

The Daily Office: Sharing God's Work of Creation

By the Very Reverend Gary W. Kriss, D.D.

Ours is an age in which “spirituality” is very popular. This is a term that has various meanings, depending on the context, but what many people seem to mean is something that is somewhat mystical and essentially quite individual—I would venture to say, subjective. In many ways, what a lot of people mean by spirituality is a kind of New Age derivative of Protestant Christianity, a “me and my god” attitude toward religion and religious experience. Even among people who self-identify as Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, the subjective, essentially private, element of religion and religious practice is very strong. Whether explicit or implicit, what this attitude is generally about is personal salvation, though that may not be the term they use to describe it. While every individual can and should have a personal relationship with God, what that means, exactly, can vary quite a bit. And I would go so far as to suggest that some of the things that it might mean to some people are problematic, to say the least.

A number of years ago, while I was on a sabbatical, I spent a week at St Alban's Cathedral in England. At St Alban's, the staff of the cathedral, as well as other people, gathered every morning in the cathedral to read Morning Prayer together. However, while Matins and Evensong are prayed daily at most English cathedrals, I am not aware of any others—though there may be some—where the whole staff is actually expected to be present. This may have changed under a new regime but the then Dean of St Alban's made it clear to staff that they were indeed expected to be present and he liked to say that we prayed the Office for ourselves and for those who did not. When he spoke of those who did not pray the Office, he was not referring to people who were simply unable for some reason to pray it. I am quite sure that he was referring to *everyone* who was not praying Morning Prayer, whoever and wherever they were.

From his perspective—and I think that this is the correct understanding of the intention behind the Book of Common Prayer—reading the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer is everyone's responsibility. What the Prayer Book envisions is the whole company of Christian people praying the Offices morning and evening, every day, either with others in church, or wherever they might gather, or even by oneself.

Whether one does this with other people or alone, he or she is in fact praying the Office communally, because we are praying the same Office that everyone else is praying, even though we may be separated in place and even time. The Office is part of “common prayer”—common prayer is not ordinary prayer, it is communal prayer, the prayer of everyone, the prayer, in fact, that everyone says together. So even when we are alone, we are praying it with all of the other people who pray it. And we do so not merely because we have promised to do so, not merely because it is a good thing to do. Rather, we do it precisely because it is something that the whole Church is called to do. In fact, when we pray the Office, the purpose is not our personal spiritual growth and fulfillment. It may be, indeed it should be, spiritually enriching in a personal way to keep this rule of prayer, but that is a peripheral benefit, and not at all the basic purpose.

If one were to think about it for a moment, what is going on with Morning and Evening Prayer should actually be quite obvious. The purpose of the Offices is to order the day. That is to say,

they put the day into order. And this is not just a practical matter, like following a schedule. When we pray the hours, we are ordering the day in a very specific way. In fact, we are sharing in God's work of creating the world and the Church.

Order—more specifically, bringing order out of chaos: this is precisely what creation is about. Genesis begins with an account of how God created the world, but this is not an account of creation *ex nihilo*. While we do indeed believe in creation *ex nihilo*, the creation of the world “out of nothing,” that is not what the Bible sees as the most important aspect of creation. What is important is order, overcoming chaos. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was without form and void”—it was chaos—“and darkness covered the face of the deep.” The world was already there, but it had no order and was shrouded in darkness—no light at all. And day by day, God brings light and order into this void, until at last it can support life. And at the center of it all he places Paradise, the Garden of Eden, a place of perfection where God himself can be known. But beyond the walls of Paradise, chaos still threatens and periodically challenges God's order.

The whole story of the Bible from beginning to end is about God bringing order out of chaos—at the beginning of creation, at the flood, at the redemption of the people of Israel from slavery, at the establishment of the kingdom of David, and so on right down not only to Jesus looking chaos in the face on the cross and overcoming death, which is a form of chaos, at the resurrection, but to John's great vision of the final achievement of a new creation—a new heaven and a new earth—at the end of time. The great Apocalypse is about the final challenge of chaos and the ultimate victory of God's order.

Morning and Evening Prayer are part of this same movement, the daily action of God, in and through his Church, to establish order in the world and in the lives of human beings. “There was evening and there was morning”: the repeated refrain of the first chapter of Genesis, is lived and prayed by the Church as we pray Evening and Morning Prayer day by day.

I live quite near an Orthodox monastery. It is actually somewhat unique because one of the things that the community there has done is to examine the liturgy carefully and to restore some things that have either been obscured by accretions over the centuries or even lost. So, when one goes to Vespers there, the service does not begin in the same way it begins in many Orthodox churches. One of the most dramatic things they have done is to restore what we would call the service of the light to the very beginning of the evening Office. All the lights are off, and the priest comes out from the Altar with a lighted candle and sings, “Wisdom, stand aright. Behold, Christ the light of the universe.” Immediately, the congregation begins the hymn, *O radiant light*, and the candles in the church are lit and the lights are turned on.

In fact, the American 1979 Prayer Book has introduced the singing or recitation of the hymn, *O gracious light*—same hymn, different translation—at the beginning of Evening Prayer, together with the option of a similar service of the light. In both cases, the meaning is the same. Remember that the very first thing God does in the story of creation is to create light—darkness is one of the most dramatic aspects of chaos and to dispel it is to start along the way of establishing order.

