

The Commination Service

After my foray into the nether reaches of the *Book of Common Prayer* (see: *Accession Service*, PBSJ, Michaelmass 2015) I decided to continue my exploration of some of its less familiar, and certainly less well-thumbed, pages. Here I rediscovered, just before the wonderful Miles Coverdale translations of The Psalms of David, a rare nugget. The service in question is called ‘A Commination’ with the sub-title of ‘Or Denouncing of God’s Anger and Judgement against Sinners’. It has, further, a sub-sub-title, ‘With Certain Prayers to be used on the First Day of Lent and at certain other times, as the Ordinary shall appoint’. It is interesting to record that in The First English Prayer Book (of 1549) Thomas Cranmer called his service, ‘The First Date of Lente, commonly called Ashe-Wednisdaye’, or in some editions, ‘A declaration of scripture, with certein prayers to bee used the firste daye of Lent, commonlye called Ash-wednesdaie’. In the 1552 revision the title became, ‘A Comminacion agaynste Synners, with Certayne Prayers to be used dyvers tymes of the yere’. In this more ‘Protestant’ version of the Prayer Book all reference to Ash Wednesday, with its inclusion of Romish practices like The Imposition of Ashes, was quietly erased.

The first rubric in the 1662 version requires that, ‘After Morning Prayer, the Litany ended, according to the accustomed manner, The Priest shall, in the Reading Pew or the Pulpit, say...’. The Church’s current preference for celebrations of the Holy Communion on almost all ‘special’ occasions (and these now generally includes Ash Wednesday, although this is not formally a Day of Obligation), means that Morning Prayer and The Litany are infrequently if ever heard. Thus the addition of the Commination Service has become an even rarer event.

First, the title: one definition of Commination is ‘the action of threatening divine vengeance’ (OED), or, to put it in Prayer Book words, ‘The Denouncing of God’s Anger and Judgement

against Sinners'. There is in the human mind a degree of discomfort in thinking of an angry God, yet all down the centuries of recorded scripture God has overtly declared his anger, especially against his Chosen People for their sin in their abandonment of his laws. Prophet after prophet in Old Testament times railed against the Jews for their sins. God's anger or wrath at sin and sinners is mentioned around six hundred times in the Bible. God is uniquely holy and thus cannot abide sin; he loathes the very idea of it, so, in the eyes of God we are all sinners and we all deserve judgement. As Saint Paul succinctly put it, 'The wages of sin is death' (Rom 6: 23).

Ash Wednesday sees the beginning of the penitential season of Lent, the forty days that take us through the Passion, Trials and Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and lead us, in a right frame of mind, to celebrate the glories of the Resurrection. The Communion Service taught Christians to beat their breasts and remind themselves of the significance of God's anger in their lives.

The service begins with a short prayer in which those present are reminded that they stand in direct lineage of the Primitive Church in which notorious sinners were 'put to open penance and punished in this world'. The wish is clearly made that such a discipline should be restored but, in the meantime, we should remind ourselves of God's curses against impenitent sinners. There follows a list of some nine 'cursings', essentially taken from the twenty-seventh chapter of the Book called Deuteronomy, which, to each, the congregation, 'shall answer Amen'. The author of Deuteronomy identified twelve causes of God's anger but Cranmer introduced a number of variations to the Biblical text. The first Deuteronomist curse is against 'the man that maketh any graven or molten image ... and putteth it in a secret place (KJV)'. Cranmer, wrote, 'Cursed is the man that maketh any carved or molten image,

to worship it'. The second Commandment, given to Moses on Mount Sinai, 'Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image ...' is tempered with the words, 'Thou shalt not bow down to them nor worship them ...' (in the language of the Prayer Book Decalogue). It was clear that the making of images *per se* was not considered sinful; God, at various times and in sundry places, demanded the creation of images. We only have to think, for example, of the gold coated, graven images of cherubim with outstretched wings that stood guard over the Ark of the Covenant, both in the Tabernacle (Ex 37: 9) and in Solomon's Temple (1 Kngs 6: 23) or the Temple doors, made of juniper wood, into which were carved cherubim, palm trees and open flowers (1 Kngs 6: 35).

