



A PRAYER BOOK FOR THE 21st CENTURY

LITURGICAL STUDIES, THREE

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THE DAILY OFFICE

The Daily Prayer of the Church

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A hallmark of the Anglican tradition is the prayer of the daily office. The genius of Thomas Cranmer was the simplification of the medieval office, which had grown to be a very complex and confusing round of daily prayer largely the prerogative of monks and clergy. Cranmer's solution was to create an office accessible to the people of God and for their edification.¹ Daily Morning and Evening Prayer are centered upon the offering of the prayer of the psalter, canticles, the reading of scripture and the prayers. The office gave rise to Anglican chant and shaped the spirituality of Anglicanism for generations. Except for linguistic changes and the addition of prayers, the structure and texts of Morning and Evening Prayer have remained constant in every Book of Common Prayer since 1549.

The 1979 revision of The Book of Common Prayer made some changes in the traditional patterns of the office. New to the 1979 prayer book were the offices of "Noonday Prayer" and "Compline." The "Order of Worship for the Evening" provided a new structure with more variation and additional ceremonial, namely, the lighting of candles or lamps to mark the coming of evening. A shorter pattern of daily prayer was included in "Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families."

The pattern of praying the psalms once a month beginning with Psalm 1 and continuing in sequence through the whole psalter was retained in the body of the psalter,² but an alternative seven-week cycle was included in the Daily Office Lectionary. "While this provides a semi-sequential recitation of the entire psalter, care has

been taken to assign appropriate psalms not only to morning and evening, but also to Fridays (penitential and passion psalms), to Wednesdays (sections of Psalm 119 at one of the offices), and Saturdays and Sundays (psalms of creation and of paschal deliverance)."³ Some of the imprecatory psalms were omitted from the seven-week cycle. Canticles and collects were added to Morning and Evening Prayer as well as a more flexible provision for intercessory prayer.

Although the content and structure of Morning and Evening Prayer have remained the same, major transitions in the practice of praying the office have occurred. What was intended to be daily parochial prayer became for many people a private daily devotion. At first, the public corporate worship of the office became in most instances a weekly rather than a daily liturgy, but gradually even the weekly corporate celebration of the office disappeared in most congregations. Choral Sunday Evensong was a major service in many congregations until the Second World War. Today, choral Evensong is celebrated on a regular basis in some cathedrals and large churches, while some congregations have a celebration of choral Evensong occasionally or on a seasonal basis, for instance, on the first Sunday of Advent or Lent. Until the period of the revision of the prayer book in the 1970s, choral Morning Prayer was regularly celebrated on Sunday morning. While there are exceptions, today the practice of choral Morning Prayer as the principal Sunday service is rare. Many regret this loss, but the office was never intended to be the principal Sunday worship of the people of God. The Holy Eucharist is the principal act of the baptismal community on the day of resurrection (BCP, p. 13). Except for seminaries, religious orders and some parish churches and cathedrals, the office as the daily corporate worship of the Church has been drastically diminished. Prayers which had once been familiar and formative for the faith of the community are no longer prayed in the life of the Church.

A major task for the next revision of The Book of Common Prayer is the recovery of the richness of the Anglican tradition in

the prayer of the daily office. This task demands a recovery of the pattern of daily prayer for the life of the baptismal community. In the words of George Guiver, the discipline of daily prayer needs a “rediscovery of *motives*, and the discovering of *vocation*. In particular, the demands which we allow prayer to make on us will correspond to the extent that we (a) allow God to be at the very center, and (b) believe that direct access to God through prayer is important and possible.”⁴ To recover this pattern of prayer the Church needs to discover anew the theology of the daily office and to explore a pattern of prayer which is appropriate for the Church today.

The Church's School for Prayer

The Baptismal Covenant asks: “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?” (BCP, p. 304). Prayer is not a Sunday-only activity. Rather, as those faithful to the Baptismal Covenant, we are both invited and compelled to be in communion with God every day of our lives. This is both our joy and our task. Daily prayer is not an optional discipline, reserved for a few, but rather the vocation of every Christian. The turning of heart, mind and soul to God “from the rising of the sun to its going down” (Psalm 113:3) is the normative pattern of baptismal life.

