

THE JOY OF PUBLIC WORSHIP

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by

THE REVD CHARLES ROBERTSON, MA

[Minister of the Canongate Kirk and Holyrood House]

In his book "THE SERPENT" Neil Gunn brings us into a home where the mother is dying and the minister has called. In the evening, when Tom asked his mother how she had liked the visit, she said, "Och, well enough. He seems a good-meaning man." But somehow a solemn mood had been engendered, leaving behind the dead waters of despondency which made the woman feel alone and desolate. Tom sensed the mood and tried to dispel it. He bent down before the fire and, banking up the glowing core with fresh peat, he said in an easy natural voice, "I know you often wondered why I wouldn't go to church. But the trouble with a lot of these men is that they're so full of themselves and so sure they're right. They're only happy when they make you feel like a sinner. Is it St Paul who says that joy is next to godliness? But to them joy is a sin. And if you dare question them, they grow angry and threaten you with the bad place. They're solemn because to be solemn makes them feel important.....The world knows all about it, Mother. So it's no good being upset. Men who have power are like that. Now isn't that a good fire?"
"Yes," she said, turning her face. Her eyes were shining."¹

I wonder how many more people have attended a service of public worship and come away with the idea that joy is a sin? Certainly, the popular view is that worship is both solemn and serious and should be treated with proper respect. We come to church not to be happy, but to be holy. It seems fitting to wear long faces and lack-lustre eyes during a service which seems more fit for endurance than enjoyment. Sombre and subdued is right, happy and carefree is wrong. And when at last we leave the church the only delight we feel comes from the knowledge that once again we have done our duty and we won't have to do it again for another six days! And the joy of public worship - what has happened to it?

That there should be joy is undeniable. Even in the Old Testament, where

the divine presence is so often regarded with dread, joy was a mark of worship. The Psalmist "marched in the ranks of the great to the house of God, among exultant shouts of praise, the clamour of pilgrims." (42:2) When they dedicated the wall of Jerusalem which Nehemiah had built, "a great sacrifice was celebrated that day, and they all rejoiced because God had given them great cause for rejoicing, and the rejoicing in Jerusalem was heard a long way off." (Nehemiah 12:43) In the presence of God there was "fulness of joy," (Psalm 16:11) and it was appropriate to "acclaim him with sacrifice before his tent, and sing a psalm of praise to the Lord." (Psalm 27:6)

It is in the New Testament, however, that joy in worship comes into its own. Joy is, of course, one of the great New Testament themes, and it is a joy "too great for words" (1 Peter 1:9) when it occurs in connection with the presence of Jesus Christ. Joy marked both his birth (Luke 2:10, 20) and his resurrection (Matt 28:8), and joy was his special gift to his disciples - "my joy in you and your joy complete." (John 15:11) Joy is ascribed to "the angels of God over one sinner who repents"; (Luke 15:10) and here, for the sheer joy of it, I can scarcely forbear to quote William Lorimer's translation of the story of a shepherd finding his lost sheep:

"And oh, sae blythe as he is tae finnd it ! He pits it up on shuither an birrs awa hame wi it, an there he caas his friends and neibours an says til them, 'Ye maun haud a spree wi me, my friends, I hae funnd my sheep at gaed will' I tell ye, they will be blyther in heiven owre ae sinner at repents o his sins nor owre ninetie-nine saunts at needs nae repentance."

That joy in heaven reaches its climax at the marriage of the Lamb when the vast throng of the redeemed, with the noise of rushing water and deep roars of thunder cry, "Alleluia ! Exult and shout for joy to do him homage, for the wedding-day of the Lamb has come." (Revelation 19:7)

Why is it that so little of that joy is reflected in our public worship ? Even in our own tradition, there is some evidence that it was not always so. Our forefathers taught us to sing

"Him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell",

while in

England they still sing to this day

"Him serve with fear".

