

How do we encounter God?

It is entirely possible to state a belief in God and for it to make no practical difference to the way you live. It happened in the time of Jesus and it happens now. People who go through the motions, say the right prayers at the right times, follow the ritual, but are essentially unchanged. It is of course most obvious when they are in positions of power – the Borgias now there's an extreme example, but we are all capable of this kind of compartmentalisation in our lives.

Equally, it is entirely possible to follow the teaching of Jesus about how we treat other people and yet be agnostic or even atheist. There are many very good, kind, compassionate people who might say that they behave in a Christian way, but have no particular beliefs about God.

There are other people who will talk about a force for good, something indefinable that they try to get in touch with through music, or crystals, or at special sites where the lay lines meet. It is as though they sense the presence of the Holy Spirit but cannot quite connect.

As Christians we are taught that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and we encounter him through worship and prayer, through following Christ, and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which flows from the Father and the Son. It is following God with our intellect, with our bodily actions and with our heart, in other words with body, mind and spirit.

Yet, despite knowing this, throughout the years we have never really got it right. And it is not for want of trying.

In 1549, in the reign of King Edward 6<sup>th</sup>, the first Prayer Book in English was published. It was written by Archbishop Cranmer. This was to be the prayer book. As it said, really quite sensitively, in the preface:

*and where heretofore there hath been great diversity in saying and singing in churches within this realm, now from henceforth all the whole realm shall have but one use. and if any would judge that way more painful, because that all things must be read by the book, whereas before, by the reason of so often repetition, they could say many things by heart: if those men will weight their labour, with the profit in knowledge that which daily they shall obtain by reading upon the book, they will not refuse the pain.*

In the communion there were rubrics: first to advertise any that were evil livers, a sort of name and shame, but also instructions in the manner of garb and ritual. The priest should wear a white alb, with vestment or cope and stand before the midst of the altar.

There were exhortations, some wonderfully fierce, which were to encourage Christian behaviour – these were designed to bring an end to the idea of Sunday observance whilst doing what one liked during the week.

In the intercessions, there were extensive prayers for those who have died, and the intercessions then went straight into the Eucharistic prayer. There was to be no elevation of the host. At the end there were many notes eg that the bread used should be unleavened and round but without markings and must always be divided, no-one having a whole round piece of bread. The bread had

to be placed in the person's mouth to avoid them taking it away and using it for any superstitious beliefs. Well this prayer book lasted all of three years.

In 1552 it was revised by Cranmer. At the beginning was printed a copy of the Act of Uniformity – an act which gave a quite different tone to the whole book - which stated that if anyone used any other prayer book or form of liturgy or was at a service where it was used, they could be convicted, the punishment for a first offence being 6 months in prison, of the 2<sup>nd</sup> – one year, and for the third, life imprisonment. Not quite so sensitive as it had been in 1549.

And in those 3 years, the Prayer book itself had changed. No longer any mention of vestments. The priest would stand at the North end of the altar. No prayers for the dead. At the end there is a great discourse on kneeling, for while the instruction is that communion should be received kneeling, the explanation is that this in no way signifies adoration of the host, that the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine.

What has happened is that the liturgy has become a notch lower, more protestant, more distinct from Roman Catholicism.

Reading through the 1552 version, a sense of joy seems to have disappeared – perhaps, dare I say it, an absence of the Holy Spirit.

When we think of what happened between this prayer book and the coming of the 1662 Prayer book, we can see that this was hotly disputed theology. It mattered to people – it was literally a matter of life and death. Under Queen Mary, Cranmer was put to death, and the liturgy returned to the Roman rite. But the prayer book survived. And the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which we still use today, is very similar to the earlier editions.

At the heart of the matter was the dispute between those who valued ritual in worship, and wanted to emphasise the transcendent nature of God, and on the other hand, those who wanted to emphasise the following of Christ, how we live our lives following the teaching of Jesus and Paul, being prayerful. These should not be an either/or, but a both/and.

Somehow, after the horrors of the civil war and the restoration of the monarchy, by 1662 that balance was achieved. This prayer book is less prescriptive. For example in manner of dress it says that clergy should either wear surplice and scarf or white alb with vestment or cope. The bread can be taken in the hand or the mouth. Although the Holy Spirit is mentioned rarely, the spirit of reconciliation permeates the Book, which is how it has survived.

In those turbulent years, the genuine theological differences found champions in the rulers. For in this country, even before Henry 8<sup>th</sup>, the Kings and Queens have been closely associated with the church. And of course they still are. Our Present Queen is Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

Today we celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. We are fortunate indeed to have a queen who takes her role with the utmost seriousness and understands the balance between ritual, Christian living and the work of the Holy Spirit. She sets us a wonderful example of what it is to be dutiful, to take seriously being an example to others, a way of Christian living.

On Coronation Day she broadcast to the millions across the Commonwealth and Empire who had shared in the ceremony through radio or television, whatever their religion:

*“All of you, near or far, have been united in one purpose. It is hard for me to find words in which to tell you of the strength which this knowledge has given me. The Ceremonies you have seen today are ancient and some of their origins are veiled in the mysteries of the past, but their spirit and their meaning shine through the ages, never perhaps more brightly than now. I have in sincerity pledged myself to your service, as so many of you are pledged to mine. Throughout all my life and with all my heart I shall strive to be worthy of your trust”.*

This goal she has kept before her, at what cost we will never know, but that she has succeeded shows the work of the spirit, the spirit of unity and truth.

Without the ritual, so much of our Christian heritage would have been lost. Without the Christian duty, the daily enactment of the commandments to love one another, Christianity would be an empty religion, but without the Holy Spirit, we can never be one, never work together, never be Christ’s body on earth.

We now have Common Worship as an alternative to the 1662 prayer book. It uses current language, and contains within more choice. But whatever prayer book we use, unless the Holy Spirit is working within the church, and within us as individuals, the deep divisions that still exist within the church will rise to the fore and become as destructive for the church as the rifts of those turbulent years during and after the reformation.

Let us pray that the Holy Spirit may be our guide, that all royalty and commoners will take with the utmost seriousness the vows they make, that we may find our common purpose and whatever book we use, we may have prayer to God our Father in common, in the power of the Spirit and through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.