

The Daily Prayers of the House of Commons

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It is a surprise to many to know that Parliament starts every day with three and a half minutes of prayer. That is how long it takes for the Chaplain to lead the assembled members through a form of prayer which is largely unaltered since the seventeenth century. The office of Speaker's Chaplain is a "Restoration" appointment, but prayers in the chamber go back much further.

The members of the House of Commons had taken up residence in a church, for that was what the original Chamber of the House was. After years of itinerant life, in 1547 the House of Commons accepted the offer of Edward VI of the "redundant" Collegiate Church of St Stephen as a permanent home. This fact established the custom of facing benches; the House having, from the first, occupied the Collegiate seating in which previously the Canons of St Stephen's had received the Divine Office.

However, by the time that the Commons moved into its own permanent chamber in the disused Chapel within the Royal Palace of Westminster, many things had changed in both Church and State.

In the first place, the College of priests in the Palace had now been dispersed, as had the monks of Westminster; but more importantly a very different religious tone was now abroad. The Church of England had by now adopted many ideas from continental Protestantism. Yet, even so, it had not thrown off entirely all links with historic Catholic usages: instead,

it had subjected many of those ancient traditions to critical examination, and, in that light, changes and reforms had been made. In particular, the necessity of channelling all prayer through the Mass and consequently the necessity of the concept of 'The priesthood of all believers' shaped the devotions of those who had been influenced by the new theology. This meant that the necessity of a readily available clergyman did not need to inhibit the House of Commons from having prayers when it assembled, even if there were only lay members present in the House. Indeed, in keeping with the religious mood of the time, prayer, not least extempore prayer, was believed to be a highly desirable prelude to any meeting, particularly when many ecclesiastical and doctrinal matters formed the agenda for the meetings of Parliament in those days.

The first detailed reference to prayers being said actually in the Commons chamber itself ¹ occurs in the first year of the reign of Elizabeth I. The *Commons Journal* for 11 February 1558 records:

This morning Litany was said by the Clerk kneeling and answered by the whole House on their knees with diverse prayers'. ²

It may be speculated that the practice of daily prayers became established about this time - whether before this date or soon after cannot be said, as there is no record which gives us the precise details. Prayers would seem to have been said in the Parliament of 1563-67 because on the opening day of the next Parliament (4 April 1571) the Journal records the House's agreement:

'that the Litany shall be read every day in this House during this Parliament as in the last was used; and also a prayer by Mr Speaker such as he shall think fittest for this time, to be begun every day at half hour after eight of the clock in the morning and that each one of this House then making default shall forfeit for every time 4d to the Poormen's box'. ³

The later introduction of a clergyman to say prayers was not universally popular, not least to the Clerk of the House. In a rather dry note in the Journal for 23 March 1603 the Clerk (who was at that time Fulk Onslow) ⁴ recorded that the prayers on that day had been read by the Clerk of the House 'to whose place the service anciently belongs'. ⁵

There is a small foretaste of things to come when in 1584 it is recorded:

'Ordered That a particular form of prayer be directed by some of this House for God's blessing and especially upon that day's consultations'.⁶

It would seem that this resolution was not acted upon at that time, as no 'form of prayer' from that date is extant.

It was not until the Restoration in 1660 that a committee was appointed to 'inform themselves as to what form of prayer had hitherto been used in the House',⁷ but there is no record of any report of their findings having been made by the Committee to the House. Similarly, Sir B Hicks asked permission in 1624 to introduce 'a Prayer of Thanksgiving' to be said at the Parting of Parliament, but this also was never done.⁸

It is generally asserted that the prayers at present in daily use in the House date from the Restoration. From the content of them it is obvious that they could have had no origin in anything that would have been prayed in the Parliament which met between 1649 and 1660.

THE ORIGINS AND STRUCTURE OF THE PRAYERS

The prayers start with the Chaplain reciting Psalm 67 (*Deus Misereatur*) without doxology, in a translation which is the work of Coverdale in The Great Bible of 1539. The Chaplain then greets the members with 'The Lord be with you', to which they reply before he says, 'Let us pray'. This is the signal for a singular custom. The members now turn inwards, that is, with their backs to the Speaker and the Chaplain, and face their seats and they remain thus for the rest of the prayers. This seems to be a modification of a previous custom in which members turned and knelt on their seats which provided a more practical height at which to kneel when wearing a sword. In the House of Lords many of their lordships still kneel on the benches in this manner. There follows the three-fold Kyrie and then the Lord's Prayer. The version used follows closely Tyndale's translation of 1526 for the first part, but the conclusion 'for thine is the Kingdom ...' is first found in the Scottish Book of Common Prayer of 1637.⁹

The prayer for the Sovereign which follows next has a long and complicated history. The first version of it appeared 'officially' in the Primer of 1553 but is clearly derived from a prayer by John Fisher in his *Psalmi seu preces* (1925) translated by T Berthelet in 1544 under the title *Psalmes or Prayers taken out of holie Scripture*.¹⁰

