Praying with the Anglicans - from Thomas Cranmer to R.S. Thomas

There is a rather pleasant symmetry–perhaps particularly on the feast of St Thomas the Apostle- in both beginning and concluding what I want to say with a brace of *Thomases* (albeit one attached as a Christian name and the other as a surname). The first, Thomas Cranmer, was of course the principal architect and author of what is by any reckoning the bedrock of both Anglican liturgy and the foundation of any distinctive spirituality Anglicanism may possess, *The Book of Common Prayer*. The other Thomas, R S Thomas, was a rather terrifying Welsh Anglican clergyman who evidently scared the living daylights out of his parishioners but who was also, and unquestionably, one of the greatest poets in the English language over the past century. They couldn't have been more different, and there was also more than four centuries separating them.

What I want to suggest, however, is that a crucially important element in Anglican spirituality *at its best* is its relationship with poetry, not always poetry in the formal sense, but language that is consciously poetic in the use of rhythm, cadence, imagery and imagination. The starting point is therefore the traditional Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. A few things need to be said about it.

The first is that until relatively recent times it was the Prayer Book for worldwide Anglicanism. Rather like the old Latin Mass for Roman Catholics, you would find the same liturgy anywhere, no matter how far you travelled. But, in parallel with the Second Vatican Council (though as an entirely separate movement) the 1960s was the decade in which Anglicanism began both to modernise its liturgies and also to jettison any idea of a single liturgy for the whole Communion of churches. The "Old Book of Common Prayer" - as it is today sometimes known - still retains its place, however, in the hearts and minds of many Anglicans, and not only the old, the snobs, or the diehards…The reason for this continuing attachment is that the language of the Book of Common Prayer does something that modern language can seldom do (no matter how carefully crafted), and this is *to draw us in - behind the words - to a space, a holy space where the religious imagination within us can find God.* (This is a basic premise to which I will be returning a number of times during this talk – *the place, the space behind the words*.) It is not simply that the language of the Prayer Book is old (even archaic in the technical sense). It is that it has cadence, depth and rhythm and, although it uses many words, none of them is wasted. The Book of Common Prayer was, if you like, "lucky" to have been written at a high water mark for the English language, shortly before Shakespeare and the King James Bible (the "Authorised Version"). When the Prayer Book first appeared, it was written in what would have been seen as polished English but not a language that the members of a congregation in church would not have understood, any more than those who crowded into the Globe Theatre to enjoy a new play of Shakespeare were all professors of English literature. This was good English but it was vernacular English. It was just a good time for the vernacular.

Another thing to note is that although through the centuries the Book of Common Prayer was the *sole* liturgy for the Anglican churches in different provinces, it was more than that - it was also very often the book which people used at home for their own prayers. You may have noticed that the title of our morning worship today was "Morning Prayer *daily throughout the year*" - even the daily office was not meant to be simply an obligation for the clergy but an opportunity for any faithful Christian in any place.

You and I live in an age when we learn nothing by heart. We probably don't even know our own mobile phone numbers, let alone anyone else's; we just press the right button. But generations of faithful Anglicans (literally through the centuries) would have learnt many of the prayers in the Book of Common Prayer by heart. They

could have probably - if pressed - have recited the entire public liturgy of the Church by heart, precisely because it was not just the public liturgy. People's individual spirituality was often moulded by the language, the imagery and the beauty of their Prayer Book, a book that they knew inside out.

Thomas Cranmer, to all intents and purposes the "author" of the Book of Common Prayer, was a complex person and not an entirely admirable one. This perception rather changed when he met a martyr's death, having finally realised that he could not stay on the right side of every succeeding English monarch, regardless of his or her religious viewpoint, and retain even the semblance of a conscience for himself. What Cranmer did possess, however, was an extraordinary ability to craft beautiful liturgy where the words, the rhythms draw the attentive worshipper to a new place, the more so when the words have become familiar and have even become part of the person's whole psyche. Many of the prayers of a particular Sunday or holy day, *the collects*, were translations from older Latin collects but they are superb translations. One of the difficulties we face today, of course, is that we cannot easily translate any clause that ascribes his divine attributes to God, without sounding either patronising or stilted. In Tudor English it all sounds perfectly natural.

