

PRAYER AND NURTURE

Some Problems in Leading Young People in Prayer

Everyone is affected by the acceleration of change in society; perhaps none more so than the parish minister. To attempt even to summarize the various ways in which his role has been, is or will be subject to change is far beyond the scope of this article. Our discussion will be limited to one specific topic: the problem of leading young people today in meaningful prayer.¹

One imagines the plaintive retort already forming itself in some minds: surely in prayer, as in worship, we have to do with something more permanent, less subject to change than the winds of popular fashion; surely here we form a bulwark against the erosion of eternal values. Yet whatever truth there may be in such reactions, society itself forces the need for rethinking upon the minister, for one of the more astonishing situations with which the secularization of society confronts him is the duty of conducting worship in a secularized context.

Let us explain. Many ministers are invited to act as school chaplains and in that capacity to conduct school services or assemblies. They may conclude, with some rationality, that their presence helps to define the situation as one to which an act of Christian worship is appropriate. Yet, in the industrial areas in particular, the young people and the adults in the assembly represent a variety of backgrounds and shades of belief and unbelief, and thereby constitute a different kind of group from any that is found within the fellowship of the Church.² The recognition of this fact must influence the manner in which the chaplain approaches his work. Part of his task is to show such people how meaningful worship can be; to lead them, as it were, to a new understanding of themselves in relation to eternal things. He is unlikely to be able to do this by a mere reduction or truncation of a Church order of service. He must seek new ways, so that a 'disclosure situation' may become possible.³

Even within the Church the effects of the modern world are apparent, not least in the attitudes and questionings of young people. Most often they want to find meaning and relevance in Church life and practice, yet there is a distinct element of impatience and even rejection of traditional ways that were fashioned in a very different age from their own.

Among young people within and outside the Church, the demand for a change of approach is strong and at times well articulated.

'Well, you go in and get the old hymn-books and you wait and the headmaster goes on about something and you don't understand it, with all them thees and thous and go verily . . .'

'Many just sing the hymns and say the prayers like someone in a trance – they mean nothing. It's always hymn, prayer, reading and another prayer – let's have a bit more variety now and again.'

'Instead of the old, incomprehensible prayers we want more newer prayers concerning subjects of our time, in naturally phrased language which will make people think.'⁴

For such young people traditional worship, so far from being a disclosure situation, is largely incomprehensible, unconnected with life, monotonous and repetitive.

Destructive criticism is irksome, even when it makes a worthwhile protest. More important is the identification of the kind of changes which may assist the nurture of our young people today: changes not only in the structure of worship and prayer but also in the attitude of the leader. The need for brevity in this article forces us to treat these important matters somewhat summarily.

(i) A basic flaw in approach is to regard prayers with younger people as essentially simplified versions of adult prayers. Prayers, it will be granted, arise from the situation of those who offer them, or they are at least related to it. But the world of the adolescent is by no means a simplified or diluted version of that of their elders: it has its own structures, its own *rationale*. Indeed, the 'generation gap' arises because the concerns, ideals, anxieties and rejections of the younger generation are often qualitatively different from (but not necessarily inferior to) those of older age-groups. If corporate prayer is to be meaningful, the leader must attempt a genuine engagement with this world – which is likely to happen only if he gets to know some of the young people really well, so that a genuine mutual openness results. Only then will he be in a position to begin the attempt to lead them in prayer.⁵

(ii) The adoption of a clearly articulated theme related to issues in the life of the young people, or the life of their community (be it school or Church), will help to establish the unity and relevance of the act of worship, provided that the theme is adequately reflected in all the constituents of the worship, such as hymns, readings, prayers and address (if there is one).⁶

(iii) The language in which the prayer is expressed must not only be intelligible to the young people but must also sound natural to them. This does not indicate the use of juvenile jargon – a painfully contrived 'with-it-ness' is never appreciated. It means rather that all forms of jargon – ecclesiastical, pietistic or archaizing – are equally unacceptable. Provided the leader has got to know the young people

well and does not allow liturgical tradition to inhibit him, the prayer should find its appropriate form and mode of expression without too much difficulty.⁷

The question of language involves the vexed problem of the form of the second person singular in prayer.⁸ The traditional 'Thou' form has its defenders. Does it not express the 'otherness' of God? Has it not become a recognized, specialized usage, like 'tu' in French? Is there not value in retaining certain archaisms for specific purposes, as Shakespeare certainly did? And is the 'Thou' form not hallowed by liturgical tradition? Yet such arguments are perhaps to be overruled on two counts. First, they get very little support from the New Testament where Jesus apparently encouraged the use of familiar and intimate language in prayer.⁹ In the second place, the logic of our earlier arguments points inexorably to the use of the familiar, everyday term.

