

Article reprinted from *Cross+Way* Issue Autumn 2007 No. 106

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WHAT SHOULD WE PRAY?

Prayer for the dead in Anglican liturgy.

By David Phillips

There is no evidence for intercession for the dead until the middle of the second century though before long it appears to have been reasonably common. The doctrine of purgatory developed gradually and by the time of Thomas Aquinas in the 13th Century it had reached its full form. Aquinas employed all the arguments about prayer and masses shortening the time spent in purgatory. The Council of Trent in the 16th Century, reacting against protestant criticism, enshrined all the medieval errors and declared anyone who rejected it as anathema.

The Reformers had particularly targeted the doctrine of purgatory and its hideous bi-products including the selling of indulgences which precipitated Luther's 95 Theses. This focused the two great themes of the Reformation, the doctrine of salvation and the nature of authority. The Reformers however did not simply reject the doctrine of purgatory but also the whole practice of praying for the dead. They knew it had a long history, but they also saw that it has no Scriptural basis and leads people away from the truth.

Whilst the English Reformation did retain some traditions which other reformers rejected this was certainly not true of prayer for the dead. In the Anglican liturgy the issue comes to the fore in two places, the prayers and statements made at funerals, and the prayer for the Church at the Lord's Supper.

The great change in Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's first Prayer Book of 1549 was the use of English throughout. Many parts of the services were reformed, but not all, and so some of the earlier prayer for the dead persisted. For example the petition for the dead 'Grant unto them, we beseech thee, thy mercy and everlasting peace'. The reform of the liturgy was continued in Cranmer's second and equally short lived book of 1552. All reference to prayer for the dead was removed and the prayer at Communion, which had been titled 'Prayer for the Church' was now called 'Prayer for the Church Militant', thus clarifying that its petitions are not for those at rest in Christ.

The 1662 Book of Common Prayer is, of course, largely the text of 1552, but in one definite difference is in this prayer. Thus today, unlike in 1552, we pray:
And we also bless thy holy Name for all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear; beseeching thee to give us grace so to follow their good examples, that with them we may be partakers of they heavenly kingdom.

The phrase 'that with them' is seized upon and taken by some to mean that we are praying for both us and the 'departed'. But this is to both distort the plain meaning of the English and to ignore the title which declares it to be still a Prayer for the Church Militant.

The Homily on Prayer also roundly condemns the practice of prayer for the dead and the doctrine of purgatory is repudiated in Article 22 of the Thirty-nine Articles.

In the 17th and 18th century there seem to have been some who wished to reintroduce prayer for the dead as being an ancient custom, whilst themselves claiming to reject all ideas of purgatory. The Anglo-Catholic movement of the 19th Century generally sought to reintroduce medieval error and

ceremony including prayer for the dead and purgatory and the forebears of Church Society set themselves firmly against this perversion of the truth.

It appears that the first public prayers for the dead came in 1900 in prayers for those killed whilst on military service in South Africa. The petition read:

'For all those who have fallen in the true faith of Thy Holy Name, that they may enter into the rest which Thou hast prepared for those who believe in Thee.'

This was not, of course, an official text, but it showed the direction things were going.

By 1927 a revision of the Prayer Book was under consideration and this included a very marked undoing of reformed doctrine. For example, whilst in the 1661 Funeral service we commit the body to the ground (the spirit having already gone) in the revised book 'we commend the soul of this our brother departed'.

Then we are also expected to pray 'and we beseech thee...that when the judgment shall come... both this our brother and we may be found acceptable in thy sight'.

Part of the reason this book was rejected by the laity in Parliament is that they saw clearly that it is incompatible with the reformed doctrine of the Church of England - regardless of what the Bishops and Clergy were attempting to claim. For the next 40 years these erroneous services were used freely in the Church whilst the Bishops turned a blind eye.

In the 1960s the Church issued some experimental services entitled Series 1 then later Series 2 and 3. These sought again to introduce the practices rejected in 1928. Indeed much of the text of 1928 was incorporated in Series 1.

In an attempt to address the conflict this created the Archbishops' Doctrine Commission produced a report in 1971 called 'Prayer and the Departed'. Rather than set out a coherent theology of death this report sought more to describe past and present practice and find a form of words all could agree with. They stated:

all ... are agreed that we should praise and thank God for his grace and goodness revealed in the lives of those who have been his servants, and for the reality of our fellowship in Christ with them. It is only a question of whether or not the praises should extend into prayers of petition and intercession for them that the division comes.

The primary form of words they proposed was:

May God in his infinite love and mercy bring the whole Church, living and departed, in the Lord Jesus, to a joyful resurrection and the fulfillment of his eternal kingdom.

This is a prayer for the dead, but only in as much as they, with us, are part of the invisible Church, the communion of saints. The Commission also took the view that it was acceptable to 'commend' the soul of the departed at the funeral, though not at other times. These proposals bring confusion rather than clarity since they have no coherent theological basis. Though regrettable they were only modest proposals but as always people have sought to wring more out of them. (In the liturgical changes of the 1990s this report was still being used to try to persuade Evangelicals to accept prayers that went beyond what was proposed.)

The 1980 Alternative Services Book followed the 1971 report using the word 'entrust' at the funeral and the exact form of words set out above. However, it also introduced other services, and alternative prayers, something that has now proliferated with Common Worship. The tendency has been for prayers to be slipped into these other places which go beyond the 1971 compromise. In part this is because these texts are not treated as alternatives to the BCP services and therefore not

subject to the same rigorous revision process.

So at the interment of ashes using the ASB people will have prayed:

grant that we, with all those who have believed in you, may be united in the full knowledge of your love...

The ASB also allowed communion at a funeral whereas Cranmer had rejected it to avoid falling back into the nonsense of masses for the dead. In this new service people prayed:

'raise us from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, that at the last we, with our brother N, may come to your eternal joy...

One of the additional prayers (p344) reads:

Remember, O Lord, this your servant, who has gone before us with the sight of faith, and now rests in the sleep of peace. According to your promises, grant to him and to all who rest in Christ, refreshment, light, and peace; through the same Christ our Lord.

All these go further in prayer for the dead than was set out in the 1971 report.

It was hardly surprising to find the same pattern repeated in Common Worship. Now people may pray:

Remember for good this your servant N as we also remember him/her

Bring all who rest in Christ into the fullness of your kingdom where sins have been forgiven and death is no more.

CW Pastoral Services p264 etc

This prayer seems to imply that those who currently rest in Christ have not yet been forgiven. Whereas, if we are in Christ now, we are forgiven, because we are justified by faith. Such a confused prayer can be taken to imply the existence of purgatory.

Therefore, it is easy to see how the Church of England has gradually slipped from the clarity and purity of its reformed liturgy into forms of words which have no scriptural justification and lead inevitably into error.

Where does the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent prayer for Diana fit into all this?

*May she rest in peace where sorrow and pain are banished,
and may the everlasting light of your merciful love shine upon her;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Should we take 'may' as expressing an uncertain hope, or a clear petition? Either way it is not far removed from what has been tolerated in the Church of England in recent decades but it is far removed from the reformed doctrine of the Church. Sadly, as in so many areas, the Church now seems only able to confuse people at large rather than declare to them the glories of the gospel.

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