

A Free Church Appraisal of the Book of Common Prayer

BY THE REV. GORDON RUPP, M.A., B.D.

A METHODIST will not be expected to write of the Prayer Book with the critical appreciation of a Congregationalist, Baptist or Presbyterian. The tradition of his Church has been nourished on too much that is precious and important in the Anglican liturgy for him to write with other than humble and grateful pietas. Not for him the Puritan complaint against "old written, rotten stuff", to describe its antiphons as the "tossing to and fro of tennis balls". But for Thomas Cranmer, he will agree, the Prayer Book might have been what Milton called it, "the skeleton of a Mass Book", but in fact its dry bones were marvellously quickened. We may sympathise with the tragic gallantry of Richard Baxter and his friends in 1662, and yet be glad that Baxter's pre-fabricated alternative to the Prayer Book remained a personal *tour de force*. When we have appreciated its place in the Reformed tradition of devotion, the scriptural dignity of its prayers, we may still be thankful (having seen the corroding effects of 60 years of liturgical compromise within Methodism) that the Caroline Bishops withstood the nitpicking arguments into which a century of Puritan objections had concentrated.

On my desk is a worn volume dated 1792, one of several editions of "The Sunday Service of the Methodists", John Wesley's abridgment of the Book of Common Prayer. His preface contains these notable words :

"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. And though the main of it was compiled more than two hundred years ago, yet is the language of it not only pure, but strong and elegant in the highest degree. J. WESLEY."

In the generation following the death of Wesley an outstanding figure was Dr. Adam Clarke, orientalist, archivist, scholar of European fame, and all his days a loyal Methodist preacher. In 1811 he wrote :

"With respect to the Liturgy of the Church of England. This book I reverence next to the Book of God. Next to the Bible it has been the depository of the pure religion of Jesus Christ, and had it not been laid up there, and established by Acts of Parliament, I fear that religion would, long ere this, have been driven to the wilderness. Had it not been, under God, for this blessed book, the liturgy of the British Church, I verily believe Methodism had never existed".

Thus from the first days until now there have always been Methodists who have used the service of Morning Prayer, and the Communion Service almost unchanged from 1662, so that even those elements in the re-united Methodist Church which come from a non-liturgical and even anti-liturgical tradition are sharers today in a living Church

of which the Prayer Book has been an important element. The Methodist gives thanks for the Prayer Book, then, as in private duty bound, and his appearance in this present symposium is not to be regarded as the startling intrusion of the Ancient Mariner at the wedding feast, bearing strange tales of some alien liturgical adventures elsewhere!

I

A Methodist gives thanks for the Prayer Book as one of the normative documents within the English Protestant tradition. It stands four-square with those other writings, next the English Bible and before Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and the *Pilgrim's Progress* (perhaps we could add *Paradise Lost*) as documents which have influenced the life of England more deeply than many battles and most Acts of Parliament. For the Prayer Book has influenced even those who stood against it in protest and conflict. It is a one-sided view of history when Anglicans and Free Churchmen attempt to sketch their own tradition as though it had developed its muscular power by shadow boxing and forget the ancient sparring partner. For it is from the tension, ferment, conflict between the Anglican and Dissenting traditions that some of our most precious liberties and dearly purchased verities derive.

Those historians who have emphasised the negative and destructive elements in the Reformation have never really assessed its creative achievement. That within the relatively short space of a generation, between 1517 and 1559, there could emerge new forms of Christian proclamation, theological categories, institutions of Christian discipline and piety, and new media of worship which could nourish a vast succession of great and humble Christian men and women ("variations of Protestantism" to which Catholic polemic turns its blinkers), these things represent a creative work which has few parallels in Christian history.

The achievement of a vernacular liturgy of such quality that even the Tuscan ranks of Chester-Belloc pay tribute to it (on the ground that, after all, it was written by apostate Catholics!) is commonplace. But for Thomas Cranmer's genial sensitivity to the "Matchless beauty of the shapèd syllable" the enterprise might have been disastrous. Had his mind been slick and smooth, or fumbling and slovenly, had his been a botched and second-rate job, one wonders whether in fact the English Protestant tradition could have endured without grave disasters. But Cranmer had more than a flair for language. T.S. Eliot once said that "great prose can only be written by people with great convictions". It is even more true of great prayers.

