



6 May 2012
St John ante portam Latinam
Choral Evensong
Ezekiel 36 vv. 23–28
Matthew 6 vv. 25–34

**O Lord, open our lips
‘Make clean our hearts’: A sermon to commemorate the
350th anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer, 1662.**

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A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you' (Ezekiel 36 v. 26)

In Shakespeare's rarely performed play Henry VIII¹, there is an encounter between Henry's first wife, the Spanish-born Catherine of Aragon, and the powerful Cardinal Wolsey. The cardinal seeks an audience with the Queen and suggests they go somewhere quiet for a chat. The Queen, well aware that the Cardinal is plotting her downfall, stands her ground proclaiming that she has nothing to hide. So the Cardinal, anxious that the servants and attendants do not hear what he has to say, starts to address her in Latin.

She interrupts,

*O, good my lord, no Latin;
I am not such a truant since my coming,
As not to know the language I have lived in²*

'The language I have lived in', the language we have lived in, is what we seek to commemorate during the course of this term in our Sunday evening sermon series to mark the 350th anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer, and what I shall focus on particularly this evening. The 'language we have lived in' is of course primarily Tudor language wrought in the religious and political furnace of the sixteenth century, and it has shaped not just individual piety, but our common life, society and culture; sacred and secular; and indeed the nature of the English language itself. It is worth reflecting for a moment, that at the time of which Shakespeare wrote, the lines he gives the Spanish Queen are telling: For all native-born educated people of class would have been trilingual as a matter of course with French and Latin as the 'higher' languages of culture; English the 'vulgar tongue'. Now, as we know, English is the standard language of international communication and its many forms are spoken by at least 1.3 billion people. The Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible were seminal in the transformation of this, our provincial, 'vulgar' tongue; for the language of the BCP, (to pick up on our first reading), has been responsible in part for '*gathering us*' and bringing us into our own land; within it, we have '*lived and moved and had our being*'. We are English, and we are British, in part, because of the BCP, for to become a nation requires of us that we 'feel' we are one, and it is through shared written texts more than anything else that we come to imagine ourselves politically and culturally to be just that: A people. Of course, Shakespeare and others have played their part, but in reality it is a small one, for in building a common people, it is the lines that we speak and recite regularly that seep into the marrow of our bones; that percolate down into the soul, texts that have both shaped us as individuals persons and bound us together in community:

¹ Henry VIII is usually dated c. 1613, on account of the fact that the Globe Theatre burnt down during one of the play's earliest known performances in that year.

² Henry VIII Act 3, scene 1.

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'Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep...'

'Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid...'

Or indeed those texts that have spoken to us at key moments of our lives and that live on with us, whether it be renouncing *'the devil and all his works'* at Confirmation, or the promise *'to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse'*,

'The language we have lived in' is primarily that crafted by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry 8th and Edward 6th, and Protestant martyr in the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary, 'bloody' Mary, who had him burnt at the stake in 1556.

His prose is, of course, widely admired by cultured unbelievers as well as by those of faith and there is always more than a wisp of nostalgia for some Golden Age of English and England involved in the praise of the BCP. But what is much more significant are the ways in which Cranmer's words have shaped English Religion and personal faith, have been engaged in the intimate and holy business of soul-making. And the key to understanding this lies with our reading from *Ezekiel* and God's promise:

'A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you'

For amongst theologians, Cranmer is a heart specialist, an unabashed theological cardiologist – for him, it is all about the transformation of the heart by God's grace: So we are enjoined to acknowledge *'the devices and desires of our own hearts'*, and to pray that our hearts may be *'set to obey'*; that the *'thoughts of our hearts'* might be cleansed, that *'all thy laws'* might be written on our hearts, that with *'meek heart and due reverence'* we come into God's presence; that we might *'feed on him in our hearts'*; that our hearts might be *'open', 'inclined', 'lifted'*, the list goes on...

Why? Why does Cranmer place so much emphasis on the heart, the heart as a metaphor for our desires, our loves?