And in that notable edition of The Scottish Psalter published in 1595, which contained not only a remarkable series of doxologies but also a collection of prayers, including a collect upon each of the 150 psalms, the prayer that introduces Psalm 100 begins,

"O Lord, who art our plentiful help of all happiness" - imagine

that from a staid, douce, not to say doleful Presbyterian minister ! It seems that there was at least a note of joy in our public worship which is not always present today. Perhaps it is because we are too conscious of all the suffering in the world, and feel that any form of rejoicing in our worship is out of place. But if (to use that fine phrase of Professor W C Unnik's) our worship is

"in the magnetic field of the Holy Spirit"²

ought we not to expect if not sparks to fly, at least a sparkle to shine ? There is, as Austin Farrar has suggested³, something explosive about a service of worship. He sees the presence of God as the point of the explosion, and the moment of sacramental consecration as the moment of detonation. But we keep our heads down to be on the safe side, and refuse to allow ourselves to be drawn into the action. And so we lose that sense of excitement, that thrill of joy, which we should experience whenever we are aware that God in his greatness and grace has drawn near us. James Joyce, in a marvellously happy phrase invents a word which could well be applied to Christian worship. He speaks of the

"Gracehopper always jiggling ajog, hoppy on akkant of his joyicity."⁴ Leaving aside the enchanting and illuminating word "gracehopper" as a possible substitute for the more staid "worshipper", fasten on to "joyicity" and let it roll about your tongue. I think you will agree that it catches the spirit of happiness that ought always to be present whenever we gather for worship in the name of God. But how are we to recover the joy of public worship ? How are we to restore to the people the opportunity to begin to

"glorify God and to enjoy him for ever"

as suggested by the Shorter Catechism's first question and answer ?

It will not be done by the re-introduction of ancient liturgical practices. It may be argues that they once served their generation well and may well serve ours; it may even be asserted (on more specious grounds) that they embody the right way of conducting worship. But liturgical fundamentalism is as dangerous and moribund as any other kind of fundamentalism : It will smother the worship with fastidiousness and lead in the end to fossilisation. There is "no joy" there, as the revealing colloquial phrase for describing failure puts it. The recovery of joy in worship depends, I think, upon at least two things. The first is the recovery of the balance of the liturgy, and the second is the recovery of what might be called the fun-element of the faith.

Liturgy, in its widest sense, is the vehicle whereby God makes his approach to man and man makes his approach to God. It is grounded upon the saving activity of God in Christ Jesus, and is created by the revealed and the redemptive Word of God. From the beginning, it has followed the dual pattern

of what came to be known as Word and Sacrament. As Neville Clark reminds us in his splendid study, Call to Worship", (a book upon which I have heavily and gratefully relied for this part of the lecture) the biblical witness is that "through the Exodus, God calls his people from bondage; at Sinai's mount he calls them to solemn assembly; in the commandments his Word is proclaimed to them. They make their response with united voice: 'All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do'; and the covenant, thus constituted, is ratified and made effective by the offering of sacrifice. The climax is reached in communion : 'they beheld God, and ate and drank.' So the people of God is created." (Exodus 19 - 24)⁵ Throughout the Old Testament the pattern is repeated whenever the covenant is broken and renewed. Even after the Exile, when in the great assembly presided over by Ezra there was no ratification by sacrifice and communion, the elements of the pattern were still present : Israel called to assembly for worship, the sounding of the Word of God in the new law brought by Ezra, and in place of the sacrifice and communion, a great eucharistic prayer offered by Ezra, celebrating the mighty acts of God in creation and redemption. (Nehemiah 8 - 10) The destruction of the temple meant that the perspective had changed, but the pattern still remained the same. And when the temple was eventually rebuilt, the pattern continued, with the significant addition of the eschatological hope that "the future would surely hold a new intervention of God, the speaking of a final saving word, the accomplishing of an ultimate redemptive action, the establishment of a new and greater covenant."⁶

When, however, we come to the non-sacrificial worship of the synagogue, with its elements of prayer and praise and the study of the law, it looks as though we are departing from the pattern established throughout the earlier generations of the people of God. But the synagogue worship was complemented by the emergence of a second liturgical practice, the solemn Jewish family meal. Thus it is not uncommon to find that by the time of our Lord, pious groups, the faithful remnant, those who were "waiting for the consolation of Israel", were in the habit of meeting together on the eve of sabbaths and festivals to share a simple family meal, to break bread and to share the cup of blessing over which had been offered a solemn eucharistic prayer, recalling past deliverance and reaching forward to future deliverance.

This pattern of Word and Sacrament, so characteristic of the Old Israel, was broken and remade when in the mighty act of God from Incarnation to Ascension the New Israel in Christ was formed. The old liturgy was also broken and remoulded after the pattern of Christ. The Word was still to be proclaimed in the context of praise and prayer, still to be sealed and ratified and realised in sacrifice and communion. But there was a new covenant, a final sacrifice, a revelation and a redemption at last complete. The liturgy of the early Church which emerged on

the other side of Calvary reflected the original yet changed pattern of the earliest tradition. In the context of prayer and praise, it moved from the proclamation of the Word to its eucharistic completion at the Lord's Table.

