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Not 'Just for Sentiment's Sake': A Defence of Traditional Language Worship

ROBERT STACKPOLE

'Why should the Church be expected to use a language 300 or 400 years old, just for sentiment's sake?'

Archbishop George Carey

The triumph of modern language worship in the Church of England seems almost complete. An estimated three-quarters of Anglican parishes now use the *Alternative Service Book 1980* Rite A or other modern language options for their main Sunday service. Most relegate the traditional language liturgies to an early slot on Sunday morning—if they bother to offer one at all. Moreover, there is not a single Anglican theological college left in England that gives Prayer Book language services an equal place alongside contemporary rites. As one ordinand recently said, his liturgy teacher loved the Prayer Book 'for its beauty and theology, but found it out of step with the needs of today.' The sentiment is not uncommon.

Nevertheless, the preservation of 'traditional language'—namely, the words, phrases, couplets and cadences of Thomas Cranmer's Prayer Book – remains a popular cause with a tiny, embattled minority of liturgists, a somewhat higher proportion of the laity, and with His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. Their case needs to be heard, and taken seriously, by the elite core of liturgical scholars now leading the Church of England in an entirely different direction.

Few would deny that the Prayer Book is a masterpiece of religious poetry-in-prose. As such it has an evocative power which is hard to define. Its very beauty draws out of us a sense of wonder at the divine presence, and its rich yet succinct style communicates the Christian revelation with gracious ease. Favourite passages include the phrase 'Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only son Jesus Christ ...'. What better way to speak of the Father's infinite love for us, reaching out to us through his Son? Or again, we may recall the words at the administration of the chalice: 'The Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ,

which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life'. With what poetic brevity is the mystery of the sacrament here expressed! Often the Prayer Book uses scriptural wording or metaphor to communicate what cannot be captured in merely literal or everyday phrases. For example, the traditional prayer of thanksgiving after communion is a splendid and effective summary of the life of the Church. This prayer reassures us that we have been made 'very members incorporate in the mystical body of Thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people, and are also heirs through hope of Thy everlasting kingdom'. Prayers such as these, repeated over and over, Sunday after Sunday, sink down into our hearts and become part of us, nourishing the depths of our souls, and surfacing again for us from the memory in times of trouble.

Words to edify and glorify

However poetically evocative and memorable the Prayer Book Communion Service may be, liturgists such as Colin Buchanan still object to the 'heavy and archaic' words it sometimes employs.¹ Allegedly, many of these words are now incomprehensible to the average person in the pew. Buchanan cites words such as 'beseech, ordinance, governance, supplication, succour, transitory, manifold, property, vouchsafe' as among the chief culprits.² In some instances, Buchanan's charge is justified. A few verbal alterations are needed in the 1662 text to render it intelligible today (e.g. 'impartially' for 'indifferently'; 'go before' for 'prevent'). But more often than not, it is hard to see the force behind Buchanan's complaint. The word 'beseech' for example, lies somewhere between 'beg' and 'plead' on the one hand, with their overtones of grovelling, and 'request' and 'ask' on the other, which are too bald and business-like, or worse, imply that we are God's peer. We need a special word such as 'beseech', so that we petition God for blessings in a way in which we make requests of no-one else: with complete trust in His love and power, and total deference to His infinite wisdom. Again, what is 'heavy and archaic' about words such as 'property' or 'substance'? Anyone who has taken 'O' level Science is familiar with 'substances' having 'properties' in the sense of 'characteristics'. Replacing these words with 'nature' and 'being', as the A.S.B. does, means using philosophical terminology instead. Do more people today take 'O' or 'A' level Philosophy than Chemistry?

