

## **The Bible in Public Worship**

THE problem of the use of the Bible in public worship must ever have a central importance in the life and work of the Christian Church. Although Dr. Lee's main interest was perhaps in other matters, he spoke quite strongly on this question. In his *Reform of the Church of Scotland* he complained that over the whole Church of Scotland it had become the custom to 'substitute a lecture for the lessons ; so that not a word of Scripture was ever heard in the churches, except, perhaps, the text of the sermon, or some quotation in the prayers or discourses . . . And (he goes on) it is notorious that even at the present day there is a considerable number of churches in Scotland in which lessons from the Bible are not read' <sup>(1)</sup>. That he called a 'scandalous proceeding'. It was certainly a serious departure from the practice of the Early Church. Even though the Church of Scotland was not alone in this dereliction of duty, it was a sad falling-away from primitive custom.

Let us see what that custom was. You will remember that the Christian Church inherited much from Jewish custom and belief. In the matter of worship in particular, Jewish types seem to have been retained by the Christians. The synagogue service contained two lessons from 'Scripture', that is, what we now call the Old Testament. The first lesson was from the Pentateuch, which was read through portion by portion over three years, and this was normally the duty of the ruler of the synagogue. The second lesson came from the Prophets, and this could be read by any member present on the call of the ruler. The lessons were in Hebrew, which in New Testament times was no longer the vernacular, and so it was that after the lessons were read a translation was provided along with an explanation and application of them. You can see how this worked out at Nazareth <sup>(2)</sup>. The first lesson had been read, and Jesus was invited to read the second lesson, the prophet, and the passage chosen was Isaiah 61. Having read it, he closed the book gave it back to the ruler, sat down, and proceeded to the interpretation.

<sup>(1)</sup> Op. cit. p. 31.

<sup>(2)</sup> *Luke 4* : 14 f.

It appears that something similar to this happened in the Christian assemblies. From what the New Testament says, it seems clear that the Scriptures of the Old Testament were read, and further, Paul shows that he expected some at least of his letters to be read to the assembled Christian congregation. That suggests an Old Testament lesson, and part of what was later on in the New Testament.

There is little positive evidence about this till we come to the writings of Justin Martyr. In his *First Apology*, dated about A.D. 150, he was explaining what took place in Christian worship, and one passage sums up our concern thus: 'On the day called the Feast of the Sun, all who live in towns or in the country assemble in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as time permits. Then, when the reader has ended, the president instructs and encourages the people to practise the truths contained in the Scripture lessons. Thereafter we all stand up and offer prayers together'. The Lord's Supper follows.

Here we have reference to two lessons, an Old Testament lesson and a Christian writing, followed by a sermon. That is to say, there were two ways in which the Bible was used in public worship—lessons and sermon. Now it is curious that Justin does not mention a third use for which there are many witnesses, namely, the use of the Psalter. This also was a custom in the Jewish Church, both in Temple and in synagogue, and the Christians seem to have continued this practice from the very first, and there are of course several references to psalmody in the New Testament. There are thus three ways of using Scripture in the public worship of the Christian Church, and we now give some attention to each of them.

1. PSALMODY. This has throughout the history of the Church been one of the most popular items in public worship. In the early days, it seems, the congregation took a large part in this exercise, and there are many testimonies in the writings of the Church Fathers to its interest and value. Indeed the frequent references and quotations in the books of the early period show that the psalms were well-known and much loved, and in fact many were known by heart. Jerome speaks of a girl who began to memorize them at the age of seven, and he says that he himself in his youth had done this too. So he recommends that all Christians should learn them in this way. He even advised women and children to learn the Hebrew language that they might be able to

read and sing the psalms in the original tongue ! Many other writers speak of the value of the psalms for religious edification and spiritual development. Above all their value in the service of public worship is frequently emphasized. Evidence comes from John Chrysostom, Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose, Augustine, Athanasius and many others.

