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Ever Burning

Through the glow of candlelight there came a sweet reminiscence. My wife and I were fortunate to be invited this year to our annual *sumptuous* Candlelight Dinner.

For the past decade I have served at this dinner with sheer pleasure. Those who serve seem to have as much fun as the guests do. They partake of the same elegant fare, and taste the same fine wines, and enjoy the spirit of the evening.

While delighting in the many delicious courses, a guest, and parishioner, told me of an experience that he had had a few years ago.

He had given a paper at an International Conference on Scientific and Medical.

Writing, at Pretoria, South Africa. After delivering the paper, at a reception that evening, a member of the Conference asked our speaker if he was an Anglican. He replied that he was, and then asked in turn why this person might think so. The member's reply was that as he listened to

the paper he could detect an influence of the language and beauty of the Book of Common Prayer.

What a splendid experience! Our parishioner had offered a professional speech to a learned assembly, and yet years of allowing the Book of

Common Prayer to form his memory enabled him to articulate his research, quite naturally and unaffectedly, from the same reservoir of beauty.

At the moment of his telling me this story, the candlelight seemed to burn brighter, and my mind reflected back to our Anglican beginnings. I remembered the words of Hugh Latimer to Nicholas Ridley, as they were being burned at the stake for their faithfulness to what would become Anglicanism. "Be of good cheer, Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day, by God's grace, light up such a candle in England, as I trust, will never be put out."

Five hundred years later, through a speech given by an American in South Africa, the same faith of Ridley and Latimer, so beautifully articulated by Thomas Cranmer in the Prayer Book, had *shone* through to a society of scientists, one of whom recognized it as his own.

This story of our parishioner, who describes himself, theologically speaking, as a Cranmerian, is a paradigm for the inherent value of the Prayer Book. It is an inheritance of immense spiritual power. But the quality of its power is not simply its language, but rather how its language conveys the truth and beauty of the gospel of Christ Jesus.

It is the inherent power of the Gospel that compels the use of the Prayer Book. It embodies the indispensable inheritance of Scripture, and in a poetical way, articulates the wisdom of the Church developed over the centuries. Through the regular use of the Prayer Book, the inherent power of the Gospel does not cease to bring the faithful worshipper into the presence of the living God.

One undeniable aspect of this good news is the proper focus on sin and redemption. A number of years ago, one of our ladies asked me about the General Confession. It seemed hard and severe and exacting. "How low do we have to go?" she asked. My reply was simply, "As low as we need forgiveness."

The Prayer Book is exactly correct on this point of the goodnews of Jesus. We go as deep as we can into our darkness, all the way to that point of conscious depravity, and beyond. "There is no health in us."

But then, with the greater depth of divine forgiveness, we hear of the promises of Christ. "He pardoneth and absolveth all those who truly repent, and unfeignedly believe His holy gospel."

The good news embodied throughout the Prayer Book reflects this balance of spiritual life. True to Scripture and to the teachings of the Church that stem from it, the language of our liturgy unfolds the *beauty of holiness*.

But in order for the beauty of holiness to take root in our souls we must use it. And just as our parishioner, to his delight and surprise, found the Prayer Book reflected in his own professional paper, we also shall find our minds formed by its use.

But the Book must be *used*. To truncate its form to suit our vain imaginations, or to use it only as dilettantes, on occasions when we want to supply our bored selves with some version of spiritual experience, is to miss the *wisdom* of common prayer. This is why the new liturgies are so superficial. They treat the wisdom of

the Christian tradition as if it were simply another point of view, when in reality it is the teaching of the Holy Ghost. To use the Prayer Book faithfully and regularly is to be filled with the Spirit and the whole counsel of God.

There are of course other ways of

Christianity, other forms in Churches that lead beautifully and wisely to the heavenly Jerusalem. And there are still other Christians who prefer their own choice of experience and inspiration to the discipline of common prayer. They too are part of the Body of Christ, but their way is individualist and neither beautiful nor wise.

The light of Anglicanism burns still today and will be ever burning. Its brilliance shines from the knowledge of God articulated in Scripture and enflamed with the love of the Spirit. Its fuel is the blood of martyrs. In the midst of a world increasingly barbaric, the Book of Common Prayer shall provide St. John's with a beacon to guide her path.

Every time we light a candle in the Church, or even at the Candlelight Dinner, we remind ourselves of God's purifying fire in our midst.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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