Sermon at St Edward's, Cambridge
24th July 2005
Book of Common Prayer

I last had the great privilege of speaking from this pulpit on 6th July 1997 and I return this morning at your vicar's invitation, not because I feel qualified to preach, but because I have a deep affection for this church. This is where I worshipped as a child, here I was prepared for confirmation, and to St Edward's I return with a renewed sense of gratitude to Almighty God for His love and grace over nearly 85 years of sometimes turbulent life. It is a particular joy that this is a Sunday on which we celebrate and give thanks for the Book of Common Prayer.

My own devotion to the Prayer Book has its roots in infancy and early childhood, in nostalgia and in family tradition. I was born in Oxford and both my parents, sharing a love of choral music, liked to hear Evensong sung in the College chapels, so that I was carried to services sleeping in my mother's arms from a very early age. And later, when we moved to Ludlow on the Welsh borders, I remember Evensong in the small church near Ludford Bridge where in winter the tortoise-stove would flare dramatically when the wind changed, like the tongues of fire at Whitsun, and where there was a brass-bound copy of the Prayer Book left in the pew where we habitually sat which to me was a great object of desire and my first intimation of the physical pleasure of turning the pages of a book. During the longueurs of the sermon I would explore it and I can remember my excitement on first reading the rubric at the end of the Communion of the Sick:

> In the time of the plague, sweat or such other like contagious times of sickness or diseases, when none of the Parish or neighbours can be gotten to communicate with the sick in their houses for fear of the infection, upon special request of the diseased, the Minister may only communicate with him.

I was moved then, as I am today, by the priestly heroism so much taken for granted, and would vividly picture that solitary figure walking through the empty streets carrying the sacred vessels, that lonely celebration of Holy Communion in the candlelit and fetid sickroom.

And later I attended a church school in Ludlow where the parish priest would visit each week to teach us the Collect and instruct us in its meaning. So these marvellous prayers, a single sentence, beautifully-constructed, so simple yet so pregnant with meaning, entered my consciousness, became part of my religious and literary heritage and helped to make me a writer. I am not ashamed of this nostalgia; we are made by our past just as our present will shape our future; but nostalgia is, of course, the least part of my devotion to the Book of Common Prayer.

It is difficult publicly to mourn the increasing neglect of this wonderful book without being accused by some zealots for change of intellectual arrogance, prejudice, hypocrisy or mere nostalgia, especially if the critic is less than regular in his or her own church attendance. I am not competent to criticise either the theology or the historical basis of the comparatively new Common Worship which, unlike its predecessor, does include parts of the Prayer Book, perhaps because the revisers have discovered through research how many parishioners still retained a love of the old liturgy. This inclusion of Prayer Book passages – which some purists in the Prayer Book Society deplore since it is so piecemeal – shows a welcome advance from the rabid dislike of the Prayer Book shown by some revisers after the introduction of the Alternative Service Book. But surely it is not only an older generation who mourn the neglect of an incomparable liturgy which for generations has solaced, sustained, rebuked and exhorted all manner of men and women and provided cadences of immense beauty and power with which they were christened, married and at last laid to earth.

It is appropriate that the corporate worship of the Church in the authorised liturgy should be ordered, expressed in words written to be spoken aloud by priest or congregation, and in language of such nobility and grace that it has some claim to be worthy of the God it worships. The language of the Prayer Book is, for many of us, so sanctified by use that we have no need to fumble to find the right page or to concentrate on the precise words or their order, but are united in fellowship with each other in the act of worship and by grace into communion with Almighty God. Private prayer, the communication of the individual soul with its God, may be spontaneous or formal, articulate or a silent cry of gratitude or longing, needing no special place or posture and as varied as the number of those who pray. We can call upon God in a bus queue, in an aircraft, in those difficult moments in the early hours when we lie wakeful, when we see strangers in distress and are touched by compassion, and when we experience those transcendent moments of joy and exultation and are moved to give thanks for the glory of God. But I am interested to find how often my own private and spontaneous prayers either use or echo the words of the Book of Common Prayer. Evelyn Waugh, in a letter advising Lady Diana Cooper on the order in which to pray, wrote that she should remember the word ACTS: Adoration, Contrition, Thanksgiving and last, Supplication. The Third Collect in the Communion Service is, for me, the most perfect prayer of supplication ever written.

> Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, who knowest our necessities before we ask, and our ignorance in asking: We beseech thee to have compassion upon our infirmities; and those things, which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask, vouchsafe to give us for the worthiness of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

We live in an age imbued with a restless desire for change. It sometimes seems that nothing old, nothing well established, nothing which has evolved through centuries of experience and loving use escapes our urge to diminish, revise or abolish it. Above all, every institution has to be relevant – a very fashionable word – to the needs of modern life, as if human beings in the early twentieth-first century are somehow fundamentally different in their needs and aspirations from all previous generations. One argument put forward for the replacement of the old liturgy is that the Book of Common Prayer alienates the young and has no relevance to their lives. But the desire always to simplify and popularise seems to be part of an attitude towards the less-educated young which I find both demeaning and arrogant. Is this not tantamount to saying that from them nothing of value can be expected, and to them nothing of value need be given?

