

"WHAT GOES ON IN THERE?"

INTRODUCTION

The morning was hot and stuffy with very little in the way of inspiration in it. The congregation was small and sleepy. From behind waving fans, the assembled worshippers looked not too hopefully toward the pulpit where the minister, evidently ill-prepared, struggled with his sermon and didn't quite get it off the ground. And when it was over and the benediction had been pronounced, he stood at the door of the church as was his custom to greet the people as they left. "Sure is a hot day, preacher" said one man. "Terrible, dreadful" replied the minister. "Good morning, Reverend....hope it rains today" suggested another. "Yes" responded the minister...."we sure need it. It would be a blessing". And so it went as the people filed out. Then, suddenly, he was shaking hands with a stranger. And something in the eyes and the bearing of this stranger made the minister uneasy and uncomfortable.

"My name is Jones" said the minister, extending his hand. "Yes, I know" was the reply he received. An awkward silence followed. "And yours?" asked the minister. "Oh, I'm just a stranger passing through...." Again, a moment of silence. The minister tried again. "I see....well, sir, it's been good to have you with us today, and I hope you'll plan to come again. Yes - come again". To which the stranger replied, "why?" It's reported that the preacher didn't see any more people after that although he continued to shake hands with folks at the door. He didn't hear what they said as they went by him. Only one word was in his ears. "Why?" That one word apparently set the preacher to thinking, and it was later reported that it put some new meaning into his ministry. He was jolted by that sharp question asked by the visitor who stopped to worship and was invited to come again.

Alongside of that, let me share with you something that happened here on Sunday morning some time ago. It was around ten o'clock. The choir was rehearsing up here in the chancel in preparation for the service. I was standing at the back of the church, in the narthex, near the front doors. Two boys, about eight or nine years of age, stood on the front steps of the church, with their faces pressed up against the windows looking in. I opened the doors and invited them to come in. After a few moments, one of the boys turned to me and said, "Mister, what goes on in here anyway?"

DEVELOPMENT

We have here two questions that are more or less related and I'm using them as a spring board for this sermon. They've given me some disturbing thought: "Come again" "Why?" And "Minister, what goes on in there?"

Have you ever stopped to think about why do people come to church? Why should they come? Often we hear the question framed in the negative, why don't people go to church, but I've thought more provocative to ask it this way: "Why do they come?" Because, mind you - they do! According to a recent pollster's latest sample of public behavior, there are usually about forty million people in church on a Sunday morning across America. It's good to know this - reassuring to us here in the city where congregations are slim. Forty million - why? What about yourself? Why do you go to church? We do not go from coercion - that's for sure; nobody makes us go, at least not here in this town. We value our freedom. We don't go for amusement; there are more entertaining things to do on a Sunday than go to church. We don't go to parade our righteousness; we have too healthy a sense of humor for that. Yet we go - and, in spite of divided churches, dull sermons, hot Sundays, and lots of other things that bother us about the church, we go and we continue to go. Why?

PURPOSE

Let's think about this question and consider what going to church should mean to us, and why we Christians must, in this secular age and urban setting, need to concern ourselves with the worship of God - cultivate, if you will,

the art of it, and try to make it a more effective and uplifting force in our lives. It was Ruskin who once said that the most precious hour in the week is that hour when a company of men and women baffled and weary with the week's labor have come in after six days' exposure to the full weight of the world's atmosphere, where the thorns and the thistles have been springing up in their lives, and the minister has but sixty minutes to get to the separate hearts of the people, to try by this way and that to open the hard fastenings of those doors where the Master himself has stood and knocked saying, 'If any man will open the door, I will come in'.

How can we here in the city get this door open a bit wider, to teach and train people in the art of worship, and to make it more effective in the fight to overcome some of the ills of modern life, for instance - to overcome the loss of identity and the loss of community. And is so often the case in my messages, I have three words, three points to put before you to stimulate your thinking through this matter.

PREPARATION The first word is PREPARATION. Something significant, I feel, can and does go in "in there" when we come with some sense of expectation and preparation. Very little is likely to happen in our lives when we don't.

