

# THE STORY OF THE PRAYER BOOK

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The story of the Prayer Book (or, to give it its full title, the Book of Common Prayer) might seem to many today a subject of merely academic interest. Even in the Church of England, large numbers have become strangers to the book itself, and are therefore indifferent to its history. It is, of course, still used a little in most churches, and there are some churches, and many cathedrals, where hardly anything else is used. But the ordinary parish churches where this is so have become uncommon, instead of being normal, as, well within living memory, they were. In those churches at least, the history of the Book of Common Prayer will still be of interest, and it will also be of interest to those who remember such churches with regret. The Prayer Book has a great past, though a much less impressive present; its future, however (if its merits are anything to judge by), could be less like its present than its past.

The story of the Prayer Book can be divided into three: I. The Period of Christian Origins, II. The Period of the Reformation and since, and III. The Principles of the Prayer Book (which are the moral of the story). Each of these three sections will have a number of short sub-sections.

## I. The Period of Christian Origins

### *THE NEW TESTAMENT*

The history of the Prayer Book goes back in some respects to the beginning of Christianity in the first century - to the reading of the Scriptures on the sabbath in the Jewish synagogues, of which we hear in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles (Luke 4:16-20; Acts 13:14f.,27; 15:21); to the expounding of the Scriptures there in sermons, as by our Lord and St. Paul themselves (Luke 4:21-27; Acts 13:15-41); to the great emphasis which the New Testament lays on prayer, including corporate prayer, where two or three are gathered together in Christ's name (Matthew 18:19f.); and to the sacraments of baptism and holy

communion, instituted by our Lord in the Gospels and practised by the church from its foundation (Acts 2:37-42). All these examples and commands of the New Testament are followed in the Book of Common Prayer, and have indeed been practised in one way or another throughout Christian history, though the Prayer Book reformed that practice by taking it back to its New Testament roots.

### *LITURGY*

All Christians, of whatever allegiance, would probably claim to follow the examples and commands of the New Testament, in the same way as users of the Prayer Book do. But the Prayer Book way of following them is distinctive - it is a liturgical way of doing so. Liturgy is worship in set forms, such as can be written down or learned by heart. It is particularly suited to themes that are permanently and universally relevant, as all the greatest themes of Christian worship are. This is not the only way of worshipping God, but it is a traditional way which has definite sanction from the Bible. The Psalms in the Old Testament and the Lord's Prayer in the New Testament are instances of worship in set forms - liturgical worship. Of course, there are also instances in the Bible of prayers not in set forms but newly composed for the occasion, and Christians are free to worship in this way also, and are wise to do so when they want to bring before God particular individuals and local or temporary needs. Those who worship liturgically at Sunday services can still use freer forms on less formal occasions, though the reverse does not seem to be equally true. Be this as it may, the liturgical way is the historic Anglican way of worshipping, at the church's main corporate services, and the Prayer Book is an example of liturgical worship.

### *PATTERNS*

From early times, it has been customary for Christians to join in daily services, Sunday services, and services for special occasions. Daily services have never been practicable for everybody, because of the demands of daily work, and in the New Testament we find them

only practised in settings of semi-communal life, such as that of the early Jerusalem church (Acts 2:46; 5:42). Elsewhere, daily prayer in private was substituted, and it often still is, except among the clergy. Corporate Sunday worship, on the day of the resurrection, has been a universal rule since the earliest times, and there is a distinct reference to it in Acts 20:7. Services on special occasions are found in the New Testament in the cases of baptisms, ordinations, and services for the sick, and services for weddings and burials were later added. This threefold pattern of worship (daily, weekly, and on special occasions) is maintained in the Book of Common Prayer. Another pattern maintained in the Prayer Book is that of the Christian year. This was developed, on the basis of New Testament teaching, between the second and fourth centuries, and was afterwards elaborated and corrupted. The Prayer Book simplifies and purifies it again.

