Worship in English: Thomas Cranmer and the Book of Common Prayer

Wembdon Lent Talk 7th March 2012. Ed Moll

Introduction

Which of the following would you expect to see in Church? Hocus-pocus, Quasimodo, hokey-cokey?

If you have not come across these, Hocus Pocus is the phrase uttered by a conjuror when he performs a trick; Quasimodo is the name given to the hunchback of Notre-Dame in the novel by Victor Hugo, and the hokey-cokey is a dance.

They are all thought to be derived from parts of the Mass, the Catholic service in Latin: Hocus-pocus and hokey-cokey both might come from the phrase *Hoc est corpus*, and Quasimodo is taken from words used on the first Sunday after Easter “Quasi modo geniti infantes”. What they illustrate is that many people knew the *words* of the Latin services but had no idea what they meant.

This evening we’re going to meet Thomas Cranmer, perhaps the greatest architect of worship in English. He did this so that people in church would know what they are doing, and therefore would know the God whom they were worshipping.

Setting the Scene

The Protestant Church was born during the period we call the Reformation. Before this time, there was only one official Church in Western Europe, the Roman Catholic church. There were underground movements as we will see next time, but they were persecuted. The Church of England was one of several churches which emerged during the Reformation, along with Lutheran churches in Northern Europe, Reformed churches in Switzerland and Germany, and a whole variety of others.

Date

The date of the Reformation is the middle of the 1500s, during the time of the Tudor kings.

• *After* 1066 (obviously); after the Crusades, Robin Hood, after the Black Death; after the Battle of Agincourt (Once more into the breach ...); after Pudding-bowl haircuts; after Columbus discovered America (1492); after the Wars of the Roses (white Rose of York, Red Rose of Lancaster).

• *Before* the English Civil War with Cavaliers and Roundheads and Oliver Cromwell (the seeds of the Civil War were sown in the English reformation). It was *before* 1662 (we will come to that later), and before the great fire of London (1666) and Samuel Pepys; and two centuries before Jane Austen; three centuries before Queen Victoria and Sherlock Holmes; and four centuries (just) before *Downton Abbey* and *Upstairs Downstairs*. 
Thomas Cranmer and the English Reformation

The Reformation in Europe

The Roman Catholic Church had become corrupt. The Pope had great spiritual and political power, which no doubt contributed to the corruption.

- His *spiritual* power came because of the Church’s belief that the Pope was Jesus Christ’s deputy - so-called ‘Christ’s vicar’ - and that therefore the Bible’s teaching could be added to. As a direct consequence, the Church’s teaching had drifted a very long way from the Bible’s teaching. It was unrecognisable.

- The Pope’s *political* power followed from his spiritual power over Catholic rulers, which was everyone in Europe at that time.

These things were simmering away. The trigger for Reformation came with Martin Luther. He was a monk who had been appointed to teach the book of Romans. He took the extraordinary (at the time) step of *reading* the book of Romans. Luther discovered that the Bible’s message and the Church’s message were completely different. The Bible teaches us to trust in Jesus Christ alone. The Church told people to do what the Church said.

And so the Reformation began.

Reformation in England

About fifteen years after Luther kicked things off, the Reformation came to England. It came in 1534 under King Henry VIII. It had two leaders: the King and the Bishops

- The King needed to break with Rome for political reasons. Henry VIII wanted a divorce, but the Pope refused. *It’s a bit like the EU sometimes with us. We want to deport a dangerous person: the EU says we can’t.* This was central to Henry VIII, so he had a reason to break with Rome, and declare England a sovereign country.

- The Bishops, including Thomas Cranmer, believed in the Reformation, and wanted to break with Rome for theological reasons.

The Reformation in England happened through a combination of these two forces. *It’s a bit like two people driving a car, where one has their hands on the steering wheel (the bishops), and the other has their feet on the pedals (the King). It lurches a bit - but it moves!*

During Henry’s reign, Cranmer saw some progress:

- A Bible was put into every church (the King’s Bible);

- The dissolution of the monasteries was for Henry’s benefit, but from Cranmer’s point of view it shut the door to rewinding the clock of reform.

Then Henry died and was succeeded by his young son Edward VI, who was in favour of further reform.

