

150th ANNIVERSARY DINNER AFTER-DINNER SPEECH

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Church services bring memories and associations. I think of the minister of Glenshiel, who had been a seaman, and because of that came down the pulpit steps backward. I have it on good authority that once, on a Fast Day, as the visiting preacher was in the middle of his sermon, the host emptied the collection bag on the Table, and proceeded to count it, as the sermon continued.

More seriously I think of Kenneth Macpherson, the minister of Duirinish, who preached at my ordination in Portree on 'a royal priesthood'. When I asked him why they had one Communion Sunday, and one only, in Duirinish, he replied that either the main service every Sunday was Communion or it was not, and that that distinction was more important than the relative frequency of the sacrament. He had been organist in the Episcopal Church in Fort William, and accustomed to weekly Communion. His statement has not left me.

Can public worship be toxic? Certainly its blessings and benefits are more obvious at some times than at others. There is the old playground verse about the teacher;

Mr MacGregor is a very good man,
He goes to church on Sunday
To pray to God to give him strength
To belt the boys on Monday.

A journalist was preparing a television discussion with a prominent Church of Scotland minister on the subject of prayer, and suggested in advance that they might begin by quoting that verse; but the minister then withdrew from the discussion, 'since you are approaching the subject in a frivolous way'.

At the end of the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson was ill, and had not been seen for weeks. His wife and his doctor communicated messages to and from him, but rumours began that he might have died. A group of congressmen demanded to see him, led by a Senator who had opposed many

of Wilson's policies. When they entered the room, the Senator, a pious man, bowed and said, 'Mr President, We've been praying for you', to which Wilson responded, 'Which way, Senator?'

On the 27th of June 1961 Arthur Michael Ramsey was enthroned in Canterbury Cathedral, and the service was broadcast north of the Border. The appeal of trivia being even then established, the one thing I remember clearly from the service was the relative discrepancy between the number of degrees possessed by the Archbishop and the number held by the Dean of Canterbury, Hewlett Johnson. Johnson had been Dean for thirty years, and he had been Dean of Manchester before that. His devotion to the Soviet Union and his defence of Stalin brought him the title of the Red Dean, and he had also collected honorary degrees from near and far, with the result that the act of enthronement involved him saying 'I, Hewlett Johnson, Master of Arts, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Science, Doctor of Letters, Doctor of Divinity, Doctor of Laws, do install you, Arthur Michael Ramsey, Master of Arts, Doctor of Divinity. Somehow that has stuck. When Donald Coggan was enthroned in 1974 they sang Metrical Psalm 122 to the tune York, from which city he had been translated; and that reminds me that at President Eisenhower's funeral in Washington in 1969 they had sung 'The Lord's my shepherd' to Evan.

Having emphasised trivia, and transferring the spotlight from the Archbishop to the Dean, I continue by recalling the occasion when the Dean began a sermon in his cathedral with the words, 'I wish to speak to you about freshwater fishing in the Soviet Union.'

Now I have long given it as my opinion that a good description of a sermon is 'an address appropriate to the act of worship of which it is a part'. So much depends on the rest of the service, and the more the essential ingredients of Christian worship are covered by prayers and hymns and readings and, indeed, the environment in which the service is happening, the freer the sermon is to bring something unexpected or surprising, which may lift the atmosphere or broaden the interest or bring some humour and humanity to the occasion. And that might include freshwater fishing in the Soviet Union.

I have attempted to use the Bible in the preparation of sermons throughout my ministry; but I do not think we need be slavishly committed to expository preaching, so long as the rest of the service is sufficiently rich and balanced.

With that in mind, let me say a word in favour of the importance of the provision of public worship for unbelievers. When I commend such provision, I dare say that for some of us that is what we think we have been doing for years, while some will say that their vocation is more that of offering the worship that flows from Christian conviction, to which the unconvinced are welcome to attach themselves - though the two attitudes are scarcely mutually exclusive.

