

The Christian Year in Worship.

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It was one of the less fortunate results of the Reformation, that in the general recoil from liturgical ideals of public worship the Evangelical Churches either lost or reduced their sense of the close connexion between that worship and the great cycle of commemorations known as the Christian Year. This cycle, or 'Proper of Time,' running from Advent to Trinity Sunday, and therein recapitulating the whole drama of God's self-disclosure in Christ, gave a particular character and significance to each Sunday or great feast. It opened with the great Advent responsory, one of the jewels of liturgical art, with its sense of awe-struck expectation—'I beheld from afar, and saw the Glory of God and a cloud covering the whole earth.' It closed with the acclamation of the Eternal Godhead, 'one and very Trinity, one and supreme Deity, holy and perfect Unity,' revealed in time through the incarnation of the Son. Between these points, week by week, the story of the Christian revelation was unfolded, and the mind of the worshipper led by all the resources of poetry and symbol to explore its inexhaustible significance.

Retained in a simplified form by Anglicans and Lutherans, though stripped of much of the liturgic beauty which it had gathered during its long development, this sequence was entirely abolished by the Presbyterian Churches. We can easily understand some of the reasons for its repudiation, along with much else which seemed at that time to be bound up with a deadening formalism, and to threaten spontaneity and realism in the approach of the soul to God. None the less, the virtual abandonment of the 'liturgical year' has meant in the Churches which took this drastic course a serious spiritual impoverishment; for with it they cast away the rich gifts of history and poetry, with all that these had to contribute to corporate and expressive worship. So there are many reasons why the present revival of interest in liturgical forms—for example, in the Church of Scotland—should include some attempt at its restoration.

The first and outstanding reason is this. Christianity is fundamentally a historical, one might even say a dramatic, religion. To conceive of it either in terms of pure moralism, or in terms of pure interiority, is to misunderstand its genius from the start. It announces the love and grace and redeeming power of God given through and in a human life,

and manifested by sensible signs. Therefore it consecrates history as a medium of the divine self-imparting: puts before us, not only a series of spiritual and ethical truths and demands, but a series of factual happenings, and gives to these factual happenings an inexhaustible significance.

O marvellous interchange! The Creator of mankind, taking on him a living body, vouchsafed to be born of a Virgin:

And begotten in no earthly manner, hath made us to be partakers of his Divinity.¹

There, once for all, are the credentials of that historical element which the Church reduces or neglects at her peril; and which, in one way or another, she must weave into the fabric of her worship. For, the more deeply we meditate on the successive moments of the Christian story, the more profoundly we are penetrated by the eternal reality which they convey; and this in a manner which can be understood by the simplest, and yet which the greatest saint can never exhaust. Therefore, it is a part of the Church's task to bring again and again to the minds of her children these subjects of meditation: sometimes in their homely and intimate aspect, sometimes in their transcendental significance.

While all things were in quiet silence, and night was in the midst of her swift course:

Thine almighty Word leaped down from heaven out of thy royal throne, alleluia!²

Now the device of the Christian Year, following each moment of the Christian revelation from its promise at Advent to its fulfilment at Pentecost, is a sovereign method by means of which the Church can apply history to the purposes of devotion; emphasizing turn by turn the beauty, the cost, the undying power of redemption, and building up round these varied disclosures of God's love for man and self-giving to man her acts of adoration, penitence, thanksgiving, and joy. It is strange, then, that a method of worship which keeps so close to the gospel, which stresses the objective character of God's revelation in Christ, and is indeed entirely concerned with our Lord's life and death, should ever have fallen into disrepute. Here, surely, we

¹ Antiphon: Octave of Christmas Day.

² Antiphon of the Benedictus in Christmastide.

have evangelical worship in its purest form ; and there should have been little difficulty in discarding such late-mediaeval accretions as blurred its noble outlines, and restoring the liturgical cycle to something approaching its original austere simplicity. And moreover, if—as Bérulle has said—Christ is Himself the major sacrament, then His life in its total movement and in each of its great ‘states’ of helpless childhood, dedicated manhood, devoted service, sacrificial love, and liberated power, must be the great theme of a specifically Christian worship ; and each of these will have its own peculiar sacramental value. It will give us God in a specific way, and will be a means of grace to the Church and each member of the Church ; since in each we contemplate from a particular angle the Word made flesh. Therefore an important part of the Church’s life of worship, says the Russian theologian Boulgakoff, consists in ‘making these sacred memories live again, so that we again witness and take part in them.’

Moreover, this deliberate linking up of religious feeling and historic fact, so plainly appropriate to an incarnational faith, puts the weight of worship where it should be put—in the humble and joyous contemplation of the divine perfection, not the anxious contemplation of our own sin ; and by means of a cycle which touches every aspect of our life, and evokes a wide range of emotional response, defeats monotony, that arch-enemy of institutional religion. There is a sense in which the fervent liturgic Christian does really live again through the drama of redemption ; experiences year by year, and with no sense of unreality, the awed expectation of Advent ; enters ever more fully into the mystery of the Crib, the purifying discipline of the forty days in the Wilderness, the tension and heart-breaking majesty of Holy Week, the triumph of

Easter. It is surely right that the Church should help him to do this ; by means of her liturgic life maintaining the essential contact between theology and devotion, sounding the heights and deeps of Christian thought and feeling, and sweeping all her members with her into the great life-giving stream of her traditional prayer.

Round this liturgic year, of which some elements seem almost as old as Christianity itself, all the poetry of devotion has gathered, and made it the supreme art-work of the Church’s soul. No one who has heard, or even read, the Reproaches of Good Friday, the Exultet of Easter Eve, or the Easter vigil service of the Orthodox rite, can fail to catch here the very accent of the Church’s adoration ; or miss the deep realism with which she enters into the experiences of her Lord. And apart from these great instances, the beautiful device of antiphons and responsaries—almost invariably built up from Biblical material—which gave variety and special colour to the daily offices, might give new interest and beauty to our Sunday worship. The painfully this-world and self-interested character of many of the attempts to improve the quality of that worship suggest that here contemporary Christianity has something to learn ; and that a bringing back into our services of some of the liturgic treasures which the past has bequeathed to us, might at least be a step towards the realization of nobler and more disinterested ideals. The aim of all worship is, as towards God, the praise of His glory ; as towards man, an increase of that faith and love, that awe-struck delight, which is the raw material of adoration. How better can we hope to nourish this, than by the constant remembrance of those Mysteries in and through which the Divine Charity was manifested in the temporal world ?