You can saunter into a musical comedy, I suppose, without previous preparation, but if you want to hear what Shakespeare and the great dramatists are saying, then you have to bring something with you. When people say as they sometimes do, "But I just don't get anything out of church", I'm always tempted to ask if they're putting much in to it - by way of preparation. Conceivably a man could go into a library, sit all day among the books, the great ideas and thoughts of the ages, and come out as empty headed as he went in. In other words, you have to prepare for it, you have to bring something to it. If the Lord's Day is to add up to anything in our lives, if it to be fruitful as it ought to be, then one must make some preparations for it.

That's why Sunday should always begin on Saturday night. Very early in the history of the race the discovery was made that one day set aside for rest and spiritual renewal was indispensable to human well-being, and for very good reason it was decreed by the Hebrews that the Sabbath should begin with sunset. The people must get their minds ready, go through certain disciplines, prepare to sensitize their spirits to God's spirit. Our Jewish friends have a fine idea in this regard. Now let's face it. There are many for whom nothing happens on Sunday morning because too much has happened on a Saturday night. Good old Saturday night. Saturday has been almost preempted by the world, the flesh and the devil. More liquor is consumed, more money thrown away, more cars wrecked, more brawls started, more souls damaged, more people shot on Saturday night than on any other. It's a noisy night, and while we may not join in the raucous humlabaloo, we have to live in it and around it.

My wife and I do not go out on Saturday night. We made the decision shortly after coming to this church and city that we couldn't bring our best to Sunday morning if we were running around town on Saturday night. Only five or six times in fifteen years have we ever been out on a Saturday night. Sounds very dull, I'm sure to some of you, and my wife would say that it is. Nevertheless. I don't know how it was with you, but I grew up in a home where preparation for Sunday began on a Saturday night. Shows were cleaned, clothes arranged, housework completed, Sunday School lessons were prepared. Sunday was to be a different day, and mind you we knew this from what went on around our home on a Saturday night. I don't know how far you can go in all of this, but surely there are some small disciplines that can be followed, preparations tended to, to help make our Sundays a little different. A good night's sleep is helpful. Getting up in time. Having something to eat before you come. Getting to church ten to fifteen minutes before the service begins. Come

in and sit in the quietness. Listen to the magnificent organ preludes that are being played. I wouldn't have missed that "Prelude and Fugue in D major" this morning for anything.

One minister was so troubled with the late comers coming in after the service began that he once shocked everybody with this opening prayer:

"O Lord, bless those mightily who are in their places, give grace to those who are on their way, and have mercy on those who are getting ready to come and who never arrive".

What about those who miss most of the service, but make it for all of the coffee hour? What goes on "in there"? It depends in part on what one brings to it, how one prepares for it, and I'm sure that there's room for improvement on this point for all of us.

PARTICIPATION The next word is participation. And what's what worship is really for, every person walking up the altar steps of thought and meditation, laying bare his soul in the presence of the Most High. There is a sense in which it doesn't matter at all whether you listen to the sermon or not, or take in the solo and the anthem, and share in the prayers - although I wouldn't want to press this too far. But I think one can worship without them. The Quakers do. They sit in silence and wait for the inner light. Worship is something infinitely more than a performance in which some are actors and entertainers and promptors and the rest the audience. What goes on in church is something that takes place on the deeper level, the unconscious level of being. It's what the Bible speaks of as "the deep that calleth unto deep". And often without a word being spoken that does happen.

A writer on the editorial staff of the NY Times, who writes for the most part not about the big issues in the headlines, but about the common folksy things with which we are familiar daily, was hurrying to catch the subway one hot morning back in June, when he saw a flower someone had apparently dropped on the subway steps. He stopped to pick it up - a lilac blossom with a faint fragrance still clinging to it. As he did, there came home to him something he had almost forgotten - it was Summer in the country. Somewhere beyond these hot pavements, these man-made canyons of cement and steel, out there where he was born, green things were growing and blooming in the fields, blue mists were rising over green mountains. Summer in the country. But here in the city, he had almost forgotten that....a whole world of reality and beauty shoved out of his mind by the sights and sounds of the city hard at work. And he stood there with the flower in his hand....remember, he said.

