

A Guide to the Use of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer

by
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Introduction

For a visitor to one of churches, the prospect of following the Book of Common Prayer can appear to be daunting. Even to those who have been parishioners in one of our churches, the BCP can still be a bit mysterious. While there are many books describing the history and theology of the BCP, there are very few published items that are really helpful in providing guidance to the person in the pew. The purpose of this monograph is to provide such a guide to help individuals discover the beauty of the BCP and to enable them to treasure it as a friend. We will begin by looking at the BCP as a whole, then examine the Morning and Evening Prayer and the service of Holy Communion, and, finally, other helpful offices contained therein.

The Structure of the Book of Common Prayer

The first thing that you should be familiar with are the Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (pp. x-xli). You will note that by reading Morning and Evening Prayer daily, you will have read most of the Bible in one year. Some of the books listed are in italics. These books are found in the Apocrypha or in the Old Testament section of a Catholic or Orthodox Bible. Ecclesiasticus (abbreviated *Ecclus*, not to be confused with Ecclesiastes) appears many times in the lectionary. In recent editions of the Apocrypha or Catholic/Orthodox Old Testament Ecclesiasticus is called Sirach. Note, also, the Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days (pp. xliv-xlv). You can ignore the Calendar and Tables (pp. xlvi-lvii) while you become familiar with the various Offices.

Pp. 3-34 contain the Orders for Morning and Evening Prayer. This is followed by the Prayers and Thanksgivings (pp. 35-53) for various situations. To this should be added the Family Prayer section near the end of the BCP (pp. 587-600). It is useful to read through them so that you can use them in your private devotions and/or include them as a part of Morning or Evening Prayer depending upon your personal needs.

The Litany or General Supplication (pp. 54-59), according to the rubrics, may be used after the third collect at Morning or Evening Prayer, or before Holy Communion. While it is intended to be said in a congregational setting, praying the petitions individually can be most profitable. A Penitential Office for Ash Wednesday (pp. 60-63) is self-explanatory.

The next major section of the BCP (pp. 67-269) includes The Order for Holy Communion and the Propers (Collects or prayers, Epistles, and Gospels) for each Sunday, Holy Day, and/or Special Occasion).

Pp. 273-342 contain Offices used by the clergy. Anyone who is pursuing Holy Orders needs to be familiar with these Orders. Nevertheless, the Offices of Instruction (pp. 283-295) is useful for all Anglicans. It and the Catechism (pp. 577-583) provide the reader with concise statements on what we believe. For a more comprehensive exposition of

Anglican theology you should go to the very end of the BCP (pp. 603-11) where you will find The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Articles of Religion.

Central to daily prayer are The Psalter or Psalms of David (pp. 345-525). The wording may prove difficult for some since its translation from the Hebrew predates the King James Bible. Nevertheless, the continual reading and rereading of them will bring about a familiarity that will be a source of comfort.

Pp. 529-574 contain The Form and Matter of Making, Ordaining, and Consecrating Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, The Litany and Suffrages for Ordinations, The Consecration of a Church or Chapel, and An Office of Institution of Ministers into Parishes or Churches. These are important for those pursuing Holy Orders, but are not really pertinent to the laity.

Morning and Evening Prayer

Since most of our churches celebrate Holy Communion every Sunday, there are many parishioners who have had little or no experience with Morning or Evening Prayer. This is unfortunate since these Offices are a real treasure. Therefore, it is hoped that all Anglicans will make them a central part of their daily devotions. Here are some guidelines for the private saying of these Offices.