The next prayer is one for the Royal Family. There was no Prayer for the Royal Family in any Prayer Book until 1662. The precedent of praying for members of the Royal Family was set when a limited number of them were mentioned in the Litany of 1544. The present prayer is based on one which was first used around 1604. At that time it was to be used in worship after the Litany proper had been completed.¹¹ There is an early copy of this prayer in the Westminster Abbey Muniments dating from 1611. This prayer has often been modified as births and deaths in the Royal Family have necessitated.¹²

The provenance of the Prayer for Parliament, which now follows, has been a matter of some debate. It is certainly 'the centre-piece' of the short daily service. One version of its origin is given by Lord Hemingford, although the historicity of his story is extremely doubtful:

'A curious story is told as to the origin and authorship of this prayer which has been in use for many years, not only in the House of Commons but also in the House of Lords, where prayers in the same form are said by one of the Bishops. A Select Committee, it is said, was set up to consider and settle the form of the prayers to be said at the commencement of each day's sittings: the Committee decided on the 67th Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, Prayers for the Sovereign and the Royal Family and so on: but they desired to include a prayer specially appropriate for use by Parliament, asking God's blessing upon their work for the nation; they asked the Chairman of the Committee to compose such a prayer for their consideration: he gave much anxious attention to this task without settling anything to his satisfaction: but one night he retired to bed after thinking much on the matter and dreamed a dream: he dreamt that an Angel woke him and told him to get up and write what he (the Angel) should dictate, and then dictated this prayer: the Chairman met his committee the following day, told them of his dream, said he thought the prayer was a perfect one, but that unfortunately he could not remember it! He promised to go home and try his hardest to recollect it: on returning to his house and going into his room, he found lying there a sheet of paper on which in his own handwriting was the prayer which the Angel had dictated, and which he must have written down at the Angel's dictation, in his sleep; he submitted it to his committee who approved and adapted it without alteration as divinely inspired. The story may be a curious one, but it is far from absurd: it is well known in these days, that the brain may continue working during

sleep with the result that a 'dream' may solve a problem which the sleeper has been thinking about.' ¹³

The prayer as now used, has a resemblance to the prayer for the High Court of Parliament which was included in the Book of Common Prayer in 1662, the authorisation of which was an almost contemporary event. That prayer is reputed to have been composed by William Laud, when he was Bishop of St David's. for the service on a special fast day in 1625. ¹⁴ But the prayer adopted for parliamentary use is certainly not the work of Speaker Yelverton as has sometimes been asserted. ¹⁵

The last prayer, 'Prevent us, O Lord' is a translation of a collect *Actiones nostras quesumus domine* which is in *Sacramentarium Gregorianum* and is 'clearly derived from an older prayer in the Gelasian Sacramentary'. ¹⁶ This collect appeared in the Book of Common Prayer of 1549 where it was included among six collects to be said after the offertory, when there is no communion. ¹⁷ It is usual to ascribe the authorship of the translations of ancient collects which are contained in the 1549 book to Cranmer and this may well be true. However, we must not forget that although Cranmer was chiefly responsible for the 1549 book (perhaps less so for the Prayer Book of 1552), he did have the assistance of twelve colleagues, six bishops and six learned divines in the compilation of the book. Liturgical Commissions are not a twentieth century invention. ¹⁸

'The Grace' (2 Cor.13.14) was first added as a conclusion to a service in 'The Litany used in the Queen's Chapel' of 1559 and thence found its way into the Elizabethan Prayer Book. ¹⁹ Until 1983 the Grace had always been said by the Chaplain alone, but since then the Speaker and the Members have joined him in saying this final prayer.

Variations in the Prayers

Apart from that minor variation, the daily prayers have remained unchanged since the seventeenth century, with the only additions and subtractions being the necessary alterations in the name of the Sovereign and members of the Royal Family. These would be done according to the Royal Warrants issued from time to time to procure those same alterations in the Book of Common Prayer. ²⁰

The prayers in the House of Lords ²¹ follow the same pattern as those in the Commons except that in recent times the Bishop who conducts the prayers in that

House has had a choice of Psalms with which to commence the act of worship rather than the unchanging Psalm 67.²² When the Lords made this change in 1970 there was some discussion as to whether the Speaker's Chaplain ought to be given a similar discretion over the opening Psalm, but it was decided not to make any change.²³

There are only two recorded examples of deviations from the norm, both in the twentieth century. The first came on 26 October 1950 when the rebuilt House of Commons Chamber, which had been erected on the same side and in the same 'Collegiate' style as the one which had been destroyed by enemy action, was officially opened.²⁴

The second occasion when there was a variation was on 22 June 1965 on the occasion of the seventh centenary of Simon de Montfort's Parliament. That day there were to be special ceremonies, but before the two Houses assembled in Westminster Hall for these, they each held prayers in their own Chamber. The form of prayer was as usual except that before the final collect 'Prevent us, O Lord' the following prayer was used:

'Almighty and Eternal God, Though Judge of all the earth, Who hast been our refuge from one generation to another, we humbly seek Thy blessing as we meet to commemorate the Seven Hundredth Anniversary of the Parliament of Simon de Montfort.

We praise Thy name, O Lord for the goodly heritage bequeathed to us by those who, in bygone days, have served Thee here and for the guidance of Thy Spirit throughout the ages.

