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# The 450th Anniversary of 'The Prayer Book'

Peter Toon

Whit Sunday 1999 is the 450th anniversary of the official beginning of the use by the Church of England of the first complete *Book of the Common Prayer* in English, the 'vulgar tongue'. Copies had been available since March 7th, and there had been some use of the English services in various places, but it was from Pentecost 1549 that all cathedrals, parishes, chapels and colleges were required by law to use only the services provided in *The Book of the Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church after the Use of the Church of England*.

This long title of the first, official English Prayer Book indicates that the Contents fall into three divisions. First of all, there is 'the common prayer' which in the Preface is referred to as 'the common prayers in the church, commonly called divine service' and which in the Act of Uniformity is also called 'the common prayer commonly called the service of the church'. In other words, this is a reference to Mattins and Evensong to which are added 'the Litany and the Suffrages' which were referred to as 'the common prayer of procession'.

In the second place, there is 'the Administration of the Sacraments' which refers to Baptism and the Supper of the Lord (Holy Communion). Thirdly, there are 'the Rites and Ceremonies' – Confirmation, Penance, Matrimony, Visitation of the Sick, Burial of the Dead and the penitential Office for Ash Wednesday. Ordination is not included, for the ordination services were not published until March 1550 but they were intended to be bound with *The Book of The Common Prayer*, and were so in later editions.

The expression 'after the Use of the Church of England' points to a wholly new liturgical situation in England. As in Europe so also in England there had been several 'Uses' based upon cathedral centres. The Preface refers to five varieties of Divine Service – those of Salisbury, Hereford, Bangor, York and Lincoln – and there were others. The variations were minimal and insignificant in the general scheme of things but they were nevertheless real. Thus the Uniformity based upon *The Book of the Common Prayer* required by the Edwardian Acts of Uniformity was

unknown in the Middle Ages in England, where limited variety of use based on a basic uniformity of structure, doctrine and content had been the norm.

What also was unknown and perhaps deemed impossible before 1549 was the presence in one Book of all that was needed (except a Bible) for the daily, weekly and yearly worship of the Church of England. Before the Reformation the services of the Church had been contained in five books: the Breviary, the Missal, the Manual, the Pontifical and the Processional. The Breviary contained the eight canonical hours (daily offices); the Missal, together with the *Temporale* and the *Sanctorale*, contained everything needed for the celebration of the Mass; the Manual contained the services used by the parish priest; the Pontifical provided for the specific ministrations of the bishop and the Processional contained the anthems sung in procession on Sundays and festivals. How all these were to be fitted together was not left to innovation but was set out in the 'Directorium' or, as the Preface to the 1549 Prayer Book calls it, the 'Pie'.

In one major sweep the complicated liturgical and ceremonial structures of the Middle Ages contained in multiple books gave way to a simple yet comprehensive system of ordered public worship and occasional offices and ceremonies in one book, and that in 'the vulgar tongue'.

The Bible intended for use with *The Book of the Common Prayer* (1549) was The Great Bible in its 1540 edition. Although the appointed Psalm, Gospel and Epistle readings for the new Mass called 'The Supper of the Lord' were printed in full for Sundays and Holy Days, there is no Psalter in this first Prayer Book. ('The Psalter, or Psalms of David pointed as they are to be sung or said in Churches' was not printed as part of the Prayer Book until 1662.)

In 1552 the title of the second Prayer Book prepared and edited by Archbishop Cranmer showed changes from that of 1549. It was, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies in the Church of England* (1552). Omitted is the definite article before 'Common' and never again will it appear in the titles of Anglican Prayer Books. Omitted also are the words 'of the Church after the Use of' and they are replaced by 'in'. Later they were restored in slightly amended form in 1661 for *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to the Use of the Church of England* (1662).