I could spend all the time allotted (and the whole day in fact) to giving examples of stylish liturgical writing from the Book of Common Prayer. I will give just a couple of examples of what I mean.
The first is from the general confession at Morning or Evening Prayer, a prayer which would have been known from earliest childhood to anyone in a churchgoing family. It is a very long prayer but listen to how it begins – "Almighty and merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done. And we have done those things which we ought not to have done.."
You might say, "Well, you wouldn't want to be in a hurry if you're going to use language like that." No, and you shouldn't be in a hurry either! But the poetry, the contrasting ideas, the imagery and the subtlety are all there *if you are attentive*:

- "Almighty *and* merciful"..,
- "Straying from thy ways like lost sheep…"
- "Devices and desires" – quite different things and very good psychology: our hearts do have devices to restrain our conscience, don't they, as well as human desires?
- Placing the things we have left undone that we ought to have done *before* the things we did that we ought not to have done..

You have in that prayer of confession massive pastoral insight and very sound psychology, as well as flawless theology and beautiful language. Indulging in too much analysis takes away from the ability of the prayer to bring us all in our own way to different places, though places where we ought to be - *behind* the words.

I will say less about a collect I have chosen (and I could have chosen another two dozen as easily for the beauty and insight that they convey. I believe almost all of them hit the spot to perfection, in what we should want to ask God each day for ourselves. This is the collect for the Fourth Sunday after Trinity:

> O God, the protector of all who trust in you,
> without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy:
> Increase and multiply upon us your mercy;
> that thou being our ruler and guide,

we may so pass through things temporal
that we finally lose not the things eternal:
Grant this, O heavenly Father,
for Jesus Christ's sake, our Lord.

It takes time, it takes a quiet praying of such a prayer regularly (and not merely *annually* on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity) for it to almost become part of what one is, but this is at least part of what we mean by the inheritance and the spirituality of the Book of Common Prayer.

Things have changed. A few years ago, the Church of Ireland fully revised its Book of Common Prayer but decided – wisely I think (and I was on the Liturgical Advisory Committee at the time) – to include both the traditional services of the old Prayer Book and liturgies in contemporary language, in the hope that nothing would be lost and much might be gained. I think that the new Church of Ireland services have retained something of the dignity and the "space" of the Cranmerian services, but I am glad that the tradition of the original Prayer Book was not set aside. I think also that there is the real hope, as expressed in the preface to this 2004 Prayer Book that the new book "would have equal capacity to enrich private as well as public devotion".

I want now to move on to looking briefly at ways in which this spiritual inheritance of the 16th century Book of Common Prayer has been expressed, in part through poetry that may not of itself be formal prayer, but yet poetry which is truly prayer if properly assimilated. I am going to look at two types in particular(and there could of course be many others).

The first is to consider couple of the great Anglican priest-poets of the 17th century, those we place in the category of *the metaphysical poets*. These are a rather disparate group and include a surprising number of Church of England clergy. To over-simplify the matter somewhat, the poetry of the metaphysical poets might be seen as being characterised by two things that we might certainly have detected - even if not to the same degree - in the Book of Common Prayer. The first is a highly imaginative use of metaphor, and the other is an intensely beautiful lyricism. We might add that there is also a very earthy sense of *life as it is*, not overlaid with any sentimental pietism.
The two poets I've chosen are probably the most famous of the metaphysical poets – George Herbert and John Donne. George Herbert – Welsh-born, rising to prominent positions in both academic and political life in England, and then giving it all up to become the Vicar of an obscure country parish, Bemerton, where among much else he wrote a remarkable book on pastoral care – "The Country Parson".
Two brief examples of Herbert's spirituality as expressed in poetry. The first is the more obviously "clever" yet demonstrates an immense grasp of the nature of God and the nature of humankind, *The Pulley*, the stuff of prayer if not a prayer in itself :

When God at first made man,
Having a glasse of blessings standing by;
Let us (said he) poure on him all we can:
Let the worlds riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

So strength first made a way;
Then beautie flow'd, then wisdome, honour, pleasure:
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure
Rest in the bottome lay.