### TEXTS

In liturgical worship, it is possible for particular texts to remain in use for centuries, and even throughout Christian history. The lessons from the Bible which are read at Christian services are obvious examples, but there are other shorter passages, such as the Grace (2 Corinthians 13:14), which Christians use as prayers, and there are sung items as well, notably the Psalms, and Canticles like the *Magnificat*, *Benedictus* and *Nunc Dimittis*, taken from the Gospel of St. Luke (Luke 1:46-55, 68-79; 2:29-32). Scattered throughout the Prayer Book, there are also ancient texts from the periods of the Fathers and the early Middle Ages, which Thomas Cranmer, the compiler of the Prayer Book, adopted and did not alter beyond translating them into fine English. The three Creeds, the *Te Deum* at Morning Prayer and the *Gloria in Excelsis* at Holy Communion are examples. Most of the collects for Sundays and Holy Days are translated by Cranmer from the old Roman collects (though where necessary he substituted excellent collects of his own composition, such as those for the first two Sundays in Advent and for the Sunday after Ascension Day). The Burial Anthem 'Man that is born of woman...' and the Ordination hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* ('Come,

Holy Ghost, our souls inspire') are other examples of ancient texts which the Prayer Book has translated, and so are the four short prayers before the main prayer at Baptism, which Cranmer introduced from the Mozarabic liturgy, the ancient liturgy of Spain. Another of his borrowings from ancient sources elsewhere is the Prayer of St. Chrysostom at Morning and Evening Prayer and in the Litany, which comes from the Byzantine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. The Marriage vows, which are in such curiously antiquated English, and stand out from the rest of the Prayer Book by having even a strange word-order, were one of the very few items which were already in English in the mediaeval services, where the rest was in Latin. It was recognized even then that the couple had to understand what they were promising, and, as the words were so familiar, Cranmer retained them in their mediaeval form.

## II. The Period of the Reformation and Since

### *LATE MEDIAEVAL DECLINE*

The Middle Ages were a period in which tradition, instead of being the servant of Scripture, came to be treated as its master, with a resultant decline both in doctrine and in morality. Worship suffered as well. Biblical preaching was neglected, the reading of Scripture became disorderly, and ceremonial became enormously complicated. The worship of the transubstantiated elements, prayer for the dead detained in purgatory, and the invocation of saints as if they were minor deities, became major focuses of worship, despite their unbiblical character. Moreover, since the language of public worship was Latin, which was no longer generally understood, even what was good was lost upon the majority. When, providentially, the revival of Greek learning at the Renaissance recalled attention to the Scriptures in their original tongues, the need for a reform of church life became widely recognized, with a reform of worship as part of it.

## CONTINENTAL MODELS

The great Reformation of the Western church began on the Continent, about 1517, and only spread to England about 1530. The reform of worship had therefore made some headway on the Continent by the time it got under way in England, and there were continental models to assist Cranmer in the task. He was particularly helped by a revised Breviary of the daily services, drawn up by Quignon, a Spanish cardinal living at Rome, and published in 1535, and by a manual of reformed worship and discipline called the *Consultation*, issued by Archbishop Hermann of Cologne in 1543. Quignon remained a Roman Catholic, but Hermann was one of the few bishops who joined the Lutheran Reformers. The Reformation followed somewhat different lines in Germany, where it was guided by Martin Luther, from the lines it followed in Switzerland, where it was guided by Huldreich Zwingli and John Calvin. Though Cranmer was influenced by Calvin's sacramental teaching, his approach to worship in general was more influenced by Luther, and this led to his retaining what was good in the existing worship of the church, and not trying to sweep everything away and begin again, as Zwingli attempted to do.

