

The Book of Common Prayer: “As We Pray, So We Believe”

Lesson # 18 of 27

Scripture/Memory Verse:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

Lesson Goal & Objectives

Goal:

- \$ To provide students with an understanding of the background and rationale of the familiar forms of worship in the Book of Common Prayer.
- \$ To help students understand that corporate (community) liturgical worship down through history is “normative” in character – that is, it is a standard of faith and worship.

Objective:

Students are invited to reflect on the nature of corporate worship – worship within and by an identifiable community – and the importance of a set written liturgy. They will then learn how the Book of Common Prayer came into existence, and how its purpose is to make worship more accessible to the people of God. Students will then begin to become familiar with the Prayer Book.

Introduction and Background for the Teacher

1) What is Worship?

The English word, “worship,” derives from Middle English, “worth-ship,” and means acknowledging and extolling the “worth” of God. Worship is that which is inherently due to God. For example, we read in the Psalms:

“Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and make good your vows to the Most High.” (Psalm 50:14)

“Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his Name; bring offerings and come into his courts.” (Psalm 96:8)

We are elevated and transformed by God’s grace when we ascribe worth and glory to God. However, the focus and value of our worship does not depend on how we feel about it: whether we are “fed” or whether we find the experience to be “meaningful.” In fact there is a paradox here: the less our worship is *about us*, the more spiritually transformative it is *for us*. The more we focus on God, Himself, the more He is able to fill us with His Love and Life.

2) Liturgical Worship

Our worship as Anglican Christians follows a “script.” We don’t make it up as we go along; it is already written for us in a form that has been developed over many centuries. The Book of Common Prayer provides that script for us as Anglican Christians.

The term “liturgy” indicates a written order of public worship, contrasted with the more informal approach to worship in many Protestant churches. Some folks in this more Protestant tradition criticize the idea of a scripted worship as not being spontaneous. There is also room for spontaneous prayer in our worship, for example during the “Prayers of the People.” However, it is only when we can all read the same prayer together that we can truly offer our prayer in a “corporate” way – as a whole community praying together as one. Originally “*liturgia*” was a secular term that meant “the work of the people” in general, but the word has come to mean the work of the People of God in giving collective praise to God. Liturgical worship is:

- \$ Corporate – the arranged forms provide a framework for collective participation.
- \$ Biblical – it adapts the language of scripture in orderly and meaningful arrangement
- \$ Theological – as the result of careful reflection and collaboration, liturgical prayer expresses the fullness of the Christian faith. C. S. Lewis said, “ready made prayers” such as those of the liturgy “keeps [us] in touch with sound doctrine” and “reminds [us] what things we ought to ask.” Liturgical prayer prevents us from wandering off into ideas that do not participate authentically to the Faith of the Church.
- \$ Holistic – Liturgy is not restricted to the words that are said, but also involve movement, visible signs and symbols, and sacrament. It involves and engages the worshiper on many levels at once.

Liturgy embodies the ancient principle of *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* which means: “the law of prayer is the law of belief.” This ancient teaching of the Church stresses that our prayers express what we believe, and at the same time actively form and shape that belief. Faith and worship always go hand-in-hand: each affects the other.

This is nicely expressed by the American novelist, John Updike,

“There was a time when I wondered why more people did not go to church. Taken purely as a human recreation, what could be more delightful, more unexpected, than to enter a venerable and lavishly scaled building kept warm and clean for use one or two hours a week and to sit and stand in unison and sing and recite creeds and petitions that are like paths worn smooth in the raw terrain or our hearts.”

3) **The History of the Prayer Book**

Many people seem to think that an ordered liturgy such as that contained in the Book of Common Prayer is the product of late medieval church tradition, and that the truly vibrant worship of the early church was free and spontaneous. Actually, ancient Jewish worship in temple and synagogue followed orderly “set” forms, as it does today (for example, the Psalms

which we include in our Book of Common Prayer has been part of Jewish worship since ancient times). Early Christians adopted these forms, and quickly developed their own. We still possess texts of many of these ancient liturgies, and our Prayer Book tradition developed organically out of the earliest forms of Christian worship which then developed through history.

By the 16th century, many Christians called for a reform of the liturgy in order to make it more accessible to ordinary believers. Because the services were in Latin, most people did not understand what was being said. Public worship had become a performance by the clergy that relegated the laity to the status of passive spectators who rarely even received communion. The first Book of Common Prayer offered a form of collective worship that was accessible and participatory – truly “*Common Prayer*.”

The first Book of Common Prayer came into use on the Day of Pentecost, 1549. Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, was the principle architect for the Prayer Book assisted by a commission of bishops, priests, and theologians. Using the Medieval Latin service books as a basis, Cranmer also drew from Greek liturgies, and vernacular German services composed by Martin Luther. These rich sources gave beauty and deep meaning to the Prayer Book liturgy.

