

An Appeal for the Collects and Lessons of the Book of Common Prayer

*feedback for the ACNA Liturgy Taskforce
from the Rev. Matthew Brench, Vicar of Fitchburg*

There are a number of little things that could be mentioned that I expect editors more competent than myself can resolve, such as the capitalization of lines in the General Confession in the Daily Office, or the apparent omission of the word “your” in the line “in your faith and fear” in the final petition of the Prayers of the People in the Standard Eucharistic Rite. But what has stayed on my heart and mind as the most significant object in the *Texts for Common Prayer* corpus for feedback are the Collects of the Christian Year and the Sunday & Holy Day lectionary.

It may first be helpful for me to provide a brief personal introduction so that the context from which I am writing may be more clear. I am a young and relatively new priest, ordained a deacon in 2012 and a presbyter in 2013. I’ve been preaching on a weekly basis for most of seven years, and have served as the installed Vicar of a small church plant for most of four. I do not have many years of pastoral experience to draw upon, nor do I have the biases of long-term familiarity with the 1979, 1928, or any other edition of the Prayer Book; I speak out of loyalty to the Anglican tradition, but not out of prayer book partisanship. And, as one in his early 30’s, I hazard to say I might represent the younger generation of clergymen, for what that’s worth.

Furthermore, in my first three years serving as a priest, I took advantage of the opportunity to follow the spirit of the Taskforce’s methodological statement: to follow the standard of the 1662 Prayer Book. So for three years (until the current draft ACNA lectionary was promulgated last year) I used the 1662 Sunday lectionary, with added OT & Psalms provided from *An Anglican Prayer Book*, the little blue book edited by Peter Toons for AMiA, originally, if I recall correctly. Before then, I had been in training and formation under the Revised Common Lectionary; so I have roughly equal experience in using both systems.

Before I formally entered into the Anglican tradition, I had experimented with daily lectionaries and Psalmody – aiming to pray all the psalms and read all the Bible in regular intervals of time. It was a lot of work, a mix of tedium and joy, and was generally quite rewarding labor. That experience helps me to appreciate the massive challenge of designing a set of lectionaries for an entire province; it cannot be an easy task. So I need to express my respect and gratitude for your labors in this area, lest my hopefully-constructive criticisms which follow be taken in an unintended spirit of meanness and disdain.

The Short Plea

In a nutshell, I dearly wish and hope that we could have a form of the historic Sunday & Holy Day lectionary restored to our ACNA Prayer Book. The 3-year revised common lectionary, in all its versions, is a fascinating piece of work and has a lot of merit to it, but compared with the historic resources at our disposal, it falls short in every category. It attempts to bring together the best of both worlds (liturgical coherence and biblical coverage) but ultimately fails. Rather than crafting yet another edition of the RCL, I would urge your committees to reconsider the original Collects and Lessons of the Book of Common Prayer (be it as found in the 1662 book, or the 1928 American, or the 1962 Canadian, with their very minor differences in this area).

I will explain and defend this plea according to three areas of concern: the Collects of the Day, the coherence of the Lessons in the liturgy, and the desire for wider biblical coverage in the ordinary course of Sunday preaching.

Issue #1: The Collects

The first thing that struck me when I started studying and using the historic lectionary was that the Collects actually tied in with the Lessons *every week*. It wasn't always huge or profound, but it was always present and relevant in some way. And quickly discovered that there is a wealth of resources written by Anglican divines of the past 500 years, ruminating on the ways in which the Lessons are literally *Collected* up in their assigned Collects, even noting how Cranmer improved upon the previous Sarum/Medieval system at certain points.

In the Revised Common Lectionary and the 1979 Prayer Book, of course, many of the classic Anglican Collects were edited, moved, or replaced. And they only connected with any of the Lessons on special occasions, like in the Advent season, major holidays, and through highlights of other liturgical seasons. Naturally, I was overjoyed to hear that your committees had elected to restore the majority of the classic Anglican Collects for use in the ACNA calendar! However, that joy was quickly tempered by the news that the Lessons would follow a new improved version of the RCL. It is lovely to have more (even most) of the Collects back, but as long as they remain divorced from their historic Lessons, their impact and use remains severely limited.

The unfortunate situation of both the 1979 book and the ACNA Collects is that they, through the majority of the year, are a seemingly-arbitrary piece of the Communion service liturgy – a prayer to be said, moved on from, and forgotten. As long as they have no connection to the Lessons, they serve no greater function beyond nostalgia, and that is a sad situation indeed.

This disconnect between Collects and Lessons is especially true in the Trinitytide season, where the logic of the RCL and the historic lectionary are completely different.

Issue #2: Liturgical Coherence

Besides the disconnect between the Collects and the Lessons is the disconnect among the Lessons themselves. In the historic lectionary, the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel all shared some topic or theme in common, forming a sort of broad discipleship course over the course of the Christian year, season by season. Some were more obvious or profound than others, but the link was always there. In the RCL, the Gospels and Epistles are typically disconnected, with the intent that the congregation hears more of the Scripture read on Sundays over the course of the 3-year cycle. Modern adaptations of the traditional lectionary add an Old Testament lesson and a Psalm, matching the format of the modern liturgy, but still keeping the thematic connections between all the lessons. In my three years' coverage of a form of the historic lectionary, I got notable feedback from my congregation about how they were able to see connections between different parts of the Bible (especially OT and NT) that they'd never seen before – and these were not young believers by any means!

