

**SOMETHING MORE THAN ENTERTAINMENT**

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Psalm 100

In my files I have a clipping from the New York Times under the dateline November 20, 1954. It gives a report of the religious practices in the tiny country of Ceylon. Among other things, it says:

¶The chief source of entertainment for women in Ceylon is religion. Pilgrimages to distant shrines, visits to temples and other festivals offer women their most exciting occasions. Women are barred by custom from the movies.¶

I suppose the first response many Americans would make is best characterized by what one rather honest individual *did* say when I mentioned the article not too long ago:

¶Oh, my! How do they keep going? Life would be terribly dull without movies!¶

But many other Americans would quickly add:

¶Life can be terribly dull *with* movies. It's a good thing the Ceylonese women have their religion.¶

But is religion merely entertainment?

Well, let me forcibly assert that religion ought never to be dull! To be sure, it has been dull to millions. But it need not have been. A religious faith can, and ought to, be the most exciting thing on earth.

Scan the pages of this Book and you will find such enthusiastic testimonies as:

¶A day in Thy courts is better than a thousand.¶

AI would rather be a doorkeeper in the House of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.©

AS the hart pants for the flowing streams, so longs my soul for Thee, oh God.©

A religious faith can be entertainment in the highest sense of that word. A true expression of it should grip

the mind,

and heart

and imagination.

But we can never let it go at that.

These hours which we spend in corporate worship on Sundays and Wednesdays and at other times throughout the week must be Something More Than Entertainment.

We can never allow our presence in church to degenerate into something that we do when there is nothing more exciting to be done.

Of course, it has descended to that level at times. Many people come to church to be entertained. I guess every minister who is pressed for an answer will admit that sometimes he has the feeling, as he mounts the pulpit stairs, that there are those in his congregation who have comfortably settled back in their seats saying,

AStrong right, preacher, I've condescended to come to church.

Now thrill me!©

Who among us hasn't heard comments like these coming from people leaving their church on a Sunday morning: AIsn't Dr. Sweetly just divine?© Or, AHonestly, I don't care for those sermons on sin at all!© Or, AWasn't the choir just heavenly!© Or, AI don't like the soprano. She sings flat!© (Thank goodness no one can ever say that of you, Gloria!)

You see, for them it is only entertainment. Sometimes pleasing. Sometimes not. But *still* entertainment. And one of the great weaknesses of the church is that so many people come just to be entertained on a high level. Well, how can we overcome that? Is there anything in our worship experience that can provide Something More Than Entertainment?

Dr. Henry Hallam Tweedy once listed some of the tremendous things that can happen to sensitive people through Christian worship. Here are a few of his suggestions:

- ▲ In quietness to flood life with a sense of the nearness and goodness of God.
- ▲ To recall sins and shortcomings, seeking forgiveness and setting the will against repeating them.
- ▲ To face frankly and squarely ones difficulties and dangers, ones burdens and sorrows, and in quietness and confidence be sure that, with God=s help, one can meet them triumphantly every day.®

Take a look at these three things which worship can accomplish in our lives, for to see them is to recognize that your visits to Father=s House must be Something More Than Entertainment. For one thing,

### **Worship Makes Possible An Encounter With God.**

In quietness, our life is flooded with a sense of the nearness and goodness of our Heavenly Father. In 1917, during World War I, John Oxenham received word that his son had been killed in action. In his despair and loneliness, Dr. Oxenham went to a London chapel to pray and think. In the quiet beauty of that place of worship, he wrote the poem, The Vision Splendid.

▲Mid all the traffic of the ways,  
Turmoil without, within,  
Make in my heart a quiet place,  
And come and dwell within.

AA little shrine of quietness  
All sacred to thyself,  
Where Thou shalt all my soul possess,  
And I may find myself.©

Out of that spiritual experience of worship in the life of that grief-stricken father came *much* more than a poem which has inspired millions. There also came the assurance that he was not alone! That amid all the complexities of life in a war-torn world, he could find a sense of the nearness and goodness of God.

That's the purpose of the church. Whether it be located at a busy intersection where cross the crowded ways of life, or on a lonely country road where people rarely pass, or like our own in the center of a community of homes, its purpose is the same:

To make possible the divine-human encounter between God and people.  
To help men, women, boys and girls to come into a closer communion with Christ and to thus discover His will for their lives.

I don't mean to suggest that we can only sense  
the nearness,  
goodness,  
beauty, and  
peacefulness of God in church.

He can be, and *is*, known elsewhere. Many of you have testified to that.

I don't suppose there is any place where God could seem further away than in a New York subway where one is

deafened by the roar,

jostled by the crowd,  
and trampled under foot  
if he or she is not careful.

And yet, an unknown writer has left us a testimony of a daily encounter with God in such an unlikely place.

Al who have lost the stars, the sod,  
For killing pavement and cheerless light,  
Have made my meeting place with God  
A new and other night.