The most original of all Cranmer's achievements was the work which brought the Orders of Morning and Evening Prayer out of the mediaeval offices. It was a work which occupied him over many years, probably at least from 1538-47, and those who will may study this development in the fascinating volume *Cranmer's Liturgical Projects* (ed. Wickham Legg, Henry Bradshaw Soc.). There, as in the commonplace books, is evidence of a slow moving, tenacious, scholarly mind. We can even watch him toying with the possibility of a Protestant commemoration of saints in a series of evangelical fourth lessons, and it is possible that

if such an element could have been retained, something more of the richness of the doctrine of Communion of the Saints would have been preserved. Above all in the projects and in their fruition in the Prayer Book we can watch the gradual erection of a noble edifice, quarried from many sources, but fitly framed together, able to sustain the long burden of a people's prayers.

II

The creative conservatism of Luther and Cranmer has seemed to many to be belied by their vigorous assault on the Canon of the Mass. Gasquet and Bishop voice the pain of the faithful at what seems to them wanton vandalism. They say of the Canon that "the fact that it has remained unaltered during thirteen centuries is the most speaking witness of the veneration with which it has always been regarded, and of the scruple that has ever been felt at touching so sacred a heritage, coming to us from unknown antiquity." Yet neither Luther nor Cranmer was insensible of the majesty of noble prayers. The truth is that liturgy is one part of the whole life of the People of God, bound up with theology and proclamation, discipline and piety, in the bundle of life of the mystical Body. The abuses, the superstitions, the perversions into which late mediaeval Christendom had fallen were not new errors but perversions of grand Christian truths, the communion of the saints, the solidarity of believers in Christ, the all availing power of the merits of Christ. These are enormous truths. Yet the abuses in doctrine as popularly expounded and the perversions of practice had placed at the heart of 16th century Christendom not the availing passion of the God-Man, but Ecclesiastical Man (who in consequence has bedevilled modern European history even more sadly than Economic and Political Man). Liturgy may be like the blood stream of the living Church; but is there any guarantee, on even the highest doctrine of the Church, that no poison can enter the blood stream? And if it does and persists, then what shall be done in the end thereof? The Reformers answered this question drastically in the proclamation of Justification by Faith, in turning Mass into a Communion, and by reconstructing the liturgy to point so sharply to the all-sufficient sacrifice of the Cross of Christ that never again could his High Priesthood be usurped by Ecclesiastical Man. Hence, as in no later Prayer Book, the tremendous staccatoes in the concerto of the liturgy of 1549—"His one oblation, once offered".

This is not the place to examine Cranmer's doctrinal intentions or the development of his own eucharistic belief. There is a good deal of work to be done before we can make a decent assessment of the problem. We should have to begin by working over Cranmer's unpublished eucharistic sections in his "Commonplace Books" and the notes in the Lambeth MS. We should have to note, as one of the important clues, the long and careful transcriptions from Brentius's reply to Occolampadius, and its full treatment of the Eucharist in the Lutheran view, and we should note that it was this same Brentius who conducted, with Cranmer's kinsman Osiander, the liturgical reforms of Nuremberg, and that this same Brentius was the author of the