One could quibble *ad nauseam* about particular words, but the force behind Buchanan's complaint is that, in general, seventeenth-century English is no longer easily understood by the English people. To continue to use it in worship, therefore, violates Cranmer's original intention in putting the liturgy into the vernacular in the first Anglican prayer books.³ Cranmer, it is claimed, used language people could clearly understand so that Christian worship would edify them with the truths of the saving gospel. On the other hand, it should be pointed out that Cranmer never intended the English to worship God in *common parlance*. He fashioned

his Prayer Book to lift the English people to a *new level* of liturgical understanding, not only through use of the vernacular, but also through use of the formal language of the royal court, and phrases rich in scriptural association. Dorothy Mills Parker reminds us that Cranmer's Prayer Book was written

not in street language but in heightened vernacular, the noblest language of its day, which accounts for its timelessness. The objective was not to reduce worship to a level *immediately* understood by all, but to raise people up to a higher level—to inspire, chasten, ennoble and sanctify them ...⁴

Besides, as the Prince of Wales pointed out in his speech before the Cranmer Schools Prize in December 1989, the language with which we worship God must to some extent remain 'over our heads' simply because the One whom we worship is by definition above us: the infinite, eternal, radiant God. Thus 'religious English', precisely because it is somewhat archaic, expresses the reality of the One who abides from 'everlasting to everlasting', from age to age the same. Moreover, the formal, stately prose of the Prayer Book signals to the worshipper that his encounter with the Lord is supremely special and of utmost importance. A special, exalted use of language in worship, therefore, more clearly expresses the truth about the Lord's 'otherness', His special and unique nature, than many a modern rite in everyday English.

The manifestation of the transcendent glory of God is not some peripheral matter, an 'optional extra'. As the Psalmist tells us, it lies at the very heart of what we mean by 'worship': 'give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name: worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness' (Ps. 96). The Anglican spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill urged that the recognition of the glory of God is the centre of all true worship:

worship is the little human spirit's humble adoring acknowledgement of the measureless glory of God ... Man has to tune in to that universal voice of adoration which says all the time—whether we know it or not—Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts! Heaven and earth are full of Thy Glory: Glory be to thee, O Lord most High! ... This note of solemn yet joyous adoration, which obliterates all thoughts of self, ought then to be the first point, both in public worship and in private devotional life, which supports that public worship and makes it real. For this is the Church's acknowledgement that the First Commandment does come first: a fact most modern presentations of Christianity scandalously neglect.⁵

Theologians will sometimes argue that an 'incarnational' religion demands that we learn to find God in and through the everyday and commonplace, just as our Lord assumed flesh and dwelt among us. As Dr. Gerald Bray has pointed out, however, Christ was not generally recognized as the divine Lord in his earthly state:

Jesus, in His earthly ministry, was found in the highways and byways, but not recognised as Lord and God ... Indeed, the only time the Gospels suggest the possibility of worshipping Jesus is in the account of the Transfiguration, an event which by definition was not an everyday occurrence. There is at least as much reason to say that our worship of God should reflect *the transfiguration of the ordinary* as there is for saying that the contemporary vernacular should be the basis of our liturgical language ...⁶

The manifestation of the glory of the Lord, in a way that evokes wonder and adoration, must therefore be an essential quality of good liturgical language. Such language cannot be reduced, as David Jasper seems to think, to 'the concern of conveying information, from which people may take profit, or gathering a congregation into the common task of intercession for the needy, for those in authority, or for the sick' (The *Modern Churchman*, No. 1 1989). To be sure, liturgical language must edify the congregation with the truths of the Gospel. Its central purpose *includes* the conveying of such information. But it must convey more than mere information; it must convey *meaning*: to the heart as well as to the head, through sound as well as through the mind. We are to *experience* God in worship, not just think about Him and address Him.

Even as a means of conveying edifying 'information', however, Cranmer's exalted style remains preferable to most modern options; for Cranmer's prose was drawn primarily from Scripture itself. His metaphors and phrases are thoroughly Scriptural, often direct quotations from the Bible and especially from St. Paul. As Dr. Roger Beckwith has pointed out:

Cranmer not only modelled his services in general on the principles and teaching of the Bible, and drew lessons and psalms and canticles from that source, but as far as possible constructed his very prayers out of the words and phrases of the Bible, to an extent unexampled in liturgical history, either before or since. In the last century, the SPCK used to circulate a book called *The Liturgy Compared with the Bible*, compiled by Henry Ives Bailey ... What this book does is to go through the whole text of the Prayer Book, apart from the rubrics, and quote passages from Scripture in illustration and support of every statement it contains. I doubt whether you could do this with any other liturgy which the world has seen, and this is what makes the Prayer Book so supremely edifying.⁷

To this day, wherever traditional language services are used in conjunction with the reading of the Authorized Version of the Bible, or its conservative revisions (the R.V. and R.S.V.), English worship still resonates with the text of Scripture itself, reinforcing its meaning and offering it in prayer.

