

Liturgy at the Cross-roads

Presidential Address to the Church Service Society : May 1968

IT ought not to be necessary to apologise for the somewhat dramatic title of this address. So far as the title goes, it is no more than the acknowledgment of an obvious fact. Neither the Church's mission to those outside (and it is urgent), nor her hold upon many even of her own members (and it is increasingly tenuous), is likely to be properly effective until she has solved this problem of her worship—for the moment at least. And of course it never can be solved except for the moment, since her cult is never merely a fixed deposit of forms and ceremonies, but a living and developing thing.

It is quite safe to go further and assert that this task now stands first in the agenda of all the Churches ; and this is bound to be so since it is by her worship primarily, however else secondarily, that the church is recognised for what she is. Her true heart and mind show in her face, not primarily as that face is turned to the world, but as it is turned to God.

There are those who in all good faith insist on reversing this order ; but the reversal is a dangerous one. For if the face that is turned to the world is unloving, devious and hypocritical—and sometimes it is—this is the symptom of trouble at the deeper level, where she meets God in worship. Therefore, as Von-Allmen has said, ' when the Church needs reformation, it is the cult that must be reformed. '

It is surprising, when you think of it, that this particular kind of reformation should be so difficult. Yet all branches of the Church now acknowledge the difficulty and are trying to find the solution. I need not waste your time or my own by enumerating more than one or two from an endless array of such researches, for example, the various remits from the General Assembly to the Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion regarding baptism, confirmation, the language of modern worship and the practice of worship in a Reformed Church ; or again the setting up at the instance of the Anglican Primate of a Liturgical Commission with an oecumenical out-reach ; not to mention the interesting and persistent experiments in liturgical revision now being carried out by the Roman Catholic Church. As we all

know, these movements are being kept in touch with one another through the new crop of oecumenical periodicals which are a characteristic feature of the oecumenical scene today. This purposeful colloquy is already resulting in a fruitful cross-fertilisation of the various liturgical sub-traditions, Anglican, Reformed, Roman, Free Church, and even Orthodox.

Nothing short of a profoundly challenging situation could have provoked a response so universal, so persistent, and so obviously *concerned*. The Church, at the place of her common worship, stands again, as so often before in her long story, at the cross-roads.

But which road to take ? Which of the many ?

Let us agree that the matter is fraught with some considerable difficulty. I am being bold enough to ask : Is it quite as easy as some thoughtless folk, or quite as difficult as other earnest folk make it out to be ? Is our view of the problem to some extent confused by the fact that in a generation in which there is a very widespread suspension of belief, people are no longer generally attracted to worship, and therefore the Church, not content to conduct a holding operation, is tempted to think up desperate measures to attract people to services ? (I have something to say about this later). Or, resisting that temptation, are we simply in the position of the frustrated detective—in possession of all the data and with all the clues lying before him on the table or in the typed reports—who is unable to see the solution, yet is teased by the feeling that the answer is there, staring him in the face, if only he could see it ; but because of some preconception regarding the case, the channel of his thought is obstructed, and he is at a loss.

Is it possible then that at least one part of the difficulty regarding worship in the Reformed Churches is due to certain preconceptions which take charge of us the moment we address ourselves to questions of worship, and which prevent us from thinking freely about the subject at all ?

What are these damaging preconceptions ?

I.

It is too much to suggest that the first disabling obsession is the idea, deeply ingrained by teaching as well as by inherited assumptions, that there is such a thing as 'Reformed worship.'

What however is reformed worship ? Is it the service of Word and Sacrament ? That is simply Christian

worship. Is it then the earlier Calvinian services in Geneva with their clear residual legacy from an earlier catholicity ? Or the later severely stripped form and order of which a French Reformed churchman in the eighteenth century said in effect that it was like nothing Christendom had ever known before (and this was not said in approbation) ? Or is it 'Knox's Liturgy' with its immense paragraphs of humiliation and politically motivated intercession and invective, retaining, as it admittedly did, certain vestiges of catholic practice ? Or the Directory with its Puritan removal of almost every residue of corporate participation, which, assisted by the accidents of history, was to ensure not the reformation but the deformation of the Church as the worshipping community—except for an all too rarely administered sacrament—and that for centuries to follow ? Or is Reformed worship simply the expression of an ethos—a worship in fact shaped by a verbal and sacerdotal culture ? (And of this more later in this paper).