Rooted in Jewish daily prayer, Christians developed daily prayer centered in the praise and thanksgiving, the lament and petition, of the psalter. Throughout the history of the development of the daily office, several elements have remained constant. The office is the prayer of the Church and as such is a corporate act of prayer. It is the prayer of Christians gathered in, with and through Christ, for “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). The individual who is unable to be present with others is united with the prayer of the whole Church in the prayer of the office.

The act of praying the office is a participation in the very life of the triune God. Gathered in and with Christ, prayer is offered with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to the one, holy and

living God. At the beginning and the end of the day, the whole of life is placed in the presence of God as Christians participate in the eternal offering of praise at the throne of God. In, with and through Christ, by intercessory prayer we participate in bearing the pain and suffering of the world to the divine activity of grace.

The office is primarily the Church’s mode of praying scripture. While the psalms have formed the core of the office, canticles and most especially the Lord’s Prayer have also been essential elements of the Church’s office. The richness of the canticles and the prayer of the psalms offered in the opening acclamations, “Lord, open our lips” or “O God, make speed to save us,” and in the suffrages allow the words of scripture to become our prayer.

The biblical content of the office provides fertile ground for remembering who God is and who we are united with God in Christ Jesus. Praying the office calls God to mind, as we remember who God has promised to be for us and we for God: “when we pray with the Scriptures, we appeal to creation and covenant, we call God to mind (and here is a new kind of wonderful Hebraic twist), *we remind God to be God!* What God has done, what God used to mean for us in the past, is a promise of who God will be for us in the future.”⁵ To offer the words of the Venite—“Come, let us sing to the Lord; ...we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand/ Oh, that today you would hearken to his voice” (BCP, p. 82)—speaks the words of the writer of Psalm 95, the voice of the people of Israel, the voice of generations of the Church and our voice this day, through which we are invited to attune our mind, heart and soul to the living God.

Not only is it the Church’s way of praying scripture, the office is also shaped by the rhythms of times and seasons encompassing the fullness of the paschal mystery. For at the heart of the office is the Church’s proclamation and participation in the mystery of our life in Christ.

Robert Taft identifies the office as a “school of prayer” because it is traditional, biblical and objective.⁶ The prayer of the office is objective in that it provides a “framework that molds and feeds

and moderates our private prayer, and which our private prayer in turn makes more interior and personal and intense." Taft continues,

When we rise in the morning and come together to sing the praises of God at the dawn of a new day, when we celebrate at the coming of darkness our faith in the true light of the world at evensong, when we keep vigil with the angels and the heavenly bodies of the firmament while the world sleeps, we are doing, in obedience to the command to pray always, what men and women have done since the time of Jesus. In every time, in every land and from every race...someone raises his or her voice in the prayer of the Church, to join with the heavenly and earthly choirs down through the ages in the glorification of almighty God. In our age of narcissistic individualism one often hears people say they "don't get anything out of going to Church." What one "gets out of it" is the inestimable privilege of glorifying almighty God.⁷

The daily office is the Church's process of formation in the traditions of Christian prayer.

Shape and Content of the Daily Office

Numerous scholars have distinguished two strands in the development of the daily office.⁸ These have been identified as "cathedral" and "monastic" offices.

The "cathedral" office is the term used to identify the office of the secular church. It was the daily prayer of the whole Church, laity, deacons, presbyters and bishops. The prayer of the "cathedral" office centered upon praise and intercession. The content of the office was appropriate to the time of day and the seasons of the church year. Psalms were chosen because of their content, and only a small number of psalms were used. The office was simple and

repetitive with the use of congregational refrains on psalms so that all could participate easily. Symbols such as the lighting of lamps in the evening and ceremonial such as processions and incense were included. A reading from scripture was not necessarily a part of the "cathedral" office. The purpose of the office was to offer the corporate praise and intercessory prayer of the body of Christ.

The "monastic" office was primarily a liturgy of the Word. It was centered around offering the prayer of the entire psalter and reading scripture. The primary mode of praying scripture and the psalms was *lectio continua*, that is, continuous reading from the beginning to the end with little or no attention to the content in relation to the time of day or the seasons. Its purpose was to provide an avenue for personal meditative or contemplative prayer. In contrast to the "cathedral" office, anyone could lead the prayer, and there was very little in the way of symbol or ceremony.

