

THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER AND ITS DOMESTIC USE TODAY

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When I was completing my article on the domestic use of the Prayer Book in Georgian England for publication in the Lent 2020 edition of *Faith and Worship*, I could not have imagined the limitations we are now all living under in response to COVID-19. It has given new urgency to valuing the Prayer Book as a guide to personal and household devotion, at a time when its role in public worship is unavailable. For many of us, whose spirituality and faith has been profoundly shaped by the Prayer Book's familiar words and phrases, we can turn to it once again as a source of comfort and guidance in these disturbing times. Reflecting on how previous generations used the Prayer Book at home, and what we can learn from them today, these brief thoughts are offered as a companion piece to that earlier article.

Rhythm and Structure

The necessary self-isolation of these times can take from us the usual rhythms of each day and week that help bring structure to our lives. If we are not careful, the days can just merge together, disorientating us in the process. In response, the Prayer Book offers us a daily, weekly and seasonal rhythm of prayer that can help re-order our lives when life itself has become disordered.

The foundation is, of course, the daily rhythm of morning and evening prayer. 'Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee' George Herbert famously wrote. The Prayer Book commends to us the wisdom of this discipline. Reflecting the monastic, and particularly the Benedictine roots, of the Prayer Book's spirituality, this daily rhythm is less something the Prayer Book obliges us to keep going, but rather a pattern of prayer that keeps and holds us through each day as we face the uncertainties of life. It is a spiritual heartbeat that, through prayer, psalmody and engagement with scripture, helps to keep the soul alive. This is especially so at those times when we find it hard to pray and God seems distant. It is then that we can let the liturgy do its work of carrying us. When we don't even know where to begin, the Prayer Book makes a beginning for us.

The offices of morning and evening prayer are central to this, providing punctuation points at the start and close of every day. Morning Prayer invites us to commend the coming day to God. Its opening canticle, the Venite, in bidding us to 'sing unto the Lord' encourages us to offer the whole day and 'all our doings' in it, as an act of worship. By contrast, Evening Prayer is an opportunity to reflect on the day as it draws to a close, noticing those things we should give thanks for and seeking God's forgiveness for anything that has been amiss. Not least, both offices, through prayer, canticles and creed, reaffirm God's unfolding plan for the world's salvation. As the *Te Deum* in Morning Prayer affirms God's glory and the majesty of the risen Christ, so the evening's Magnificat speaks of the lowly being raised up and the proud being scattered. They place our story within that larger story of grace, reconciliation and hope for a world renewed.

Building on this daily pattern, the Prayer Book then provides a pattern for each week. Sunday is, of course, its high point, but Wednesday and Friday are also to be kept as special days of prayer. As every Sunday is a celebration of Christ's resurrection, so every Friday is a commemoration of the crucifixion. The Prayer Book directs that the Litany be used on all these days, and this great prayer is itself a wonderful devotional

aid in holding up the needs of the world before God. In this way each week is given its own internal structure, one that helps us heed Herbert's words to worship God 'seven whole days, not one in seven'.

Beyond this weekly pattern unfolds the richness of the liturgical year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Ascension, Whitsun, and Trinity. It is characteristic of the Prayer Book that it directs us to keep Sundays *in* Advent and Lent and the Mondays and Tuesdays *in* Easter Week and Whitsun Week, but that all other Sundays are identified by being either 'after' or 'before' the principal holy day to which they relate (for example 'the sixteenth Sunday after Trinity'). This pattern also applies to the days before Easter, save for Good Friday which stands apart from all other days: it is, as it were, the day when time itself stands still at the foot of the cross. This has the effect of gently enhancing and modulating our awareness of the movement of time. We are in Advent, Lent, Easter Week or Whitsun Week, but for the rest of the liturgical year we are either consciously moving from or towards the next major holy day, or, in the wonderfully named Sundays of Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima, towards both Lent and Easter. In this way we are encouraged not to focus on the present moment alone, but instead to see today in relation to past and future, before and after. In ordering each day, week and season in this way, the rhythms of the Prayer Book are subtly carrying us forward through time, just as the beats and bars in music allow individual notes and chords to become a flowing melody. They help our souls to sing.

Crucially, these rhythms are shared rhythms. To state the obvious, the Prayer Book is concerned with enabling common prayer. It provides a pattern of devotion we hold in common with others. Building on this idea, F. D. Maurice, in his classic mid-nineteenth century commentary on the Prayer Book, observed that it lifts us out of our isolation and reminds us that we are part of a community. That insight has particular power and challenge when we are required to be physically isolated from each other. Maurice notes that again and again the Prayer Book invites us to pray as a family: 'O Lord open thou *our* lips... And *our* mouth shall show forth thy praise'. We may be physically separate, but we are spiritually one in Christ. 'O God make speed to save *us*. O Lord make haste to help *us*'. As I sit alone saying the daily office, the Prayer Book insists I still use the language of a community at prayer. We are one with our brother and sister Christians of every age. We echo their devotions as they echo ours. And together our worship is lifted up with that of the angels, archangels and all the company of heaven. In isolation, I may struggle to glimpse that greater vision, but the Prayer Book will not allow me to let it go. Its language holds us in this universal offering of worship just as it holds our days in a unifying rhythm.