The conclusion is inescapable. If the term 'Reformed worship' is taken to imply the Reformation patterns in Scotland, there is not a minister who now practises or wishes to practise it ; though it is just possible to invoke the name of the reformers in support of some things which never clearly emerged in their blue-print—not because of the hostility of Knox and his successors but because so much that was good became the casualty of our turbulent history. The point to be noted and weighed is this : that the reformers certainly did not regard themselves as discovering and shaping a novel species of cult called 'Reformed worship' but as striving to recover *Christian worship* in its purity. The misfortune is that for political and social reasons they partially failed, and with their successors in the succeeding century the failure became catastrophic. What is grotesque is that the ruins of that attempt should ever have been dignified by the most inept of titles—'Reformed worship.'

Thus we stand, at this point of liturgical debate, at the cross-roads. To break through this road-block whose existence is due to our special history is quite simple. It means quite simply accepting, as von-Allmen has reminded us, that our task as ministers is not to construct Sunday by Sunday a service of supposedly Reformed worship but simply Christian worship. It is this, and this alone, that will fulfil the Reformers' aims.

This task implies, nevertheless, that the Minister should understand what Christian worship is. It must be admitted

that in the course of the liturgical revival in Scotland some ministers, lacking adequate models of liturgical theology, were all too liable to pick up mechanical sacramental theologies which other churches were already on the point of discarding—discussing for example at what point in the Holy Communion the actual *epiklesis* took place, as if it were at some liturgically appointed moment that the ritual word of the celebrant was effectual, and not, as we must always assert, that it is the sovereign act of God's free grace that sends the Spirit when He wills. It was inevitable that the Churches, Roman and Reformed alike, with so confusing a journey to make in this line of country, should wander somewhat in the process of finding the right road. Nevertheless today liturgical scholarship has provided more than adequate help towards the understanding and practice of Christian worship—an understanding that does not infringe doctrinally the freedom of the Divine initiative. For if it was the task of the reformers to restore Christ to His rightful place in doctrine and government, it is the task of the Church today to restore Him to His central place in worship. A Church which understands livingly the prophetic, priestly and kingly offices of Christ in terms of worship is a church wide open to the experience of renewal when God chooses to give it.

II.

This brings us to a second preconception which obstructs liturgical thinking in the Reformed Churches. It is surely to some extent because of the cultic aridness of Reformed worship that, in an attempt to mitigate it, we readily succumb to what is now a built-in temptation, the temptation to please. In other words, ministers themselves do not always think clearly about the thing they meet with their people to do, because they are too busy thinking about something else, how to hold the regular worshipper, to obtemper the occasional attender, and possibly to woo the unattached vagrant, all at the same time.

And that is not our business. That way we shall certainly do the wrong things in ordering the service. When an experienced Anglican missionary in India insisted: 'I will not alter the liturgy to suit the unconverted!', one can only admiringly agree 'How bold! and how right!'. For if we alter the liturgy to suit the unconverted, we have sacrificed the very thing it is our business to preserve for the prospective convert for the maintenance of his Christian life.

It is always fatal to confuse the norms which govern arrangements for an evangelistic meeting and those which govern the ordering of the mystery. Do the one thing or do the other but do not confound them ! To confound these so very different objectives is to rub out the sheer difference between the Church and the world and to do so at the very point—Christian worship—where the difference ought to stand out in sharpest relief, a difference in values, attitudes, ultimate beliefs and even ways of speaking.

Incidentally, it is at this point, the difference between Church and world, that the discussion might appropriately take place regarding the vocabulary to be used in the services of the Church.