Traditional language, therefore, serves both to manifest the glory of God, and to edify the congregation with the truths of the gospel. Many people also find that given regular use, traditional services are actually

easier to follow than the modern rites. Cranmer's famous doublets, for example, such as 'truly and earnestly', 'hear and receive', 'grace and heavenly benediction'—these tend to reinforce and give nuances to the meaning of the text. *A.S.B.* prose races by too quickly. Traditional English prose, on the other hand, takes time to nourish and strengthen the mind and heart.

'Thou' versus 'You'

This brings us to the issue of how we ought to address God in worship. After nearly three decades of liturgical revision, many still find it helpful to address God with the traditional 'Thou' rather than the familiar 'You'. To borrow some terminology from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, our encounter with the living God is an 'I-Thou' rather than an 'I-You' relationship. There is an analogy between the two kinds of relationship, but not a straight equivalence. Of no other being, for example, could it be said that unto Him 'Our hearts be open, all desires known', and from Him 'no secrets are hid' (*B.C.P.*: Collect for Purity). The traditional form of address, therefore, expresses the uniqueness of the divine-human relationship. As Raymond Chapman explains in his essay 'A Book for All Seasons', this effect of Cranmerian prose seems truly providential:

In the sixteenth century the gradations of *thou* and *you* were complex; the pronouns were moving from a simple distinction of singular and plural to special and often subtle connotations of relationship. The fact that Cranmer used the *Thou* form proved at last to be a gift to posterity. The word became obsolete in ordinary use, leaving us with a special pronoun for a very special mode of address. God is personal, to be addressed in prayer as holding a direct relationship to the worshipper and not an abstract or impersonal force. On the other hand, He is not a 'person' in the common sense of another human being. The existence of a special word which testifies to both truths is invaluable.

Of course, we sometimes call God 'Father' or 'Jesus', the Word made flesh our very brother, but we need to balance this revealed, intimate, family language, which tends to dominate our private prayers, with words of address which emphasize God's 'otherness': His mystery, majesty, radiance, and transcendence. We are drawn to love Him in return, at least in part, because He who draws near to us is other and infinitely greater than ourselves.

The literary scholar D.L. Frost offered an important *theological* reason for the use of the familiar address in worship:

That our Lord taught a new way of thinking about and praying to God is the most compelling reason for accepting in modern services the change from 'thou' to 'you', and the whole accompanying shift to a contemporary form of language. What was only an accident to linguistic history has created a

special form of address for God, a form we have learned to value as indicating his majesty, his 'otherness', his transcendence, but which we now find to be contrary to a more important emphasis in Christ's teaching.⁸

Undoubtedly, Christ did invite his disciples to share in his intimate relationship with God as 'Abba, Father'. Nonetheless, we may share in such intimacy with God in worship only by the costly way of penitence and faith. As the Prayer Book says, it is only those who truly and earnestly repent of their sins who may draw near with faith, and even then, we will never attain the same constant intimacy with the Father as our sinless Saviour enjoyed. In fact, Jesus did not reject the more formal Jewish styles of address in prayer; he merely *added* to them, thus his prayer 'I thank Thee Father, Lord of Heaven and earth ...' (Matthew 11:25). Similarly, defenders of Prayer Book language do not usually seek to banish all references to God in worship as 'You'. There are special times in public worship—such as communion hymns, or spontaneous intercessions during prayer meetings—when more intimate forms of addressing God will be appropriate. Nevertheless, traditional language keeps the emphasis on the uniqueness and special nature of God, helping us to draw near to God as He truly is, and preserving us from the sin of presumption.