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewell also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlesnesse:
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tosse him to my breast.

The other is a poem which has since become a popular hymn in Anglican hymn singing. It is much more direct, and far simpler than *The Pulley*. It is certainly more than usable as a prayer. I will give just part of this poem.

Teach me, my God and King,
in all things thee to see,
and what I do in anything
to do it as for thee.

A man that looks on glass,
on it may stay his eye;
or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
and then the heaven espy.

All may of thee partake;
nothing can be so mean,
which with this tincture, "for thy sake,"
will not grow bright and clean.

I move on now to the great John Donne. One cannot do Donne justice in a short spell, and I will not attempt to do so. One cannot be judgmental on such matters but it seems certain that his spirituality was rather less clear-cut than George Herbert's. His output of poetry included some extremely erotic and sensuous verse as well as some vicious satire. Although he ended his days as Dean of St Paul's Cathedral London, he was no George Herbert, a country parson by instinct.
Some of Donne's religious poetry is simply magnificent, cutting across convention and even propriety. In one of these poems, and I can only think of it as prayer, Donne calls on God to hammer him into submission –

Batter my heart, three person'd God, for you as yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend; That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new. But then the poem ends quite shockingly (certainly to modern ears), because Donne goes so far as to use language very close to sexual violence –

> Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
> Except you'enthrall me, never shall be free,
> Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

Very earthy, even unacceptable, and yet we cannot deny John Donne his place in the development of a spirituality within Anglicanism which focuses on the reality of life, rather than the idealised picture of a life that really does not exist on earth. But before leaving Donne, I want to make it up to him! One of his meltingly beautiful pieces of prose, derived from one of his sermons, has now become part of the funeral liturgy in the Church of Ireland's "new" Book of Common Prayer :

> Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening
> into the house and gate of heaven,
> to enter into that gate and dwell in that house,
> where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light;
> no noise nor silence, but one equal music;
> no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession;
> no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity;
> in the habitations of thy glory and dominion,
> world without end.

If the first grouping – Herbert and Donne – give us some picture of prayer as expressed confidently and with immense depth through beauty, through image, metaphor and even paradox, there is a more modern and another very disparate group – given less recognition perhaps – that almost harks back to attitude of the Old Testament psalms. This is prayer that brings a ruthless directness into dealings with God, an honesty and yet also a real piety. Prayer that can shake its fist at God while still (like Job in the Old Testament), surrendering to God, even with love, because there is no hope to be found anywhere else.

I am aware that I have jumped over T S Eliot, W H Auden, Emily Dickinson, even John Betjeman, and a score of others who either as poets or as liturgists have followed in this tradition of spirituality, a tradition which is at times lyrical, at times quirky and paradoxical, but always Christ-centred, and always deeply conscious of the grace of God in Christ.

But this last grouping has an unsung fascination. I mention three poets – one a woman-poet of the nineteenth century, one a minor war poet of the First World War, and the other the Welsh clergyman, R S Thomas.

Christina Rossetti, born in London, though of Italian extraction was influenced by a strange combination of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in art (within which her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a distinguished painter) and also Anglo-Catholicism, then burgeoning in London parishes of the Church of England. What is of great interest is the combination within her writing of a deep piety and a cool ruthlessness. Christina Rossetti is probably best known today for a poem that we hear at Christmas but now as a popular carol we hear in churches, but also of course over supermarket and airport public address systems - *In the bleak mid-winter*

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Culminating in a final, rather pietistic although beautiful verse, again a prayer :

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

But then - from the same pen - a poem which is today used in entirely secular settings but, I suspect, rarely heard in church! The first verse :

