

*'That they all may
be one'*



Aspects of Epiclesis in the Anglican Tradition

Anglicanism, now an almost worldwide phenomenon, owes itself to the English Church. It has its own distinctive characteristics, naturally, but claims nothing for itself other than to be recognised as part of Christ's One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Its origins date back to the first preaching of the gospel in Britain during Roman times but its ethos and particularity stem to a large extent from the turbulent years of the Reformation and its aftermath, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

This 'Church of England' emerged not only as a church of the Book, ie the bible but also of the Prayer Book, a liturgical church where clergy and people are held together as the body of Christ by Eucharist and daily office. Thomas Cranmer, 1489-1556, the genius behind this liturgical revolution, sought, as far as the Eucharist was concerned, to restore communion to the people, to open up the treasures of their inheritance to them by the use of the English tongue and to rectify the perceived 'abuses' of the medieval mass. Naturally, therefore, he looked behind immediate practice in the Latin church to the Fathers and to the early Greek liturgies that were available in his day. He also drew on liturgical rites other than the Latin rite of the Roman Church, rites which were current to some extent still in the Western Church of his era, in particular the Gallican and Sarum rites. These had already been formative of the English Church and notably they contained traces of the earlier Eastern liturgical and Patristic tradition. Anglicanism has remained true to this influence in some degree at least. The understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist might serve as an illustration.

In sixteenth century Europe, medieval disputation as to the nature of the real presence of Christ in the consecrated elements of bread and wine had led to an exclusive stress on the words of institution ie "This is my body . . . This is my blood . . ." as marking the exact moment of consecration. The earlier appreciation (consistently present in the Eastern

tradition) of the role of the Holy Spirit in effecting the change, had become overlaid. Happily, in his first *Prayer Book of 1549* Cranmer restored the *epiclesis*, the invocation of the Holy Spirit over the gifts. The words appear directly before the institution narrative:

Hear us, O merciful Father, we beseech thee; and with thy Holy Spirit and word vouchsafe to bless and santify these thy gifts, and creatures of bread and wine, that they may be unto us the body and blood of thy most dearly beloved Son Jesus Christ.

These cleverly crafted words, together with their position, before rather than after the institution narrative, illustrate Cranmer's desire to be conciliatory in view of the current debates concerning the moment of consecration. The Spirit **and** the Word are 'sharers' in the consecration. To make the prayer **before** the words of institution allows us to keep an open mind as to when the change in the elements actually takes place.

As time passed and the doctrinal disputes of the Reformation period raged more fiercely, successive Prayer Books in the Church of England veered unavoidably in a more Protestant direction. The **direct** invocation of the Spirit on the gifts was submerged. Significantly, however, in the earliest Scottish and American Anglican Prayer Books this *epiclesis* is retained and in fact is also placed **after** the words of institution in line with the continuing Eastern practice. In the Church of England, however, by the time we come to the classic Book of Common Prayer of 1662, the authorised service book for over three hundred years, we have to dig fairly deeply to find an *epiclesis*. Are there vestiges?

The prayer of consecration in the 1662 book makes no direct reference to the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless we can perhaps discern an implicit presence there of the self-effacing Spirit who works his work, whether we acknowledge him or not. After the communion and 'Our Father' follow two alternative prayers of thanksgiving and self-oblation. Here too we sense the underlying influence of the Holy Spirit. In the first of these prayers the priest, on behalf of all, pleads the merits and death of Christ, and acknowledges the worshippers' faith in his blood. Now the blood *is* the life and life *is* the Spirit in the Eastern tradition. Then he goes on to ask of the Father that: "all we who are partakers of this holy communion, may be fulfilled with thy GRACE and HEAVENLY BENEDICTION "- that all may offer and be offered in sacrifice. Grace and heavenly benediction **are** the Holy Spirit, He alone can make us worthy to be hallowed (sacrificed). The traditional *epiclesis* itself specifically asks for the Spirit's blessing on the

worshippers as well as on the gifts, so that they may be sanctified and made one in Christ and offered with him to the Father.

The second prayer is in particular a thanksgiving. It speaks in gratitude of the “*spiritual* food of the most precious Body and Blood” which has been received, recognising that all who have partaken of these riches have become “very members incorporate in the mystical body” of Christ. The prayer ends with a petition for perseverance “in that holy fellowship” and for grace to fulfil such good works as God shall appoint. Surely here too the Spirit’s presence is intimated? The whole prayer is, in a sense, an elongated *epiclesis* on the communicants.

Three hundred years or so passed, during which Anglicanism was forming itself and establishing its classic comprehensiveness, the holding together of disparate theological stances and liturgical self-understandings, in a *middle way* which, in the ideal, allowed tolerant space for the use of reason together with Scripture and tradition, ie the ancient creeds, the teaching of the Fathers. The 1662 Prayer Book was the uniting force.

