

The 1662 Book of Common Prayer

The Book of Common Prayer is always associated with the year of our Lord 1662, the year in which it was authorized for use by Act of Parliament. In ecclesiastical circles, among clergy and others, the book is often today called, in a kind of jargon or shorthand - '1662'.

1662 is the place to start.

In 1662, the islands of Britain and Ireland had just gone through what was arguably the most turbulent twenty years in their history – the Civil War between King and Parliament, which started in 1642 – the execution of the King – the wars in Scotland and Ireland – the time of Parliamentary authority under the Commonwealth – the seizure of power by Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector – and then the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

Even this rural part of Hampshire was affected by these events. We believe that the two parishes in the benefice of Langrish and East Meon were on different sides in the conflict. Sir Hercules Langrishe of Bordean House raised a troop of horse for Parliament; it is more than probable that East Meon was on the side of the King. A significant battle was fought at Cheriton, just down the road to Winchester.

This church building bears the marks of the conflict. Although there is no evidence in the burial registers of the time, four soldiers from the Parliament side were apparently buried here by their Cavalier opponents, with the 'Amens Plenty' stone placed above them, an example of the grim humour of the victors of war. The lead lining from the 12th century font was stolen to make bullets. And why does no medieval stained glass remain in the windows of this wonderful Norman Church? Quite possibly because of the consequences of local wartime violence.

In order to understand the significance of the Book of Common Prayer, we need to imagine ourselves back at the time of the Restoration of the monarch in 1660. Maybe there was joy in the hearts of the Cavaliers at the return of the King. But the overwhelming emotion throughout the land would have been one of relief, of the need to rebuild a fragile and divided nation, and to ensure that religious differences would never again be the cause of war. The Preface to the book, which I shall return to later, takes the immediate past as a starting point, referring in a marvellously understated way to 'the late unhappy confusions'.

Charles II knew this. As he was waiting to be restored to the throne in 1660 he promised 'liberty to tender consciences...that no man should be disquieted, or called in question, for difference of opinion in matters of religion which do not disturb the peace of the kingdom'. He made this promise, not from a position of strength, but from a position of weakness, to reassure the Presbyterian Scots who had helped restore the monarchy that their religious sensibilities would be tolerated once he was King.

In 1661, Charles summoned twelve Anglican bishops and twelve Presbyterian ministers to a meeting at the Savoy palace on the banks of the Thames. The hope was that the Savoy Conference would produce a new Prayer Book that would keep both sides happy – 'to keep the mean between two extremes' as it was put. It was not to be. Compromise could not be found, and the Presbyterians withdrew.

The Prayer Book was revised by the Bishops alone. A law of parliament, the Act of Uniformity, enforced the book's use in all parishes by St. Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1662. Over one thousand Presbyterian and other non-conformist ministers refused to do so, and were deprived of their livings, in what became known as 'The Great Ejection'.

The 1662 Book of Common Prayer remains to this day authorized for use by Act of Parliament as an official liturgy of the Church of England. If ever it was deemed too out of date or too archaic for modern use, its disuse would have to have Parliamentary approval. That is a measure of how central this book was, and continues to be, to the religious and cultural life of these islands. And not only these islands, since the Book of Common Prayer has influenced the style and content of worship all over the English-speaking world. Last month, I attended a morning service in Christ Church Cathedral, Cape Coast, Ghana. The service was a fusion of Matins and Eucharist. The Eucharist part used contemporary language; the elements of Matins we used were straight from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

So much by way of introduction and context. In the rest of this talk, I intend to address three other aspects of the Book of Common Prayer's history, namely

- The origins of the Book of Common Prayer and what it contains
- To say a little more about the purpose of the 1662 Book, and to reflect on the word 'Common' in the title
- To talk about the influence of the BCP since 1662 on our English religious tradition and culture, and to assess the importance of the BCP for today

In 1662, the main personalities involved in the reissue of the Book of Common Prayer were King Charles II, his leading ecclesiastical politician, Gilbert Sheldon, Bishop of London, and his chief liturgical adviser, John Cosin, Bishop of Durham. But as far as origins, content and composition are concerned, we have to go back a further hundred years or more.