We have no time this evening to explore the arguments about whether primitive Christian worship involved two distinct liturgies, the one reflecting synagogue worship, the other repeating the Last Supper. What is clear is that in the New Testament, there was both form and flexibility, both order and opportunity for acclamation and proclamation in the Spirit. But the freedom was always controlled freedom, freedom within the liturgical pattern which ministers to the building up of the Body of Christ. Spontaneity and liberty were always subject to the force of the injunction that all things must be done "decently and in order." (1 Cor 14:40)

The twofold pattern, Word and Sacrament, lay at the heart of New Testament worship, and continued throughout the early centuries of the Church's worship. Justin in the sixth decade of the second century supplies us with a description of a service at Rome where the unity of the two elements is preserved. The Synaxis, or Service of the Word, begins with Scripture readings "as long as time permits." Then a sermon is preached by the bishop. Common prayers follow, the congregation standing with outstretched hands. The Eucharist is introduced by the Kiss of Peace, followed by the Offertory of bread and wine brought by the people to the deacons. The eucharistic prayer is offered by the bishop, "at some length" and "according to his ability". In it he sounds the notes of creation, redemption, and the association of the bread and wine with the body and blood of the Lord, and evokes the response of the congregational "Amen". The solemn communion takes place as the people go to the Table and stand to receive the bread and wine. This, the climax of the Service, is also the conclusion. The balanced wholeness of the Word and Sacrament is not disrupted even by the distinction that the Synaxis belongs to all the worshippers, while the Eucharist belongs to the baptised alone.

This is not the place to trace out all the twists of liturgical development down the centuries, but three movements may be briefly mentioned. The first is that the Catholic worship of the formative centuries, the essential characteristics of the primitive liturgy live on. It is biblically based, theologically rooted, Christocentric and doxological. The Latin, Western emphasis is on sin and sacrifice, while the Eastern, Orthodox worship hinges on the adoration of the timeless Mystery and catches the worshipper up into the heavenly places. In the Western Church, however, the Resurrection begins to fall into the background and the focus moves to the Passion. This leads to a disturbance of the balance of Word and Sacrament: the weight of the service falls on the Eucharist, and the proclamation of the Word begins to lack effective place and provision. The people's part in the service is drastically reduced: they are no longer active participants

but observers, watching the clergy perform the sacred drama, on their behalf. The climax of the Service has become not the communion of the people but the elevation of the consecrated elements. To accommodate the dominance of the dying Christ, the very architecture of the churches is altered, to make it easier to worship and adore the sacrificial Victim. In the later mediaeval period there were counter-developments such as the creation of the Service of Prone (a sort of Service of bidding prayers for both the living and the dead) and the provision of vernacular mass-books for the laity, but these were not powerful enough to redress the balance that had been so thoroughly disturbed.

It took the revolutionary ferment of the Reformation to create new forms of liturgy in which the Word of God could once again come into its own. But the pendulum swung too far. Preaching came to occupy a central place, and educational and homiletical concerns spilled over into the prayers and even into the vestments, for it was at this time that the academic gown, introduced by Luther, became a quasi-liturgical garment. The observers of the later mediaeval period had become the listeners of the Reformation period, and seeing was replaced by hearing. Of course the Reformers, notably Calvin, fought for the weekly Eucharist and for the unity of Word and Sacrament as constituting the liturgy, but in the event the best they could do was to produce Orders which, in the absence of the sacrament, took the form of Ante-Comunion Services. The liturgy in all but its structure had become a preaching Service : mystery and awe had given way to intelligibility and presumed simplicity. Worship had come a long way from Justin and the primitive Church and the biblical pattern.

A long way : but there was, however, still a long way to go ! The changes in liturgy from the 17th century down to the 20th century presents a picture of worship in Scotland that is stern and bare. Although the standards of the Church of Scotland preserve in a direct and easily discernible line the balance of Calvin and his Genevan Service Book, the practice of the Church has been more influenced by the puritan doctrines of uncompromising fidelity to Scripture, and a rigorous attempt to return to the practice of the New Testament Church. While this sounds good, it is in fact strictly negative, since it allows in worship only that which is specifically and explicitly permitted in Scripture. But Scripture is used in a capricious way, in a mass of isolated and incidental texts to bind and control the minutiae of worship. So-called human additions and alterations to God's revealed plan for worship could never find justification, for does it not say in the Book of Deuteronomy, "You must not add anything to my charge, nor take anything away from it" (4:2); and is not this confirmed by the Preacher in the Book of Proverbs when he says, "Add nothing to his words or he will expose you for a liar" (30:6) ? Thus psalms were acceptable, but hymns were suspect; the Order for Communion

