

St. James Stratford October 30, 2011 8:30 service

It's said that if you want to know about Lutherans, read the Augsburg Confessions; if you want to know about Anglicans, read their prayer books. "Lex orandi, lex credendi" is our motto. "The law of prayer is the law of belief". As I'm doing an instructed Eucharist at the 10:30 service this morning, I thought I'd speak a bit here about the Book of Common Prayer.

It is interesting that, this past Wednesday, we observed a Commemoration for Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons in the late 9th century. Once he had subdued the Danes, one of Alfred's initiatives was to promote education and the translating of Latin spiritual texts into Saxon, so that the more common people could read for themselves. Alfred was ahead of his time. By the early Middle Ages, Latin was once again the dominant language of Christianity, and the reading of the Bible and other spiritual texts was seen as the purview of the clergy, and the educated upper classes. Preventing the common people from reading the Bible was one way in which the church controlled its people.

Language was a key issue for Luther in 1517 when he nailed his 95 complaints on the door of the Wittenburg church, sparking the official beginning of the Protestant Reformation. The English Reformation, although influenced by the goings-on on the continent, evolved differently – as do many things English! But language was also a key issue.

When one thinks of King Alfred in the 9th century, promoting the translations of spiritual texts – presumably including parts of the Bible – into Saxon, the language of the common people, it is startling when one realizes that it was not until 1535 – 650 years later – that Miles Coverdale, Bishop of Exeter, translated and published the first complete modern translation of the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) into the common language – English. In the 1539 the so-called "Great Bible", the product of Coverdale and others, was published, and in 1540 Henry VIII, with the help of Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer, decreed that the Great Bible be chained to a bookstand in every parish church in England, so that any common person might read the Bible. And read it they did!

Thomas Cranmer was also responsible for producing the first English-language books for use in the liturgy. The idea of having a prayer/liturgy book for each person to read was a new idea. The Exhortation and Litany, the earliest English-language service book of the Church of England, was the first overt sign of Cranmer's changing views, to reflect a more "protestant" outlook. The Litany would have had in its original Catholic version a very large portion devoted to the saints.....which Cranmer removed. The Litany, which you'll find on page 30, borrowed from Coverdale's NT and Martin Luther's Litany, and is the only published service during the reign of Henry VIII which might have been considered "Protestant".

It wasn't until the death of Henry and the accession of Edward VI that liturgical reform proceeded more quickly. In 1548, Cranmer finished his work on an English-language Communion service, in which he obeyed a church order that Communion was to be given to all the people as bread and wine. The ordinary Roman Rite of the Mass had made no provision for any congregation present to receive Communion. The idea of a prayer of consecration AND a communion was very new. But although it abandoned much of the theology of the Mass, Cranmer kept the structure of the Latin Mass.

By outwardly maintaining familiar forms, Cranmer hoped to establish the practice of weekly congregational Communion, and included exhortations to encourage this; and instructions that Communion should never be received by the priest alone. This represented a radical change from late medieval practice—whereby the primary focus of congregational worship was taken to be attendance at the consecration, and adoration of the consecrated host. In late medieval England, congregations only regularly received Communion at Easter; and otherwise individual lay people might expect to receive Communion only when gravely ill, or in the form of a Nuptial Mass on being married.

The Book of Common Prayer was introduced on Whitsunday 1549, after considerable debate and revision in Parliament. It was said to have pleased neither reformers nor their opponents. It was widely unpopular in the parishes, especially in places such as Devon and Cornwall. Particularly unpopular was the banning of processions and the sending out of commissioners to enforce the new requirements. There was widespread opposition to the introduction of regular

congregational Communion, partly because the extra costs of bread and wine that would fall on the parish; but mainly out of an intense resistance to undertaking in regular worship, a religious practice previously associated with marriage or illness.

Interestingly, the call of Cranmer and other Reformers for the weekly receiving of Communion was not something that was fully embraced by the Anglican church until the later part of the 20th century.

It appears that spirited conversations – and in fact there were actual riots in SW England - about prayer books has been very much part of our Anglican DNA right from the beginning! The 1549 BCP was intended to be temporary, and indeed the first of many revisions occurred in 1552. The book was banned during the reign of Bloody Mary, and then brought back during the reign of Elizabeth I, who oversaw another revision in 1559. In 1662 – along with another another revision – the book was given its title.....ready for it?

The Book of Common Prayer and administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Church of England Together with the Psalter as it is appointed to be said or sung in Churches, and the Form and Manner of Making Ordaining and Consecrating Bishops Priests and Deacons.

The last Canadian revision published in 1962 changed “Church of England” to “Anglican Church of Canada”....but the full title endures!

The 1662 edition travelled to Africa, Asia, the Philippines, Ireland, Wales, Australia, New Zealand, the United States. In all those places, Anglicans have revised the “parent book” to reflect the liturgical developments of the late 19th and 20th centuries, as well as changes which reflect their own individual cultures.

The same in Canada. The Anglican Church of Canada developed its first Book of Common Prayer separately from England in 1918. A much more substantial revision was done in 1958. This revision was given final approval by General Synod in 1962, to coincide with the 300th anniversary of the 1662 edition. And the BAS of 1985 is considered to be part and continuation of this long tradition.

A couple notes about the Book.

Although the scripture texts were changed in 1662 to those from the King James Bible, the Psalter, the Book of Psalm, kept the translation of Myles Coverdale, which we use to this day. One of Coverdale's contributions to the English translation of scripture: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." of psalm 23. And for those of you who like Handel's Messiah, the psalm texts that Handel uses for Messiah are taken from the Book of Common Prayer.....

Like Coverdale, Archbishop Cranmer's genius was not so much in his liturgical expertise, but rather in the beauty of his language, particularly those quintessentially English prayers we call – with typical English idiosyncrasy – "Collects", perhaps the most glorious prayers ever written in English. From the Collect for Purity, which begins our worship Sunday by Sunday, to the changing Collects of the Day. Each Sunday we come to church, carrying with us the ins and outs, ups and downs of daily life. These prayers gather us and they focus our attention on our relationship with God. Sunday by Sunday, they call us to – in the words of one famous collect – "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" – the word of God, and the sacrament of Holy Communion.

That phrase "read, mark, learn....." has become part of the English language. In fact, the BCP stands along with Shakespeare, and the King James Bible in its importance to the English language. Other phrases that have entered our language through the BCP: "speak now, or forever hold your peace"; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"; "Till death do us part"; "all sorts and conditions of men"; "peace in our time".

One could go on.....! and perhaps on!

But I would end with the conclusion to the preface of our Book of Common Prayer:

It is in faith that this Book of Common Prayer is offered to the Church, with the hope that those who use it may become more truly what they already are: the People of God, that New Creation in Christ which finds its joy in the adoration of the Creator and Redeemer of all.