Thomas Cranmer was born in Aslockton in Nottinghamshire in 1489. He died in Oxford, burned at the stake for treason, close to the Martyrs Memorial between Balliol and the Randolph, on 21 March 1556. Cranmer served three monarchs as Archbishop of Canterbury. Henry VIII appointed him in 1532 to deal with 'The King's Great Matter' – the Aragon divorce and the Boleyn marriage. Cranmer was Archbishop under Edward VI, when the Reformation in England properly began, and was then deposed, tried and executed under Mary. In 1549, he created the first Book of Common Prayer, which was authorised for use by Parliament in the same year. Cranmer's Book of 1549 went through a number of revisions in the first century or so of its life – 1552, 1558, 1604, 1637 – as well as the period after the Civil War and before the Restoration when its use was outlawed, but in essence, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, as we still use it today, owes most to Cranmer and to his original Prayer Book of 1549.

Cranmer's liturgical work shows originality, and he was a skilled translator, but the Prayer Book is a wonderful example, long before the coming of computers and software, of 'cut and paste'. Of the Prayer Book he was less the author, and more the editor. Cranmer had a huge library, and a wide knowledge of how worship in England had developed through the Middle Ages. He was also a connoisseur of other men's words, and not afraid to borrow and adapt. The content and the literary style of the book were down to him. The historian Diarmid MacCulloch says:

'Cranmer deserves the gratitude not merely of the Church of England, but of all English speakers throughout the world. Through his connoisseurship, his appreciative pilfering of other people's words and his own adaptations, he created a prose which was self-consciously formal and highly crafted, intended for repeated use until it was polished as smooth as a pebble on a beach.'

Most of the contents of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer are there in Cranmer's book of 1549, and in the amendments made in 1552.

Whereas worship in the Middle Ages was primarily, though not exclusively in Latin, Cranmer's book was in English, reflecting the growing importance and spread of education and literacy and the invention of printing. It was meant to be used by the educated, clergy and laity alike.

From ancient and medieval practice, and by combining some of the services used in the monastic tradition, Cranmer put together two forms of prayer for use every day – Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer – with associated prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, including a litany. He restructured the service of Holy Communion, and moved its theological understanding in a more Reformed direction. He reduced and simplified the Calendar of saints and holy days. He revised both the Lectionary – the portions of scripture to be read on each day of the year – and the Collects, Epistles and Gospels appointed to be read on Sundays at the Holy Communion. Included in the book were services for the important rites of passage – baptism, confirmation, marriage, sickness and death. As well as the services, there were instructions (what we call rubrics) about how the services were to be conducted – about standing and sitting, about who could do what, and what to wear and so on.

The 1549 Book, and the principles remained the same in 1662, was meant to be a compendium, containing within two covers, everything needed, by both clergy and laity, for daily and Sunday worship. And it was 'common prayer'. Even if clergy and people were worshipping in thousands of different churches across the land, they were doing the same things, and saying the same words at much the same time. It was all about unity and uniformity. It was also meant to be controlling and centralized, an example of big government – Church and State (it was hard to differentiate them then) telling you what to do, for reasons of order and stability.

If you would like to read more about the content and purpose of the Prayer Book, whether in the 1549 or 1662 versions, the best help is to be found within the book itself. In the Book of Common Prayer 1662 you should read the three articles at the beginning that no one ever reads because the writing is too small – 'Preface', 'Concerning the Service of the Church', and 'Of Ceremonies'. In the 1662 version, the Preface was new, but the latter two articles are substantially unchanged from 1549. They give a real flavour not only of the contents of the book, but of the purpose of the whole enterprise.

In 1662, there was, above all, respect for tradition and continuity. The Preface speaks of 'review', of 'change in particulars', rather than root and branch innovation. 'The main body and essentials' remain from the past. Nothing was included that was 'contrary to the Word of God or sound doctrine' or that could not be subscribed to by 'men of good conscience'.

In 1662, as in 1549 and in 1558, there was again a strong centralizing and controlling purpose. Contemporaries' reading of history then was that one of the causes of the Civil War was that things, in a liturgical sense, had got out completely of hand. Individual and party preference had overridden the common good. To prevent that situation ever arising again, the answer had to be uniformity in worship. Only the services in the book were authorized, clergy leading worship had to be episcopally ordained and take public oaths of obedience, and a standard of ceremonial was established. Using a theatrical parallel, not just the text, but the stage directions were standardized. Everything was to be done in common – the 'common' concept was really important. The aim was 'preservation of peace and unity in the church; and the procuring of reverence'.

