

An Order of Service for Christmas Eve

WHY is it that there are people to be seen in Church at the Christmas Eve Service who never otherwise attend ? Francois Mauriac has said, “ Every Frenchman believes deep down in his heart that the religion he isn’t practising is true.” Is it the case that many Scots people feel the same way and welcome this opportunity of making, without self-consciousness, public acknowledgement of their “ deep down ” faith ? Or are non-theological factors more important here as elsewhere ? Do present day Scots, under the influence of alien customs, regard a religious service conducted in a romantic atmosphere at the witching hour as an indispensable prelude to a day spent feasting on turkey and plum pudding ? There may be no agreement on the reasons for the popularity of this Service but there can be no doubt that better attendances are reported each year, despite a tendency for numbers at ordinary Services to decrease.

In compiling the Order below, my thinking has been controlled by the special nature of the congregation that gathers for this Service, and the unique opportunity that it provides. Many of our most faithful members will not be present. A midnight excursion will not hold any attractions for elderly. We are hardly likely to provide a creche to enable families with young children to attend. There is little doubt in my mind that the majority of those present will be only occasional churchgoers, and many of them will be once-a-year people. We certainly cannot assume that this is our ordinary Sunday congregation with some additions.

What we can assume is that for the main body of the congregation this is their Christmas Service ; and so we cannot order it on the basis of a Vigil observed by those who will return for a great festal celebration of the Lord’s Supper. We can also take it for granted that the majority of the worshippers will be unfamiliar with liturgical practice and lack any profound understanding of the cultus ; and so it will be necessary to take particular care that all that is said and done is readily intelligible and felt to be purposive. Ministers enjoy discussing in an academic way how worship can be made relevant to modern man. Modern man comes to worship on Christmas Eve as at no other time. His presence presents a unique challenge since we can hardly offer him a

“ crash ” course on our traditional thought forms before beginning an Order intended for instructed worshippers who have patiently learned over the years that, in Geddes Macgregor’s words, “ Worship is not so much inspiration as perspiration ”.

It is intended that the Service provided here should last one hour, beginning at 11.30 p.m. There are two parts, divided by the Christmas Bell. The first part is an Act of Preparation and the second an Act of Celebration.

The Introduction states the aim of the Service and begins with a warning. This may seem tendentious and prosy but I think it is very necessary, particularly if it is the custom to hold the Service by candlelight or in near darkness, or where there are attempts in various ways to create a special “ atmosphere ”. Those who come only to this Service will have enough romantic ideas about Christmas without our fostering them.

Alfred R. Shands in his “ The Liturgical Movement and the Local Church ” reminds us that “ Christmas and Easter are two occasions on which the Church can reach individuals who cannot be reached at any other time. Often the Church loses valuable opportunities by providing a routine service at these times ”. It is to him that I owe the idea for the theme which occupies the main period of the first part of the Service—“ The World Needs a Saviour ”. He says on page 108, “ For Christmas Eve when the Church has its most effective moment to preach the gospel to the whole parish, a service used by the Abbé Michonneau might be tried. It is called ‘ The World Needs a Saviour ’. The important point in working out the theme is to make the relevant connection between the Gospel and the true situation of the modern world as it is experienced by the people of the parish. In the first part, members of the parish dressed in their ordinary clothes enact scenes familiar to their own experience, showing how the world needs a saviour in our homes, in our work and in our hearts ”. We are not concerned here with the second and third part of the Abbé’s service, nor need we necessarily follow the dramatic method that he used to expound the theme. There are many ways in which it can be worked out, e.g., readings from current newspapers ; extracts from modern novels speaking to man’s condition ; an arrangement of scripture passages in a modern version interspersed with secular readings in the form of a commentary. Dialogue preaching might be used to reveal Man’s need. There is an opportunity in this part of the Service for a Beat or Folk

Group to participate. The theme provides us with a challenge to our imaginations. If we can devise no better plan we can always give an address ourselves ! In choosing the hymns and carols for this part, we must bear in mind Erik Routley's comments in his "Hymns Today and Tomorrow", p. 76. "Christmas brings many people into touch with the church who attend it, or think of its teachings at no other time. Partly the sentimental hymns help to achieve this. But the casual contact of many is not with the heart or anything near the heart of the Christmas message. It can hardly be gainsaid that nowadays the indiscriminate use of sentimental hymns and carols enhances the secularization of the season The effect of the 'snow on snow', world brotherhood image of Christmas is to make us all think of Christmas as a season of hospitality, of child adoration and of general bonhomie". The number of items of praise is not specified since it will depend on the time taken with "The World Needs a Saviour".

The culmination of the Act of Preparation is the Prayer of Confession to which what has gone before should naturally have led us. We must admit our need before we can celebrate. Those who will not acknowledge their sinfulness obviously cannot rejoice to welcome a Saviour.

The Christmas Bell ushers in the second part which is straightforward and requires little comment. The Word is read and the Word is preached that we might get to the heart of the Christmas message, and encounter the saving power of God. The Incarnation is proclaimed as the answer to the world's needs. In his novel "Late Call", Angus Wilson deals with life in a New Town. He makes one of his characters say of the vicar of the church there, "You never get any of this dry-as-dust theological stuff from him that's done so much to keep people out of the churches. Quite the contrary. Last Easter he gave a sermon on the eleven-plus". One can imagine the sort of sermon that vicar would preach on Christmas Eve in order to be topical and "with it". In his book Wilson seems to imply that the New Town would be better for some of that dry-as-dust theological stuff. Clearly we are less than fair to our hearers if on such an occasion as this we offer trivial moralising and obvious exhortation. No sermon should be given more preparation so that its theology might be clear, winning and sound.