By worship for the unbeliever I mean two things. The first is that which is readily represented by parish ministry, in funerals and civic occasions and all sorts of events in which there is ready acceptance of the presence of people who are rarely at worship, reluctant to confess faith, and unlikely to have their names on Communion Rolls.

Such involvement is suggested by this passage from Dr Christina Larnier's Gifford Lectures of 1982:

I would ... be extremely sorry if I thought that my public recommendation of methodological and other sorts of atheism, were to result in my corpse being banned from a proper College Chapel funeral, complete with hobgoblins, foul fiends and the twenty-third psalm sung to Crimond. What other way is there to go? The fact that I am intellectually unable to begin to formulate the kinds of argument which would convince me of the existence of Lord Gifford's one true god, and am spiritually tone deaf, thus making mystical experiences inaccessible, has not diminished my affection for the forms of patriarchal religion in which I which I was reared.¹

She adds; In the Prayer Book controversy in the Church of England, those who object to turning the parish church into a sect of the faithful and the sacred text into words with late twentieth century meanings are acting on sound sociological principles. I am totally behind them.

From that I go to other Gifford lectures, David Daiches' *God and the Poets*, where he recalls his rabbi father invoking the Aaronic blessing on a boy at his bar mitzvah. 'It is, in a way, what we all want - a totally certain invocation, by someone whose communally agreed role it is to utter it, of divine good for us.' 'The power and beauty of these benedictory words transcend any question of belief in a personal God. The cadence of the repetitions, the incantatory effect, the sense of transmitting a force for good through an intermediary, the simple

finality of that resting of the last word, shalom, peace - this is poetry, spoken poetry, that goes behind and beyond questions of belief to express the universal yearning for reassurance and for some kind of personal relationship with the giver of that reassurance.²

Public worship for unbelievers has, I think, another meaning, in addition to that represented by parish ministry and the sort of thing of which Christina Lerner and David Daiches speak. I suggest that it is a frequent assumption that Christian faith involves deep personal belief, to the extent that if you lack that deep personal belief your faith is defective. It is an assumption which can be found in prayers and sermons and certainly in many hymns; but I wonder to how many of us it genuinely applies. Is it possible that many if not most Christian people have allowed themselves to regard themselves as unbelieving second grade Christians, when in truth they represent a perfectly authentic style of faith?

Two incidents come to mind. A Good Friday service had a sermon the main point of which seemed to be the presentation of Jesus as a man of great and exemplary courage, with the implication that we are challenged to be like him. I remember feeling deeply convinced that there must be more than that, that the benefit and value and implication of Jesus must be more than exemplary; and yet I did not feel within me a strong personal faith.

If there are offered both evangelical piety and sacramental observance, in what measure are we permitted to practise either or both?

The other incident occurred while I was enjoying a gentle walk on Wolf Pen mountain in North Carolina with the remarkable Carlyle Marney, Baptist minister and director of Interpreter's House on Lake Junaluska.

I don't remember how the conversation led to the point, but I said to him that that I found it difficult to use modern English in prayer, addressing God as you, and so on. He responded, 'I am the same. I reckon I don't believe that much.' And I realised that he had put into words what was true of me too, though I had not come to awareness of it.

What I mean is that I find it hard to think of prayer as like a phone call to a more or less distant relative, in which easy contemporary language is fitting and almost required. The language of worship is like the action of a sacrament

and the theatre of liturgy - they are mysterious signs, and art forms more than specific actions.

Be that as it may, my suggestion is that this society has long cherished the sacramental, while adhering to the importance of the Bible and honouring the value of personal faith confirmed by interior conviction and assurance. I just wonder if the balance of the personal and the sacramental sometimes calls for resetting, and the faithful observance of many Christian people for whom personal faith is rather remote needs to be recognised and affirmed more than has been customary.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Christina Lerner: *Witchcraft and Religion*, Blackwell, 1984
- 2 David Daiches: *God and the Poets*, Oxford, 1984