If the need for this change is accepted, it is wholly inadequate merely to substitute the 'You' form for the 'Thou' form but otherwise continue as before. This is to trivialize – to ignore the necessity for a radical recasting of the prayers in modern idiom.¹⁰ It is also to be insensitive to the way language works, for twentieth-century English differs from sixteenth century in many more ways than the usage of the second person singular.

Care must also be taken in the use of the language of religious symbolism, including that frequently used in address to God. Traditional prayers have tended to abound in such language, which often appears so divorced from the modern situation as to be little more than pious verbiage. The modern idiom would seem to indicate the need for austerity in this respect.

(iv) It is important that young people should be introduced to the structures of prayer, and should see them as related to their own experience. Thanksgiving, intercession and supplication are the easiest to relate to everyday life, and probably for this reason are more readily intelligible to young people. Even so, an imaginative link with their world will lend immediacy to the prayer.¹¹ Difficulties are often expressed about confession, which should be handled with restraint and not used to induce morbid introspection or exaggerate a sense of guilt.¹² Other types of prayer should probably be restricted to explicitly Church groups.¹³ Not only should such structures be explained to pupils, but they should also be discernible in the actual prayers, although perhaps only two of them will be used in any one prayer.

(v) The active and positive participation of the pupils is to be encouraged and stimulated in every part of the service. One way of achieving this is to make use of responses, or the technique of choral speaking in relation to certain lessons, hymns or prayers, or simply

by having pupils read the lesson (after careful preparation and practice). More thorough-going participation may be secured with the cooperation of the staff, through role-playing and dramatic work, either 'live' or on tape.¹⁴ Every encouragement should be given to the pupils to engage actively in personal, silent prayer – not so much through the use of periods of silence (which many find difficult to cope with) as through the thoughtful use of the bidding prayer. This moves prayer in the direction of meditation – a valid religious exercise, the recovery of which would be salutary today.

(vi) Our emphasis on innovation does not imply the neglect of the great classics of Christian faith and devotion. Many of the prayers of the great figures of the past have a permanent value and more, not less, use of them is desirable. They are often fit subjects for choral speaking. To get the full benefit of them, however, linguistic adjustments may once again be necessary.¹⁵

(vii) Much of the impact will be dissipated if the service is too long and if the radical rethinking is not applied to all aspects of worship. Hymns require to be carefully selected to avoid the sentimental and artificial. Modern tunes can be used, occasionally accompanied by the guitar if possible.¹⁶ The use of the record player can provide a variety of music for different purposes. Lessons should almost always be selected from a modern version. The A.V. should be used only where a particular passage is rendered with peculiar beauty or pungency in that translation. Carefully selected readings from other literature and from poetry have also a place if they throw light on the theme. The talk or address, if used, must meet the requirements of brevity, thematic relevance and contemporaneity.

(viii) If worship is to follow a developmental pattern, it is desirable to reduce the range of age groups present if that is at all possible. Particular groups, such as the fifth or sixth years, may require separate treatment. It is also well to reflect that a developmental procedure always looks ahead to the next stage. If ministers pursue a vigorous, experimental approach to worship with the young, the logical conclusion is that Church worship itself will require to be geared more convincingly to late twentieth-century man and his needs.¹⁷

Finally, a review of selected publications from the last ten years or so may illustrate the evolution of thought and practice in this field.

Worship with Elevens to Fourteens, E. A. H. Tressider, R.E.P., 1961

Coming from the period prior to the major impact of Loukes and Goldman on the educational scene, this book already gives the impression of being somewhat stereotyped and dated. Use is made of a 'worship centre' in which the focal point is a picture, and that may be an El Greco or an Elsie Anna Wood! Another feature is the use of

questions and answers from the Senior Catechism of the Methodist Church. The prayers are very traditional ('Thou' form), frequently drawn from the Christian classics or from hymns. The world of the young people is seldom effectively reached.

Boys and Girls at Worship, R. & E. Doidge, S.C.M., 1965

Teenagers at Worship, R. & E. Doidge, Denholm House, 1965

The first book consists of seventy services 'for the Primary or Secondary School Assembly', according to the dust-jacket. This claim is much too sweeping. The material just comes within the lower reaches of the age-group with which we are concerned here. The themes reflect doctrinal concerns, as well as being about 'Myself', 'Other People', 'Everyday Life', 'The World Out of Doors', 'Qualities of Life' and 'The Seasons'. The structure of each act of worship is simple but rather rigid. The prayers are short but the language is traditional ('Thou' form) and sometimes lapses needlessly into biblical metaphor or abstraction. At other times, it captures the freshness of the world of the older child.

