



20 May 2012
The Sunday after Ascension Day
Choral Evensong
Psalm 98
Luke 4 vv. 14–21

O Lord, open our lips
O sing unto the Lord a new song: for he hath done marvellous things

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“I believe there is no Liturgy in the world, either in ancient or modern language, which breathes more of a solid, scriptural, rational piety than the Common Prayer of the Church of England.” Thus wrote the revivalist preacher and the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. This somewhat prosaic description of a text which sounds worthy rather than exciting does nothing to conjure up the passion and conviction that lies behind the text’s genesis. It is so easy for us from our early 21st century perspective to forget or to ignore what the creation of the Book of Common Prayer cost in terms of broken promises; crushed dreams and simple human suffering.

The bibliographical story of the Book of Common Prayer does not need rehearsing here this evening. Suffice it to say that from 1548 when Cranmer completed his new English Communion Rite until 1662 when in effect, the printing of the first copies of the 1662 Prayer Book marked the end of a period of just over 100 years of liturgical turmoil, the English church had lived through a degree of upheaval and trauma that makes our modern day concerns and controversies seem very trivial indeed. In this period England had experienced a succession of monarchs of varying but equally convinced religious persuasions which produced a liturgical and spiritual see-saw affect upon English ecclesiastical and political life which must have been bewildering and often terrifying to live through. England had also experienced the trauma of rebellion and civil conflict and numerous martyrdoms and slayings as the great and the good, and those less well-known to history, fell foul of the prevailing zeitgeist. England her immediate neighbours had experienced an island wide brutal civil resulting in a truly shocking regicide; and even the man most responsible for the compilation and tenor of the new Prayer Book. Thomas Cranmer, had not been spared the purging heat of the heretic’s pyre.

And yet the actual language of the 1662 revision was little changed from that of Cranmer. Some words and phrases which had become archaic were modernized; the readings for the Epistle and Gospel at the Holy Communion, which had been set out in full since 1549, were now set to the text of the 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible and the Psalter, which had not been printed out in the 1549, 1552 or 1559 Books—was in 1662 provided in Miles Coverdale’s translation from the Great Bible of 1538.

So what had been achieved? Was it just the production of something solid’ and ‘rational’ as Wesley believed or had something much more profound been achieved? Well, for a start Cranmer and those who followed had managed to achieve something which has eluded our modern Liturgical Commission; he produced Common Prayer replacing the multiplicity of local use rites found throughout medieval England. He did this by creating not an endless series of expensive and often overlapping tomes but a single small volume which contained all that a believer might need to participate fully in the worship of the church. Secondly, the Prayer Book represented the final consolidation of the widespread desire to produce a vernacular text which could be accessed by all. There were of course many who did not like the new modern idiom of the 1662 prayer book but for the vast majority of worshippers the text opened a window on to a world previously only glimpsed through the prism of Medieval Latin. Finally, the Prayer Book of 1662 has become, along with the 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible with which it has enjoyed an almost symbiotic relationship, the foundation document of the post-Reformation English Church. It has defined how we might talk about God and encounter God and has shaped the lexicon of both our religious and secular discourse ever since.

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It is therefore I think a matter of regret that so often in the modern church the Prayer Book has to fight for its place at the table. So many, so often, all too readily dismiss it as archaic in both language and content and as therefore being unable to speak anew to the modern psyche. As a result the use of the Prayer Book has become marginalized within the life of the church and largely restricted to state occasions and to use in those great churches and chapels which have a strong choral tradition or to use within the small country parish where the combined ages of the congregation make Methuselah look like a slip of a lad.

The Prayer Book does of course offer up some soft targets. Proponents and advocates of the Prayer Book often talk as if they believe God reveals himself only in 16th century English and that all that has come since is not of God. Critics can point to the marriage preface with its bewildering combination of a truly beautiful and profound theology and a deeply unsettling description of what it sees as our baser urges to argue that the theology of the prayer book is simply outdated and even offensive. And it is hard in these egalitarian days to defend the order for the Churching of Women although it is primarily a thanksgiving for the safe delivery of a child and is according to the *Church Times* making something of a comeback although I am not clear where!

Yet to argue thus, and only thus, is to deny the reality of what the Book of Common Prayer represents. I picked as my texts this evening these two readings; one from the Book of Psalms and one from Luke's gospel because for me they encapsulate something of what the prayer book achieved for the English Church. Psalm 98 is thought to be the work of deuterio-Isaiah and is a hymn celebrating the kingship of Yahweh with strong resonances of the Magnificat to which this psalm is an alternative at evening prayer. It is joyful and uplifting and proclamatory. Isaiah is again the focus of attention in the New Testament pericope and once again proclamation is at the heart of the Jubilee message being read out aloud by Jesus himself in the synagogue. Both passages speak of something new and fresh and joyful and of something that will set people free.

I would not want to overtax the potential of any analogy between Isaiah and Cranmer but I think there some parallels to be drawn. Both men were driven by a strong sense of mission and divine calling. Both struggled to deal with the burden of that calling experiencing fear and frustration and yet overcoming these emotions to fulfil their purpose. Most significantly perhaps I believe both were men of faith who never lost their belief that God's Will would be done. Isaiah in particular is often decried as a pessimist but his message was never wholly one of doom; he never believed that the whole Jewish nation would be utterly destroyed but rather he saw his experiences and that of the Jewish people as a form of purge through which God would keep his promises to David and his chosen people.

Likewise Cranmer, while not always a wholly likeable character, was a man of faith who truly believed he was doing God's work. His greatest concerns were the maintenance of the royal supremacy and the diffusion of reformed theology and practice but he is best remembered by posterity for his contribution to the realms of language and of cultural identity. His soaring prose helped to guide the development of the English language and the *Book of Common Prayer* has made a major contribution to English literature and has influenced many lives in the Anglophone world. The Prayer Book is also, of course, the vehicle that has guided Anglican worship over the last four hundred years. Catholic biographers sometimes depict Cranmer as an unprincipled opportunist and a tool of royal oppression, while neglecting to appreciate fully sixteenth-century context in which Cranmer found himself. Standing in that pulpit in the University church in Oxford on that fateful day in 1556 he surely took real courage to finally denounce his former recantation before the assembled academy and church before being dragged from that pulpit to his place of execution where he dramatically stuck his right hand, with which he had signed his recantation, into the fire first.

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For their part, Protestant hagiographies sometimes conveniently overlook the occasions on which Cranmer seems to have betrayed his own principles. To balance both perspectives I would want to suggest this evening that Cranmer was a committed scholar whose life showed the strengths and weaknesses of a vulnerable and often under-appreciated reformer. His greatest achievement, the Book of Common Prayer which reached its final form many years after his death, did indeed ‘sing unto the Lord a new song’ and transformed not only how we talk about God but also how we think about God. For the ordinary man and woman in the pew, including those who were illiterate, the advent of a vernacular liturgy available in a single affordable volume meant that for the first time they could begin to establish a personal relationship with God that no longer needed to be mediated through another or was dependent upon the interpretation of others. It is all too easy for us to underestimate the import of that achievement or what it cost in terms of human suffering and loss.