

Common Prayer in the Church

BY THE REV. F. J. TAYLOR, M.A.

ON the title page of the first English Prayer Book which was ordered to be the only service book in use for the due performance of public worship from Whitsun Day, 1549, there appeared the descriptive phrase—which in substance has been retained through every subsequent revision—"The Book of the Common Prayer and the Administration of the Sacraments, and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church after the use of the Church of England". This title drew the attention of the considering reader to two important features in the new service book. In the first place it contained forms of service for all those occasions both public and domestic in the life of the community for which the Church had long provided services, and plainly declared that the substance of the new way of worshipping was not such a novelty as a superficial examination of the book might lead the reader to suppose. The claim of the English Church to order its worship freely, subject only to the control of Scripture, was exhibited and vindicated in the issue of the first English Prayer Book. Yet despite the novelty of the English language and an English liturgical idiom the voice of the "new" liturgy was the voice of the catholic and apostolic Church of the early centuries.

Worship was still regarded as the supreme activity of the Church and it was expected that every Englishman, being a baptized Christian, would be ready, as in the past, to recognise this truth by attendance at divine service. The preface to the book deplored the breaking, altering and neglecting of the "godly and decent order of the ancient Fathers" which had so grievously marred the contemporary worship of the western Church, and frankly proclaimed the intention of restoring the central liturgical tradition of Christendom, based upon a renewed apprehension of the message of the Bible and the witness of the Fathers of the early centuries. Whatever differences there might be in the new order, and diligent study would speedily reveal how considerable these were, in essentials it professed to continue the simplicities and glories of primitive catholic worship, thus preserving the traditional pattern of Christian worship in the recognizable form of corporate activity. In this way the organic unity of the Church of the sixteenth century with the earliest Church was eloquently set forth and the claim of the Church of England to be an authentic member of the whole Catholic Church, yet possessed of that liturgical liberty which all such members should have possessed, was manifestly declared.

The opening phrase "The Book of the Common Prayer" indicated that the book was to be taken neither as one other example of the vernacular primers of which so many editions had been produced in the preceding century to help the private devotions of the laity, nor as a manual for the priest providing in an intelligible and compact form the necessary information required for the due fulfilment of divine service, but as an indispensable medium of corporate worship to be offered both by priests and people. The recovery in the sixteenth century of the Biblical understanding of the Church as the mystical

Body of Christ, led to a renewed awareness of worship as the supreme function of the whole people of God in which every member was called upon to exercise that priesthood in which he shared by virtue of his membership in the priestly body. It is possible that the phrase 'Common Prayer' in the title of the book, if accurately defined, signified only Morning and Evening Prayer, since the sacraments and other rites of the Church were explicitly named, but it is as the Book of Common Prayer that it has come to be known, used and loved through four centuries. Moreover, contemporary critics when the book first appeared understood the word 'common' as a definition of the contents and purpose of the whole book. They criticised this attempt to provide for every occasion forms of service in which the whole congregation would have an active share, as an impossible and undesirable ideal. "In times past," wrote Gardiner¹ to Cranmer in 1550, "when men came to church more diligently than some do now, the people in the church took small heed what the priest and the clerks did in the chancel, but only to stand up at the Gospel and kneel at the Sacring, or else every man was occupied himself severally in several prayer . . . and therefore it was never meant that the people should indeed *hear* the Mattins or *hear* the Mass, but be present there and pray themselves in silence." Christopherson, who was described as "one of the most learned and respectable of the Romish party" during the reign of Queen Mary, held similar views when he wrote: "Let them (the common people) not so greatly pass for understanding what the priests say, but travail themselves in fervent praying, and so shall they highly please God. Yea, and experience hath plainly taught us that it is much better for them not to understand the common service in the church than to understand it."² Such men as Bishop Gardiner and Christopherson challenged the assumptions of Cranmer to which he had given expression in his liturgical work because they appeared to run contrary to the accumulated wisdom of the Church.

