

The St. Giles Book of Common Order 1884—1926

FOR a Divinity student forty or fifty years ago the problem of finding material for the composition of prayers and other forms for public worship was a serious one. Those who were content to rely on "the inspiration of the moment" and to utter, as the prayers of a congregation (to say nothing of the whole Church) the private thoughts of their own (often very) peculiar minds, in language that no man would consider suitable for the ears of an earthly king, no doubt were not greatly troubled by such difficulties. There were, however, in the colleges at that time a number of young men, candidates for the Ministry, who felt the urgent need of help and guidance in the conduct of services generally, and especially in the gravely responsible task which they would have to perform as leaders of the people's devotions. How, in short, were we to secure a decent standard of reverence and at the same time, of reality in this part of the service? That was the question we were asking ourselves; and for that we needed guidance.

There were not many books from which it was possible to get much help. There was, of course, the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, and some used it freely. But it was felt that there ought to be some contribution from the Presbyterian Church to the liturgical store, and the Church of Scotland had nothing official to offer. It lacked leadership in this matter. What then was a young man to do? What we did was to learn up by heart the prayers we were to use each Sunday. And one of the sources which we found most profitable for this purpose was what we all knew as the *St. Giles Prayer Book*. For one reason or another we did not (in Edinburgh at least) make so much use of *Euchologion* at that time; although, later, when we were ordained, we used most thankfully the Holy Communion service which it contained. But in its ordinary services it seemed to lack the warmth, the intimate personal note, that we found in the *St. Giles* book. Perhaps also there was another reason for our preference: that this, we knew, was a book in use every Sunday, and indeed every day, and valued by a great congregation as their own liturgy, officially sanctioned by their minister to be used until such time as "another formulary be set forth by the proper authority".

Dr. Cameron Lees was one of those far-seeing men who in the latter half of last century turned the minds of many people in Scotland towards a worthier conception of common worship than was usually in vogue among the clergy at that time. He saw that the old High Kirk of St. Giles, steeped as it was in centuries of Scottish devotion, deserved to have a liturgy at once dignified and real. This was necessary not only for the Sunday services but also for the orderly conduct of daily service. So in 1884, a year after the Cathedral was restored to its proper unity mainly by the generosity of William Chambers, there was published "A Book of Common Order for Sunday and Weekday Services", and, although Dr. Lees modestly kept his name out of it, yet it was a matter of common knowledge that he was responsible for its composition. In its original form it was much less complete than it later became. The first edition contained only twelve orders for daily service, the first ten of which were for use also at morning and evening service on Sundays. It went through a number of editions (I think six in all) and additional services for Good Friday, Holy Communion, Baptism, Marriage and Burial were incorporated in the later ones. It was not, of course, entirely of his own composition. In the Preface he speaks of the services as having been "compiled", and some of the sources from which they were derived are easily traceable, particularly *Euchologion*, which was published by the Church Service Society in 1867 and the service book of the Catholic Apostolic Church.

Under Dr. Wallace Williamson the use of the book was continued, with certain omissions and alterations which greatly improved it. It is unfortunate that he did not carry out his intention to publish a new revised edition, but this never materialized. Consequently there are few to-day who realize how great was the improvement carried out simply by the stroke of his pen. By the omission of many redundant and many awkward passages the prayers were revitalized and their great spiritual value brought out. There are still a few copies of the book to be found in which these alterations are indicated in red ink. Thus, while some of the changes which he made in the Order of Service were far reaching (*e.g.*, the introduction of the Creed at all services, and the use of *Euchologion* at Holy Communion) the actual wording of the prayers underwent no drastic change except by way of omission.

It is always difficult to assess the merits of an old service book and perhaps one is apt to value too highly the forms to which one has grown accustomed, and say "the old is better". This must be kept in mind in trying to judge of this book. As one who was privileged to officiate in St. Giles for six years or so I may be somewhat prejudiced in favour of it. But to me it seemed, and still does seem, that, with Dr Wallace Williamson's amendments it furnished a profoundly satisfying common order, with few anomalies and defects. No one who was familiar with it could miss the deep spirituality which pervaded it. There was something in these prayers which pierced through the hard shell of formalism and went to the heart, as *e.g.*, in the evening Commendatory Prayer (used also in the Marriage Service) "O loving Father, in darkness and in light, in sorrow and in joy, in life and in death, may we feel Thy hands laid upon us, and abide in the peace of Thy children": or, to take another example, what could be more touching than this sentence, taken from one of the many beautiful Thanksgivings for the Faithful Departed, "Keep alive in our hearts the remembrance of their goodness and give us grace to cherish the hope that, when the day breaks and the shadows flee away, we shall meet with them again in Thy presence with exceeding joy"?

The service for Good Friday seems to me still to be the best that I have seen anywhere, combining, as so much of the book does, those elements of reverence, reality and spiritual fervour which are to be found in all great liturgy. In some minor points also it seems to have the advantage over more recent books, as for instance, in the place of the Anthem at the end of the service and the inclusion of the Thanksgiving in the first prayer.

