

Pulpit and Communion Table

THE subject on which I am to speak—Pulpit and Communion Table—has been chosen, not with any intention of depreciating one of these necessary and symbolical pieces of church furniture, and unduly exalting the other, but with a view to showing that one has in fact and in long experience been depreciated in Scotland, and suggesting that Scottish religion has suffered in consequence.

One of the most necessary and salutary of the services the Reformation rendered to religion was the grounding of faith and practice in the Word of God. So long as the Scriptures remain the rule by which believing people test their faith and guide their life, preaching must hold a place of cardinal importance in the Church's ordinances of worship. In Scotland, however, it came by force of a number of circumstances to hold a place of such overwhelming dominance in worship that other essential elements had much less than their due importance given them. In particular, the Communion never received its proper place. This was a consequence, not so much of any intention of the Reformers, as of certain accidents of history.

The Communion had from the beginning of the Church been the distinctive Christian rite ; it was the focus and crown of its worship. Until the Reformation it was an inseparable part of the Church's ordinary Sunday service ; all the acts which make up the regular Sunday service for us were preparatory to the commemorative ordinance in which our Lord commanded His people to remember Him. It was not the intention or desire of Calvin to break that long tradition ; on the contrary he wished that the service each Sunday morning should go on to its natural consummation in an observance of the Lord's Supper. But he was frustrated in his purpose by the civil magistrate, first in Strasburg, and then in Geneva. The service which in consequence became customary was only the ante-communion service, stopping short of the climax for which it was the preparation. So far he had to compromise. But the Communion Table, though not regularly in use for its appointed purpose, was still central to the people's worship. Doumergue has shown that if the symbol of the Supper itself was not presented each Sunday to the worshipping

people, the Table was always in their sight to remind them of it. And it remained in use, for it was there that the worship was conducted, the prayers offered, and the people called to praise. The pulpit was used only for prophetic purposes—for the exercise of the preaching office; of the worship itself the Table was the focus. What could more fittingly be so than that "earthly counterpart of the heavenly mercy-seat"?⁽¹⁾

Why that Genevan practice was not introduced into Scotland by those who in other respects followed closely Calvin's example and precept, is a question I am not in possession of sufficient historical knowledge to be able to answer; but I can point to at least some factors that throw light upon it. Partly it was due to certain limitations of the leaders of the Reformation, both on the Continent and in Scotland. John Knox may be taken as an example. Anyone who realizes and appreciates the immense service that great man rendered to the Scottish Church and nation cannot venture upon criticism of him without reluctance, and a feeling that one is exposing oneself to a charge of ingratitude. Such a charge would be quite unjust. It is possible to pay him the amplest meed of honour and thankfulness for the qualities that made him the providential man for the leadership of Scotland in that time of crisis for its fortunes, and yet feel that his lack of other qualities made the price at which he purchased the heritage he bequeathed to us in some respects a heavy one. With all his immense intellectual force, he was deficient in the finer sensibilities of the mind—in imagination, in the historic sense, in sensitiveness to those beautiful things which by their associations and their suggestiveness, by the thoughts the sight of them stirs and the visions they enkindle, make a far more powerful appeal to certain other types of mind than the most convincing demonstrations to the logical understanding ever can. Lest I should seem unjust I quote a sentence or two from one of his fervent admirers:⁽²⁾

"The delicacy, the tenderness that should deal with certain phases of religious experience, that should express certain emotions of the soul; of these, though not destitute, neither was he remarkably possessed. Nor might we reasonably look to him for these. Knox was a man raised up to do battle in fierce times, with rude and rough adversaries; and though not without kindly sympathies and

⁽¹⁾ See W. D. Maxwell: *John Knox's Genevan Service Book, 1556.*

⁽²⁾ Charles W. Baird: *A Chapter on Liturgies.*

gentle susceptibilities, he was not so placed as to develop them in full proportion with other attributes of his noble soul." It is not in the least unjust to him to say that because of his exceptional mental constitution he failed to appreciate the value of symbolism in general and of the Communion in particular, to those who were strong in the qualities in which he himself was weak—in imagination, and sensitiveness to that side of the Sacrament which has less to do with the deeper longings of the soul.

