

Church Going

Imagine a fellow of mature age entering an empty church (not large) of a week day – out of reminiscences, for he had once been a churchgoer, let's say an Anglican like the poet Philip Larkin, or let's say it's you, moved by a touch of nostalgia.

For let's say *you* also were once a believer, devout enough, but over time, due to education or the secular influences of our modern world or just disenchantment with church in general, you left it all behind, a childhood memory. The days of *Going My Way* and Fr. O'Malley (as crooned by Bing Crosby) were over. Maybe it was echoes of the Gospel's own criticism of religious leadership's tendency to strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

And so there you are. Along with Larkin in his poem *Church Going*, you make sure nothing is going on (and at a deeper level you do feel, as Larkin did, that "Church" in general is indeed *Going*, fading, becoming a thing of the past, irretrievable as far as you are concerned.)

Another church: [writes Larkin] . . . seats, and stone, / And little books, sprawlings of flowers . . . / . . . the small neat organ; / And a tense, musty, unignorable silence, . . . // Move forward, run my hand around the font. / . . . Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few / . . . verses, and pronounce / "Here endeth" much more loudly than I meant . . . / I sign the book . . . / Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet, as Larkin confesses, you may admit: *Yet stop I did: in fact I often do / And always end much at a loss like this, / Wondering what to look for; wondering, too, / When churches fall completely out of use / What we shall turn them into . . .* Along with the poet you can imagine: *after dark, will dubious women come / To make their children touch a particular stone . . . // . . . Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff / Of gown-and-bands and organ pipes and myrrh?*

But by this part of Larkin's poem may you not agree with his conclusion regarding his visit to this empty church?

A serious house on serious earth it is, / In whose blent air all our compulsions meet, / Are recognized, and robed as destinies. / And that much never can be obsolete, / Since someone will forever be surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious, / And gravitating with it to this ground, / Which he once heard, was proper to grow wise in, . . .

So ultimately Church is something to become serious about. But what do we mean by serious? Regular attendance? Frequent communion? Of course! But must we not probe deeper than that? How to define serious? Maybe it means dealing with life as more than making a living, even raising a family . . . Maybe it means pondering and pursuing your ultimate personal origin and destiny and all that entails, the better part of which is faith, hope and actual love – things that Philip Larkin, even in his condition of unbelief, touches upon in this poem. As a website titled *Interesting Literature* states: *In the last analysis, 'Church Going' is perhaps the greatest Christian poem written by a non-Christian, and a fine, if measured, paean to the continued worth of churches in secular times.*