In 1662, a number of changes were made in the contents of the book, compared to its last revision in 1604. Curiously, the 'Forms of Prayer to be used at Sea' were included for the first time, evidence, maybe, of Britain's growing influence as a maritime trading power. A service for the 'Baptism of those of Riper Years' (adults, in other words) was added with the comment that it might be 'useful for the baptizing of natives in our Plantations'. Other changes included the replacement of the word 'minister' with 'priest' and 'congregation' with 'church' and some alterations to the Communion Service which made it slightly less Reformed in theological terms. Passages of scripture were brought up to date using the King James translation of 1611. As I mentioned earlier, a considerable number of Puritan clergy, left over in the parishes, as it were, from the Cromwellian period, could not subscribe either to these changes, or the way in which they were enforced, and were ejected. Some of these, like Richard Baxter, were sincere and high-minded men and scholars of distinction. Those who left were the founders of what came to be known as Dissent, eventually coalescing into Congregation and Presbyterian Churches. We are not to think of those who enforced the Act of Uniformity as wanting those who left to leave, just that uniformity was of paramount importance, and that uniformity brought consequences. Some Puritans laid low, as it were, agreed to episcopal ordination and carried on in their parishes, squaring their conscience as best they could. In this parish, Richard Downes became vicar in 1650, at the height of the power of Parliament. He must surely have been of the Puritan persuasion. Yet it appears he came to terms with the restored monarchy and the restored prayer book, as his successor (probably his son) did not take office until 1674.

Many of the Churches established after the Reformation, and in England that would mean Independents and Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Baptists, eventually produced their own statements of faith – a kind of theological 'confession' to which all members subscribed. The Church of England has never gone down this route, and indeed, has only recently rejected the most modern version of confessional statement – the so-called Anglican Covenant. For its beliefs, the Church of England, has relied on the Scriptures, the ancient Creeds, and the decisions of the Early Church in the first four centuries. The Church of England has never had a theologian like Augustine or Aquinas, Luther or Calvin. It has long been recognised and agreed that what the Church of England believes is best understood in the way that Anglicans worship. This principle is summarized in a Latin tag – *Lex orandi, lex credendi* – 'the law of worship is the law of belief'. The texts which Anglicans pray inform our self-understanding and theological reflection as Anglican Christians. This is still the case in the era of the contemporary services in the Common Worship series. The point is that the 1662 Book of Common Prayer is not just a set of services – it is a major part of the ethos of Anglicanism, in terms of belief, worshipping practice, pastoral care and spirituality.

The 1662 Book of Common Prayer was carried on a wave of emigration and empire-building around the globe. Along with government and civil service, Britain exported its liturgy. The 18th century (and subsequently) saw a rise of missionary work in countries with no tradition of Christianity. Missionaries kept to Cranmer's principle of worshipping in familiar language, and so the Prayer Book was translated into many languages – Tamil (1818), Chinese (1819), Maori (1838), just to give three of over fifty examples. The continuing, if fragile, existence of the Anglican Communion with its 80 million adherents throughout the world today owes much to this common liturgical heritage.

Here is one of my copies of the Book of Common Prayer 1662. It was a Confirmation gift. It is bound together with Hymns Ancient and Modern (Standard Edition). Throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, copies of the Prayer Book were given to mark important occasions in people's lives. Godparents gave it to the newly-confirmed; parents would buy a special edition to mark a child's baptism; grooms would give a copy to brides, and mothers to sons as they set off for war. It was

common practice until quite recently for people to take their own copy of the Prayer Book to church, often bound with Hymns A & M.

The Book of Common Prayer 1662 was the standard Anglican liturgical text for three hundred years. Every church you went to, by and large, used the same services, even if there were growing differences in emphasis, and especially in ceremonial. That was one of the reasons for the 1928 Revision.

But over the past fifty years, things have changed radically. Most parish churches and even Cathedrals use the Book of Common Prayer at 'off-peak' times – 8.00 a.m. Holy Communion service and Evensong. Many churches never use a BCP service. In my previous parish, from 1988 to 1996, I never used a BCP service. I was brought up with it, so it was not hard to relearn when I arrived here. Clergy being ordained now are much less familiar with the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and how to use it.

There will be some who regret all this change, and who wish we were back in the 1950s. But before we get all nostalgic about warm beer, and old maids cycling to the 8.00 a.m. service (BCP undoubtedly), it would be good to understand the reasons why change has taken place.

Change began in the 1960s with the experimental revision of the Holy Communion Service in what was known as Series One and Series Two. On the back of the latest liturgical scholarship, the aim was to recreate, as far as possible, in form and content and style, the Holy Communion Service of the first centuries of the Church. We were getting back to our roots, and other traditions, like the Roman Catholic tradition, were doing the same. The ubiquity of the 1662 Holy Communion service was no more.