Rumblings of change came however by 1928, when there was an abortive attempt to revise the Prayer Book. By the nineteen seventies the tide could not be held back. 1980 saw the publication of the *Alternative Service Book* with its revised pattern for the Eucharist in line with similar experiments both in the Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant Churches. How did the *epiclesis* fare? Not surprisingly it has had a good press, for the fruits of liturgical scholarship have emphasised its historical and doctrinal importance and the west has been keen to make up for lost time, more or less successfully. The full theological import has not always been grasped and the language and its setting are often poor in the extreme by comparison with the centuries’ old tradition of the Eastern Churches - but that it is happening at all can only be for the good.

The Alternative Service Book has four Eucharistic Prayers. In each of them there is specific reference to the Holy Spirit on two or three occasions including the use of an *epiclesis*. We shall quote here from the first and the third prayers which are most noteworthy in this respect. The Preface of the *First Eucharistic Prayer* concludes its recital of the saving work of Christ with a direct reference to the Holy Spirit and Pentecost and then, in the Prayer itself, there is an overt *epiclesis* over the gifts before the words of institution: . . . “as we follow his (Christ’s) example and obey his command, grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit these gifts of

bread and wine may be to us his body and his blood” . . . Then, afterwards, the *epiclesis* is ‘concluded’, just before the final doxology and AMEN, with a prayer for the Spirit’s blessing on the worshippers: “. . . as we eat and drink these holy gifts in the presence of your divine majesty, renew us by your Spirit, inspire us with your love, and unite us in the body of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord . . .”

The *Third Eucharistic Prayer* has a similar ‘split’ *epiclesis* as it is termed (in established Eastern practice there is a single invocation on both the gifts and the people *after* the words of institution). Before the consecration the celebrant prays: “. . . grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit, and according to your holy will, these your gifts of bread and wine may be to us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Afterwards he asks: “Send the Holy Spirit on your people and gather into one in your kingdom all who share this one bread and one cup”.

These developments are pleasing, and a start. Liturgical renewal is still underway, however. The *Alternative Service Book* is being replaced by *Common Worship*. The Eucharistic Prayers have proved problematic and it remains to be seen how long it will be before an even richer and fuller awareness of the Holy Spirit’s role in the Eucharist can be re-incorporated into Anglican liturgy. Theology needs to keep pace, however, for liturgy cannot exist apart from the theological understanding that informs it.

But Anglicanism *does* have a tradition of its own in this area to rediscover. The seventeenth century Caroline Divines for instance were at pains to show that the English Church could and should look to the East as well as to Rome in matters liturgical. Jeremy Taylor is a case in point. He veered away from the controversies of his time, concerning the question of transubstantiation* for example, preferring to follow the Eastern Fathers in their awareness that the Eucharistic *Presence* is a mystery far beyond our comprehension and something which should be accepted by faith and with reverent awe. Bishop Taylor composed a Liturgical Prayer Book, embodying a Eucharistic Rite, *The Collection of Offices*, using some Eastern sources. He recognised that it is indeed the Holy Spirit who consecrates at the Eucharist and so he incorporated an *epiclesis*, in its fullest double form *after* the words of institution: “Send forth thy Holy Ghost upon our hearts, and let him descend upon these gifts, that by his good, his holy, his glorious presence, he may sanctify and enlighten our hearts, and he may bless and sanctify these gifts: that this bread may become the holy body of Christ . . .”.

Then, moving into the eighteenth century, there is Thomas Rattray, the Anglican bishop of Brechin, Scotland. He composed a version of the ancient *Liturgy of St. James*, being a Patristic scholar in the Eastern tradition and desiring to enrich his own liturgical inheritance. Naturally he understood the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharistic action and incorporated a full *epiclesis*: “Send down thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts. . . that he may make this bread the holy body of thy Christ, and this cup the precious blood of thy Christ, that they may be to all who partake of them for sanctification of soul and body, for the bringing forth the fruit of good works . . .”.

Holy Week in 1998 in fact saw a celebration of Rattray’s liturgy in Salisbury Cathedral, England. The churches of the Anglican Communion do indeed have their own resources at hand for renewing their liturgy more fully within the Patristic tradition, if they will. Some of the religious communities are already pioneering the way.** Changes have to be gradual of course and the laity prepared. A streamlined, cerebral liturgy, allegedly all that modern-day men and women can cope with, cries out to be enriched by the treasures of the past we have let slip so that a right sense of the numinous might be restored. It is through worship and adoration that an alienated creation will be drawn back to its source and goal within the blessed Trinity.

*We pray thee, heavenly Father,
To hear us in thy love,
And pour upon thy children
The unction from above;
That so in love abiding,
From all defilement free,
We may in pureness offer
Our Eucharist to thee . . .

Within the pure oblation,
Beneath the outward sign,
By that his operation, -
The Holy Ghost divine -
Lies hid the sacred Body,*

*Lies hid the precious Blood
Once slain, now ever glorious,
Of Christ our Lord and God.*

(Cf English hymnal 334.
Words anonymous VSSC).