And there are others to whom the Prayer Book is important, men and women who would think it presumptuous to call themselves Christians. They are seekers after truth, hopeful travellers, rather than among those who have found their way home to faith. They would perhaps describe themselves as reverent and sympathetic agnostics, but they are deeply aware of the religious dimension of life. They feel the need to worship and give thanks and until now they have found their natural home in the Church of England and their spiritual life nourished by the Book of Common Prayer. They may not have the fashionable appeal of the disadvantaged young of the inner cities whom, of course, the Church must rightly strive to serve, attract and retain, but they too have a hunger for God and their loss is a loss, not only to the Church of England, but to the Christian faith.

And, this morning, in celebrating the Book of Common Prayer we revere and commemorate Thomas Cranmer, that sometimes muddled, occasionally accommodating, only too human servant of Henry VIII and the reformed Church who by God's grace gave faith and worship a language which has never been equalled let alone surpassed. Of no man can it be more truly said, 'He being dead yet speaks.' Cranmer could not have known in 1552 that he was providing a vehicle for English worship that would remain unchanged for over four hundred years. Being a modest man, the responsibility would have appalled him. But he was doing even more. He influenced the whole direction of the English language. He was not ashamed to borrow from others, from Miles Coverdale, Richard Joye and Richard Taverner and, where he made alterations, the change was always an improvement. He knew when to use an Italianate word, when a simpler homely one would be stronger, when to use them together in a marvellous balance. But he was not writing for literary effect. He was writing for the public worship of God, above all he was writing for truth. In this restless age, with its contempt for authority and tradition, when anything new is seen as an improvement, why cannot we have the grace to recognise when a thing is perfect and the humility to leave it alone?

And the book he gave us is scriptural, the Bible passages based on William Tyndale's marvellous translation. Tyndale, martyred twenty years before Cranmer went to the stake, was one of the greatest geniuses ever to write in the English tongue; like Cranmer he wrote not for his own age, but for all time. The influence of these two books, the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, runs like a golden thread through our literature and history. We recognise their cadences not only in the works of such writers as Isaac Walton and John Bunyan, but in the sonorous and majestic phrases of John Milton, Sir Thomas Browne and Edward Gibbon; we detect the influence of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer in the novels of such different writers as the Brontës and Thackeray. It is difficult to see how anyone can claim seriously to study English literature – or indeed hope to understand much of western literature, painting or music – without some knowledge of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer.

And to those who love them, the familiar words have a power untouched by time. The Third Collect in The Order for Evening Prayer is surely as relevant today to an elderly lady living barricaded in her city flat as it was when it was written:

> Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by they great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

The litany is a beautiful and comprehensive prayer which only needs one addition (the inclusion of those who travel by air as well as by land and sea) to make it totally appropriate for 21st century travellers. And now, particularly in London and our inner cities, how appropriate is the petition that we should be delivered from battle and murder and from sudden death.

The picture most of us associate strongly with Cranmer is of that frail old man, after a life which held its share of prevarication, compromise and political manoeuvring, steadfastly holding his right hand in the flame so that the hand which had offended by signing his recantation should be the first to feel the fire. As Diarmaid MacCulloch points out in his magisterial biography, we live in a sceptical and compromising age where honest doubt is honoured above clear ideological certainty. We do not condemn Cranmer for his recantation: rather we approve the reasonableness and honesty of a man who will avoid an agonising public death if he can do so. But for us – who by God's grace will never have to face so appalling a choice – there still comes that moment of decision, sometimes in small matters, sometimes in large, when prevarication and compromise have to stop and we can only say, in the words of Luther, 'Here stand I. I can do no other.' In this moment Cranmer is our example and our inspiration.

But it is our privilege and joy as lovers of the Prayer Book to do more than take courage and resolution from Cranmer's example of courage and perseverance. It is our task to ensure that what is most lasting about him – his work – is never forgotten. If Tyndale and Cranmer had not lived I would not be speaking to you this morning in the language I am using. The Christian religion would not have spread worldwide, we would almost certainly not have had Shakespeare and English would not now be a world language, and one of extraordinary richness, strength and versatility.

Praise for the Bible and the Prayer Book as literature would, of course, have been incomprehensible to Tyndale and to Cranmer. Tyndale was translating into the language of the common people the good news of man's salvation and the hope of everlasting life. Cranmer was setting out to establish a firm foundation for the reformed church in worship and theology. I wonder if, working patiently through the long hours and glancing at the leaping flames in their fireplaces, they had a fleeting premonition of the terrible deaths that awaited them. I hope not, but who can tell? Yet, as a writer, I like to believe that both had a creator's joy in their genius, that they knew the supreme satisfaction of putting the right words in the right order and that, snuffing our their candles at the end of the working day and looking back as what they had achieved, they knew that it was good.

May we who enjoy so rich a heritage from their example and their genius resolve that their work shall be honoured and, above all, used both in private reading and in public worship, not only in this our generation, but for all generations to come.