

A NEW ZEALAND PRAYER BOOK

A Literary Critic's View

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I have been asked to write about *A New Zealand Prayer Book* with two points of view in mind. One is to ask how it might strike someone who only rarely takes part in the liturgy. The other is to consider the literary qualities of the Book. For the first I am well enough qualified as an occasional worshipper in Anglican churches. The second is a little difficult, since literary qualities do not exist in a vacuum. The Book is a set of texts for liturgical activity, and one cannot consider them as literary texts in a way divorced from this purpose and use; and I am conscious of my liturgical ignorance. However, I am by trade a teacher and critic of literature, and I shall write of this text as I would of any other. I am aware that this Book is the product of many years of work by many people, and that it is the Book of regular worshippers. I have some critical things to say: I have not tried to give offence; I have tried not to give offence; but there is no point in being inoffensive. I call things as I see them, and in the way I would normally call them. And this is the easier because, by and large, I believe the Book to be a success.

The *Book of Common Prayer* is a hard act to follow. This is not only because its prose, considered aesthetically, is of striking beauty, but also because, for those who can use it, it provides a language that shapes public utterance. It is an act: a liturgical text is a script for performance, and the first requirement is that the words should be sayable, especially by a congregation most of whose members are not practised in public speaking. A liturgical book should provide a firm guide for the rhythms of speech, if the congregation's part is not to become a ragged and embarrassing mumble. By and large the *Book of Common Prayer* does this by a clearly marked periodic structuring of its sentences, and a rhetorical use of doublets and triplets, normally near-synonyms, occasionally antitheses. The new Book controls the rhythm of utterance in a simple but effective

way. The sentences are predominantly parallel in structure, composed of short clauses which form a comfortable breath-group. Instead of relying on punctuation (which a disconcertingly large number of readers seem not to notice) the Book sets out each breath-group as a separate line. This is easy to follow on the page, and seems to work well in practice. The danger for the basic style of writing adopted for the new Book is that the rhythms may become repetitive, and this is a danger that is not always avoided, but there are points where the modulation of a passage is wonderfully shaped. The other virtue of the *Book of Common Prayer* is its density. In my experience one may, from time to time, hear a phrase or clause as though for the first time. The *Book of Common Prayer* may not be very accessible, but it has depth. Whether or not *A New Zealand Prayer Book* has this depth is not clear, and cannot be yet, but the first impression is that it doesn't. But, you will be relieved to hear, I do not propose to use 1662 as a stick with which to beat 1989. Some comparisons are, however, inescapable, since 1662 is still authorised for use; in another backward looking glance, I would remark that my first exposure to modern liturgies was *The New Zealand Liturgy* 1970, and I was sorry when that was replaced by the current first Form of the Eucharist, but alas I don't have a copy of 1970 to hand to make specific that feeling.

The Introduction to the new Book concludes:

It is our hope that the use of these services will enable us to worship God in our own authentic voice, and to affirm our identity as the people of God in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

This suggests that the language is intended to be of the here-and-now, the English of late twentieth-century New Zealand (the use of the other language of Aotearoa is an issue which I am unqualified to address). In fact, the majority of the English could have been written at any time in this century, and in any part of the English-speaking world. There is no reason to regard this as a deficiency: it suggests that the English will wear well, and I assume that the Province is not in a hurry to repeat the work of the last twenty-five years. Some of the weakest parts of the Book are those which are most specifically contemporary, and there is a reason for that. When a new discourse is created, it at first generates new ways of understanding the world. As these new perceptions become widespread, the language in which they are expressed tends to decline into a set of

buzz-words, becoming dulled by over-use - a phenomenon familiar enough to anyone concerned with religious language. There is a sorting-out, and some of the words and ways of saying things will enter the common stock of the linguistic experience of speakers of English: but the worst time to use a new expression is when it is on everybody's lips. To take a case in point, my least favourite line in the First Form of the Eucharistic liturgy (in fact, the only line I have difficulty with) is

Teach us to care creatively for its resources.

"Resources" is all right, I suppose, though it's a dangerous word when "management of human resources" is the vogue expression for dealing with people. It is doubtless intended to raise one's ecological consciousness, but the economic reference, the connotation of exploitation, is inescapable and dubiously apt. "Creatively" is by now a cliché, and I wonder how seriously it is thought through. Our religious responsibility for the world lies in the fact that it is God's creation: is it seriously intended that our relationship to it should be seen to parallel that of the Creator? Maybe, but then that is a big idea, and needs more than one easy adverb to express it. There is a simpler problem with this line: it is very hard to say. There is a cluster of very short syllables, and the tongue is flipping around between /c/s and /t/s in a way which is simply difficult to manage. Also, this passage does not have the rhythmic balance between priest's and people's parts which is found in other sections in this Intercession and Thanksgiving (e.g. "Give comfort to those who mourn. / Bring them peace in their time of loss"). In general, the Book has a nice rhythmic sense for short utterances, but is less assured in longer units.