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

No loss of faith, but the other side of the coin. The psalmists could share with true feelings with God yet within a deep faith, so we should not be shocked if modern religious poets can do the same. Another contrast between gentle piety and rather bleak stoicism can be found in another poet, less well known – Charles Hamilton Sorley.. Born in Scotland, educated at public school in England, a cousin of the British politician of a later generation, RAB Butler, Sorley died in the Battle of Loos in 1915 at the age of 20. He was regarded by some as potentially a great poet, and is one of those poets commemorated in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey in London. One of his poem-prayers has become a much-loved choral anthem in Anglican circles (set, incidentally, to music by Charles Wood, born in this city of Armagh), and Sorley's prayer is full of the deep piety of a young Christian soul –

This sanctuary of my soul
Unwitting I keep white and whole,
Unlatched and lit, if Thou should'st care
To enter or to tarry there.

With parted lips and outstretched hands
And listening ears Thy servant stands,
Call Thou early, call Thou late,
To Thy great service dedicate.

Sorley never lost his deep faith (according to those who knew him well), but listen to this outpouring of grief and cold anger in a poem written from the battle-fields of the First World War –

When you see millions of the mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
Say not soft things as other men have said,
That you'll remember. For you need not so.
Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,
"Yet many a better one has died before."
Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
Great death has made all his for evermore.

Not perhaps what you want to hear at this Spiritfest (devoted as it is to understanding spirituality at greater depth) and yet I would want to suggest that this *tension in faith* is part of Christian spirituality. So is a brutal honesty with ourselves and with God. We have heard from two poets, Christina Rossetti and Charles Hamilton Sorley, whose deep piety has brought them right inside the canon of Anglican prayer and spirituality and yet who can express with honest ruthlessness the real challenges of faith in the face of fear, or death or carnage. There must be place in an authentic prayer-life - a real and honest spirituality - for that call of an anguished father to Our Lord after the Transfiguration , “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief”, and for the cry of Our Lord himself from the cross, “My God why have you forsaken me?” This is why our apostle of today, St Thomas the Apostle – Thomas the doubter - should never be demeaned or disparaged. He was honest and although he was rebuked, he was also rewarded.

I am going to end briefly with the other Thomas – R S Thomas, a rector in the Church in Wales, he died at the age of 87 just over 10 years ago. His poetry, even about his pastoral ministry (and he was obviously a very good pastor, even if a somewhat scary one), has both a compassion and a grimness about it. Although a firm Welsh nationalist and a fluent Welsh speaker, he never wrote poetry in Welsh because he had not been brought up as a native speaker. I am going to give two short examples of his poetry, the first – rather quirky, devotional and beautiful in praise of God, again using metaphor and imagery, almost a *Te Deum* although in the starkness and minimalism of our generation a far distance from Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer and yet part of that stream in Anglican spirituality. The other poem is a challenge, in an extract from another of his poems (with which I really will finish) - a challenge to us here today, as we face the future as Irish Christians together.

Praise

I praise you because
you are artist and scientist
in one. When I am somewhat
fearful of your power,
your ability to work miracles
with a set-square, I hear
you murmuring to yourself
in a notation Beethoven
dreamed of but never achieved.
You run off your scales of
rain water and sea water, play
the chords of the morning
and evening light, sculpture
with shadow, join together leaf
by leaf, when spring
comes, the stanzas of
an immense poem. You speak
all languages and none,
answering our most complex
prayers with the simplicity
of a flower, confronting
us, when we would domesticate you
to our uses, with the rioting
viruses under our lens.

You and I live in strange, disturbing and confusing times for our country. People have lost faith in so much, and yet the plea for a real and authentic hope is loud in our ears. As Christian disciples, we must face that plea together, but not by giving in to hopelessness or retreating into our carefully protected spiritual bunkers. And we have that choice – to be God's people, or instead to go into the desert of faith lost and of hope destroyed. And so, the last word is with the forbidding R S Thomas -

He [God] needs us as a conductor
his choir for a performance of an unending music.
What we may not do is to have our horizon bare,
is to make our way on
through a desert white
with the bones of our dead faiths.

AMEN

+Richard
Meath & Kildare