

What does the Book of Common Prayer have to do with the Coronation?

by Iain Milne (a trustee of the Prayer Book Society)

Across its familiar services, the Book of Common Prayer teaches us the profound importance of prayer for the sovereign - for the sake of the bodily and spiritual health of the King himself, of the Church of which he is Governor, and of his kingdoms and their people. The coronation rite has never been formally included in the BCP. However, its history and message is much more closely bound up with the BCP than this might suggest.

The coronation service of medieval English kings retained a core traceable back to the pre-Conquest rulers of the House of Wessex. The *Liber Regalis*, a 14th Century volume still held by the Chapter of Westminster, records how these elements were intended to be enacted at a high medieval English coronation. This beautiful manuscript continued in practical use well after most other public Latin liturgy had been set aside outside of college chapels. The details of the coronations of Henry VIII's children are complicated and in some respects uncertain, but it is believed that the service was first held primarily in English for the 1603 coronation of James VI of Scots as James I of England.

It was not inevitable that the coronation rite and its Anglo-Saxon era symbols and prayers should survive the Reformation. Its retention was possible because the Prayer Book established the English protestant tradition as one which distilled down but fundamentally retained that which was most essential in its medieval inheritance, and also strongly encouraged prayer for the monarch, the Church, and the wider community. James and his religious counsellors could have tried to change direction, but by choosing to approach the service in the Prayer Book's spirit they laid the foundations of abiding precedent. Scottish kings were also anointed with the oil of godly wisdom from the 14th Century and James had not only been anointed as King of Scots as an infant (by John Knox) but had insisted on his wife Anne's anointing and coronation in 1590. When James came south, he brought with him ideas about Christian monarchy which were compatible with both English Prayer Book and coronation ideas.

Whereas the chief authors of the texts found in the BCP are known – principally, Thomas Cranmer, and Miles Coverdale - it is not known with certainty who was involved in preparing the order of service in 1603 and, in particular, translating key elements of the *Liber Regalis*. However, it seems very likely that they included many of those who were involved in the Hampton Court Conference, the 1604 Prayer Book, and the preparation of the Authorized (King James) Bible. Lancelot Andrewes, who was Dean of Westminster, is very likely to have been involved. Because its changes were not radical, the 1604 BCP is often forgotten. However, its very confidence in the value of Elizabethan worshipping conservatism was crucial to shaping the terms of debate which led ultimately to the Church of England adopting and maintaining the 1662 BCP.

Subsequent revisers of the coronation service were also committed to the Prayer Book liturgical and linguistic tradition. King James's son (Charles I) and grandson (James VII/II) both had, in William Laud and William Sancroft, Archbishops who played an important role in maintaining and shaping both the coronation service and the Prayer Book, whilst the most substantial further changes until the modern era were instigated by Henry Compton, Bishop of London, who strengthened the conventional centrality of the Prayer Book in the coronation of William III and Mary II. Their coronation was preceded by Choral Matins, as nothing could more illustrate the Dutch Calvinist King's commitment to the established religion of England than an extra public dose of the BCP.

Since that time, the coronation has been firmly established as a service in the Prayer Book tradition. There are many elements of the worshipping culture of the Prayer Book which have been fixed features of coronations and deserve more attention than space permits – such as the idiom, the theological ideas of

the prayers, and the emphasis on psalmody. But it is seen most strongly in the large quantity of wording in coronation services taken directly from the BCP. These words prevent a ceremony which could have declined into national pomp and dynastic pageantry from forgetting its context in a wider Church touching all levels of society, and orient the coronation as a service honouring and glorifying the King of Kings and seeking his mercy and blessing in a manner rooted sincerely in biblical precedent.

Until the early 20th Century, after the introit came the entirety of the BCP Litany. This was curtailed first due to Edward VII's appendicitis. However, the Litany survived – as the 1953 order of service stated, "*The LITANY shall be sung as the Dean and Prebendaries and the choir of Westminster proceed from the Altar to the west door of the Church*". With its prayers for King, Church, nation, and all mankind, it would be very fitting if the Litany was used in the days and hours preceding the coronation not only as a preface to the coronation proper at the Abbey but in ordinary parish churches and prayerful homes.