## REFORM BY STAGES

One of the advantages of retaining what was good from the past was that Cranmer could make some claim to be beginning from where people were. As he said himself (echoing the New Testament), an unnecessary degree of change injures Christian unity and wounds the conscience of the weaker brother. The same cautious motives led him to reform worship by steps and not all at once. In 1538 the English Bible had been set up in every church, and in 1543 he started introducing readings from the English Bible into the Latin services, and further extended the practice in 1547. He could now move much faster, with the accession of a more sympathetic king, Edward VI, in place of his father, Henry VIII. In 1548 he introduced English communion devotions, and the administration of the sacrament to the laity in both kinds (not just the bread, as formerly), into the Latin Mass. In 1549-50 he published, within a single manageable volume, a

complete manual of worship in English, the first Book of Common Prayer. In 1552 he published a revision of it, in order to make its biblical teaching much more explicit. Among other changes, he altered seven features of the 1549 Holy Communion service which had been turned by Bishop Gardiner of Winchester to support unreformed teaching. This revision was only just in time, as Edward VI died the following year, and Cranmer's work was brought to an end by the accession of Queen Mary. Whether he would otherwise have produced a further revision is doubtful. The only real evidence shows that he might have altered some of the rubrics.

### *FINAL ADJUSTMENTS*

On three occasions in the next 110 years, small changes were made to the Prayer Book, to bring it to the form with which we have been familiar since 1662. In 1559 Queen Elizabeth prefixed the 1549 words of administration at Holy Communion to those of 1552, in order to underline the fact that a genuine, though spiritual, participation of Christ takes place. In 1604 James I added the second part of the Catechism - the part explaining the doctrine of the sacraments, drawn up for him by Bishop Overall. In 1662, under Charles II, a detailed revision was carried through, though all the changes made were minor, and the character of the book remained unaltered. The changes are summarized in the 'Preface', which was added at that date, as of four kinds: fuller directions to the minister, modernizing of obsolete words and phrases, use of the most accurate translation for passages of Scripture, and provision for fresh needs (notably by the addition of an Adult Baptism service).

### *TEMPORARY SUSPENSION*

The Prayer Book was withdrawn in 1553, when Queen Mary attempted to restore mediaeval Christianity, only to be brought back by Queen Elizabeth six years later. It was again withdrawn in 1645, when the Puritans of the Commonwealth period introduced non-liturgical worship. It was brought back at the restoration of the

monarchy in 1662. There has been talk of withdrawing it a third time in our own day, when the Church and State Commission of 1970 unsuccessfully proposed to give the General Synod power to do this. What has instead been done has been to promote as aggressively as possible the use of alternative services, so that this time the Prayer Book has tended to disappear from view without actually being prohibited.

### *SILENT UPDATING*

It is often supposed that there has been no change in the Prayer Book since 1662, apart from changes of names in the prayers for the royal family, but this is not strictly true, as there have been two major changes to the introductory material. New Easter Tables were substituted in 1752, when England adopted the Gregorian Calendar, in order to correct a slight but accumulating inaccuracy in the old Julian Calendar, which had been in use since the beginning of the Christian era. And a new Lectionary was substituted in 1871, the main effect of which was to reduce the rather formidable length of the lessons, so that the New Testament, in the daily course of readings, has since been read through twice a year, not three times.

### *TRANSLATION AND PROPAGATION ABROAD*

The Prayer Book was fairly rapidly introduced into the whole of the British Isles and the British dependencies abroad. Translations into French (for the Channel Islands and Calais), into Welsh, into Irish and into Manx appeared at intervals between 1553 and 1765. In Scotland, owing to the prevalence of Presbyterianism, the Prayer Book made little headway until the separate organisation of the Scottish Episcopal Church in William III's reign, and it was not translated into Gaelic until 1794. With the colonial expansion of the British Crown and the missionary expansion of the Anglican church, especially from the eighteenth century onwards, the Prayer Book has been carried to many parts of the world, English-speaking and otherwise, and modern vernacular versions are in use in many missionary provinces. The



claim that people find them culturally alien seems to conflict with widespread experience of their acceptability.