## Recovering Authentic Common Prayer

In the Early Church 'Common Prayer' constituted morning and evening

times of worship for all the members who were able to attend. With the development of the monastic movement and the expansion of the provision and requirement of times of daily prayer therein, the public daily prayers of the whole body of the faithful were eclipsed but not forgotten. In the medieval period the 'common prayer[s]' usually referred to those daily Latin offices said or chanted in the choir/chancel by the parish priest each morning and evening and which were open to the laity. And by extension it also referred to the prayers chanted by the priest and clerks within the Litany used in processions around and into the church.

It was the vocation of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in the 1540s to take the lead to recover the truly 'common prayer' as understood in the Early Church for the changing ethos, liturgy and language of the ancient Church of England. This task, inspired by the doctrinal insights concerning the Faith within the Protestant Reformation, included both the translation of material from the Latin service books into the 'vulgar tongue' so that all could understand and participate, and also the creative simplification of daily worship from multiple Offices to two Offices, Mattins and Evensong. Then, of course, all was to be set within the recovered 'Pauline' doctrine of justification by faith and the hearing and reading of the Bible in English.

The structure of the new Mattins and Evensong for the first English Prayer Book is similar. Cranmer included three Canticles (*Venite, Te Deum* or *Benedicite* and *Benedictus*) for Mattins and two (*Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*) for Evensong. Each service also had the Psalms in order, the Lord's Prayer, the Old Testament and New Testament Lessons, the Suffrages, the Creed and three Collects, the first being that of the week or the festival. The Psalter is divided into 60 parts so that with the average of a 30-day month, all the 150 Psalms are chanted/prayed by the members of the Body in union with Christ the Head of the Body each month. Further, with the reading of a chapter of both the Old and the New Testaments twice a day, the Old Testament is read through once a year and the New Testament twice a year. This emphasis on (what seem to us) long readings arose from the concern of the Reformers that the written Word of God be not only available to but also known by the people of England.

Daily Prayer was seen as a means of grace wherein the local congregation is united by the Holy Spirit not only to the whole church on earth and in heaven but also and supremely to the Lord Jesus Christ, the great High Priest, 'who ever lives to make intercession for us'. The spiritual movement in the Daily Offices is 'to the Father through and in the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit'. Nowhere is this more important than in the recitation or chanting of the Psalms, where the Body of Christ prays in union with Christ the Head, and Christ himself prays in and with His Body.

For the Reformers an essential part of this liturgical movement known as divine service was being informed, inspired, nourished and empowered by the Word of God, written in the Holy Scriptures. The spiritual dynamic and logic of the provision of whole chapters from the Old and New Testaments at Mattins and Evensong is captured in the Collect written by Thomas Cranmer himself for Advent II: 'Blessed Lord, which hast caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them; that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour, Jesus Christ.' The power of the Scriptures when heard, read and meditated upon is also movingly communicated by Cranmer in his homily, 'A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture', contained in the *Book of Homilies* of 1547.

With the new daily Offices all distinction of quantity, quality and value between the Daily Prayer of the monastics and clergy on the one hand and the prayers of the laity on the other was removed. Though the clergy had the duty of leading the prayer, the prayer was intended to be 'common prayer'. All were welcome and all were invited to participate, even if by reason of their secular vocation they were unable to attend often. For, with the ringing of the bell at the parish church, all knew that it was time for Daily Prayer.

The Daily Prayer in Mattins and Evensong as provided in *The Book of the Common Prayer* of 1549 was a public service of worship but it was shorter than that provided in the later Prayer Books (1552 and 1662). It was simple in structure, compact and suited for daily use, including Sundays. On the Lord's Day, Mattins began the public worship of the day to be followed, after a short interval, by the Litany sung in procession into church and then by the administration of the Sacrament, 'The Supper of the Lord and the Holy Communion, commonly called The Mass'. Sundays and Holy Days did not provide an either/or of Mattins or Holy Communion because the whole provision of Mattins, Litany, Holy Communion and then Evensong was intended to be the 'common prayer' in 1549 for holy days. The Litany was also intended for use on Wednesdays and Fridays after the Morning Office.