Most surprisingly (to me at first, at any rate) is the logic of Trinitytide. In the RCL it's just an "ordinary" time, devoted to the generally-sequential reading of Gospels and Epistles. It never

occurred to me that there might once have been a catechetical plan to that long season. But as I began to use it, I found that there are indeed multiple interpretations of how those 24+ Sundays progress! The website lectionarycentral.net in particular was a valuable resource for me as I rediscovered this gem of the traditional Anglican calendar with its Collects and Lessons.

Meanwhile, the 3-year cycle, by my observation, is just too long. Only the more meticulous sermon-planners seem to be able to remember where the lectionary has been. The quest for broader biblical coverage in the Sunday lectionary has resulted in such spread-out coverage that the rare repetition hinders effective liturgical formation. Want to have a sermon series on 1 Corinthians? Good luck to your congregation remembering what was covered during Epiphanytide last year.

Similarly, the usual disconnect between the Epistle and Gospel means that one or the other will “go to waste” in the sense that its message and contents find no echo elsewhere in the liturgy. Sometimes preachers force a connection (which is eisegetical preaching, rather than expositional), but whatever one does, something gets missed out. This can easily communicate to a congregation that some parts of the liturgy are extraneous, of lesser value. We must never suggest to our people that we worship the way we do simply “because that’s the way we do it” – no meaningful liturgical formation comes of such law-minded approaches. Rather, by using the historical lectionary, wherein the Lessons always relate (whether the preacher makes a point of highlighting it or not), the unity and formative purpose of the liturgy is fully preserved, demonstrated, and realized.

Issue #3: Wider Biblical Coverage in Sunday Preaching

One of the greatest strengths of the RCL and its variants is that it provides for much more expositional preaching, going through the Epistles and Gospels largely sequentially over time, especially through Epiphanytide and the season after Trinity, though to a lesser extent also during Lent and Easter. Early in my ministry formation, I loved this feature, especially the version of the RCL that included OT readings during post-Trinity season that summarized the OT over the three years. It was a great feature. I was briefly sad to see it gone from the ACNA’s version, but ultimately gladder to see the consistent unity between OT and Gospel.

But then, while using the historic lectionary, I eventually decided I wanted to do an intense preaching series through the end of 2 Chronicles and the entirety of Ezra, Haggai, and Esther. With the RCL, this would be impossible without simply ignoring or changing the readings. But with the historic lectionary, I simply changed the already-optional Old Testament reading to my sermon text, and left the Epistle and Gospel intact, still in harmony with the Collect. The liturgy remained in its intended unity even though the sermon series had taken a temporary deviation from the normal course. I have since realized that any attempt to do an in-depth expositional sermon series will force a departure from any lectionary, traditional, RCL-based, or otherwise. For all its good coverage, the RCL and its variants neither do nor can fully cover any book of the Bible in order and in its entirety. A through-book sermon series will always necessitate a deviation from the lectionary.

With that admission in mind, it became apparent to me that a simple 1-year lectionary, such as in our historic Prayer Books, is much preferable to preachers who desire such expositional series. In a three-year cycle, any deviation from the lectionary makes a huge impact: it’d be 3 years until the

omitted texts make their return. In the historic lectionary, anything omitted is sure to come back next year.

The same phenomenon is true for the Prayer Book major feast days. Those that fall during seasons where they may be celebrated on Sundays may be celebrated on Sundays without fear or concern, because the ordinary Collect and Lessons they replace will show up again the following year. It's no surprise that the 1979 book forbade most of the major feast days from normal Sunday observation – the relative value of each Sunday's propers became higher once they only show up every 3 years!

Thus it seems much preferable to me (and I'm not the only one who has thought or written of this) to stick with the historic 1-year lectionary, and allow the "third" lesson to be one of two options: either an Old Testament lesson to supplement the Epistle and Gospel, or a fill-in-the-black for those preachers who are doing an expositional book study. That way the liturgical traditionalists are happy, getting to keep their beloved Prayer Book lectionary, and the evangelicals are happy, free to preach their book series sermons without having to wrangle with the lectionary each time.

But as I said before, the RCL is still a brilliant lectionary in its own right. Much of it could be profitably preserved as the Sunday readings for Morning (and/or Evening) Prayer.

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Excursus: the Daily Office Lectionary

The draft ACNA Daily Office Lectionary looked really exciting when I first saw it. But as I've been using it this year I quickly found two enormous set-backs: the end of Epiphanytide and the beginning of Trinitytide. It quickly became obvious to me that the last three weeks of Epiphanytide were meant to be the Pre-Lent (or "-gesima") Sundays, with the OT readings starting up in Genesis. Taken at face value, this lectionary will almost always omit the first half of Genesis; certainly not in line with good reformed, protestant, Anglican tradition. Similarly, the Trinitytide Sundays were clearly intended to be Sundays after Trinity, rather than the awkward RCL-style "Sunday closest to __" system. Again, the majority of the book of Job will virtually never be read according to the present draft.

