





# **The Importance of the Book of Common Prayer in 2012 its 350th anniversary**

by Paul Boyd-Lee

***The Book of Common Prayer is central to the Christian faith as practised by the Church of England and this year it celebrates its 350th year of publication. No other book has been printed in such portable versions with such legible print and good binding.***

## **Background to Cranmer**

The Book of Common Prayer was compiled in the sixteenth century by Thomas Cranmer who was born in July 1489 and later served as Archbishop of Canterbury during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I. In this capacity he was leader of the English Reformation. When Mary came to the throne and reinstated the Roman Catholic religion, he was accused of heresy, tried and in 1556 was sent to the stake at Oxford where his memorial is now to be found.

It was Anne Boleyn that secured the appointment of Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury and it was he, with his two Cambridge associates Stephen Gardiner and Edward Foxe, that worked on Henry VIII's annulment of marriage with Catherine of Aragon on 23 May 1533. As it happened, Henry had already secretly married Anne Boleyn the previous January but on 28 May Cranmer validated Henry and Anne's marriage, whilst on 1 June, Cranmer personally crowned and anointed Anne queen as well as delivering to her the sceptre and rod. On the following 7 September Anne gave birth to Elizabeth, later to become 'Good Queen Bess' so it is fitting that in 2012 we celebrate not only the Diamond Jubilee of her namesake Elizabeth II but also the 350th anniversary of the handiwork of Thomas Cranmer.

It is evident then that Cranmer was a man of much distinction. Though he is said to have loathed his schooldays he later became a distinguished scholar who spoke Latin, Hebrew, Greek, German, French, and Italian. At the time, Cambridge University library only contained about 600 books, whereas Cranmer's was more extensive and included many books by authors which neither Oxford nor Cambridge had.



*The following two sections are based on the Prayer Book Society's The BCP Story*

### **The Book of Common Prayer's merits**

Cranmer's memorable cadences in the Prayer Book have given guidance and illumination to generations of Christians in regular worship and at the turning points of their lives; it continues to do so.

Its contents are deeply rooted in the Bible: not only does it make very full provision for the reading of Scripture, but its services are in substance and language scriptural throughout. The Book is still irreplaceable as the guarantee of orthodoxy, dignity and beauty in the Church's worship while its services are reverent in honouring the power and majesty of God, accepting the reality of human sin and joyfully acknowledging the pardon given through faith in Jesus Christ.

Its direct and unambiguous words have become a familiar part of our speech, to the extent that it is, after the Bible, the most frequently cited book in the 'Oxford Dictionary of Quotations'. For centuries it has provided guiding influences on our language and been the basis of religious expression in this nation. Like the Authorised King James Bible and the works of Shakespeare, many words and phrases from the Book of Common Prayer that readily come to mind, have entered popular culture such as the following,

'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest,'

'peace in our time,'

'ashes to ashes,'

'Let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace'.

Even today, with its '39 Articles' it remains the official doctrinal standard of the Church of England as well as many other parts of the worldwide Anglican Communion. It also appears in many variants in churches inside and outside of the Anglican Communion, in over 50 different countries, and more than 150 different languages. Traditional Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian prayer books have borrowed from it, and the marriage and burial rites have found their way into those of other denominations and into the English language.

## **History of the Book of Common Prayer**

The first edition was published in 1549, during the reign of Edward VI, and was a product of the English Reformation following the break with Rome. Prayer books, unlike books of prayers, contain the words of structured (or liturgical) services of worship. The work of 1549 was the first prayer book to contain the forms of service for daily and Sunday worship in English and to do so within a single volume; it included Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, the Litany, and Holy Communion. In addition are found other occasional services in full: orders for baptism, confirmation, marriage, 'prayers to be said with the sick' and a funeral service. It set out in full the Epistle and Gospel readings for the Sunday Communion Service. Set Old Testament and New Testament readings for daily prayer were specified in tabular format as were the set Psalms. The canticles, mostly biblical, were provided to be sung between the readings.

The 1549 book was rapidly succeeded by a reformed revision in 1552 under the same editorial hand, that of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. It never came into use because, on the death of Edward VI, his half-sister Mary I restored Roman Catholic worship. On her death, a compromise version, largely 1552 with a few amendments from 1549, was published in 1559. Following the tumultuous events leading to and including the English Civil War, another major revision was published in 1662 and that edition has remained the official prayer book of the Church of England with its 350th anniversary now being celebrated.

Its Lectionary provides for the reading of the whole Bible, cover to cover, in every year with the Psalms and Gospels being read twice.

Two dates are often cited for the introduction of the Book of Common Prayer in 1662. The first is 19 May when Royal Assent was granted, the second being 24 August when the Book came into use.

