

## **The Language of Worship**

ON nothing has the effect of the speed of events been more keenly felt than on religious faith and its expression in worship. The faster events move, the more insistent is the cry for change in our patterns. The Church dare not turn a deaf ear to this. There must be a far more earnest desire to understand than has frequently been in evidence hitherto. The Church needs constantly to be reminded that age is no guarantee of the worth of anything, nor is tradition unchangeable or unchallengeable. The Church can never live in the past, and this applies as much to the language and the forms we use as to any other aspect of her life. At the same time, there is always a residuum of eternal truth in all our patterns which does not change. It is the Church's task to see to it that this residuum is preserved intact through the chances and changes of temporal affairs.

All that can be attempted here is to set forth some of the salient facts in the formation of the traditional language of worship, and their influence on worship to-day ; together with one or two guiding principles which these teach, and which must govern any attempt to reform the vocabulary of worship.

The language of the Church's worship is a fairly composite thing, drawing its vocabulary and form from three main sources, Jewish, Greek and Latin. These three have been refined and adapted by translation to form the language of the worship of all the Churches. These three traditions, too, have contributed far more than a host of prayers, and hymns, psalms and canticles. They have set a pattern which has been almost universally followed by the Church.

First, the Jewish tradition. There are four main areas in which its influence is to be seen. The most obvious, and least important, are the few words still used in their Hebrew form, *Alleluia*, *Hosanna*, and *Amen*, which is so continually misused. The second and also obvious but incalculable debt owed to the Jewish tradition is to their Psalter, which has been a mine from which successive generations have quarried devotional language. To-day it provides much of the vocabulary of our prayers. It can, of course, be argued that this language owes a great deal to the translators in King James VI's day ; but even if this is so, the debt to the Psalter remains. A third

debt has been traced by scholars like Gregory Dix and Oesterley when they point out most convincingly the remarkable verbal similarities between the traditional eucharistic prayers and parts of the Jewish graces at ritual meals. These similarities are both verbal and formal, the order followed in both acts of worship being remarkably similar.

But there is an even more fundamental debt that the Church owes to Judaism. The Old Testament Jew was largely conditioned by his history and his theology. For this reason his worship tends to be the commemoration of the great deliverances wrought for him by God. This commemoration adds to his faith that, if he is faithful, God will continue to bless and prosper him. So we find him celebrating God's mighty acts in the past; indeed the way in which he addresses God as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," a phrase we still use, is evidence of this backward-looking element. The Jew is like a man in a rowing-boat, going forward confidently with his back to the direction in which he is going. His worship is a memorial which provides him with a dynamic for the future. There is in his worship, in his prayers, an element of thanksgiving, dedication, and intercession. As Max Thurian observes: "It is evident that the liturgical memorial is not only a thanksgiving and an intercession before God, but also insofar as it is a memorial of the wonderful works of God, it is a proclamation before men which recalls them to gratitude and responsibility<sup>(1)</sup>. This attitude is reflected in the few prayers we find in the Old Testament, as for example, the prayer of King Solomon in 1 Kings iii, 6-9. It is reflected in the Psalms as well, as for example, Psalm 136, where there is a recital of the whole range of the history of man from his creation until the present time. We still do this when we say "O God, our refuge and strength throughout all generations..." This element of memorial, thanksgiving and intercession leading to faith, hope and dedication, has been reflected in the worship of the Christian Church from earliest days until now. Much of the form of our worship, as well as its vocabulary, has been conditioned by this characteristic of Jewish worship; and this constitutes what is perhaps the greatest debt owed by Christian worship to that of the Jew.

The debt to the Greek is scarcely less. In the Gospels and Acts we see the beginning of the bending of the Jewish patterns of worship in Synagogue and Temple to distinctively Christian ends. There are also several Christian

<sup>(1)</sup> *The Eucharistic Memorial*, Pt. I, p. 107.

Hymns, or Canticles to be found in the Gospels. The Lucan *Magnificat*, *Benedictus*, and *Nunc Dimittis* are examples. Some scholars maintain that these are strictly speaking pre-Christian, C. F. D. Moule quoting P. Winter as describing them as Maccabaeian Psalms. Whatever they are, they are part of the debt the Church owes to Greek tradition and they have come to occupy a very special place in the worship of the whole Church.

Another feature of the worship of the New Testament Church is that the usual manner is to pray to God through, or in the name of, Christ, and to praise God for Him. Direct prayer to Christ is rarely found in the New Testament. The prayer of St. Stephen, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit", and St. Paul, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" are exceptions. Much more usual is prayer and praise given to God through Christ.