- A First Book of Common Prayer was published in 1549 which was half way between the Roman services and the Protestant ones. The second prayer book of 1552 was substantially the one we have today, which was finally revised a century later in 1662.
When Edward died, he was succeeded by Mary I. She set about reversing the Reformation in England. She was nicknamed ‘Bloody Mary’. During her reign 300 people were burned for their protestant faith - a large number even in brutal times.

One of them was Thomas Cranmer. He was arrested and interrogated. During this time it appears he wrote a document pulling back from strong Protestant views. It was not enough to save his life, and he was sentenced to be burned. Here is a contemporary account:

> Fire being now put to him, he stretched out his right hand, and thrust it into the flame, and held it there a good space, before the fire came to any other part of his body; where his hand was seen of every man sensibly burning, crying with a loud voice, 'This hand hath offended.' As soon as the fire got up, he was very soon dead, never stirring or crying all the while.¹

We can sum up Cranmer’s legacy of the Prayer book under five headings. The Prayer Book, and Worship in English was:

**Accessible²**

The first thing to note about the Book of Common Prayer is that it was in English.

Before the Reformation, worship had always been in Latin. The congregation, and often also the priests, did not know what the words meant. How can you worship God in a language and using words you do not understand? That is not worship but magic. How can words in a foreign tongue build up the worshippers? That is why the Reformation brought worship back to local languages, and in England that was English. This is a key principle of the Reformation, as we see in Article XXIV the 39 Articles:

> Article 24 Speaking in the congregation in a language that people understand  
> It is plainly repugnant to the Word of God and to the custom of the early church for public prayer or the administration of the sacraments to be conducted in a language not understood by the people. (p. 621 in my BCP)³

It so happened that Cranmer’s prayer book is in beautiful English. As a friend of mine said: ‘devotion can be beautiful and still be … well devoted’. (Gordon Woolard)

The principle of Accessible Worship remains fundamental for us.

1. For the Prayer Book, it meant that when Anglican churches were planted overseas, usually where colonists went, soon there were translations into local languages: Mohawk, Spanish (1707), Tamil (1818), Japanese (1879), Chinese (1829), Maori (1838), Xhosa (1864), Zulu (1864), Hawaiian (1863). **See the Posters on the display.**⁴

2. For us today, we need to admit that we no longer speak the same English that Cranmer spoke. The BCP of 1662 is in ‘a language not understood by the people’. We will see in

¹ Written by an anonymous bystander. Taken from [http://englishhistory.net/tudor/pcranmer.html](http://englishhistory.net/tudor/pcranmer.html) accessed 6 March 2012

² The first two headings are suggested by Mark Ashton with C J Davis “Following in Cranmer’s Footsteps” in D A Carson (ed.) **Worship by the Book** (Zondervan 2002)

³ This translation is from an **English Prayer Book**

⁴ Posters were provided by the Prayer Book Society. More information at [http://www.bcp350.org/](http://www.bcp350.org/)
the next point why we need to keep to the doctrine of the Prayer Book. The need for accessibility means that we must not feel tied to the language of the Prayer Book. That is why the Prayer book needs updating. That too is why we can use newer words and songs, and newer Bible translations. They are more accessible: but they must also be at least as faithful to the Bible.

Which brings us to our next feature: Biblical

**Biblical**

The Roman Catholic Church hid the Bible from the people: it was an offence to read the Bible. The Reformation put the Bible back into the hands of people. In our next talk we will meet Bible translator William Tyndale,. His driving desire was to put the Bible into the hands of every believer:

> If God spare my life, ere [before] many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost [speaking to a scholar].

Cranmer brought the Bible back into worship in two ways:

- **The reading** of the Bible. There had been lectionaries before, but they were very complicated. With Cranmer’s lectionary, individuals could work through the whole Bible in a year. This would change the church from within because

  With Bible in hand, people were wanting to know where the priest got his ideas from.

- **The language** of the Bible was brought into the words that were used in the service. In this way it is Scripture which impels us through the movements of the service, more than our feelings or the church’s tradition. For instance, turn with me to Morning Prayer (p. 2)

  Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness… (emphasis added)

Cranmer made Scripture the driving force behind worship.

