

The Book of Common Prayer

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The adjective, ‘common’, as used in the title of this famous prayer book, means, simply, ‘shared by two or more people’. It was Archbishop Thomas Cranmer’s intention that it would be the shared and common prayer of English-speaking churchgoers – that is, in his time, everybody in the Tudor kingdom. As that constituency grew, over subsequent centuries, with the British Empire, beyond the imagination of anybody in the sixteenth century, so the Book of Common Prayer became the prayer book of the global English Church, or what we have come to know as the Anglican Communion, throughout the world. Whether, in 1960, let us say, an Anglican communicant attended a service of Holy Communion in St Andrew’s Cathedral, in Sydney, with the minister in surplice and scarf at the north end of the holy table, or a High Mass at the Anglo-Catholic shrine of Christ Church St Laurence, a few blocks away in the same street, with the three sacred ministers on the altar steps, and six candles ablaze; or, similarly, service at Evangelical All Souls’, Langham Place, next to the BBC in London, or a few blocks away, High Mass at Anglo-Catholic All Saints’, Margaret Street – or anywhere across the worldwide Anglican Communion, the words of the prayers were in the same Cranmerian idiom (as the scripture readings were from the ‘authorized’ King James Bible, ‘appointed to be read in churches’). Moreover, the hymns, from the rich and beloved store of Anglican hymnody, were welcomingly familiar.

There was a profound linguistic-liturgical bond of unity, founded on a common textual identity, in tension with the comprehensiveness of Anglican belief and practice. For the laity, in particular – usually, inevitably, less preoccupied with ceremonial and doctrinal nuances and differences – the sense of belonging to a common Church was strongly reinforced by the use of common prayer. It is ‘a language at once grand and simple, heightened and practical, archaic and timeless ... the acute poetry, balanced sonorities, heavy order, and direct intimacy of Cranmer’s prose have achieved permanence’.¹ Writing, in 2023, of ‘the once and future prayer book’, Peter Hitchens commented that:

it embodies something very deep, an unusual coincidence of literary beauty and disturbing truth. ... It is also so perpetually lovely and full of the Holy Ghost that sin wilts in its presence and Godly persons of any denomination can and do sink gratefully into its poetry, given the chance. It provides the Constitution of Private Life, from font to graveside. ... You cannot hear it spoken and be unaffected. It embodies the idea that truth is beauty and beauty is truth.

Tellingly, he observes of his own experience of it:

I also found that thing lacking from so much modern religion, a presumption of intelligence. Its authors absolutely knew and had experienced the very doubts that I sought to overcome. They offered no sweet-talk or patronizing oversimplification. They were unapologetic. They expected me to be literate.

He closes with this charge: ‘Please look after this book. Though England has largely forgotten it, the whole round world still has need of it.’²

There had always been the general understanding that, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, with the strong bulwark of the magisterium of its teaching office, the Prayer Book embodied, expressed and

1. Wood, ‘God Talk’.

2. Peter Hitchens, ‘The Once and Future Prayer Book’, *The American Conservative*, 7 October 2023.

preserved the fundament of Anglican theology. So, an Anglo-Catholic bishop could say: 'We love, esteem, revere, and use the Book of Common Prayer – it is Common Prayer and binds us together as one Church. It also serves as our teaching office, our magisterium. It is a compendium of ancient Catholic faith and practice.'³ And a statement from the other end of the theological and liturgical spectrum of the Church, in the diocese of Sydney, could affirm: 'the Book of Common Prayer, together with the Thirty-Nine Articles [are] to be regarded as the authorised standard of worship and doctrine in this Church'.⁴

