

THE CHILDREN'S ADDRESS IN THE CONTEXT OF WORSHIP

In the experience of my life-time, the children's address appears to have increased from an occasional event to become at least in many of the main Sunday services of the Church of Scotland a regular or at least frequent item. It is quite common to have the Sunday School present at the first part of the service, leaving during or after a children's hymn which follows the address. This often means that the first part of the service is framed to suit the children, which can involve certain limitations in praise, prayer and either a restriction or omission in the reading of Scripture. One can find this part of the service entirely directed to children in a manner that upsets the balance and unduly divides the conception of community worship. I cannot recall any serious study of this situation. Apart from the welcome discussion in Presbyteries — at long last — of General Assembly remits on worship, our Presbyteries are extremely remiss in the oversight of worship. This is very serious in a Church that gives so much freedom to its ministers in the ordering of worship, and so little liturgical training and oversight.

This article is an attempt to stimulate study by presenting certain aspects of the problem in its setting of worship and religious education. Our Church suffers from an appalling lack of understanding of the meaning and purpose of worship, and sermons, still one of the main instruments of teaching and influence for congregations, so far as one can judge, seldom deal with this great subject. This is surely one reason why many see little relevance in worship and stay away.

One instance of misunderstanding in both pulpit and pew is to me very revealing. I recall how a most devoted, capable, and experienced elder in his sixties, sent on a Presbytery deputation to judge the capabilities of a student on trials for licence, reported with great enthusiasm on the exceptional abilities of this young man: "He was absolutely grand. He came down from the pulpit, called all the children to come running out of the pews and gather round him, and they had grand fun." Children have been known to run round the Communion Table and up and down the pulpit steps, are shewn amusing objects, see live animals brought into church, and so on. Now while I believe that seeing and doing things can be most effective and one has no right to question the inner motives of others, the manner in

which these things are done and the apparent effect do not always give the impression of sincere worship and a genuine presentation of the Gospel to children.

Some Fundamentals

Let it be assumed — though too many services give the impression that too much is assumed — that before initiating or continuing worship specially directed to children in the main service the minister will most carefully consider all the circumstances, the most worthy form of service possible, local conditions including the type of congregation, tradition, and church building, his (read also “her” throughout) own ability or adaptability. This would appear to be a suitable subject for consultation with the Youth Committee of the Presbytery, though I have never known such obvious action undertaken. From time to time, also, such matters should be kept under constant review to suit the rapid changes in modern youth and in parishes. A married ministry with frank criticism from one’s wife and children is invaluable; but, as in the conduct of worship generally, our Church suffers from the lack of wise, constructive expert advice in this as in worship generally and Presbyteries — one must reiterate this point — have this responsibility which must be exercised if we are not to suffer continually decreasing attendances at worship.

But the root of the matter lies in the minister’s own spiritual life, his zeal, his motives, his self-criticism, his constant search for more effective ways of leading children’s worship. The basis of children’s worship lies in infant baptism, in which with the background and implications of Jesus’ baptism in Jordan, remembering that God acts first through the Holy Spirit, God makes the child a member of His Church, and minister, parents and congregation respond in obedience. This must be built upon to encourage the child’s own response, to realise the gift of the Spirit, growing in spiritual stature. My maternal grandfather called the children’s address “the sermonette”, and indeed it is, like the sermon proper, the work of the Holy Spirit re-inspiring the Word of God through the mind and voice of the preacher in terms suitable for today. Therefore, in whatever form the Scriptural Word is conveyed, the address must be based upon Scripture which, though variety is essential, ought to be quoted in some part of the exercise in no formal manner but with the enthusiasm which is its due. I have found it increasingly valuable to use as the theme of the children’s address some facet or illustration of the sermon. This is one aid to corporate worship. So the minister must determine prayerfully that he will

act simply and solely as the channel for God's Word to children. He must at all costs avoid the temptation to interpose his personality, to create anything like a mass media "happening", though he has much to learn from the mass media in the way of presentation and technique, realising the influence of television on youth.