These writers bear witness not only to the fact that the psalms were used in worship, but also to the normal place of the psalms in the service, namely, between the lessons, especially, in the Communion Service, between the Epistle and the Gospel. Augustine is particularly interesting in this connexion. Frequently in his sermons he mentions the lessons that had been read, and makes it clear that the psalms came between them. Thus, ' In the apostolic lesson, thanks are given to God for the faith of the gentiles. In the psalm we said, Turn us again, O God of Hosts, and cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved (Ps. 80 : 7). In the Gospel we are called to the feast '. In fact he was showing the relationship between these parts, and incidentally shows us the position of the psalm. One occasion he chose a particular psalm for the service, possibly to suit the subject of his sermon, or because he meant to expound the psalm. Unfortunately the reader read the wrong psalm. This might have disconcerted some preachers, but not Augustine, who said, ' We chose for you a short psalm, which we ordered should be read by the lector ; but at the time, apparently perturbed, he read another instead. We chose to follow in the error of the lector the will of God rather than our will in our proposal '.

The Church then in early days regularly used the Psalter, and this practice has continued throughout its history. In the development of Roman Catholic worship, the psalms gradually came to take a smaller place than at first. Instead of a whole psalm, only part of it was used, with the result that the psalm in the *Roman Missal* services came to consist of one verse of the psalm sung at the beginning and repeated at the end, called the antiphon, together with sometimes only one other verse sung between the antiphons. But it seems that the new proposals emanating from the Vatican Council intend to give the psalms a larger place. Another development was that the psalmody came to be performed only by cantors or by choirs rather than by the whole congregation—a development which came about very early. But again the present intention seems to be to give the people a greater share in this matter.

The Churches of the Reformed tradition at once gave back to the people the right to the psalmody. This was done chiefly by means of metrical forms, and Scotland has long been in favour of that proceeding. A complete metrical version appeared with the *Book of Common Order* of 1564, but it fell out of favour, largely owing to changes in the spoken language, and in 1650 the version which is still in use was published. There has been from time to time much criticism of at least some parts of the metrical psalter, and proposals have been made for a slight revision, though there would be strong and widespread opposition to very drastic changes. On this matter, Robert Lee said, 'The Psalter contains the noblest poetry, the sublimest devotion—no language can be found so proper to be employed in praising and blessing the Lord. Our own version in metre, though sometimes rugged and occasionally sinking to doggerel (*sic*), is, upon the whole, faithful, vigorous and good' <sup>(1)</sup>, a sentiment with which many still agree.

It has been argued that a wider use of psalmody would be a benefit in our worship. Dr. Lee made two suggestions<sup>(2)</sup>: Psalms of a moral and didactic character, instead of being *sung* as if they were addresses by us to God, should be *read* as lessons, as words of warning, reproof, encouragement, instruction, addressed by God to us. Secondly, the prose psalms in particular, whose characteristic, he said, is not parallelism but responsive construction, if they cannot be chanted, should be read or said responsively, as between the minister and the people. Both these ideas are in use in many congregations, and might be more widely practised with great benefit to all worshippers.

2. THE LESSONS. We saw that in the early Church lessons from the Old Testament and portions from what became the New Testament were read in the services. Clearly they were regarded as forming an essential part of the liturgy and as being of fundamental importance. They were indeed of kerygmatic value, proclaiming the grand truths of the faith. Upon this use of the Bible depended much of the establishment and progress of the Church.

The brief quotation from Justin suggested two lessons. But in fact there were often more than two. The New Testament itself suggests the reading of two lessons from the Old Testament, the Law and the prophets, and also one from a Pauline letter, to which 'memoirs of the apostles' must have

<sup>(1)</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 135.