The progressive abandonment of that prayer book (to the point, now, where it has all but disappeared from the liturgical experience of most Anglicans) as a result of the modern liturgical movement, in parallel (and for the same reason of pursuing modern-language liturgy, with all its alleged benefits) with the abandonment of Latin in the Roman Catholic Church, has led to such a wide variety of liturgical forms (and even anti-liturgical developments, with no prayer book at all, as in many parishes in the diocese of Sydney, the world's largest Anglican diocese) that chaotic disunity has trumped the sense of unity which the former linguistic universality at least precariously preserved in worship. Even within individual parishes, such as the aforementioned All Saints', Margaret Street, different linguistic forms, ancient and modern, co-exist in a single parish's worship, as one goes from such as weekday Low Mass to Sunday High Mass, hearing, even at the generally admirable All Saints', at Low Mass – while the priest is traditionally facing east and wearing a lace alb and fiddleback chasuble – the ugly response to 'The Lord be with you': 'And also with you'. This has long since been rightly discarded even in the most modern Roman Catholic liturgies, which have improved matters with: 'And with your [or thy] spirit' ('et cum spiritu tuo'). Other parishes may have an early morning communion service on Sunday, according to the Book of Common Prayer (most

3. Bishop Chad Jones, 'The Theology and Practice of the Missal', Earth & Altar blog. Available online at: <https://www.earthaltar.org/post/the-theology-and-practice-of-the-missal> (accessed 12 March 23). Bishop Jones is the Bishop Coadjutor of the Eastern Diocese of the Anglican Province of America, a conservative breakaway group from the Episcopal Church.

4. Quoted in John G. Mason, 'A Prayer Book for Australia?', Anglican Church League, Sydney, July 1995.

of the attendees being older people) with a later morning service, usually seen as the main parish liturgy, designed for families, in entirely modern forms – all of this effectively producing, just within one parish, two congregations, with next to no worshipping contact between them.

I was surprised when Professor David Jasper, whose generally excellent study, *The Language of Liturgy*, to which we have already had several occasions to refer, while approving aspects of my argument in *The Word in the Desert*, deprecated my suggestion there that liturgical diversity was a sign that the Anglican Church was falling apart into disunity. If what is happening, today, in that Communion – and which is (inevitably) reflected in its liturgical chaos – is not a fatal fracturing of unity, one would be interested to know what ecclesiastical disunity does look like. If Anglicans are no longer engaged in common and shared prayer, then they are no longer united as a Church, because – as is repeatedly stated – it was common prayer that expressed their unity of worship and doctrine.

Laszlo Dobszay (writing in 2010) makes a similar point with regard to the disposal of Latin and the advent of the vernacularised Roman liturgy: ‘Fifty years ago a Catholic entering a Catholic church in any part of the world could feel at home because the Latin liturgy he found there was identical to that experienced in his own country.’⁵

One of the ironies of the diversity-obsessed modern Church is that no liturgy is more encouraging to diversity than the traditional rite. While the modern Mass will ‘segregate attendees by linguistic and, hence, ethnic lines (i.e., Spanish Masses, Vietnamese Masses, etc)’, ‘every traditional Latin Mass parish I have ever attended’, declares Brian McCall, editor-in-chief of *Catholic Family News*, ‘is more ethnically diverse than liberal Catholic parishes’, because a universal and international language of liturgy – that is, a catholic rite, in the general sense of that adjective – is used.⁶

While it seems impossible to imagine, in these days, that a reunification of Anglicanism (or, indeed, a revival of it) could occur, if it is to come about, then it can only happen through the recovery of a degree of liturgical unity and, if that is to be achieved, then – again, unimaginable as it may sound – this needs to be pursued through a

5. Dobszay, *Restoration and Organic Development*, p. 79.

6. Knuffke, ‘Traditional Latin Mass Appeals to People from All Walks of Life’.

recovery of the Book of Common Prayer. It is only since the beginning of the abandonment of that book in living worship half a century ago that everything and anything that could be imagined that could go wrong with the Anglican Church and with its mission in the world has been happening, to the point, today, on any realistic assessment, that that Communion as a *koinonia* (the Greek origin of the word, of fellowship and sharing) is in its death throes.