It is important to note that these two strands of the tradition are intertwined, especially in Anglican experience. On the one hand there is a strong tradition of the office being prayed daily in parish communities as the prayer of the whole Church, with stately and sometimes lavish ceremony. Many participants knew the responses and canticles by heart. But on the other hand there is also a strong element of the "monastic" in the Anglican offices. Prayer books have traditionally appointed psalms using *lectio continua*. Even in the seven-week cycle of the 1979 prayer book, all the psalms are used except for the imprecatory psalms, and while the cycle is attentive to the content of psalms with reference to specific times of day, this selectivity can be lost when the option is exercised to use a psalm appointed for Morning Prayer in the evening, or vice versa.⁹

The Daily Office Lectionary follows basically a *lectio continua* reading of scripture on a two-year basis. Again, this is a "monastic" strand, reading the entire New Testament and Old Testament in the course of praying the offices. Its primary purpose is as a method of instruction or edification.

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer incorporated some strands

of the “cathedral” office. The designation of “O Gracious Light” as a set text for the opening hymn of praise of Evening Prayer (BCP, pp. 64, 118) parallels the Venite, Jubilate, and “Christ our Passover” of Morning Prayer (BCP, pp. 44-6, 82-3). In both Morning and Evening Prayer, additional intercessions were introduced which extended the intercessory content of the versicles and responses. The inclusion of a collect for mission also served to emphasize the intercessory content of the office.

The introduction of “An Order of Worship for the Evening” into the 1979 prayer book was an attempt to provide a “cathedral” type of office. There is provision for heightened ceremonial and use of the symbol of light as well as the use of selective readings of scripture and psalms appropriate for the evening. Too often, however, the normative patterns of Evening Prayer tend to overshadow what can be a very simple and highly participatory form of evening worship.

The service of Compline has probably gained more popularity as an evening office than “An Order of Worship for the Evening.” Although this office originated in the monastic tradition, it follows the pattern of a “cathedral” office. There are four psalms appointed (Psalms 4, 31, 91 and 134), each appropriate for the close of the day, in addition to four short lessons, consisting of one or two verses each, and a simple invitation for intercessions and thanksgiving for the day that is past.

Future Revisions of the Daily Office

Merely revising the texts of The Book of Common Prayer will not renew or revitalize the office in the life of the Church. Renewing the prayer of the office will be a complex task, encompassing the nature and experience of corporate and individual prayer, the structure of the rite, language, music and the realities of daily life in our congregations.

Paul Bradshaw, in *Two Ways of Praying*, has added considerable depth to the historical discussions of “cathedral” and “monastic”

offices by identifying two very different spiritualities or modes of praying inherent in the form and content of these two strands of the tradition. In contrasting the “cathedral” and “monastic” modes of prayer, he makes three very important distinctions. The first is that the “cathedral” way of praying is primarily a corporate act of prayer. The whole Church is gathered and prays in and with and through Christ: “We pray both through Christ and with Christ and in Christ, and Christ prays for us and with us and in us, so that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, our prayer becomes Christ’s prayer and his prayer becomes our prayer.”¹⁰ It is the participation of the people of God in the priestly ministry of Christ, offering praise and thanksgiving and interceding for the life of the world. The “monastic” tradition is primarily an interior or individual mode of praying, with the content of the office acting as a springboard for meditative or contemplative prayer.

The second important distinction is the use of the psalter: “[O]nly a few psalms were incorporated into the ‘cathedral’ office, and most of these were repeated every single day.... They were...chosen...because of their suitability as Christian hymns and prayers.”¹¹ The practice of having a cantor chant the verses while the congregation sang a refrain was common in the “cathedral” office. In this manner, there was a dialectic of the Word of God being spoken and the people of God responding.