AA pigment in the crowded dark,  
Where people sit muted by the roar,  
I ride upon the whirring spark  
Beneath the city-s floor.

AYou that need country skies to pray,  
Scoff not at me, the city clod,  
My only respite of the day  
Is this wild ride with God.®

Yes, God *can* be found amid the deafening roar of a subway train.

I love what David Seabury, the eminent psychiatrist, said to a patient who was pouring out her troubles. Right in the middle of her consultation, he interrupted her to point to a glass paper weight on his desk. The sun had broken through the high buildings of the New York business district and touched the piece of glass turning it, for a moment, into a shining jewel. The patient was disturbed that the doctor seemed to pay so little attention to her troubles and was so very much interested in the reflected colors of the sun in the paper weight. Dr. Seabury tells us what he said to her. Let me read it to you.

AHow do you think I keep going? Do you not know, for instance,

that bankers working at a desk and become depressed, and soured on life, if they do nothing about it?

ADo you not know that lawyers who work with people hearing troubles, family and otherwise, can become fed up on life?

ADo you not know that physicians and surgeons who see, oft times, the worst side of human nature have to watch themselves continually or they become professional and lose that human touch that differentiates the top-notcher from one who treats human life just as a mechanism?

AAAnd is it not the same of people who work in factories, or wherever they are, that if they give themselves *out*, they must fill themselves *up* with beauty, or their life will become a quagmire of pessimism and defeat? Perhaps if you clutched beauty more, your problems would not now be cluttering up your life.

ASo, I take every opportunity I can to clutch a handful of beauty. To listen to a snatch of song. To open the door of my heart to a little bit of peace so that I can overcome life and not let life overcome me. @

And that's what these services of worship are intended to provide:

An opportunity to make encounter with God. And, in quiet beauty, possess a sense of His nearness,  
His goodness  
and His power.

ASo Where He shall all our souls possess and we may find ourselves. @

Surely an experience like that can make our Christian faith and worship Something More Than Entertainment.

**Worship Awakens Our Awareness of Sin and Sharpens Up The Reality of God=s Forgiveness.**

So often we engage in the foolish practice of comparing ourselves with others. And because we think we are not quite as bad as some people we knowC

the alcoholic,  
the heathen in distant jungles,  
the girl who plays fast and loose, or  
the miserable mendicant on skid rowC

that we are all right. That we have no need of God=s salvation.

We look at our economic accomplishments,

we drive through the winding streets of our  
upper-middle class of our community,  
we pick up our newspapers and read blazing  
headlines of those who literally seem to wallow in sin,

and, as we do, we mentally lift our self-righteous thumb high and placidly gaze at the plum of our own accomplishments and, like Little Jack Horner, say: *What a good boy am I!*@

But, when we enter the House of God, that illusion is suddenly shattered. Through an encounter with Him in some holy place of worship, we suddenly see ourselves as God sees us. We become agonizingly aware of that secret sin which lies buried beneath the surface of our upper-middle class complacency.

And our sin becomes intolerable!

A divine repugnance rolls in like the relentless waves of the ocean and we find our heart crying out:

*God! Be merciful to me, a sinner!*@

And as we do, we experience the miraculous birth of what James promises in his epistle:

*Humble thyself before God and He will lift thee up.*@

We can actually feel the burden lift as God Himself comes out of His great heaven and, stooping

over, takes the burden of our sin from off of us and lays it upon His Son. The overwhelming fact of His total forgiveness bursts upon us like a sudden ray of sunlight piercing through a thunder cloud and we *know*

that we have been forgiven,  
that our sin has been taken from us as far as the east is from the west,  
that is has been cast into the abyss of God=s complete forgiveness.

And in that moment with God, worship becomes Something More Than Entertainment.

A businessman tells of kneeling beside a reclaimed drunk in a bowery mission. As he rose to his feet after praying with this man, he said: *What a miracle of grace!* A friend overheard him and asked: *Do you mean that this drunkard should be changed? Freed from his slavery to drink?* *No,* said the businessman, *I had nothing to surrender except the things that were destroying him. I was thinking of myself. Taught the courtesies of life from the cradle, given the benefits of education, possessing all the material things economic security can give, and yet God led me to see my own sinfulness, made me willing to kneel as empty of good works as this poor alcoholic, and then gave me His forgiveness. That=s what I call a miracle of grace=*

To anyone who has ever known the awful, indescribable depression that is the result of a sense of guilt, the words of Jesus *Go in peace, thy sins are forgiven* are the most beautiful words which could ever fall upon ones ears.

To be forgiven.

To feel the warmth of God=s love against the icy blast of guilt.

To hear His words *My grace is sufficient for thee.*

To experience that lightness of heart which comes with the knowledge of sin forgiven is to make worship Something MoreCoh, so very much moreCThan Entertainment!

