Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

For more than 300 years, the Book of Common Prayer was the living bread which nourished the worship of Anglicans around the world. And Christians of many other traditions as well. Last century it began to be replaced by other forms of worship. Today, for many people, the old bread has gone stale. Changes in language and society and changes in approaches to worship mean that the one book has been replaced by many. As we sang earlier

_Ancient forms all have their ending_

_For the newer rite is here ..._

Like many other memorable expressions of human thought, the Book of Common Prayer is at the same time, a book for its own time, and a book for all time. Today, as we commemorate the Book and honour its creators and compilers, we need to make sure we retain and enhance what is timeless in its approach to worship.

So, how does the book represent the particular spirit of religious life in England in the 16th C? In three ways at least –

The first is the stress on **uniformity** – the book is actually the appendix to an Act of Parliament, the _Act for the Uniformity of Common Prayer and Service in the Church, and Administration of the Sacraments_. England had endured more than 130 years of civil and religious strife since Henry VIII had separated the Church of England from Rome – England became Protestant, then Catholic, then Protestant again, then Anglo-Catholic, then Puritan … seven years of bloody civil war ended in the public beheading of the king, and the start of 11 troubled years of the Commonwealth.

From 1549 to 1662 there had been seven official prayer books, five in English and two in Latin. What the people now needed was religious peace and reconciliation. So the Book became law. And uniformity was taken very seriously. The Act prescribed that any minister who used any form of service which was not in the Prayer Book was liable to a fine of 100 marks for the first offence, or six month’s imprisonment; for a second offence, the penalty was 400 marks or 12 months’ imprisonment; and, for a third offence, life imprisonment, with all the minister’s goods and chattels being forfeited to the Crown.

Today, Anglican services vary from country to country and from diocese to diocese and even from parish to parish, and the services in some churches bear little resemblance to traditional Anglican forms. Variety has replaced uniformity as a virtue of Sunday worship.

Secondly, the Book of Common Prayer emphasises **daily worship**. The first and main service in the book is the order for Morning Prayer, to be said daily throughout the year. The service included one of the most ancient hymns of the church, the triumphal Te Deum, which we sang again this morning in a new translation. It’s the first time I have heard it for many years.

After Morning Prayer comes the order for Evening Prayer, to be said daily throughout the year; then the Litany, to be sung or said after Morning Prayer on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays and at other services; then comes the calendar, what we now call the lectionary, and then prayers and thanksgivings for particular occasions. Only then, well into the book, do we have the Order of the
Ministration of Holy Communion, which parishioners were urged to share at least three times in the year, of which Easter was to be one.

Today the emphasis is on Sunday worship, not on daily worship. And in most Anglican dioceses, but not in Sydney, Holy Communion has become the main Sunday service, and some Anglicans feel cheated if there is no communion. One sad result of this is that many of us show less reverence towards the communion than we used to. In 1956, as the Book of Common Prayer began to be replaced with new forms of service, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsay, lamented that

*the awe in the individual’s approach to Holy Communion, which was common to the Tractarians and Evangelicals of old, stands in stark contrast to the ease with which our congregations come tripping to the altar week by week.*

In some parishes, a few people even chatter to their friends or family as they come forward to communion or as they go back to their seats, disrupting the prayerful meditation of those who see the Holy Communion as one of the precious holy mysteries which unite us with our Lord in his death and resurrection. In this service, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it,

*we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us; we are one with Christ, and Christ with us.*

Thirdly, the Book of Common Prayer puts the *emphasis in worship* on human sin and divine judgment: this is the theme of all 11 sentences which begin morning and evening prayer. Then there is the general confession:

*Have mercy upon us, miserable offenders . . . *

Not a cheerful beginning!

