

SO YOUR SUNDAY SERVICE IS TOO LONG?

Today's Text: Nehemiah Ch. 8: 1-12; Acts 20: 6-12

Extracts:

1. **"Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded Israel. Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. Then he read from it in the open square... from morning until mid-day ... and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. ...And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. Then all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen!' while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground"** [Neh. 8: 1-3, 6]
2. **"Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together. ... Now when he had come up, and broken bread and eaten, and talked a long while, even till daybreak, he departed"** [Acts 20: 7-8, 11]

The 1978 FIFA World Cup final was played on Sunday, 25 June 1978 between the host Argentina and Holland. In one large church in Lagos, the last Sunday service was in progress at the time of the kick-off. Apart from the fact that the attendance was quite lean, compared to normal, those who came were not under any illusions that they wanted a short service. From the way that even the officiating priest was rushing things up, you could sense that he himself was also anxious to go and watch the match! He was noted for his usually long sermons. On that day, he promised to be brief. After only about ten minutes into the sermon, a young man at the back row could not hide his impatience. He looked at his watch several times. Then he slipped out of the church and drove off. Just a few minutes later, there was a loud bang from the nearby road. People rushed to the scene only to discover that the young man had been crushed to death in his car by a trailer as he tried to drive into the busy expressway.

Many of us have been a little luckier than the young man but we are hardly different in our behaviour. When we choose to go to church at all, we cannot wait to get out. For the short time we are there, we hardly concentrate. Instead, we are criticizing everything, such as the "time-wasting," the "boring sermons" or even the "unending collections." In response, many churches are cutting down on the length of their services. But why should that be when the same people are spending more time on their jobs, businesses or pastimes without complaining? How long is enough? That is the subject of today's lesson.

1. Why should I go to church in the first place?

In today's discussion, we shall use church to refer to a place or building where people go to worship God. In the predominantly Christian countries of the Western world, church attendance is reported to have dropped significantly especially among young people. These are societies where workers have Saturday and Sunday off from their regular jobs. In fact, most public offices and businesses close on Sunday. Therefore, the drop in attendance may not be due to lack of time to go to church. The likelihood is that most people do not see church attendance as necessary for their salvation.

Some people argue that God cannot be housed on earth, His footstool [**Is. 66: 1**]. Some people quote Jesus when He spoke with the Samaritan woman, saying, "The hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain [*i.e., where Moses received the Ten Commandments*] nor in Jerusalem [*where Solomon's temple was built*] worship the Father. ...But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth... God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth" [**Jn 4: 21, 23-24**]. The emphasis then is for every true believer to become the temple of the living God [**2 Cor. 6: 16-18**]. In that case, wherever such believers are, they are carrying the house of God in their hearts.

Unfortunately, most of us have not reached there! Even those who have done so keep backsliding as a result of sin. Don't we need a spiritual gas station where we can refuel our empty tanks? The church plays such a role in several ways, some of which are as follows:

a) *The church as a school*

Although it is possible for us to educate our children at home, we rush them to school as early as possible. Why? It is because school is a two-way system. As the child is passing through school (to become literate and certificated), the school is also passing through him/her (discipline, interpersonal relations, friendship, etc). That is why even where schools offer external or Internet-based programmes, they still encourage their students to visit the campus for a prescribed period before they graduate. Even after certification, we continue to train (the life-learning experience concept) so that our knowledge does not become obsolete.