I

Late medieval piety had sought to give some firmer content to the devotions of the individual worshipper by providing him with helps to the better fulfilment of his duty of prayer. Some of these devotional manuals have been collected and edited in one of the volumes of the *Henry Bradshaw Society*³ and they mark the virtually complete detachment of the worshipper from the action of the Mass. It is taken for granted that he will be present in the parish Church at the celebration of Mass, but communion does not appear as the climax of the rite, nor is there any active part for the congregation to take in co-operation with the priest. The purpose of these manuals is to provide "meditations for ghostly exercise in the time of mass" that souls might be moved "to the loving remembrance of the passion of Christ". At the offertory when the priest takes the chalice and holds it up in oblation "have meditation how our Lord, the Saviour of all mankind,

¹ *Letters of Stephen Gardiner*, ed. J. A. Muller, p. 355, quoted in *Liturgy and Society*, A. G. Hebert, p. 173.

² *ibid.*

³ *Tracts on the Mass*, ed. J. Wickham Legg, esp. pp. 19ff.

most willingly offered Himself to His eternal Father, to be the sacrifice and oblation for man's redemption, and offer yourself to Him in return both body and soul, which He so dearly bought." After the Elevation each worshipper in silence is to "call to remembrance and imprint inwardly in your heart by holy meditation the whole process of the passion from the Maundy unto the point of Christ's death; . . . this is a meditation of sweetness unspeakable to them that inwardly can consider it, and in the same to remember . . . the great mercy and tender charity of Him that did vouchsafe to suffer that confusion for our sakes". Even at the Lord's Prayer the worshipper is not summoned to recite it in company with his fellow worshippers but to let its seven petitions call to mind "the seven words of great mystery which our Lord did speak hanging quick upon the cross in His great agony, distress and pain of death. . . ." Each member of the congregation is thus treated as an individual who will engage in what Dom Gregory Dix rightly calls 'a spiritual communion'¹ which can and should be repeated several times during the day quite apart from the liturgy. The adoration and intercession of the worshippers had a common starting point in the moments of the liturgical action but from that point they might diverge into as many different directions as there were worshippers in the church. In these circumstances the liturgy became degraded from the corporate action of the believing community into a convenient, perhaps indispensable, means of stimulating the devotion of churchmen, and each element in the service was expounded as an aid to private meditation on the passion and atonement, while other aspects of the Gospel embodied in the rite were ignored.

There was much in the contemporary situation to justify Bishop Gardiner in his criticism of any attempt to modify what had become a vigorous and much loved devotional tradition. The continued use of Latin as the sacred language of worship was an effective barrier to the participation of the faithful in the liturgical action (it is to be observed that in the modern Roman Liturgical Movement there is a strong movement to secure official permission for the use of the vernacular), and the medieval development of ceremonial inevitably made the celebration of the Mass a task which only professionals, priests and trained choirs, could accomplish. The presence of a congregation ceased to be strictly necessary for the offering of the Holy Sacrifice, which thus came to be regarded as the duty and privilege of the ministry virtually apart from any common life of the Church. With a congregation reduced to silence and inactivity it was not surprising that many laymen in turn reduced their obligations to the bare minimum of being present at the consecration of the sacred elements or even contented themselves with a glimpse of the elevation from outside the church. In episcopal visitations in the later middle ages there are to be found complaints of the low standard of eucharistic devotion to be found in some churches. So long as this distortion of the eucharistic rite was accepted as the normal method of celebration, sanctioned by the traditions of many generations, the only possible way of avoiding the degradation of a formal participation in public

¹ *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dom Gregory Dix, p. 605.

worship was by the stimulation of the private devotions of the members of the congregation, regarded not as an organic whole sharing in the common life of the whole Body of Christ but as an assembly of devout individuals whose personal requirements in worship must be met.

A similar degradation had also overtaken the daily prayers of the Church by the late middle ages. From the simple beginnings, based on the use of the Psalter as a common prayer book, there had grown up a complicated scheme of daily services far beyond the capacity of the average worshipper. The daily round of praise and prayer became more of a burden than a joyful duty when in the ninth and tenth centuries the Office of our Lady and the Office of the Dead were added to the public recitation of the Hours. There is again abundant evidence in medieval visitations of the inevitable formalism and even irreverence of such a deadening routine. The use of the term "Choir Offices" for those services testified to the fact that they had become the preserve of the religious and the secular priests, for the average churchmen could not take part in acts of worship conducted in a dead language and with such complicated directions that it was often more difficult even for the ministers "to find out what should be read than to read it when it was found out." Moreover, the Christian in the world had not the time to worship in this way if he was to fulfil his secular vocation and so enable the life of the world, including the life of religious and of secular priests, to be carried on.