But the most important contribution to the form, as well as the language of worship is the Lord's Prayer, which has become the model of all prayer and a focal point in the worship of every Church. It is one of the few acts of worship in which Christians of whatever denomination can share.

The other part of the debt owed to the Greek tradition is to the Greek Church. From this source have come a number of the finest hymns and prayers. These were in the main neglected until the beginnings of the liturgical revival under such men as William Bright, John Mason Neale, R. F. Littledale, and John Keble. These men rescued them from their Greek oblivion and rendered them into fine dignified English. Examples of them are to be found in the *Church Hymnary* in "Hail, gladdening Light" (281), and in the *Book of Common Order* in the beautiful intercession beginning "For the peace that is from above and for the salvation of our souls . . .". From these sources a host of morning prayers of great beauty have come. Many can be found in *A Chain of Prayer across the Ages*, and provide phrases and thoughts which can be profitably used in contemporary worship.

But, inevitably, the course of history has made the debt the Western Church owes to the past more to the Latin tradition than to the others. This is because for some thousand years Latin was the language of worship for the whole Church. At the Reformation, the Anglican Church did little more than translate the Roman Missal, and adapt some of the monastic services for morning and evening use. The Gospel and the Epistles and the Collects for the Day were

taken over as they stood. In other reformed churches the debt is not so obvious, but is no less real. In Scotland some of the rich heritage has been claimed and put to good use. Our *Book of Common Order* contains many of the Roman collects and prayers. Indeed the Collect form is coming to be used more and more widely in the Reformed Churches. The whole vocabulary of the Church's worship owes an incalculable debt to the Latin tongue and to those who for centuries sought to maintain the standards of worship of the people.

There is one more relevant fact. From the earliest days until the Reformation, the normal service of public worship was the Eucharist, or Mass. Every period in the Church's history until then had this in common. The worship of the Church centred around the action of the Eucharist ; and, as the liturgy developed, there came to be a richness and emotional satisfaction in the total drama which the worshipper saw being enacted before his eyes, and in the words and music he heard with his ears, which gave a deep satisfaction. This is why in the West, at least, and because the language of worship was the precise, terse Latin, the vocabulary became polished, almost epigrammatic, and so objective as to be drained of almost all emotion. This objectivity is one of the vital keys to the understanding of the language of worship up to the Reformation. But it must also be remembered that such prayers were offered during the celebration of the Mass, or at least in the presence of the Reserved Sacrament ; so that there is an extraneous emotional appeal which makes the most objective language alive, and a potent means of devotion.

After the Reformation, those churches that merely translated the Roman prayers and collects, while abandoning the Eucharist as the norm, found out that these were not entirely satisfying. This is why, in England, since the beginning of the Oxford Movement, men have sought to restore the Eucharist to its rightful place in the Church's worship. Since then, too, many have exercised their talents in the writing of new collects, some of which are of great beauty. The work of men like Milner-White in such books as *After the Third Collect*, provides fine examples of this art.

In our own Church the change was much more violent and radical. While it is true that for John Knox the norm of public worship continued in theory, at least, to be the celebration of the Lord's Supper, this celebration was stripped of most of its external and emotional appeal and made a matter

of stringent plainness, in order that there might be no suspicion of the survival of the sort of superstitions against which the whole movement for reform was an understandable protest. Unfortunately, however, the Lord's Supper soon came to be only occasionally celebrated, as it still is in Scotland generally to-day, and though the dramatic element was excluded from the Church's worship, the vocabulary of the prayers did not change appreciably ; indeed, it became more and more arid, complex, and intellectual. In place of the terse Latin forms, prayers were long and diffuse, stylized and with the emotional rigidly excluded. With little change this continued until the middle of last century when a growing number of people desired to return to those standards of beauty, dignity, and simplicity which characterized a former day. It was then that the *Church Service Society* was formed. At first it was not clearly stated what that former day was, but, as the movement owed much to the Oxford Movement, and to the Catholic Apostolic Church, it tended to align itself with the Roman tradition. The collects came to be used once more, the Creed was recited, and it was advocated that there be more frequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper. Later, and far more significantly, the movement began to look further back to the Early Church, and from it there began the harvesting of the rich heritage of hymns and prayers of the Church. But in spite of this, the Church still lacks the dramatic and emotional elements so needful to spiritual health.