*The Dictionary of English Church History* notes that,

‘...The Prayer book now remained unaffected by Parliamentary action till 1645, when its use was forbidden by the ordinances of the Long Parliament. A Bill for Uniformity passed the Commons in July 1661, but this was then delayed by the revision which was in progress. This was completed, adopted by Convocation in December, and in 1662 the Bill was again considered in Parliament, as well as in Convocation [i.e. meeting of the Bishops]. The revised book was not discussed by either House of Parliament, though the Commons asserted their right to do so if they pleased. They also threw out a clause, introduced by the Lords, giving the Crown power to dispense with obligations of the Bill. It received the Royal Assent, 19th May. It orders the exclusive use of the book, which is annexed to the Act, in all places of worship from St Bartholomew’s Day (24th August) 1662, before which all ministers must publicly declare their assent to it on pain of deprivation...’.

The *House of Lords Journal* records that,

‘... the Act of Uniformity was given Royal Assent on 19 May 1662. The final clause of the Act of Uniformity stated that: ... the Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and other Rites and Ceremonies of this Church of England, together with the Form and Manner of Ordaining and Consecrating Bishops, Priests and Deacons, heretofore in Use, and respectively established by Act of Parliament in the first and eighth Years of Queen Elizabeth, shall be still used and observed in the Church of England, until the Feast of St Bartholomew, which shall be in the Year of our Lord God one thousand six hundred sixty and two...’.

Worship within England has come a long way since those days of yore when the Prayer Book provided continuity giving voice to the praise and prayer from one generation to another. It looked to things eternal and deliberately placed political correctness outside the prayer and worship of the church. Unlike so much modern liturgy it provides large sections of the Bible whole and without dilution.

## **The Prayer Book contents and England**

One of the striking features of the Book of Common Prayer is the way the people of Israel frequently and consistently take central stage in the text. This is in no way to glorify them; far be it! Rather, they are the people it admonishes to ‘turn to repentance’ because of their past and present misdoings. ‘We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, ...’ cries out the words of the *General Confession* in both Morning and Evening Prayer. This clearly picks up Jesus’ direction to His twelve disciples.

‘But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’

Matthew ch.10 v.6

The Prayer Book was compiled at the time when the country was throwing off the yoke of the Roman Catholic Church, which had been its state religion for centuries. This rejection of Catholicism was not just to do with the foibles of King Henry VIII’s inability to secure a son and heir; that was just the trigger to make it happen.

To the English of the time, the denial to them of scripture in their mother tongue, the power of the priesthood, and subservience to Rome, all added fuel to the smouldering fire of unrest. The torment of fire and torture that confronted heretics of the day caused fear and anguish amongst those who looked helplessly on, or worse still what some endured if they failed to submit to Roman doctrine.

This was Thomas Cranmer’s world when he was despatched to mainland Europe under the instruction of King Henry to take soundings as to how the king might legally annul his marriage with his queen Catherine who seemed unable to provide him with the male child he sought. Whilst Cranmer was overseas he learnt firsthand of the Reformation and the tensions between it and the Roman Church.

Hence, when he was recalled home to become Archbishop he brought with him the seeds of separation from Rome, a way forward for Henry’s divorce, and the ingredients to complete his work on the Prayer Book.

Thus the break with Rome, a few years later in 1534, could well have coincided with a recognition of the people in England, and possibly other parts of the British Isles of their calling to proclaim the Gospel, albeit in a way far different from approaches to this today. After all, King Henry had just over a decade earlier been granted the

title *Fidei defensor* - Defender of the Faith - and after the break with Rome declared himself Supreme Governor of the Church of England, a title held by virtually all Sovereigns of England ever since.

This then was the setting for the new Prayer Book. Its prayers are for every day as well as others that progress through all the necessities of life. First come those for Morning and Evening, then Baptism, Holy Communion, Marriage, Sickness, Burial, in addition to those for the Sovereign, Government, Ministers of Religion, those at sea and so on.

The structure leads the participant through a logical order of approach to the Almighty God. In the opening section there is an invocation to why we need to worship God before the text turns to acknowledge our sins whilst seeking God's forgiveness. Following this comes the prayer our Lord Jesus taught us, '...Our Father which art in heaven ...' as found in Matthew ch.6 v.9 ff.

Then in Morning Prayer, and often sung, comes *Venite, Exultemus Domino* which is merely the Latin for the opening of Psalm 95 'O Come, let us sing unto the LORD;...'. In the centre of this psalm again is found the theme of Israel as mentioned to the disciples, but this time as the 'sheep of his hand'. Immediately prior to this the congregation actually acclaim, 'we are the people of his pasture'. To add weight to this really connecting with Israel of the Old Testament the words spell out God's dealing with them when they rebelled in the Wilderness.

The next Cantic *Te Deum Laudamus* - We praise thee, O God - opens the way to Israel's forgiveness and introduces the Saviour and highlights their redemption thereby.