There are various ways, I suppose, of trying to say what worship is. This is certainly one of them: a way of remembering - a way of being reminded by prayers and hymns, by sacred writings and sacred music that life is not really stripped down to the bare essentials of bread, butter and business, but is surrounded and enveloped a great mysterious world of reality to which we belong and from which we can never wholly escape. A way of remembering who we are and what our origins are and our destiny is.

Perhaps this is why people go to church. Because something does go on in there as it does nowhere else, to remind them of a certain grandeur, a certain stature, a higher and holier dimension of life which we can so easily forget. Something goes on in there that enables them to link their lives up with a power greater than their own. In there they are reminded that there is One who slumbers not nor sleeps, who walks with them through the valley of shadows, that there are paths out of difficult

problems, always a light at the end of a dark tunnel, that power is available for every human need. It is in our worship that we try "to split the sky in two and let the face of God shine through". Preparation, participation by your presence helps to create the miracle we call worship.

PRACTICE But there is one final word to add to this in order to complete our trinity. The final word is practice. Without this final word, the other two words are apt to be incomplete. Something significant goes on in church when we prepare thoughtfully for it, when we participate wholeheartedly in it, and finally when we practice conscientiously what comes out of it. The test, of course, is in the practice. No truth, remember, is given us just to hold in our minds and admire. Every word of God is given us that we may weave it into the texture of our lives.

We have plenty of critics around us who will tell us that we church folks are really mostly ears, that we go to church and very little comes out of it, that we tend to substitute hearing for doing and call that serving God. Their criticism is not without foundation, and there is truth in that old complaint, but after making allowance for that complaint, that's not the entire story - not by a long shot.

For there's no way to estimate what gets structured into human society through what goes on in a church, through the people who carry their Sundays into their Mondays, who fight the good fight all week long, who try to translate their convictions and insights into everyday affairs. There's an old story in the 6th chapter of Isaiah of a young man sitting in church and out of the silence hearing a voice, "Who will go for us?", and out of the deeper silence of his own heart, he answered, "Here am I, Lord. Send me". And it's a story that has happened over and over again - countless times - as men have carried their Sundays over into Monday.

I clipped an article from a magazine some time back, entitled, "Sermons That Started Something" - in which it summarized an itemized a long list of social achievements big and small that received original impetus and impulse in a church service. Many schools and universities were named, among them Northwestern, Harvard, and Princeton, some of the achievements traced to a specific service. Hospitals and reforms were mentioned. It pointed out, too, that sermons have stopped things - like the war between Chile and Argentina which ended up with both sides setting up that great statue of Christ on the mountain - the Christ of the Andes. When Aaron Burr shot Alexander Hamilton in a duel, a preacher up the Hudson River in Albany preached such a forceful sermon on the folly of it that he set in motion the initial law which eventually put an end to dueling in America. And it was a communion service that Harriet Beecher Stowe, in a flash of insight, got her idea for Uncle Tom's Cabin which figures so largely in the outlawing of slavery. When the benediction was pronounced, she walked home as though in a trance, fighting to keep back the tears, went straight to her room, and wrote the outline of the vision she had seen before the altar of God in her church.

CONCLUSION "Mister, what goes on in there?" Who knows? It's hard to put it all in to words. Not enough - to be sure. We know this. But who knows: when we bring our best to this hour, through some preparation ahead of time, when we enter into the experience - fully, wholeheartedly - and then when we follow through and seriously practice some of the things put before us - who knows...who knows what can and will happen when people pause for an hour and bow down before God, renewing previous commitments and reexamining convictions to a way of life proclaimed by the Lord of Life. Who knows...it may yet change the face of all the world.

PRAYER

PRAYER O God, our Father, who hast brought us together this day in this
 place of worship, grant that each of us may in these moments again
commit ourselves to thee and to thy purpose for us, and that we may go forth from
this place - strengthened, renewed in body, mind and spirit, to do thy work and to
let thy light shine through in our world. Amen