The principle of Biblical Worship remains fundamental for us.

1. The reading and teaching of God’s word remains the foundation of our services. We work through books more often than through topics so that we let the Bible set the agenda for the church.

2. The Scriptures guide the words we use in the service. It is good to use the confessions, prayers and creeds from the Prayer Book: we can also use confessions, prayers and creeds from the Bible.

3. Our singing must also be about putting Scripture truth to music: both to build up and to worship. They must be accessible, and biblical (and as we shall see, congregational too). We don’t sing songs which don’t make sense: and we don’t sing songs which don’t tell the truth (like Jerusalem). It might be good to return to singing Psalms and canticles (to newer tunes).

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5 M Reeves *The Unquenchable Flame: Introducing the Reformation* (IVP, 2009) 117

6 Reeves 125
The Prayer Book brought the church back to worship that is Accessible, Biblical, and ...

**Congregational**

Before the Reformation, worship was done by the priests for the people.

The significant parts of medieval services happened in the chancel with the congregation as observers rather than participants.

And remember that it was done in the Chancel, by other people, in a language you did not understand! No wonder people struggled to know what was going on. Like going to church in a foreign country: (joke follows)

*A group of guys took a trip to France and decided to attend Mass in a small town, even though none of them understood French. They managed to stand, kneel and sit when the rest of the congregation did, so it wouldn’t be obvious they were tourists. At one point, the priest spoke and the man sitting next to them stood up, so they got up, too. The entire congregation broke into hearty laughter.*

*After the service they approached the priest, who spoke English, and asked him what had been so funny. The priest said he had announced a birth in the parish and asked the father to stand up.*

The Reformation brought worship to the whole church. We do not have priests to offer worship for us; the whole church offers worship. This is the sense of the priesthood of all believers. Christian worship must therefore be congregational so that the whole congregation takes part in the worship.

The Prayer Book brings us congregational worship by giving us speaking parts:

- Set prayers are given for the whole congregation. We may find the repetition irksome, but in an oral culture, they could be learned and familiar. Or they could be said a line at a time.

- Affirmations like the Creed allow members of the congregation to say what they believe. Of course it is the ministers’ duty to make sure people understand what they are saying - which is something we try to do when we lead (please say with me, if you feel able to).

- Songs and Psalms allow the people to express their worship.

- There is far more congregational involvement with Cranmer than before. And, I submit, there is more congregational involvement in a Prayer Book Service than in an ‘informal’ in which only the service leader knows what is going to be said next.

The principle of Congregational Worship remains fundamental for us.

1. We still do this through using ‘set prayers’ and creeds’. With projectors and copiers we can more easily introduce new words, but the point is that they involve everyone. And there is benefit in familiarity if the words are good.

2. On music, it is important that songs are congregational: a good song in church needs to be accessible, biblical, and singable. There may be occasions for a solo, but the bread-and-butter of church music is congregational singing.

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7 Ashton p. 73
3. We keep working at ways to engage the whole congregation in the whole service. A church service is not a cinema or a theatre-house where we meet to watch something happening ‘on stage’. Church is the meeting together of God’s family. Our meeting continues over coffee. Initiatives like Café Church, and questions after the sermon are simply extending the congregational involvement.

Cranmer’s Prayer Book brought us back to worship that is Accessible, Biblical, Congregational, and ...

**Doctrinal**

It’s clear that I need a D at this point. I toyed with using the word ‘didactic’ which is more accurate but less clear to most of us. Didactic means that it teaches. The point is that every service of worship tells a story. We have seen that the elements of the service - the prayers, creeds, readings - must be accessible, biblical and congregational. The point here is that the arrangement of these service elements proclaim the gospel:

Liturgy tells a story. We tell the gospel by the way we worship.\(^8\)

The genius of the BCP is that the story it tells is the *Gospel* story.

*Morning Prayer*

We could look at the service for Morning Prayer and see that it has three main movements:

- Movement 1 starts with a scriptural call to repentance, and an exhortation, followed by confession of sins, a declaration of forgiveness and a response. We are preparing to listen to God’s word.