The medieval world was not wrong in thinking that God was worthy to receive continual praise and adoration for the redemption of the world through the self-offering of our Lord Jesus Christ, nor was it misguided in thinking that this supreme duty of man should be carried out with the aid of the finest artistic achievements of the human spirit; neither was it wrong in supposing that worship should be solemnly offered in the name of every Christian soul in a parish or town, bringing under the fatherly rule of God the work, the hopes, the joys and the anxieties of Christian people as members of Christ. But there was an evident danger in this conception of worship, for men would all too easily come to think of it as something offered to God on their behalf, and of themselves as too rude and unskilled to engage in such a high and demanding activity. Just in so far as men had some understanding of the surpassing majesty of God and of the wonder of His love which had stooped so low in Jesus Christ, they would tend to think of themselves as incapable of celebrating His praises in a worthy fashion. If there were also practical difficulties facing the ordinary churchman, such as the use of an unintelligible language or the employment of too much time in the daily acts of praise, then he would normally be content, as most medieval churchmen were content, to leave it to the professionals.

II

It is when full weight has been given to the medieval ideals of worship and to the attempts made to repair the ravages in its practice caused by a false individualism, that the achievement of the English Prayer Book can be justly estimated. Cranmer was aware that behind the rich development of early and later medieval worship was a primitive

catholic pattern of corporate worship in which the whole assembly had taken an active and intelligent part. It was possible to argue that the rapid growth of the Church after the peace of Constantine and the conviction that it must demonstrate a grandeur in worship now that it had emerged from the catacombs to become public made these later developments inevitable. "The Church of the fourth century did not hesitate to be magnificent, just because she did not refuse to be public."¹ But such magnificence in the presence of thousands of ill instructed nominal Christians led to a rapid elimination of the corporate element in the structure of worship and to that clerical monopoly of it which was the leading feature of public worship in the later middle ages. Yet Christians as partakers of a common life in the Body of Christ could only express that common apprehension of salvation in the common prayer of the whole body in which each member would have his distinctive function to discharge. "Common prayer in public worship, in the full sense of the word, is peculiar to the Jewish and Christian religions."² The Jews in exile in Babylon or in other parts of the Dispersion were nevertheless partakers of a common religious tradition embodied in corporate activity and rooted in a common salvation. This salvation was attested in the sacred writings of prophet and priest and the use of these writings in public prayer in the synagogues enabled the congregation to glorify God "with one mind and one mouth". Such prayer was the living expression of the consciousness of redemption which the people of God possessed and it was stimulated by the recitation in the Scriptures of the mighty acts of God wrought out in their history.

The members of the new Israel which was constituted by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, knew themselves to be a covenant people dependent upon one Lord, and likewise partakers of a common salvation, and this shared experience had to find expression in common worship. The breaking of bread was the characteristic corporate act of worship in the new community, mediating an assurance of salvation and deepening the mutual communion of the people in union with their Lord. But it was not only in the primitive eucharist that all believers could participate. St. Paul in answering the queries addressed to him by the Corinthian Church, commented on the fact that "when ye come together every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying."³ The liberty of the children of God was manifested in the responsibility of each one to contribute something to the total action of the worship. The apostle did not contemplate a disorderly and unedifying procedure except where wilful individualism prevailed, but a united engagement in common action. In the synagogue services the conduct of worship was not restricted to a professional class; members of the congregation were summoned to participate.⁴ In the earlier forms of the choir Offices "the ideal was that each person so far as possible should contribute

¹ Dix, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

² *Prayer*, F. Heiler (E.T.), p. 304.

³ I Cor. xiv. 26.