There is a language fitting to be addressed to God and a language natural for the use of men. As to the first perhaps only angels know it ; on earth the Church speaks in 'half words and quarter words,' nevertheless the standard is there, a lofty standard for an august office. On the other hand there must be worship in a language suitable for human beings to use ; and while that varies vastly as between different communities (and congregations), inevitably it will everywhere fall below the standard of words fitted to express the mystery of God's being and the grace of His dealing. Yet the standard still challenges the practice ; and it is at the point of tension between these two, the ideal and the possible that actual liturgies take their shape and form in language.

If we accept these upper and lower limits for the words of worship, a rather striking corollary follows. It is when the minister represents Christ in His *prophetic* function (speaking for God) that He condescends more nearly to the diction of earth. But when he represents Christ in His *priestly* function (speaking for men), he uses the most exalted tongue of adoration known to him. If there is condescension, it is from God's side. It is man who strives for the tongue of angels.

At the present time a general and somewhat uncritical emphasis is being laid upon the need for common language in common worship ; and it may well be, if that trend is allowed unlimited scope, that the Church may in the end discover that she has deprived ordinary folk of an experience of exalted worship which, in their moments of deeper awareness, they anxiously covet, and which, when they get it, profoundly satisfies them.

The absence of disciplined thinking in the current debate about language is illustrated by the constant reference to the

word ABBA, the nearest equivalent to which in English is averred to be 'Daddy'. Even if it were a reliable semantic assumption that the word ABBA as used in a Jewish family in the time of Jesus is equivalent to 'Daddy' in our highly informal family life today—an assumption surely somewhat dubious—the researches of Professor Joachim Jeremias seem to demonstrate that as Jesus used the word ABBA, it carried, and was then understood to carry, a Messianic significance. When Messiah came, this title ABBA would be the term he would use in his address to God.

True, if Jeremias is right, then the effect of Christian initiation is to admit, through Christ, to that unprecedented and intimate relationship with the Father which Christ, as the Son, enjoyed, of which the Gospel speaks, and which did in fact bring in a new liturgical language developed out of the old. Yet that remained a language inevitably sacral and therefore somewhat stylised; it was never a simple vernacular since it had to be a tongue able, so far as is humanly possible, to do justice to the mystery.

Let us carefully note: these considerations do not necessarily forbid us to say YOU to God instead of THOU; what they require is that if we say YOU, it must be in such a context and manner as we will carry the gravamen of the Church's highest awareness of the holy and loving God. And this implies that the question about the language of worship cannot be properly answered before the profounder question is raised—regarding worship itself. It is at this point we discover a third impediment to liturgical thinking and practice, due, among other causes, to the social pressures of our age.

III.

'The tendency of all worship,' wrote Evelyn Underhill, 'to decline from adoration to demand, and from the supernatural to the ethical, shows how strong a pull is needed to neutralise the anthropocentric trend of the human mind; its intense preoccupation with the world of succession, and its own here-and-now desires and needs. And only so far as it is released from this petty subjectivism, can it hope to grow up into any knowledge of the massive realities of that spiritual universe in which we live and move.' (WORSHIP, p. 17).

Nor is this indifferentism, but rather the assertion that a genuine Christian ethic derives from other and profounder premises than the humanist acknowledges. For while the

Christian will be careful to remember, with Dag Hammarskold, that "the way of holiness necessarily passes through the world of action"; while he insists on asserting the ethical in its sharpest application of social involvement, (being careful not to forget the people in the process of supporting the movement!); while he does and must assert the significance of Jesus as 'the Man for others'; yet, on the other hand, he asserts none of this, none of it at all, except something else is placed first, the Church's offering—and being clearly understood to offer—the *worship* of the whole Creation, the response of the creature of the Creator, of the redeemed Creation to the Redeemer, of the Creation that still 'groans and travails' to the Christ of the eschatological hope. For without this, the beating heart of the Church must grow cold, the horizon even of her ethical vision fatally restricted, and the quality of her emotion inevitably coarsened.

Here then we discover another impediment in our thinking about worship. For it is not, I think, unfair to comment that much of the vernacular prayer of our time is largely (though with genuine sincerity) social—ethical in temper, and if this be not informed, as to its structures and forms, by a profound awareness of Christian doctrine—with a clear eschatological horizon—it will be found in the final analysis to fall little short of ethical or psychological humanism.