The answer lies with Cranmer's understanding of the human condition; his reading of human nature: For Cranmer, *'what the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies'*, *'what the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies'*³. This is in direct contradiction to what passes for common sense today, namely the assumption that people's wills and decision-making flow straightforwardly from the rational processes of their mind. Not so, says Cranmer, rather our minds are like little boats cast upon a stormy sea where the weather is made by our *'unruly wills and affections'*. Our minds are in fact prisoners; our wills their jailors; and our hearts, the judges, wielding the power to imprison or set free. In short, we rationalize what our hearts tell us, so for example, highly intelligent people (of which there are a few in this City) are simply those most capable of elaborating justifications, of coming up with "side arguments" to support their own inclinations.

³ This quotation is drawn from the work of the Cranmer scholar, the Revd Dr Ashley Null, Canon Theologian, Diocese of Western Kansas.



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For Cranmer then one must start with the heart, and with a clear diagnosis, namely that we have diseased, ingrown hearts; that we are sinful creatures turned in upon ourselves; our natural inclination being to love those things which make us feel good about ourselves; we live then with the distorted vision of a narcissist, in what D. H. Lawrence described, as *'the glass bottles of our own egos'*⁴. Something radical must then happen to us – the glass bottle of the ego must be smashed if we are to live with a new spirit; or to return to Cranmer - we need open-heart surgery. But if we are to receive a new heart – we must first accept the diagnosis, recognize that we are sinners, that we are *'miserable offenders'* in whom *'there is no health'* and that we need God's radical intervention, Of course such language seems dramatic and overstated to the modern mind, yet at root *'being penitent'* is simply the result of a reality check, it involves seeing things as they are, acknowledging the tough truth about ourselves, and *'flinging back that discouraging truth to God to take care of and dispose'*⁵. And that is all that is required of us - to acknowledge reality and seek God. God's healing and transforming power is then set free to bring about the sort of renewing, liberating love that is spoken of so evocatively in our gospel in those famous words about the birds of the air and of the lilies of the field, which simply take *'no thought of the morrow'*.

For Cranmer, the transformation of the heart, of our instincts, of our intuitions, of our desires is not simply a matter for the individual, it is a common task for the people of God; for individual sin and pride bring disorder and confusion and brokenness into the world. The BCP is about a Common, public, a shared life in Christ; it is not the language of a Cardinal Wolsey; of an the educated elite, or of the clergy or even of the individual wrestling with God. Rather it is a language within which all can live, so it is the *'the wills of thy faithful people'* that are stirred up, for example, before Advent and the *'the hearts of the disobedient'* that, we pray, may be turned *'to the wisdom of the just'*.

This powerful emphasis on the communal, on the common and public life, is one of the reasons for the extraordinary influence of the BCP across the Anglican world far, far, beyond these shores. For despite its profoundly English character, it has been translated into 150 languages and Cranmer's emphasis on scripture and on the language of the 'open' heart has touched peoples of many nations as well as providing a firm foundation for an abundant liturgical flowering that has helped peoples in very different places to create a 'language they can truly live in' through Christ.

Would Thomas Cranmer dared to have hoped that his prayers might shape the English religious imagination and its language for several hundred years? Could the scholarly Archbishop, in his study looking over the Thames writing in the midst of one of the most turbulent periods of English history, have even begun to imagine that he would help to incline, to lift, to open new hearts to God's grace in Mexico, China or Papua New Guinea and in the tongues not of 'vulgar' English but Maori, Melanesian pidgin, or Yoruba⁶?

*'A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you'
'And let all the people say, Amen'.*

⁴ From the poem 'Escape', by D.H. Lawrence.

⁵ Meditation on the Ash Wednesday Collect in C.F. Barbee and P.F.M. Zahl, 1999, *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer*, Eerdmans, Meditation on the Ash Wednesday Collect).

⁶ For further information on this, see Part 5 of *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey*, 2006, Eds. C.Hefling and C. Shattuck, OUP.

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