In an unusually intemperate and, in terms of his broader argument, self-contradictory passage (for, elsewhere, he proves the opposite of what he is arguing), Professor Jasper indicts ‘conservative haters’ of modern language rites, of ‘being caught in the Cranmerian time-warp’.⁷ As if to support this point, he continues: ‘no one would question the statement that we cannot write like Shakespeare today’. I have never, in fairly wide reading (and writing myself) about conservative reaction to modern-language liturgies in the Anglican Church, encountered any writer who has been so unwise and, linguistically speaking, reckless, as to suggest that we should be writing, liturgically, like Cranmer now, in devising new rites – even in the very unlikely event that we could find someone so gifted who could. Rather, we are urging the recovery of Cranmerian liturgical language itself on the basis of his incomparable and timeless genius as a liturgical writer in English. There is no warp here, temporal or otherwise, and this is the self-contradictory irony of Jasper’s position in this statement, as he spends far more time in his book, on ritual poetics, demonstrating – and very persuasively, too – the enduring Cranmerian genius and its superiority to modern-language liturgies.

Curiously, what is more, for someone usually so perceptive, he seems not to realise the further irony of his calling on Shakespeare in an attempt to discredit those who would defend the revival and perpetuation of Cranmerian liturgy. Many more people, across the English-speaking world, and further, attend performances of Shakespeare in Elizabethan and Jacobean English than attend church liturgies that have escaped the ‘Cranmerian time-warp’ – or any liturgies, for that matter. The ongoing popularity of Shakespeare is another argument for the genius of poetic language of that remarkable period in the development of English language and literature, and its ability to communicate the most profound truths of human experience, sustained in performances of the Cranmerian liturgy

7. Jasper, *Language of Liturgy*, p. 126.

in church, as it continues to captivate audiences in Shakespearean performances in theatres – another domain of Jasper’s ritual poetics. As Peter Hitchens writes:

We rightly love William Shakespeare for his astonishing understanding of power, love, ambition, and doubt, and anyone who publicly suggested that his great plays should be turned into baby talk and paraphrase would be driven from the stage. Yet Thomas Cranmer, who had a similar understanding gained from intimate contact with kings and a comparable gift of clear and unforgettable poetry is endlessly revised and rewritten and toned down by figures unworthy to sharpen his quill.⁸

Jasper invokes T.S. Eliot in the name of ‘discontinuities’ in language to support his critique. For all his modernism in poetry, Eliot (as we have noted) was an outspoken defender of traditional language in liturgy and scripture, as his well-known lambasting of the New English Bible, on its appearance, testified, as was his opposition to revisions of the Psalter and his rebuking of any compromising of traditional usage in liturgy in his own parish church. I have shown in my study of Eliot’s faith how often he uses quotations from the Cranmerian liturgy in his poetry – a strange kind of discontinuity!⁹ Writing of the ‘New Translation of the Bible’ in *Theology*, in 1949, he warned: ‘If the Church rewrites its Bible and its liturgies to conform with every successive stage of deterioration of the language, the prospect is gloomy.’¹⁰ Also this, in 1962: ‘Must we look forward to the day when the Collects of Cranmer are revised for use in Anglican Churches, to make them conformable to “contemporary English”?’¹¹ It would seem that the poet was a champion of continuity in liturgical language, with no time at all for discontinuity. Fortunately, he did not live to see that lamentable ‘day’ he refers to as he died in 1965.

8. Hitchens, ‘The Once and Future Prayer Book’.

9. Barry Spurr, *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T.S. Eliot and Christianity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010), pp. 203-10.

10. T.S. Eliot, ‘New Translation of the Bible’, *Theology* 52, no. 351 (September 1949), p. 337.

11. T.S. Eliot, ‘Review of the New English Bible’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 16 December 1972, p. 7.

