

previous experience of worship beyond attendance at occasional rites of passage for members of their family, or attendance at school assemblies. This creates a situation in which there is often little awareness of any tradition, and thus there is an openness to, and indeed often a desire for, innovation in styles and forms of worship. This for me has raised questions about what is acceptable and what is not, both in terms of the denominations which as a Church of Scotland and Free Churches Chaplain I was expected to represent, and in terms of what is fitting for the worship of God. Obviously this is an area in which heated debate is possible and perhaps even inevitable.

Worship as a Naval chaplain I have found to be an enriching and broadening experience. I return now to parish ministry in Scotland wondering which insights gained in my naval ministry I shall be able to deploy in my new situation in which I already discover a quite different set of expectations.

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CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICES AT THE KIRK OF ST NICHOLAS, ABERDEEN

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Christmas Eve services, now of widespread occurrence, were rare in Scotland Parish Churches until after the Second World War. For long the East Church of St Nicholas was the only parish church in Aberdeen where such a service was held. It was instituted by the pioneering James Cooper during the eighties of last century. Under the long-standing leadership of J.M. Nisbet (Organist 1890-1935 and a member of the committee responsible for the Revised Church Hymnary) the church maintained its strong musical tradition and carols sung by the choir were the major component of the Christmas Eve services. Older members remember the service in the thirties as a great Aberdeen occasion with a considerable

detachment of nurses from the nearby Royal Infirmary adding a distinctive touch to the packed congregation with their scarlet-lined cloaks. By the nineteen seventies, the multiplication of such services and an ageing congregation led to smaller attendances. An increasing proportion of noisy revellers discouraged both choir and congregation and the choir ceased to participate in the service in 1981. There was, however, a reluctance to abandon the midnight occasion altogether both because of its long continuance and because of the opportunity it afforded to present the Gospel, however briefly, to people who are otherwise seldom within earshot of preaching. In form the service might be said to be a modified 'dry mass'. The principal difference lies in the re-arrangement of the Liturgy of the Word so that the Gospel reading comes last, at midnight. Towards that hour, while 'Still the Night' is being sung the reader advances towards the congregation which, unbidden, remains standing. Occasionally the steeple bells are kind enough to strike just when the hymn suggests they should. The Gospel is the first thing spoken on Christmas Day. A short series of celebratory versicles and responses, heartily participated in, follows and then informal Christmas greetings are exchanged throughout the congregation. Offerings are given and the Sursum Corda leads into a form of Great Thanksgiving. Earlier prayers and readings are short, as is the sermon, and there are seven hymns, including a recessional, in a service which now lasts somewhat less than an hour. The hymns sung before midnight are selected from those which refer to nativity as an historical event and those at and after midnight celebrate it as contemporary. There is no 'warm up' carol singing to lessen the impact of the hymns sung during the service. Coffee and Christmas pies are usually served afterwards.

When the choir ceased to sing at midnight another service was instituted at 8 p.m. to which our band of singers make its contribution. To it some, at least, of our older members feel able to come but about half of those attending do not belong to the congregation. The total number is not large. Given that our choral resources are now much depleted it has seemed wise, after the first year, not to follow the familiar Nine Lessons and Carols form - thereby avoiding any unfavourable comparison with the excellencies of its prototype from King's College, Cambridge.

The service consists of hymns, carols and readings both biblical and non-biblical. In order to avoid a mere pot-pourri the endeavour is made to arrange these according to a coherent and progressive pattern. This varies

somewhat from year to year. Two specimen orders appear below. Section titles appear on the service sheet which everyone has but are not mentioned as the service proceeds. Use is made of a variety of readers. Some of these are usually drawn from organisations or enterprises outside the congregation with which it has links.

In our extra-ordinary double building the medieval crossing and south transept form a spacious 'lobby' in which an almost life-size nativity tableau is set up. As a pendicle to the service the congregation moves, singing, with choir and clergy and gathers round the manger where a brief devotion is conducted. As ours is the city church, I have thought about moving finally to the main south door and offering a blessing *urbi et orbi* but have so far refrained as that might also challenge unfortunate comparisons.

I - THE SALVATION EVENT

Processional Hymn: 160 Hark, the glad sound!

Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Before the Event - The Curse

Genesis 3.8-19

Carol: In the bleak midwinter (Darke)

Before the Event - The Promise

Isaiah 11.1-9

Hymn: 170 It came upon the midnight clear

The Event - Annunciation

Luke 1.26-35

Hymn: 194 Love came down

Poem: The Annunciation (Edwin Muir)

The Event - Birth

Carol: Come to Bethlehem (Peter Warlock)

Luke 2.1-18

Carol: Noel Nouvelet (French, arr. Rutter)

Reading: The Shepherd (Frederick Buechner)

Hymn: 171 All my heart

After The Event - Now

Poem: Advent 1955 (John Betjeman)

Carol: Watt's Cradle Song (Brian Kelly)

Reading: Our responsibility (J. McIntyre)

Prayers

Hymn: 191 1-3 + two others O come, all ye
All move to crossing during this hymn

Choir: Infant holy

Prayers

Hymn: 180 Child in the manger

The Blessing

II

Processional Hymn: 160 Hark, the glad ...

Prayers and Lord's Prayer

A world in thrall to sin and futility

Ecclesiastes 3.16-4.4

Hymn: 181 On Christmas night

A deliverer promised

Isaiah 11.1-9

Carol: God rest you merry.

The Saviour comes

Matthew 1.18-2.2

Hymn: 171 All my heart

Reading: Holy Family (Studdert Kennedy)

Carol: Falan Tiding (Tyrolese)

Poem: Wise men and shepherds (S. Godolphin)

Poem proclaimed

Hymn: 175 Angel voices

Luke 2.8-14

Carol: Nightingale Carol (Wilhelm Dorfler)

The Work goes on

Reading: From 'A Christmas Carol' (Dickens)

Carol: Whence is that goodly fragrance

(Old French)

Poem: The Nativity (J.B. Tabb)

Prayers

Hymn: 191 (as in I) O come all ye faithful

All move to crossing during this hymn

Prologue: A couplet from Angelus Silesius

A verse from Phillips Brooks

Prayers

Hymn: 195 Away in a manger

The Blessing

References

- 1) Collected Poems, 1984 edn, p.223. There are two poems with this title. This is the later one.
- 2) From 'A Christmas Triptych' in Union Seminary Quarterly Review, XIX.2 January 1964, p.126
- 3) Lines beginning "Some ways indeed are very odd" taken from an ephemeral publication which gives no source.
- 4) Faith, Theology and Imagination, p. 154, lines 14-37
- 5) From Food for the Fed-up, as in The Best of Studdery Kennedy, p. 75, lines 5-19.
- 6) Oxford Book of Christian Verse, 138.
- 7) No note appears to survive of the excerpt used. The service sheet notes that the year of use was the 150th anniversary of the first publication of A Christmas Carol.
- 8) As in John Baillie, A Diary of Readings, Day 121.
- 9) As in Victor Gollancz, A Year of Grace, p.45, first extract.
- 10) ? the words of verse 3 of Hymn 172.

Over the years a considerable list of poems and passages used or noted for possible use has been built up. Some attempt is made each year to strike a balance between the challenging and the sentimental, the theological and the nostalgic, the celebratory and the reflective, but it is the Christian and not the secular Christmas which is always in view.

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