

# TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

## The Book of Common Prayer

**I**T MAY AT FIRST APPEAR STRANGE to suggest that a liturgical text like the Church of England's 1662 *Book of common prayer* is in fact, and was intended to be, as much a manual of spiritual guidance as a directory of public services. Certainly few modern liturgical volumes would make any such claim, least of all the same Church's 1980 *Alternative service book*. But the difference in title between the two books is instructive. *The book of common prayer* is what its name suggests; and its concern is not simply, or even primarily, with the provision of standard and uniform rites for the Church's public liturgy, but also with the spiritual needs of the whole people of God. It is, in short, a manual of lay spirituality designed to address the needs and conditions of seventeenth-century English Christians. Martin Thornton has written:

To the seventeenth-century layman the Prayer Book was not a shiny volume to be borrowed from a shelf on entering the church and carefully replaced on leaving. It was a beloved and battered personal possession, a lifelong companion and guide, to be carried from church to kitchen, to living room, to bedside table. It was a symbol of the domestic emphasis, providing spiritual stimulus, moral guidance, meditative material and family prayer.<sup>1</sup>

Thornton may overstate his case somewhat. But the underlying point he makes is a vital one: that, in an age of virtually unprecedented religious upheaval and uncertainty, the 1662 *Book of common prayer* offered (and was intended to offer) a source of spiritual guidance for lay Christians. Behind this guidance lay a pattern of spirituality concerned to integrate the secular and the sacred, in both their corporate and personal dimensions. It is the purpose of this article to explore briefly both the nature of that spiritual guidance and the spirituality which animated it.

At first sight the Preface of the 1662 Book might suggest a narrower aim than is being argued here:

Our general aim . . . in this undertaking was, not to gratify this or that party in any [sic] their unreasonable demands; but to do that which to our best understandings we conceived might most tend to the preservation of peace and unity in the Church; the

procuring of reverence, and exciting of piety and devotion in the publick worship of God . . .<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the words of the ‘Act for the Uniformity of Common Prayer’ (which dates from the reign of Elizabeth I but was included in the first edition of the 1662 Book) might appear to evoke the world of intolerant bigotry rather than of spiritual guidance:

if any person or persons whatsoever after the said feast of the nativity of Saint John Baptist next coming shall in any Interludes, Plays, Songs, Rimes or by other open words declare or speak any thing in the derogation, depriving or despising of the same book . . . that then every such person, being thereof lawfully convicted . . . shall forfeit to the Queen our Sovereign Lady, her heirs, and successors for the first offence an hundred marks . . .<sup>3</sup>

First impressions here, however, are deceptive. The 1662 reformers were well aware that ‘the preservation of peace and unity’, let alone ‘the exciting of piety and devotion’, was impossible without the production of a book that would be genuinely accessible in terms both of its language and of its concerns. And the apparently humourless severity of the Act reflects more than the perceived need for order and structure after so much upheaval: it also reflects the overriding concern of the book’s compilers to allay Puritan suspicions of ‘set forms’ of worship and prayer, not simply by legal means but by spiritual ones—in other words, to provide a manual of ‘common prayer’ so universally known and used that it became an integral part of daily life.

The first characteristics of the spirituality of the 1662 Prayer Book, then, were an emphasis on simplicity and accessibility. The Preface makes this clear: alterations from earlier versions were intended to be expressed ‘in terms more suitable to the language of the present time’<sup>4</sup> —no false archaizing was at work here. In the section entitled ‘Of Ceremonies’, originally in the 1549 Prayer Book, we read:

And besides this, Christ’s Gospel is not a ceremonial law, (as much of Moses’ law was) but it is a Religion to serve God, not in bondage of the figure or shadow, but in the freedom of the Spirit; being content only with those ceremonies which do serve to a decent order and godly discipline, and such as be apt to stir up the dull mind of man to the remembrance of his duty to God . . .<sup>5</sup>

In part, this concern for simplicity was a reaction against the excessive complexity of earlier liturgical texts. The 1662 Preface observes that

the number and hardness of the rules called the *Pie*, and the manifold changings of the service, was the cause, that to turn the book only was so hard and intricate a matter, that many times there was more business to find out what should be read, than to read it when it was found out.<sup>6</sup>

It also reflected, however, a concern to produce a book whose language was accessible to everyone:

It [the Prayer Book] is not only all in English, but in common and plain English, such as we use in our common Discourse with one another . . . So that the meanest person in the Congregation that understands but his Mother Tongue, may be Edified by it, as well as the greatest Scholar.<sup>7</sup>

Whether ‘the meanest person’ really did feel at home with the kind of massive theological density that periodically afflicts the Prayer Book’s contents, or made use of such phrases as ‘a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction’ in his or her common discourse is perhaps open to question. But the underlying concern with simplicity and accessibility is undeniable. In some respects it is best illustrated by the evident preference of the Prayer Book compilers for imaginative, rather than invariably conceptual, language in liturgy, a preference which many modern writers of liturgy would do well to copy. ‘We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep’ is both more vivid and more accessible even in a predominantly urban culture than ‘We have sinned . . . through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault’, which appears in its modern Anglican equivalent.