The author of Deuteronomy included four separate curses on those who had illicit sexual relations (lieth with) – 'his father's wife; any manner of beast; sister; daughter of his father or mother; and mother-in-law'. Cranmer wrapped this up in one curse – 'he that lieth with his neighbour's wife'. In conclusion, Cranmer compounded all manner of disparate sinners in one final curse – 'the unmerciful, fornicators and adulterers, covetous persons, idolaters, slanderers, drunkards and extortioners'; a sort of catch-all catalogue of wrong-doing.

There follows what is surely the longest prayer in the Prayer Book, comprising just short of eight hundred words. Long it may be but it includes no fewer than twenty Biblical references, ranging from Isaiah and Ezekiel, through the Psalms to the Evangelists and Saint Paul. It is a positive tour-de-force.

Psalm 51 comes next, to be said by priest and people kneeling. Artur Weiser stated that, of the seven penitential Psalms (the others are: Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130 and 143), this is the most important. He wrote, 'It demonstrates the essence of true penitence. Here with

inflexible earnestness the uttermost depth of sin is grasped and the way is shown that leads to forgiveness and true communion with God'.¹

The Lord's Prayer follows, with a small set of versicles and responses. The order ends with two collects said by the priest and a concluding prayer to be rehearsed by priest and people. In reference to this last element, the 1549 version has a short rubric, 'Then shal this antheme be sayed or song'. The 1662 service concludes with the opening and closing verses of the Aaronic Blessing (Numb 6: 24 & 26), although used in the second-person format.

The current practice in the Church of England, when there is a service of any kind on Ash Wednesday, is to celebrate the Holy Communion. Increasingly this includes The Imposition of Ashes with ash obtained from the burning of the previous year's palm crosses. We should therefore ask whether the Communion Service has any modern relevance. The Old Testament contains many references to ash and dust, in connection with penitence, from Joshua through to Jonah. God's curse on Adam with the words, 'For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return' (Gen 3: 19), have been taken to be a reminder of human mortality. Jesus indicated the importance of public repentance when he said, 'Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes (Matt 11: 21). Tertullian (c160-225) wrote of the use of sackcloth and ashes in the penance of an adulterer² but by the twelfth century the use of ashes had become closely associated with the beginning of Lent. In the decades before the Protestant Reformation, the Imposition of Ashes was a regular mainstay of Lenten piety and practice. Although Martin Luther and other reformers seem to have written little against the liturgical use of ashes on Ash Wednesday it ceased to

¹ Weiser A, *The Psalms*, (London: SCM Press, 1962), 401.

² Tertullian, *De Patientia*, Chap XIII.

be a feature of public worship in the sixteenth century, probably because it could not be scripturally authenticated. Eamon Duffy wrote that, ‘At Candlemas that year [1548] the bearing of candles “was left off throughout the whole city of London”, ashes were omitted on Ash Wednesday, palms abandoned on Palm Sunday “and not used as afore”’.³ It seems that blessings had been replaced by cursings.

I think the time has come for the Church to reintroduce the Communion Service on Ash Wednesday, but, to allay modern sensitivities about cursing, this section could be omitted (rather as the Exhortations have been dropped from the Holy Communion service). This slightly amended Communion Service could perhaps follow Holy Communion, instead of Matins and The Litany which the Prayer Book rubric suggests. A liturgy combining fine Cranmerian prose with the ancient practice of the Imposition of Ashes would enable the Church to stay faithful to its Catholic and Protestant roots and remind worshippers of their mortality, their need for repentance and the possibility of Divine retribution, for we surely are dust and to dust we shall inevitably return.

David Fuller

Biographical note:

Dr David Fuller was a founder member of the Blackburn Branch of the PBS. 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.

³ Duffy E, *The Stripping of the Altars*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 459.