<sup>(2)</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 137.

been added very early—the possibility of four lessons. In some places in the Church there were even more than that. The document called *Apostolic Constitutions*, of date about A.D. 380, in one place (Book VIII) mentions lessons from the Law, prophets, epistles, Acts and Gospels, and in another (Book II) mentions the Law, the historical books, Job and the Wisdom books, prophets, Acts, Epistle and Gospel, and adds, ‘Let the lections be read two by two’. But in general there were seldom more than three, Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel, and this number gradually came to be recognized as the most suitable number, though in many places in the West the number was often reduced to two, even by the time of Augustine. In the Communion Service these are technically known as the Epistle and the Gospel, while in the Morning and Evening Offices, as in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and in our own ordinary services, the lessons are Old Testament and New Testament. At the present time there is a tendency, especially with lectionary makers, to provide for three lessons. In proposed revisions of the Order of Holy Communion, the idea is to have Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel, one reason being that if only Epistle and Gospel are read, the Old Testament will become less and less known. Our own lectionary in the *Book of Common Order* provides for three, and new service books in Canada and the United States do the same, while the new lectionary being prepared by the Joint Liturgical Group follows the same plan.

That brings us to an interesting question. On what plan should the lessons be selected? In the early days, were lessons chosen at random, or to suit a particular subject, or was there a wider or more formal scheme? For a time and in certain places the idea was the straightforward continuous reading of a book or a series of books of the Bible. There are for example series of sermons preached by men like Origen, Chrysostom and Augustine on individual books of the Bible, which show that the books were being read and expounded systematically. The Rule of St. Benedict planned for the reading of the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice in each year, and that was the intention of the English reformers in the *Book of Common Prayer*. But that plan was and always has been to some extent upset by the need to read special lessons suited to the day or the season. The great Feasts of the Christian Year for example demand proper lessons. At Easter the narratives connected with the Resurrection should be read, and so also at Christmas the Nativity narratives are necessary. Incidentally this was one

of the demands made by Dr. Lee among his proposals for the improvement of public worship <sup>(1)</sup>. It came about therefore that lectionaries were drawn up, though they were not, it seems, complete for the whole year until about the fifth century. They are coming more and more into use in our day, and there can be little doubt that lectionaries are extremely valuable, providing lessons for every Sunday of the year. They assist ministers to find subjects for their sermons ; they give a guarantee that preachers will not stick too closely to favourite topics ; or on the other hand, that they will not omit subjects which they find difficult. Moreover they are very good for the people, because when a lectionary is in use, they will hear the whole Christian Gospel read and preached about year by year. It is greatly to be hoped that more and more use will be made of this kind of direction for Bible-reading in Church.

3. THE SERMON. The proper significance of the sermon is that it should be the explanation, interpretation, or application of one or more of the passages read as lessons. Whether the subject of the sermon is an event commemorated in the festivals of the Christian Year, or some point of doctrine or some problem of ethics, or a matter of pressing importance in the current life of the congregation or of the nation, it should be attached, normally, at least, to a particular verse or passage of Scripture. This seems to have been ordinary practice in the Early Church. Many passages in the sermons of the Fathers of the Church are applications to current events of their times, and the same ought to apply to our modern days.

There is much evidence that many of the early preachers were listened to with keen appreciation, even on occasion with shouts of approval and loud applause. There is a well-known instance of Chrysostom rebuking his audience for applauding him, saying that in his opinion that was a bad and unseemly custom—but nevertheless being loudly applauded for the sentiment. On the other hand, Origen for example sometimes criticizes his hearers, among whom, he said, there were men whose main interest was in the things of this world, who even during service would carry out business transactions and indulge in worldly conversation, and women too whose real interest was not in the sermon or the service, but in gossip and scandal. Perhaps that is why *Apostolic Constitutions* tells us that one of the duties of the deacon was to prevent ‘ nodding, whispering and sleeping ’. Nevertheless

<sup>(1)</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 161.

it is quite clear that the Gospel was proclaimed faithfully and bore much good fruit.

