

The Church : Bride and Body Mystical

Sermon preached by the President at the Service of Commemoration and Thanksgiving on the occasion of the Centenary of the Church Service Society, held within the Kirk of the Greyfriars, Edinburgh, on Friday, 21 May, 1965.

Text: Ephesians 5, v. 27.

“That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

“Church” : a dull, conventional and even drab concept in the twentieth century? How differently the Bible presents the Church of God, as seen through the eyes of her Sole King and Head, the Lord Jesus Christ :

“From heaven He came and sought her
To be His Holy Bride ;
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.”

St. Paul describes Christ’s will and purpose for the Church, His body, in terms of an Eternal Love committed to purchase and create a fellowship both seemly and comely ; a resplendent Spiritual Body, unblemished and unspoiled ; a Body finding its vocation as Christ’s own mystical Bride reflecting His Holiness and responsive to His outreach of redeeming love.

The great mystery concerning Christ and the Church, the secret revealed in the Incarnation of the Son of God, is that His Sacrifice and Atonement have purchased and created the new Israel of God, a living fellowship, cleansed in the waters of baptism, and nourished by the Word of Christ, the Word offered and sealed in sermon and sacrament. This redeemed community, called, chosen and cherished by the Saviour as His own Bride, is ever loved and tended by Jesus Christ Himself in order that He may offer to Himself, in all the splendour He bestows on her, the *Church*, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she may be holy and without blemish.

I believe that a vision of that kind prompted our fathers to found *The Church Service Society* one hundred years ago. This Society’s real origins are to be found in our predecessors’ faith in and love for the Church of God. This move-

ment came from those churchmen's zeal to conform to the Lord's will for His own Church, as expressed in St. Paul's words. In so far as in them lay, the members gone before dedicated themselves to help to exhibit the glory and splendour of Christ's Bride and Body mystical ; and, in the realm of public worship, to help disclose more of the seemliness and sanctity of the Church.

This high purpose was to involve very practical activities, if they were to remove from the public face of the Kirk the dark shadows of the "curse of Cromwell", in order to let the Kirk be seen again in the freshness, dignity and richness of her Reformed and Catholic heritage. To overcome ugliness in churches ; to dispel crudity and lifelessness from services ; and to reject slovenly and careless practices then prevalent in public worship, required considerable courage and dedication in 1865. Those initial efforts at the removal of spots, wrinkles and blemishes from the Kirk's practice in worship, were often genuinely misunderstood, and were more often misrepresented ; and in the founders of our Society, we remember resolute and doughty churchmen of high principle and noble vision, who gave themselves to the study of ancient and modern liturgies and to the preparation of venturesome forms of service, for the clearer showing of the true face of the Kirk, as a glorious church, holy and without blemish. The Society was part of their good deed a century ago for the house of our God and the offices thereof.

Within these very walls after the partial restoration of 1857, the Rev. Dr. Robert Lee of Old Greyfriars was inviting his congregation to kneel at prayer instead of standing, or rather lounging ; to use his printed *Greyfriars Order of Public Worship* ; and to join in a richer and more dignified form of service, the praise being led, first by a harmonium, and then by a pipe-organ. Amid the storm of abuse, distortion, prejudice and misunderstanding which broke over poor Robert Lee's efforts here, George Campbell, Robert Herbert Story and James Cameron Lees of blessed memory, dared to give embodied form to the new vision and insights of the times by founding, on 31st January, 1865, *The Church Service Society of the Church of Scotland*. Doctor A. K. H. Boyd, under whose ministry in St. Andrews three generations of my own family were privileged to sit, has written of Doctor Lee : "He was persecuted into his grave for his innovations : and now we easily enter into his labours" ; and of our Society, Doctor Boyd goes on, "from the beginning I am proud to have been a member of it, as are my

dearest and most esteemed friends. But it was a serious matter to belong to it at the first."

This Society was conceived at the deepest level of Christian faith in God : the One Living God Who has called men into the life of the One Body of Jesus Christ. God is Spirit, and His worship must be spiritual worship offered in sincerity and with reality. The Saving Grace which is given us in the One Head of the Body, Jesus Christ, must characterize everything within the life of that Body. Worship, which is as breath to the Body, must be gracious, genuine and holy. Only so, is the holy and unblemished nature of the One Body exhibited and heralded.