Much is being written at the moment about the importance of having a regular routine, of establishing boundaries between work and rest, and how all of these things can contribute to our mental, physical and emotional well-being. The rhythms of prayer and reflection offered by the Prayer Book sit well with these wider considerations. Having regular times for prayer, whether each day or each week, creates a spiritual structure for our lives that can both complement and reinforce our other routines. Other practices, such as having a usual place we go to in our house to pray, or keeping a candle lit during our time of prayer, can strengthen this further. The Prayer Book itself makes much of having an 'accustomed place' for prayer in relation to public worship, and the same holds true for domestic devotion too. Together they can help reinforce our rhythm of prayer and the structure it brings to our days.

Adaptation

So much for the pattern and rhythms of devotion that the Prayer Book offers us. What then of content?

The wisdom of previous generations was that, in the domestic setting, the Prayer Book should be used creatively. Across the generations, Anglican spiritual writers as diverse as Jeremy Taylor, Susanna Hopton, Robert Nelson, Robert Raikes and Charles Simeon commended the faithful adaptation of Prayer Book texts for personal use. This can happen in a number of ways. We may choose to use the Prayer Book offices largely as written. If we are using them each day, then we might wish to take advantage, through each week, of the variety of canticles provided rather than always using the *Te Deum* and *Benedictus* in the morning and the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* in the evening. On Sunday, we may want to pray through the first part of the Communion service, traditionally referred to as *Ante Communion*, finishing with the prayer for the Church Militant. On Wednesdays and Fridays we might turn to the Litany.

But in personal devotion we may, following established Anglican practice, also break away from the regular order of the liturgy. We can, for example, opt for something simpler. There is ample evidence of earlier generations beginning their personal and household prayers with the opening responses used at morning and evening prayer, followed by a psalm, a Bible reading selected from those appointed for the day (as set out in the introductory material to the Prayer Book), and concluding with a selection of collects, the Lord's Prayer and the grace. We may decide to use the prayer 'for all sorts and conditions of men' in the morning and the General Thanksgiving in the evening. If we do, we may want to take advantage of the directions contained in the Prayer Book that the offering of special petitions and thanksgiving can preface these prayers, thereby giving them a more personal character. If a canticle is included within a simple structure, a form of morning prayer may follow a weekly cycle beginning with the *Gloria* on Sunday, and then the *Venite* on Monday, with the *Te Deum*, *Benedicite*, *Benedictus*, *Jubilate* and perhaps psalm 150 on subsequent days. A similar pattern can be used for evening prayers.

In this way the Prayer Book becomes a lively source of material, offering us patterns and prayers from which to shape our own devotions. Historically, this approach readily embraced the use and adaptation of texts which, in public worship, were assigned to the priest or minister alone. For example, many sections of the Communion service, including the *Comfortable Words* and the post-Communion prayers of oblation and thanksgiving, may, in personal devotion, be used by anyone. A careful change of words or phrasing will sometimes be required to enable such prayers to make sense when we pray them in the context of our personal devotions at home. The collects for each Sunday and holy day are a particularly rich resource in this regard, as are the sequence of prayers placed at the very end of the order for Holy Communion for use when the sacrament is not celebrated. These and other prayers can be lifted from their usual context in public worship and be used at any appropriate time. A good exercise is to go through the Prayer Book, copying out those prayers that particularly resonate for us. These can then form the basis for creating our own spiritual companion. We might use them to form our own weekly cycle of prayer, allocating certain prayers for certain days. The first collect for Good Friday, for example, might be used every Friday, while verses selected from the Easter Anthems might be used every Sunday.

The Prayer Book also encourages us to regularly reflect on Scripture as an integral part of our daily devotions. Its introductory material 'concerning the service of the church' explicitly urges that the clergy should not only read Scripture but give themselves to 'meditation in God's word'. There is no reason to see this as simply a clerical practice. It is for everyone to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest Scripture. Once again, this emphasis reflects the Prayer Book's roots in Benedictine spirituality, deliberately echoing the monastic practice of 'meditatio'. This involves taking a particular phrase from, for example, the psalms, and prayerfully repeating it, either saying the phrase aloud or silently in our hearts. The intention is to let the phrase draw our thoughts and awareness away from ourselves and towards deeper attentiveness to God. If the practice is unfamiliar, then finding a favourite psalm and selecting a phrase from it to meditate on can be helpful here. As a beginning, the phrase may be repeated slowly and reflectively for the space of a few minutes and then a time of silence kept, perhaps at the conclusion of morning or evening prayer, before finishing with the grace. An alternative is to use brief portions of the liturgy itself (themselves frequently derived directly from Scripture). For example words taken from the set of response in the Confirmation service might be used: 'Our help is in the name of the Lord, who hath made heaven and earth' or 'Lord, hear our prayers and let our cry come unto thee'. Verses quoted in other services point us directly to central truths of Scripture. Thus the burial service begins by going straight to the Gospel of John and the words of Jesus: 'I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord'. Examples like this are a rich source for prayerful reflection and meditation.

