THE POETRY OF WORSHIP

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The topic I have chosen may seem far removed indeed from the grim business of war and the demands of a practical ministry. Of all the things to talk about while our armies are invading Europe and a new academic year is getting under way at Iliff, the poetry of worship may appear to be the most irrelevant. Today's minister must, in the very best sense, be a man of the world. He must live close to the place where his people also live; he must go down with them into the valley of tragedy and anxiety that is shadowed by the heavy clouds of war. Surely, then, there must be something more vital and compelling to say now to ministers and minister-in-the-making than that worship is akin to poetry, and that the minister must lead his people in worship as a kind of poet.

But think a moment. This matter of worship is of great and urgent importance. After all, worship is the distinctive function of the church, and leading in it is the minister's proper and unique job. Is this less true in wartime than in peace-time? Not at all. Worship is the sense and service of the living God. It is the very heart of the response we call religious. The minister's task, whether he be a chaplain at the fighting front or a pastor in the home church, is to direct and deepen this ancient, ever-new thrust of the human spirit after God. If the church and we who serve in it cannot give folk caught in the perplexity and pain of war some vision of the living God, then we can give them nothing. Now if ever the church must become the house of God, and the minister, while necessarily a man of the world, must be what we used to call him, the man of God.

You may grant the importance of worship in the wartime strategy of the ministry and yet deny that worship has anything to do with poetry. When anyone suggests that religion and poetry have something in common, vigorous protests are raised. I wrote a book last year in which I maintained that a study of poetry could teach us a great deal about making public prayers, and a reviewer at Garrett chastised me for holding the questionable position that religion is a kind of poetry. Incidentally, I did not and do not hold that it is.

Perhaps the reason we resent the hint of any such connection is that we think of poetry as fancy, whereas we want our religion to be founded upon fact. Poetry suggests to many people a kind of lacy embroidery on the stern and sturdy fabric of human life, a decorative prettiness fringing the raw and bleeding edges of reality. But this is a false notion of poetry. If you live close to poetry, whether by writing it or reading it, you begin to see how indespensible the poetic impulse is to worship, and how near to God and man the poet may come.

A poem, after all, emerges from the anguish and splendor, the heartache and glory, of life itself. I remember Robert Frost telling us at Amherst that a poet "leans against life until it stings him into utterance." Good, lasting poetry is no frosting on the cake of ordinary experience; it is the very essence of that experience, and poets are the most sensitive interpreters of it we have.

Not only does poetry have a great deal to do with the truth of the human heart; it is the only way in which these truths can sometimes be said at all. Poetry sounds depths and strikes overtones which no cold, dry prose can reach. It is "the heart's eager dim enormous language," instinct with the vastness of common things.

Let me give some examples of what I mean. Suppose you want to find out

all you can about Scotland. You consult a geography, perhaps, or a guide-book, and get lots of useful information. If you want to mine coal or learn the distances between traveling points this is all very helpful. But sometime you will want to know what Scotland means to a Scot, and then you must put down your geography and guide-book and take up Robert Burns:

> My heart's in the highlands,
> my heart is not here;
> My heart's in the highlands,
> a-chasing the deer;
> A-chasing the wild deer,
> and following the roe;
> My heart's in the highlands
> wherever I go.

Or consider the Bible itself, which contains much more poetry than we commonly assume. Dietary regulations, social codes or military engagements may be described fairly enough in prose; but when Job hears God out of the whirlwind, or John of Patmos visions the heavenly Jerusalem, only poetry does justice to the experience. The Psalms are poetry because they have to be. No language but that of the heart can say what it means to be God's child, sheltered and shadowed by His mercy and His power. Religious faith breaks out into poetry because it can truly express itself in no other way.

But I must get on to my theme, the poetry of worship. And first of all it is necessary to say what we take poetry to be. On the surface, of course, poetry is a pattern of word-sounds based on rhythm. This always means metre — a measured arrangement of syllables. It may or may not mean rime, the similarity of sound in the words ending a line. A hymn has rime; a psalm does not; yet the psalm is every bit as poetic as the hymn.

Beneath the surface poetry is much more than this. It is essentially metaphor, which is a way of saying one thing and meaning another. Metaphor takes visible objects, persons, events, and makes them mean something invisible but real. "The Lord is my shepherd"; "I am the vine, ye are the branches."

Here, for example, is a short poem by Ben Johnson which uses the metaphors of tree and lily to stand for two opposing conceptions of life:

> It is not growing like a tree
> In bulk, doth make man better be;
> Or standing long an oak, three
> hundred year,
> To fall a log at last, dry, bald, and sere;
> A lily of a day
> Is fairer far in May,
> Although it fall and die that night,
> It was the plant and flower of light.
> In small proportions we just beauties see;
> And in short measures, life may perfect be.