Of course, no one would be expected to write like Cranmer or Shakespeare today, for the Church or for the theatre. Any such imitation would be a parody. In any case, we do not need them to, for we have Cranmer's liturgy and Shakespearean drama, and both can speak to us today as compellingly as they did in the sixteenth century.¹² This is a matter of words and language, in the liturgical context, and how they function most effectively for the purposes, pastoral and spiritual, they are designed to achieve, and to affirm a language of liturgy, like liturgy itself, that transcends time and place. Jan Kott famously called Shakespeare 'Our Contemporary' in his book of that title in 1964; and Milton, in his great sonnet on the dramatist, in 1630, predicted that immortality:

Dear son of Memory, great heir of fame ...
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thyself a live-long monument.

Thomas Cranmer, in his liturgy, is worthy of the same description and accolade and this is why my project is focused on defining and demonstrating, through close analysis of the text of the Book of Common Prayer, what it has to offer, today, and why it needs to be restored – now, as a matter of urgency – to active liturgical life in the English-speaking Churches, in the context of the contemporary ongoing undermining and destruction of that life.

In our focus precisely on language, we should look closely at the essence of the Prayer Book's unmatched genius as a compendium of liturgical language in English at its best. Particularly, I would

12. An example of parodic Cranmer was provided by Charles Williams, the so-called 'Forgotten Inkling' (of the famous Oxford group, that included C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien). Williams was a gifted poet, dramatist and theologian, and composed a series of collects for the wedding ceremony of his friends, Anne and Vivian Ridler, in 1938. One went like this, in sub-Cranmerian style: 'Almighty and most merciful God, who by the glorious Incarnation and Atonement of Christ Jesus hast made men capable of eternal life: Increase among us the knowledge of the exchanges of Thy love, and from the common agony of our lives redeem us to the universal joy of Thy holy city ...' and so on, becoming too much of a good thing, by its busy-ness. In Grevel Lindop, *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 252.

demonstrate that, while, obviously, Cranmer's is, to a degree, a dated and strange idiom to contemporary ears and eyes (as it was, fifty, one hundred, two hundred ... years ago), the depth and breadth of the spiritual life that it embodies, expresses and nurtures, is an incomparable resource for public-corporate and private-individual prayer that not only far exceeds any other forms of worship which the Anglican Communion has subsequently devised, but offers, to the English-speaking world, at large, in its liturgical Churches (including the Roman Catholic Church in English-speaking countries), the best that can be known and thought in the way of this special and peculiar discourse. This has nothing to do with nostalgia, of 'living in the past', as critics of such a strategy routinely protest and, in the modern way, insist that we have nothing to learn from the past. In this matter, we have much to learn from it.

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In characterising the language that Cranmer uses, the most apt term would appear to be poetic prose. Cally Hammond is correct when she observes that, in the archbishop's day, 'there was no concept of "free verse"', but then she makes a too sharp distinction: 'he was not writing poetry, he was writing prose'.¹³ Jasper, too, and very oddly – considering his detailed examination of the archbishop's indebtedness to the 'poetic and dramatic tradition' – similarly insists that he was 'a writer of prose rather than verse' and, of him, again: 'though no poet'.¹⁴ While these observations are true in the strict terms of the prosodic theory and poetic practice of Cranmer's immediate contemporaries, such as Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, such are the qualities of Cranmer's prose composition that to speak of it as 'poetic' is legitimate in the broadest sense of that term. Moreover, we should also remember that in the years – a century after Cranmer's death – when the 1662 version of his prayer book was published, Milton, writing *Paradise Lost* (in composition from 1657 to 1665), did so in a blank verse which exemplifies (as he puts it in his note on 'The Verse' to that poem) 'ancient liberty recovered ... from the troublesome and modern bondage of riming', such as he had encountered in his, otherwise-admired, Edmund Spenser. Milton and Cranmer, in their

13. Hammond, *Sound of the Liturgy*, p. 124.

14. Jasper, *Language of Liturgy*, pp. 88-89.