

Introduction

“And now I come to the great thing which so much troubleth my conscience, more than anything that ever I did or said in my whole life: and that is, the setting abroad of writings contrary to the truth, which now I here renounce and refuse . . . and written for fear of death and to save my life, if it might be. . . .”

The scene was the University church in Oxford. Thomas Cranmer, lately Archbishop of Canterbury, stood on a wretched platform opposite the pulpit, addressing the astounded congregation. He was in bare and ragged gown, his long grey beard touching his belt, a dirty old square cap on his head, passion in his voice. He had broken from his prepared text and spoke from the heart in this, his last public utterance before facing a terrible and fiery death.

“. . . and that is, all such bills and papers which I have written or signed with my hand – ”

He held it up, over his head.

“. . . since my degradation. And foreasmuch as my hand offended, writing contrary to my heart, my hand shall first be punished therefor: for, may I come to the fire, it shall be first burned.”

Those listening in the packed nave cried out in appeal to him to remember his recent recantation, read out earlier in his discourse, of Anglican doctrine in favour of Papal authority. This was the issue, at the very pivot of the Reformation, on which he had wavered agonisingly back and forth in seven varying recantations since Bloody Mary had succeeded to the throne three years before, and for which he had been deposed as Archbishop.

Ignoring the shouts, he almost leaped from the platform and thrust his way through to the South door, his guard pursuing him. Hurrying outside, he literally ran through the driving rain towards the place of execution in The Broad, so fast that his guard could barely keep up with him.

As Spanish friars exhorted him in the name of the Catholic Queen and the Pope to recant once more, he was chained to the stake, the piled faggots were lit and in no time the fire was licking around him searing his flesh with torments. But he thrust his right arm into the living flame, crying out *“This hand hath offended!”* – the hand that had signed the recantations he so bitterly regretted. He held it there, steadfast and immovable – except for

one moment when he withdrew it quickly to wipe his streaming face. Within minutes, his hand turned black, bubbled and was consumed; and not long after, with a courage and steadfastness that moved all those watching to tears, he gave up the ghost. It was 21 March 1556; Cranmer was 67.

By far the greatest monument to this passionate, learned, enigmatic man, and to the convulsions then shaking England, was his greatest creation, the Book of Common Prayer. It is as central to our life on these islands as our cathedrals and our very language itself.

One can still go to Cranmer's study, the room in Lambeth Palace where he actually wrote, translated and compiled that most precious jewel of England. It adjoins the chapel, on the first floor and opening onto the N side of the sanctuary, like a very large box in the theatre.

It is not the untouched original due to a wartime bomb; but one can stand, very still, where he must have sat at his desk, pen in the same hand that was later so terribly consumed, and hear, as he must have heard, the sound of the eternal Thames slapping against the Palace walls not far away, and the grinding of passing boats – as, in his day, he would have heard the creak of oars and the cry of boatmen as well as the ceaseless water.

A most powerful awareness of water and of the sea – the sea imagery which pervades his work – is one of many reasons why his words have such a memorable impact on us. We are an island people. None of us is ever far from the sea, whether geographically or inside our heads, and Cranmer is always fully conscious of that. Our literature is soaked in brine, the North Sea wind blows through its topsails. Such images pervade his most glorious work with their disturbing and uncanny capacity to engrave themselves, not only on the mind, but on the heart.

The original Prayer Book was published in 1549; the present book marks the 450th anniversary of its appearance. Its immense achievement was to bring together, in crackling English when our language was at its vigorous prime, and in simple, common form, the enormously wide, fragmented variety of mediaeval services that had for so long split the nation diocese by diocese. The seven monastic offices in Latin, spread through the day, were brilliantly distilled into Matins and Evensong in the vernacular – in knife-edged words and glorious tumbling phrases which, together with the language of the Communion Service, irradiate and are interwoven into the very flesh of English today; so much so that those phrases are now used daily, without knowing their origin, by millions of people who have never darkened the door of any church in their lives.