The other critique of the 1662 Holy Communion service, and of Cranmer's 1549 original, was its emphasis on human sinfulness and distance from God. More modern liturgies do not minimize sin, but they do not go on about it so much and so repetitively, as does the BCP. Maybe fashions do change, and they will change again, but sin was not the focus of religious people in the later 20th century.

It was also said, and I think rightly, that the 1662 Book of Common Prayer does not encourage congregational participation. If you follow strictly the rubrics of the 1662 Holy Communion Service (and we don't) the congregation says and does very little. The congregation should not join in, for instance, with the Collect for Purity and the Prayer of Humble Access. The same discouragement applies to the choral forms of Morning and Evening Prayer, unless you have a good voice and are well-versed in the mysteries of Anglican chant. In the 20th century, the whole thrust of liturgical theory, and this still holds true today, is that worship is a corporate activity in which everyone takes an active part, and not something which the priest says and does (or choir sings) on behalf of the congregation. All modern liturgy is deliberately much more interactive and participatory, again in line with the customs and spirit of the age, whether we approve or not.

Then there is the democratic aspect. In the 17th century, Church and State could tell people what to do and what to say, and, by and large, the law was observed and enforced. From the mid-20th century, that acceptance of authority began to dissipate and disappear. People had more confidence, and were prepared to do what they wanted to do, and to consider the consequences later. In terms of the worship of the Church of England, it was just no longer possible to prescribe, in a rather narrow way, how congregations might worship. Clergy and congregations wanted freedom of expression. It is no accident that the Common Worship contemporary anthology of church services which we use mid-morning is based less on prescriptive texts than on outlines, frameworks and structures, with a lot of choice and alternatives in terms of content.

There has also been, and still is, the debate about language, and whether it is helpful and appropriate to worship God in the idioms and language of 16th century England. When I spoke last year about the King James Bible, I said that the translators of the 1611 version would be amazed to know that the KJB was still in widespread use four hundred years on. And I am sure that Thomas Cranmer would say the same about the Prayer Book which he brought into being.

We still go to see Shakespeare plays, and for those of us brought up on it, the language of the 1662 Book is not difficult at all, and is often rich and beautiful, but we have to accept that it will not suit everyone's religious and spiritual temperament, and it may not be the way through which those searching today will most readily and easily approach and find God.

We cannot turn back the liturgical clock. Will the 1662 Book of Common Prayer still be in use in a generation's time? Where there remains a strong choral tradition, as in Cathedrals and large parish churches, I'm sure it will. I'm less sure about what we might call 'your average congregation', especially as those more familiar with the BCP join the worship of heaven.

What may well be of lasting value is the 1662 Book of Common Prayer's contribution to English language and culture more generally. Along with Shakespeare and the King James Bible, it is one of the three foundations of English as we know it. Whether as deliberate quotations or unconscious borrowings, many phrases have entered the language. To take just four of many examples:

- "let him now speak, or here after for ever hold his peace" from the marriage service.
- "Till death us do part", from the marriage service.
- "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" from the funeral service.
- "From all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil" from the Litany.
- "Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" from the collect for the second Sunday of Advent.
- 'devices and desires' – the title of a P.D. James novel – from the General Confession

In that sense, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer will remain an indispensable part of our literary and linguistic heritage.

I end on a personal note. My first memories of church are from the 1950s when the 1662 Book of Common Prayer was the norm. I am part of the last generation to have brought up with the BCP. The vicar I remember best from my youth was liturgically very conservative, and was very reluctant even to try out anything new or experimental. In my teens, I suppose I was a bit of a radical. In the mid-1960s I eventually persuaded him to allow the use of Holy Communion Series Two on fifth Sunday evenings. Four times a year – I thought it a triumph!

But because I was brought up with the BCP, even in those times in my public ministry when I did not use it much (late 1970s, early 1990s), it has never been lost from my spiritual consciousness, and I think I have grown to appreciate its richness and numinosity, its rhythm and cadences, more and more.

Above all, I return again and again to the Sunday Collects, which have been a lifeline to me in difficult times. Some of the Collects were Cranmer's own compositions; others he enriched and adapted from other sources. They always begin with God, and one of his attributes, often his mercy. Then there is a petition and request, before a final doxology of praise. In structure, they are perfect prayers. They begin with God and return to God. Those of a certain age – old people now – learned them by heart in Sunday School. Here are two favourites of mine – prayers that are now part of me....

Epiphany 4

O GOD, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright; Grant to us such strength and protection, as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Trinity 7

LORD of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things; Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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16 October 2012*