Formality, taste and 'Englishness'

Buchanan argues that the formal style of the Prayer Book is especially objectionable. Cranmerian prose allegedly encourages 'an overformalised concept of worship which makes it an eclectic exercise, an escape from life'.⁹ He cites, for example, Cranmer's use of couplets such as 'godly and quietly', 'sins and wickedness', 'confirm and strengthen', 'grace and heavenly benediction', all of which bespeak the style of a more leisured and less literate age. Of all human activities, however, it is surely worship which *ought* to be taken at a leisurely, contemplative pace. We need to slow ourselves down in order to worship and adore. In the busy, breathless world of the late twentieth century, slowing down in worship is especially needful. Only in this way can we return God's loving gaze, open our hearts to Him and learn to be attentive to Him. If the formal prose of the seventeenth century encourages us to do this, so much the better.

In *Towards Liturgy 2000*, Michael Perham claims that for many Prayer Book language is just a matter of 'literary taste'.¹⁰ Be that as it may, one of the main purposes of worship is surely to reflect God's glory on earth, to give God worthy praise by thankfully offering to Him the very best praise we can, utilizing the creative talents He gave us, especially the human arts such as music, architecture, sculpture and song. Literary excellence is itself one of these arts, and therefore a worthy instrument for giving glory to God. Thus, worship has been described as

the dedication to the Most High of all that is best in what the eye can see, the ear can hear, the voice say or sing, the mind conceive, and the hand exe-

cute—the sanctification of colour, sound and sense, of skills and intellect, imagination and devotion. Thus it is that worship calls for art, and that art so often finds its noblest use in worship.¹¹

As stated above, Cranmer's English liturgy is surely a masterpiece of religious poetry-in-prose; as such its use in worship gives greater glory to God than many of our modern, more pedestrian alternatives.

Perham suggests that for some Anglicans, worshipping in Prayer Book language is a matter of 'Englishness'.¹² He is not without sympathy for this affection for he admits that it includes an appreciation of our Christian roots, enabling us to pray with the 'Communion of saints' from our English Anglican past. A liturgy in historic continuity with our past serves to remind us of our spiritual ancestors, on whose rich inheritance of faith and devotion we very largely live today, and who, 'with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven' surround us as we pray. Beyond this, Perham might also have mentioned the relevance of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Rites drawn from our English heritage better enable us to offer up to God the best of our particular language, locale and history—our 'scandalous particularity' so to speak. As Sheridan Gilley explained:

The Prayer Book liturgy is an English one, though it has been valued wherever the English language has been valued. Catholic Christianity is universal; but it permits us the love of our native place, and to love the universe you must love one part of it first. I am not being a Little Englander in preferring the majestic English that nurtured Shakespeare to that of the airport lounge, and surely even our ecumenists must tire of the airport lounge and return to the English national liturgy ... Let us worship in the language in which Shakespeare worshipped—giving back to God the noblest of his gifts, our worship in the finest of our mother tongue.¹³

For fear that the riches of traditional language could be lost to future generations altogether, Perham suggests that any revision of the *A.S.B.* should include a mixture of language styles, much as we find in our hymn books. For example, well loved traditional-style prayers and canticles could be printed side-by-side with modern options, rather than relegated as an appendix, as they were in the *A.S.B.* Indeed, this would meet the demands of some devotees of the Prayer Book. Sheridan Gilley, for example, argued that:

for certain universal prayers, which are Catholic and not just Anglican, for the Pater Noster, the creeds, prefaces, Sanctus and Gloria, for the Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis and psalter, indeed for much of the devotion of the ancient Catholic Church, the Prayer Book contains the very finest versions of our tongue ... If the whole Prayer Book cannot be saved, these at least must be saved; for these are, as Newman called them, the 'accents of

the Church Catholic and Apostolic ... in England', and until another Cranmer arises nothing will replace them.¹⁴

The difficulty with Perham's suggestion, however, is that if fully implemented there would no longer be any completely traditional language rite left in the *A.S.B.* Parishes fond of the traditional style of *A.S.B.* Rite B could only view this as an attempt to nudge them towards wider use of modern language.

