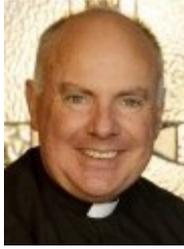


## WHAT PLACE HAS THE BCP IN OUR ANGLICAN CHURCH?

Fri 1 February 2013



The 1662 Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* was three hundred and fifty years old in 2012 and remains an important aspect of not only our Anglican heritage but wider society.

Phrases such as ‘till death do us part’ and ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ have entered into common parlance. The popularity of the services of Choral Evensong and the Holy Communion from the 1662 *BCP*, especially in the English cathedrals and university colleges, but also in a few Australian cathedrals and parish churches continues. In a few of our own Canberra parishes the service of Holy Communion from the 1662 *BCP* is still regularly celebrated and valued.

One of the great ironies though is that Anglicans use the same service of Holy Communion from the *Book of Common Prayer* in distinctly different ways and with distinctly different theological understandings about what is happening in this service.

Some Anglicans have used the 1662 Eucharistic liturgy in the form of a solemn high mass, with incense and bells and with a theology of the real and objective presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements. Others have used mostly the same words but with little elaboration and without any theology of a real presence of Christ in the Eucharist itself or in the Eucharistic elements.

In a situation where there is such great difference in practice and theology it is difficult to know how the 1662 *BCP* can be agreed as the standard of worship and doctrine, and yet this is the situation in which we as church find ourselves according to the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia.

Perhaps we are left with the ambiguity of an indefinable standard or the necessary acceptance of a plurality of practice and theology reflecting the bitter quarrels between the entrenched positions of various church parties. Perhaps also we are led to conclude that there was a uniformity of worship from which we have now departed.

Brian Cummings however in his recently released and excellent book, *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559 and 1662*, destroys this myth pointing out that while the *BCP* was proclaimed by the English Parliament in a ‘Act of Uniformity’, ‘its real effect was anything but’ (p. xiii).

Perhaps also if we are grown up about our Church and its liturgical practice and theology we need to acknowledge that there are differences, what has been called a ‘multiformity’, and that it is child-like to insist that our way is the only way. We can value our way of doing things but it defies our history and heritage to argue that there is only one way – our way.

If we as a church in the modern age, governed as we are by our Constitution, want to preserve the heritage of this great asset which comes to us from our Anglican tradition, then perhaps we need to accept that Eucharistic theology and practice are indeed multiform and surrender any desire to dominate the field. It is only in recognizing and respecting this that we can really continue to honour the heritage we have received. To claim an exclusive position for any one group or party or to claim a pure theological position is to misrepresent and dishonour the heritage we have received.

By Reverend **Brian Douglas**