



# Common Prayer, Uncommon Beauty

by Jonathan Aitken

**L**AST YEAR, THIS COLUMN and the world celebrated the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. This year brings the 350th birthday of another magnificent monument of early modern English—the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (BCP). All who savor the riches of our common linguistic heritage should rejoice in its commemoration. For the BCP’s combination of spiritual wisdom and literary beauty gives it a following far beyond the ecclesiastical frontiers of Anglicanism, Episcopalianism, and the Church of England that originally commissioned it.

The BCP was the creation of Thomas Cranmer, a Tudor statesman blessed with a genius for the writing of prose bordering on poetry. A court favorite of King Henry VIII, who made him Archbishop of Canterbury, Cranmer compiled the various prayers, collects, and orders of worship that eventually emerged as the 1662 prayer book. However, before it could be published in its final form its principal author was burned at the stake for his Reformist sympathies during a period of Catholic repression.

Although these power struggles have long since been forgotten, Cranmer’s majestic command of the English language lives on. In the words of his leading biographer, Diarmaid MacCulloch: “Millions who have never heard of Cranmer or of the muddled heroism of his death have echoes of his words in their minds.”

These echoes of Cranmer’s gift for language ring down the centuries because he had a perfect ear for cadences that are both beautiful and eternal. He wanted “a mere ploughboy” to be able to remember the BCP’s most powerful phrases. He did not hesitate to borrow from the finest spiritual writers of his time such as Miles Coverdale, an early translator of the

Psalms, and Archbishop Reynolds, who authored the prayer of General Thanksgiving. Yet the most sparkling gems of the BCP were Cranmer’s own compositions such as:

We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done. And we have done those things which we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us. (General Confession)

Or:

Lighten our darkness we beseech thee O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night. (Collect for Evening Prayer)

In my own love of the rhythms and resonance of such prayers I am conscious that I may be one of a dwindling band of English old fogeys. My familiarity with Cranmer’s language dates back to the 1950s, when hardly any form of liturgy other than the BCP was used in Britain’s schools and churches—as had been the case for the previous 300 years. But in the last half-century, evangelicals and modernists have elbowed out the BCP, replacing it with liturgical practices whose flexibility is all too often equaled by its banality.

American worshippers of various denominations may find the arguments for and against the BCP to be an esoteric British debate between the cult of quaintness and the pressures of political correctness. Yet



excellence is excellence whatever the current fashion, and Cranmer's words, like Shakespeare's, have survived because they are "not of an age, but for all time."

A recent reminder of the BCP's timelessness was provided last year by the global reaction to the royal wedding when Prince William and Catherine Middleton chose Cranmer's "Solemnization of Matrimony" liturgy for their marriage service in Westminster Abbey.

As a result a worldwide television audience in excess of 1.5 billion listened to ancient yet spine-tingling spiritual phrases such as:

To have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health till death us do part.

And:

With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.

Such sentiments are light years removed from the current practices of pre-nuptial agreements and quickie divorces. The promises are couched in a solemnity of language that heightens the commitment.

**A**S THE VOWS OF MARRIAGE and many other lines from the BCP demonstrate, Cranmer had a master's touch for the sonorities and structures of an English sentence. He has influenced innumerable authors over the past 350 years. It is easy to find Cranmerian echoes in the prose of writers as diverse as Edward Gibbon, John Milton, William Makepeace Thackeray, the Brontës, T. S. Eliot, P. G. Wodehouse, John le Carré, and P. D. James. But the literary heritage of the BCP is surpassed by its spiritual challenges.

The first vernacular prayer books (there were forerunners in 1549 and 1552, also largely authored by Cranmer, from which the definitive 1662 BCP emerged) were far more original than the "Latin Mass translated into English," as has sometimes been asserted. Although the structure of the Holy Communion service was fairly close to the Catholic Sarum Rite, even here there was a new "in your face" power to the BCP liturgy. For example the invitation to make a confession prior to accepting the sacramental bread and wine is dramatic:

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, as are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life following the Commandments of God and walking henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God meekly kneeling upon your knees.

Apart from the special exhortations and rubrics in the order of various services, the key dynamic in the BCP is the interplay between Scripture, doctrine, devotion, and prayer.

Eighty percent of the 1662 Prayer Book is Scripture. It contains readings from the King James Bible with Epistles and Gospels selected for every Sunday of the year. Also central to the BCP are the Psalms, set for morning and evening readings on each day of the month. These are in the 16th-century translation of Miles Coverdale whose vernacular version of the Psalter had become so popular by the start of the 17th century that Cranmer did not dare replace it with the King James Version.

Herein lies a vital clue to the BCP's continuing survival and perhaps revival. It was always meant to be read aloud. Cranmer's genius came from being as good a listener as he was an author. He had perfect hearing for spiritual language that would season with the familiarity of repetition and perfect pitch for writing jeweled miniatures of prayer known as "The Collects." One such collect, for the Second Sunday in Advent, captures the oral spirit of the BCP with its emphasis on reading and memory. Its opening words are famous:

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them...

The inward digestion of Scripture is one of the keys to a Christian spiritual journey. It is magnificently guided by the Book of Common Prayer—still going strong after 350 years. ❧

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