

Homily, St. Andrew's
Sunday, September 21, 2014

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

My Mom was given [this] Book of Common Prayer for an important birthday in 1952. She was then given [this] Book of Common Prayer by my grandma just before she left Montreal to head west in 1967. I have them both because my mom gave them to me in the fall of 2002 after I'd casually mentioned that I needed to buy a copy of the Book of Common Prayer as I began seminary. I had received [this] Book of Alternative Services from my sister on April 23, 1989 as a confirmation gift but I didn't have a BCP. So almost exactly 50 years after mom got [this book] as a gift, she gifted it to me. Finally, this copy of the BCP, the one I tend to use the most now, was a gift only a little over a year ago from a parishioner who wanted me to have a large print version... [which is actually why I use it the most!] As I looked at material about our forebear Thomas Cranmer this week, I found myself referring to and exploring all of these books, and making some fascinating discoveries.

The discovery that got my really got my attention has to do with the Eucharistic prayer. I'm not sure how I came to discover it except that as I looked through [this] copy of the BCP, I noticed that it was organized differently than [this one], with the service of Holy Communion beginning on a different page than I'm accustomed to. It turns out, [this] BCP, that my Mom got in 1952, was published in 1918, and [this one], the one we continue to use today, is the 1962 version. I had never noticed before, I didn't know, that the 2 books have a number of differences. I have not done a thorough comparison by any means, but I have looked into what for me was a shocking discovery. In the 1918 BCP, the Eucharistic prayer ends after the words of institution, with: "Do this, as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me." I was stunned and it brought back to mind something of what I'd read - without much understanding - about the original writer of the BCP, Thomas Cranmer. Had Cranmer actually written the final paragraph of the Eucharistic prayer that is in the 1962 BCP or just what it was all about? At first I was going to let all of you here do the research yourself to figure out what happened but then decided to do what any 21st century priest might do... I put the question to my Facebook friends, tagging a couple of my seminary profs, and started a conversation with clergy and others across the country!

I'm going to leave you in suspense for a few minutes about that particular mystery while I first take you back to the 16th century. Last week we talked about the beginnings of the Anglican Church, when the Church IN England became the Church OF England with the change in authority from the Pope to the Sovereign, beginning with King Henry. We talked a little of the bigger reformation movement that was happening on the continent but didn't say much about the religious, theological, spiritual and liturgical changes in England in and amongst the political and economic concerns. The key message was about how our religious beliefs and spirituality are impacted by, and impact, our social world - how we actually live our lives and how God is incarnated, or not, in the process.

Thomas Cranmer met King Henry by happenstance in the midst of the swirling controversy about his desire for divorce from Catherine of Aragon. The 2 hit it off and Cranmer became one of the King's closest advisors. He was made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533 - the year before the major changes in the authority structure really got going, and was removed shortly before his death in 1556, more than 20 years. Cranmer was a dedicated reformer throughout his life, participating in a discussion group beginning in about 1520 that debated the theology of Luther's revolt and the new ideas

developing on the continent. Once in a position of power, however, Cranmer had to balance his reforming beliefs with a Sovereign who was more theologically traditional and less inclined to change. Nevertheless, he promoted the publication of an English Bible and was part of making its use mandatory in every church in the late 1530's. Cranmer's first major liturgical work was an English Litany that was first published in 1545 and remains in use, though sparingly, today.

With King Henry's death and the rise of Edward, Cranmer and the other reformers in England were able to push forward with several changes. Most notably, the first Book of Common Prayer was published in 1549 and while by continental standards it was considered rather conservative and traditional, for the majority of the English populace, for whom reforms had barely been felt yet, it was radical. Even if much of that first publication was simply an English translation of traditional services, the change in language is everything. All of a sudden the average church-goer can understand the words of the liturgy, for it is in the "vulgar tongue," instead of the obviously more sacred Latin language. That was hardly the end however, for a new version of the Book of Common Prayer was published in 1552 and it contained a number of changes in the direction of greater theological and liturgical reform.

One such change is described in some of our reading as the "Black Rubric." This was an instruction that addressed a controversy about whether or not communion should be received while kneeling or not. I'm not going to read the whole thing to you, but you can find a later (and softer) version of it on page 92 of our BCP. The issue would have been that most congregants were accustomed to kneeling to receive communion but one of the major theological debates in the reformation was about eucharistic theology - what happens when we celebrate communion? Do the bread and wine actually, literally and physically transform into the substance of Christ's Body and Blood, through the scientific process of transubstantiation, or is it about something more, or strictly, symbolic? This is a question that people, including the forebear we celebrate today, Thomas Cranmer, died for. It's very hard to change religious practice of the masses, so people were allowed to continue kneeling, but the "Black Rubric" makes clear that no adoration is being done of the elements. "For as concerning the sacramental bread and wine, they remain still in their very natural substances, and therefore may not be adored, for that were idolatry to be abhorred of all faithful Christians." (Jeanes, 25)

With such a clear statement against transubstantiation, Cranmer's position on this particular theological debate was abundantly clear. Unfortunately, that position cost him his life. A year after the second BCP was published, Mary rose to the throne and as a faithful Spanish Roman Catholic, she was determined to eliminate all reformation ideas from the English Church, along with all the reformers. Thomas Cranmer was arrested and tried for heresy. He tried to save his life by recanting his protestant opinions but was nevertheless burned at the stake on March 21, 1556. His legacy, however lives on in his work.

With the various versions of the BCP, Cranmer's legacy is about more than the words on the page. I mentioned earlier that in our 1918 BCP, the Eucharistic prayer ends with "in remembrance of me," while the 1962 version we use today, there continues on a whole other paragraph, from "Wherefore, O Father..." all the way to "... world without end." My Facebook community helped sort out the mystery. Cranmer's 1549 prayer was basically the Roman version in English and included the whole prayer we know today and more. In the 1552 revision, Cranmer took out the last big paragraph, ending the prayer instead at "in remembrance of me." It was his way of trying to express his developing and reformed Eucharistic theology that emphasized the eating of outward and visible signs as a metaphor for inward and spiritual nourishment, connected through faith not through a literal conversion

of substance. In the second version, Cranmer tries to make it clearer that it's the communicants who are consecrated in the act, not strictly speaking, the elements of bread and wine.

The debate about what happens when we celebrate the sacraments is an on-going one. Cranmer's liturgy, this amazing achievement, has continued to be edited and revised and updated over the years. In various countries at various times, liturgists and theologians have been variously influenced - some by the 1549 version, some by the 1552. The crafters of our prayer book of 1918 made one choice; those of 1962's made another. The 1985 Book of Alternative Services makes different choices still in various ways and for various reasons. Going through them all would be a whole course of its own! Part of the legacy that Cranmer leaves for us is to decide for ourselves. He himself changed over time, leaving us options that push us to consider our own beliefs and our own practices, in light of our own time and place.

Cranmer's first great work was the litany he wrote in 1545. It is still in use, finding its way into both our service books. [BCP p 30; BAS p 138] As part of our honouring of Cranmer today, instead of our regular prayers of the people, we will use Cranmer's Great Litany. Neither version we have available to us in our books is Cranmer's original, but let's assume that both attempt to be faithful to Cranmer's original spirit and intent. As we enter into this prayer, let's listen for Cranmer's heart, his concerns, his theology and his dreams for the world. And let us consider how they can become our own, as we pray with our hearts, for our concerns, with our theology and for our dreams for the world.