repeated exactly the pattern of the Last Supper; and extemporary prayer was better than set forms of prayer because it allowed the Spirit freedom and proclaimed the superiority of divine direction over human wisdom. Objection to set forms rapidly led to an individualistic and idiosyncratic approach to the conduct of services; and objection to using a book, even when the book in question was the Bible, led to an impoverished and grossly deficient public worship. Scottish worship reached its most barren expression in the 17th and 18th centuries when Word and Sacrament, far from being in balance with each other, could be completely absent for long periods in particular parishes.

The form of liturgy at its best reflected the emphasis of the constitutive nature of the Word in the ordering of the services and demonstrated an unshakeable attachment to biblical roots. But the restriction of the appeal to the hearing faculty alone, the exaltation of instruction and intelligibility at the expense of offering and mystery, made the worship joyless and drear. The sacrament did have a place in this worship, for it was commanded in the Word : but when it was celebrated it was so inexorably out-weighed by the Word as to have a minimum impact on the worshipping spirit. At best, this form of service reduced worship to the level of religious exercises, where all the parts of the service combined in a didactic and educational role to instruct the people in their duty. It made little provision for the offering of worship, made small allowance for human frailty, gave only restricted space for the liberating praises of the redeemed, reduced congregational participation and gave too much scope to the exercise of inflexible presbyterian sacerdotalism. Lengthy sermons and prolix prayers emptied the sanctuaries of joy and went a long way to emptying them of worshippers too.

Can joy be restored to public worship ? In the words of Neville Clark, "the worship of God must ever be Trinitarian in tone, Christological in pattern, centred on Word and Sacrament⁸; corporate, congregational, embodied; awesome, exultant, ordered and free." But how is this to be achieved ? First of all, by restoring to the liturgy the indissolubility of Word and Sacrament, which together form the unalterable core of the divine Service. This is not to say that the Sacrament is to be celebrated at every service, for there is ⁹room for the provision of what have been called "para-liturgical services", where experiment and variety can be given their due place. But it does mean, at the very least, that where the Sacrament is not celebrated weekly, but monthly or quarterly, the weekly service should preserve the full structure of the Liturgy, stopping short at consecration and communion. Thus the non-sacramental weekly service will be related unmistakeably to the stated celebration of Word and Sacrament for meaning and completion. In other words, the balance of Word and Sacrament must be restored, the relationship between Synaxis and Eucharist must be recovered, and that not just in the structure of our hymn book as The Church Hymnary : Third Edition so marvellously does, but in the structure and fabric of our weekly worship

in Church.

But if the unity of Word and Sacrament is the first truth to be restored, the second truth to be recovered is that worship is both corporate and congregational. The people must have a real part to play in worship, and the emphasis is as much on the word PLAY as on PART. The argument that the derivation of the word LITURGY places it in the sphere of work rather than of play is well known. LITURGY comes from the Greek words leitōs meaning of or for the people, and ergon meaning work. But it is possible, and cheering, to see liturgy in terms of play rather than work, as Professor J G Davies so persuasively argues in his book "New Perspectives in Worship Today". Much of the remainder of this lecture is a reflection of his arguments. He shows us that the essential elements of play are closely linked to the essential elements of liturgy. They share the same appealing "Tell me a story" and the same delight in feasting, though to be sure, the eucharistic meal is not in any physical way a feast, but may be seen as a mixture of a game of charades and a game of "Let's Pretend".

The good news of the Gospel may indeed be perceived as a serial story which begins "Once upon a time" and sets us out on a course of adventure which is full of surprises and is always fresh and new. It is a story which has not ended, for it is not confined to nor completed by the pages of the New Testament. It is still being told through the lives of all those who hear it and who heed it. It is a story with a future too, for it tells of the day when God in Christ will call us all into the glory of his kingdom. And it is a story which Christian worshippers live out partly in imitation, in a splendid kind of "make-believe" which is all the more exciting because it is real. For the eucharist is not only play, a feast of fun and joy and even rapture. It is also a play, a drama which we re-enact and which in the most literal sense we reproduce, the minister playing the part of Jesus and reproducing his actions in the Upper Room by taking and blessing and breaking and giving, and the congregation acting the parts of the apostles as they gather round the Table and receive the bread and wine. The Gospel is, after all, God's spell, and it has all the variety of charms and spell-binding powers that any childlike heart could wish. It is a delight, a celebration, a game whose outcome is not foreclosed, and this gives it a zest and an air of excitement that is engaging and ultimately irresistible.