As memorable are the Collects, the subject of this book, those tough, exquisite little prayer-gems of English, of spirituality and sense of the living presence of the Almighty.

For centuries our children have learned the Collects by heart – in the case of one school I knew of in the 1960s, pupils were not allowed to leave the precincts on a Sunday until they had mastered the day’s Collect and repeated it from memory to their housemistress – finding, as they grew older, how much they teach about divine compassion and majesty, human need and human helplessness apart from God.

Why are the Collects so important? It is not merely a matter of their antiquity – though there is something very powerful about our using the self-same words as our forebears and as the saints and martyrs did in their hour of trial, in the classical world as much as under the Nazis. Nor is it their penetrating beauty and precision of language. Nor is it their symmetry of form, remarkable though that is. Even more important is the doctrine inspiring them – their exposition of the manifold divine attributes, and the manifestation of how sinful man can lay his needs and weakness before a righteous but infinitely merciful God.

Whatever the origin of the word “Collect”, it describes a very ancient form of liturgical prayer. Five of the Prayer Book Collects date from Leo I, Bishop of Rome 440-461, twenty from Gelasius, Bishop of Rome 492-496, and twenty-seven from Gregory the Great, 590-604, who himself condensed and re-arranged earlier liturgies – indeed, he himself calls the Collects he co-ordinated “ancient”. It is not impossible some may date from Christ’s lifetime and have been written in the very dawn light of our faith.

They are characterised by brevity and concentration; they ask for one thing only, and that in the tersest language. Each one is based on a significant scriptural source, and each follows a set pattern of construction.

A complete Collect has five parts. First there is the address to God. Secondly comes a description of some property or attribute of God, extending the address by a relative clause relating to the petition about to be made. The third part is the petition itself, the heart of the prayer. Fourthly, the reason or purpose behind the petition. The Collect ends with the only Christian way of approach to God – the name of Jesus. There is a musical form and inevitability about it all; one half-consciously anticipates the pattern of syntax and meaning as if one were listening to a Bach fugue turned into words.

No one has done more for our understanding of these seminal short, tough prayers than Canon Henry James Burgess and much of the scholarship I am vainly trying to imply is my own in fact derives from his two splendid books on the subject, *Why Prayer Book Collects* and *A Prayer for all Seasons*. Born in 1908, his distinguished life as parish priest, Canon of Sheffield Cathedral and Director of Education of that diocese happily still continues, during which he has brought out nine books on various theological and related subjects. With great generosity he has donated the copyright of his two Prayer Book books to the Prayer Book Society as guardians of his opinion

far into the next century.

His break-down of the thrust and historical origin of each separate Collect appears in the following pages.

When in Oxford a few years ago I often used to pass the spot where Cranmer met his death, while visiting a much-loved step-daughter when she was at Balliol reading Greats. I would reach out and touch the small commemorative stone set in the wall, as I passed it. It was just fifteen feet from this stone, on the actual execution site, that workmen digging a trench at the end of the last century found “a quantity of Ashes”.

It is curious, but although this find was meticulously recorded, few twentieth century biographers of Cranmer mention it, even as a speculative footnote. Is it too fanciful to say that, perhaps, it is because this cannot be his memorial? – that his true memorial is, as Pericles said of others, that he is now “woven into the stuff of other men’s lives”?

For I am certain that when I hear his words in a London taxi going down Regent Street while the driver explains he listens to Choral Evensong on the BBC every week, because he “finds something wonderful” about it; when I observe a girl kneeling at the sanctuary rail in front of me about to take Communion, caught up in the fervour of love he expresses; or when the self-declared atheist sub-postmaster of a neighbouring village is selling me stamps over the potato sacks but we are both actually more-than-half listening to Cranmer’s haunting cadences from the radio left on at the back of the shop, suddenly stirring the spirit and imagination, that Thomas Cranmer is alive and well and living in England.

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