- Movement 2 exhorts us to listen obediently (via Ps 95), and then moves into the first Bible reading, a responsive hymn, the second Bible reading, and a second responsive hymn.

- Movement 3 focuses on the response of faith, with the recitation of the creed, various prayers and the thanksgiving.\(^9\)

That is still the basic flow of our service of morning worship. It proclaims that we come together and come to God through the Gospel, and not through our efforts.

*Holy Communion*

I want us to dip into the Communion Service to see this worked out as well. Turn with me to Page 237 of the Prayer Books. I’m going to skip through some representative sections, highlighting some areas where the service shows distinctively Gospel-focused features:

First notice that Communion takes place at a **Table**. At the foot of p. 236 that the rubric says

The Table at the Communion having a fair white linen cloth upon in …

Holy Communion is a meal with a Table, not a sacrifice with an altar.

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\(^8\) Bryan Chapell *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel shape our practice* (Baker Academic 2009) p. 19

Then the prayer of preparation (p. 237) recognises that we need God’s help to draw near:

ALMIGHTY God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Then we have the Word of God setting the scene for us, through rehearsing the commandments, and then the Bible readings and Creed. Turn to p. 240 rubric. There are some notices (!) (‘Then the Curate [incumbent] shall declare unto the people …’), and

Then shall follow the Sermon, or one of the Homilies already set forth, or hereafter to be set forth, by authority.

Then it is Scripture which encourages us to give, and Scripture which teaches us to make intercessions (p. 241-245).

The confession on page 251 teaches us again how we draw near. There are some long exhortations, and then this short one:

YE that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God, meekly kneeling upon your knees.

Then the confession. Notice that it makes clear that sin is an offence chiefly against God:

ALMIGHTY God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men: We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we from time to time most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent …

Move on a couple of pages to p. 255 and we find something that Cranmer wrote from scratch. I think it beautifully sums up the basis on which we drawn near to God:

WE do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

In other words, we’re not here because we deserve to be, but because you have mercy on us. Help us to stand on the cross of Jesus, and on that alone.

The body and blood of Jesus by which we are saved is the body in which he died on the cross outside Jerusalem, and the blood that was shed there. Jesus never intended us to confuse that body with the bread and wine by which we remember his death. The problem

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10 See K Badie “The Prayer of Humble Access” Churchman 120.2 (Summer 2006) 103-117
with the Roman Catholic Church confused these two. The Reformers like Cranmer wanted to help us keep the distinction clear, and we see this in two places of the service:

First in the prayer of consecration (p. 255-256). Just over the page we read:

Hear us, O merciful Father, we most humbly beseech thee; and grant that we receiving these thy creatures of bread and wine, according to thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ's holy institution, in remembrance of his death and passion, may be partakers of his most blessed Body and Blood …

The prayer is that God would change us rather than the bread and wine. They remain bread and wine, but by God's Spirit we can be assured us of Jesus death for our sins.\(^{11}\)

The words of distribution are interesting in this connection because they connect the death of Jesus to be bread and wine without in any way admitting that the elements have changed (p. 257):

The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve they body and soul to everlasting life: [this refers to Jesus body on the cross, and not to the bread] Eat this [ie the bread which is bread] in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart [because it's bread in the stomach] by faith with thanksgiving

Finally, we respond with more praise to God with the Gloria (p. 259). This quick survey of the structure of the communion service shows that the details and the way they are arranged tell one story - the Gospel story.

The structure of Cranmer's services reflects his biblical theology.\(^{12}\)

The principle of Doctrinal (or Gospel-shaped) Worship remains fundamental for us:

1. We care about the individual elements of the service, that they keep us pointed to Jesus Christ and his once-for-all sacrifice.

2. We care also about the arrangement of the elements. Not only that there is a sense of conceptual flow, but that the flow tells the right story. Mostly this is in the background and we never pay much attention. Often we notice it in the absence: I am always struck when I go elsewhere and there is no confession, even in a communion service!

3. We keep the Word central to everything. That is why, incidentally, the Reformers would never celebrate a sacrament (Baptism and Communion) without a sermon: otherwise the sacrament becomes a piece of magic!

