

THE LANGUAGE OF WORSHIP

At the outset I must make it clear that my only qualification to speak on this subject is your invitation to do so.¹ I approach this subject simply as one who has had the responsibility of conducting public worship but whose participation nowadays is as often from the pew as from the pulpit or prayer-desk.

My starting-point is the distinction I used to draw between public worship and private prayer when speaking to a class of intending First Communicants. It went something like this: when a prince addresses his royal father in public he will say 'Your majesty' or at the very least 'Sir', but in private he will call him 'Daddy' or 'Dad' or even 'Pop'. I used to emphasize that in our private prayers we could and should be 'at home' with our heavenly Father who loves us and cares for us. But in our public worship we must remember that our heavenly Father is the King of kings and Lord of lords and accordingly we must treat Him with proper respect and offer worship couched in beautiful though formal language. How far this was meaningful, let alone helpful, to my hearers I do not know² but I am sure that this distinction could be criticized at various levels.

First of all, I am quite sure that the language of public worship *does* affect the language of private prayer, where it is offered at all. Much private prayer may not be verbalized or articulated, but I am certain that I am not alone in my tendency to address God in private in much the same way as I would address Him in public. This means that I am still rather formal and distant with God. I could not easily address God as 'Daddy' though perhaps a younger generation could – with a slightly different connotation!

This tendency towards formal private prayer has been accentuated by most 'helps' to private prayer. John Baillie's superb *Diary of Private Prayer*,³ which has helped me greatly, is fairly formal in language. H. J. Wotherspoon's *Kyrie Eleison*,⁴ which I use constantly, is even more formal. It is comparatively recently that more informal 'prayer helps' have appeared and some may feel that the tendency is now to go to the opposite extreme and that what is now offered is not really prayer at all but a kind of explosive meditation – if that is not a contradiction in terms.

The poor quality of the devotional life of the Church which is so often deplored is due, I suspect, to our being unable to give our people and ourselves suitable words and concepts in which to pray. Scaled-down public worship is not adequate for it cannot readily become the vehicle of our private prayers. The result is that many

Church members hardly pray at all. In this situation we need a great deal of help not so much from the mystics and the masters of the craft as from the journeymen practitioners a little more advanced than we are.

Secondly, it may be questioned whether the royal mode of address is entirely appropriate even in public worship. Daniel B. Stevick has pointed out⁵ that our worship polarizes round two conceptions: the Kingship of God and the relation of a shepherd with his sheep.

I used to find a slight awkwardness in explaining my distinction between public and private worship in the fact that we had a queen and not a king at the time. Stevick is a citizen of the American republic which at least in theory deplores the whole concept of monarchy. The American Book of Common Prayer has to substitute 'O Lord, save the State' for 'O Lord, save the Queen' in Matins and Evensong. Monarchy is unknown to many members of the Church Catholic and where it is known it has less than pleasant associations with the former colonial regime. But how many hymns as well as prayers depend on this concept of the Kingship of God and look for the coming of His Kingdom.

The same kind of criticism can be made of the concept of the shepherd and the sheep. Many children and even adults living in highly urbanized areas may never have seen a live sheep and a dead one only as mutton chops. What can the imagery of the sheep and the shepherd mean to them? Little or nothing, one would think. But the obstinate fact remains that the favourite item of praise at a working-class wedding or cremation service is the 23rd Psalm. Why? Does it somehow, somewhere, strike a chord? Or is it only a vague idea that this is the one you have on these occasions?

All this is a reminder that when we discuss the language of worship it is far more than a question whether we should use 'you' and 'your' or 'thou' and 'thine' in public prayer. What is really under consideration is a whole range of underlying presuppositions, not least of which is an assumption that the average worshipper is familiar with the subject matter and imagery of the Old and New Testaments. As a pew-dweller I have often heard a prayer transposed into 'you' and 'your' retaining basic scriptural imagery and archaisms like 'unto' and 'forasmuch as'. Stevick suggests that we must do some translating of images. Those which were meaningful for a former generation must be replaced by new images which are meaningful for today.

This of course is easier said than done. The pitfalls that can await us in the attempt have been illustrated by Professor Cyril Richardson who used to quote⁶ the translation of 'O Thou Strong Tower of Refuge' as 'O You impenetrable dug-out' which presumably would

be the atomic-age equivalent. Even the order of words presents difficulties. 'God Almighty' has unsatisfactory associations as a critic of the use of the phrase in a modern liturgy has pointed out.⁷ Doubtless there will be many more failures in the search for images which are appropriate as well as meaningful.

A third weakness in the distinction I used to draw between private and public worship is an unexpressed assumption that we are able to give due honour in beautiful and formal language to the King of the Universe. Perhaps we should sing more often with Paul Gerhardt:

'What language shall I borrow
To praise thee, Heavenly Friend?'

However beautifully worded our prayers and our hymns may be, we cannot really give God his rightful worth and true place. At most we can only attempt to do so.