Preparation

What follows is in no sense normative but a report of opinions and experience in city, suburban, country town and village parishes. I have found that a long-term programme of training in worship including every congregational agency has resulted in growing interest and attendances throughout these ministries, and I believe that this ought to be undertaken in every congregation. Indeed I wish that it could become common practice to set aside a period, perhaps a winter season, once every so many years, with worship and of course its expression in the whole of life as the main theme. Preparing children to worship in church and to accept the children's address in its proper context means giving acts of worship and teaching about worship precedence in the Sunday School. If this were done, one would get a decrease in the too common complaints about Sunday School lessons. The leader must inculcate a sense of the real presence of God, and the need for our response in meaningful participation — reading the Lessons, using Bible and hymn book for responsive readings and prayers, making simple responses with clear cues, acting out the stories, etc. Periodical Children's Services or Family Services in church give the minister chances to set the pattern of corporate and participatory worship with present and future consequences. Indeed I believe that both the name and the pattern of "Sunday School" should be abandoned and replaced by "Children's Service" or "Youth Worship" — not "Children's Church" because children ought to be made to feel a part of the whole worshipping community.

Similarly in the Junior Fellowship (the name I preferred to "Bible Class" though holding firmly to Scriptural basis) and the Youth Fellowship, as in the Sunday School, we prepared and always in the case of the Youth Fellowship duplicated suitably responsive forms of service. This meant, e.g. that proper acts of worship always took place at the Youth Fellowship, a practice visiting speakers used to comment on favourably. The hall being beside the manse, in my country charge I took prayers at the close of every Scout night when I was at home.

However exacting, work as chaplain to schools offers golden

opportunities — in my country charge I had three primary schools, one boarding school, and an infant school. Knowing children personally and gaining their friendship opens channels for the direct operation of the Holy Spirit and enables the minister to enter the mind of the child. Good relations with the staff and careful observation will also enrich one's knowledge of educational methods although, especial in modern conditions, I have much more faith in genuine love, care, and understanding than in modern educational theories — children respond to personal interest and affection. Amongst the most obviously effective activities I recall involved co-operating as one of a team listening to their ideas and helping to work them out. Getting a senior Sunday School class to jot down their reactions to the story of Jesus' birth, we found ourselves creating a modern Nativity mime which we were invited to perform at the Carol Service in the Usher Hall, Edinburgh. This made a powerful effect on the class. The mime became a play with original carols and was taken up by Primary VII in a local school. This meant hours of enjoyable work with them before we produced it in Church and a great welcome for the chaplain in that school — and elsewhere — thereafter.

On the same principle, I regularly attended the Youth Fellowship — as a member, working however as the back-room boy in choosing themes and getting good speakers, films, etc. and taking every chance to stress faith, worship, and Christian activity and prodding them to create and (first along with a local teacher) to run a Youth Club open to outsiders, and then a Junior Youth Club in the Manse barn converted by two or three of their number, an apprentice joiner doing the difficult jobs — opening the wall for a fireplace and chimney. All this, to me, is preparation for, and involvement in, worship, further expressed when they ran Christian Aid Week, undertook service for the aged, and took positions on the local Community Association Council, also providing leaders for various youth agencies. It was reiterated that such activity was an expression and an offering of worship and as some of them went on to teach in Sunday School and to lead the Junior Fellowship one hoped that this ideal remained. Surely we can believe that above all human categories of "success" or "failure" wherever the Holy Spirit is allowed freedom and we realise the inadequacy of our unaided efforts and remain humble dependent God's Word will not return to him void.

The meaning and importance of Holy Communion as an essential part of Christian worship, preached and explained in services and agencies, followed by a spontaneous suggestion in

the Kirk Session for more celebrations, enabled us to offer Communion to those who desired it after shortened services at the great Festivals. The Church's Audio-Visual Unit approached us and made a set of colour slides, with a taped commentary, for their purposes, using the time before and after a celebration, and I took this round the schools and agencies and always used it for my confirmation class.

Determined to improve congregational praise and teach the children worthy items including our heritage of psalms and paraphrases, we offered a fairer salary to get a good organist and then set about improving congregational praise, keeping liaison with Sunday School agencies and local schools who of course had their own special services where I had the chance to develop responsive worship and involve children there, and in church, in reading lessons etc. Children's choirs not only took part at the Christian Festivals but branched out in dramatic and concert work. A recording unit from Aberdeen University made a tape of our congregation singing a psalm for their collection. I must stress that this congregation had for some years been building up youth work and that as minister and Session we set out deliberately to work as an integrated team, supported by willing helpers and deriving great renewal through a Stewardship Campaign.

The basic principles set out in such detail above though most fully developed in the country parish (of whose 2,000 inhabitants about half were in some way connected with the parish church) had been applied in varying degrees in my city, country town and suburban parishes: each required suitable adaptations and one learned by experiment and longed for more opportunities of pooling experiences in more enthusiastic fraternals including other denominations and in more interested Presbyteries. In my first charge my "father in God" was an elderly neighbouring minister with a passion for youth whose counsel and example were invaluable: I wish that every young minister could have similar help.