The Church's vocation is her presentation "as a chaste virgin to Christ". We might say that a century of service and witness on the part of *The Church Service Society* has been devoted towards making an effective contribution to the seemliness, grace and beauty of the bridal gown of the Church of God in our land. After all, dare we forget that, according to the Bible, the consummation of the ages is reached in the Church "coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband"? Such a vision has been the inspiration of our Society. Today we gratefully recall the endeavours and achievements of our members gone before.

Their essential effort has been to achieve greater *seemliness* in the public worship of Almighty God : "Let all things be done decently and according to order." The object of the Society from the outset was, in the light of liturgical study and research, which was a re-discovered area of theological concern and scholarship, to engage in "the preparation and ultimate publication of certain forms of prayer for public worship." So they set to work, in order to find a fresh and living liturgical expression, at once relevant, dignified, gracious, dynamic and orderly. This appeared right and necessary to them in what has always claimed to be a Reformed Church, an *ecclesia semper reformanda*, a church which requires continual renewal, in worship as in all its life, in obedience to the Word of God and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The worship of Almighty God, offered in the Majesty of His Presence Who is goodness and mercy, stands under the sovereignty of Christ the King. "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace;" and therefore, informality, slovenliness, familiarity, indecorum and obscurity are not the token of sincerity and spirituality, any more than enthusiasm

and verbal agility are a substitute for disciplined preparation for worship. The meaningful, ordered and carefully prepared church service, wherein each element has been thoughtfully considered, is the expression of the Rule of Jesus Christ, through His own Spirit, in the fellowship and worship of His Body, the Church.

What, after all, of our approach to the great of this world ?

“ Yet if his majesty our sovereign Lord
Should of his own accord,
Friendly himself invite, and say
‘ I’ll be your guest tomorrow night ’
How should we stir ourselves,
Call and command, All hands to work !

Thus if the King were coming would we do.
But at the coming of the King of heaven,
All’s set at six and seven,
We wallow in our sin,
Christ cannot find a chamber in the inn,
We entertain Him always like a stranger,
And as at first still lodge Him in the Manger.”

Seemliness in church worship has always been the high resolve within our Society.

The Church Service Society has also been inspired in its witness and work by a sense of the Unity and *Catholicity* of the Church of God, the Church, holy and without blemish. “ I believe One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.” His grandson has written for us about our first Secretary’s, George Campbell’s “ strong sense of the Church Catholic, to which all his friends bear witness. It was perhaps the strongest element in his character.”

As well as its direct vertical reference to the Living God, the worship of the Church must have horizontal links of continuity with the Universal Church through all the Christian centuries, the on-going-life of the Body. Worship can be most inspiring when it carries echoes and overtones of our whole Christian past : the hymns of the apostles and martyrs ; the prayers and praises of the Celtic saints and all who brought the Gospel to our shores ; the ordered worship of Knox’s Liturgy ; and the whole devotional treasury of the Catholic Church. The first report adopted by our Society on 31st March, 1865, states that “ it seems most natural to seek the real magazine of adequate expression of Christian

devotion in the accumulated treasures of the Church's own prayers—these vehicles of her worship which the living Bride of Christ, developing her own fitting phases of thought and feeling, has produced according to her need. Through these the spirit of prayer will most appropriately speak."

The note of catholicity in public worship speaks of the One Saviour of all mankind and proclaims the welcoming arms of the One Body, outwith whose embrace there is no hope of salvation. Reform and revival in liturgy, which is the divine service of God, can be part of the renewal of the Church in her Unity, Holiness, Catholicity and Apostolicity, and to such an end our Society remains committed.

The Church Service Society now begins a second century of endeavour for the seemliness, Catholicity and *holiness* of public worship in our beloved Church of Scotland: may God prosper this noble cause! If the Church is indeed Holy, because indwelt by God, the Holy Spirit, then reverence will mark all that is said and done within the worshipping fellowship. Public worship is traffic with the unseen and eternal: "The Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him." "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is and is to come."

The Church realizes her glory and splendour as the Bride and Body mystical, only as she worships the Father in Spirit and in truth.

"For Thy Bride that evermore
Lifteth holy hands above,
Offering up on every shore
This pure sacrifice of love:
Christ our God, to Thee we raise
This our sacrifice of praise."

On such a note of high thanksgiving we make our commemoration and rededicate ourselves at this Centenary occasion in *The Church Service Society*. Unworthy though we be, yet called to be very members incorporate in the mystical Body of Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves to the Saviour within the life and worship of His Church, that He may present the Church to Himself, a glorious Bride, without stain or wrinkle or any other defect, but holy and unblemished.

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Now unto the God of all grace, Who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, be glory and dominion, for ever and ever. AMEN.