Cranmer’s Prayer Book brought us back to worship that is Accessible, Biblical, Congregational, Doctrinal, and …

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\(^{11}\) The rubric at the end of the service says:…the sacramental Bread and Wine remain still in their very natural substances, and therefore may not be adored; (for that were idolatry, to be abhorred of all faithful Christians)

\(^{12}\) Ashton p. 71
Cranmer’s Prayer Book was the Book of Common Prayer because there was to be one liturgy for the church everywhere in the Kingdom.

From the King’s point of view, centralisation was good for strengthening his power. And that may explain where there were rebellions. For instance in 1549, Devon and Cornwall rebelled against the BCP in English because they did not speak English. But they did not speak Latin either, so this was not about worship in their own language! In later years the Prayer Books had a rough ride in Scotland and Ireland for similar reasons. It was about having the King’s authority imposed on them.

From Cranmer’s point of view, the Prayer Book was a vital part of the project of bringing spiritual reformation to the Church. If the BCP was to help people know God and worship him, then it had to go everywhere. It had to go everywhere because biblical Christianity (nowadays evangelicalism) was needed everywhere. And it still is.

Did it work?

The Prayer Book and the Church of England.

The Prayer Book alone was not sufficient for keep the Church of England reformed.

The Prayer Book was introduced throughout the Kingdom (but not without a rough ride in the regions!). And there was reform so that by the end of the 16th century England was a clearly Protestant Country.

In the 17th century the Civil war showed that the work was not finished. When the monarchy was restored, the Prayer Book was restored too (that is why it’s the 1662 Prayer Book) as the best accommodation between Protestantism and Order.

In the 18th century, everyone used the Prayer Book, but many did not believe its truth. There many ‘Deists’, people who believed in God who exists but takes no part in human affairs. They are the forbears of the liberals we have today. That was the world in which George Whitefield and John Wesley ministered. Change came about when they preached the gospel message.

In the 19th century, everyone used the Prayer Book, but the Oxford Movement led by John Henry Newman along with Keble and Pusey, tried to show that they could believe Catholic doctrine and still use Prayer Book and the Articles. They gave birth to the Anglo-catholic movement we have today.

In the 20th century, the Prayer Book is still in use and loved for its beautiful language. It’s a symbol for the heritage movement. In our unkind moments we call these folk ‘choral atheists’. They believe in the beauty of language rather than in God.

That is why in the 20th century the movement for other prayer books gathered pace. In 1928 there was an attempt at a revision. Parliament refused to authorise it but it was used anyway. In 1980 the ASB was produced which was pedestrian and man-centred. Now we have Common Worship in which as far as I can tell, almost anything goes.

The Prayer Book is not actually the instrument that changes or guides the church’s belief. The Prayer book reflects and captures it well. The church’s teaching and belief and Gospel
come through biblical preaching. In each age that I mentioned above, reform and revival
came to the church in England through the gospel being proclaimed and preached.

The principle of common worship from Cranmer’s prayer book comes through preaching
the Bible, because it is through what we teach that we come to believe what the Prayer book
contains. Good liturgy alone will never be enough to keep a church orthodox. But it is a
great help!

It is through the Bible’s teaching that we see in each new generation that our worship must
be:
- Accessible
- Biblical
- Congregational
- Doctrinal

Then we discover that it is everywhere, because it’s not simply an Anglican thing: biblical
worship across the denominations varies much less that it will across mixed denominations
like the Church of England is today

For those … committed to “worship under the Word”, minor differences in
terminology and strategy surface here and there, while the fundamental priorities
are remarkably similar, as is also the shape of their Sunday morning meetings.13

I think Cranmer would have approved.

Our focus for next time is the text of these scriptures: if we are worship under the scriptures,
we need to be able to understand them. We can do that only because they are in English!

Let’s finish with the General Thanksgiving from the Prayer Book:

ALMIGHTY God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee
most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and
to all men; We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of
this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by
our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And we
beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be
unfeignedly thankful, and that we shew forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but
in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in
holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom
with thee and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

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13 Carson “Worship under the word” p. 62 in Carson Worship by the Book. An edited version of this essay is
also reprinted in Melvin Tinker (ed.) The Renewed Pastor: writings in honour of Philip Hacking (Christian
Focus, 2011) p. 97-138