It may be claimed that the Daily Offices provide a structure for a godly order of spiritual and moral discipline not only for clergy but also for the whole laity – king, lords and commons. Within this structure is the 'Administration of the Sacraments [Baptism/Confirmation and the Supper of the Lord] and other Rites and Ceremonies [Churching of Women, Holy Matrimony, Burial of the Dead, Visitation of the Sick, Ash Wednesday] after the Use of the Church of England'. Thus the total provision of the

*Book of the Common Prayer* is for the 365 days of the secular year, the 365 days of the church year from Advent to the end of the season of Trinity, and for the whole of the life of Christians on earth from birth to death.

The plan for the reading of the Bible in the Daily Offices follows the secular year, but the Collects, Prefaces, Epistles and Gospels for use at Holy Communion are integrated into the Church Year. A sermon was to be preached at the Holy Communion and where the preacher was incapable of doing such, provision was made by the *Book of the Homilies* (1547) which contained 12 homilies, divided in editions from 1549 into two or even three parts to make short sermons. Four of them (1 and 3, 4, and 5) are by Cranmer, and the two basic themes are on reading Scripture as a means of grace and on salvation by grace through faith with works of love to God and man as the fruit thereof. They represent Cranmer's mature, biblically Protestant Augustinianism.

The Preface to this first Prayer Book (1549) in the reign of Edward VI repays careful reading. In it the Archbishop of Canterbury contrasts what he understood to be the discipline concerning daily prayer and the reading of the Scriptures in the Early Church with what he knew as the discipline of the late Medieval Church in England. In the latter it was believed that the purity and saving power of the Word of God had been smothered or eclipsed by reason of complicated rules and distracting additions. Thus a reformed catholic way forward is to make access to the 'common prayers' and to the reading of the Scriptures available to all: therefore, the need for the preparation and then the publication of *The Book of The Common Prayer* (1549), followed by the revised edition of 1552.

Significant changes were made in Mattins and Evensong in the 1552 edition of the English Prayer Book. All were aimed at making these public services richer in content and thus more suitable to stand alone if required not merely as the Daily Office but as a full, public divine service for Sundays. Opening sentences from Scripture, an Exhortation and a Confession of sins with Declaration of Forgiveness were placed at the beginning. Further, certain Psalms were provided as alternatives to the *Benedictus*, *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*. Then in 1661-2 Collects were added at the end with the 'Grace' as the conclusion.

## A Reformed Mass

The thinking behind the changes in the outward nature and symbolism of Christian worship in the Church of England in the reign of Edward VI is well illustrated by the content of a short essay by Cranmer entitled, 'Of Ceremonies, why some be abolished and some retained' and printed at the

end of the 1549 Prayer Book. (In subsequent editions of the *Book of Common Prayer* the essay was placed at the beginning.) Here the Archbishop explained why some of the 'accustomed ceremonies be put away' and why others 'be retained and kept still'. And he ended in this way: 'For we think it convenient that every country should use such Ceremonies as they shall think best to the setting forth of God's honour and glory, and to the reducing of the people to a most perfect and godly living, without error or superstition; and that they should put away other things, which from time to time they perceive to be most abused, as in men's ordinances it often chanceth diversely in divers countries.' So, for example, in the 1549 Rite for Holy Communion, the Holy Table or God's Board is still called the Altar but elevation of the elements is forbidden by the rubric following the Words of Institution: 'These words before rehearsed are to be said, turning still to the Altar, without any elevation, or showing the Sacrament to the people.'

Changes inspired by knowledge of the theology and practice of the early Fathers on the one hand, and of the insights and doctrine of some of the leading teachers of the Reformation on the other hand, are obvious to careful study in all the new English Rites of the 1549 Prayer Book.