In the Middle Ages the sermon lost much of its force. There was too much emphasis on casuistry or on purely dogmatic points, and too little of the straightforward preaching of the Gospel. The Reformation brought about an immense change here, for there was a return to the original purpose of the sermon, as an explanation of biblical teaching with its application to the needs of the day, and especially to the needs of the individual soul. Today there is a fresh emphasis on 'kerygma', on proclamation. And von Allmen has said in a recent book, 'In the hands of God, the sermon is a basic means by which there takes place a direct prophetic intervention in the life of the faithful and of the Church, with the object of consoling, setting to rights, reforming, questioning' (1). And from another point of view, it might be well for us all to remember that Luther once suggested that when a preacher has finished his sermon, he should be able to say, 'In preaching this sermon I have been an apostle and prophet of Jesus Christ'.

These then are three outstanding ways in which the Bible has been used in public worship. They are indeed not the only ways, though the most obvious and direct. For THE PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH also are founded on biblical teaching, and not only so, they are dependent largely on biblical language. This is true both of the ancient service books and of our modern ones. Look for instance at our own *Book of Common Order*, and see how much scriptural quotation and reminiscence there is in the prayers. There is here an interesting if academic question, as to the priority of the biblical or the liturgical phraseology. Some think that where biblical quotations seem to exist in the early prayers, the language of the scriptural writer was really only an echo of liturgical language already established in the primitive communities. The great liturgical scholar Anton Baumstark thought so (2), as indeed John Mason Neale long before him also believed (3). But so far as we are concerned, the Bible is in fact the source of much of our prayer language, and it is only right that it should be so, and should continue to be so. Robert Lee said on this point, 'The style of our Authorized Version English Bible has become the standard of language for religious compositions and should be taken as a model in

(1) *Worship: Its Theology and Practice*. London, 1965. p. 143.

(2) *Comparative Liturgy*. London, 1958. p. 59.

(3) *Essays on Liturgiology*. London, 1869. Essay XV.

all prayers for Christian congregations ' (1). And his own Prayer Book is an illustration of the use of that principle.

The Lord's Prayer is an important example of this. At a very early date it was in use in worship, and in the time of Augustine it was regularly said in the Eucharistic service. It fell out of use in Scotland from the seventeenth century, though the *Westminster Directory* recommended its use. And Dr. Lee thought that the disuse of this form was another ' scandalous proceeding ' in the worship of his time. It is good that the recitation by the congregation of this prayer, given by our Lord himself, and recorded in the Scriptures, is finding a place in the services in more and more congregations.

One other subject must be mentioned. We have no time to speak of all the services of the Church, but we must not omit that of HOLY COMMUNION. To omit that might give the impression that the service of the Word is the most important, the central thing in our worship. For many people that may be so, especially perhaps in our Scottish Church where Holy Communion has for long been only an occasional service. The Eucharist however is an integral feature of Christian worship, with its roots firmly fixed in the New Testament. The first Christians, we are told, continued not only in the teaching of the apostles, in fellowship and in prayers, but also in the breaking of bread. And indeed there seems to have grown up very soon a close connexion between the Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper. That continued throughout the early centuries ; it continued to the Reformation, and even then it was only in the Reformed Churches that the custom was broken, though some leaders, John Calvin in particular, protested. But we must remember that our Lord instituted the Eucharist and commanded his disciples to celebrate it and so to remember him. Apart from the Lord's Prayer, this is the only instruction about forms of worship which our Lord gave to his disciples, and it is not surprising to find some modern theologians urging a wider obedience. Karl Barth says that worship is blunted and lacking in focus when the Eucharist is absent from it, and von Allmen demands that the old connexion between the Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper should be restored. It is becoming more and more clear that the Churches must face this question again.

In conclusion, there may be in coming days many changes in the forms of our worship ; old habits may be

(1) *Op. cit.* p. 176.

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replaced by new customs ; the shape of the ministry of the Church may be altered, and with that the shape of the liturgy. But one thing must remain if our worship is to be truly and wholly Christian. The Bible must still be read, sung, quoted and preached, in our public worship, so that the Word of God, living and powerful, may more and more sanctify our life, and bring the world to him at whose name every knee shall bow and whom every tongue shall confess, to the glory of God the Father.

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