A further feature of the Prayer Book’s spirituality is its contextual concern: despite the fact that much of what it contains is taken from earlier sources, both Catholic and Anglican, the 1662 Book reflects pervasively the context and culture to which it is addressed. The Preface makes this clear:

And in these our doings we condemn no other Nations, nor prescribe any thing but to our own people only. For we think it convenient that every country should use such ceremonies as they shall think best to the setting forth of God’s honour and glory, and to the reducing of the people to a most perfect and godly living, without error or superstition . . .<sup>8</sup>

It is this cultural specificity which points to the central feature of the book’s spirituality: its concern to integrate both the sacred with the secular and private faith with public worship. Each of these is worth exploring

further before we reflect specifically on the nature of the book's spiritual guidance.

The importance attached by the compilers of the 1662 Book to integrating the sacred with the secular, the religious with the everyday, is constantly apparent. The Lectionary, though largely that of Cranmer in 1549 (which itself was massively influenced by Quignon's revision of the Breviary in 1535) almost entirely follows the civil year, with minimal alterations for major feasts. The result is a clear preference for simplicity and continuity rather than for seasonal or other variety. The choice of saints was also significantly influenced by secular considerations: St Crispin (25 October), for example, appears partly because he was the patron saint of the guild of shoemakers, whose members might not have been amused at his exclusion, and perhaps also because the Battle of Agincourt was fought on that day.<sup>9</sup> This preference for secular concerns over theological or liturgical sensitivity was not, perhaps, an unmixed blessing; and not everyone today will find congenial the provision of a special service for November 5, 'being the day of the Papists' conspiracy'.<sup>10</sup> Yet the book's concern with secular issues was not just another case of Christianity being smothered in easy jingoism: though this is certainly evident, notably in the 'Forms of Prayer to be Used at Sea', it is much less so than in many later liturgies, notably those associated with the First World War.<sup>11</sup>

There are other, more positive, aspects of this concern to interrelate religion and secular life. The provision of prayers and thanksgivings for specific occasions is noteworthy both in order and in subject matter. The prayers provided are (in this order) for rain, for fair weather, in time of dearth and famine, in time of war and tumults, in time of any common plague or sickness, for those to be ordained, for Parliament, and 'for all sorts and conditions of men'. The order of thanksgivings is broadly similar: for rain, for fair weather, for plenty, for peace and deliverance from our enemies, for restoring public peace at home, and for deliverance from plague 'or other common Sickness'. This is not particularly original: the subject matter of the prayers, though not the prayers themselves, can be found in the Sarum Missal.<sup>12</sup> But a comparison with similar prayers in the 1980 *Alternative service book* is again instructive: in the later book the subject index of prayers is dominated by the Church's life and concerns, where the priorities of the 1662 compilers are determined, refreshingly, by the needs of the wider community. The theology of the prayers themselves may make us uneasy today; and certainly many of them appear to be sullied by the crude interlinking of suffering with sin, or of prosperity with godliness, which is to be found in many of the Psalms. But the underlying emphasis on relating the sacred to the secular is undeniable; and few modern service or prayer books compare in this regard.

There are several other examples of the same basic principle at work. The Commination service, though again likely to give rise to some disquiet among twentieth-century Christians, also reflects this thorough-going concern to address the lives and needs of community and people as a whole. Its purpose is to move people to 'earnest and true repentance', so that they 'may walk more warily in these dangerous days'.<sup>13</sup> The series of solemn curses which it contains goes well beyond the narrowly religious: it begins with those who worship molten images and ends with those who are unmerciful, fornicators, adulterers, and so on. But the list also contains denunciations of 'those who lead the blind astray', 'those who pervert the judgment of the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow', and 'those who smite their neighbours secretly'. It is of course possible to detect here a whiff of that hypocritical humbug whose uglier manifestations included the wholesale denunciation of any whose lifestyle or beliefs did not suit the prevailing temper of the religious establishment. But it is nonetheless hard to deny that the Commination service did at least serve to remind people both of the essential destructiveness of social and corporate sin, and of the equally essential relationship between public worship and private morality. Many modern equivalents, at once more anodyne and more churchy, may have something to learn from it.