Take for example 'The Supper of the Lord and The Holy Communion commonly called the Mass'. (Further, we have from Cranmer's own hand, *A Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament* (1550).) If we examine this Rite from the standpoint of later evangelical, Protestant theology we can say that it is the old Mass in English rather than Latin and that while there are a few significant changes in theology and piety there is nevertheless an important continuity in structure and content. But, if we examine it from the standpoint of those who were familiar with the Sarum Mass and the theology of the Eucharist, we can say that while it has many similarities with the received order and content of the Latin Mass, it has nevertheless major changes (other than the sole use of 'the vulgar tongue') which place it more in the orbit of the conservative Protestant Reformation than in the spirit of Medieval Christendom.

One significant change concerns 'the oblation'. In the Sarum Mass this is something offered by the church to the Father in the name of the Son: 'This **oblation**, therefore, of our service as also of thy whole household we beseech Thee, favourably to accept, O Lord...' And, 'Which **oblation**, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, do Thou vouchsafe altogether to render blessed, approved, ratified, reasonable and acceptable, that it may be made unto us the Body and Blood of Thy most dearly beloved Son our Lord Jesus Christ.'

In the 1549 Rite 'the oblation' is what Christ has offered to the Father:

‘O God heavenly Father, which of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesu Christ, to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption, who made there by his **one oblation** once offered a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, **oblation** and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world...’

The doctrine of the ‘eucharistic sacrifice’ in the Latin Mass is changed in the 1549 Rite. In the Latin Mass the sacrifice is offered from the church below to heaven above: ‘Therefore, most merciful Father, through Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord, we humbly pray and beseech Thee to receive these gifts, these offerings, these undefiled sacrifices, which first of all we offer to Thee for thy holy catholic Church...’ In contrast, in the 1549 Rite the sacrifice is spiritual – ‘prayers and supplications’ and ‘sacrifice of praise’. The bread and wine are not in any specific way related to a eucharistic sacrifice offered to God, but they are the content of the eucharistic meal, the banquet of the kingdom of God.

Another significant change is the way in which the saints are commemorated. In the Latin Mass there is specific reference to their merits and prayers: ‘In communion with and venerating the memory firstly of the glorious and ever-virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ our God and Lord; and also of thy blessed apostles and martyrs Peter, Paul, Andrew, James John ... [etc] ... and of thy saints, by whose merits and prayers grant that we may in all things be defended by the help of thy protection...’ In the 1549 Rite the saints are presented in order to be emulated: ‘And here we give unto Thee most high praise and hearty thanks for the wonderful grace and virtue declared in all thy saints from the beginning of the world; and chiefly in the glorious and most blessed Virgin Mary, mother of thy Son Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, and in the Holy Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles and Martyrs; whose examples (O Lord) and steadfastness in thy faith and keeping thy holy commandments grant us to follow.’ The same principle of commemorating the saints in order to be inspired by them and thus to imitate them is found in the Collects for Saints’ Days in the 1549 Prayer Book.

It is reasonable to claim that the Latin Mass of the Sarum Rite was not only translated into English but also when translated modified in doctrine so as to reject medieval doctrines of the eucharistic sacrifice as propitiatory, of transubstantiation, of the invocation and intercession of the saints, and of human merit as contributing to eternal salvation. Further, it was made conformable to the recovered doctrine of salvation by grace through faith, a teaching which Cranmer had expounded with simplicity and clarity in his three homilies (3,4,5) in *The Book of Homilies* (1547). It is in this general, reformed catholic context that ‘the Invocation’ is to be understood and to which we now turn.



Before the recitation of the Words of Institution of the Lord's Supper, the celebrant prays: 'with thy Holy Spirit and Word vouchsafe to bless and sanctify [here he makes the sign of the Cross] these thy gifts, and creatures of bread and wine, that that may be unto us the body and blood of thy most dearly beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Who in the same night in which he was betrayed took bread...' This Invocation was not (as some have claimed) an attempt to imitate the Epiclesis (or Invocation of the Holy Spirit) found in the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Churches and to suggest an ontological change in the bread and wine. Rather, it was inspired partly by early Western sources and partly by the eucharistic theology of Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr. The latter would have preferred it to refer specifically to the blessing and sanctifying of the assembled congregation so that they are worthy recipients of the holy meal. In the event, it was removed in the 1552 edition because it could lead to misunderstanding.