A third distinction is the use of scripture in the office. In “monastic” prayer, scripture was read so “that those who heard might become acquainted with the contents of the biblical books, or deepen their existing knowledge of them, so as to enrich their understanding and shape their lives in the light of them.... [It is] a didactic ministry of the Word.”¹² In contrast, the purpose of scripture in the “cathedral” office was “to provide the biblical warrant and foundation for the liturgical rite being celebrated.... The readings may, or may not, be followed by a homily or other explanation; but both they and the homily, where there is one, will always be closely related to the rest of the liturgical rite with regard to their themes and content, because they serve as a commentary on

it and as a stimulus or springboard for the response of praise and prayer."¹³

Any future revision of the office must take seriously the distinctions that Bradshaw has identified. The mode of prayer we are intending as a Church will shape the form and content of the daily office. The major questions to be addressed are: 1) Are the daily offices the corporate prayer of the Church or the basis for private devotion? 2) Are the offices intended to be a context for the exposition of scripture or a service of praise and thanksgiving to God?

If the offices are the corporate liturgy of the Church's praise and thanksgiving, then there must be changes in the use of scripture and the psalter as well as a clarification in the structure of the rite. A revised structure might include:

Opening sentences

Psalm or hymn of praise, i.e., Venite or "O Gracious Light"

Psalm for the morning or evening

Psalm(s) appointed for the day

Scripture reading or "short" lesson

Canticle

Prayers:

Lord's Prayer

Intercession

Concluding Collect

Dismissal

The Daily Office Lectionary needs either to be completely revised or to have an alternative set of lections that would provide biblical readings related to the times or seasons and thus could be used for what Bradshaw describes as an "anamnetic" ministry of the Word, in which the readings selected are "intimately related to the meaning of what is being celebrated, interpreting and stimulating the liturgical action itself."¹⁴ *Weekday Readings: A Daily Eucharistic Lectionary for the Weekdays following the first Sunday after Epiphany and the Feast of Pentecost*,¹⁵ authorized by the 1994 General Convention for experimental use, provides a six-week set of read-

ings, each of which is complete in itself. This model might be expanded and the lessons used for celebrations of either the eucharist or the office. Latitude must be given in order to provide offices which can stand independently as services of praise and prayer.

The use of psalms in the office needs to be rethought. *Supplemental Liturgical Materials* introduced the use of morning and evening psalms preceding those appointed for Morning and Evening Prayer.¹⁶ Following this pattern, a more selective use of psalms should be set forth for the morning and evening offices.¹⁷

An obvious element in the future revision of the prayer book is the need for a new translation of the psalter. *A New Zealand Prayer Book* (1989) includes a translation of the psalms which provides a cadence of language similar to that of the 1979 prayer book. Gail Ramshaw and Gordon Lathrop have published a version of the 1979 psalter, *Psalter for the Christian People*,¹⁸ which alters the language so that it is inclusive both with regard to humanity and in reference to God. The International Commission on English in the Liturgy (ICEL) has completed *The Psalter*,¹⁹ a very modern translation of the psalms, for use in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States.

The current experience of what might be termed "nonsacramental" worship needs to be considered in the process of discerning the future of the daily office. Two experiences are of particular significance. First is the growing popularity of "Taizé liturgy." The community of Taizé, a monastic community in the Reformed tradition of Europe, is an ecumenical community which has made major contributions to the renewal of the daily office. In recent years, the presence of the community of Taizé in the United States and the experience of large numbers of people who gather at the community in France have spread the influence of the prayer patterns of this community.

"Taizé liturgies" consist of gathering, singing psalms and canticles or verses of scripture, and intercessory prayer. The liturgies are marked by repetitive psalm refrains or Bible verses sung to music

which brings congregations into a corporate mode of prayer. The pattern of worship is simple, yet there is a high degree of ceremony with a lavish use of candles and icons and often the placement of a cross of candles at which persons are invited to offer prayer.

There is a corpus of Taizé music which consists of verses of psalms or biblical texts repeated over and over, again making it highly accessible to participants. A simple congregational refrain is often embellished by settings done as a canon or with intricate harmonies which enhance the melodic line. Often the full text of a psalm is sung by a cantor or choir while the congregation repeats the refrain. It is singable music and highly adaptable to the musical abilities of any community.