We have all heard sermons on this same theme; but there is no more vivid and telling way than this to put the truth that it is not length of days that makes the worth of life, but its graceful, poised excellence, however brief and fragile. And by the way, is there any more relevant theme that needs to be preached to the young lives in our own time which face the fearful prospect of being cruelly snuffed out in strange and distant corners of the earth?

The unending mystery of poetry is the way in which a picture of some commonplace experience becomes the token of a vast and wonderful one. Emily Dickinson could use broom and dustpan as symbols of the anguish of bereavement:

> The sweeping up the heart,
> And putting love away,
> We shall not want to use again
> Until eternity.

If you would know what is in man, what truly concerns him, what God he worships, read the poets. The depth and reach and height of life is their province, and their prerogative.

Ministers ought to read more widely and eagerly in the poets than they

do. And we should read in it less for sermon illustrations, and more for truth about life. If we did, our sermons would not be so flat and stale, our appreciation would be heightened for the momentous revelations hidden in the casual remark and the unnoticed event, and our perception of God in the drift and passage of common things would be clearer.

Now turn to worship. We all know ministers who are thoughtful preachers and careful preachers, but awkward or blase when leading people in worship. Yet if a minister fails here, he fails at the crucial place in his ministry. Why should worship be a tedious exercise, a pious pleasantry, or a dull routine? Because we have failed to enter it with the sense of glory, the breathless eagerness, and the heartfelt importance it ought to possess. While we have been asleep, our brethren in the enthusiastic churches on the other side of the tracks have been vigorously awake, answering in their own way the need for verve and power and color in the public service of worship. There is today a mighty craving for the experience of the living God in men's hearts. Can we meet that craving with the resources of Christian worship?

We can, because we must. First of all, however, we must sense the poetry of worship. Our public services must come alive. They must glow with feeling and lift us into God's presence by the imaginative route. They must employ us in the great business of seeking and serving the Maker, Lover, and Keeper of life.

But how? A first suggestion applies to the words we use in our worship. We naturally inherit a conventional worship-language, hallowed by ages of use and repetition. I would not for a moment discard this precious heritage. But I would insist that we supplement conventionality, wherever possible and proper, with the living speech of poetry. Our own pastoral prayers especially need the poetic touch. Here the minister is largely a free agent. He should endeavor to translate ancient truths into vivid bits of present-day life. His prayer should pierce through the husks of conventional piety to lay bare the kernel of our spirits. The words of the prayer, then, should stimulate the imagination, stretch the mind, invigorate the will.

Sometimes this means that we use poetry itself as the pastoral prayer. There are many fine poems written in the moods and for the purposes of prayer. I shall never forget Reinhold Niebuhr's use of John Donne's "Hymn to God the Father" as a pastoral prayer in the University of Chicago Chapel. Its words probed directly and deeply into us, laying bare the sense of guilt and calling forth the mood of confession. There is a large difference between mentioning confession in the prayer and actually creating the mood. Only the power and vitality of poetic speech can do the latter thing.

Or there are prayers already in use which have the true poetic quality and may become models for our own efforts. One of the best is the collect for aid against perils in the Book of Common Prayer: "Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, O Lord, and by Thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of Thy only Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ." If you prefer a less sombre and more graceful image, here is an old prayer written some time before 700 A. D.; "Make us, O Lord, to flourish like pure lilies in the courts of Thine house, and to show forth to the faithful the fragrance of good works, and the example of a godly life, through Thy mercy and grace." Metaphor — that is what gives these prayers their power and poignancy. And do not think that only antique prayers have poetry in them. Walter Rauschenbusch spoke of "our sister the Night;" Reinhold Niebuhr suggests that we are all wrapped up in a "bundle of life." Each of us, too,

must learn to use words in this creative way and thereby become something like poets, brooding with an artist's insight over the raw materials of life.

The second suggestion I want to make has to do with the action of worship. Let us understand once and for all that worship is doing something. It is an action, engaged in by the churchly fellowship, purposefully and communally. William Ernest Hocking has written that worship is the sphere of the will in religion; and the will is that in us which decides, resolves, acts.

There are two widespread misunderstandings of worship which we ought to avoid. One holds that worship is contemplative, not active; it is the pious and passive surrender of our wills to God. We used to sing a hymn that began "O to be nothing, nothing;" and, as Dr. Fosdick has said, it seems that our wish was largely granted. This notion of worship leads to the idea that action comes after worship. Worship is not the sphere of the will in religion, but social action, humanitarian service, is.

The other misunderstanding is that worship is an "opening exercise" warming up the congregation before the real business of the sermon gets under way. To judge by the way many ministers and laymen go through the motions, you would think that this view had many converts. On this basis worship is not action but a prelude to action; it is a kind of moral calisthenics before we turn to the more important task of "doing something about it."