In like manner, we need to go to the house of God, first to become "spiritually literate" and next to meet the "household of faith" [**Gal. 6: 10**]. Hannah would have been able to raise her son, Samuel, at home to fear God. Instead, she took him to the priest, Eli, to raise him in Shiloh where the house of the Lord was at the time [**1 Sam. 1: 7, 24-28**].

b) *The church as a medical centre*

When we have illnesses that can be medically treated, we go to the hospital. In some cases, however, such illnesses have a spiritual dimension that may render hospital treatment ineffective. Where then do we go from there? In the days of Jesus Christ, “the blind and the lame came to Him *in the temple*, and He healed them” [Matt. 21: 14]. The word of God says, “Is *anyone* among you sick? Let him call for *the elders of the church*, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick” [Jam. 5: 13,14]. This privilege is for *every sick person*. If you do not belong to or attend a local church, which *elders of the church* will you call?

c) *The church as a sanctuary*

When we are buffeted right left and centre by the strains and stresses of modern living, we need to go somewhere to find a sanctuary, a safe haven or place of safety. Some of us may go to medical experts or gurus or practise yoga. Some people may commit suicide so as to “end all the suffering.” The likelihood is that the problems may become compounded.

There is a better option. God is ever present in His earthly house, the church, for “the Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him” [Hab. 2: 20]. Jesus Christ drove away moneychangers from the temple because God’s house “shall be called the house of prayer” [Matt. 21: 13; Is. 56:7]. God assured Solomon at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, “I have chosen and *sanctified this house*, that My name may be there *forever*; and My eyes and My heart will be there *perpetually*” [2 Chron. 7: 16]. Hundreds of years later, when Jehosaphat was threatened by massive military invasion, he brought his people to that temple and God answered his prayer [2 Chron. 20: 1-5]. Later, when the king of Babylon wrote to Hezekiah to threaten him, Hezekiah went into the church and presented the letter to God. Immediately, God sent the prophet Isaiah to assure him that all would be well [2 Kgs 19: 14-15, 20]. Today, the only relic of Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem is the Wailing Wall. When the Jews have desperate problems, they write their prayer requests and stick them into the wall! The answers come quickly.

Certainly, there is more to the church than meets the eye. David enthused, “I was glad when they said to me, Let us go into the house of the Lord” [Ps. 122: 1]. In another place, David said, “One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: *that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life*, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple” [Ps. 27: 4]. All David ever desired was to build God’s house before his death. David was the man after God’s own heart [1 Sam. 13: 14]. Therefore, who are we not to follow David’s example and cultivate a burning desire to go to church, especially on Sunday [or Saturday for Sabbath Day keepers], the most convenient day for most worshippers?

2. How long is enough?

I owe my writing ability in the English language (which is not my mother tongue) to an Irish missionary at teacher's college in the old Western Region of Nigeria. At the beginning, the students had a big problem with him. When you wrote an essay that you would consider your best, he would say that it was too long. If in reaction you then decided to write a short piece, he would say that it was too short, that the main ideas had not been adequately developed. One day, all the students in his class protested and asked him to tell us what he would accept as long enough. His reply is still guiding me today: "Write for *as long as you are effective!*" How long should your Sunday service be? My reply would be the same: *for as long as it is effective!*

Before developing that subject, let us look at Ezra's revival service soon after the restoration work in Jerusalem by the returning exiles. We shall use Paul's Sunday service in Troas to buttress the discussion.

a) *The assembly*

The assembly in Jerusalem was made up of returnees and the remnants that had been carefully scrutinized through registration by tribe or function [**Neh. Chap. 7**]. In fact, priests without identifiable genealogy were disqualified [**vv. 63-65**]. On the whole, there were 42,360 people besides the servants [**v. 66**]. The service was held in the open square in front of the Water Gate. They were gathered "as one man" [**Neh. 8: 1**], that is, in total unity. Paul's communion service took place in the upper room "where they were gathered together" [**Acts 20: 6**]. Again, that suggests unity of purpose. Paul's congregation consisted of the disciples of Christ and new converts who had come to listen to Paul on the eve of his departure to Jerusalem [and ultimately to his death in Rome some years later].