⁴ St. Luke iv. 16-21.

something to the whole".¹ Each lesson had a fresh reader, each respond a fresh singer. The number of parts in the service was often elaborately multiplied to draw in as many different voices as possible, and even the precenting of the opening words of an antiphon, psalm or hymn might serve to give a part to yet another worshipper.

The celebration of the Eucharist was in the early centuries the work of the whole assembled Christian community, each group having its distinctive office to manifest by the corporate action of the Body of Christ its self-offering in the bread and wine laid on the table of the Lord. The celebrant had the fixed and variable prayers to recite; to the deacon was entrusted the responsibility of reading the Gospel and to the subdeacon the Epistle. Groups of ministers assisted the celebrant in his work and in the ceremonies of the sanctuary. The singers were responsible for the elaborate and variable part of the music, especially the Introit, the Gradual, Alleluia and Offertory. The congregation had its part in responses to the celebrant, especially in the Amen after the consecration and in certain parts of the singing, while in the Offertory and the Communion the whole people shared in the climax of the action. The use of antiphonal utterances² gave an impressive part to the congregation in the prayer of the leader and made corporate prayer a reality. In the developed eucharistic prayers³ of the fourth and fifth centuries the content of the prayers assumed a less variable form and the transition from a pattern to a fixed order of words to be used on every occasion was inevitably hurried by the problems of an expanding church life after the end of persecution. But these prayers are still congregational prayers even where the litany form has been abandoned, for their content is made up of the "God-ordained historical facts"⁴ which are the substance of Christian faith and common life. In one long prayer the worshippers are drawn into the world drama of their salvation, proceeding from the fulness of being of the eternal God and the Logos to the creation of angels, the world, living beings and mankind: from the fall and ruin of man, through the beginning of redemptive action in the choice of a particular people giving to them the law and guiding them in righteousness up to the coming of the Son of God, His teaching and healing, suffering and death, resurrection and exaltation. The consciousness that all are members of one body finds full and satisfying expression in these prayers, and in the great intercession makes the needs and concerns of one to become the need and concern of the whole assembled congregation.

III

It was this tradition that Cranmer set himself to restore in the English Prayer Book. His grasp of principles was profound, for the book is no antiquarian reconstruction of a long forgotten past but the deliberate and successful attempt to simplify and re-order the existing liturgical material, to give expression to the common action of the

¹ *Principles of Religious Ceremonial*, W. H. Frere, p. 24.

² See the eucharistic prayer of the president in the *Didachs*.

³ See *The Apostolic Constitutions*.

⁴ Heiler, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

Body of Christ in which every worshipper has a function to fulfil. In Morning and Evening Prayer the ordinary working clergy were provided with a daily office which could be used daily without being burdensome, and which the ordinary worshipper could also use as the vehicle of common devotion. The careful and orderly arrangement of the Scriptures and of the Psalter was to help the worshipper to feel himself part of the Christian community in every corner of the realm, where these same psalms and lessons were being read at the same time, while the actual structure of the services, in their rubrics and in the frequent use of versicles and responses, was designed to draw the congregation into active participation.

In the Eucharist, communion was restored to its position as the climax of the rite as in the primitive age. In this emphasis on the communion, the priest was drawn out of his isolation as the sole participator in the essential action of the church and the worshippers were drawn out of their devotional isolation both by the act of communion and in the corporate thanksgiving after communion, that unique feature of the English rite. Cranmer was content to let the appeal to Scripture and the fathers justify the work that he had done. Whatever defects might be found in the details of his liturgical work he had accomplished something of lasting value in his restoration of the true practice of common prayer to the Church of his birth and upbringing. The English Prayer Book has always been the layman's hand book rather than the priest's manual, and following the lead of Cranmer the Church still expects that all its members will be able to share in the one liturgical action. Even in the worst days of the eighteenth century the majority of Anglican worshippers followed the services closely in their books, and in fulfilling the people's part were able to share in the common prayer of the Church. Thus the recovered truth about the Church and its priestly character found worthy expression in the Book of Common Prayer, and the layman's birthright of full participation in the corporate action of worship was restored to the English worshipper. It is to this priceless heritage that the attention of the considering churchman must be directed in the celebrations of this year, which are to mark the four hundredth anniversary of the first use of a vernacular Prayer Book.