

Homily for the First Book of Common Prayer, 1549

June 4, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Acts 2:38–42; Psalm 96:1–9; John 4:21–24**

Today we commemorate the institution of the first *Book of Common Prayer*. It came into use on the feast of Pentecost, June 9, 1549. Edward VI was king. He was ten-years old. A regency council was in charge of his kingdom. Thomas Cranmer was archbishop of Canterbury. And it is largely to Thomas Cranmer, whose study and knowledge, along with his gifts as a translator, that we have a Prayer Book tradition that has stood the test of time. The history and theology of Anglicans is still defined by its Prayer Books.

Our four American books have all reprinted without alteration the preface adopted in October 1789 for the first American book. These words are near the end of this preface, “It seems unnecessary to enumerate all the different alterations and amendments. They will appear, and it is to be hoped, the reasons of them also, upon a comparison of this with the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England. In which it will also appear that this Church is far from intending to depart from the Church of England in any essential point of

doctrine, discipline, or worship; or further than local circumstances require.”¹

The greatest credit for the first Prayer Book goes to the first bishop of Pennsylvania, William White, whose ecclesiastical temperament was broad and his personality gentle.²

I want to speak briefly about two of the principles of the English Reformation that still shape the lives of Anglican Christians. These words are from one of the most important of our church’s historical documents, The Articles of Religion—our American version was adapted from those of the Church of England. This is the beginning of Article VI with its title, “The Sufficiency of Holy Scripture for Salvation.” It begins, “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”³

The other is Article XXIV. Its title, “XXIV. Of Speaking in the Congregation in such a Tongue as the

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 11.

² *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006), 306.

³ *Ibid.*, 868.

people understandeth.” Its text is short and to the point. It begins, “It is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the Primitive Church, to have public Prayer in the Church, or to minister the Sacraments, in a tongue not understood of the people.”⁴

The 1549 book appointed the Old Testament and the Apocrypha to be read through once a year. January 1, called until 1979, the Feast of the Circumcision, had its own lessons. On January 2 in the morning Genesis 1 was read, Genesis 2 at Evening Prayer. The New Testament was read three times in the course of a year. The gospels and Acts in the morning, and the epistles at Evening Prayer. So, on January 2, Matthew 1 was read in the morning, Romans 1 was read at Evening Prayer. With regard to the Old Testament, the 1549 book stated, “certain books and chapters, which be least edifying, and might best be spared, and therefore are left unread” The one exception to the rule about reading the New Testament is that only three chapters of the Revelation to John were appointed, two on the feast of Saint John the Evangelist, one on All Saint’s Day.

⁴ Ibid., 872.

One of the gifts of our lectionary project is the permission to include more, not less of the Bible, at Daily Morning and Evening Prayer. One example, if you only attended the Eucharist daily, as some Anglicans and many Roman Catholics do, you would never hear the biblical account of the death of David and his last words to his son Solomon. You would hear them here at the Daily Office and you would know that David's last words to his heir were instructions about who had to die for Solomon to secure his throne. Since our weekday Eucharistic lectionary is essentially that of the Roman Catholics, I have something to say about that transition because of how we pray the Daily Office.

Prayer Books are never perfect. The Articles of Religion are not perfect. On the whole, I think it is right to say our Prayer Books reflect and encourage a generous and honest Christian spirit. What is necessary for salvation in Matthew is different from what is necessary in John. We don't attempt to resolve all the contradictions we read in Scripture or the contradictions of how Christians have managed to fight over who can be at the table of the Lord since the days of Paul and Peter.⁵ I try very hard to be as truthful as I can be about what I think I know and

⁵ Galatians 2:11–16.

what I may need to learn. Our Prayer Book tradition invites us to continue to grow up to the full measure in Christ.

I close with a classic Prayer Book collect in its traditional form. The word “love” replaces the word “charity” in contemporary English.

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth; Send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee. Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ’s sake.

*Amen.*⁶

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁶ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 164–5.