In both cases, we can smell the spiritual zeal in the air. There was great expectation that something big was about to happen. Jesus told His disciples that where two or more persons were gathered in His name, He was there in their midst [**Matt. 18: 20**]. Having invited God into their worship, great things were bound to happen. As we have said repeatedly, you can do a similar thing by ensuring that you come early to church on service day. If you are not there *when the service begins*, you are not part of the assembly.

b) *Faith comes by hearing the word of God*

Ezra the priest brought out the Bible of his time, the Law of Moses [Genesis-Deuteronomy] and read from it "*from morning until mid-day*"! As he read it, "the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law" [**Neh. 8: 3**]. All the while, they stood up [**v. 5**]! In Paul's service, he

preached a sermon *from morning to midnight* [Acts 6: 7]! That was too much for one young listener called Eutychus. Even though the church (upper chamber) was well lit, he fell into “a deep sleep” and fell down three storeys where he was found dead [v.9].

You may say that the sermon was too long. But why was Eutychus the *only one* who fell asleep? Why are you among those complaining in your church? Why are you restless? Why are you not concentrating on the word of God like Ezra’s congregation or the majority of Paul’s? How can your faith be built up when your ears are not attentive?

c) *Worship*

After the marathon reading of the Word, the priest, Ezra, led the congregation in worship. He blessed the Lord, “the great God,” and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” as they lifted up their hands. Then, with their faces to the ground, they worshipped God [Neh. 8: 6]. Then, the Levites taught the people in little cells how to apply the word of God to their daily lives. It touched their hearts so much that they wept [vv. 7-9].

In Paul’s service, Eutychus’ death created an opportunity for God’s glory to be magnified among the people. Paul simply went downstairs, embraced the young man and said with authority, “Do not trouble yourselves for his life is in him.” The young man came back to life. You can imagine the impact of that on the day’s worship. Even after the communion service, the sermon continued “till daybreak” and nobody fell asleep [Acts 20: 10-12]!

In both cases, the unexpected affected the length of service. Ezra’s people did not anticipate the impact of reading the Law of Moses on them. Can you imagine thousands of men, women and children weeping and confessing their sins and weaknesses? Raising Eutychus from the dead was not on the day’s church service programme when Paul began preaching. Therefore, in a church service where the Spirit of God is in charge, you can sometimes not say that you know when the service would end. You just have to go with the flow of events!

d) *Dismissal*

Nehemiah the governor joined Ezra the priest, the scribes and the Levites to comfort the people and to let them know that grieving was not the appropriate response, that they should actually be rejoicing, “for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” The people went away with joy “to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly *because they understood the words that were declared to them*” [Neh. 8: 10-12]. Paul’s service ended *because* he had to leave at daybreak but the joy that he had left behind was

abundant and endearing. In deed, the joy of the Lord became their strength.

When last did you leave your Sunday service fulfilled and happy? Did you carry back the same or worse concerns and problems than you had taken there in the first place?

3. Conclusion

You may not have control over the Sunday [or Sabbath Day] service programme in your church. However, you can make the most out of it because it is your personal relationship with God that matters. Therefore, no matter how long is the service in your church or how it is conducted, make sure that the following aspects [gleaned from today's case studies] feature *in your participation*:

- Get to church before the service begins so that God's entourage does not arrive before you do.
- Confess your sins and ask for forgiveness. This opens the channel of communication with God for "the Lord is far from the wicked but He hears the prayers of the righteous" [**Prov. 15: 29**].
- The Bible contains the word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit [**Eph. 6:17**]. Don't leave home to church without it. Take a notebook to jot down important points (to you) as you listen to the day's sermon. Check every reference because many preachers bluff with numerous references that they have copied rightly or wrongly from a concordance! Listen to the sermon as attentively as possible because *it is not what the preacher says but what the Holy Spirit ministers to your heart that matters*.
- How do you worship and what should you pray for? Again, your place of worship has a major say here. However, according to the Scriptures, "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks (should) be made for all men (and women), for kings (i.e., governments) and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence *for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour*" [**1 Tim. 2:1-3**]. Even if everybody else leaves early, make sure that you have satisfied yourself on those prayer points.

How long is enough? If you worship *by the power and not the hour*, that question becomes irrelevant. May God grant you His power to worship Him in spirit and in truth.