The introit, always taken from psalm 122 – "*I was glad*" – has not always consisted of the same words, but they have always been taken from the Coverdale translation. The epistle (1 Peter 2.11) and the Gospel (Matthew 22.15) have, on the other hand, always been taken from the King James translation. In this, the coronation exactly follows the pattern set by the Prayer Book's 1662 revisers. Widespread familiarity with Coverdale's psalm translation and scriptural words read every year in the BCP Sunday communion lectionary reinforced the understanding that the spiritual health of kings and queens and of nations is of the same stuff as the daily bread of the country's parish churches. Each coronation, some listeners will have heard with Peter's words the sound of sermons from the third Sunday after Easter, and others will have heard with Matthew's the collect for the 23rd Sunday after Trinity: "*be ready, we beseech thee, to hear the devout prayers of thy Church*".

After the Litany, introit, and requisite political oaths, comes BCP Holy Communion. The service is set with coronation ceremonies like a crown set with precious stones. It has been used at every coronation since 1603 except that of the Roman Catholic James VII and II. From the collect for purity (reminding us and especially the sovereign of the need to approach the awesome mysteries of the Lord who sees all with a clean heart, ready to receive in obedience), through to the words of offering, consecration, and thanksgiving shared with the humblest parishioners in the land, only two gentle abbreviations were introduced at George V's coronation in 1911 – the opening preparatory Lord's Prayer was assumed already said, and the *kyrie eleison* - in the English of the BCP offices - replaced the Ten Commandments.

Additionally, we have two hymns of the Christian church retained in honoured use by the BCP. Firstly, the *Veni Creator Spiritus* – "*Come Holy Ghost*" – has always been sung at the beginning of the Anointing just as it is appointed in the Prayer Book for all ordinations and consecrations of bishops, priests, and deacons. The parallel between dedicated, sacral lives marked out by a community for a sacred office is clearly intentional (as also seen in the traditional garments in which the monarch is dressed during the service). Secondly, whilst its location has moved, the *Te Deum* has always featured in the coronation and for four centuries this has been in the translation used in Morning Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer. Since the emergency changes made for Edward VII, it has been found fitting to place this hymn of praise and acknowledgement of lordship at the conclusion of the service.

Unlike medieval coronations, held on prominent holy days, this year's coronation date, May 6th, seems to have been chosen primarily for practical reasons as the best day to proclaim this good news to the world. But the Prayer Book did retain, against much pressure to the contrary, a Christian calendar bearing witness to the history of the Church and lives of her saints. In the BCP, May 6th is honourably marked *St John ante Portam Latinam*. St John's faithfulness in a world of spiritual darkness and his marvellous deliverance at the Latin Gate can speak to our times. And romantically, given His Majesty's known affection for the Eastern

Orthodox tradition, in the Julian calendar still used by some Orthodox Christians, it will be April 23rd – which for them, as it is marked in the Prayer Book, is St George’s Day.

At the time of writing, it remains to be seen how faithfully BCP in spirit will be the coronation allotted our King. However, given the service’s roots, the influence of the Prayer Book – and through it, the sincere love of God’s holy word and all that flows from it – will doubtlessly be felt. In individual and corporate prayer, through greater and more confident use of the Litany, by Bible reading and reflection on kingship, responsibility, and the religious commitment of nations, and by participation in the thanksgiving and honour due to God, and in myriad other ways, it can and should shape the Church’s prayer at this significant time. The Prayer Book has assuredly not lost its power to honour God and to set a Christian light before any English speaker. Let us confidently use the good salt of the Prayer Book in this coronation year to inspire Christians to love and serve their Lord and their neighbour as we are commanded by “*the only ruler of Princes*”, that reigns in Heaven for evermore.