The integration of the religious with the everyday, then, forms an essential ingredient of the 1662 Prayer Book's spirituality. It is complemented by an equal, though more implicit, concern to relate faith to worship, theology to spirituality. Bishop Jeremy Taylor, one of the book's stoutest episcopal advocates, makes this point eloquently:

Public forms of prayer are great advantages to convey an article of faith into the most secret retirements of the spirit, and to establish it with a most firm persuasion and endear it to us with the greatest affection . . .<sup>14</sup>

And in a sermon preached in defence of the Prayer Book in 1681, Bishop Beveridge points out to his hearers that the book contains everything Christians ought to *believe*—the most important scriptural texts, the Psalms, and the historic Creeds; everything they ought to *do*—all the duties of the Christian, and all that the Christian should avoid; and everything for which they ought to *ask* or pray.<sup>15</sup> Nowhere, as Beveridge goes on to say, is this made clearer than in the provisions for Morning and Evening Prayer: 'Let us . . . suppose a Congregation of sober, devout Christians (such as we all should be) met together to perform their Publick Devotions to Almighty God . . .'<sup>16</sup> He continues, like many other early exponents of the Prayer Book, with a detailed commentary on the offices themselves. And it is here, perhaps, that the distinctive nature of the book as a manual of lay spirituality is most apparent. The

Prayer Book stipulates that the daily offices must be said in church (i.e. not in the choir, as in medieval times), and that they are to be said in the English tongue, or any other vernacular. ('Yet it is not meant, but that when men say Morning and Evening Prayer privately, they may say the same in any Language that they themselves do understand.')<sup>17</sup> A bell is to be rung beforehand, in the hope that the people would come to hear God's Word and to pray *with* the priest, rather than simply being aware of him praying for them.<sup>18</sup>

It is of course difficult to know how far the pattern of daily common prayer envisaged by the Prayer Book in fact prevailed in seventeenth-century England, just as it is hard to know whether 'all fathers, mothers, masters, and dames' really did 'cause their children, servants, and prentices . . . to come to the church at the time appointed' for instruction in the Catechism by the curate, as the Prayer Book prescribed. But the intention at least is clear: to make available to 'all sorts and conditions of men' an integrated pattern of Christian living, where faith and daily prayer, corporate worship and secular life at both community and national level are brought together, each informing the other. The daily offices perhaps articulate this best: the verbosity and lack of seasonal variety are compensated for by a solid scriptural simplicity and a careful attentiveness to both personal and corporate concerns. The invitation to confession explains with exemplary clarity the purpose of daily common prayer for the Christian:

to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at [God's] hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy Word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well as for the body as for the soul.

It is against this background that the nature of the Prayer Book's approach to spiritual guidance needs to be seen. The service of Holy Communion includes an Exhortation which was to be read on the previous Sunday, and which stresses the need for personal preparation:

And because it is requisite, that no man should come to the holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet Conscience; therefore if there be any of you, who by this means cannot quiet his own Conscience herein, but requireth further Comfort or Counsel, let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned Minister of God's word, and open his grief; that by the Ministry of God's holy word he may receive the benefit of Absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of his Conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness.<sup>19</sup>

In his study of spiritual guidance and sacramental confession within the Anglican tradition, Edward Pusey made much of this important text, commenting that ‘Direction, rightly understood, is only “ghostly counsel and advice” become habitual’,<sup>20</sup> and is in no sense a removal of personal responsibility.

It is clear that this ‘ghostly counsel and advice’ need not be restricted to the narrowly religious. In the Visitation of the Sick, the minister is instructed to encourage people to make a will, and preferably not to leave this until they fall ill:

And if he [the sick person] hath not before disposed of his goods, let him then be admonished to make his Will, and to declare his Debts, . . . for the better discharging of his conscience, and the quietness of his Executors. But men should often be put in remembrance to take order for the settling of their temporal estates, whilst they are in health.<sup>21</sup>

This is followed by a further rubric in which the minister is required earnestly to encourage the sick person to give generously to the poor. Provision is then made for private confession and priestly absolution; and the Visitation ends with a prayer ‘for persons troubled in Mind or in Conscience’ which reflects a profound pastoral sensitivity:

But O merciful God . . . , give him a right understanding of himself, and of thy threats, and promises, That he may neither cast away his confidence in thee, nor place it any where but in thee. Give him strength against all his Temptations, and heal all his distempers. Break not the bruised Reed, nor quench the smoking Flax. Shut not up thy tender mercies in displeasure, but make him to hear of joy, and gladness, that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice . . .<sup>22</sup>

Confession of sin is not only encouraged in times of sickness. The ‘Forms of Prayer to be Used at Sea’ encourages those facing imminent danger to reflect on their lives and to confess their sins;<sup>23</sup> and here too the prayers provided illustrate the Prayer Book’s capacity to articulate the inner ambiguities of human experience, and to lead people through them:

We confess, when we have been safe, and seen all things quiet about us, we have forgot thee our God, and refused to hearken to the still voice of thy word, and to obey thy commandments: But now we see, how terrible thou art in all thy works of wonder; the great God to be feared above all . . .<sup>24</sup>

But they also illustrate something else. There is one other significant aspect of the Prayer Book's spirituality not hitherto mentioned, an aspect which in turn powerfully reflects contemporary human experience: the reality of death. The first rubric in 'The Communion of the Sick' begins:

Forasmuch as all mortal men be subject to many sudden perils, diseases, and sicknesses, and ever uncertain what time they shall depart out of this life: therefore, to the intent they may be always in a readiness to die, whosoever it shall please Almighty God to call them; the Curates shall diligently from time to time (but especially in the time of pestilence, or other infectious sickness) exhort their parishioners to the often receiving of the holy Communion . . .<sup>25</sup>

'In the midst of life we are in death': the sentence prescribed during the Burial of the Dead underlines both the stark reality of death in seventeenth-century England and the concern of the Prayer Book to ensure that people never forgot it. That concern was not an unmixed blessing: unquestionably it helped to foster the dubious connection between suffering and sin to which we have already referred. But it also underlies the essential purpose of the Prayer Book's spiritual guidance, which was designed not to soothe the consciences of the rich, nor to lead the leisured on privatized spiritual journeys, but rather to encourage everyone to confront and ponder those awkward realities which religion so often homogenizes or plays down: the relationship of personal and public integrity, the corrosive power of sin, and the imminence or omnipresence of death. In turn this made of the Prayer Book not simply one long *memento mori* but rather an integrated guide to living in which every aspect both of human experience and of Christian faith had its place. Though writing before the 1662 Book was written, the great Anglican apologist Richard Hooker exactly caught the spirit both of the Elizabethan prayer books and of their seventeenth-century successor. Emphasizing the importance of observing both feast- and fast-days, as all the prayer books stress, he wrote:

Our life is a mixture of good with evil. When we are partakers of good things, we joy, neither can we but grieve at the contrary . . . And because as the memory of the one, though past, reneweth gladness; so the other, called again to mind, doth make the wound of our just remorse to bleed anew; which wound needeth often touching the more, for that we are generally more apt to Kalendar Saints, than sinners days; therefore there is in the Church a care, not to iterate the one alone, but to have frequent repetition of the other. Never to seek after God, saving only when either the Crib or the Whip doth constrain, were brutish servility . . .<sup>26</sup>

*Gordon Mursell*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'The Caroline divines and the Cambridge Platonists', in *The study of spirituality*, ed Jones, Wainwright and Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1986), p 435. See also Thornton, *English spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1963), esp. pp 258–70.

<sup>2</sup> *BCP* p 14. All quotations from *The book of common prayer* are taken from *The book of common prayer from the original manuscript*, ed Cornford (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1892). Spelling has been modernized but the original use of capital letters has been retained.

<sup>3</sup> *BCP* p 6.

<sup>4</sup> *BCP* p 14.

<sup>5</sup> *BCP* p 21.

<sup>6</sup> *BCP* pp 16–17.

<sup>7</sup> Beveridge, 'A Sermon Concerning the Excellency and Usefulness of The Common-Prayer' (London, 1681, printed 1687), p 12.

<sup>8</sup> *BCP* p 22.

<sup>9</sup> W. K. Lowther Clarke, 'The Calendar', in *Liturgy and worship: a companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion*, ed Lowther Clarke (London: SPCK, 1964), p 233; and Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV:iii.

<sup>10</sup> *BCP* p 30.

<sup>11</sup> Lowther Clarke, *op. cit.*, p 857.

<sup>12</sup> E. C. Ratcliff, 'The choir offices', in Lowther Clarke, *op. cit.*, p 277.

<sup>13</sup> *BCP* p 326.

<sup>14</sup> Jeremy Taylor, 'An Apology for Authorized and Set Forms of Liturgy', in *The whole works of the Right Rev Jeremy Taylor DD*, ed Eden, vol 5, (London: Longmans, 1853), pp 229–314.

<sup>15</sup> Beveridge, *op. cit.*, p 16.

<sup>16</sup> Beveridge, *op. cit.*, p 19.

<sup>17</sup> *BCP* p 19.

<sup>18</sup> Cf Ratcliff, *art. cit.*, p 279.

<sup>19</sup> *BCP* p 244.

<sup>20</sup> Preface to the Abbé Gaume: *Advice on hearing confession* (Oxford: Parker, 1878), p clxii.

<sup>21</sup> *BCP* p 307.

<sup>22</sup> *BCP* p 312.

<sup>23</sup> *BCP* p 499.

<sup>24</sup> *BCP* p 497.

<sup>25</sup> *BCP* p 313.

<sup>26</sup> *The laws of ecclesiastical polity*, Book V sect. 72.