1. Read the rubrics (instructions in italics) so that you know the Order for each of the Offices and various options. Don't try to absorb it all at one time. You will make mistakes at first, but that is OK. Don't try to do too much. Keep it simple at first.
2. Before beginning these Offices refer to the Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year and place book marks at the Biblical lessons (use any version of the Bible you are comfortable with), the Psalm for the day, and the Collect of the Day. For the latter you will have to go the Holy Communion propers for the current week; it is the same from Sunday thru Saturday. Preparing these before you begin will enable you say the Office without breaking the smooth flow of the liturgy.
3. SAY THE OFFICE OUT LOUD. To really benefit from this discipline you should not only read the Office, but hear it as well. Thomas Cranmer, who authored the first two BCPs, created a masterpiece of English literature. That is why, in spite of later versions, Cranmer's original form has remained the same. Through the daily recitation of these Offices, the language will become very comfortable and the words will simply roll off your tongue as you get caught up in its rhythms. After awhile you will no longer focus on the words you are saying, but the liturgy itself will "lift up your hearts" so that it becomes a spiritual experience and you will be in communion with God. It is similar to the Latin Tridentine Mass. Even though most Roman Catholic parishioners could not translate the Mass into English, nevertheless they knew what it was about and its beauty contributed to their experiencing the presence of God during the liturgy. This can also be compared to watching Italian opera. If you concentrate so much on English subtitles you

miss the beauty of the music itself. That is why opera-lovers will read the libretto beforehand so as to get the gist of the story and then they can enjoy the wonderful arias of the operatic work.

4. Both Morning and Evening Prayer begin with *Sentences of Scripture*. Keep it simple by selecting one or two that are most meaningful to you and one that is appropriate to the season.
5. The most commonly used canticle in Morning Prayer after the first lesson is *Benedictus es, Domine* (p. 11) and after the second lesson is the *Jubilate* (p. 15). And, the most commonly used canticle in Evening Prayer after the first lesson is the *Magnificat* (p. 26) and after the second lesson is the *Nunc dimittis* (p. 28). I suggest that you use only these for awhile so that they become a part of your very being. Later you can experiment with other options. Also, use the Apostles' Creed and save the Nicene Creed for Holy Communion.
6. The mandatory collects are the Collect for Day, the Collect Peace, and the Collect for Grace (p.17 in Morning Prayer). In Evening Prayer, the Collect for Grace is replaced with the Collect for Aid against Perils (p. 31). At first you might want to conclude these Offices with the Grace (p. 20 or p. 34). As you become more comfortable with these liturgies you may want to add other prayers (pp. 18-19 for Morning Prayer and pp. 32-33 for Evening Prayer) or other collects from the BCP.

Service of Holy Communion

The service of Holy Communion is central to our Anglican Faith and most of our congregations celebrate Holy Communion every Sunday. While much of it is read by the priest, there is a good amount of preparation that the person in the pew can do. Here are some guidelines:

1. While some churches use the Anglican Missal or move the Gloria in Excelsis to the beginning of the service, nevertheless the basic structure of Holy Communion is the same. Therefore, you should study the structure of the service as it is contained in pp. 67-84. Try to learn some of the prayers and collects by heart even if some of them may actually only be said by the priest. They are wonderful prayers and are useful in your private devotions. I recommend the Collect for Purity (p. 67), the Prayer of Confession (. 75), the Prayer of Humble Access (p. 82), the Prayer of Thanksgiving (p. 83), and the Gloria in Excelsis (p. 84).
2. Before going to the Holy Communion service read the Collect, Epistle Lesson, and Gospel Lesson for the day. This will give you as sense of what the overall theme is about and will anticipate the message of the sermon.
3. The BCP's rubrics identify three Sundays when the first Exhortation (pp. 83-84) is to be read. The private reading of this Exhortation by individuals prior to the Service of Holy Communion can be most profitable to the person in the pew and is an excellent source of preparation for this Holy Sacrament. The latter two

Exhortations (pp. 86-89) are rarely used since traditional Anglicans are used to the weekly celebration of Holy Communion.

Concluding Comments

Hopefully this concise guide will be helpful to you. Remember to keep it simple at first and don't get discouraged if you make mistakes. Through the daily discipline of the reading the Offices you will find that the language and the rhythms will become intoxicating and you will look forward to this every day. After awhile the Book of Common Prayer will be your constant friend just as the Holy Bible is your friend. You will know where to turn for prayers that relate to your own special needs, especially prayers of thanksgiving and intercession. Page ix has a wonderful guide for searching for Psalms with particular themes. I especially recommend the reading of the Psalms for daily inspiration and comfort.

To summarize, then, I urge you to see the Book of Common Prayer as a wonderful Christian handbook that contain our beautiful liturgies, prayers, scripture readings, and doctrine. It is truly a treasure that you will want to open frequently.