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THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER (1662)¹

By Lee Gatiss

Last year we celebrated the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. This year the history buffs and antiquarians are in joyful mood because it is the 350th anniversary of that famously Anglican date — 1662.

In these days of spiritual ignorance in the country and doctrinal laxity in the church, many Anglicans look back to former times with a certain degree of wistfulness.

Declining electoral rolls speak of a nation less focused on the things of God than seems to have been the case in centuries gone by when our ancient and airy church buildings must, we imagine, have pulsed with activity and vibrancy.

In a period of liturgical diversity and confusion, other Anglicans feel the disappearance of a uniform standard of worship across the denomination to be an incalculable injury, particularly as it permits both a lack of gravity in church services and the propagation (often) of dubious theology.

In an era of polarisation in ecclesiastical politics, with pressure groups and ‘turbulent priests’ disturbing the peace of the Church, the search for authoritative leadership to impose order on a fractious, wayward communion is an understandable desire.

One date lingers in the collective Anglican memory as suggestive of a golden era: 1662. Weren’t churches full in the seventeenth century? Didn’t the *Prayer Book*, hallowed by over a century of sacred use, ensure unity and uniformity in the public meetings of every English parish, with a reverent dignity and stylistic polish often wanting in modern expressions of church?

1662 is an emblem of the liturgical good old days.

Reformers

The *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) was not actually invented in 1662. The first such book in English was edited by Archbishop Cranmer in 1549, under good king Edward VI.

It was quickly revised again and re-issued in an even more Protestant and Reformed version in 1552. So this year is the 460th anniversary of that second Edwardian prayer book too.

Playing a key role in the composition of that book was the Italian reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli. As Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, Vermigli had a huge influence over Cranmer and Ridley and other English reformers, and was a great link between the English and Continental Reformations.

Vermigli, incidentally, died in 1562. So this year is also the 450th anniversary of this great man going to glory.

What Cranmer and Vermigli did with the *Prayer Book* was concentrate Reformed Protestant theology into a useable liturgical form. So that, from then on, every day in every parish, and every Sunday morning and evening, the English people (and soon the peoples of their far flung empire) began to pray in a new way.

The new *Prayer Book* was in English, ‘understood of the people’, as the *39 Articles* put it, not the Latin of the medieval Mass. It took the best of Augustinian medieval piety, translated it, and fed it into the spiritual diet of the English people, strengthened by the renewed emphases of the Reformers on salvation by grace alone, through faith alone.

Not only that, but the *Prayer Book* prescribed a healthy and robust diet of Bible reading and preaching for every church. If one follows all the set readings laid down in the *BCP*, one gets through the Bible once a year and the Psalms every month.

True worship

This exceeded the expectations of every other Church, whether in Rome, Wittenberg, or Geneva. So the Anglican Church had, from this moment, an emphasis on Bible reading and preaching *par excellence*.

This in turn shows us what the authentic Anglican understanding of church is. It is not, as so many would like to make it, merely a religious social club where we gather each week to celebrate ‘community’ — though community is important, and the corporate nature of the church in prayers and responses trumps our more modern individualism and performance mentality.

Church is not all about ‘me and my felt needs’ being met by a distant God, who comes down to give me a particular experience. Vermigli once complained of church services that ‘everything is so noisy with chanting and piping that there is no time left for preaching. So it happens that people depart from church full of music and harmony, yet they are fasting and starving for heavenly doctrine’.

So in the classic Anglican understanding of church as seen in the *BCP*, church is not to be centred on any earthly mediator, whether that is a celebrity pastor, a mediating priest or a worship band leader.

In 1662, church was about gathering to hear God speak through his Word, confessing our sins and our faith, and responding to the Spirit, in prayer for each other and for the world.

Lord’s Supper

The Reformers Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer all died as martyrs because they refused to submit to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass.

So-called transubstantiation — the changing of the substance of the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper into the body and blood of Christ himself — was the great dividing issue of that era. Our Reformers refused to believe this, to teach this, or to countenance the superstitious practices that had grown up around it.

Why? Because they did not find such a doctrine in the Scriptures that they were now reading afresh. And in every case, it was this very thing which led to these martyrs’ execution. They literally went to the stake and were burned for their view of the Lord’s Supper.

But what did they put in the place of the Mass? What was it that they taught Anglicans to pray and to remember as they gather around the Lord’s Table?

They taught that the Supper is a divine instrument of assurance. There we confess ‘our manifold sins and wickedness’ to God. Then we are assured by the words of Scripture itself, that ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’ and that ‘he is the propitiation for our sins’.

Grace

We come to the table (not, notice, an altar), ‘not trusting in our own righteousness, but in God’s manifold and great mercies’. We come with nothing in our hands to receive God’s mercy. It’s all about God doing something, not us.

The movement of the action in the *BCP* liturgy is from God to us — God in his grace reaching down to us in our sinfulness. We simply take and eat, in remembrance of what Jesus has done. Read theologically, the 1662 service shows us that, although we are more wicked than we ever thought, we are also more loved by a merciful God than we ever dreamed.

The result is that, pastorally speaking, our consciences are assured of God’s love towards us in Christ, even when we’ve been most searingly honest about our shortcomings and failures.

We praise God that, ‘by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we and all thy whole Church may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his Passion’.

1662 makes it very clear that what is going on at the Lord’s Table is not a sacrifice on an altar made by a mediating priest on behalf of the people, which has to be repeated again and again each week to be effective.

Finished work

That was the wrong message you got from the Mass. In the Mass something is offered to God. What the *BCP* says, however, is that Christ’s once-and-for-all sacrifice on the cross for us was utterly, completely and totally sufficient to pay for our sins. No additional sacrifices are necessary:

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

All the language of us making a sacrifice is kept until *after* we’ve eaten. Only then do we pray that God would accept from us (to use the language of Hebrews 13) a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

So after we’ve fed on Christ in our hearts by faith, we offer and present to God not the bread and wine but ourselves (to use the language of Romans 12), as a holy and lively (or living) sacrifice.

There is of course more we could say about the *BCP* as it was definitively ordered in 1662. It was almost the same as Cranmer’s book, with surprisingly few alterations considering all that happened in the interim.

One thing that was specifically added in 1662 was a service for the baptism of adults or ‘those of riper years’, who may not have been baptised as infants during the confusions of the tumultuous Civil War period.

But, generally speaking, the book and liturgy remained unchanged: the same elegant expression of the profoundly liberating gospel. That is something to give thanks for in this 350th anniversary year.

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Endnotes:

- 1) This article was originally printed in the August issue of *Evangelical Times* and is reproduced here with permission from the Editors.