And this is fatal. For the crisis of this historic moment is no longer, if it ever was, primarily ethical (whatever it may be secondarily). It is doubt—ultimate doubt—that is 'our modern crown of thorns'. It is a crisis of faith that confronts us, and of the ultimate understanding of life that faith alone makes possible.

It is already bearing bitter fruit. And this was bound to happen since, lacking an ultimate reference, man's historic struggle cannot but turn negative and bitter. For, without God and the fulfilment of obedience in worship, human frustration sinks readily to the level of malice, however that malice may be disguised as altruism. I suspect that we are already witnessing this in some contemporary crusades and marches, a smouldering anger against society which really masks an unacknowledged failure of inner personal fulfilment—and that is at root a failure of faith.

Therefore, even as we bear the burden of intercession, the paradox that rebukes us is this: that the greater the world's need of moral renewal, the more the Church must

turn her face to God in adoration. Whatever her second task, this is her first. And this, the note of awe and wonder and mystery, is the muted note in much of the Church's worship now.

The world that wears that 'crown of thorns' will not be converted by apologetics, since to that world, so long secularly conditioned, apologetics usually means bringing to religious facts an attitude that is appropriate only to scientific facts. But it may become aware of the Unseen by another way—a way that is very ancient, yet modern too—by bringing to the religious facts the attitude appropriate to them, namely the attitude of worship in both liturgy and life.

There then is the task of liturgy: not to please people, but to do what we are there to do, in a sequence of liturgical actions following in meaningful *nexus* one from the other—to worship God before ever we can become capable of serving man, or rather never to attempt the one without the other. There is of course also a very human side to all this, to deny which is to impoverish the expression of worship itself. And it may be that here we come upon yet another disabling preconception in our thinking about worship, namely, that we have too long lost touch with the Biblical conception of man, man in the wholeness of his being—man who is not a spirit inhabiting a body, but an embodied spirit. Let us consider this afresh now.

IV.

We insist on the dogma of God's embodiment of Himself in the Man Jesus. And we insist on the embodiment of man's response in ethical obedience. Yet, and this is strange, we deny it to our people in worship, this embodiment of man's response to God. We have therefore to take seriously the charge, not unjustly made, that in our worship we of the Reformed Church are too much the children of a largely verbal culture. Indeed the ecclesiological pattern of most of our churches until quite recently not only clearly indicates this, but also militates against liturgical revision. It is not unfair to go yet further.—the cult is in practice largely sacerdotal.

Superficially it is easy to understand how this arose. Confronted by the crying errors of the church in the sixteenth century, the urgent didactic priority of that age, together with the people's own hunger for the word of God, brought into being a starkly verbal and dialectic culture, in terms of which the new worship forms came into being, alarmingly

divorced from the previous classical archetypes. In the world at large that spartan culture has now long passed away, leaving the worship forms it created isolated and at last revealed in their cultic poverty.

This isolation becomes daily more obvious. The fresh impetus to the Romantic Movement in our time, modified by the rationalism of scientific attitudes, has finally forced into being a whole apparatus of psychological understanding. This new psychology is meantime fatally vulnerable, since it does not yet understand that the ultimate reference of any stabilising psychology is in some sense eschatological. Nevertheless, as every young adult instinctively and properly recognises, it is a partially valid interpretation of the emotional richness of human nature. It has certainly modified our artistic and emotional cultures quite as radically as technical science has recreated our practical life. The whole apparatus of communication and response—as a moment's reflection will show—has changed.

All this means that, as I have said, our inherited liturgical forms are tied to a culture that is no longer, *culturally* speaking, authoritative even for most Christians.

It is at this point that, not indeed as to basic liturgical structures but certainly as to the Church's kinetic, vocal, and even plastic expression in worship, the Church stands now, quite crucially, at the parting of the ways. The decision is essentially a Christian one, rooted in the nature of man, and it will not wait indefinitely ; if the Church does not make it, others are already doing so in other fields. At low-tide, the watcher will suspend judgment on Canute, since at low-tide there is no challenge ; but when the Spring tides flow, Canute is found to be, first a fool, and then an anachronism. The Church must heed well this warning.