The exigencies of the time also weighted the balance against that side of the spiritual life getting adequate recognition. They were such as to make anything like an equilibrium between the intellectual and the spiritual sides of religion impossible. The Reformed Church was born in controversy and cradled in fierce debate. It had to fight argumentatively for its life. If it was to justify its tremendous breach with tradition and custom it must carry conviction of the necessity of it home to the minds of the people. And the pulpit was the place where the argument had to be carried on. It fulfilled then the function which the newspaper fills to-day. The preaching was the centre of intellectual and political, as well as ecclesiastical interest; the Church was the chief forum of debate. The preacher could never rid himself of the consciousness of the assize that was proceeding in the minds of the people; he was compelled to address himself to it. Doctrine and polity in their manifold aspects and implications filled the public mind, and nobody felt that there was anything out of place when even the prayers of the sanctuary were invaded by the spirit of the great controversy, turned into direct means of disseminating doctrine, perverted into instruments of debate. In such an atmosphere there was little room for the contemplative spirit; the intellectualizing of religion tended inevitably to place so essentially spiritual an ordinance as the Communion in what was relatively an inferior place.

Still another factor in the circumstances of the time tended in the same direction. There was a great shortage of ministers, and frequent observance of Communion was in most places impossible. Knox's own prescription was of monthly Communion. But that was ideal. In few churches was it practicable. The Book of Discipline enjoined that the observance should be quarterly in burghs and half-yearly in country parishes; but in many places it was possible only once a year. Even in the Capital, at the worst time of the national troubles, it was disused for two years.

It is true that when the occasion did come, the observance was carried out at great length, as if to atone for the rarity of its occurrence ; but few will agree that that was in any sense a real atonement for reducing to so meagre a number the opportunities of the people to communicate.

Still further : when the observance did occur, a Table had to be constructed for the purpose. In most churches there was no permanent Table. In the long intervals between the Communion there was nothing in the sight of the people to remind them of the central ordinance of their worship. So extreme was the reaction from the abuses of the altar that every vestige of it was swept away. An endeavour was made to get back to primitive practice by seating the communicants in a company at a real table, as the Twelve sat with our Lord at the Table in the Upper Room. The beautiful custom of covering the pews with white cloths is a survival from that practice. When the Communion was over, the Table which had been made for the purpose was taken to pieces, and nothing was left to keep all that it stood for before the people's minds. The pulpit remained, central, solitary, supreme, the only thing upon which the attention of the worshippers was concentrated. Can you wonder that the preaching assumed predominant importance in their minds and that the importance of the Communion tended to sink from sight ?

For a time, part of the service was in the hands of the reader, who spoke from the reading-desk. When his office ceased, as it did quite early, his part of the service disappeared, and only the preacher's part was left. Then more than ever the preaching became central. The whole service indeed came to be known by that name : people spoke of it as "the preaching," and nothing else. So it continued to be styled in some quarters down almost to the present day. The sermon became the focus of everybody's interest ; it was the chief justification of having service at all : the idea of worship sank into insignificance : the Scriptures were neglected, and the prayers and the praise—which was reduced to a minimum, and at one time, in some places, actually abandoned—were regarded as greatly subordinate in importance.

Now this one-sided emphasis, this exclusive intellectualizing of Scottish religion, and in particular the reduced emphasis on the Communion, produced important results.

For one thing, it displaced an element in religion which is to many minds of high importance. It swept symbolism

almost entirely from the field, leaving nothing to make that appeal to the imagination of faith without which religion becomes "an intellectual all-in-all," a thing of dogma and argument, and therefore, to perhaps the majority of people, ineffably uninteresting, intolerably dry. In the result men like Walter Scott found nothing to attract them in it. Your theologian is apt to forget that the imagination is as much as the reason an essential instrument of thought. Ruskin had abundant justification for his saying that "the life of the imagination is the discovery of truth." Without it, reason is earthbound: it is chained to the literal facts with which its processes begin, and is unable to divine the soul behind the facts, or even the laws and processes to which they owe their being. Even in science it is the function of the imagination to give substance to things unseen. In religion also that is its office. It is not sufficiently realized that it is to the imagination far more than to the logical understanding that religion makes its appeal. The language by which it consistently speaks to us is the language of symbol. It can convey to us no understanding of the realities of the spiritual world except by the use of metaphors, analogies, figures, images. Didactic baldness, logical precision, are here subordinate; truth has to be conveyed by suggestions, adumbrations, hints, that set the imagination to work to divine the realities behind them. Scripture begins and ends with glowing imaginations that are susceptible of no literal construction; the vivid pictures which it presents in material terms convey no conviction of real things to any mind that does not penetrate, as it can only do by the aid of the divining rod of imagination, behind the material figure to the spiritual fact. If you are to reach the truth of Scripture you must maintain a constant play of imagination over the symbolic language it uses. So long as you treat it as what it is, an imaging of truths which the symbols but dimly and partially reflect, you get from it its spiritual and perennial value. But the moment you begin to press the images with unimaginative ruthlessness into the strait-jackets of the logical understanding, you crush something of the sap and virtue from them; and more, you run the risk of imposing meanings upon them, or drawing inferences from them, which they were not intended to bear. Take such words for example as those which the religion of Christ has borrowed from the Jewish ritual to throw light upon the sacrifice of our Lord, and what it means for us—such words as priest,

