

Saved by Jesus; Formed by the BCP

What we pray
is what we believe

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I learned to read attending Evening Prayer with my grandfather, who was 68 years my senior. Much about my life, and particularly about my life in faith, has been shaped by that experience – struggling to match hieroglyphics to sounds, basking in the Elizabethan cadences of the evening psalms, stretching to comprehend the majestic language of the King James scriptures and the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*, breathing the air perfumed by beeswax as vesper light streamed through the stained glass windows. No wonder my undergraduate degree was in English, specifically Elizabethan drama.

The words I heard and learned by heart shaped not only what I believe about God. They shaped my understanding of the larger church and of my own community of faith. Since ancient times the church has recognized this truth, encapsulating it in the formula *lex orandi, lex credendi* – loosely translated, “what we pray is what we believe.” As Anglicans, we understand that the church is responsible for ensuring that the words we say (and sing) in worship truly reflect our understanding about the nature of God, the saving work of Jesus Christ, and the implacable energy of the Holy Spirit.

The conviction that liturgy both forms and nurtures our faith is distinctively Anglican. Because Anglicans have no magisterium, no centralized doctrinal authority, and no codified confession of faith, we rely, like no other denomination, on our liturgy to proclaim and to shape our belief. Fully two-thirds of *The Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) is drawn directly from the Old and New Testaments. Christian writings contained in it are as old as the Apostles’ Creed and as new as the interdenominational community of Taizé in France. Episcopalians are prone to respond to the question “What do you believe?” by handing the questioner a copy of the BCP and adding, “Come and see.”

Our faith is not only given voice by the words of our liturgy – the “rite” – but also embodied in liturgical action – the “ceremony,” spelled out in the rubrics (the liturgical instructions). The priest who pronounces “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us” also breaks the communion bread, just as Christ’s body was broken, just as Christ distributed bread among his friends. The offertory sentences are accompanied by the presentation of bread, wine, and money – the fruit of our life and labor – carried in procession to the altar from among the people. The words following a baptism – “You are marked as Christ’s own forever” – are said as a cross-mark of holy, fragrant oil is stroked on the forehead of the newly baptized.

The roots of our American *Book of Common Prayer* are grounded in distinctively Anglican concerns. While his conflict with the Bishop of Rome was coming to a head, King Henry VIII commissioned an English translation of the Bible (the Coverdale Bible), which was to be chained to a lectern in every church so that all could have access to it. A few years later, the act calling for a new English prayer book mandated that it be grounded in Scripture; agreeable to the order of the primitive church; unifying to the realm; and edifying to the people. Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer then created the BCP as the liturgy for the English church – in English, not Latin; providing forms for daily worship accessible to the common person, not only to priests and monastics; and utilizing written prayers which were to be prayed, in common, by all the people. Further, Cranmer’s prayer book provided that Holy Communion was not to be celebrated unless there were two or more present at worship; a priest could not make Eucharist alone. The importance of fidelity to both scripture and tradition, of theology articulated through the worshipping community, of participation by the assembled congregation, and of speaking in the language of the people remain defining elements of Anglican liturgy.

The rites and ceremonies of the BCP have deepened and enriched my faith as well as my experience of worship. On occasion, the BCP has challenged and, in some cases, reframed my understanding of what it means to be Christian in the Anglican mold. It continues to do so. A short wander through the BCP reminds me of these points of our theology:

- The note regarding the funeral liturgy: “The liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all its meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we, too, shall be raised....” (BCP p. 507)

Everything the Anglican tradition teaches is that we are an Easter people, called to live (now, even before we die) a resurrected, redeemed life. Even during the blackness of Holy Week when we walk with Christ to Calvary, we travel toward the light of the Resurrected Christ found on Easter morning.

- The congregation's resounding "We will," when asked – in baptism, confirmation, marriage, and ordination – to uphold the new beginning being celebrated. (BCP pp. 303, 416, 425, 514, 527, 539, 559)

Our faith teaches that we are meant to live in community. We pray in common, together. We make Eucharist together. We commit to support our brothers and sisters, to pray for them when they are unable to pray for themselves. Our capacity for living faithfully is generated in and supported by the faith community that surrounds us.

- The words of the Sanctus (Holy, holy, holy Lord) that were first formulated by the prophet Isaiah as the song of the hosts of heaven, and that have been sung by human beings in worship for thousands of years. (BCP p.362)

This is a song of the people, recognizing God's glory not only in heaven but here on earth, all around us and at work within us. These words – some of our oldest spiritual roots – are to this day sung by Jewish as well as Christian congregations and serve as a reminder of our close kinship.

- The five questions that elicit the five promises of the baptismal covenant: Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship...? Will you persevere in resisting evil...? Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons...? Will you ... respect the dignity of every human being? (BCP pp. 293-4; 304-5)

For Anglicans, believing in Christ is only the beginning – it's the living in Christ that puts our faith to the test. True to our Celtic roots, we live out a practical faith, understanding our actions to be prayers often more powerful than our words. These promises outline the pattern of self-giving that Christ lived and called his followers to practice.

- The petitions framed in the Thanksgivings for National Life, such as "...We thank you for the great resources of this nation. They make us rich, though we often exploit them. Forgive us..." (BCP pp. 838-9)

Even as we give thanks for the blessings showered on our nation, we acknowledge that our national pride can become arrogance and can blind us to the needs of others.

- In the Catechism, the listing of all Ten Commandments, including "... VII To use all our bodily desires as God intended..." (BCP pp. 847-8)

Putting such time-worn words in "the language of the people" restores their power, and convicts us of narrowing their scope in order to tame them. Anglican formation asks us to reflect on how these "10 rules for life" are manifest in our everyday living.

- The congregational welcome for the newly baptized: "We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood."

Little baby – eternal priesthood. These two concepts don't seem to fit in the same sentence. Yet the catechism (BCP p. 855) reminds us that our work is to "carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world." Our faith calls us to rethink what

“priesthood” means and reminds us that our God is a living God and that his kingdom begins on this earth.

- The “bedtime prayers” of compline: “Keep us, O Lord, as the apple of your eye; Hide us under the shadow of your wings,” and “Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace.” (BCP pp. 132, 134)

These reminders that we are beloved of God are drawn from Psalm 17 and an antiphon from the Middle Ages. They embody Anglicanism’s “both/and” thinking and combat our temptation to dualism: flesh bad/spirit good, earth bad/heaven good, us bad/God good. Compline assures us that we are enfolded in God’s tender care, and yet called to stand watch alongside Christ.

- The “Prayer for Young Persons,” which I pray for “us” rather than “them”: “Show us that your ways give more life than the ways of the world, and that following you is better than chasing after selfish goals. Help us to take failure, not as a measure of our worth, but as a chance for a new start.” (BCP p. 829)

The monastics say that holiness of life means an endless round of falling down and getting up, falling down and getting up, with God’s help. When the world judges us as failures, we remember that God is a God of redemption whose promises give life.

What does the Book of Common Prayer teach me about my faith? In addition to giving me beautiful, well-considered words to articulate what I believe, it tells me that daily prayer is as much my work as weekly church attendance; that no concern lies beyond the reach of prayer, which rises out of the faithful lives of people who have gone before me; that worship practices of ancient people still speak to me; that my church community stands ready to offer comfort and inspiration at each transition point of my life; that participating with the community in worship offers more nourishment than gratifying my own personal preferences; and that community worship can equip and empower each of us to be the church in our daily life and work.

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For more on The Book of Common Prayer, search the site www.anglicansonline.org.