Popular appeal?

Perhaps the most persistent argument against Prayer Book language is the alleged *popularity* of modern language rites, especially among the young and in urban areas. Michael Perham, for example, insists that

a silent majority has not just acquiesced in the change (to modern language), but deepened its experience of worship through it. That is not something one can prove, and it is something that some would challenge, but you would not find many parish clergy with thriving congregations who would say otherwise.¹⁵

This is a curious argument indeed, given that 1960–1990, the great era of liturgical change, has seen a gradual *decline* in church attendance across England. There are simply not many numerically 'thriving congregations at all these days, so it can hardly be said that contemporary language rites have proved a great boon to the church's appeal. (Amongst the thriving congregations known to this author are two that use nothing but the *B.C.P.* and *A.S.B.* Rite B). Moreover, it is hard to make a fair comparison of the popularity of traditional as against modern language services, given that in many parishes the fervent desire to change to contemporary English arose not among the laity, but among the clergy. In some cases the clergy led a prolonged struggle to introduce it. As a result, many elderly parishioners found Prayer Book language relegated to an 8 a.m. Sunday Service, hardly a time when it could fairly compete for popularity with a 10 a.m. *A.S.B.* Rite A, and also a time of day bound to deter younger adults from attending (who usually enjoy staying up late on Saturday night!).

The only major scientific study of this whole question was the Gallup Poll conducted in 1979–1980, intended to measure preferences for traditional and modern forms of service and versions of the Bible in various age groups and according to regularity of worship. It should be pointed out that Gallup is one of the largest, and most respected opinion research organizations in the world.¹⁶ The findings of this survey startled many an incumbent:

The results of the survey showed how inaccurate had been the claims of the modernizers. Far from being the luxury of the privileged classes, it was found that greater support for traditional forms came from the lower socioe-

conomic groups than the higher: for example, only 66 percent of Anglican respondents in the highest social group preferred wedding services in the traditional form, whereas 77 percent of the lowest group expressed such a preference. In all questions, respondents in the South of England were rather less fond of the traditional forms than respondents in the Midlands ... As was expected, the elderly were more traditionalist than the young, but even in the youngest age group (16–24 years) 72 percent preferred the traditional Lord's Prayer, 65 percent wanted the traditional wedding rite, and 55 percent preferred lessons to be read in the Authorized Version.¹⁷

Regular worshippers were generally found to be more tolerant of innovations and modern language than infrequent attenders, but this phenomenon might have been expected, because 'there would naturally be a higher rate of falling away among the disaffected and a greater adaptation among those who persisted'.¹⁸ No doubt many 'Christmas-and-Easter Christians' prefer the old-fashioned words simply for their nostalgic appeal. But, to be fair, many infrequent worshippers also carry with them a deep sense that the faith with which they struggle contains time-honoured wisdom; the use of traditional language symbolizes and reinforces that message. It is precisely such people, presently on the fringes of the Church, who ought to be a prime target for the Church's evangelistic outreach.

Conclusion

All things considered, we have found few convincing arguments for the use of modern language in the Church of England's worship, and much that would suggest that Prayer Book language should be preserved as much as possible. We have suggested that Prayer Book language is more evocative, expressive and memorable than the wording of many contemporary services. It is generally not as incomprehensible to the average person in the pew as Buchanan and others suggest. Moreover, it communicates something of the transcendent glory—the eternity, specialness and beauty of God—which is lacking from many of the modern rites. Its use of 'Thou' to address God, for example, helps express the uniqueness of the divine-human relationship. Furthermore, its leisurely pace encourages a contemplative, reverent approach to God, especially suited to counter-balance our modern hectic pace of life. Through its deeply Scriptural content Cranmerian prose serves to edify the congregation with the truths of the saving gospel, and through its very literary excellence, Prayer Book worship offers great glory to God. In this way we offer to God through worship the very finest fruits of our English cultural, literary, and religious heritage—a form of worship well suited to an 'incarnational' religion. Finally, it is not at all clear that modern language services have significantly wider appeal than the traditional ones. Indeed, the people most given to the Prayer Book style, the occasional worshippers, may be the very ones the church might most be able to attract in this 'Decade of Evangelism'.