original of the Catechism done into Latin by Justus Jonas and published in English as "Cranmer's Catechism" in 1548. We should need to remember that in 1548 there did not exist a number of tidy eucharistic theories which can be neatly labelled "Zwingli," "Luther," "Calvin," that as a matter of fact the doctrine of the Eucharist among the Reformers was as fluid and complex in this period as the doctrine of the Church, that there are at least twelve points of debate among them from the doctrine of the Presence to the "manducatio indignorum". Not only were there differences between Zwingli and Bucer, Peter Martyr, A'Lasco, Bullinger, but about some of the subsidiary questions we can make different party alignments. We need a great deal more careful exposition of the eucharistic doctrines of Bucer, Peter Martyr, and A'Lasco before we can dispose of the problem of Cranmer's own changing beliefs. It is assuredly not safe to label him as Zwinglian on the strength of the "ferretings and mouse-hunts of an index" and apart from a careful and unprejudiced exposition of Zwingli's own teaching. The view that sees in the Eucharist a purely mental contemplation of a past event in history, and joins with it gratitude for the forgiveness of one's private and individual sins, seems to be a view of the Sacrament unknown before the 19th century, and it seems unwise to rush into the suggestion that Cranmer intended to foist upon the Church of England the eucharistic idiosyncrasies of the Plymouth Brethren; Dom Gregory Dix has remarked with penetration that Cranmer's rite is "the only effective attempt ever made to give liturgical expression to the doctrine of 'Justification by Faith'" alone, though, of course, he misunderstands the evangelical conception of faith. The statement which has sometimes been made that the Reformers destroyed the eschatological character of the eucharist seems to be the reverse of the truth. The emphasis on "one oblation, once offered" restores the Biblical "hapax" and "ephapax", the historic once for allness of our salvation. Like the New Testament, the new liturgy sought to bind the existence of the Church to the point in real life where the Blood was shed. But it is living, saving faith which is no mental antiquarianism which here and now grasps that which is beyond all time, before the foundation of the world and at the end of the age of ages, the divine "Now" which in time and space is "Then" but is "Now" to us in Faith in the God who comes to us veiled under the forms of bread and wine. It is transubstantiation which "overthrows the nature of a sacrament" and which therefore wipes out eschatology and enables the eucharistic sacrifice to degenerate into the individualism run made of the later mediaeval sacerdotalism.

III

A Methodist may be thankful that the Anglican tradition has not stood alone, and wonder whether a national liturgy might not have cramped the life of the Church, whether Luther was not wiser in his insistence on the need for growth, experiment and variety. He knows the value of the Free Church insistence on the sovereign freedom of the Spirit. Despite the perils of sentimentalism, slovenliness and individualism, the worship of the whole congregation, the hymn sing-

ing (which gives the Methodists the colour of their liturgy) and free prayer have given awe and wonder to that holy intimacy in which a preacher dares to address his Maker "as a man speaketh to his friend." Dr. Lowther Clarke's description of liturgy as the "good manners of created beings in the presence of their Maker" is a very Anglican definition and it stops short of the "glorious liberty of the children of God". But we must seek to be judged, in our several traditions, at our best, and not at our worst, and when one ponders the story of the Prayer Books through four long centuries complaint is hushed to make one of John Wesley's most characteristic comments—"What hath God wrought!"

The Canadian Revision

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EVERY recent revision of the Book of Common Prayer, and this may also be said of every revision since the first was made for "the more perfection" in 1552, has distinctive values of interest and moment for every individual and autocephalous church within the worldwide Anglican family.

Revision in Canada, as in the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America and elsewhere, is part of a continued and continuing story which has as its early chapters "1552", "1559", "1604", "1662", with perhaps the ill-fated Scotch Liturgy of 1637, the Services of the Non-Jurors, and the plan for "comprehension" in the reign of William and Mary. These last if not chapters are at least appendices of significant import.

It has been said that the Prayer Book is "the Church of England written down". In so far as this is true there must of necessity be many revisions to meet the needs and to express the character of every several national and regional church.

Quod Ecclesia Anglicana libera sit.

True liberty is always tied to loyalty. Rarely has this been better said than in the Prayer Book itself, doubtless by Cranmer, the master liturgical craftsman: "whose service is perfect freedom". Liberty is never unconditioned.

Certainly for us of the Church of England in Canada our liberty is bounded firm and fast by loyalty, for Jerusalem built in England's green and pleasant land is the mother of us all. So it was that our first Canadian revision was essentially conservative, holding closely to the book of our mother Church.

The Prayer Book of the Church of England is an essentially Catholic book. It grew out of the very life of the living Church. Here is the greatest treasury of worship and devotion in all of Christendom. It is likewise a book of the Reformation, "the which at this time by the aid of the Holy Ghost". The Renaissance might be as "the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees" but the Reformation was as "a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and