'We therefore pray thee, help thy servants: whom thou has redeemed with thy precious blood.

Make them to be numbered with thy Saints: in glory everlasting.

O Lord, save thy people: and bless thy heritage.

Govern them: and lift them up for ever.'

So this text harks back to various attributes of the people of ancient Israel found throughout the Old Testament. For example they are referred to as God's 'servants' and His 'heritage' (inheritance).

'O ye seed of **Israel his servant**, ye children of Jacob, his chosen ones.'

1 Chronicles ch.16 v.13

'...Return **for thy servants' sake, the tribes** of thine inheritance.'

Isaiah ch.63 v.17

'...and Israel is the **rod of his inheritance**: The LORD of hosts is his name.'

Jeremiah ch.10 v.16

After completing the reading of scriptures the service reaches the *Benedictus* which is usually sung and commences with,

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people'

Luke ch.1 v.68 ff

As an alternative to the above but continuing the theme about the literal people of Israel, is the Hundredth Psalm, the *Jubilate Deo* - O be joyful in the Lord - in which after the opening words all the people sing 'we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture'.

This leads into the Creed after which come prayers where specifically 'A Prayer for the Queen's Majesty' is always to be said. Although the apostle Paul exhorts Timothy in the First book ch.2 vv 1-2 to pray for kings and those in authority and so we follow in those footsteps, nevertheless it was founded on an Old Testament instruction to,

'...pray for the life of the king, and of his sons.'

Ezra ch.6 v.10

Notice it says 'and of his sons'. That is precisely what is the order in the Prayer Book because *A Prayer for the Royal Family* follows that for the sovereign.

Evening Prayer follows a similar format to the morning except that the *Venite* is replaced by the *Magnificat* - Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord - which is based on Luke ch.1 v.46 ff. Herein she exclaims,

'He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever'.

Luke ch.1 vv 54-55

So the theme of Israel is not lost through using the alternative canticle. Similarly, in the evening the *Te Deum* is replaced by the *Cantate Domino* derived from Psalm 98, which includes these words.

‘He hath remembered his mercy and his truth toward the house of Israel: ...’

Psalm 98 v.3

Finally, prior to praying for the Queen’s Majesty and the Royal Family again in the evening, there comes one of two alternatives. Either it is the *Deus Misereatur* - God be merciful unto us - which though repeating much of Psalm 67 actually opens with words derived from the Israel Blessing found in Numbers ch.6 v.24

‘God be merciful unto us, and bless us: and shew us the light of his countenance, and be merciful unto us.’

Alternatively though is the more popular canticle at this point the *Nunc Dimitis* which reflects on the moment when Joseph and Mary ‘the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law’ (Luke ch.2 v.27). Then Simeon appears.

‘... the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.

And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.’

Luke ch.2 vv 25-26

It was at this precious moment he took the child into his arms and uttered these few memorable words now recast into the closing framework of Evening Prayer.

‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

‘For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.’

Luke ch.2 vv 29-32

In essence, a glance at these opening sections of the Book of Common Prayer reveals it is not only heavily loaded with Scripture, but contains large portions pertaining to the ongoing importance of the people of Israel both at the time the book was compiled and to the English nation today. Also, histories of those days suggest that the people then saw themselves as the people of the book as well.

Though some may think otherwise, it is rather trite to conclude that this liturgy's words are for the purpose of any body of Christians meeting together. Certainly its words are for the glorification of God by any who choose to make use of them, but specifically it is directed towards those who believe their ancestors actually came from the people of Israel and in addition, they still have a duty as God's Servant People to uphold His laws and proclaim His word. That was the culture of the day when *The Book of Common Prayer* was penned. Surely any drift from that outlook will be to the English people's detriment and consequently all whom they deal with in the world.

Sadly, many Churches of England today have all but dispensed with this Book of Common Prayer and together with the Free Churches have largely settled into repeating benign prayers, often filled with self-centredness, which frequently sound like requests to the Divine Storehouse. This may sound harsh and judgmental but the truth is that too little is heard of a penitent approach to Almighty God; prayers that extol His greatness and so on, before laying before Him our necessities as we see them to be answered by His divine will in a way that He sees as being expedient for us, rather than the way our selfish wills feel we need. Not only that, but political correctness, liberation theology and suchlike are writ large in our culture instead of perceiving God's plan and purpose for His creation as proclaimed through the prophets and apostles. All these things the Book of Common Prayer sidesteps, whilst drawing worshippers to the glory of God and His word that it seems to attain effortlessly. Though it may bring its adherents through the depths of sin it then raises them to the heights of heavenly glory.

That is precisely the journey Thomas Cranmer personally travelled and we have much to thank him for, not least of which for sacrificing his life to what he firmly believed in, namely free access for all to his Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ.

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