That it had serious shortcomings has, of course, to be admitted. In its original form it was far from perfect, and compared unfavourably, on the whole, with *Euchologion*. The prayers were too long and diffuse, and, here and there, sank below the level of simplicity, very near to banality. The Creed had no place except in the Baptism Service until Dr. Williamson introduced it; the Holy Communion and the Burial Service were inferior to those in *Euchologion* and were soon set aside. And no doubt a scholarly critic could find other defects in it. But in drawing a comparison between the two books one important factor must be kept in mind, that, while *Euchologion* was no more than a liturgical text book with no ecclesiastical sanction behind

it other than that of the Church Service Society, the St. Giles book was issued as a book of Common Order prescribed for use in that Church. It could scarcely be ignored by the Courts of the Church if anyone took exception to it. That practically nothing of this nature took place is due to its moderation. Yet, moderate as it had to be, it was certainly a bold step forward towards an authorized liturgy and one cannot but admire the wisdom and courage of Dr. Lees in introducing it when he did, and the loyal support which the Kirk Session and congregation gave him.

Compared with the more recent books *Prayers for Divine Service*, and *The Book of Common Order*, 1940, the St. Giles Book in its original form has many defects. That is only to be expected, in view of the amount of time and scholarly work which have been devoted to their production. But when we take into account the revised form in which it was in use under Dr. Williamson there lingers in one's mind a doubt whether, after all, in the orders for daily service and for the ordinary services on Sundays something vital was not lost in ignoring it when those books were edited and compiled. It is a little difficult to say just what is amiss with our present *Book of Common Order*, but something there must be, since it is not nearly so freely used for the weekly services of prayer as for sacramental and other special services. I do not think it could have survived forty years' constant use as the St. Giles Book did. It would have died of inanition long before that period came to an end. But Dr. Lees, in composing this book, had prepared a rich store of devotional material, which Dr. Williamson, with that rare sense for the right word and the right phrase which he possessed, moulded into a book of prayers in which were combined such dignity and warmth of feeling that they are alive still. It is difficult to tell what is the secret of this. Devotional perception is like artistic sense; it cannot be defined. But one distinctive feature of the prayers in this book is that to a very large extent they come straight out of the Bible. Professor W. P. Paterson, in giving one of his little practical talks to his students, used to advise them to be scriptural in their prayers; and it may well be that, in saying this, he had in mind the example of his old friend Dr. Cameron Lees, and many of the prayers which he composed for the *Book of Common Order*. Another possible reason for the vitality of these prayers is that they are not too rigidly put into a mould, as so often happens to modern prayers:

beginning—"Almighty God Who . . .", embodying a petition in the middle, and ending with a purpose or result "that we may etc."—the collect mould, which, no doubt, has been used in the past with great effect and is still a convenient framework, but, if used to excess, may become tiresome.

In conclusion, readers who cannot easily obtain a copy of this book, which is out of print now, may be interested in the following selection of prayers taken more or less at random, not as a complete anthology, but rather as a sample of what it contains.

Confession

Father, we have sinned against heaven and before Thee, and are not worthy to be called Thy children. Mercifully forgive our wanderings.

Thou art our Father, but we have been disobedient children ; Thou art our King, but we have been rebellious subjects ; Thou art our Master, but we have been unprofitable servants. Our own hearts condemn us, and Thou art greater than our hearts and knowest all things. Have mercy upon us. For the sake of Thy Son Jesus Christ pardon our sins. Give unto us the assurance of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Supplication

Make us ever to love Thee with all our heart and soul and strength and mind, and to love our neighbour as ourselves, to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with Thee, waiting in hope and patience for the coming of our Master, that we may give in our account with joy.

Suffer us not in our health and prosperity to forget Thee, or in our sickness and adversity to think ourselves forgotten of Thee. Serving Thee humbly here upon earth, when the shadows of this world are passed away, may we enjoy the vision of Thy heavenly glory.

O Thou merciful and loving High Priest, who hast passed within veil, help us with Thy mighty intercession, that we may stand accepted in the day of Thy coming, who livest and reignest . . .

Intercession

We pray for all rulers, judges and magistrates, that Thou wouldst bestow the spirit of wisdom upon all to whom Thou hast given the authority of government, and that we, under them, may lead quiet and peaceable lives, in all godliness and honesty.

We pray for the whole company of the faithful throughout the world, that grace mercy and peace may be multiplied to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.

Lord of the harvest, have respect, we beseech Thee, to our prayers and send forth labourers into Thy harvest. Look with compassion on the heathen that have not known Thee, and on the multitudes that are as sheep having no shepherd, and fill all who serve Thee in the ministry of Thy blessed Gospel with great zeal for Thy glory, for the honour of Christ our Lord, and for the salvation of Thy people.

We pray for all in sickness and distress (and for any such known to ourselves whom we name in our hearts before Thee . . .) that Thou wouldst give strength to the weary, aid to the sufferers, comfort to the sad and help to all in tribulation.

The Faithful Departed

And, rejoicing in the Communion of Saints, we bless Thee for all Thy servants who have departed this life in Thy faith and fear, especially those dear to our own souls. Make us followers of them as they were followers of Christ, that even now we may be one with them in the communion of the same spirit, and hereafter may be gathered together with them into the bosom of Thine infinite and eternal love.

Commendatory

Take us now and evermore into Thy good and holy keeping. Go with us where we go, dwell with us where we dwell, and grant that no clouds of this mortal life may hide us from Thy love, which is immortal, and which Thou hast manifested unto mankind in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Keep us by day and by night, O Thou Shepherd of Israel, whose eyes are upon the righteous, and with whom the darkness is as light. Save us from all the works and powers of darkness, and make us children of the light and of the day, that we may dwell in the light of Thy presence for ever, through Him who is our light and life, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Abide with us now, O Lord, for it is toward evening and the day is far spent. O Thou who neither slumberest nor sleepest, evermore be with Thy children. As Thou coverest the earth with darkness cover us with Thine infinite mercy ; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

CECIL T. THORNTON.