

Sermon *The Book of Common Prayer*, Whit Sunday 2006

A warm welcome to members of the London and Southwark Branches of the Prayer Book Society. As campaigners for *The Book of Common Prayer* you will be very used to modern clergypersons telling you how superior the new services are to the traditional ones. I heard of one man who went to his Vicar and asked to be married. He wasn't a regular churchgoer and he didn't really know his way about the various options. The Vicar asked him, "Do you want the old service or the new one?"

He said, "Well, I think I'd like the new one please". On the day of his marriage this bridegroom was driving himself to church when there was a sudden downpour. The car got water in the engine and stalled. The bridegroom got out and tried to fix it. The rain came on harder and he got his trousers all muddied, so he rolled them up above his knees. Anyhow, he managed to fix the car and get to church – late. His bride was already at the altar. He ran straight to her side. The Vicar looked at his dishevelled state and said, "For goodness' sake man, pull your trousers down!"

And the man replied, "You know Vicar, I think I will have the old service after all!"

When I think of my own campaigning for the Prayer Book, I feel like echoing St Paul's boasting, "Are they Israelites, so am I. Thrice I was shipwrecked, once I was stoned". Well, more than once actually. I first wrote in favour of the Prayer Book in 1973 when I was a curate and my Vicar – a bluff Yorkshireman I thought I could trust – introduced the new services overnight. I helped with the famous petition of a million signatures which was sent to the Bishops and the Synod. This was in the late 1970s and signed by everybody you've ever heard of in the arts and public life. The bishops turned it down with the high-handed derision that is their trademark along with their ignorance. They said: "Some of these people don't even go to church!" Thus failing to understand that the Prayer Book is for all sorts and conditions of men, every man of England a member of the Church of England, as Richard Hooker said.

When *The Alternative Service Book* came out in 1980. I co-edited with Professor David Martin a volume of critical essays *No Alternative*. I have led seminars and given countless talks about the Prayer Book. I have frightened the Chairman of the Liturgical Commission on *The Today Programme*. I have sat through terminally tedious meetings in Northwood – who hasn't? I have lobbied Parliament with Dennis Enright and watched Charles Sisson make the Archbishop of Canterbury squirm. I have been a priest for 36 years and we have used *The Book of Common Prayer* at all the churches where I have served.

We use it here as you know. And we use it for our main services – not for the one at six o'clock in the morning on the fifth Sunday after Pancake Tuesday. We use it for christenings, where we do not omit *the devil and all his works*; at weddings where the happy couple are reminded of *men's carnal lusts and appetites like brute beasts that have no understanding*; at funerals – *worms, vile bodies* and all.

What has *The Book of Common Prayer* got that the modern services don't have? In a word, the Prayer Book has us bang-to-rights. Its understanding of human psychology and human nature is spot on. It knows that we are sinners and that *if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*. Remember also it goes on to

declare the good news *but if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*. You see, because *The Book of Common Prayer* gets it right about earthly things, we can trust it to speak to us of heavenly things.

The modernisers don't like it. This is because the modernisers don't really believe Christian doctrine. They are very nice, respectable people, these modernisers and progressives; and they don't like to be made to think of themselves as sinners. Of course this makes all their windy talk about *salvation* completely empty. And it remains empty and worthless - for all the guitar-twanging and aisle-dancing and barmy choruses and jogging for Jesus music and overhead projectors and unseemly assault at the sign of the peace.

The modernisers don't like to be reminded of sin. They think of mankind as *come of age* and *liberated*. But when they look at the wars and genocides of the last century, can they really put their hands on their hearts and say there is nothing to acknowledge, nothing to bewail?

Take a look at modern society. Practical atheism in our schools where teachers are bound to teach that any god is as good as any other – or none. Anarchy in personal and sexual morality, as any coupling between any two (or more) pieces of flesh is celebrated. The consequent near abolition of marriage and the family.

Abortion used as a form of contraception and amounting to 200,000 every year. A mass media which sexualises young children. A debauched consumer culture of mingled celebs, Big Brother – who would have thought Orwell so right and yet so wrong? - cocaine, clubbing, TV nuts 'n' sluts shows wall-to-wall and hyper-shopping. All this uneasily hitched to a totalitarianism-lite and bullying political correctness which everywhere seeks to curtail our natural freedoms – from foxhunting to smoking, from the sorts of games allowed in the playground to what's written on packets of sweeties. And if any alien culture dares attack our wonderfully liberated progressive way of life we will certainly fight back: we will fire salvos of condoms and identity cards.

The nation needs *The Book of Common Prayer* more than ever. But this is not for its allegedly *beautiful language*. It is for its truth. It is, as I said, because it has us bang-to-rights-and tells it as it is with the relationship between God and mankind. There are people who believe that we can be saved by our manners and refined taste – but they forget that the best of our manners and taste were developed out of Christian dogma and Christian chivalry. And if the Christian doctrine is thrown out, the refinement will soon fade. In utterly memorable words, T.S. Eliot prophesied this catastrophe back in 1934:

*Do you need to be told that even such modest attainments
As you can boast in the way of polite society
Will hardly survive the faith to which they owe their significance?
You constantly try to escape
From the darkness outside and within
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.*

Christianity is a dogmatic religion. But the word *dogmatic* is a dirty word in these our progressive and liberated times. It should not be a dirty word. Dogma just means that a proposition is true. Think for a minute: what would it mean to believe something that wasn't true – or as you sometimes get the impression from Church of England people was *only a bit true*? Nothing too *extreme*, old boy.

It is not only the Prayer Book Society that needs the Prayer Book. The nation needs the Prayer Book and desperately. Sometimes when I look back over the decades of campaigning I think we have not been forceful enough. I can think of one campaign which did succeed against all the odds, against powerful vested interests as nasty as anything thrown up by the General Synod. I mean the Campaign for Real Ale. They campaigned against the gassy unwholesomeness of keg beer. We should study their tactics and see where we might learn from them in our opposition to the gassy unwholesomeness of modern liturgies.

One of the mistakes we made – I certainly made it – was to look at the new forms of service as they came out and laugh. How could anyone replace the sublime *Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace* with *Lord now you let your servant go*? It suggests someone in urgency not of soul but of bladder. We underestimated the ruthlessness of the modernisers and we have seen the Prayer Book sidelined.

The Christian faith is a life and death issue. And it is nowhere set out more clearly than in *The Book of Common Prayer*. Your country needs it. Your country needs you, brandishing the Prayer Book to reform and restore your country. After today's service, come and enjoy our party in the garden. Then return to your parishes and prepare for the Kingdom of God.