Today the focus has shifted from us to God, from our sin to God’s glory, God’s mercy and God’s love – in APBA, Morning Prayer now begins with the song of the elders from the book of the Revelation:

*You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, For you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.*

And, of course, the second order communion service begins with the presider’s greeting

*Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit*

To which we respond

*Blessed be God’s kingdom, now and for ever.*

The clearest difference between the Book of Common Prayer and modern prayer books is in their *occasional services.* For example, the Book of Common Prayer included a service of thanksgiving after childbirth, for childbirth then was frequent, painful and dangerous. APBA replaces this with a service to celebrate the birth of a child, which can also be a naming ceremony to replace the sacrament of baptism. APBA also has a service to receive members from other churches, and the new Canadian book has a service for midweek lunchtime services. Only last month, the 77th General Convention of the American church added two new services to its book – a service for the blessing of same-sex relationships and a service to comfort those who have recently lost their pets. A pause for prayer, perhaps.

But, while so much has changed, some of the principles of Divine worship in the Book of Common Prayer continue in contemporary Anglican worship, at its best.

The first of these is *elevated language.* God deserves the best we can offer, in our speech as well as in our life.

The compilers of the Book of Common Prayer insisted that worship should be
But the compilers could not have known that they were writing at a time when the English language was at a rhythmic and rhetorical peak. My Oxford Dictionary of Quotations was published in 1999, but its three largest sections are all from this period -- from Shakespeare, from the Authorised Version of the Bible and from the Book of Common Prayer. A total of 3,188 quotations in all, from these three sources. Just over 15% of the total.

The Act of Uniformity was passed in May 1662. In May this year, while opening an exhibition at Lambeth Palace to mark the anniversary, Prince Charles praised the language of the Book of Common Prayer, language, he said, which embodied the beauty of holiness --

when you are up against it, and you have terrible moments to endure or overcome, whether it is being in war or faced with some appalling difficulty, or even facing death, then those words, those wonderful words, come back to you, if you have been lucky enough to have absorbed them over your lifetime.

In his testimony last week, Brian Edwards quoted some of the sentences from the Prayer Book which had been very precious to him during his life.

We will be reminded of this imperative again this morning when we sing our final hymn:

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim …

Some of the language of the Book of Common Prayer is now out of date – in 1662 preventing did not mean stopping us, but going before us, leading us; indifferently did not mean without caring but impartially, without discrimination; and comfort did not mean making us feel better, but giving us added strength . . . these and many other words in the Book of Common Prayer need revision, but we still come closer to God when we worship in the beauty of holiness and avoid what some critics call the pedestrian language of some modern liturgies. With God, we don’t have to walk – we can fly!

A second enduring principle in the Book of Common Prayer is that worship should be God-focused – it should give us, with Isaiah, a vision of God’s Divine Being. As the compilers said, Every country should use such ceremonies as they think best to the setting forth of God’s honour and glory, and to the reducing of the people to a most perfect and godly living …

Worship is meant to be a life-changing experience – by glimpsing the glory of the triune God we are challenged to become more like him, and to renew our commitment to living for him:

‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’
And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’

It is too easy to think that worship is about us – our needs, our problems, our family and friends, that it is about giving us the strength to resist temptation. And it is, but only as we focus our minds and hearts on the God who never fails to help those who live in his steadfast awe and love.

And the third enduring principle is this: Worship is a communal activity. God in Jesus did not die just for us, as individuals, he came to redeem all humanity. So Christians should not be concerned just for their personal salvation, or for their personal needs, they should be worshipping together in spirit and in truth, and seeking the common good.

In March 1988, during Australia’s Bi-Centennial celebrations, the Prayer Book Society in Australia held a conference to mark 200 years of the use of the Book of Common Prayer in Australia. The First Fleet brought 100 copies for the use of the soldiers and convicts, as well as 200 catechisms and 500 psalters; the Prayer Book which the chaplain, the Reverend Richard Johnson, used at the first
Christian service in Australia is still on display at St Phillip’s church in York St.

At this conference in Melbourne, several speakers warned against the privatisation of worship, the move away from common prayer. Without some guidance, lay people may offer prayers which simply reflect their own particular concerns and interests rather than those of the whole people of God. It is a warning I need to take seriously when I am rostered as the intercessor at this service.

Worship at its best involves common prayer; it means worshipping in solidarity with all other believers, not just Anglicans, bearing their burdens as far as we can, in prayerful concern and self-giving action. And we need to honour God every day, and dismiss every excuse and put aside every other activity, to worship every week, at least, so that, in the words of the old Communion service,

the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy; so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

That is God’s promise, and our goal.