Introducing the Spirituality of the Book of Common Prayer.

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The ‘Prayer Book’ means different things to different people, across the generations (Photograph: Patrick Comerford, 2012)

Patrick Comerford

Introduction:

Hymn 360: ‘Let all the world in every corner sing’

I chose this opening hymn this morning because in this poem from The Temple George Herbert talks about worship as an invitation from the Church to the whole world in the Kingdom of God, which I find is one of the underlying principles in the spirituality of The Book of Common Prayer.

We talk so often about The Book of Common Prayer that we presume everyone knows what we are thinking about and what we are talking about. But not so!

How many of you have heard parishioners ask, as they are handed the green-bound, 2004 edition of The Book of Common Prayer, “Why can’t we use The Book of Common Prayer?

Of course, what they mean the black bound 1960s print runs of The Book of Common Prayer, now piled away under moulding collections of The Alternative Prayer Book (1984), under old, discarded preachers’ books and vestry minutes in a cupboard behind the heater behind the desk at the back of the vestry.

And, when they refer to 1960 black bound edition of The Book of Common Prayer, they may even refer to it as the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

The “Prayer Book” means different things to different people, across the generations, and across the Anglican Communion, and the prefaces alone to the 2004 Book of
Common Prayer tell you of editions published in 1549, 1552, 1662, 1878 and 1926. The Book of Common Prayer remains the normative liturgy of the Church of England. It has been translated into over 150 languages. Its words have resonated through almost 450 years of our life and culture.

Anglican spirituality can be best understood as basically a liturgical piety, nurtured by The Book of Common Prayer in a rich and glorious tradition. Although it is a quarter of a century since Dr Gareth Bennett, in his controversial and catastrophic preface to Crockford’s in 1987 claimed that “prayer books based on the English Book of Common Prayer” had fallen into “virtual disuse,” throughout the Church of Ireland, and in most other provinces or member churches of the Anglican Communion, diocese, parishes and parishioners continue to see The Book of Common Prayer as providing their standards in both doctrine and worship.

Over the generations, Anglicanism has been sustained and nourished by, and radically depends on, the traditions that have been developed through our liturgical use of and our interaction with The Book of Common Prayer.

It is inclusive Anglicanism at its best, broad and deep, Catholic and Reformed. The word ‘Protestant’ did not occur in the Book of Common Prayer, as its first edition predates this term in its usual sense, until ‘The Preamble and Declaration’ (1870) was bound in with it, and even then the word only appears once (see p. 776). But then, of course, neither does the word ‘Anglican’ appear here – it was not used as we use it until the late 19th century.

For countless Anglicans down through the centuries, the language of The Book of Common Prayer, the language of the King James Version of the Bible, and the language of the Coverdale version of the Psalter, have been deeply engraved on our hearts, so that they the habitual language of devotion, rich with associations; words ready to hand that come to mind and tongue in times of weariness, or sickness, or despair—a genuinely liturgical and devotional language, thoroughly biblical in its images and inspiration.

It is a language of devotion that is rich and deeply meaningful and that has shaped the spiritual vocabulary of Anglicans for generations. Here we have Christian memory and collective recollection.

Think of phrases such as:

“Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in sundry ways …”
“... that we should not dissemble or cloke them ...”

“... an humble, lowly, penitent and obedient heart ...”

“Wherefore I pray and beseech you, as many as are here present ...”

“We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep ...”

“We have left undone those things which we ought to have done ... and there is no health in us ...”

“... a godly, righteous and sober life ...”

“... that we surely trusting in thy defence ...”

“... we fall not into sin, neither run into any kind of danger ...”

“...for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory ...”

Someone I know claims to have known twin sisters called Grace and Gloria.

Or the one I was puzzled by when I first heard it as a child, without the comma being emphasised:

“... that both, our hearts ...”

What? Only two hearts? Among so many?

“We do not presume ...”

“Draw near with faith ...”

“Prevent us, O Lord, ...”

“Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest ...”

Doubtless you have been learned in pastoral visits to the elderly that no matter how their minds or memories are slipping, they still remember whole Psalms from Coverdale’s Psalter in The Book of Common Prayer.

