

## *The Accession Service*

The Ninth Day of September in the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Fifteen marked the day when Queen Elizabeth II became the longest reigning monarch in British history, surpassing her great, great grandmother Queen Victoria's sixty-three years and two hundred and sixteen days (a reporter in *The Times* precisely quoted the length of Victoria's reign as 23,226 days, 16 hours and 23 minutes!). Pondering on this momentous achievement brought me, via a complex set of thought processes, to some rarely used pages which are to be found at the very back of the *Book of Common Prayer*, tucked neatly away between the Ordinal and the XXXIX Articles of Religion. Although its pages are headed 'Accession Service' the order is more correctly titled, 'Forms of Prayer with Thanksgiving to Almighty God'. There is no clear indication, certainly within this phrase, that these prayers have anything to do with the reigning monarch. It is only in the introductory rubric that readers are informed that these prayers are:

For use in all Churches and Chapels within the Realm, every Year, upon the Anniversary of the day of the Accession of the Reigning Sovereign, or upon such other Day as shall be appointed by Authority.

These Forms of Prayer do not comprise a service order, but rather contain, in Section I, a selection of Psalms, Proper Lessons and Suffrages to be used within the daily offerings of Mattins and Evensong (not, it should be noted, Morning and Evening Prayer, as these Divine Offices are called in the earlier pages of the Prayer Book). Section II offers a set of Propers for inclusion with the Administration of Holy Communion. By way of a conclusion Section III provides for Te Deum Laudamus to be used, 'on the same day at any convenient time'.

The custom of marking the Day of Accession was inaugurated during the reign of Elizabeth I and it continued with her successors. Elizabeth acceded to the throne on 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1558, but ‘A Form of Prayer and Thanksgiving’ was not published until 1576. The tenth anniversary of the beginning of her reign was marked with the ringing of church bells and the occasion became known as Queen Elizabeth’s Day, or, simply, Queene’s Day.

As was common in the sixteenth century such rejoicings quickly developed sectarian undertones and the day of celebration, which increased in fervour as her reign progressed, became one of Protestant rejoicing and anti-Catholic sentiment. These observances developed further with the passage of time and included triumphal parades and processions and the burning of the Pope in effigy.

On the accession of King James I of England (who was James VI of Scotland), on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1603, a form of prayer and thanksgiving was issued for use in all churches ‘upon his entry to this kingdom’. A similar form of service continued with Charles I but its form was not immediately revived after the Restoration in 1660. The date of accession of Charles II was, of course, the day of the execution of his father (30<sup>th</sup> January, 1649), a day of humiliation and melancholy, not for rejoicing.

A new service order was compiled by the command of James II (who acceded to the throne on 6<sup>th</sup> February, 1685). James declared, ‘Whereas not only the pious Christian emperors in ancient times, but also of late our own most religious predecessors, kings of this realm, did cause the days on which they began their several reigns, to be publicly celebrated every year (so long as they reigned) by all their subjects with solemn prayers and thanksgiving to Almighty God: This pious custom received lately a long and doleful interruption upon

occasion of the barbarous murder of our most dear father of blessed memory, which changed the day, on which our late most dear brother succeeded to the crown, into a day of sorrow and fasting: but now we thinking fit to revive the former laudable and religious practice, and having caused a form of prayer and thanksgiving to be composed by our bishops for that purpose.’

Since those times there has been much argument within the Church about the legitimacy of such Forms of Worship. A report in Volume 43 of *The Christian Observer* in 1843 debated the legality or otherwise of the annexation within the Prayer Book of formularies that were dictated by the monarch or even laid before the Sovereign in Council. Its author wrote:

Our Reformers, in rescuing the Church from Papal supremacy, considered it necessary to allow the Sovereign in Council to appoint Ecclesiastical Commissioners; to institute conferences; and to direct the spiritual Fathers of the Church to compose forms of prayer and thanksgiving for special occasions, to be set forth for public use by royal authority.

The author asked whether the Church and the State in a Christian land could be considered to be one body. He suggested that in truth there is, and must be, a good deal of mutual aid and mutual forbearance where a national Church is legislatively established. Convocation is properly the legislature of the Church, and Parliament of the State: and the monarch exercises a powerful control over both; having the prerogative to summon, to prorogue, to dissolve, to ratify, or to reject.

In a debate in the House of Lords on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1858, the then Bishop of Oxford (the Right Reverend Samuel Wilberforce) expressed his concern about the legality and authority of, among other things, the so-called Accession Service. It seems to have been clear to the

members of the Spiritual Bench that such Prayer Book additions had come about very much through the dictation of the sovereign or from Parliament; there was very little, if any, debate or consultation within the Convocational assemblies of the Church. Hansard reported the Bishop as saying that:

He was content to leave that service as it was, with that amount of authority which its being annexed to the Prayer-book might give it; but bethought their Lordships ought to pause before they took any step which might give any new authority to it. He should be sorry to see a Proclamation enjoining its use, unless the service was really intended to be used. He thought no such service should be added unless it had authority. This had no authority. The other State services were prepared by Convocation and sanctioned by the Crown, which gave them an ecclesiastical use. They were made in answer to an Act of Parliament, and the Act of Parliament overshadowed them; but the Accession service had no such authority. It was agreed to by Convocation in the reign of Charles II, and an Act of Parliament afterwards provided that the doings of that Convocation should have no validity whatever, and that the clergy should pay no regard to them. That was the only ecclesiastical authority for the service for the Accession, and it therefore stood on a far weaker authority than any of the other State services.

The Bishop further reported that he was not prepared to ask Her Majesty (Victoria) to order that which he believed, on the authority of great lawyers, could not be enforced, because it would be a violation of the Act of Uniformity; and their Lordships well knew that there was nothing in the realm of England which allowed the Sovereign to violate any Act of Parliament to which the Sovereign and the Parliament had given their assent. The best lawyers had told him that any clergyman using that particular service might be proceeded against for penalties under the Act of Uniformity.

These were some of the debates and disputes that surrounded, among other liturgical matters, the inclusion and continued use of the Accession Service in the nineteenth century. Were the Prayers and Thanksgivings legal; could they be enforced upon a sometimes reluctant clergy? Did the Sovereign has the right, either by the Henrician ‘Act of Submission of the Clergy’ (1533), or by any other concessions, avowed or tacit; or by direct scriptural warrant; or for the glory of God, and the religious benefit of the people, Scripture not opposing it; or by civil and ecclesiastical prescription; or in any other lawful way; to issue forms of Prayer and Thanksgiving, and to enjoin upon the functionaries of the Established Church the observance of them?

In the Church of England’s current Prayer Book, *Common Worship*, the final page of the section entitled Festivals (page 367) offers a Collect ‘For the Sovereign’, a list of lections, which very much parallels those in the *Book of Common Prayer* and a Post Communion prayer, which is almost a direct copy of the Prayer for Unity (No 10) in the Deposited Prayer Book of 1928.

In this momentous year for our Queen, and in the many that follow in the long continuation of her reign, we should put aside Erastian discussions about the legalities of State Services and remember, read, mark, learn and, more importantly, use those few pages that are hidden away at backs of our Prayer Books.

David Fuller, B Sc, B Th, Ph D

**Biographical note:**

David Fuller was a founder member of the Blackburn Branch of the PBS. He holds a Bachelor of Science (Hons) Degree from The University of Wales (1966), a Bachelor of Theology (Hons) Degree from The University of Aberdeen (2009) and had the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy conferred on him by The University of Glasgow in 2014. He is a Licensed Lay Reader in the Scottish Episcopal Church, Diocese of Argyll and The Isles. He lives in retirement on the Isle of Mull.