mind connecting links between the various segments of the speech ; that the next segment must be at the periphery of consciousness, like an actor in the wings awaiting

his cue, otherwise an awkward pause may result. This means a certain amount of mental strain; and, when I listen to a sermon without notes, I find myself sympathising with the preacher, searching for the linking mnemonics, and studying to some extent the architecture instead of the substance of the sermon! Presumably most sermons are written, at least in abbreviated form, for preservation; and it would be sheer impertinence on my part to suggest that a minister should read his sermon, write and memorise it, or preach it from full or scanty notes. Each must find the method by which he feels himself to be most effective, and my only plea is that a written sermon, not merely read but properly delivered, is by no means a back number. In some circumstances, such as "revival" and informal services and meetings where a strongly emotional atmosphere is desired, notes must be discarded, for there must be an appearance of spontaneity, even though it is the result of careful preparation and skill in the art of speaking. I am sure that, when a sermon has "heads", it is easier to carry it away in the mind.

I have heard Caird, Flint, and Charteris preach for forty-five minutes, and, though a mere boy, I would willingly have listened for another half-hour; but I fancy that in these days the sermon of twenty minutes, or, as a maximum, twenty-five, is the most effective. The service should be so arranged that the congregation is got out of church after the sermon as quickly as is reasonably possible. Any undue prolongation of the service, by Offering or otherwise, blurs the sermon and diminishes its impressiveness.

Regarding the Anthem, I, being totally unmusical, am scarcely entitled to an opinion; often I cannot distinguish the words, and during it my thoughts tend to wander. If there is a general objection, it is that the finer the music, and especially solos, the more it may suggest a musical exhibition; and in any case the congregation cannot join. There is an old legend of a monastery where every night the aged monks, with cracked and unmelodious voices, but with wholehearted sincerity, sang their evening praise. An orphan boy was adopted and found to have a wonderful voice, and soon the service consisted of solos to which the monks listened with rapturous admiration. After some time, goes on the legend, an angel was sent to enquire what had happened, because now no evening praise from the monastery came up to heaven! What is a distraction to the unmusical, however, may well be to the musical an inspiration.

For the Offering I favour strongly the plate at the church door. I know that the bags may bring in more money, and that the Offering may have a real place in the service. But the difference, to my mind, is similar to the distribution of wealth as enjoined by Christianity and by political Communism, the difference between giving and enforced taking. When a non-churchgoer, perhaps poor, is induced to come to church, the result of forthwith pushing a bag under his nose may be unfortunate. If it is desired, the officiating elders may, when they enter, lay on the Communion Table a bag containing the church-door collection. If bags be employed, let the Offering be received early in the service, so that there is no later interruption of its course.

When the children of a Sunday School or similar organisation attend an adult service, there is usually a short address to them, followed afterwards by the ordinary sermon. The latter may well be omitted on such occasions and the service shortened, for to the adult the address to the children is often as good as a sermon. Otherwise let the children be dismissed before the sermon; the double address is too long for many adults, and, surely, for all the children.

There are sometimes special annual or anniversary services connected with religious or other societies, at which the President or some official of the society is asked to take part by reading the Scripture lesson or otherwise. Keep out the laymen! In most spheres the professional is better than the amateur; the layman is apt to be self-conscious and a little nervous, and these feelings spread to the congregation, and the service may become too much of a "stunt". In my boyhood there was a drawing-room ornament, consisting of a rough glass ship inside a narrow-necked bottle. The bottle, of course, had been blown around the ship; but the observer's reaction was one, not of admiration for the ship, but of wonder that it was not worse in such an unexpected, unsuitable, and uncalled-for situation. I have sat

in a pulpit beside the minister, and my only hope was that I did not appear to the audience as like that ship as I felt !

In conclusion, greatly daring, may I make a suggestion regarding the second Sunday service ? The services exist for the spiritual welfare of the worshippers ; but, subject to that over-ruling consideration, the minister should be saved as much work as possible. I attend both services when possible, not indeed as a hardship, but largely as a duty and an act of courtesy to the minister ; for I am honestly satisfied that I derive more spiritual good from one service than from two. I feel that the devotional part of one service is enough, and the knowledge that there is to be another reduces my concentration at both. One good sermon comes back to the mind and is helpful throughout the week ; two good sermons are apt to jostle with and confuse one another, and I find that often the best way is to select one and intentionally forget the other. I wonder if I am typical of the average occupant of the pew ? In that case it should be understood that it is the duty of every member, unless it is absolutely impossible, to attend one service, but not two. There must be a second service for those unable to attend in the forenoon, but the second service would be a repetition of the first, and the same sermon would be preached again. I venture to think that this could be no disadvantage to the congregation, would make no difference to the stranger, and would give the minister greatly increased time for visiting, study, general reading, relaxation, and exercise.

A minister can hardly make this change himself, lest he should be accused of laziness. Might not a Presbytery recommend that, as an experiment, and with the consent of his Kirk Session and congregation, any minister who wished should adopt this scheme ?

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The Acts of God : A Plea for a Fresh Approach to Liturgy.

OFTEN, when I have the opportunity to be in the pew, I am struck by the sense of hurry in our services. We give very little importance to pause. I am carried along on the crest of the minister's speaking and the congregational singing ; and I find myself struggling to lay hold on the fact that in the midst of it all there is the solemn and mysterious act of God.

I think this is what we have mainly lost in our break-away from the old liturgies,—the pause ; the opportunity to recollect that we are a people waiting for certain promised acts of God. The liturgies achieved that spaciousness without effort because of their sequence of movement and the clearly-marked transition from one action to another. We are badly needing to recover it in a way that will be organic to our own forms.

Our worship, as we are always saying, is an offering to God. But it is an offering made in response to what He does ; not only what He does because of the very nature of His being, but what He does there and then while we are gathered together. If we must declare what is the ultimate thing in worship it is this : that God's promise overshadows us in it. And it is because He is a God giving us His very self that "our mouth is filled with praise."

Hence the gravest fault in the ordering of our worship is to obscure in any way this Divine act, this self-giving of God, this actual forgiving, this actual making known to us of His will, this actual receiving of our prayers, this actual imparting to us of His Spirit. I am persuaded that we can obscure it by our "much speaking" as others may by an over-elaborate, formal ritual. We can be "priestly" in the bad sense by not giving time for the believer's own cry to come to God, and by not allowing the Spirit of God to speak in His own way to each heart (this is particularly true when we can no longer count that there has been personal prayer in the home before the corporate worship of the church) and by a false sense of our importance as the mouthpiece of the people's prayers. I think that is what disturbs me most when I sit in the pew : the constant effort to keep abreast with another man's thought, the sense of hurrying along with him when I want to be still, and believe, and wait upon God. (The Quakers can teach us something here, if only as an antidote.)