Furthermore, most of the major feast days do not have daily readings assigned as of yet, though I (and others I know) assume that is a temporary oversight. I have been alarmed at how many fellow clergymen do not know how the Daily Lectionary works, and that it has proper lessons for the major feast days. This is true mainly among those trained under the 1979 paradigm, whether that is the actual book still in use or not.

Significant work will be needed to "translate" the present draft from its traditional calendar background into the RCL-style calendar that the Communion lectionary uses. Or, if my pleas in this document are heard, then this Daily Lectionary becomes perfectly useable again with the Pre-Lenten and Trinitytide seasons restored to their traditional formats.

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Potential Compromises

I should conclude with the admission that I am very likely advocating a lost cause. The influence of the RCL and the 1979 book over the past nearly 40 years in our tradition (as well as similar cases in other traditions) have now brought up two generations of clergymen and lay people with no exposure to the historic Western lectionary and its resources. There are few people advocating for its return because only the “old folks” and the remnant of grumpy traditionalists care about it, and they’re mostly hung up on one or another “perfect” edition of the Prayer Book, just to make their cause all the more inaccessible and remote to the ordinary Anglican. I would point out afresh that I am neither an old man nor a grumpy traditionalist. I’m a young man who has had the privilege of getting to give both the RCL and a form of the traditional lectionary equal hearings, and reporting on his findings accordingly.

Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that this is little more than a pipe dream, and so I will leave the committees with these final thoughts of how we might be able to “make the best of it” if we must indeed continue with our new version of the Revised Common Lectionary.

First, we could have publish in our Prayer Book two Sunday lectionaries: one traditional/historic and one modern. The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod does this in their *Lutheran Service Book*. Granted, this would authorize a measure of liturgical discord within the Church, as different parishes choose between them. But the benefits of preserving this gem of Anglican (and indeed broader Western Christianity) would be great, and one would not have to seek out a “1928 BCP only” congregation to experience this ancient lectionary. Rubrics would be needed, of course, to clarify that a parish should commit to one choice or the other for at least three years, to prevent cherry-picking and liturgical meandering that would undo the value of either lectionary and calendar system.

Second, we should publish the Collects and Lessons together, not in different parts of the Prayer Book. This, I have observed, is one of the several features of the 1979 book that renders it almost entirely unusable to lay people. The more page-flipping is required, the faster the people in the pews get lost. Besides, if we really do value our precious Cranmerian Collects of old, we should not be hiding them in yet another appendix-like section of the Prayer Book. Some examples of what this suggestion would look like is as follows:

The First Sunday in Advent

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

[This Collect is to be repeated after the Collect of the Day throughout the season of Advent.]

Year A Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 24:29-44

Year B Isaiah 64:1-12; Psalm 80 *or* 80:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Year C Zechariah 14:1-9; Psalm 50 *or* 50:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:25-33

The Exhortation is read. Preface of Advent

Christmas II & III

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born [this day] of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and forever. *Amen.*

[This Collect is to be repeated after the Collect of the Day until the end of December.]

#2 Sunrise Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-14)15-20

#3 Principle Isaiah 52:7-12; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-12; John 1:1-18

Preface of the Incarnation

The First Sunday of Epiphany [Baptism of Our Lord]

Eternal Father, who at the baptism of Jesus revealed him to be your Son, anointing him with the Holy Spirit: grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit, that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

Year A Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 89:1-29 *or* 89:20-29; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17

Year B Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 89:1-29 *or* 89:20-29; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11

Year C Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 89:1-29 *or* 89:20-29; Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-22

[Renewal of Baptismal Vows;] Preface of the Epiphany

The Fourth Sunday of Easter [Good Shepherd]

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Year A Acts 6:1-9,7:2a,51-60 *or* Nehemiah 9:1-15; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:13-25; John 10:1-10

Year B Acts 4:(23-31)32-37 *or* Ezekiel 34:1-10; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:1-10; John 10:11-18

Year C Acts 13:13-16,26-29 *or* Numbers 27:12-23; Psalm 100; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Preface of Easter

Week of the Sunday closest to October 5 [Proper 22]

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in continual godliness; that through your protection it may be free from all adversities, and devotedly serve you in good works, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

Year A Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80; Philippians 3:14-21; Matthew 21:33-43

Year B Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 2:1-18; Mark 10:2-9

Year C Habakkuk 1:1-6,12-13,2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-17; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Preface of the Lord's Day

Thank you again for your longsuffering in the course of this momentous and arduous task of compiling a new Prayer Book. I pray you receive this, and what other feedback you receive, in a spirit of love and thankfulness as we celebrate our common prayer. I hope my words have been as fair and useful as they have been sincere. God be with you in these final years of review.

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