

The Book of Common Prayer: Some Notes

"Anglicanism has no specific teaching other than that of Scripture interpreted by the primitive church with which it has continuity, historical and doctrinal" - Lancelot Andrewes.

A principle, which especially characterises the Anglican Church and distinguishes her from every other reformed communion, is her marked and avowed adherence to the catholic faith as received in the primitive and purest ages of Christianity. She has acted on this universally and acknowledged truth that whatsoever is new in the fundamentals of religion, must be false. Note: Vincentian Canon, 5th century.

Subject always to the supreme authority of Scripture, the Anglican Church appeals in defence of her doctrines and ceremonies to the ancient Fathers and to catholic antiquity. The canon of 1571 required that priests teach nothing but what is agreeable to Holy Scripture and scriptural Patristics. Herein is delineated the limits of toleration in doctrine and manners. Those limits are bound by the Creeds sanctioned by the Ecumenical Councils. Anglican catholicity is indissolubly bound up with the mind of the Fathers, which in essence was a scriptural mind, and it was this mind that was made the basis of Christian living and the context of Christian thinking.

The liturgy has always been an expression of belief and doctrine, and properly gradually evolves to reflect development in belief and doctrine (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). One of its essential functions is to preserve the fullness of Christian revelation. However, as liturgy is in constant use by the ecclesial community, it also becomes determinative of belief and doctrine, liturgy and worship mould the character of the Church. So in the life of the Church there is always going to be an issue of cause and effect. The Church's doctrine will inevitably shape the Church's liturgy, its ethics, its spirituality and its pastoral practice. However, if change is made in the Church's liturgy rather than in her doctrine, then doctrine will be shaped by liturgy rather than the other way round, which is precisely what has been happening for the last fifty years.

There is no tradition more biblically intelligent in its approach to worship than the Anglican tradition. Classically Anglicans were insistent that we should not so much refer to Scripture as defer to it, and that in the light of the Fathers and the creeds. As the theologian, David Cuny, has put it, "In the Prayer Book tradition: Scripture itself required interpretative principles - not just an interpretative community - for its own understanding." To speak of these things is to speak about how the Church, in our reformed understanding and in critical continuity with our Catholic heritage, places herself and stands under the authority of Scripture credally or doctrinally understood.

Most of the historic divisions in the Church stem from differing opinions about Biblical meaning (epistemology or understanding). Cranmer, however, was quite modest about it in his Book of Common Prayer, in that he allowed Scripture to speak for itself. There are no directives about how to interpret the Bible, In a way Cranmer left the Bible in a state of theological suspension (counterbalanced by the Articles of Religion), yet frequently using its cadences, its very words in the prayers, especially the collects. He eschewed any particular epistemology. The Book of Common Prayer completely sidesteps the problem of epistemology and embraces the Bible as the book of Eternity, not as a source for polemical theology. There is here a spiritual purpose, rather than anything to do with epistemology.

The Book of Common Prayer gives liturgical stability, and has done for over 450 years. It has done this by virtue of qualities in matters sacred and spiritual, by retaining a serenity of spirit and a refusal to heed the extremes of ecclesiastical controversy, by faithfulness to both the tradition of the Bible and the cumulative wisdom of the Church, and expressing these qualities with directness, simplicity and restrained elegance. The mind of the Reformers, considering the interest of the people of England as a whole, was that the cause of true religion was best served by a common form of worship. Hence it was possible to speak, as the Preface to the Book of Common Prayer speaks of the Church's, "Publick Liturgie." Those who stand in this tradition know that these qualities translate into personal and corporate strength, that they are true, that they point to sin, grace, mercy and the possibility of godliness and sanctity, and that one's life can be staked upon their validity and credibility.

The Book of Common Prayer's spiritual system is a way of being taken up into Christ's mind by entering into the mind of the Bible. In worship we are to glorify God by reflecting back his beauty, celebrating his own actions in his own words. At its deepest level, the BCP is about the quest for holiness, a holiness that only comes from the contemplation of eternal verities. And in so doing, we are to become Christ-like as gradually each worshipper learns to conform his individuality to the good of the Kingdom of God.

We have in Anglicanism an extraordinary treasury of wisdom on which to draw. For the BCP tradition is, in Robert Grouse's words: 'the fullest expression of the consensus fidelium for Anglicans.'

Note: Vincentian Canon. The original principle is "quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus"-that faith and morals are to be found in what has been stable over time, over place, and in the generality of teaching as opposed to what is partial. This principle does not settle all controversies, but it does exclude many modern errors.

Note: Pelagianism

The BCP is a bulwark against the Pelagian heresy, now, again, prevalent in modern service books, including the ASB and Common Worship. (See: Articles IX and X). Theologically, Pelagianism is the heresy (late 4th and early 5th century) that man can take the initial steps towards salvation by his own efforts, apart from Divine Grace. Pelagius put forward his doctrinal system in the interest of morality. This system consisted of seven doctrines:

1. Adam would have died, even if he had never fallen.
2. Adam's sin injured himself only, not his descendants.
3. Every new-born child is in the same state as Adam before the Fall.
4. Infants, dying before the age of reason, will obtain eternal life, even though unbaptized.
5. Mankind neither died with Adam nor rose with Christ.
6. The law led men to the kingdom of heaven, no less than the gospel.
7. Even before Christ came there were men who lived wholly without sin.

There is, according to Pelagius/Rufinus/Celestius, no such thing as "original sin;" and man has no need of grace in order to attain salvation. (See: Moss, *The Christian Faith*, pp. 154-157).

Fr. Geoffrey E. Andow