This Order has been prepared in an attempt to provide a satisfying Act of Worship for infrequent churchgoers and at the same time to make it a worthy offering to God. Some

readers will feel that it is not sufficiently contemporary in form and style. Others will question this whole approach, taking the view that this occasion calls for the use of the best of our liturgical materials and that the casual participant will find them more helpful than any attempts to play down to what we think is his level. My admittedly unsatisfactory effort will have achieved some good if it stimulates others to hard thinking about what is to be done at the Christmas Eve Service. In that thinking, consideration should be given to the admirably prepared and carefully annotated Order along traditional lines which appeared in the Annual for 1963.

T. W. KILTIE

Order of Service

Introduction : We are met on this holy night to praise God for what He has done for us : to consider the meaning of the birth of Jesus for the world : to seek to understand our lives in the light of His coming : and to prepare to greet our Saviour with joy on Christmas Day.

We must be aware of the spiritual dangers of such a Service as this with its hallowed associations and customs. It may so easily be an escape from reality rather than an encounter with the Real. Sentimentality may blind us to the true significance of Christmas. Familiarity may make us overbold as we approach this wonderful and mysterious Event. Our traditional carols and readings may so concentrate our minds on the setting of His birth that we miss the fact of Christ. Let us, then, ask God's help that our worship may be acceptable to Him and a worthy celebration of Christ's coming.

Let Us Pray

O gracious God, increase our faith and deepen our understanding.

Help us by Thy Holy Spirit to know better Thy loving purpose in sending Thy Son, that our hearts may be filled with wonder and praise.

Help us to know ourselves better, our weakness, ignorance and sinfulness, that we may welcome Christ as our Saviour and rejoice to receive the peace and joy He offers.

Help us to know better the needs of others, that Thy love shown forth in Christ may flow through us into troubled lives.

O gracious God, banish from our minds all that would obscure the true glory of this season : through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Praise

“ *The World Needs a Saviour* ” (including items of praise)

Let Us Pray

Almighty God, we confess with shame the sins that separate us from Thee and spoil our lives.

Forgive us the pride and self-sufficiency which makes us try to live by our own power and wisdom, though it be to our hurt.

Forgive us the love of ease and forgetfulness of duty which leads us to disobey Thy commandments and neglect Thy worship.

Forgive us the malice, bitterness and impurity of heart which hinder us from enjoying fellowship with Thee. Forgive us from our secret faults and failings.

Silence

Almighty God, we confess with shame our part in the sins that disfigure Thy world and delay the working out of Thy purposes for mankind.

We seek Thy pardon :

- for our failure to work for peace and reconciliation among men.
- : for our lack of imagination in entering into the sufferings of others.
- : for our misuse of the rich resources of the earth.
- : for our reluctance to protest at injustice and our readiness to turn a blind eye to wrongdoing.

We have done with all pretence, O Lord God. Humbly we admit our need of a Saviour. As we wait to hear the bells of Christmas Day, we pray that He who came to seek and save the lost may be born anew in our hearts, to cast out our sin, to assure us of Thy forgiveness, and to bring us peace with Thee, who art His Father and our Father, to whom we give glory for evermore.

Amen.

The Christmas Bell

Praise: “ O come all ye faithful ”.

Scripture Lessons (including the Gospel, for which all may stand)

The Sermon, concluding with an Ascription

*The Offering**Let Us Pray*

Glory be to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men : for unto us is born this day a Saviour who is Christ the Lord. We praise Thee, we worship Thee, we glorify Thee for this greatest of Thy mercies, O God our Father.

We bless Thee for sending Thy Son to be our Redeemer : for His taking of our nature : for His life on earth : for His suffering and death upon the Cross : and for His glorious resurrection and reign at Thy right hand.

We bless Thee for the grace, truth and light that are in Him : for the freedom He offers mankind : and for His living power in the lives of those who trust Him.

We bless Thee for Thy tenderness and humble-heartedness revealed in the manner of our Saviour's birth. May the example of Him who laid aside His glory to lie a weak and helpless Child in the Manger Cradle inspire us so to humble ourselves that our readiness to serve may show the sincerity of our thanksgiving: through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

Inspire Thy Church, O Lord, we pray, to proclaim the Gospel with power in every land, and speed the time when all men shall greet this Christmas Day with joy.

O Thou who gave Thy Son to be Prince of Peace, lead the nations to know Thy love which alone makes reconciliation possible. Gather all Thy Children under the rule of Christ that, obedient to His will, they may find peace and prosperity in serving the common good.

Sustain and bless our Queen, the Royal Family and all who have the responsibility of government and leadership in our land.

O God, who hast hallowed family life for ever by the events of this day, we seek Thy blessing upon our

homes, and pray that they may be filled with love and joy and peace. Remember in Thy mercy all who are far from home at this time, and be very near to all who on this day of gladness are sad and troubled.

Almighty God, we bless and praise Thy name for all those dear to ourselves with whom we once rejoiced at this time and who, having departed this life in Thy faith and fear, now rejoice with Thee in heaven. We pray that by Thy grace we may yet know with them the joy of Thy blessed presence.

Accept our prayers, O merciful God : accept these gifts we now dedicate to Thee : and accept this offering of ourselves which we make through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us when we pray to say :

Our Father

Praise

Benediction