The second book is of much the same variety. It begins with the statement that 'teen-agers are challenging folk with real needs' (p. 7), but its general position is fairly traditional and the authors' commendation of the picture-and-flowers technique as a means of enriching the atmosphere of worship does not inspire confidence that they are fully aware of the peculiar ethos of teenage society.

Prayers for Every Day - A Book for Schools, V. Bell (ed.), O.U.P., 1965

This book springs from the recognition that 'the archaic language and syntax of the more traditional kinds of prayer constitute a barrier which is insurmountable by the mind of the twentieth-century child' (p. vii). The writer pays close attention to the vocabulary and rhythm of modern speech ('You' form), while attempting to avoid any suggestion of banality or bathos. The result is perhaps more convincing in its faithfulness to the traditional patterns and content of prayer than in its relatedness to the situation of the pupils.

Give us this Day, Vol. I, *A Pattern of Praise*, C. Buckmaster, Univ. of London, 1964

Give us this Day, Vol. II, *Times and Seasons*, *ibid.*, 1967

With these publications we clearly enter the contemporary world. Their focus is a pattern of five services for the days of the school week, with additional prayers and a wide variety of readings in which the biographical predominates. The language of the prayers is precise, well phrased and easily understandable. The 'You' form is normally used, but when traditional prayers occur, as in the anthology of 'additional prayers', the 'Thou' form is retained. A notable contri-

bution is the prayer of confession (Vol. II, p. 11), which avoids the kind of damaging introspection to which objection is often rightly taken and turns the thoughts in a positive direction. Engagement with the world of young people today is largely effected through the appropriateness of the language and content of the prayers and readings, and by the encouragement given to the young people to participate vitally in the services.

Sixth Form Worship, A. R. Bielby, S.C.M., 1968

Directed to the special problem of the seniors, this book is based on a realistic appraisal of the situation and characterized by an openness which allows readings from Revelation and from Fred Hoyle to stand side by side. The themes are naturally more sophisticated: models and myths, heredity and environment, creation, humanism and Handel's *Messiah* are only a few of those that give coherence to sixty acts of worship. The elements of the worship are simple; singing is omitted, for 'young men do not sing'! (p. 33). The prayers, which usually come at the end, are short and clearly related to the theme. The language ('Thou' form) is traditional but not elaborate, and the worst archaisms are avoided. The great prayers of Christendom are incorporated. A most useful, thought-provoking book for all concerned with this vital age-group.

Explorations in Worship, S. M. Hobden, Lutterworth, 1970

These suggestions for thirty-five senior school services make use of themes drawn from the world of the pupil – the world of families, school and friends, of work and pleasure; also from the wider world of the lonely, the deprived, the despised and the hungry; and from times, seasons and the Christian year. The prayers, in a modern idiom that does not lack dignity ('You' form is used), are short, specific and well integrated with the themes. There is a wide variety of songs, hymns, readings and poetry, and every attempt is made to secure maximum participation and engagement. Good use is also made of records, such as 'I have a dream' by Martin Luther King. Altogether, a most stimulating piece of work.

School Assemblies for the 8-13s, D. J. Prickett, Denholm House, 1971

This thematic treatment of worship in Primary and Middle Schools embodies much of the modern trend. The themes, broken down into topics and sections, are drawn directly from the concrete world of middle childhood. The elements of the worship are richly varied, and are intended for use in a flexible way. The prayers (predominantly in 'You' form) employ everyday language in a relaxed style appropriate for this age-group at the lower end of the spectrum discussed in this article.

Looking for Meaning – a Book of School Assemblies, B. S. Holt, S.C.M., 1971

The significance of this book lies in the thoroughness with which it canvasses the same issues as have occupied our attention in this article, and the imaginative approach it makes to the problem of school assembly today. It is interesting to observe that the place given to prayer is relatively small, and sometimes it is omitted. The weight of meaning is carried by prepared dialogue, or by narrative punctuated by dialogue. The subjects dealt with range from 'the Bible' to 'the Uses and Abuses of Science', and from 'School Religion' to 'On Being Human'. The prayers, which may be either classical or specially devised, share the common features of brevity and thematic relevance.