But perhaps there is the further danger of idolatry of the worship itself. Beauty of language in public worship can become an end itself instead of doing honour to and acknowledging the worth of the King of Kings. The worshipper's attention is diverted to the language and he may be so occupied in appreciating and savouring it that he almost forgets to whom the words are being directed. I have to confess that this has been my own experience at a Communion service at which a very beautiful but unfamiliar liturgy was being used and also on another occasion when the minister was exhibiting considerable verbal skill and originality in his prayers.

I have begun to wonder whether the bleakness and barrenness of Scottish Church building of a former day has a parallel in worship. A better appreciation of 17th and 18th architecture has shown us that Scottish Churches were not as barren as has been alleged but there is no doubt that they were plain and relatively unadorned. At least part of the reason for this was a concern that no man-made beauty should obscure the truer beauty of God. Many Puritans saw the soaring cathedral not as a pointer to God but rather as something which came between God and his people. It may be that we should do well to discard the mellifluous Ciceronian periods of a former day and use plain language and simple syntax in our prayers.

Like the dimly-lit cathedral the use of beautiful and formal language may have the effect of creating a sense of mystery. This the Orthodox Churches would not and do not hesitate to do and the screen which veils the ritual has its counter-part in the ancient and beautiful language which must veil the meaning. On the other hand the Western Churches, with the notable recent inclusion of the Roman Catholic Church, have sought to have the worship of the sanctuary in the vernacular. There is now the rather odd situation

that the communion whose worship was so long in an ancient and largely unknown language now has a liturgy which is much more contemporary in language than the liturgies of the Anglican Churches or even of the Reformed Churches. The Church of Scotland has in the Book of Common Order a liturgy written in an earlier form of our vernacular. For all its beauty the language is not the language of today.

I suppose that I am not alone in finding much of the language used in contemporary worship banal and unattractive, but does the average man in the pew find the worship offered in the words of the Book of Common Order or the Book of Common Prayer mysterious in a good or a bad sense? Does he find that the measured cadences speak to him of the mysteries of God or does he just find the whole act of worship obscure and meaningless – an empty form?

Dr. Herman Schmidt, in discussing the etymology of verbs of saying, asserts that 'we speak truly if we make what we are talking about unhidden'.⁸ What is talked about must be brought into the light. It would seem therefore that it is an improper use of language to use it to make things obscure. It should be used to make things plain. If we apply this to the language we use in worship, it too should be used to make things plain. It should help us to understand more clearly what God wants of us in love and service. It should help us to express more clearly how we feel about God and to say what He is worth to us.

This of course raises almost as many problems as it solves. It raises questions of the homiletic element in worship, its educational role, and of how far it can or should be a revelation of God to the worshippers and how far it is an expression of the worshippers' sense of the worth of God. If the worshippers have a very inadequate sense of God's worth or very little faith in His love and purposes for them, should the worship reflect their actual state of grace or that to which they should aspire?

Here is both the strength and the weakness of a liturgy handed down through the centuries. Such a liturgy may be criticised as obscure or meaningless or as being well beyond what I and my fellow worshippers feel or believe about God. To that extent it may be thought suitable for consignment to the scholar's study. But such a liturgy can be and often is a witness to the fullness of the Christian Faith received by our forefathers. Although we cannot attain to such fullness of faith, the use of the words they used in worship guards against the dilution of the Faith to suit ephemeral whims and unites us in fellowship with the Church Catholic in time and eternity.

It would be idle to pretend that I have done more than share my perplexities but to offer a solution would be facile. It seems to me

that this is not an age for a definitive liturgy and that it is useless to expect to create one in what remains of the present century. We shall have to continue to experiment as honestly and reverently as we can in worship. Many of the results will be far from satisfactory. The fastidious will suffer agonies. But it is clear that we cannot live merely on the worship experience of past generations. At the same time we ignore this experience at our peril. I would commend the practice of the Church where I worshipped in Edinburgh⁹ for about six years. There worship was offered by both ministers and congregation in modern contemporary language but the Kyrie Eleison, Sanctus, and Lord's Prayer were used every Sunday and the Apostles' Creed at Sacraments. New and old were held together in a firm framework and growth in worship was possible.

NOTES

1. This is the substance of a paper read to the Dunkeld Fellowship in April 1972.
2. The problem of preparing First Communicants has been exercising the Church of Scotland for some years but no official guide has yet been issued. Some guide-lines were put forward at the General Assembly of 1972.
3. John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer*, Oxford University Press, 1936.
4. H. J. Wotherspoon, *Kyrie Eleison*, Blackwood, 1899, New Edition, 1961.
5. Daniel B. Stevick, *Language in Worship*, New York, Seabury Press, 1970.
6. In class at Union Theological Seminary, New York.
7. J. H. J. Westlake, 'The Problems of Modern Vernacular Liturgy', in *Studia Liturgica*, Vol. 6, p. 149.
8. H. Schmidt, 'Language and its Function in Worship' in *Studia Liturgica*, Vol. 8, p. 9.
9. St. John's, Oxfgangs, Edinburgh, under the ministry of Revd J. F. Orr.

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