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HOW TO PRAY THE SERVICE (V)

In these notes on the Prayer Book orders of Morning and Evening Prayer – which I promise will be coming to an end soon! – we have been considering the service according to its fundamental division into three parts. After the preparatory prayers of penitence, we began last week to consider the praise of God's grace in his word. Next week I trust we shall finish the series by considering the third part, the prayers in which we claim the promises of grace for the church.

The praise of God's grace in his Word begins with opening versicles and responses, and continues (at Morning Prayer, after the canticle Venite) with the recitation of the psalms, the Bible's own book of praise, and the Church's school of prayer. Following the psalms, and explicating in greater detail the themes they set forth in a concentrated form, come the lessons (readings) from Scripture, one from the Old Testament, and another from the New. (Although on Sunday mornings at St. John's we read the epistle and gospel lessons printed in the Prayer Book, at other services we follow the lessons appointed on pages x-xlv.) In Cranmer's original lectionary, almost the whole Old Testament was read through in the course of a year, and the New Testament about two and half times (although even he omitted portions he thought likely to edify only the most mature Christians, like the genealogies of Genesis 10, the Song of Songs, and Revelation.) The lectionary (table of readings) of the '28 Prayer Book (pp. x-xlv) is not quite so extensive as Cranmer's, but still takes one through a representative selection of the Old Testament and the greatest part of the New every year.

Like the other Protestant reformers, Cranmer sought to bring all the faithful into saving contact with God through his Word written, and had been an enthusiastic proponent of the first official English translation of Scripture, the "Great Bible" of 1539 (a predecessor of the "King James Version" of 1611). For Cranmer, the corporate reading of the Scripture at the daily office was one of the chief benefits of its reform. Indeed, in the Preface of 1549, he says that it was the "first original and ground" of the Church's common prayers: "for they [the "ancient fathers" of the early church] so ordered the matter, that all the whole Bible, (or the greatest part thereof) should be read over once every year; intending thereby, that the Clergy ... should (by often reading, and meditation in God's word) be stirred up to godliness themselves, and be more able to exhort others to wholesome doctrine, and to

confute them that were adversaries to the Truth; and further, that the people (by daily hearing of holy Scripture read in the Church) might continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God, and be the more inflamed with the love of his true Religion". Cranmer's portrait of ancient church practice is often thought to be a romantic idealization, but the homilies of a number of the Church Fathers show that the sequential reading of Scripture was not unknown in ancient times. Moreover, until the Franciscan reforms of the daily office in the 13th century, the extensive, sequential daily reading of Scripture was a longstanding monastic practice. As is more frequently the case than many realize, this "typically Protestant" agenda turns out to be rather Catholic as well.

Since the rise of cheap publishing, the Bible can be read and studied easily and profitably in private, in structured programmes of instruction, or in discussion groups. Yet important and valuable as such private reading and study undoubtedly are, the reading of the Bible in public worship is what is normative for the Christians. For "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20); it can only be interpreted rightly, when it is read to the glory of God, and for the benefit of his people, in the context of the Church's faith – and the faithful Church. Reading it in the context of public worship – preceded by acts of penitence, followed by acts of praise, and leading to acts of prayer – is the proper context for Bible's message to be heard and interpreted, applied and obeyed, by the community of faith for which it was written. When it is read apart from this context, its interpretation is open to all kinds of distorting influences and errors.

The canticles which follow the lessons, therefore, have an important role to play in the service, as acts of praise and thanksgiving that teach us how to respond to the word of God written. As with the Psalms, they are still known by the Latin names they had for centuries before the Reformation. These names, consisting in the first Latin words of each text, were no doubt a practical convenience for those living through the transition from Latin to English, but to later generations they are a reminder of the ancient continuities of worship maintained in the Prayer Book.

After the first lesson at Morning Prayer is said (or sung) Te Deum ("Tee-DEE-um" or "Tay-DAY-um"), "We praise thee, O God", an ancient hymn traditionally said to have been sung by Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine at the latter's baptism. It is the greatest non-scriptural hymn of the Church, in praise of God as Creator (ending in "Holy, Holy, Holy"), in confession of the Trinity, and in acclamation of Christ as Redeemer. During Lent, and on weekdays that are not feast days, may be said instead one of two canticles from the Apocryphal additions to Daniel 3, known as the "Song of the Three Children": Benedicite (Benna-DIE-see-tay), or Benedictus es, domine. The former calls upon all creatures to "bless the Lord", and is commonly used during Lent, when through self-denial the Church seeks a right use of creatures in right relation to the Creator.

The office of praise comes its triumphant conclusion in the three "evangelical" (i.e. gospel) canticles taken from St. Luke's gospel. At Morning Prayer, in the Benedictus, we sing the song of Zacharias at the birth of Christ's forerunner, his son John the Baptist (Luke 1.68). In his son's birth Zacharias the "dayspring" (the dawning) of the day of salvation, and he dedicates his son to "prepare the way of the Lord".

We now apply his words to the beginning of each day we live in the grace of Christ, and our own witness to him in it. At Evening Prayer we sing the Magnificat (Mag-NIFF-i-cat), the Song of the Blessed Virgin Mary giving thanks for the child she carries in her womb (Luke 1.46); and the Nunc Dimittis (Nunk-dim-IT-iss), the Song of Simeon at his meeting the infant Jesus (Luke 2.29). These evangelical canticles are (as Hooker writes) "the first gratulations wherewith our Lord and Saviour was joyfully received at his entrance into the world...being prophetic discoveries of Christ already present, whose future coming the other psalms did but foreshadow." If the psalms present the longing and promise of redemption made "to Abraham and his seed forever", these evangelical (or gospel) canticles express joy in that promise now fulfilled in Christ. As such they are exactly appropriate note upon which the Church's praise of God in his word comes to a conclusion.

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