

Dean Peter Howell-Jones' Sermon for the 32nd PBS Festival in Blackburn Cathedral, 13 May 2017.



I'd like to begin with a word of thanks for the invitation to be part of this service today and for the opportunity to preach at Blackburn's 32nd Annual Festival commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation.

After just seven weeks in post I have to say that I am still delighted to be here and even more delighted that a number of our services at Blackburn Cathedral still follow the pattern laid down in the Book of Common Prayer. The beauty of the language, the clarity in the rubrics and the completeness of the liturgical round, still provide a helpful pattern of worship in our ever-changing world.

But more than this, for those of us who grew up with the Book of Common Prayer as the staple liturgical diet of Sunday worship, (and these numbers are diminishing by the year), we were probably not fully aware of just how radical this 'Book of Common Prayer' actually was.



I don't need to remind the group gathered here this morning that the book we have before us today was finally 'locked down' in 1662 after a century of argument about form and content. It remained unchanged until 1927 when proposals to amend it failed to gain Parliamentary approval, much to the anger and bewilderment of the Bishops of the Church of England.

This 'Book of Common Prayer' which has played a significant part in my Christian life and theological thinking, increasingly challenges me to understand it more fully as a radical

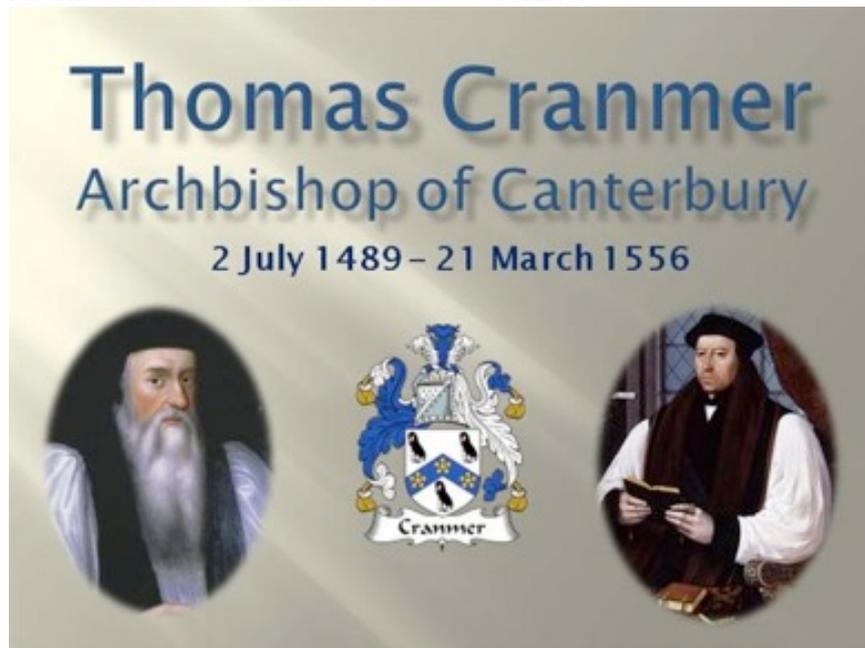
publication. Of course, to fully understand why this is so, we need some understanding of the context in which it was crafted and the impact it had on those who used it and worshiped through it.

The 16th Century was a time of great social, political and religious change, and throughout Europe there was a growing movement amongst many to break free from the authority of the Pope. In England things were slightly different. As one commentator put it – ‘the English Reformation was at the outset more of a political affair than a theological dispute. The reality of political differences between Rome and England allowed growing theological disputes to come to the fore.’



But, with the oscillation of Catholic and Protestant monarchs, holding the country together was to become a feat of liturgical and theological engineering. For Bishops, theologians and parishioners, navigating a ‘safe’ course through the reigns of Henry, Edward, Mary and Elizabeth could very easily become a matter of life and death!

So, the Book of Common Prayer very much came into being as an agent of social and political control as well as carefully crafting the first theological and liturgical structures of the English Reformation – our thanks to Thomas Cranmer.



Cranmer wanted one book and one liturgical "use" for whole country. He wanted English folk to be able to go into any church in England on any given day and experience the same worship service in the same words, which he achieved. In doing so he radically changed doctrine in areas such as the Eucharist, clergy celibacy and the veneration of saints. And most importantly, he focused on the importance of reading the Bible.

