

A Prayer for All Seasons

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The Collects of the
Book of Common Prayer

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The Lutterworth Press

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ST. JAMES'S PALACE

The Book of Common Prayer has been the spiritual resource of English and English speaking people for four centuries. It is a book of prayer for the whole community, devised and composed so that it might satisfy everyone. Cranmer looked to the past as well as the present when he set about this task at a time of reformation and change. The language he employed was quite deliberately “not of an age, but for all time”.

The language of Cranmer’s Prayer Book has survived because it has shown itself sensitive to the profound human need for continuity and permanence, and by passing into common speech. Words and phrases from this liturgy have become part of the heritage of the English language by continuous reiteration over the centuries in public worship and in private devotion. In Church of England day schools pupils used to learn by heart the great Collects from the Prayer Book. That learning, together with regular church services where the Prayer Book was the only rite, had a genuine influence on the minds and imaginations of ordinary men and women. Though their own speech could not command the cadences and rhythms of Cranmer’s prayers, because they were familiar with them they remembered them. My own experience of constant reiteration in Church has confirmed to me that as one gets older the essential poetry of this great liturgy has an ever more resonant meaning.

At home, abroad, in hospitals, on battlefields, in solitude, in society, in trouble and in prosperity, these words were remembered and gave comfort and hope in the great crises of innumerable human lives. The power and majesty of the language of the Book of Common Prayer were such that, in the words of one Collect, “Among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found”.

I hope very much that this book will provide a new incentive to study the Collects and may even encourage people of all ages to commit some of them to memory. I have been delighted to see a revival in recent years of the learning by heart of passages from the Book of Common Prayer, spurred on in part by the annual Cranmer Awards arranged by the Prayer Book Society. There is no doubt in my own mind about the importance of the trend, since I do believe so strongly that the survival of the Book of Common Prayer is a touchstone of our ability as a society to value its spiritual roots, its liturgical continuity and its very identity as a nation of believers.