The basic tradition of the Daily Office in Anglicanism is part of our Benedictine heritage, which is a heritage of order and light. Benedict was the founder of western monasticism. He lived at a time when the world of the old Roman empire in the west was quite literally coming apart at the seams. Benedict withdrew from the world but the movement he founded ultimately was a principal source of stability, faith, and order in the so-called Dark Ages and through the whole medieval period.

The Daily Office was at the heart of Benedictine life, ordering the day in a pattern of prayer and work that truly created a new world. The countryside of medieval England was dotted with monasteries, mostly Benedictine, and many of the clergy who served the parishes of the realm were monks who said their Offices no matter where they were. In fact, one of the reasons that Morning and Evening Prayer in the early English Prayer Books caught on so easily was that they were simply a version of what people had always been used to in their local churches, whether they were monasteries, cathedrals, or even ordinary parish churches.

One of the most interesting and dramatic examples of this is found in what might at first seem an unlikely place, the legends of King Arthur. First of all, remember what Arthur himself represents. Arthur arose at a time of confusion and division in Britain and established, for one brief shining moment, as the song says, a kingdom of order, justice, and peace. The Round Table is a symbol of this order and its members were dedicated to the cause of establishing and maintaining order.

Again and again, in the stories of Arthur and his knights, they go out to address some evil that threatens to dissolve the kingdom and plunge the land into chaos. Dragons, wicked knights, and magicians are among the agents of chaos they must face and defeat in order to restore order. And here is the really interesting thing: before a knight would set off on an adventure to subdue the chaos, he invariably went to church, to *Matins* as well as Mass. And at the end of the day, either in the middle or the end of the adventure, he would often find himself near a church, just in time for Vespers, underlining his role in maintaining the sacred order of the world. It is significant that the storytellers who passed on these legends took it for granted, not only that the knights attended the Offices, but that the Offices were celebrated everywhere and people could attend them.

This notion of participating in the ordering of creation is, I think, fundamental to what prayer is about and it is also fundamental to what the Church is about. Benedict did not invent it. He merely established a vehicle, the monasteries, which were a kind of leaven in the life of the whole Church as it lived out its witness in the world. The Offices are rooted in very ancient forms of prayer, going back to the Jewish synagogue and carried forward in the early Church. Under the influence of the monasteries, this pattern and its meaning continued in the medieval Church. And when monastic life was suppressed by the greedy Henry VIII, the pattern found new expression in the so-called reformed catholic religion that was practiced according to the forms of the Book of Common Prayer which were themselves deeply rooted in the timeless Offices of a living tradition.

The significance of this can be seen in the way the Anglican approach to moral theology developed. After the Roman Church's Council of Trent, which was called to combat the Reformation movement, the tendency in Roman Catholicism was to separate moral and ascetical

theology—ascetical theology being the theology of what today we call the spiritual life. What happened was that two distinct “sciences” of preparing souls for heaven emerged. One, the science of moral theology, was occupied with question of the legality or illegality of human acts. Ascetical theology, on the other hand, was concerned with spiritual progress and holiness.

Anglicanism, following its Benedictine roots, generally avoided this separation. In the classical Anglican understanding of moral theology, moral progress is in fact progress in holiness and it is achieved, not by learning the rules and following them, but by saying one’s prayers and living into the order to which God is calling all of creation, including each of us. For Anglicans, the rules of morality do not exist for themselves, rather the rules are more like benchmarks against which one measures spiritual progress. The bottom line is that if your life is not very moral, you probably are not very healthy spiritually. Whereas, if you are growing spiritually, you are moving towards a holiness that is also morally exemplary. And the morally exemplary life of the individual is a factor in the order of the community in which he or she lives—both the secular community and the Church.

The genius of Anglicanism in this is seen in the unique character of the Prayer Book Offices. One of the ways the Offices order life is by immersing us in Scripture. The Offices do not function merely as a schedule to begin and end the day and thus to bookend it with prayer. The substantial inclusion of Scripture in the Offices is quite specifically intended to go beyond scheduling, to go beyond praise and petition, to center our lives within the context of the ongoing life of the Church and, indeed, of the created order. As we hear the Word of God regularly and in an orderly repetition, it becomes part of us and we become not merely spectators of what God is doing, but participants in it, first by hearing and receiving it, then by meditating on it, and finally by realizing that we are part of the story and thus part of the ongoing work of God.

The Oxford Movement began a significant revival in mid-19th century Anglicanism. Many people think that the big thing the Oxford Movement did was to restore the Eucharist to the center of Anglican Church life and spirituality. It did lay the foundation for that—but the foundation that it laid was the Daily Office. The public recitation of the Daily Office had fallen into disuse, except in cathedrals and certain other isolated institutions. And personal use of the Daily Office had become limited to the clergy who mostly read it in private. The Oxford fathers started reading the Office publicly in their churches, as the old custom had been, and a major movement to renew the Church of England ensued.

We have reverted again to a time when the Office is rarely read in public and it would appear that those who read it in private are also very much in the minority. There does seem to be a revival of the practice in a number of places, but the results of the more general decline seem obvious, at least to this observer. We see the church fragmenting and thus failing to have any meaningful impact on a world that is also fragmenting. Individuals seek personal salvation, but church and society are in a morass. The solution is to return to our roots, to rediscover and revive our most ancient and reliable form of prayer, the Daily Office, and thus to share again in God’s work of creating and ordering the world.

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