Since I have started to find fault, and since some brickbats are to be expected, perhaps I should carry on with the less enjoyable part of writing this review. One of the areas in which the language of the Book is uneasy is in the combination of traditional "religious language" with the contemporary, not to say modish, language of personal growth. For instance, in the Nicene Creed:

*he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became fully human (p. 410).*

The problem lies in the contrast between the rather technical "was incarnate of the Holy Spirit", which is very traditional language, and "became fully human", which suggests the different technical language of human growth seminars. Are the objections to "became a man", which was the previous solution to the task of finding inclusive language, really insuperable?

The Second and Third Forms of the Marriage Liturgy show the problems of a mixture of languages in an extreme form. In general, both these Forms give the impression of being the record of an extemporized ceremony, assembled from memories of the traditional service, the language of marriage guidance and, occasionally, the romantic novelette. If they were indeed extemporized by the participants, the effect would be very different: there would be an act of defining the commitment, the choosing of the words would be more important than the elegance or dignity of the words chosen. But people choosing a Church Wedding, and a pre-scripted ceremony, are surely likely to want words better than they could have found themselves.

Consider the public declaration of the Second Form:

*I love _N_,
and I want to marry her/him (p. 786)*

The intention is clearly to make the statement direct. But I wonder whether it is the easiest way for people who are excited, proud (we hope) and certainly nervous to make this declaration. It is a statement that says all that needs saying when made spontaneously, but surely harder to say on cue than "I will". And there is a difference between "I want to", which expresses a desire, and "I will", which is the undertaking of a commitment.

I may be mistaken here, since I assume that the service has been tried, and that couples can say those words without unnecessary embarrassment, but I am sure that there is something wrong in the way in which the Second Form hides death. "God keep me true to you always"; "God so join you together that nothing shall ever part you" (p. 788). Earthly love is not forever, and it looks like a concession to those dreams about marriage which people have, which the Third Form seems to sanction, and which "till death us do part" challenges. For many people, the three great life-events

of birth, copulation and death are the chief occasions when they feel the need of the Church. It is one strength of the traditional marriage ceremony that as well as transforming these events, it also presents them as inter-linked.

The three forms for the Marriage Liturgy do suggest that the writers of the Book couldn't come up with a contemporary marriage service. It might have been better just to have provided guidelines and some formulae for a truly extempore service.

The problems with the passages I have been talking about are typical of the points where the Book is at its weakest. It is easy to find good things to set against them, and a pleasure to do so.

The opening of the first, most traditional, form of the Eucharist begins with an exchange between priest and people which creates a sense of communality (in this, quite different from *Book of Common Prayer*). The exchange culminates in Ps 118: 24:

*This is the day which the Lord has made.
Let us rejoice and be glad in it. (p. 404)*

This meets the condition of both the joyful and the distressed very powerfully: it precisely does not say "Don't worry, be happy", since it grounds the injunction to rejoice in the Creation by God. Surprisingly, an exchange of greetings, which in a small congregation can verge on the informal, and is expressive of joy, leads on to the penitential part of the service by a convincing emotional logic: this is the day which the Lord has made, so if we do not rejoice fully it is because of sin.

The confession (p. 407) is an example of the Book in its most typical strength. There are no obvious verbal felicities to point to, but it puts the traditional belief of the Church into language which is simple, easily understood, but powerful -- especially powerful because the meaning is inescapable.

The prayer on p. 414 is an example of the way in which the Book can control rhythm through the use of short speech units and parallel syntax:

*Lord, you have called us to serve you.
Grant that we may walk in your presence:
your love in our hearts,
your truth in our minds,
your strength in our wills;
until, at the end of our journey,
we know the joy of our homecoming
and the welcome of your embrace,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The opening rhythm is that of rather ordinary prose prayer, which introduces the short parallel lines. Any anxiety we might have that these lines might end up in a statement that we shall never walk alone (which anxiety is itself a sign of the forward drive of the lines) is averted by the change of rhythm created by "until", which introduces a new syntactic organisation. The lines that follow, longer, ending on an unstressed syllable, slow the pace down to enact the homecoming which is wished for, and the prayer does indeed conclude with a coming home to the familiar and expected "through Jesus Christ our Lord".

Sometimes the Book is prepared to be obscure, and even somewhat archaic:

*The peace of Christ rule in our hearts.
The word of Christ dwell in us richly. (p. 408)*

"Dwell" is hardly a common word, though its derivatives are familiar enough for the meaning to be clear: but it definitely has a "religious" feel to it. And what might the word do when it dwells in us richly? One has to stop and think, and the language makes one do this at just the right point in the service, when there is inevitably a certain amount of shuffling to find the readings, and when the people are asked to examine the meanings of words and the Word.