Especially do we thank Thee for that Thou didst inspire the minds of our Rulers in times past to call into consultation those representatives of the Shires, Cities and Boroughs of England who, in due time, were to constitute the House of Commons.

Grant that in this place truth and justice, liberty and righteousness may ever flourish and abound, and that, as we seek to know Thy will, we may have strength and power to fulfil it to the glory of Thy Holy Name and the good of all mankind.

All this we ask for the sake of Him, who is the only sure foundation of men and of nations, even Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.'²⁵

The prayers which are said before the daily proceedings commence are the subject of an often repeated 'chestnut' - that the Chaplain enters the

Chamber, looks at the Members and prays for the Nation. However, prayers are taken very seriously by Members and are considered by many to be an essential part of the day's proceedings. Indeed it should be noted that the House spends almost as much time each week in prayer as it does over Prime Minister's Questions.

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- 1 There is a bald statement, 'The first prayer that was said in the House of Commons was in *anno* I Hen IV (ie 1461) in Ambrose Kelly's text, a compilation by a late seventeenth century Under Clerk employed by the Clerk of the House which he completed in 1685. Behind part of the collection is a text of 1581. (See ed. W E McKay, *Observations, Rules and Orders of the House of Commons*, House of Commons Library Documents No 17, 1989, p.173
 - 2 *Commons Journal* (hereafter *CJ*) See Willson Havelock Coates (ed.), *The Journal of Sir Simonds D'Ewes, From the First Recess of the Long Parliament to the Withdrawal of King Charles from London*, New Haven, 1942
 - 3 *Cji*, 82.; *D'Ewes Journal*, p83 has 'the Prayer which shall begin at eight of the Clock.'
 - 4 WR McKay, *Clerks in the House of Commons 1363-1989: A Biographical List*, House of Lords Record Office Occasional Publications No 3 1989, p77.
 - 5 *Cji*, 150.
 - 6 *D'Ewes Journal*, p349.
 - 7 *Cjviii*, 150.
 - 8 *Ibid*, I, 713.
 - 9 Alan Campbell Don, *The Scottish Book of Common Prayer* 1929, 1949, p17ff
 - 10 Brightman, op.cit. Vol1, pclxvii and Frank Streatfeild, *The State Prayers and other Variations in the Book of Common Prayer*, 1950, pp14-15.
 - 11 Streatfeild, op.cit. p.16.
 - 12 C Leo Berry, '...and all the Royal family', *History Today*, Vol XVI, April 1966, pp176-7; AWS Brown, 'The Prayer Books in the Choir of St George's Chapel', *Annual Report of the Friends of St George's Chapel* (to 31 December 1957), pp20-29.
 - 13 Lord Hemingford, *Backbencher and Chairman*, 1946, pp44-5.
 - 14 JH Blunt, *Annotated Book of Common Prayer*, 1844, p.237.
 - 15 Arthur Irwin Dasent, *The Speakers of the House of Commons from the Earliest Times to the Present Day with a Topographical Description of westminster at Various Epochs and a Brief record of the Principal Constitutional Changes*, 1911, p.159.
 - 16 WE Scudmore, *Notitia Eucharistica*, 2nd and revised ed. 1872, p.716.
 - 17 *The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI*, ed. DEW Harrison, 1968, p.228.
 - 18 Thomas Fuller, *The Church History of Britain*, 1652, Bk.vii, p.386. There are interesting discussions on the subject of the evidence for Cranmer's involvement in EC Ratcliff, 'The liturgical Work of Archbishop Cranmer', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol.vii, (1956), pp189-203 (which is reprinted in eds AH Couratin and DH Tripp, *EC Ratcliff Liturgical Studies*, 1976, pp 184ff) and in CW Dugmore, 'The first Ten Years 1549-59' in *The English Prayer Book 1549-1662*, Alcuin Tract xxiv, 1963, pp 6 - 30.

- ¹⁹ Ed. WK Clay, *Liturgies and Occasional forms of Prayer set forth in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, Parker Society ed., 1847, p.17.
- ²⁰ Berry, *op.cit.*, *passim*.
- ²¹ For early history of prayers in the House of Lords see ER Foster, *The House of Lords 1603-1649*, *ip.22*.
- ²² In 1970 he had the choice of Psalms 24, 46, 67, 93 and 111; since 1979 Psalms 1, 15, 24, 34(vv1-8), 46, 66(vv1-14,18), 67, 93, 95 (vv1-7), 100, 111, 112(vv1-6), 119(vv34-40), 121, 145(vv1 - 6). *Companion to Standing Orders of the House of Lords*; Appendix F, 'Prayers for Parliament', pp214-5.
- ²³ Letter: Speaker's secretary (NEV Short) to Speaker's Chaplain (TS Nevill), 24 April 1970.
- ²⁴ *HC Deb (5th ser)*, rd478 ccl 2929.
- ²⁵ *Seventh Centenary of Simon de Montfort's Parliament 1265-1965. An Account of the Commemorative Ceremonies and Historical Narrative*, ptI, p.16.

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