Themes and Methods

I have dwelt upon background principles because everything else simply involves adaptation, long-term planning with great patience and unflagging zeal, depending upon God's sure promises beyond all human efforts and apparent results. On this basis, realising that the Church is the Body of Christ, central themes are provided by the Christian Year which enables his Body to respond to and to recognise his presence, and incidentally as already suggested ties children's address to

sermon etc. This also provides opportunities to give simple explanations of the Creed with benefit to young and old, using carefully-chosen imagery. The seasons of the natural year, particularly spring and harvest and summer flower service, involving gifts and practical activity, while of vital importance in the country, have meaning for urban areas and involve mechanical and technological subjects. Though brought up in a country manse with a large glebe, I was surprised to discover powerful undercurrents of feeling especially regarding the celebration of harvest. A zealous elder — a farmer — threatened to leave the church if harvest was celebrated before all the crops were brought in, making it more difficult for floral decorations. Hallowe'en can be noted as the eve of All Hallows and linked up with Remembrance Sunday which offers the opportunity to celebrate All Saints and recall the debt we owe to our forebears for so much good in our heritage — a much-needed lesson today. Applying the lesson thus, I never found either the presentation of Remembrance out of date or without value. Other obviously acceptable themes are offered by Mother's Day, the celebration of the dedication of the church, of a local saint and local and national occasions.

Both young and old will benefit from children's addresses that deal with each part of a worship service, each item of church furniture, and the form of the church building and arrangement. One assumes much teaching about the proper attitude to the Bible, a series on the Lord's Prayer, on the Beatitudes, etc. and on the Church. It is essential to try to deal with every subject from the child's point of view but not childishly, stimulating the child to think more deeply. I strongly agree with Janet Adam Smith's emphasis in her Introduction to *The Faber Book of Children's Verse*: "I shall not be worried if anybody criticises me for including poems which children cannot "understand" . . . the understanding will grow . . ." and she quotes a letter of William Blake: "The wisest of the Ancients consider'd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouses the faculties to act." (pp. 20, 21). This has been my own experience: as a child certain quite profound ideas and words sincerely uttered had a special aura and awakened a core of mental excitement like a tiny spark that spread into a flame.

Methods

Since this is the product of personal experience, experiment and study, an outline of possible methods of presentation must include some of my own attempts to apply principles however imperfectly realised, and in no sense with claims to authority or

success. The Divinity course in my time, apart from occasional professorial asides, included no pastoral training except a very few talks by parish ministers whom, I regret to confess, we tended to regard as having less than professorial authority. I learned much, however, as a son of the manse in a family of wide church connections, starting ministry in Sunday School work as a teenager.

Children's addresses require as much, if not more, attention to detail as the sermon. The preacher must stick firmly to one aspect of his subject, set in a pattern clearly grasped in his own mind and so capable of being directly effective. Ideally the address should be written to be spoken, and spoken with spontaneity.

As mouthpiece of the Word, the minister should normally indicate a Biblical answer to the subject. Since ignorance of the Scriptures is so widespread, I frequently use a Scripture passage, however brief, and in a modern version unless the King James Version is clear, at the beginning or in some part of the address. This may or may not be the first Lesson. I am greatly disturbed to notice that some services include only one Lesson and that some sermons do not spring from or lead into the Word.

The obvious form is to begin with a clear statement of the subject, carefully introducing as much helpful teaching as possible while attention is held, then to give a telling illustration and to conclude by setting the minds of hearers working on their own application. Let us banish vague religious generalities, unrealistic terms, exhortations limited to "follow Jesus", "give your heart to him", or "he can save you", without more specific and suitable directions. So long as it is not made an end in itself, I find that the introduction of some object, or some action, can make the most obvious impact, if kept within the bounds of teaching and worship.

Children still love stories; those that seem to go home come from personal and family experience. If you draw on the vast storehouse of available stories, you must tell them in your own way. I learnt necessary lessons through having to write and broadcast stories about modern children which conveyed the essence of parables of Jesus and other Scripture passages, asking children to try to find the origin. This taught me to weigh every word, to cut out the irrelevant, and to keep within four and a half minutes — perhaps the right length for a normal children's address.

Of course the essentials are there in the Bible already. Jesus says, "Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them." (Matt. 19: 14; Mark 10: 14); "unless you turn round and

become like children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matt. 18: 3); and let us remember his warning to those who are a 'cause of stumbling to one of these little ones who have faith in me." (Matt. 18: 6 cf. Luke 17: 2.)

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