

The Ministry of the Sacraments and the Occasional Offices

BY RICHARD COATES

MUCH fun is often poked at the people who only come to church, it is said, "on wheels". They come, to use other terms of derision, when they are hatched, matched, and despatched. It is usually inferred that the ministrations which the Church has to give on such occasions are given grudgingly, and that their necessity is looked upon as a nuisance. It is clear that if such is our attitude then our main work lies in other directions, and the performance of the occasional offices must be treated as, in most cases, an unwelcome interruption in more rewarding work. Is this so? If it is, then the sooner we get through their administration and back to our work the better. I want to suggest, however, that the careful administration of the occasional offices provides us with our most fruitful opportunity, and that the right approach to them determines our whole parochial strategy. It is by these means that we come in direct contact with many outsiders, the many who are lapsed or loosely attached, and, of course, with our loyal adherents. If this be so, then we have in these services ready-made opportunities for evangelism, edification, and instruction. It is most important, therefore, that what we do and say on such occasions should be of great concern to us. What we say is already determined, if we keep loyally to the Book of Common Prayer; what we do will be determined by our personal approach.

It is well to remind ourselves of the significance of recent statistics which reveal the extent to which the sacraments and occasional offices are still used. About seventy per cent of the children in the country continue to be baptized in the Church of England. About fifty per cent of the marriages are solemnized in our Churches, and although there are no figures published it is practically certain that at least seventy per cent of the funerals are conducted by our clergy. In large parishes where the problem of man-power exists, these services are often the main consumers of time. To some clergy, therefore, their work is an endless round of marriages, baptisms, and funerals. They become rather jaded and weary of the whole business, and wonder if there are not other, perhaps more spectacular, methods which they ought to employ to convert the multitude. Without disparaging the highly organized and efficiently and expensively run evangelistic campaigns, which must of necessity disrupt the ordinary life of the Church, I am convinced that the more pedestrian methods of parochial work still produce better and more abiding results. After all, the occasional services are open doors of opportunity, and we must not neglect them in endeavours to force open other ways of reaching the same people, who come to us on the great occasions of life. It is my contention that the Parish Church must still be the centre of spiritual

life and activity, and that the old links between it and the homes and the hospitals and the cemeteries must be strengthened rather than ignored.

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The fact, that our Lord performed his first great sign miracle at the marriage feast at Cana in Galilee, is not without significance in our consideration of the value of the marriage service. It may even indicate our main approach. Among the Jews there was no specific religious service at a wedding, but there were significant and joyful festivities. Our Lord and His mother, no doubt as friends of the family, were present in Cana; and the miracle of turning the water into wine, which is sometimes an embarrassment to temperance workers, was performed to enable the festivities to continue as well as to manifest the glory of Christ. Today we are inundated with lectures and literature upon the more technical approaches to marriage, and great emphasis is placed on the value of pre-marital instruction, some forms of which are probably rather late in arriving. It may be one's personal dislike of some of this approach that makes the obvious lesson of Cana acceptable. I would like to emphasize the opportunity which a wedding affords the parson to be a sane, sympathetic, and spiritually minded friend to the young couple and to the families concerned. In fact, I believe the sex approach could be well dropped by the average minister, and the more warm and homely approach adopted. The service itself is clear enough, if we use it, on the fundamental issues involved. In many cases the only memories of the service carried away are those of prohibitions, including "don't throw confetti". It was said of one eminent evangelical of a past generation, that at a wedding he always advised the bride to buy a cookery book and then proceeded to preach the Gospel to her and her husband. He was a bachelor, yet it may be that his approach was right—human and yet definitely spiritual. Out of the necessary preparation for the marriage ceremony, and from the kindly performance of the ceremony, and the direct and simple address that may be given, there may well come a definite Church link with the young couple and the awakening of interest among the wedding guests.

The decline in Church marriages in recent years probably reflects the feeling that there are two standards for marriage, the Christian, upheld by the Church, and the ordinary, looser conception permitted by the State. It is unfortunate that some clergy encourage this false division by implying that only active adherents should be married in church. Some are rather proud of the fact that they have reduced the number of Church marriages in their parishes. Surely there is but one standard for marriage by which the behaviour of all married people must be judged, that is, God's declared will for husband and wife. It is much better that those who marry, whatever their religious profession may be, should have these truths clearly stated in their marriage bond and ceremony. It may be the only occasion upon which the true conception of married life will be brought before them, and it is next to criminal folly for a minister of the Gospel to refuse such a duty.