The Prayer Book presented traditional forms of worship in a language understood by ordinary people. It also simplified the complexity of the medieval services in order to make them more accessible and participatory. Our American Book of Common Prayer of 1979 is the latest revision in a series of prayer books all based on Cranmer’s prayer books of 1549 and 1552. Many of the prayers familiar to Episcopalians come from that first Prayer Book.

Materials

- \$ Scavenger hunt sheets, printed before class for each student. (Appendix 1)
- \$ Bibles, or printed excerpts of Scripture.
- \$ Copies of the Book of Common Prayer
- \$ Copies of “Selections from the Didache” for each student (Appendix 2)

Opening Prayer (5 min.) (Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer, page 819)

O God, whom saints and angels delight to worship in heaven: Be ever present with your people who seek to offer your praise in the common prayers of your church on earth; and grant to them even now glimpses of your heavenly beauty, and make them worthy at length to behold it unveiled for evermore; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(Also allow the students some time to add their own petitions and thanksgivings)

Introductory Activity (5 – 10 minutes)

\$ Prayer Book Scavenger Hunt

Give each student a “Book of Common Prayer Scavenger Hunt” sheet, and allow them 10

minutes to complete it.

Lesson (20 – 30 minutes)

1. Corporate Prayer: The students will read aloud Matthew 18:19-20 (“...where two or three are gathered...”)

Discuss: How is praying with others different from praying alone? Make the point that collective worship and private prayer balance and reinforce each other.

2. The meaning of using a “Script.” The students will read 1 Samuel 1:12-17.

Discuss: Here Hannah is not reading out of her prayer book, she “pours out her soul before God.” All Christians are invited to pray from their hearts. The concerns that motivate Hannah’s prayer are deeply personal. But when we worship as a body the focus is not so much on our personal needs, as our collective praise, thanksgiving, confession and intercession. Explain the word “liturgy” to the students and stress that the liturgy provides a framework for us to pray as the collective Body of Christ rather than simply praying our own personal prayers for ourselves alone.

3. Prayer in common goes back to the beginning of Christianity: Give every student a copy of “Selections from the Didache.” (Appendix 2) Explain how the Prayer Book is based on forms of worship that go all the way back to New Testament times. Stress the aspect of continuity with the early church. (As explained in “Introduction and Background”). Have the students read different parts of the service provided in the handout.

4. First Prayer Book: Turn to the “Preface of the First Book of Common Prayer (1549)” in the Historical Documents section of the Prayer Book (page 866). Read selected and relevant portions (particularly the first paragraph) and explain how Cranmer and his colleagues assembled the first Prayer Book and why they made the decisions that they did.

5. Thumbing Through the Prayer Book: Make sure every student has a prayer book in hand. Turn to the table of contents and show them the wide variety of services and resources for private devotion.

6. Three Familiar Prayers: To demonstrate the historic character of the Prayer Book, as well as the richness of its devotional prose, have students find and read aloud each of the following prayers – as you share the information provided here:

\$ Collect for Purity (“Almighty God, to you all hearts are open...”), page 355. This was composed by Alcuin of York, an English Deacon who ran the palace school of Charlemagne around 800 A. D.

\$ Proper 28, page 236. This prayer was written by Thomas Cranmer for the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549.

§ Prayer for Mission, page 101. This was written by Charles Henry Brent, an American Episcopal priest, monk, bishop and missionary to the Philippines (died 1927).

Take-Home Activities: (5 min.)

1. During the following week make use of the Daily Devotions for Families and Individuals on page 136 of the BCP. Also explore the “Prayers and Thanksgivings” section beginning on page 810.

2. Visit different churches attended by your friends, both liturgical churches (Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Orthodox) as well as non-liturgical (Baptist, Pentecostal, or Non-Denominational). Take note of the differences and similarities with the prayer liturgy with which they are familiar. How did it feel to worship in ways that were unfamiliar? What do you find in liturgical worship that you don’t find in a more “spontaneous” approach – and vice versa? Be prepared to report on your experience at the next class.

Closing Prayer: (5 min.)

Almighty and everliving God, whose servant Thomas Cranmer, with others, restored the language of the people in the prayers of your Church: Make us always thankful for this heritage; and help us so to pray in the Spirit and with the understanding, that we may worthily magnify your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (Lesser Feasts and Fasts, page 253) (Also allow the students some time to offer their own petitions and thanksgivings)

Scripture References:

* Psalm 50:14, Psalm 96:8, Psalm 29, Psalm 150

* Matthew 18:19-20

* Acts 2:42-47

Resources

* Marion J. Hatchett, Commentary on the American Prayer Book, Harper Collins,

* Price & Weil, Liturgy for Living, Morehouse Publishing

* William Sydnor, The Prayer Book Through the Ages, Morehouse Publishing