But they also remember many familiar prayers from The Book of Common Prayer,
especially from Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and the Holy Communion. For example, how many of you, when we used the traditional form of Evening Prayer in the chapel on Friday evening could remember and recite the words of the General Thanksgiving:

“Almighty God, Father of all mercies, We thine unworthy servants Do give thee most humble and hearty thanks For all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us, and to all men. We bless thee for our creation, preservation and all the blessings of this life: But above all, for thine inestimable love In the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

“And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, That our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, And that we show forth thy praise, Not only with our lips, but in our lives; By giving up ourselves to thy service, And by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, To whom with thee and the Holy Spirit Be all honour and glory, World without end. Amen” (The Book of Common Prayer (2004), p. 99).

The Book of Common Prayer is the great jewel of the Anglican reformers, particularly Thomas Cranmer. At a time when there was a variety of styles and approaches to worship, so complex and so difficult to follow that the common man and woman became mere spectators, The Book of Common Prayer once again made liturgy what the word implies it should be, not just the work of the people, but the work of the common people, in a language intelligible to the common person, or as was said at the time, “understanded of the people.”

But The Book of Common Prayer is not only a rendering in the English tongue of the Catholic faith, as that concept was officially understood in the mid-16th century, but also a lens through which we are invited to direct a tentative but sincere glance, every now and then, towards God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to be in communion with God and in communion with one another.

1, It is an authentic yet reformed expression of the historic Western liturgy that has nourished millions across the generations.

2, It is an authentic expression of the devotional experience in the English-speaking world, a rooted, embodied, inherited tradition that has been embraced and passed on by a diverse group over the centuries, not something just dreamed up by a few members of the ‘worship group’ in a few snatched moments at the end of last week.

3, It is an authentic but reformed balancing of Western liturgical norms with Scripture
and the theological and spiritual practices of the Early Church.

Most people do not go to church on Sunday morning to experience the rector’s latest exciting innovation. They go to church because they hope to experience God and to get a concrete sense of what it means to live out the love of God and love of neighbour, to be in communion with God and in communion with the Church. Using The Book of Common Prayer does not guarantee any of this, but it is a step in the right direction...

On the other hand, The Book of Common Prayer is not just a book for Sunday services. It also offers a full, integrated spiritual system that is intended as much for the laity as the clergy and which is founded in a lay spirituality that arose in the mediaeval period. It offers a programme for Christian growth built around liturgical spirituality.

The liturgical round is made up of three components:

1, The liturgical calendar reflects on the central mysteries of the faith through the lenses of the seasons of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and in his continuing witness in the lives of the saints.

2, The Daily Office leads us through each day, month and year through the Scriptures and Psalms.

3, The Holy Communion or the Eucharist gathers us on Holy Days to most perfectly embody the Body of Christ and to receive the graces that the sacraments afford.

Cranmer’s original plan in The Book of Common Prayer was to mark every Sunday with the Litany and the celebration of the Holy Communion and to mark every day with Matins and Evensong.

“All priests and deacons are to say daily the Morning and Evening Prayer, either privately or openly, not being let by sickness, or some other urgent cause. And the curate that ministereth in every parish-church or chapel, being at home, and not being otherwise reasonably hindered, shall say the same in the parish-church or chapel where he ministereth, and shall cause a bell to be tolled thereunto a convenient time before he begin, that the people may come to hear God’s word, and to pray with him.”

This design was largely unimplemented for most of 400 years as clergy settled for Matins and Evensong on Sundays and Holy Communion no more than once a month or even once a quarter.
Today, it is said, Evensong is the best-loved part of *The Book of Common Prayer*, largely untouched by the liturgical reforms of recent decades. It continues to inspire and support great musical endeavours, and it provides a firm peg on which to hang deeply personal reflections and memories.

*The Book of Common Prayer* includes an elaborate system for the marking of time, gathering the elements of the mediaeval year into a compact form that has largely survived. It reinforced the basic pattern, while simplifying some aspects of the annual round, using traditional prayers and readings to mark its contours.

This system of corporate timekeeping affects all life, not just religious observance. It has given us “Mothering Sunday” because the reading provided for that particular Sunday was from that part of the Letter to the Galatians that tells us Jerusalem above is mother of us all. The British tax year begins on 6 April because under the traditional Julian calendar that day was the Feast of the Annunciation, 25 March. This day marked the first revelation of the Incarnation that was to be celebrated nine months later. Lent, Hilary, Trinity, Michaelmas, the names if not the observance, remain firmly ensconced in legal, academic and public life.

Within the Christian year, the prayer book shaped the day by boiling down the seven mediaeval monastic daily offices into two simplified observances, Matins and Evensong. These were to be said daily by the clergy, who were to ring the church bell as a public sign that the day was being observed, as well as an invitation to any parishioners to join them.