Now I hold that both these views are false and wrong. Their effect is to degrade worship into a secondary function of the church service. I like a good sermon as well as anybody; but I find it hard to forgive a pastoral prayer that is thrown together a few minutes before the service, a haphazard selection of hymns, and a scripture reading lifted out of a concordance simply because it has the word in it which the minister wants to play with through the sermon. No wonder our worship is so casual, so careless, so lacking in taste and thought! It sometimes seems that our busy, frenetic Protestantism has no thought or time or energy for the practice of the presence of God.

If nothing happens to people in Protestant worship it is because no one expects anything to happen. People drift in, chatting of small matters; the minister enters, fusses with his sermon notes on the pulpit, perhaps whispers to the organist or beckons to an usher; and the choir straggles in to the loft. After everyone is in place one of the deacons hurries down an aisle, takes a match from his pocket, strikes it on his uplifted shoe, and applies it to the candles on the communion table. Then the service is at last ready to begin.

The matter with all this is simply that nobody expects anything great and valuable to happen. There should be at least the same hushed expectancy which enthralls an audience before the curtain goes up on a good play, or before Toscanini comes in to conduct the Brahms Fourth Symphony. Minister and people should be eagerly silent, awaiting the tremendous mystery, the awesome voyage of the spirit to God. How seldom we get this sense in a Protestant church! I felt it once in a ramshackle Negro church on Chicago's south side; I met it again in the Russian church in Paris, as the priests were coming with the incense and the choirs were chanting inexpressibly angelic music; I have known it in a great university chapel. It is the sense that worship is an action, corporate and deliberate, through which men are lifted into the real presence of the High and Holy One.

Worship is an act; it is something done. Here again it is like poetry, which means actually "making" or "doing." The action both in worship and poetry is symbolic; it stands for something else. The visible objects and behavior

of worship point beyond themselves to that for which they stand, namely, the fact of God. If only worship were more often the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, we might appreciate the glory of eternal partnership with which it surrounds our day-to-day existence.

Worshipful action is not only symbolic, but dramatic. In saying this I do not mean that the congregation is an audience watching the minister, choir and organist perform. Soren Kierkegaard had, I think, a helpful way of expressing the dramatic nature of worship. He wrote that the congregation are not spectators in a theater but the actors on the stage. The preacher and music are the prompters giving the actors their cues from the wings. And the audience — well, God is the audience; and the whole performance is given for Him.

The last of our three suggestions is that worship is the articulation of our thought about God; which is to say that worship has a frankly theological basis. Our modern books on worship, and there are many of them, have almost completely sidestepped the issue. As a man thinks, so he worships and so he is. What he says about God and how he behaves toward God reflect his beliefs concerning Him.

In this matter there is a third kinship between worship and poetry. Genuine poetry is what Robert Frost called "enthusiasm passed through the prism of an idea." The lasting thing in it is a thought. It is not otherwise with worship. When a minister gets up to pray and says "Almighty God," he is using an idea of tremendous reach and meaning. But how many of us who say "Almighty God" really mean it, or know what we are saying? Do we accept the belief that God's power is over the whole of life, the evil as well as the good, the explanation of everything that occurs? Or are we paying merely a thoughtless compliment to Him? The point is that we worship with ideas, whether we recognize them or not; and that, therefore, we should seek to clarify and criticize our ideas employed in worship.

A poet spends a long time seeking his own idiom, his native simile. So the worshiper must constantly be zealous for truth and sincerity in worship. He may worship a God whose ways he does not altogether understand; we all do that. But he should not under any conditions worship a God in whom he does not believe. That is the deadly sin in worship. Whitehead says that the chief religious virtue is sincerity, a penetrating sincerity. It is not a virtue conspicuously present in our leaders of worship today. Yet it is the one thing needful. No traces of pretense, professionalism, or pride must come between us and God in worship. They are the masks the hypocrites wear. We are under the strict obligation to think clearly, to be honestly ourselves, in worship.

When worship is of this sort, it does two things for us. First, it brings us to ourselves. The prayer searches heartward. The scriptures, as Coleridge said, find us where we live. The hymns speak to our condition. This is the principle of self-discovery in worship. Let me give one example. I have read the words in the marriage service, "till death us do part," over a hundred times. But not until last year, while I was marrying a good many soldiers in our chapel, did these words strike immediately home. They ceased to be a formal statement and became symbols of a genuine possibility. Death really might part this couple standing before me, I thought, and might part them horribly soon; and the step of marriage was being taken in the light of this awful chance. The words broke through to where we really lived.

The second thing right worship does

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