### *ATTEMPTED REVISION*

Revision of the 1662 Prayer Book has been attempted in England on three main occasions, prior to the present day. In 1689 the aim was to conciliate moderate Nonconformists, in 1880 (following the revival of Convocation) to update certain of the rubrics, and in 1927-28 to satisfy the new aspirations of Anglo-Catholics and Broad Churchmen. In each case the proposals were rejected because of insufficient agreement, though in the third case they came into widespread use. Actual revision took place among Anglicans abroad, beginning in Scotland in 1637, during the struggle between Episcopacy and Presbyterianism, and continuing in America in 1789, following the break with the British Crown in the American War of Independence, and in Ireland in 1878, following disestablishment. The Irish revision was thoroughly loyal to Cranmer's aims, and simply tried to provide for changing needs, but the Scottish and American revisions restored features of Cranmer's first Prayer Book, for antiquarian motives, as being nearest to patristic practice. In the wake of the Anglo-Catholic and Broad Church movements, twentieth-century revisions abroad have tended, under the former influence, to favour not only features of pre-Reformation practice but also of pre-Reformation doctrine, especially regarding the sacraments and the departed. At the same time, under the latter influence, they have tended to reflect a humanistic optimism about man's condition which is hard to reconcile with the Pauline teaching on sin and salvation written into the Prayer Book by Cranmer. Up until the 1960s, Cranmer's Prayer Book was normally taken as the starting point for revision, and the additions, subtractions and transpositions made in it left much of the text unchanged. From the 1960s onwards, however, following a new policy proposed by Dom Gregory Dix in his book *The Shape of the Liturgy*, it has been normal to set Cranmer's Prayer Book on one side, and to begin again from patristic patterns, filling them out with much of the Liberal theology popular in the 1960s, expressed in a modern idiom of language.

### III. Principles

#### *THE CENTRALITY OF SCRIPTURE*

It is not often that a writer tells us as fully as Cranmer does the principles which he has set before himself and tried to implement in his book. The essay 'Concerning the Service of the Church' at the beginning of the Prayer Book is Cranmer's preface (the 'Preface', called by that name, having been added by the 1662 revisers), and it expresses his concern to restore the public reading of the whole Bible, more or less, and also of the Psalms, in an orderly and regular manner, and in the vernacular language. If anything else is read in the services, such as passages from the Apocrypha, they must be agreeable to the Scriptures. The essay 'Of Ceremonies' which follows explains that the ceremonies of the services have been reformed in such a way that they clearly set forth the Gospel, without obscuring or distorting it. Students of the Prayer Book have observed how constantly and deliberately the wording of its services echoes the teaching and even the language of the Bible. In the 19th century the SPCK used to circulate a book called *The Liturgy Compared with the Bible*, by H. I. Bailey, in which he set out, in parallel columns, the whole spoken text of the Prayer Book and the passages of Scripture on which each part is based.

#### *EDIFICATION*

Cranmer was much influenced by the teaching on public worship given by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 14. In his essay 'On Ceremonies' he quotes Paul's words 'Let all things be done unto edifying' (1 Corinthians 14:26), and applies it to those helpful ceremonies which are 'apt to stir up the dull mind of man to the remembrance of his duty to God, by some notable and special signification'. Edification means 'building up', and Paul uses it of the building up of Christian character through the understanding. In this connection, Cranmer's other essay refers to the discouragement Paul gives, in the same chapter, against using unknown tongues in the congregation, and it applies this to the current custom of reading the Scriptures and conducting the

services in Latin. Instead, Cranmer introduced the liturgical use of English, in which he proved himself not just a pioneer but a master. His Book of Common Prayer is still highly edifying today. The only problem is that in the English of the Prayer Book there are about a hundred different words or phrases which, since 1662, have fallen out of use or changed their meaning. They are listed and interpreted in *Praying with Understanding*, published by Latimer House. On the whole, however, Prayer Book English is still perfectly intelligible. It is not colloquial English, and it never was. But, however unfamiliar Cranmer's manner of expressing himself may seem, it is only rarely difficult to understand.

