Anglican Moment: Why Use Archaic Language?

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In our worship we use a form of English that is rooted in the Elizabethan era and which has changed very little in the last 400 years. It is full of these and thous, vouchsafes, beseeches, verities, charities, and properties. It even uses words like concupiscence. Who knows what that is?

There are dangers in using an archaic form of English in our worship. One danger is our tendency to forget things we don’t use often. Another danger is our tendency to ignore things we don’t easily understand. We can easily find that we have just worshipped for an hour and a half without remembering a thing that happened. Listening carefully would have required too much concentration, so we just check out.

There are also advantages to using the old English. For one thing, older English tends to be more poetic and more literary. Old English was a language created for storytelling and thus for communicating deeply and richly. English was born in the telling of Beowulf, Canterbury Tales, and Hamlet, each of which would suffer if translated into modern English.

The liturgy is a poem. It is a song sung antiphonally between God and his Beloved, between the Bride and the Bridegroom. It is only natural then that the Liturgy is composed in English of poetry.

When we attend a Shakespearean play, it takes a few moments to enter into that language. But concentration soon pays off with gorgeous wit and wisdom expressed in magnificent and memorable beauty. The same is true of the English of our Liturgy. It takes some concentration but it repays a rich and sumptuous feast of meaning.

One example of this feast is found in our confession of sin from Morning Prayer Rite I when we pray, “Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.” Such language is full of imagery and truth. How impoverished we would be if we simply translated this, “God, we have sinned against you.” Then, we would never be drawn to contemplate the idea of erring and straying, and the concept of the shepherd coming to recover his lost sheep. Our image of ourselves would be changed. More importantly our image of God would be impoverished.

So, the next time you wonder why this archaic English persists take a moment to concentrate on the elegance of the language, and to contemplate the depth and richness it lavishes on our worship. You will be glad you have maintained this heritage.  (Written by The Rev. Bradley Cunningham)