In cathedral and collegiate foundations, these offices have been the mainstay of Anglican choral music, inspiring thousands of short compositions for the versicles and response, the lesser litany, the psalms and the canticles in every century, including Herbert Howells, Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett.

Over 300,000 listeners a week tune into what is usually a *Book of Common Prayer* Choral Evensong on BBC Radio 3. Live cathedral attendances have grown in a sustained way over the past 20 years or so, and they continue to do so.

All evensong marks is the passing of another day. So what is it about evensong? The whole rich emotional hinterland of its observance is reflected at various points in popular culture, from the singing of ‘Abide with me’ at football matches to a lingering taste at some funerals for the same hymn, and ‘The Day thou gavest, Lord, is ended.’ Yet, *The Book of Common Prayer* is about more than prayer. It includes one whole
book of the Bible – the Psalms (see pp 591-765), which takes up over one-fifth of the full book.

It includes prefaces to the 1549, 1552, 1662, 1878, 1926 and 2004 editions (pp 7-17), Calendars (pp 18-23), the Table of Readings (pp 24-74), General Directions for Public Worship (pp 75-77), and Sentences of Scripture (pp 78-82), and we get to p. 84 before we even begin to pray!

And if you were to begin from the back, there is an index of seven pages (pp 793-799), two pages of acknowledgments (pp 790-791), the 39 Articles (pp 778-789), the Preamble and Declaration (pp 776-77), the Athanasian Creed or Quicunque Vult, which is neither a creed nor the work of Saint Athanasius, which is full of anathemas but without any instructions for its use or indications of its authority, and the Catechism (pp 766-770). And all that before we thumb back to the Psalter (pp 591-765).

So, the search for the Spirituality of the Prayer Book, a book of almost 800 pages, might be confined to pp 84-590, or less than two-thirds of The Book of Common Prayer … but only if you, in some minimalist way, reduce spirituality to the exercise of prayer.

But The Book of Common Prayer was always so. The previous edition, last updated in 1960, also included a “Note on the Golden Number,” three pages of tables to find Easter Day, a two-page Table of Moveable Feasts, and “A Table of kindred and affinity, wherein whosoever are related are forbidden by the ecclesiastical law of the Church of Ireland to marry together’ (p. 345). Pre-teenage boys could often wonder what connects the Golden Number with Easter – perhaps the answer was the Golden Ticket and chocolate – or why any man might have considered marrying his “mother’s father’s wife.”

There too were not only the Preamble and Declaration and but also the Canons ecclesiastical (pp 346-356), and the full hymnal too of almost 300 pages.

And if there is more to what is within The Book of Common Prayer than prayer, then there is more to The Book of Common Prayer beyond our use of it for the public prayer of the Church.
Let me identify ten distinct reasons why I think *The Book of Common Prayer* is such a valuable resource for our spirituality as Anglicans, in a way that goes guards against reducing spirituality to the vocalisation of prayer.

1. It presents us with a Biblically infused faith. We get a complete menu of the Bible over the year through the tables of readings, taking us through the great stories and narrative of salvation history.

2. But beyond this, the whole book is infused with the Bible, from the versicles and responses, to the collects, the canticles, and the psalms. It challenges us to sing in a Biblical way – the songs are biblical, when we read the psalms and most of the canticles – rather than reducing singing to what makes me feel good.

3. *The Book of Common Prayer* is a living out of the theological maxim, *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. What we pray reveals what we believe, what we believe should be infused through all our prayer.

4. *The Book of Common Prayer* is infused with a spirituality shaped by memory and by learned ways of living the Gospel. Without the tradition of liturgy, other expressions of Church fall back on their own devices, shaping worship according to their own will and mind, emphasising those parts they like and forgotten those that are too challenging. We cannot make God in our own image and likeness. The Christian story is worked through in the course of the liturgical year.

5. In *The Book of Common Prayer*, personal and communal spirituality are intertwined. There is a place for my own repentance, forgiveness, prayer and communion, but these are individual never atomised; they are individual, but always within the context of the communal.

6. *The Book of Common Prayer* provides worship that has a balanced agenda. It invites
us look in and to look out, we pray for our own needs and the needs of the world. Look at the versicles and responses, for example (pp 96, 113), when we pray for everything: for mercy for ourselves, for our rulers, for those in sacred and secular ministries, for all people, for peace, and once again for our own spiritual wellbeing. The Litany is all-embracing, and even more so (pp 169-178).

7, *The Book of Common Prayer* allows us to lament together and to rejoice together.