In all this, the domestic tradition of Prayer Book devotion adopts both a pragmatic and creative approach to personal and household prayer. Not everyone will find a daily pattern of prayer comes naturally. For most of us it is a habit that needs to be worked at. Better to begin with a very simple pattern, such as selecting just one or two familiar prayers to say each day, than to try something more extensive and find it difficult to sustain. Many will find the twin Prayer-Book principles of personal discipline and personal discretion to be good and helpful reference points in constructing their own daily or weekly cycle of prayer. There needs to be sufficient structure and content to our prayer to give it weight, but sufficient freedom to allow for personal needs and circumstances. At its best, the domestic use of the Prayer Book combines both these things into a life-giving pattern of both personal and household devotion.

Solace and Comfort

In using the Prayer Book in creative ways, we need to be aware of those parts which can be more difficult for us to engage with. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were times when the fragility of life due to disease was very much part of daily experience. The office for the visitation of the sick and the prayers to be used in times of pestilence and sickness reflect that reality. They also promote a theology of sickness as a sign of God's wrath that jars both with contemporary scientific understandings of disease and how we would now want to respond pastorally to the ill, the dying and the bereaved. In the spirit of adaptation, we need to sift this material carefully. When we do, we will find it still yields prayers of great beauty and comfort. For example the sequence of prayers in the Visitation of the Sick that begins with 'O Saviour of the world' and ends with 'A Prayer for a sick Child' can be adapted (using 'us' and 'our' rather than 'this child' or 'his') to make a powerful intercession for our current times.

Similarly the rubrics that conclude the order for the Communion of the Sick are now enjoying much fresh attention because of their teaching about spiritual communion.

They assure us that if anyone cannot physically receive the Sacrament yet 'if he do truly repent him of his sins, and steadfastly believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the Cross for him, and shed his blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefore, he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth.' Here is ancient pastoral and theological wisdom which speaks powerfully to our own times. The Prayer Book Society has helpfully made an order for spiritual communion available on its own website.

The contemporary relevance of this wisdom is to be found in other aspects of the Prayer Book's provision. I suggested earlier that one of the benefits of the Prayer Book is that it offers us a structure for prayer that we can turn to when we hardly know where to begin ourselves. As I have argued, there is plenty of opportunity for creativity in the domestic use of the Prayer Book. But there will also be times in our spiritual lives when such creativity is too much. Often criticised for its lack of variety and choice in daily worship, it is when we find prayer most difficult that we might discover again the hidden wisdom of the Prayer Book in its emphasis on simplicity, providing rules that are 'few in number, so they are plain and easy to be understood'. When we do not know where to begin in prayer, the Prayer Book does not require us to navigate a set of choices and texts and possible variations. It does not expect us to plan our route through the liturgy, mapping a pathway through the alternatives we are offered. Instead the Prayer Book invites us to be still, to come with our fears and hopes, and simply to begin at the beginning, letting the office lead us through. When we are not sure what words to utter, the prayers and the psalms can give voice to our fears, our longings and our thanksgivings. When life simply seems too much, the Prayer Book allows us to acknowledge our common frailty ('we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep') and then reminds us that we are the beloved of God who sent his son to be our Saviour ('so that, at the last, we may come to his eternal joy').

The solace the Prayer Book offers is not, therefore, the easy comfort of nostalgia. Rather it is the solace that comes through enabling us to acknowledge life in all its splendour and all its brokenness. The Prayer Book enables us to be 'real' - real about the human condition and real about the glory of God and his love for the world. The Prayer Book offers us solid food not merely milk. It invites us to engage in devotional hard work, not merely liturgical novelty. And that, in the end, is why its pattern of prayer and devotion can be transforming and sustaining in personal use as much as in public worship.

The Prayer Book is, to quote an eighteenth-century writer, a 'treasure of devotion'. Of course it stands as one amongst many different sources of prayer and worship. But for those attuned to its rhythms and patterns, it offers a sustaining spirituality equal to the demands of these deeply uncertain and unsettling times. We can turn to it again as a rich source for personal and household prayers as, in the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, we lift both our hearts, and the needs of the world, to God.

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