

Book of Common Prayer (1662) Communion Service:

A short introduction

by

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We are about to celebrate Holy Communion in a form little, but significantly, changed since Cranmer produced his Second English Prayer book in 1552. I would like to offer in place of the homilies, which originally explained the service, some points which have been raised with me by Lutheran friends at various times.

The service derives from the Latin liturgy in widespread use in late medieval England, known as the Use of Sarum (Salisbury). At the start the priest says the Lord's Prayer alone. The people do not even say 'Amen.' Why? This is the end of the old service of preparation; and one of the reasons why we are not starting with a hymn today is because this traditional, quiet and reverent beginning can be quite magical, especially early in the morning, which is when this rite is mostly used today. The Prayer of Preparation is uniquely Anglican and reveals at once Cranmer's mastery of the 'sombre and lyrical cadences' (Duffy) of English prose, such as we will be hearing in the King James' version of the Epistle and Gospel.

The use of the Ten Commandments as a kind of fixed Old Testament lesson gives to the English liturgy a moral and didactic tone, which, again, is unique. It follows the biblical pattern, with a separate commandment against graven images, unlike the Lutheran forms, which follow the Roman use. The Ten Commandments are hardly ever used in full today, except on Ash Wednesday, but they have had a considerable outworking on the manners and morals of the nation. Their weekly acceptance by the people produced eventually a rather different attitude to the relationship between Law and Gospel from that of Lutheran theology and culture.

The Collect for the Sovereign reflects the fact that at the Reformation the temporal powers of the Papacy passed to the 'Godly Prince'. Otherwise, Collect, Epistle and Gospel are all traditional. The key to this part of the service, which appears to pick up speed after a slow start, is the omission of much music, the Gloria, the Kyries, 'Anthems, Responds, Invitatories, and such like things' (1552). Cranmer did, however, provide for the Creed, which is always the Nicene Creed, to be sung and followed by the sermon, completing a neat chronological order, Old Testament, Epistle, Gospel, Creed, Sermon: God's Word read, God's Word preached.

The Offertory Sentences, again, are unique. They reflect the biblicism of the English reformers, who, faced with the naturally conservative reactions of the people to changes in the liturgy, took every opportunity to claim biblical sanction for what they were doing. The offerings both of bread and wine and of alms are followed by an offering of prayer, noble in its scope and language, and exhibiting its reformed credentials in deliberately excluding the intercession of the saints and prayer with or for the departed, as someone has said, 'giving back the church to the living from the dead.' Purgatory had been abolished in England by Act of Parliament; and the abolition of chantries and of masses for the dead was probably the point at which ordinary folk really noticed the change. Modern revisions make sensible and more sensitive pastoral provision for the commemoration of the faithful departed now.

An equally revolutionary change was the abolition of individual confession before the reception of communion. People needed a great deal of reassurance on this point, hence the rather full forms of Invitation, General Confession, Absolution and especially the so-called Comfortable Words, which owe much to the *Pia Consultatio* of the great Lutheran Archbishop of Cologne, Hermann von Wied.

The service continues with the Preface, but without Hosanna or Benedictus, probably not for theological reasons but because Cranmer disliked elaborate musical settings, feeling that they obscured understanding of what was going on. The flow of the liturgy is interrupted by the Prayer of Humble Access, hated by liturgists and beloved by the people, who implicitly recognise that it gives the most perfect expression to the doctrines of justification by faith alone and of the real presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrament: ('...not trusting in our own righteousness but in thy

manifold and great mercies’ and ‘grant us so to eat (his) body and to drink his blood’). Note the importance of the little but weighty word ‘so’, Anglicanism complementing the Lutheran insistence on right believing (orthodoxy) with an emphasis on right behaving (orthopraxy) both during the service and afterwards and including detailed provision for the reverent disposal of the consecrated elements.

The Prayer of Consecration is a single sentence of unsurpassed beauty and precision, accompanied, again uniquely, by the acts of taking, thanking and breaking. It ends rather abruptly and is followed immediately by the reception of communion, liturgically incorrect but spiritually and psychologically very satisfying, as is the response to reception by saying the Lord’s Prayer. How can we respond to this solemn moment by faith alone other than in the words, which Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ himself gave us, saying, ‘Our Father...’?

In his first English Prayer Book of 1549, much influenced by Luther’s *Deutsche Messe*, Cranmer had used words of administration, beginning ‘The body of our Lord Jesus Christ’, ‘The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ’, which could be and indeed were used by opponents of the Reformation to imply the doctrine of transubstantiation. In 1552, in accordance with his own theological opinions, he replaced them with words suggesting that the sacrament was essentially a memorial and that Christ was present only to those who received by faith with thanksgiving. But that view, too, did not prevail; and from the time of Queen Elizabeth I the two sets of words have been put together, uniting, if not synthesizing, the insights of the German and the Swiss reformations. Note the phrase, ‘preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life’, which is different from but, again, complementary to the Lutheran emphasis on preservation in true doctrine.

Even Homer nods, and Cranmer made a mistake in offering a choice between a Prayer of Oblation, which should have come earlier, and the Prayer of Thanksgiving (also from Hermann von Wied), with its generous and ecumenical view of the church as ‘the blessed company of all faithful people’. Having given short shrift to the musical items, Cranmer took up his New Testament, read that it was ‘when they had sung a hymn’ that ‘they went out’, realised that he still had the Gloria in reserve and inserted it here. Not a good idea; and it has been put back at the beginning in recent revisions.

But he also realised that he had omitted the Peace, and, in a final stroke of genius, he inserted it into the Blessing, biblical from Philippians 4, 7, beautiful in the best spoken English of the day, indeed of any day, and profoundly benedictional.