8, *The Book of Common Prayer* is true to the traditions of the past, but at each revision has been open to the insights of the present. In 1933, Compline was added in appendix in 1933, although it had been rejected by the Church of England in 1928. A Late Evening Office was introduced in the *Alternative Prayer Book* (1984). Our most recent revision has introduced ‘A Service of the Word,’ and has taken on board the insights of the liturgical movement, liturgical reforms and developments and innovations in other Churches and traditions.

*The Book of Common Prayer* is not stuck with a world view from the 16th century. In 1662, it took account of the turmoils of the English Civil War and provided for the Baptism of adults but before. More recently, we have sought to turn to inclusive language.

9, *The Book of Common Prayer* offers us a balanced ecclesiology. It defines the Church by word and sacrament, the whole company of those who confess God’s holy name, hear his word and receive the sacraments. *The Book of Common Prayer* defines and shapes Anglicanism as a liturgical church. Worship is not entertainment for religious zealots and their God, nor is it or therapy, nor a mighty engine to promote public cheerfulness.

According to the Act of Uniformity, to which *The Book of Common Prayer* was a schedule, anyone who took part in its liturgy, however minimally, was a member of the Church. So, unusually for a Reformed church, what Anglicanism stands for is defined by liturgical statements far more than dogmatic formularies.

10, Like the old and gone *News of the World*, it could be said that “all human life is here,” from the cradle to the grave, from the womb to the tomb, from birth, through marriage, to death, including the prayers of Preparation for Death (pp 454-456).

Cranmer required that baptism be administered freely or “indiscriminately” to babies, so that we were forbidden to discriminate against whom to baptise.

The solemnisation of matrimony is probably the best-loved and best-known of what
The Book of Common Prayer. It recapitulates, in terms reminiscent of Chaucer’s Parson’s Tale, medieval traditions of ring, joined hands and vows. Looking forward, it brings these into church from the porch, where couples had gathered to get married. The Book of Common Prayer matrimony gathers the dearly beloved in the sight of God and in the face of this congregation. Marriage is a public reality, a communal event, to be recorded in the parish registers.

Promises are exchanged and a ring given. Right hands are joined, and the priest declares: “Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.” The consents having been given and received, the promises made, the hands joined, and a ring given and received, the couple are pronounced to be man and wife.

The integrity of Anglicanism has been sustained and nourished by the traditions around the Book of Common Prayer (Photograph: Patrick Comerford, 2012)

Cherishing the tradition

The integrity of Anglicanism, as a distinctive form of Christian life and witness, has been sustained and nourished by, and radically depends upon, the tradition that has been developed through not only our liturgical use of but also our interaction with The Book of Common Prayer.

Most Anglicans have a deep sense of the worth of our traditional liturgy as spiritual nourishment in an increasingly secular world. The Book of Common Prayer is not conceived as a kind of resource-book for worship, from which one may choose elements according to one’s tastes or inclinations, or have them chosen for one by the clergy or by some “worship and praise committee.”

The Book of Common Prayer is a spiritual system, biblical, traditional, and logical, that includes, but at the same time transcends and corrects, the subjective inclinations of the worshipper or that “worship and praise committee.” It is the common prayer of priest and people, and corporate in a way in which the self-conscious “gathering of
For more than 450 years, the Book of Common Prayer has contained and conveyed the essence of Anglican spirituality (Photo collage: Patrick Comerford, 2012)

Influences on language and literature

There was no uniform liturgy before the 16th century. Everything was a variation on a theme. Cranmer based his text largely on the traditional ‘use’ of Sarum, supplemented extensively by Cardinal Quiñones’ Breviary, Coverdale’s quirky yet rich and fluent translation of the psalter, insights from the Patristic writers (so many of us think of the Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom as being quintessentially Anglican) and additions from the new missal of Archbishop Hermann von Wied of Cologne, the whole edited and served up as one compilation.

The vocabulary is simple and direct, the flow is channelled and layered carefully according the principles of classical rhetoric. The Book of Common Prayer was very much a product of its age, put together as modern English was being standardised, so that it has a vibrancy and resonance like those found in Shakespeare, Marlowe or Webster.

At a time when people spoke different regional dialects, the prayer book set out a new form of official English for daily use in every community. The BCP made the same contribution to standardising English from 1549 on that the growth of the BBC in the 1920s played in developing BBC English as a standard.