ransom, atonement, sacrifice itself. One and all of these words are addressed to the imagination. They are clues which it is to follow to the discovery of some part of the truth, not exact measurements of the truth by which our thought is to be bounded. The truth itself is something immeasurably greater than any one of them, or all of them together, can contain. Each of them is a window through which we are to look to discern something that is part of a totality of truth which in its wholeness is too vast for us to grasp. Everything in Scripture partakes of this character. Christ Himself has been called the metaphor of God—God's last metaphor; and we admit that the phrase is true. For is He not called the image of God, a picture, a representation, by which we may better conceive God? And is our Lord not called the Word of God? What is a word but a symbol of something else which it suggests, and helps us to visualize? He is the figure, the symbol, of what God is: imagination, pondering Him, traces through Him the lineaments of the Hidden One, the Invisible Most High.

Our religion—this is what I am trying to make plain—is throughout a religion that makes itself intelligible through the use of symbolism; it is all compact of symbols: you cannot begin to understand it without using imagination for the discovery of its truth. And Scottish religion lost much when it banished symbolism from its worship: it deprived innumerable minds of what to them was the natural way of access to truth. And by its excessive reliance on dogma, which by its very nature is an attempt to limit the illimitable, it stripped the worship of the Church for many people of all that clothed it with attraction and appeal. And I do not hesitate to say that by thrusting out of sight the chief symbol that was left to it, in the Holy Communion, except on rare occasions, it injured truth. For it thrust into the background what should be central to the Christian Faith. The Communion is a dramatization of redemption. It pictures it in symbol. It focuses with unique intensity and proclaims with uniquely eloquent brevity the fact that is fundamental to any true Christian faith. It preaches to those who receive it their need of Christ as the Food of their souls. It sums up the whole doctrine, in every one of its aspects, of Christ as the Life of men. It cannot therefore be too prominently kept before the minds of the people. Our Lord ordained it in the wise strategy of His love because He knew that without some such symbol to polarize their faith, His followers would

be in danger of drifting away from the centre, and losing hold of the things that are vital to a living faith in Him, a living union with Him. In Scotland that drift took place. The faith of the Church became like a demagnetized needle that wavered and swung wide away from its true pole in Christ, and for generations the religion of this country was far more based upon the Old Testament than upon the New. There was nothing to repolarize it. There was no symbol of the ordinance which takes us to the heart of the Christian religion, set always in the sight of the people to remind them of where they should rest their faith and hope; and the observance of the Sacrament came far too rarely to make it possible to repair the loss entailed by that deprivation. Detached from its saving symbolism, Scottish faith turned back to the legalism of Judaism. The Sacrament itself, in consequence, was long perverted from its intention. People in their thoughts of it invested it with the garments of the old legalism from which Christ had come to deliver them; it spoke to them more of law than it did of grace, with the result that many of those who needed it most turned away from it, repelled by dread where Christ meant that His love should draw them to receive His gifts to their comfort and to the building up of their faith in Him.

And even for those who did observe it, the Sacrament was emptied of much of its most moving and beautiful meaning. It became almost exclusively tied to the facts of the Passion and Death of Christ, and therefore was invested with something more than the solemnity that properly belongs to it—with a gloom which eclipsed and hid from sight the other meanings of it, the effect of which is to make the Christian heart exult with joy unspeakable and full of glory. Always of course the first thing the sacred symbols should bring to mind is Christ's work of redemption and atonement consummated on the Cross. But even the Cross should not stand in isolation: it should be set in the context of revelation as a whole. That our Lord intended it so to be, I have no doubt at all. His Cross was a word to us; the Sacrament was another. There were things He wanted to say which baffled even His powers of utterance; they could be said only in symbol. And He ordained the commemorative Supper as a mute way of expressing what no ordinary words could ever compass. He knew, for example, that no one could look often and long into His passion and death without finding *there* a way of entrance into

what was in the mind and heart of God such as no uttered words, nothing else in the world, could so perfectly open up. The Cross is central in Christianity, not only for what it says to us of that sacrifice which is the source of our salvation, but because it is the key to the whole purpose of God, to His own heart, and to the way of life for men. And the Sacrament also is such a key. It is a window, through which we are meant to look upon the whole wide landscape of God's dealings with men ; it lights up everything. It has been a weakness of our Scottish commemoration that it has been limited too much to the sacrificial aspect of the Cross ; it has cut itself off from practically every other historical aspect of Christ's revelation but that of the Passion, and so has in great measure exiled itself from the spirit of joy, which fills the heart, for instance, when Christ's way of remembrance is followed, as it ought to be, in celebrating His triumph over death on Easter Day.