By modern sensitivities the Eucharistic Prayer of the 1549 Prayer Book is exceptionally long since it contains parts which in the 1552 Prayer Book were separated from it and placed at other points in the Divine Service; but, in comparison with the Latin Rite, it is of similar length. Historically, the importance of this Prayer in the new Mass of 1549 relates to its general conformity to the structure and content of the Eucharistic Prayer in the church of East and West from the patristic period through to the sixteenth century. However, from the 1552 Prayer Book the Church of England pioneered a different approach to the structure of the Order for Holy Communion and of the Eucharistic Prayer in particular than had been known in East and West. This new structure was maintained in the editions of 1559, 1604 and significantly in 1662. And since *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662) has been the most widely used and translated edition of the Prayer Book in the Anglican Communion, this reformed structure may be called the dominant or characteristic Anglican structure.

However, since the seventeenth century there have been continued attempts to add to the Prayer of Consecration of the 1662 Prayer Book 'the Oblation' as a eucharistic offering to God and 'the Invocation' as a prayer for the blessing and sanctifying of the sacramental bread and wine. This move was achieved first by the Non-Jurors in England, then by the Episcopal Church in Scotland in *The Communion Office* (1764) and then by the newly-independent American Episcopal Church in its *Book of Common Prayer* (1789). Since then the additions have been made in the Prayer Books of other Provinces of the Anglican Communion. Apparently when the new American Prayer Book was submitted to the bishops of the Church of England for their approval, no objection was raised concerning the Eucharistic Prayer in which very clearly present were 'the Oblation' and 'the Invocation'.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Anglican Communion, especially in the provinces of the 'North' and 'West' has tended to move away from the classic Books of Common Prayer and has produced for use an ever growing supply of services for 'the Holy Eucharist' based on a structure or model that it is claimed is taken from the third-century use of the Early Church. This model may be called 'the ecumenical model' or 'the generic model' or 'the Hippolytus of Rome model' for it is used both by Roman Catholics and Protestants.

The more that Anglicans use these modern services from their Books of Alternative Services or Books of Common Worship and forget their heritage in the tradition of Common Prayer the less are they Anglican in character and the more they are without distinct identity as a jurisdiction within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of God. Further, within this generic tradition of worship where doctrine is loosely defined in the rites, they are more likely to imbibe error, heresy and indiscipline and not even know that they are so doing.

## In Conclusion

In modern times some Anglicans of 'anglo-catholic' persuasion have claimed that *The Book of The Common Prayer* (1549) was the truly 'Catholic Prayer Book' and that liturgical revision as seen in the Scottish *Communion Office* (1764) and continuing in the American *Book of Common Prayer* (1789) and later in other Provinces of the Anglican Communion has been a return to the spirit of 1549, bypassing 1552 and 1662. Of course what they have in mind is primarily the structure and content of the 'Eucharistic Prayer' containing the Oblation and the Invocation. This claim is only partly true, for, as we have seen, there is no oblation by the church as such in the Eucharistic Prayer of the 1549 Rite. Further, the 'Invocation' in this Service is not doctrinally of the same kind as the Epiclesis of the Orthodox Liturgy.

In contrast, Anglicans of a 'low church' and/or 'evangelical persuasion' have insisted that *The Book of Common Prayer* of 1552 is the truly 'Protestant Prayer Book'. For them the changes in terms of the dividing of the 1549 Prayer of Consecration into three distinct parts and there being no interval between Consecration and Communion is a move away from popish superstition and false doctrine towards gospel truth understood in a classic Protestant way. They claim that what Cranmer really intended in 1549 and made explicit in 1552 is the real doctrine of the Church of England and thus they accept, but are not necessarily happy with, the minor changes made in 1559 and 1661-2 towards a more reformed catholic content.