### ORDERLINESS

The essay 'Of Ceremonies' also quotes Paul's other great maxim in 1 Corinthians 14, 'Let all things be done decently and in order' (1 Corinthians 14:40). Liturgy itself, as the essay hints, is an orderly form of worship, and it goes on to say that to disrupt the common order of the church, without authority, is an offence before God. Those who did so in Cranmer's time, the essay explains, were either people who objected to anything being altered in pre-Reformation custom, or people who objected to anything in it remaining unaltered – traditionalists or forerunners of the Puritans. Cranmer steered a middle course between them. We have, of course, people who disrupt the common order of the church today also, but their motives are different. Most are clergy who do not appreciate the value of liturgical worship, and therefore play fast and loose with the liturgy in the vain hope of being helpful to the congregation.

### SIMPLICITY

The mediaeval liturgy was hard to celebrate. The rubrics were in separate books from the texts, and they were both many and complicated. To adjust the service to the occasion was a large task. In addition, the ceremonial was extremely elaborate, and much of it was

obscure, if not actually misleading. In his two essays, Cranmer tells us how he had attempted to meet these problems by thoroughgoing simplification. He pruned the rubrics to such an extent that they had to be developed somewhat even in 1662, in the interests of decency and order. Since that time, mostly through unofficial action, ceremonial has tended to become elaborate again, but it was not until the Alternative Service Book that the church was confronted again with a set of 'Rules to Order the Service' that rival 'the number and hardness of the rules called the Pie' which Cranmer was so concerned to abolish. Some decisions, in the conduct of worship, should always be left to common sense!

### *CORPORATENESS*

The title which Cranmer gave to his liturgy, 'The Book of Common Prayer', is itself a plain declaration of his intentions. 'Common' means 'for everybody' – not just for the country in general, in place of the regional 'uses' of the Latin liturgy (though it did replace them), but for every individual. In particular, it declared that the book was not just for the clergy (as the Latin liturgy, with its 'secret' prayers and learned language, largely was) but for the laity too. It was in the vernacular; it was simple; its rubrics declared that everything was to be made audible and visible; it provided for the laity to be offered communion as often as they were willing to receive, not just once a year, and in both kinds, not the bread alone; and it gave them a good deal to say and sing. Though, until well after 1662, more than half the population was still illiterate, and the Prayer Book had to avoid making unreasonable demands upon them, it provided a good deal which they could learn by heart, and a good deal which they could say in turn after the parish clerk. We, who have the privilege of universal literacy, can encourage the congregation to join in suitable items which Cranmer did not require them to, but even what he did require showed how sincerely he aimed at corporate worship or 'common prayer'. And in doing this he nevertheless retained a God-centred emphasis. We, who know from modern experience how easily corporate worship can degenerate into man-centred worship, are in a position to recognise what a remarkable achievement this was.

## *RESPECT FOR ANTIQUITY*

Even if we did not have Cranmer's explicit statement at the end of his essay 'Of Ceremonies' to inform us, we would be able to tell from his book how much he respected Christian antiquity. His other essay commends the Bible-reading practice of the early church. The opening exhortation of his Communion service commends the disciplinary practice of the early church, and desires its restoration. The preface to his Ordinal points out the extreme antiquity of the threefold ministry, going back even to 'the Apostles' time', and expresses a determination to maintain it. And we saw earlier how he maintained many ancient patterns and texts from the pre-Reformation liturgy, and restored others. It is therefore often supposed and even asserted that Cranmer's great aim was to restore the worship of the patristic period, in the same way as revisers of the Prayer Book in seventeenth and eighteenth century Scotland and America attempted to do. If this had indeed been his aim, it would be perplexing that he did not get nearer to it, considering how unusually good his knowledge of patristic literature and worship was. In reality, however, his aim was to bring worship back into conformity with Scripture. When this involved change, he always gave first consideration to ancient example as a possible model to follow, looking next at continental example, and finally, only if both these failed him, doing something original. But where something true to Scripture was already in use, he did not attempt to change it at all, but left well alone.

These six wise principles are the ones by which Cranmer was mainly guided, and since he carried them out with such skill, they gave his Prayer Book the unique quality which has so long stood the test of time.