This focus on scripture through the provision of a comprehensive lectionary for daily bible reading, helped fulfil Cranmer's primary goal of constantly exposing the people of England to scripture in a language they understood. Cranmer wanted the literate to read the Bible

thoroughly and faithfully, and for the illiterate to hear it read every day. (Hence his emphasis in the prayer book rubrics on the importance of the priests reading the liturgy itself and the Bible readings *"in a loud voice."*)

Thomas Cranmer was a man with mission, and whilst not finding favour with all, his focus on scripture and his commitment for all people to be able to hear it or read it was significant. And for good reason. In the first lesson of Peter we read 'For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men'

But how do we understand God's will? How do we grasp the fullness of God's revelation?



Well, Reformation thinking would certainly suggest the importance of engaging with scripture as the springboard for learning, understanding and applying God's will.

There is a danger of course when we talk about understanding God's will. Too often we limit our thinking to what we know about Christianity or how we understand Christian faith from our particular life experience.

From the moment we were born, we have been formed by our experiences:

- the environment we were born into
- our family circumstances
- the school we went to
- the friends we had or have
- our place of employment
- churches we have been part of etc, etc!

Whilst these experiences may well have been good and helped form us into the nicely rounded people that we are, there is a distinct possibility that who we are and what we think, particularly with regard to Christian faith, is now limited in some way, even restricted by the limited experiences that we have had.

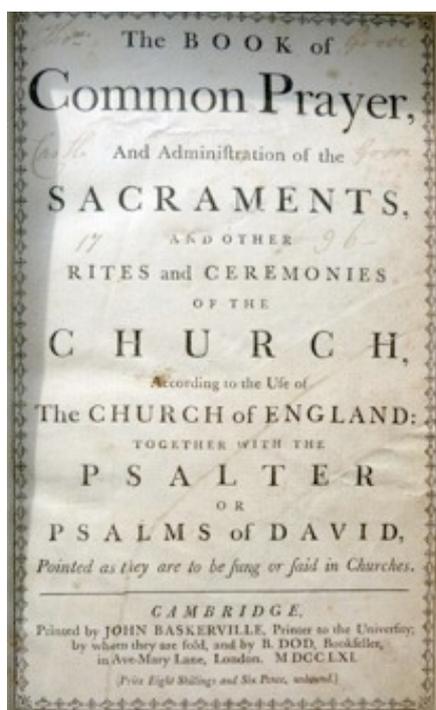
I was browsing through a book in Church House London last week debating whether to buy it or not. It was called *'How then shall we live – Christian engagement with contemporary issues'* by Sam Wells who is the Vicar of St Martin in the Fields.

The issues he identifies are thought-provoking: Islam and Islamist Extremism, Migration, International Development, Ecology, Social Media, Disability, The Family, Domestic Violence, LGBT Identity, Obesity, Retirement, Chronic Illness, Shame, Dementia, Assisted Dying and Death.

Being Christian in our modern world demands that we engage with such issues in meaningful, insightful and life-giving ways. But being Christian in a modern world also requires us to put some effort into 'understanding God's will', which in Reformation terms pushes us back to the reading of scripture.

Historically, when engaging with complex issues the church has at best been dogmatic and at worst been downright uncaring! The loving God whom we say we worship is all too often portrayed as a tyrannical dictator who demands our unthinking loyalty, which forms us into a people who function more like moral policemen than ambassadors for a loving God!

And yet, in the ordination service of clergy the Declaration of Assent has these words:



The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation.

In order to ‘proclaim afresh in each generation’ and to live out our Christian faith in any meaningful and engaging way, we need to understand the context in which we are now living and engage with scripture appropriately.

This was the challenge that Cranmer had to face up to and navigate with care during those reformation years. And the Prayer Book provided a significant contribution to that changing context.

In today’s complex and challenging world, the Prayer Book still has a significant role to play in reminding us of the foundations that were laid during the Reformation years - times of political, social and religious turmoil. It also calls us back to scripture and the importance of looking beyond our own knowledge, to seek the greater knowledge of God and the understanding of his will by immersing ourselves in his word.

This is the undercurrent of the Prayer Book and, by association, one of the primary objects of the Prayer Book Society.

I guess a leading question for us all gathered here today is how can we once again help our nation to engage more fully with Holy Scripture?

How can we emulate Cranmer’s aspiration to expose the people of England to holy scripture and so help form the nation?

Well unlike Cranmer – speaking it “in a loud voice” will probably not work.

But choosing to live by it; allowing its values and ethics to inform our decision making in business and our personal living, whilst only a small step, could impact many thousands of people we come into contact with each day of our lives.

At the heart of the Reformation was a passion and personal commitment to see things differently, to refuse to live by the predictable tunes of the day, and to have the faith to step out into uncharted territory believing that God would guide, and that people’s understanding of who God is would be enhanced, developed and encouraged.

The baton in this generation is in our hands, the question is what are we going to do with it?