The Great Thanksgiving (pp. 420-22) shows a wonderful control of movement over an extended passage. "It is right indeed, it is our joy and our salvation, holy Lord" is actually an improvement on "It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty". Throughout this passage there is a lifting sense of exaltation, with the plateau of "You are the source....", and the slight and proper lowering of the confessional "When we sinned and turned away from you", then through the atonement and resurrection up to the

Sanctus. The basic movement is a product of the content, the exalting or lowering effects of the concepts presented to the mind. But the language finds rhythms in which these movements of the heart find a fitting expression.

The second Eucharistic Liturgy, Thanksgiving for Creation and Redemption (pp. 456-75) shows the new Book in some of its flatter moments: it also has liturgically unfamiliar material of the highest power.

The opening exchange between priest and people is less dialogic, and hence less energetic, than the opening of the first form. It leads into the unfortunate *Benedicite Aotearoa*.

The problem with this is the detailed specificity of its cataloguing of the flora and fauna. It's a nice idea, but the effect of such a catalogue tends to the comic. (I am reminded of the medieval mystery play of Noah, from the Chester cycle, which has such a listing of animals as they are led into the Ark. As these animals are represented on painted boards, there can be no doubt that it is meant to be funny. There is, of course, no reason why the liturgy should not be fun, but I doubt if that is what is intended here.) The reasons for this comic effect are, I think, that the auditor is tempted to imagine the particulars of each creature (although this is perhaps not so much comic as distracting); and that the fullness of the list is itself cumulatively funny (how long will it go on? Pause for breath and here's another stanza). One might also start wondering, in a rather irrelevant way, why some are in and not others (what about the wetta? Or are only cuddly animals fit for hymns? Or the kakapo, or the moa? Should we not be reminded of our propensity to destroy God's creation?). The original *Benedicite* works because nothing is so particular (except the whales, and they are a problem), and most of the items listed are elemental pairs. The *Benedicite* is precisely about the world, and could be used in all parts of the earth (though the Netherlands have no mountains, and tropical islands no ice and snow). Too much piling up of detail begins to sound like a travelogue, and makes the islands in which we live look exotic to us.

But after that shaky start, the penitential sections (pp. 458-59) are astonishing. In the simple reading of them on the page, they meet Houseman's criterion for great poetry -- they make the hair stand on end:

Form 1

God forgives and heals us.
 | *We need you healing, merciful God:* |
 | *give us true repentance.* |
 | *Some sins are plain to us;* |
 | *some escape us,* |
 | *some we cannot face.* |
 | *Forgive us;* |
 | *set us free to hear your word to us;* |
 | *set us free to serve you.* |

God forgives you.
Forgive others;
forgive yourself.

What is genuinely great about this is that it expresses an understanding of sin in very simple and direct language, so that the usual notions of the different modes of sinning suddenly become alive -- and do so in a context of forgiveness, which is the only context in which the realisation of sin is tolerable.

But if that is great, consider the even finer alternative form:

Creator, we disfigure your world.
Lord, have mercy.
 | *Lord, have mercy.* |

One cannot hear that said, and apply it to oneself, and rest content with a bland feeling that "I'm OK", and sin is a rather embarrassing old idea. And it's got more eco-theology in it than earnest detailings of our responsibilities.

Next:

Redeemer, we reject your redemption and crucify you daily.

That's the hardest fact of all about sin to face, and even the Middle Ages, an epoch not normally thought of as soft on penance, was sparing in its use of that penitential motif.

And finally:

Giver of life, we too often choose death.

There is, at the end of this second form, no overt upward movement towards the promise of forgiveness. But with that final confession such an explicit lift is not needed. To realise that the darkness in which we live is a product of our own choice is already to move towards lifting that burden. That is true at least for the psychology of depression, and the lifting of that burden is a part of the ministry of the Church. But the confession is not just an exhortation to take responsibility for our lives; we need to confess to God, and God is there to hear the confession.

This is only a partial account of the new Book. It is (of necessity) a rather hurried one, and it cannot address the most important issue, which is how the Book will serve worshippers in their worship. "Does the language of worship matter?" is a proper question, and one proper answer is "No". But since what we know and feel is shaped by what we can say, language does matter. Like any liturgical work (including *the Book of Common Prayer*), *A New Zealand Prayer Book* is at times taken over by the discourse of secular concerns (in 1662 it was monarchy; in 1989 it is the business of "caring"). The most grudging critic would have to admit that it could have been worse (to see how much worse, look at the promotional pamphlet for the Book). In fact, much of the Book continues a tradition of the liturgy in a plain but dignified language that accords with modern (if not Post-Modern) tastes. And at its best it is both new and powerful.

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