Assembly Workshop, R. Dingwall (ed.), Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972

This extensive and rich compendium of worship material is fully in keeping with modern trends. Apart from Bible readings, sections include biography, drama, poetry, hymns and music, as well as 'life issues' and support sections on 'facts and figures', readings, religions and 'special days'. Another feature is the suggestions made for orders of service, the longest of which is 'not more than 15 minutes', and one of which is designed for 'an audience including people of several religions – or none'. The section on prayers includes general prayers, one of which is a Hindu prayer from the Rig Veda and another from the Eighteen Benedictions, although most are of Christian origin. Meditational prayers are found in several sections as well as in the prayer section. Another group comprises prayers associated with a prominent name (from St. Francis to Frank Bormann), and there are prayers for special occasions and for concluding the assembly. Some of the prayers were written by pupils and staff. They are short and use simple, appropriate language, completely free from jarring archaisms or modernisms and closely related to the concerns of young people today.

NOTES

- 1 'Young people' in this article refers to those between the ages of 11 and 18 years.
- 2 The fragmentation of society has been felt more keenly in certain areas of England, where the immigrant community has introduced a multi-religious element to the school. This has necessarily entailed modifications to school worship (compulsory in England under the 1944 Act). See the chapter on 'The School as a Multi-belief Community' in C. M. Jones, *Worship in the Secondary School*, R.E.P., 1969, pp. 91-103.
- 3 Cf. F. A. Cockin, 'Worship', in *Learning for Living*, March 1968, pp. 7-11. There is also a useful series of articles in the September 1964 issue of the same journal.

- 4 Comments of fourteen-year-old pupils, cited by H. Loukes, *New Ground in Christian Education*, S.C.M., 1965, pp. 126 ff. The whole chapter on 'Compulsory Worship' (English situation again) is well worth reading.
- 5 Cf. R. Goldman, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*, R. & K.P., 1964, p. 193: 'It is possible that levels of worship designed to meet the needs of children and adolescents at their level of language, experience and conceptual capacity could exercise a profoundly educational influence upon the religious development of the pupils. . . . A reluctance to impose adult worship and a willingness to meet the needs of a particular age group would seem to be desirable.'
- 6 Cf. Loukes, op. cit., p. 136 f.; also *Teenage Religion*, S.C.M., 1961, esp. pp. 129-133. The themes might also be related to classroom work (involving co-operation of chaplain and teachers); cf. R. Goldman, *Readiness for Religion*, R. & K.P., 1965, p. 190.
- 7 In general, the language will be direct, concise and unpretentious, the sentences short and fairly simple in structure.
- 8 C. M. Jones (op. cit., p. 81) argues for the use of modern language *and* for the retention of the archaic forms, although not in the same prayer and preferably not in the same session of worship. I am inclined to think that archaic forms may justifiably be retained only in relation to certain classic prayers of great beauty.
- 9 Particularly 'Abba', the language of childish address: 'Daddy'. Cf. *Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. Kittel, E.T., 1963, I, p. 6.
- 10 For example, I have never been convinced of the world-shattering significance of the mere alteration of 'which' to 'who' in the first line of the Lord's Prayer. On the other hand, no modern rendering of the Lord's Prayer that I have seen is convincing. The traditional form should perhaps still be used, but it needs careful exposition.
- 11 For example, a group of pupils might read out the headlines or make reference to important topics in the day's newspapers as an introduction to the prayers of intercession or thanksgiving. This has often been done to good effect in worship in the chapel at Carberry Tower.
- 12 This is well illustrated by the Yorkshire Survey described by C. M. Jones, op. cit., pp. 19-41, esp. p. 27; cf. p. 85.
- 13 E.g., adoration, thanksgiving for the saints.
- 14 Cf. P. A. White, *Dramatic Worship*, R.E.P., 1967; *Dramatic Assemblies*, R.E.P., 1971.
- 15 See the chapter 'Worship with Juniors', written by Dr. A. W. Sawyer, in *Learning in the Church*, ed. J. I. H. McDonald, St. Andrew Press, 1970, pp. 17-20.
- 16 The songs of Sydney Carter come to mind together with some of the Gelineau psalms. Modern carols are also an asset. Some Negro spirituals have acquired a new significance in the modern situation.
- 17 There is a general move towards eliminating the worst of the archaisms in traditional prayer language while still showing a fair degree of conservatism; cf. J. W. G. Masterton, *Prayers for Use in the Church*, St. Andrew Press, 1971. Such improvements are welcome. While the wishes of those in the Church loyal to traditional ways must be respected, I question whether we are sufficiently adventurous in liturgics and find alarming the common notion that more thorough-going modernization would amount to mere contemporary gimmickry.

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