None of this means that worship is a farce or that it is to be treated light-heartedly. It does mean, however, that the mood in which we carry out our worship should be infected with hilarity; but again, hilarity is not the same thing as frivolity. It means also that worship is not a sedative, but it is a lively, dynamic, explosive concentration of spiritual forces and powers which impels us out of ourselves into

the presence of angels and archangels and all the hosts of heaven, and into the presence of the living God himself.

If all, or even a part of that is true, then it holds one far-reaching consequence for the way we worship and for the kind of liturgies we construct. If worship is seen as play, as in some sense a game, the game of life, then all must be participants. And we must be participants in the normal sense of that word. Participation is something more than hearing and understanding. If we take part in a concert, that is something quite different from going to a concert. If we told someone that we had taken part in a musical festival, they would understand us to have competed or accompanied or judged, and not just to have sat in the hall and listened to the proceedings. If we only sit in an audience we cannot be said to be participating. Yet that is precisely what we say about the congregation's part in worship, that the members are participating when they are merely listening and watching. The congregation has become an audience, with occasional opportunities for audience activity, such as community singing. But if worship is a drama, the worshippers must all be actors; if it is a game, they must all be players and not spectators. In Christian worship all are to be performers, although each one or each group may have different parts to play. Worship seen as a game means that in order to participate in worship, we must all contribute to what is taking place and we must enter into relationships with our fellow-worshippers. As St. Paul says, "When you meet for worship, each of you contributes a hymn, some instruction, a revelation, an ecstatic utterance or the interpretation of such an utterance." (1 Cor 14:26) This is something beyond reading the responses in a fixed order of service with printed copies available and in the hands of the worshippers. That indeed would be a start for many of our congregations, but it is only the beginning. Participation in the game of worship must not be merely cerebral involvement. The whole self is to be offered to God through the body as a whole, not just through the brain and tongue.

Worship, then, in the nature of a game, is a creative occasion, and our services ought to offer opportunities for the individual's creativity to flourish. Members of our congregations should be free to exercise their talents in the course of worship, so that the Body of Christ might be built up. For some, the gifts will be aesthetic or artistic, and they will be able to make their contribution to the enrichment of the whole by their painting, or singing or playing a musical instrument. Many people have considerable acting talents, while others are blessed with a sense of humour and can tell amusing stories amusingly. And so far as these gifts go, we must use them in all their rich variety, as St Paul suggested when he wrote to the Romans about both daily work and worship, "The gifts we possess differ as they are allotted to us by God's grace, and must be exercised accordingly: the gift of inspired utterance, for example, in proportion to a man's faith; or the gift of administration, in administration. A teacher should employ

his gift in teaching, and one who has the gift of stirring speech should use it to stir his hearers. If you give to charity, give with all your heart; if you are a leader, exert yourself to lead; if you are helping others in distress, do it cheerfully." (12:6) This, of course, is not an exhaustive but a typical catalogue of gifts. Not to bring these gifts to God is to deny their source and, in a measure, to be guilty of ingratitude. Not to exercise them before God is to be passive and to diminish the meaning of worship. It is also to diminish the joy that should be present in any assembly of the people of God, summoned by his Word to share in his life and to receive the fulness of his presence. Participation in this sense is not easy, but it seems to be essential if the joy of the people of God at worship is to achieve its full flowering.

Morris West remarks that

"Joy is a fragile thing that can snap under your weight."¹⁰

Father Harry Williams calls it a

"tricky customer",¹¹

and likens it to walking on the water. We have no guarantees how it will work, no certificates of safety, no explanations or directions as to how we may succeed. But in the end, we recognise that joy is God's gift, that it is indeed the gift of God himself, and the measure of our joy in our worship will be the measure in which we open ourselves and our assemblies to him and to his life-giving and new-creating Spirit who by the grace of the Son makes us new again, brings us to birth again, makes us children again, ready to play his game again. and to "have the most divine time" in our worship.

"...Take Joy home,

And make a place in thy great heart for her

And give her time to grow, and cherish her,

Then will she come, and oft will sing to thee...

Joy is the grace we say to God."

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N O T E S

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