Nevertheless, the difficulty remains that in most parishes in the Church of England, it is no longer a question of 'preserving' Prayer Book language but of reintroducing it. Most parish life takes modern language worship for granted, and the virtues of traditional English are almost forgotten.

A rediscovery of our Anglican heritage, however, seems near at hand. It will be precipitated by popular frustration with the Liturgical Commission; its obsessive tinkering with our common worship, and divisive attempts to revise the *A.S.B.* Continuing chaos in the church, both liturgical and doctrinal, may impel Anglicans to look back to their roots for sources of unity and identity. Thoughtful clergy in our parishes might capitalize on this trend, for example, by offering *B.C.P.* services during set seasons of the Church's year, or by asking their congregations to use Rite B for a trial period, or by developing 'Family Services' based on traditional Morning Prayer.

A gradual revival of Cranmerian worship will not, of course, convert the unchurched multitudes, any more than the adoption of modern language has done. People come to church (or stay away) for a variety of reasons. Clarity of preaching, singable hymns, and a friendly congregation are probably chief among these. The type of language used for worship is not liable to be a major factor. But it is in the realm of *quality* of worship, and not quantity, that the case for Prayer Book worship resides. Indeed, in that realm the case for Prayer Book language has never been effectively answered.

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NOTES

1 C.O. Buchanan, *A Guide to the New Communion Service* (Church Book Room Press, 1966), p. 3.

2 *Loc. cit.*

3 See Article 24 of the 39 Articles.

4 Dorothy Mills Parker, 'The Issue of the American Prayer Book' in D. Martin and P. Mullen, ed., *No Alternative: the Prayer Book Controversy* (Blackwell, 1981), p. 151. On the Anglican Reformers' original choice of liturgical language, see Gerald Bray, *Language and Liturgy* (Latimer Studies No. 16, 1944), pp. 5-6.

5 Evelyn Underhill, 'Worship' in *Collected Papers* (Longman and Green, 1946), pp. 66, 69-70.

6 Bray, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

7 Roger Beckwith, 'The Prayer Book and Evangelical Doctrine' in *The Prayer Book: A Theological Conference held at St. Peter's Cathedral, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island*. (St. Peter's Publications, 1985), p. 77.

8 D.L. Frost, 'Liturgical Language: Cranmer to Series 3' in R.C.D. Jasper, ed., *The Eucharist Today* (S.P.C.K., 1974), p. 146. The gospels themselves contain both the exalted literary Greek used by St. Luke, and the Septuagint, as well as the 'street-Greek' used by St. John. Early church worship included both the spontaneous prayers of the celebrant, and more exalted formal hymns, as found in John 1, Philippians 2, and Revelation.

9 Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

- 10 Michael Perham, 'The Language of Worship' in Perham, ed., *Towards Liturgy 2000* (S.P.C.K., 1989), p. 68.
- 11 Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 150. Quoted by her without reference to source.
- 12 Perham, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
- 13 Sheridan Gilley, 'Prayer Book Catholicism (2)' in *Faith and Worship* No. 26, November, 1989, pp. 14–15.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 15 Perham, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
- 16 The author can vouch for this statement from personal experience: his mother was one time Vice-President of Gallup's main competitor.
- 17 Roger Homan, 'Sociology and the Questionable Truth' in Martin and Mullen, ed., *No Alternative*, *op. cit.*, pp. 186–188. Newcastle recently completed a diocesan referendum on the popularity of the *B.C.P.* service vs. the *A.S.B.* 86% of the respondents were fairly regular worshippers, 61% preferred the *B.C.P.* Communion Service, though 93% were happy with a mixture of traditional and modern services. See A.G. Heppelston, 'Lay Attitudes to Liturgy' in *Faith and Worship* No. 27, Advent 1989, p. 22.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 188.