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If our marriage contact has been at all successful, it should lead in normal circumstances to at least another great opportunity to win a home for Christ. When baby arrives, life is transformed for the young couple. His Majesty The Baby takes control, everybody must obey his dictates and worship his presence. If the pastor is fortunate enough to have a maternity home in his parish he will find a weekly visit to it a most fruitful source of spiritual good. Today most babies are born in maternity homes, except in some parts of the country where the provision of such is lagging behind. A young mother is, in the wonder of her motherhood and the thrill and thankfulness which she experiences, very open to spiritual ministration. The service of Churching understood as a thanksgiving to God is very readily accepted and appreciated by both mother and father. Once this link exists the approach to the baptismal service is much different.

As the Prayer Book envisages, the Baptism should be public. This, of course, is not a necessity, the New Testament has many very private baptisms but they were administered to adults immediately following conversion. In our present circumstances we should seek to make every baptism, if at all possible, a public baptism. On occasions Morning or Evening prayer can be the time; much depends upon practical issues such as feeding time for the baby, etc. In many parishes it may be found that the monthly Children's or Family Service, in the afternoon, is the most convenient and helpful time to administer Baptism. To have your Sunday School children, of all ages, and their teachers and parents present, provides a completely different atmosphere for the baptismal service. The administration of the Sacrament, as a regular feature, becomes a great means of instruction to growing children, and to parents with the responsibilities of teaching and training, which the baptismal covenant implies. For such a service the best place for the font is on the chancel steps. The proposed revised services recently published envisage the use of a font in such a place, and this is a wise provision. Baptistries, which are confined and cramped, may have architectural beauty, but are ornaments of doubtful value. The revised services provide for psalms, but for an occasion when many children are present, some of whom may be poor readers, the use of some familiar hymns is probably preferable. The constant repetition of the service, with the inculcation of some simple direct explanation of its meaning and implications, is most beneficial for the children and their parents. It has this effect upon the parents of the children being baptized, that it shows them the place where their own children should be as soon as they can attend Church and Sunday School, and also where there are parents present it encourages them to attend.

In cases where young people, or adults, come to Confirmation without previous baptism, it is important to emphasize that the Baptism is more important than the Confirmation. This can be supported only if the baptism is administered publicly. There are, however, difficulties, particularly the sensitiveness which some adults may have about the neglect of their parents in the past. We should nevertheless endeavour to have the service duly witnessed by as large a company as possible, and in the case of young people the baptism

should be performed in the presence of the members of the Youth Fellowship. We must counteract, in both the cases of infant and adult baptism, the view that it is as private as vaccination and also, of course, that it has usually the same automatic effect.

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The Service for the Visitation of the Sick is one, we believe, rarely used today ; even the service in the proposed revision of 1928, which has many excellent qualities, envisages a situation which both socially and psychologically no longer exists. It is rare in these days to find chronic invalids or people enduring long sicknesses in their own homes. Also, through the advance of modern medicine, sickness is not such a terrible, or fatal, thing. The seriously ill are mostly in hospital and the experience of sickness is generally short. The changed circumstances demand changed techniques, the essential ministry as envisaged in the Prayer Book must be the same : the value of the Service of the Visitation of the Sick is that it provides the corrective to the merely perfunctory and superficial approach by the minister, to those who are in sickness. If there is one sphere in which more than any other there is failure, it is probably in that of sick visiting. In our present situation the office of Hospital Chaplain, which must involve specialization, has assumed great importance. For the ordinary parochial minister, who may have a hospital in his parish, the work is demanding, but very rewarding, if well done. It may be possible in some future revision of the Prayer Book, to provide a new Service for Visitation of the Sick which could be used in hospital ward services or in the home.

Some would like to see the revival of unction, anointing the sick. While the practice is Scriptural, the lessons to be learned from the development of the use of anointing in the history of the Church must not be forgotten. Anointing with prayer became in the course of centuries the so-called sacrament of Extreme Unction. This change came about, because of the undoubted fact that the anointed did not, in many cases recover. There is much to be learned from psychological medicine, but the guiding principles as far as the minister is concerned are still to be found in the old Prayer Book service. His job today, as in any day, is so to minister to the man spiritually that his mental and spiritual condition may induce good health and restoration. His main work, therefore, is to see that the man is at peace with God, his neighbours, and his family, and if he should be facing death these are still the major considerations in the pastor's approach. Approaching death is still surrounded by a great conspiracy of silence, which it may be difficult for the minister to break ; also many medical practitioners feel it is their duty to keep their patients in such a state of semi-consciousness that they cannot realize the onset of death. In such circumstances, sympathy, wisdom, and sincerity are the great qualities needed. The shallow opposites of mere pious talk and chatty gossip must be avoided.