This lack was felt, and still is, by far more than the membership of the *Church Service Society*, and similar societies. Many of entirely different views have felt the aridity of much that passes for worship, and have sought to supply the need by other means. The hymns of Moody and Sankey and others show this. So do prayers like the following ; " Standing, O our God, upon the shrinking shores of time where ever break and moan the waves of an eternal sea, we feel utterly homeless and afraid . . ." Here is a prayer that is individualistic and self-centred, and by its coloured imagery is not calculated to appeal to the healthy and honest worshipper. It seeks to stir emotional response by highly charged evocative language and the use of literary devices such as alliteration, which make it quite unsuitable for normal worship. This prayer further illustrates the fault of over-subjectivity, pre-occupation with self, so that the prayer becomes irrelevant to the majority of worshippers. If we are not to link prayer with the Lord's Supper, then this is

not the way to supply the emotional element so much needed in any worship that is to be real.

From this all-too-brief survey, one or two basic principles which must govern the language we use in worship are clearly discernible. The position to-day is that the Church must find ways in which she can avoid, on the one hand, the arid intellectualism that has characterized so much of the vocabulary of her worship since the Reformation ; and, on the other, the sort of subjective sentimentalism illustrated in the prayer just quoted. In the effort to achieve this the Church can do no better than learn or re-learn the lessons of the past. It is not by gimmicks, or tricks of the tongue, nor by addressing the Almighty in the second person plural, nor by invoking Him in song couched in the jargon of the day, that the patterns will regain their lost reality for the masses, but in the continuing instruction of the people in the art of worship. The language used must continue to preserve the best in the past and make its own contribution to the ongoing tradition. This is no easy matter, but, if it is any encouragement, it is noticeable that a great many young people appear to find greater satisfaction in the more traditional forms than in the extreme forms of gimmickry.

To achieve this, the first necessity is for the leader of worship to remember that he is leading a congregation. It is always the aim of public worship to express, not the worship of the individual, nor even of the group, but to honour God ; and everyone shares in this corporate act. As the French writer Richard Paquier says, “. . . since the liturgy is the collective order of prayer of the Church, and neither the prayer of the individual, nor of the members of such and such a congregation, it must have its distinctive style, its definite language, as well as being independent in so far as possible of personal feeling and changing fashions.” The dangers of forgetting this are clearly seen in this attempt to use the Parable of the Prodigal Son as a prayer of Confession. “We have tried the broad, well-trodden way, we have followed the primrose path . . . tears and burdens we have put far from us ; yet the flowers have faded at our feet, and we have found ourselves at last in the wilderness, alone, the wine of life turned to gall, its bread to ashes . . .” Here is a highly personal reaction to a parable expressed in lush language and threadbare images which is not relevant to the average church-goer, who feels none of these things, and who is at best unmoved, and at worst put off by it. How much simpler, if one must use the parable this way, to say simply . . . “we

have wasted our substance in riotous living'', leaving it to the imagination of the worshipper to fill in the sordid details. How much better for to-day is the plain unvarnished language of such a prayer as the following taken from *Acts of Devotion* (1963): "In the thought of God's holiness, love and perfection, let us remember our sins: our besetting sins: our secret sins: our sins in thought, word and deed, our sins against others, and against God." This is followed by a simple prayer of absolution. It is obvious how much easier this is to follow, and how it can more easily be applied to the lives of all than the previous prayer. The contrast between these two leads to this second conclusion.

The leader of worship must always use images and language that will be meaningful to his people's needs. The Anglo-Saxon tongue is eminently suited to this end, and one-syllable words are often more effective than the polysyllables so much in vogue. Unfortunately there are still traces of this fault to be found in our own *Book of Common Order* where words such as *vouchsafe*, *acquainted with*, *forasmuch* are to be found. If those who have to lead others in prayer would only remember the injunction of Jesus: "Let your communication be Yea, Yea, Nay, Nay, for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil," how much better for all concerned.

Yet another basic need in the vocabulary of worship is objectivity. When, for example, the prayer of confession is said, it will be a general confession, and not a catalogue of the sins of the individuals present. In the prayer of intercession, however, it is often a good thing to detail specific topics for prayer, even specific people who may have asked for the Church's prayers. But the language used will still be objective, unemotional and calm. The bidding type of prayer is coming more and more into use in Scotland, followed by a short collect summing up the petitions. In all these the language should be of the simplest, with no use of images, or purple passages. It is an excellent exercise to use only words of one syllable in our prayers, and to avoid all non-Anglo-Saxon words.

Another basic requirement to be carried over from the past into the present is directness. This is most clearly seen in the Latin collects. The collect form is another way of cultivating that directness of approach that is so vital to living worship. Here is no unnecessary verbiage, no paraphrasing, no vain repetition, but a simple directness which all can follow.