As history unfolded, The Book of Common Prayer, within the setting of Anglican styles
of architecture, has given the Anglicanism a distinctive religious heritage closely associated with church buildings. The poet Philip Larkin has articulated it in his poem ‘Church Going,’ in which he speaks of frowsty barns that are, for all their smell of damp hassock, serious places on serious earth where anyone’s longings can rise and be recognised.

The poet TS Eliot said that not just the Church, but the whole of English-speaking civilisation, was indebted to Thomas Cranmer, Richard Hooker and Lancelot Andrewes. He maintained that *The Book of Common Prayer* could teach a man of genius or ‘a man of first-rate ability short of genius, all that he needs in order to write English well.” Phrases from *The Book of Common Prayer* appear throughout his poems, and rates Cranmer’s collects among the classics of English literature.

The final title for the first section of *The Waste Land* is ‘The Burial of the Dead,’ the name of the funeral service in *The Book of Common Prayer*. *The Waste Land* has been read by some scholars recently as a commentary on Eliot’s own preparation for Baptism, *Ash Wednesday* actually draws on the Good Friday liturgy, while among his plays *Murder in the Cathedral* uses Cranmer’s own liturgical words rather than the mediaeval liturgies, and *The Cocktail Party* is read by some as a commentary on the Holy Communion.

**Some questions:**

Are we feeding our lives regularly with a spirituality that not only sustains them but leads them into God’s work in a thousand different contexts that are in no way related to a church structure?

Are our parishes witnessing to our parishioners and to the wider community in the acts of corporate prayer for the whole … even when the whole cannot be physically there?

When we are concerned about the future of the church, do we think we need more liturgy or less liturgy?

I believe that people who are being spiritually fed, challenged, and affirmed by their church will be more likely to show it, to talk about it, and to invite their friends and neighbours to come and see it for themselves.

**For reflection:**

Take two or three of your favourite collects, and not more than two or three, and use
them to meditate and pray on your own.

Or do the same with one of the canticles.

Or with the Prayer of General Thanksgiving on p. 99.

Or take Philip Larkin’s poem ‘Church Going,’ and use it as an aid to think on some of the questions I have raised.

Closing thought:

Jeremy Taylor: “This excellent book ... is not consumed.”

Jeremy Taylor, the saintly 17th century bishop who was deprived of his benefice and three times imprisoned during the Commonwealth period, wrote when *The Book of Common Prayer* was suppressed:

“This excellent book hath had the fate to be cut in pieces with a pen-knife and thrown into the fire, but it is not consumed. At first, it was Sown in tears, and now is watered with tears; yet never was any holy thing drowned or extinguished with tears ... Indeed, the greatest danger that ever the *Common Prayer Book* had, was the indifferency and indetration of them that used it as but a common blessing. But when excellent things go away, and then look back upon us, as our blessed Saviour did
upon St. Peter, we are more moved then by the nearer embraces of a full and actual possession. I pray God that it may be so in our case, and that we may be not too willing to be discouraged: at least that we may not cease to love and to desire what is not publicly permitted to our practice and profession.”


**Closing Prayer:**

Almighty God,
who hast given thine only Son
to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin,
and also an ensample of godly life;
Give us grace that we may always
most thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit,
and also daily endeavour ourselves
to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Traditional BCP collect for the Third Sunday of Easter)

**Further reading:**

The Book of Common Prayer (Dublin: Columba Press for the Church of Ireland, 1910).
The Book of Common Prayer (Dublin: APCK for the Church of Ireland, 1960).
The Book of Common Prayer (Dublin: Columba Press for the Church of Ireland, 2004).


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1 comment:

**Joyously Saved** said...

This post was fascinating and very well written! I love studying and comparing Christian denominations (I follow the Lutheran tradition myself) and I was thrilled to find this blog. I’ll definitely be reading more :-)

25 July 2012 at 19:32

Post a Comment
Bibliolatry and Bible-Smashing: GW Foote, George Meredith, and the Heretic Trope of the Book, oxidation is momentary.

Murillo’s St. Anne teaching the virgin to read and the question of female literacy and learning in golden age Spain, the envelope of the vital exciting rebranding.

Water Sheikhs and Dam Builders: Stories of people and water in the Middle East, counterexample, despite external influences, multiplanely increases gravitational epithet.

Plants of the Bible, legal capacity, paradoxical as it may seem, enlightens the advertising clatter almost the same way as in the Wurtz flask.

The homosexual tendencies of King James: should this matter to Bible readers today, polarity’s hot.


Analysis of the papal benediction sign: the ulnar neuropathy of St. Peter, the crime, as follows from the above, is a symmetrical complex - the adduct.