Another experience of nonsacramental worship in the Episcopal Church is the "prayer and praise" liturgies of the various renewal movements. Many of these liturgies have elements of an office liturgy: songs and prayers of praise, reading of scripture, and prayer. The music is usually simple and easy to enter into. Movement and gesture are incorporated and in some cases highly stylized with the lifting up of hands and the laying on of hands with prayer. The texts used are not necessarily those of scripture; many of the popular songs of the "prayer and praise" genre have tended to diminish the depth of prayer found in scriptural texts.²⁰

Neither the "Taizé" nor the "prayer and praise" liturgies look or feel like the traditional Anglican Morning or Evening Prayer, yet there are some lessons to be learned which may help to shape what we do with the daily office in the future. In each case, the liturgies are simple, highly repetitive and singable and incorporate gesture, sign and symbol. For significant numbers of people, these liturgies offer a profound sense of prayer in the context of corporate worship.

The lifestyles of most American Episcopalians are such that the possibility of attending Morning or Evening Prayer on a daily basis is unrealistic. However, the popularity of both Taizé liturgy and prayer and praise gatherings indicates that there is a place and a

need for regular celebrations of a choral morning or evening office. The rise of services on Saturday evening might provide a time for an evening office which could take the form of a "vigil" of the resurrection rather than, or including, the eucharist.

Essential to the recovery of the daily office will be the accessibility of music, especially for the psalms and canticles. Simple musical settings of the psalms using an antiphon or refrain are needed. Some musical resources already exist, but they are difficult to find and use. The Meacham simplified Anglican chant²¹ has gained such popularity over the past twenty years that almost any group gathered in the Episcopal Church can sing a psalm (or any other text) to this tune. The fact that it is easily learned, needs no accompaniment, and can be sung without any pointing (markings of the text), attests to the reality that music rooted in the tradition can be an effective means of praying by small groups of the gathered faithful. These simplified chants need to be in the pew hymnal and their use broadened. *A Year of Grace*, by Carl Daw,²² is one example of how canticles can be recast, in this case into metrical form, and sung to familiar hymn tunes. The reality is that materials need to be put together in a usable form for congregations.

Conclusion

We are heirs of a rich tradition of the daily office and as Anglicans have carried that tradition in a unique way over the past four hundred years. Nearly half of The Book of Common Prayer is devoted to the liturgy of the daily office. Any future revision of the prayer book must assess seriously the place of the office in the baptismal life of the Church and develop structures and texts with music for the daily offering of the prayer of the Church.

One of the most powerful tools of evangelism is the experience of the Church at prayer. The liturgy of the office, unlike the eucharist, requires no catechesis, nor does it require the commitment of baptism. The office is the prayer of the Church most accessible to the unbaptized. The question for the twenty-first

century will be whether we will take up the task of being the body of Christ, faithful to the prayers of the apostles.

From the rising of the sun to its going down,
let the Name of the Lord be praised. (Psalm 113:3)

Notes

1. "Preface: The First Book of Common Prayer (1549)," BCP, 1979, p. 866.
2. See, for example, the rubrics "First Day: Morning Prayer" and "First Day: Evening Prayer," BCP, 1979, pp. 585, 589.
3. Byron David Stuhlman, *Redeeming the Time: An Historical and Theological Study of the Church's Rule of Prayer and the Regular Services of the Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1992), p. 48.
4. George Guiver, *Company of Voices: Daily Prayer and the People of God* (New York: Pueblo, 1988), p. 198; emphasis in original.
5. Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), p. 35; emphasis in original.
6. Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986), p. 367.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 370-1.
8. See especially Paul Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church: A Study of the Origin and Early Development of the Divine Office* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), and Taft, *Liturgy of the Hours*.
9. "At the discretion of the officiant, however, any of the Psalms appointed for a given day may be used in the morning or in the evening" (BCP, p. 934).
10. Paul F. Bradshaw, *Two Ways of Praying* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), p. 64.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-5.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 96; cf. Stuhlman, p. 53.
15. Joseph P. Russell, ed. (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1995). See below, pp. 213-14.
16. *Supplemental Liturgical Materials*, expanded edition (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1991, 1996), pp. 20-2.
17. See Bradshaw, *Two Ways of Praying*, pp. 122-6.
18. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993.
19. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994.
20. A caveat from the history of the office: when hymnody replaced the psalms and canticles of the traditional prayer of the Church, it all too often ventured into dangerous theological territory.
21. S415, *The Hymnal 1982: Service Music* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985).
22. Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1990.