

The Book of Common Prayer

Again today we are biting off another huge topic that could constitute an entire course. Today's topic is the Book of Common Prayer. I would probably venture a guess that the why so many of us have remained Episcopalians through thick and thin over the past decades or have come to choose this as our new faith tradition is primarily because of our love of the way in which we worship and the form of liturgy that we have. I think, really, that's what attracts us to this body of faith, whether we were cradle Episcopalians, and we've known the prayer book since our earliest days, or whether we were out of some other tradition, but then the Episcopal liturgy spoke to us.

So, I think we're really talking about one of the most tender topics within our faith when we talk about worship and sacraments as found in the Book of Common Prayer. You all have a copy we can refer to during this hour.

The Book of Common Prayer was first produced in 1549 by Archbishop Cranmer who, at that time was part of the English reformation. The church was changing on the continent, thanks to Martin Luther and other leaders. But the church was also changing in England. And two of the primary drivers of the ideas of the Reformation were that people should be able to read the scriptures in their own language rather than simply in Latin, and they should be able to worship in their own language. So, the Book of Common Prayer, written by Thomas Cranmer with input from a lot of other documents was the very first time that the liturgy was written in the vernacular; written in the language of the people.

It's sort of an interesting thought almost an irony that the language of his prayer book which has become so beloved by so many of us for its beautiful flowery, Elizabethan style and cadence was the attempt to write in plain English.

The Book of Common Prayer written by Thomas Cranmer is proof that flawed people can produce great works. Even though he is one of our saints, he didn't live always a saintly life. He went off to the continent and got married without telling the king and kept a wife secretly during the whole time that he was writing this prayer book. When Edward became king after Henry, he was very loyal. When Mary became queen - she was a

fierce Roman Catholic - he recanted all his Protestant faith, hoping to save his life, but it didn't work. So, as he was taken out of the Tower of London and put to the stake and was ready to be burned. By myth it is said that as the flames were beginning he stuck his right hand into the fire first to reject his recantation by burning first the hand that had signed the renunciation.

The prayer book is written in 1549 and had its first revision in 1552. Then, in 1559, under Elizabeth, another prayer book revision was adopted. It isn't until 1662, within two years after the Restoration, that what we all consider THE Book of Common Prayer was adopted in England.

You will find the language of the of the Book of Common Prayer everywhere in the culture. I'll give you a few examples. Speak now, or else forever, hold your peace. If you've ever been to a wedding, you'll remember that one. Also from the wedding liturgy, till death do us part. From the funeral service "earth to Earth, Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" from the litany "from all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil." Every single second Sunday of Advent, you will be admonished "to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the holy scriptures." The prayer book has had a huge effect on culture outside of our faith alone.

You'll find allusions to it throughout Shakespeare. Remember Shakespeare is writing in this same period. You'll see the cadence and some of the language used by Isaac Watts, John Bunyan, John Milton, and then again

later into the Romantic period and Modern Periods in the Bronte's, Samuel Coleridge, T.S. Eliot. All these people have gone to the Book of Common Prayer as a primary source.

The Book of Common Prayer's most radical gift was to give people prayers in their own language. Considering the controversies of the day, it was an attempt to create what we call our Via Media or middle way. It includes a group of statements called the 39 articles that lean towards the Protestant view. But the prayer book retained our understanding of sacraments that we still have today. The Protestants in their