Whether we evaluate *The Book of The Common Prayer* (1549) as (a) reformed Catholic but yet still Patristic, Catholic and superior in doctrine and piety to 1552 and 1662, or (b) as a brilliant step, yet only the first step, away from medieval complexity and confusion towards real biblical simplicity and clarity, there is no doubt that it is a remarkable achievement both in terms of its theological/liturgical content and of its power in 'the vulgar tongue' as the language of prayer for God's people. Its appearance and use in 1549 as the beginnings of the Anglican Common Prayer are therefore good reasons for celebration in 1999, even as they were in 1949 at the 400th anniversary of the origins of English Common Prayer.

Many aspects of *The Book of the Common Prayer* (1549) can be singled out for attention and praise. Here we may note the 84 seasonal collects together with another 12 collects in other parts of the Book, all of which had Cranmer's work in them. What have been called 'jewelled miniatures' are one of the major glories of the Anglican tradition within the Western church's use of short prayers or collects. Of them Dr MacCulloch, Cranmer's biographer, has written: 'They exhibit the characteristic threefold nature of Cranmer's liturgical compilations: adaptation of ancient examples in his own English translation (sixty-seven collects with origins in the Sarum Rite alone), refinement of existing translations and new texts from contemporaries, and straightforward original composition, the last element being the smallest proportion' (p 417). There are 24 purely original collects, including those for Advent I and Advent II.

In this context of the tremendous value and impact of the tradition of Common Prayer over the centuries since 1549 it is with regret that one has to report the serious decline in the use of *The Book of Common Prayer* for the Daily Offices, the Order for Holy Communion and the Occasional Offices throughout most of the English-speaking Provinces of the Anglican Communion. This is an added reason for emphasizing the need for and the publicity value of the 450th anniversary. Various forms of 'alternative services' with their many options are eclipsing the value not only of the disciplined use of the classic *BCP* texts with their limited options but are also preventing the realization of the aim of Common Prayer as providing a godly order for the parish, the family and the individual Christian. 'Let all things be done decently and in order' is a text cited by Cranmer both in his Preface and in his essay on Ceremonies in the 1549 Prayer Book. It is a word of the Lord that we need to hear today!

*Almighty and Eternal God, by whose providence this Church and people of England have received the Book of Common Prayer for the ordering of their prayers and praises: Grant them also the help of thy grace to worship thee with understanding and with holy fear, in spirit and in truth, and in the blest communion of thy saints; through Christ our Saviour, who liveth*

*and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end.  
Amen.*

## For Further Reading

Both the 1549 and the 1552 Prayer Books are printed according to their original spelling in *The Everyman Library*, No 448. A new volume in this Library, due Easter 1999, will contain the 1662 Prayer Book with portions of 1549 and 1552. The Parker Society published both the 1549 and the 1552 Prayer Books with modernized spelling as *The Two Liturgies set forth by authority in the reign of Edward VI* in 1844. There is much material on the 1549 Prayer Book in the biography of Archbishop Cranmer, *Thomas Cranmer, A Life* (Yale 1996) by Diarmaid MacCulloch to show the essentially Protestant intentions of Cranmer in this first English Prayer Book.

Still valuable are the old books on the Prayer Books – F E Brightman *The English Rite* 2 vols (1915); Francis Proctor and W H Frere *A New History of The Book of Common Prayer* (1905); W K Lowther Clarke *Liturgy and Worship. A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion* (1932).

More recent studies include G J Cuming *The Godly Order: Texts and Studies relating to the Book of Common Prayer* ACC No 65 (1983); Colin Buchanan *What did Cranmer think he was doing?* Grove Liturgical Studies 7 (1976); Peter Brooks *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist* 2nd edn (MacMillan 1992); A H Couratin 'The Holy Communion of 1549' Church Quarterly Review No 164 (1964) pp 148ff, and M Johnson (ed) *Thomas Cranmer: Essays in Commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of his Birth* (Durham: Turnstone 1990).

From January 1999 it will be possible to read and download parts of the 1549 Prayer Book from various Websites. For details go to [www.episcopalian.org/pbs1928](http://www.episcopalian.org/pbs1928) during 1999.

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