One of the besetting sins of Scotland is diffuseness. Here is a prayer taken from a book published in the thirties : “ We came here last week and dedicated our lives to Thy most Holy service. When we tarried in the atmosphere of prayer and worship, we believed that we had cast the world behind us, and that our lives were set towards goodness and towards God. But the tear and the wear of the following days drew us back again into the world and, ere we knew it, we were shouting with its voices, and mingling with its pleasures, and laughing at its favours, forgetful of Thee, and of all our sacred promises.” Now what is all that saying ? Surely no more than this : “ We admit our many faults, our broken vows, the hardness of our hearts, the weakness of our faith and the poverty of our service.” All the rest is verbiage which only confuses the worshipper who finds it extremely hard in any case to concentrate for more than the briefest time on anything. All prayers must be short, direct, and couched in the simplest language. For far too long the Church has paid her people the compliment, if such it is, of assuming that they can follow the spoken word however uttered, and at whatever length.

But how can the emotional element be supplied to our worship ? The Roman Church achieves this through the drama of the Mass, as we have seen, and much can be learned from them. Worship must be regarded as a unity, the praise, reading, preaching and praying making one act of worship. Once this is seen, then those parts of the service in which the people take part can supply this lost element which can be carried over into the prayers, which should never be looked on as other than offering to God the worship of His Church. It is a gross misuse of prayer to make it either didactic, evangelistic, or the vehicle of an emotional appeal. Here is an evening prayer, for example : “ As the stars come out, and the sun goes down, strange music sounds when the quiet of evening comes, and voices are heard in silence which were drowned in the noise of day, so let us be silent now until we find both doubt and desire but heralds of thy drawing nigh.” Here is an attempt to use prayer to create atmosphere by the use of rather far-fetched images, and, at the end, of meaningless verbiage. How can doubt and desire become heralds of anything ? This is not really prayer at all. How different is the old, simple prayer beloved of all : “ Almighty God, help us as the day departs to enter into Thy secret place where there is no darkness at all. Disperse the shadows that hide Thy glory from us, and enlighten our souls with the radiance

of Thy truth and love.” Here in simple language and homely imagery is a true invocation evocative of those emotions which help a worshipper to play his part in the general act of worship of the Church.

Another way of achieving this emotional response is to make the worshipper participate actively in the prayers. This can be achieved in several ways. The response is a useful expedient, though care should be taken to ensure that the response is simple and short, and capable of being honestly said by all. Again, where the service is printed in full the people may repeat a whole prayer together. This can be a confession, thanksgiving or dedication. In this, as in all else, the rules of objectivity, directness and simplicity must be borne in mind.

But perhaps the most important lesson to be learnt is to rely on the language of the Bible. The words of the Psalms have permeated our whole vocabulary to such an extent that the debt owed is hardly noticed. But the language of the Bible as a whole has set the pattern for the language of worship. If we compare its lucid, simple beauty with some of the diffuse, longwinded prayers already quoted it is easy to see how infinitely preferable is the former to the latter. It may be said that the language of King James’s day needs revision to meet our need to-day. This is partially true, but in the main the language and literary style of the Bible are of timeless value, and ideally suited to the church’s worship. The few words, like “prevent”, that have changed their meaning, can be revised or avoided. The unadorned prose of the Bible is still the best medium for expressing those ideas which make up the church’s spoken worship.

We have come nearly to the end of our survey. All that remains is to underline the need for not lightly making too drastic a break with the past in our desire to be “with it”. Rather should we be training people in those traditional patterns expressed in simple, direct language spoken quietly, naturally, and with no attempt to impress or move the worshipper; which will ensure that worship is living and relevant. Like any other art it needs to be taught as well as caught. There is a place for greater participation by the people in our worship. The Taizé Community has pioneered in this, as in so many other fields, in their eucharistic worship. And there is a need for us in our day to fall in line with Christian opinion throughout the world in the advocacy of a more frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

In the last resort, however, any renewal of the Church's worship will depend, not so much on the language used, as upon the renewal of its people. This is the pastoral side to all this. It is one which we must never forget, and to which the Church must continually be addressing itself.

As we look at to-day with its difficulties and problems, let us take a leaf out of the Jewish experience. Let us see the past preserving for us a heritage of devotional language of singular beauty, expressive of the power and love of God which has been distilled through the culture of Greece and Rome and given to us to assure us of God's availability now, as always, to save and help his people. Let us use our heritage and adapt it to our needs, adding to it our contribution, so that generations to come may look back on these turbulent days of the New Reformation and say, "These men were faithful."

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