Apart from the large cities, the parson is still the Person, when death comes. In some parts he is still sent for by all sorts of people when death is approaching. In such circumstances his ministry is much

larger than the mere conduct of a funeral service. He must govern if he can the whole approach to bereavement and its aftermath. The Burial Service, when taken thoughtfully, expresses strongly the Christian hope and is directed mainly to the comforting of the bereaved. It is not the time for aggressive preaching but more often for silent, kindly sympathy. When mourners are numbed with sorrow they are incapable of imbibing much teaching, but they are responsive to a sympathy which is strong and yet kindly. Many good meaning people will try to get the sorrowful to snap out of their dejection, to adopt a way of life that will hide death from them. The Christian pastor's approach must be such that the bereaved will learn from this great and tragic experience and reap real spiritual benefit from it, and discover that the valley of Achor can become the Door of Hope.

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The administration of the Lord's Supper cannot in these days be classed among Occasional Services, in fact we may be suffering from its too frequent administration. In ministering to the sick it may be found, especially in the case of those who are aged and infirm, that a regular monthly Communion Service in the home is a very real means of grace. In the changed circumstances of today, where the disabilities of age are greatly lessened and may be the lot of an increasing number as life is more prolonged, the administration of Holy Communion to the sick may replace entirely the older service of the Visitation. One great argument against the practice of reservation is that it tends to encourage perfunctory administrations of the Sacrament in the homes of the sick. It may be, though we doubt it, that there is a case for the extended administration from the main Communion Service at the Parish Church, when by the hands of lay people some of the elements could be taken simultaneously to the homes of the sick. We are convinced that the multiplication of Communion Services in our day is detrimental to a right conception of the Sacrament. Some parishes live by statistics and if the number of what is called "acts of Communion" declines there is consternation. We ought to ask which is the more beneficial, the frequent Communion of a small number, which may add up to a grand total, or the less frequent Communion of the whole Church. The Evangelical view of the Sacrament is the highest. We believe more about its efficacy and spiritual worth than any other section of the Church. Because of this, we ought to be most careful about its administration. Perhaps I can best express what needs to be said by quoting two verses of Philip Doddridge's Communion hymn. He wrote :

Oh, let Thy Table honoured be,
And furnished well with joyful guests ;
And may each soul Salvation see,
That here its sacred pledges tastes.

Let crowds approach with hearts prepared,
With hearts inflamed let all attend ;
Nor, when we leave our Father's Board,
The pleasure or the profit end.

One can see as the background of that hymn the great Communion Services of the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. We need clarity to teach the significance of the Communion Service as the fellowship meal of the whole Church, and courage to abolish, as soon as possible, the isolated Communion Services attended by the few. Doddridge speaks of the Lord's Table as "honoured" and "furnished". The most important furnishing of the Lord's Table is its surrounding with "joyful guests". There could be nothing more moving than a crowded Church of faithful communicants surrounding the Lord's Table in the midst. Many of our churches still make the actual approach to the Lord's Table, at the East end of the chancel, something of an obstacle race between the impedimenta of choir stalls and organ. The Prayer Book envisages the sacramental worship of the Lord's House as visible, audible, and congregational. If it is not so, it is irreverent and dishonouring. We must not perpetuate the divorce between the Word and the Sacrament by encouraging the separation of the Communion Service from Morning and Evening Prayer. Any revision of the Service must include the necessary elements which they provide. The divorce of Word and Sacrament has led to strange alliances and delinquent children, among which we class the mass sacrifice, transubstantiation, reservation, adoration, and benediction. Holy Communion is not the chief service of the day if it is divorced from the ministry of the Word. For its preservation and true understanding this combination is necessary. This has always been an emphasis of Reformed and Evangelical churchmen.

I hope these considerations upon the Sacraments and the Occasional Services may revive the energies of some who have felt that the latter are often a burden, and direct the energies of all in the administration of the former.