I cannot dwell on this. The point I wish to make is that in our comparatively rare observances of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper we have tended to restrict its meaning too much, and so to lose much of the spiritual illumination and sustenance our Lord meant it to yield us. It would be great gain to have more frequent celebrations. Short of that, it is gain to have the Communion Table set centrally in the sight of the people, so that it may at least be a visible reminder of the central Facts and Mysteries of the Faith. It is the one symbol—it and the baptismal font—left to us, and it ought not to be neglected or minimized. A religion which lives by its appeal to the imagination of faith should see that this symbol which has no association but with what is central to it, should stand where it will silently make its appeal, to all who see it, to remember Christ and to realize that He is central to faith and should be supreme in all their thought. Not pulpit or minister, not organ or choir, not sermon or singing, is central to Christian worship ; but Christ, and the symbol which silently speaks of Him should be given the central place.

It should be easily visible, not hidden, as it often is, by the organ console or the enclosure provided for the choir. It should be isolated, so that it may stand out in fitting salience. It should be raised, so that all may see it. And it should be worthy in form, whether it be in wood or stone—simple, yet as beautiful as artistry can make it. And it should be a memorial of nothing but the one thing. It is to my mind much to be regretted that in some churches the

Table is studded with the names of those young men of the congregation who fell in War. One can speak with nothing but sympathy and respect of the idea which prompted that way of commemoration, the idea of associating their sacrifice with a symbol which speaks always of the supreme sacrifice offered for the life of the world. But the Table should not divide our memory; it should speak to us of no one but of Jesus only.

It may be said that in most of our Scottish churches it is difficult to give a Table such a place as I have described. They are planned as meeting-houses, so arranged that the pulpit is central and dominates everything. And many of them have side galleries, which make it essential that the pulpit should remain where it is, and the organ also, against the gable towards which the people look. But there is no difficulty of that kind that cannot be overcome. I think for example, of one church of that kind in Falkirk, where, with the advice of Sir D. Y. Cameron, the whole of that part of the Church has been remodelled. Organ and pulpit remain where they were; they could not be placed elsewhere without adding a chancel. But the Table is set forward, centrally, salient: the organ console is sunk and as far as possible concealed: the choir flank the central space in stalls: there is a dignified lectern; and the whole of the transformation has been done with such perfection of balance and proportion, and such felicitousness of taste in every detail, that it may well furnish a model to other churches built on similar lines, in which it is desired to give the worship its rightful orientation by setting the Communion Table in the central place.

Where there is an apse or chancel, I should like to see a suitable reredos provided—a background, consistent with the *ethos* and tradition of our national form of worship, such as may stimulate imagination, suggest vistas beyond the Table, move the sensitive mind to vision of the background of all that it commemorates, in the Eternal. I would infinitely rather have nothing than what I have seen in one church, where a reredos was erected as the War Memorial, and what is conspicuous upon it is the names of the fallen, with the motto in large lettering surmounting the whole—"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori." Again one respects the intention; but the effect is inevitably distracting. The emphasis is wrong. The mind is called to think of something else than what the Table stands for. Whatever is done of that nature should

help the mind to think of the right things. So easily distracted the minds of most of us are, that everything should be done to guard against what hinders concentration, and to fix them upon what is the food of our faith and the glory and hope of our spiritual life.

There is a finer sense of what is fitting spreading throughout the Church. In all directions we see a groping after the use of a sane symbolism which is consistent with our Protestant tradition and faith. Is there not need that help should be provided for those who desire to find the best kind of fitting expression? There is need for the development of a symbolism which will help faith and not distract it, which will be in accord with the tradition and feeling of a Church which has such an inheritance and historical background as ours, and which will yet call out the imagination of those who worship, and so minister to their faith. Whoever can advance us at all in such a direction will deserve well of the Scottish Church.

I close by reiterating what this address imperfectly tries to set forth—that as the symbol of what is central to our faith, the Communion Table should be central in our churches, and that the pulpit should occupy a place of prominence befitting its high importance as the place from which the preacher exercises his prophetic office in unfolding and interpreting the things of Christ for which Christ's word in the Table stands. Thus not only would the faith of the people be helped to be fixed on the central things; the mind of the preacher also would be kept true to its centre, which is Christ—Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ glorified, our only Saviour, our eternal Lord and King.