

Introductory Reflections

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The BCP is a way of life and prayer, not a liturgical resource book. First it can and usually is used as a resource, but to use it in this way is to miss the largest and most important dimension of what it offers. As in the early Church, public prayer is enlivened and deepened by personal prayer, and both personal and public prayer are drawn together and upwards into the life of God in the Holy Communion, through which Christ constitutes his Body the Church by offering Himself in His Incarnate Body as its spiritual Food.

Secondly, this way of life and the pattern of prayer which sustains it is profoundly Scriptural. This is not to say only that it makes use of a lot of Scripture. It does. But there is much more. The way the Prayer Book teaches us to hear and understand Scripture is itself Scriptural. It is designed to nurture the Christian soul and nourish and sustain Christian community in a way that is informed by a deeply Christian understanding of what the Scriptures are, that is, of what constitutes them as Scripture. They are the 'doctrinal instrument of salvation' (Thomas Cranmer, John Jewel & Richard Hooker). Thus the ancient lectionary, which approaches the Scriptures in accordance with this understanding, is not an accidental feature of the Prayer Book. It is its very core and foundation.

Thirdly, the approach to Scripture is itself scriptural in other ways too. Prayer Book worship assumes that the whole created order is 'theophany', the manifestation of God's goodness, wisdom and love or desire. (John Calvin called creation 'the theatre of his glory'). We are taught to read the Scriptures as both the 'Book of the Word of God' and the 'Book of the Works of God' (creation).

Fourthly, prayer in this tradition is all about eros - about desire, and about vision. It is not designed to foster a disinterested love of God or of other people, 'impartial' in the interests of 'fairness'. It is all about seeing and being transformed and transfigured by what we are given to see. It is about passion, eros, burning desire. The Prayer Book assumes that the Christian life is about a pilgrimage in which our desires are lifted up and purified. It is not about cultivating an impartial selflessness, but love that has eyes and seeks always to see more and to see more clearly.

Finally, the Prayer Book presents us with a way of radical discipleship, inviting us in the context of a consumer culture to downward mobility and the ever-deeper recognition of our own poverty and Christ's riches. It leaves us among the poor not as those who have the means to help them, but as those who share their crying need. The Christian community is made up of those who know 'we have no power to help ourselves'.