If I read the human situation right, sin weighs heavily on all of us at times. We need a haven to which we can turn. For generations, people have given witness that it is in The House Of GodCin a sanctuary dedicated to His worship as is no other place on earth so dedicatedCwhere

they have most often discovered the experience of forgiveness we are talking about.

God rarely shouts! But, oh, how He whispers! And it is in a place like this, hallowed with a sense of His presence, that we so often hear that still, small voice whispering in our ear:

ANeither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more. No more. No more. @

And then our worship, our religious faith, is Something More Than Entertainment because

### **Worship Produces an Experience of Renewal.**

As Dr. Tweedy pointed out:

AIt enables us to face frankly and squarely our difficulties and dangers, our burdens and sorrows, and in quietness and confidence be sure that, with Gods help, we can meet them triumphantly every day. @

Through worship, you see, we experience renewal. For the church is a place of mystic grace.

In those moments of tragic sorrow when John Oxenham lost his son, he learned to speak of the power of prayerful worship in such a place. He described it as

AA little shelter from life=s stress,  
Where I may lay me prone,  
And bare my soul in loneliness  
And know as I am known. @

Shortly after coming to Chicago, I was down in the loop on business. One of those sudden electrical storms developed and, as the lightning began to flash, the clouds obscured the tops of the buildings. A torrential rain began to pour down upon those of us who were luckless enough to be without a rain coat. I didn=t realize where I was, so I ducked into the first building entrance I came to. It was jammed with similar pilgrims seeking shelter from the storm so I opened the

door behind them and went into the vestibule of the building. It was then that I realized I was in the Narthex of The City Temple.

It was my first time in that great church. I entered the sanctuary and there, in the quiet beauty, along with perhaps a dozen others, I waited out the storm in private worship. I had been seeking a physical shelter to protect me from the elements of nature=s outburst. I found not only that, but a place which symbolizes the shelter from life=s stress where I could meet God and know Him even as I am known by Him. And what I expressed there *that* day may be your experience here *this* day.

Dr. Edward Elson, president Eisenhower=s pastor, tells how one Saturday afternoon his secretary answered the telephone. Someone was calling to ask if the president was expected to be present in church the next day. The secretary=s classic reply was:

AI don=t know whether or not the president will be here tomorrow,  
but I can assure you that *God* will be.®

That=s what I=m talking about! God is here, if you only seek Him!

Here is a sacred place dedicated to the worship of God. When you enter it with a hungry heart and an anxious soulClonging to be in communion with HimCyou will be! He=s here! But remember, whether or not you find Him will in a great measure depend upon you.

The setting may be one of beauty.

The order of service may be well planned for a spiritual experience.

The music may be ethereal.

The message wrought out on the anvil of prayer.

But if your heart is full of rancor,

if your mind is closed and your ears are stopped,

you will leave us as you came: *with an empty heart!* Worship can be a rather unsatisfactory form of entertainment or it can be Something More Than Entertainment. It depends on you, and how you use it, or if you use it at all!

I love Dr. Charles Goff's story of how one day he was babysitting his five year old grandson. Dr. Goff took the lad up into his lap and showed him the age old object lesson of:

¶Here is the church,  
This is the Steeple,  
Open the door,  
And there are the people!@

The little boy had heard of Dr. Goff's many adult friends call him ¶Charlie® and had developed a delightful habit of calling his Grandpa ¶Charlie®. So, when Dr. Goff had finished with the object lesson, the little boy said:

¶Do it again, Charlie!

Dr. Goff repeated:

¶Here is the church,  
This is the Steeple,  
Open the door,  
And there are the people!@

Then he said,

¶Let's see you do it, son.®

The little boy put his fingers the wrong way and said,

¶Here is the church,  
This is the Steeple,  
Open the door,  
And....

¶Hey, there ain't no people, Charlie!@

Well, the church and the experiences of worship will be useless unless you use them. If you were one of the people that ¶ain't there®, then that spiritual blessing which God has set aside just for you is wasted and, in that degree, you are infinitely poorer than you might have been.

I have never been to the Singing Tower or the Bird Sanctuary atop Iron Mountain near Lake Wales in Florida. But I have been told by those who have been there that over one of the gateways is this sentence taken from John Burroughs:

I come here to find myself. It=s so easy to get lost in the world.@

I=ve often thought those would be beautiful words to place over the entrance to *our* sanctuary so that each and every time we pass through the doors, we would be reminded --

That we are entering upon an experience which can be Something More Than Entertainment.

That we are standing upon the threshold of another encounter with God.

That we will be made aware of the awfulness of sin, yes, but what is more, that once again we will hear about the majesty and miracle of God=s forgiveness.

And if we enter each time with an eager heart that says with Jacob:

I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me@

then we shall turn away refreshed, renewed, redeemed. And, from deep within the caverns of our soul will come this hymn of praise:

It was good to have been in the house of God!@