I need not here take time to concede the sheer necessity of *words* in worship, belonging as I do to a Church that acknowledges the significance of *explicit* faith. On the other hand, it should no longer be necessary to point out that there are moments when too sharp a clarity of definition—especially if it savours of scholasticism—may actually do a disservice to the worshipper. For there is also—and it is not merely supernumerary — a participation through physical action of tongue or body that is itself, if understood, an act of worship.

But how ? As to the people's participation in a service, I am prepared, as a very occasional worshipper in the pew, to make a confession—that I personally feel not wholly at

ease at a service in which the minister and people simply read the whole thing through off the pages of a book. Nor, let this oecumenically minded generation be prepared to remember, is there primitive warrant for such worship. There is, however, sufficient warrant in early tradition for a worship in which the voice of the minister and the voice of the people rose in a dialogue of bidding and response, indeed in an interplay of words and *actions*—dialogue, for instance, round the idea of the *Maranatha*, action in the Little and Great Entries, the Kiss of Peace, the People's Offertory before the Communion, the kneeling or standing as significant expressions.

There was then no book in the people's hands, nor did they require one. Augustine's precept 'Let your memory be your codex' allowed for a worship of active participation and yet of great freedom. And these are precisely the methodological aspects of corporate worship which we of the Reformed Churches ought to value and on every reformed principle—that is to say, on every Christian principle—to recover as richly as we can.

It will not be done in a hurry. It will not be done at all without teaching. But given the teaching, and given the service in which the note of adoration is instinct throughout, the long-frustrated urge of people to express themselves in worship will, even without ministerial urging (and all the better if without it), find expression like deep springwater forcing itself to the surface.

If I may be permitted a personal reminiscence, my present congregation, when I first went to them, were already accustomed to stand after an opening hymn or psalm for a Call to Prayer. Some years later—certainly there had been some teaching about worship and a service in which the note of adoration kept the modern tendency to merely humanistic ethics solidly in its place—one Sunday I found the congregation at Communion, as if with one mind, remaining standing for the Words of Institution and the biddings that follow; and they have done so ever since. I had never once asked or suggested it. Shortly after I found that they were, most of them, either standing or at least hesitating to sit, at the close of the hymn which normally follows the sermon, as if waiting for a call to the great prayer of response to the Word. Again, not many months ago, they began the practice of remaining standing for the words: 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost' before the sermon, again without any suggestion from me. It is as

if they have become aware in a new way that worship is not the critical reception of concepts presented to them in the words of prayers and sermon, but something we do, at the bidding of the Word of God. And this action of standing, in our generally silent assemblies was one way of doing it. For there is no question that there is a universe of difference between the supine listener in Church, thinking afterwards : ' That was a beautiful prayer the Minister offered this morning ! ' and the attitude of the worshipper joining with the Minister and with his fellow-Christians in hallowed words and acts of the whole worshipping world.

' Active and watchful stand we all before Thee . . . '

All the constituent elements of expression and response are available to us—speaking, singing, silence, standing, sitting, kneeling, the handing of bread and wine, on occasion the moving significance of procession (to the crib, for instance), or the Great Entry ; as well as music of every shade and mood, from confession to the heights of adoring joy, and every possible technique from chant to something near to acclamation. And little or none of it is generally used.

But when it is used, it must be always with one purpose in view : never to impress the congregation or the visitor from the outside world of unfaith, since, important as such impressions are, what they convey will be ' added to us ' only when we forget them altogether and *do* what is intended by the august summons LET US WORSHIP GOD, and by our Lord's own command THIS DO IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME. For the *anamnesis* or remembrance there referred to is neither a mere mental recollection of Gospel events, nor merely a liturgical form at a critical point in the eucharistic prayer, but rather a reference to and invocation of the real Presence of Christ in the midst of His Church, and to something that is *done* between God and His Church—in the midst of the Creation and of history—through the Mediator and Heavenly High Priest Jesus Christ :

TO WHOM, WITH THE FATHER AND WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD BE ALL GLORY AND PRAISE TO THE AGES OF AGES. AMEN.

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