

How did Cranmer address people at Court when Henry VIII was king?

A short piece on Cranmer's form and use of English

Since the 1960s, it has been taken for granted by most liturgists, and those influenced by them, that in the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI, when Archbishop Cranmer was active as a reformer, the customary form of address to an individual person was "thou/thee." From this basis, the argument has been made that if Cranmer used the customary form in his liturgy, we today should use today the contemporary customary form, which is "you." So for him it was "the Thou-God" and for us it should be "the You-God."

However, anyone who is familiar with the literature of the sixteenth century, including the works of William Shakespeare, knows that in certain important spheres of English society the customary address to an individual person was not "thou" but "you." At Court, and in the presence of the nobility and aristocracy, Archbishop Cranmer addressed the King and others (but not servants and social inferiors) as "you." Henry VIII was "Your Majesty." Cranmer himself as the Primate of all England was "Your Grace," and so were all the Dukes and Duchesses. In his letters to the Ministers of State, Cranmer addressed them as "you."

Why this "strange" usage? The answer is simple. English had been influenced by French style in the thirteenth century to use the plural form of the second person as if it were singular. Examples of it may be seen in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer of the fourteenth century. By the sixteenth century this style was well established and the second person plural was used as a singular as a form of respect, and as such could be extended on occasion to people outside the highest ranks. In contrast, "thou" was used between equals in society generally as well as to inferiors by the socially superior.

So when Cranmer and his team began the momentous task of preparing the English Liturgy to replace the traditional Latin, he had to choose the form and style of English to use. In executing this great work, he became a master of its prose. Here are some of the decisions he made to create this form of English.

First of all, he had to decide how to address both God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in praise and prayer, not only in the prayers he translated from Latin, but also in those which he composed. Since God is the King of kings, should he adopt the form used to address Henry VIII, "Your Majesty," or should he keep to the use of "Thou/Thee," which had been used in English Prayers from the very beginning of the use of English (i.e., use of Anglo-Saxon or Old English)? Cranmer stayed with the ancient tradition of the use of "Thou/Thee" and this was confirmed for him by the translations into English of the Bible by Tyndale and Coverdale. In the English Bible, God was always "Thou/Thee" and never "You." Further, there was the theological consideration buttressing this that "The LORD our God is One Lord," and here the use of "Thou" clearly declared the Unity of God.

In the second place, the Archbishop had to decide how to translate the many verses and portions of the Bible within the new Prayer Book. There were the Ten Commandments, Sentences and portions for the Epistle and Gospel related to Holy Communion and many other examples in other services. Here as a scholar he went with Tyndale and Coverdale all the way and used “thou/thee” not only of God but also of an individual person. As a linguist, Cranmer knew that there is in the Hebrew, Greek and Latin Bibles a very clear distinction between the second person singular and the second person plural; and this he wanted to be clear also in English translation.

In the third place, Cranmer had to decide how to address individual persons in those services where the necessity arose of speaking one to one—e.g. giving of Holy Communion; Baptism; Catechizing; Confirmation; Churching of Women, and Ordination. Here—and most people today who use the classic BCP seem unaware of this— we find the general use both of “thou/thee” and the very restricted use of “you.” “You” is used where the priest is addressing a parishioner respectfully before prayer is offered or a sacrament administered; and then, within the setting of the prayer as such, he changes to the use of “thou/thee.” In the Ordinal, the Archbishop addresses the bishop-elect respectfully as “you” at the beginning of the service, but changes to “thou/thee” when the ordination gets under way. However, when there is presumed an intimate relation to God, the word is “thou/thee” as in the words used at the giving of Communion in both kinds to each individual communicant.

Summary

So we see that the use of the second Person singular in The English Prayer Book (editions of 1549, 1552, 1559, 1604 & 1662) is similar but not identical to the use in The Great Bible (1540) and the later King James Version (1611). The English Bible follows a strictly grammatical approach whereas the English Prayer Book incorporates some limited, contemporary usage. What is clear is that The English Bible never attempted to be simply the English of the day; rather, it created its own form of English to perform its holy task of rendering the Word of God into a form of words true to the original language and also understood by English-speaking people. Likewise in a slightly different, but very closely related, way, The English Prayer Book created what we may now call The English Language of Prayer, where the primary characteristic is that God is always and only “Thou/Thee.”

If we move on to the period after the Commonwealth and Protectorate, when Charles II has returned and The English Prayer Book (edition of 1604) is being studied by Anglican and Puritan with a view to official revision, we find that there were no calls to render the text into the dominant form of the English language then in use. We need to realize that by 1660 the use of “you” for human beings as second Person singular had increased much from the time of Cranmer, even as the use of “thou/thee” had both decreased and become the usage of specific groups. However, within all spectrums of churchmanship in 1660, it seems that there was a very general conviction that the English Language of Prayer was fixed and stable and there was absolutely no need to meddle with it. So the edition of 1662 was in terms of its form of language identical with that of 1604 and that of 1559. Further, this edition is still very much in use not merely by a committed minority in Britain but also around the world, not least by thousands in East Africa!

The English Language of Prayer, nurtured by the English Bible and the English Prayer Book, was used in hymnody, ex tempore prayer, devotional books, and in special services for special occasions by all kinds of Protestant Christians throughout the English-speaking world. God and the Lord Jesus were addressed by all types of Christians in church and in private as “Thou/Thee” everywhere until the twentieth century. The decade of the 1960s, known for its socially revolutionary character, is the period when a massive effort was expended by church leaders to create a new form of the language of prayer where God is “The You-God.” It is also the decade when the use of “you” as second person singular entered into mass-market versions of the Bible—The New International Version, The Good News Bible and so on.

While the contemporary language of prayer has virtually totally triumphed, amazingly it has not yet found a stable form or even appropriate ways to convey various aspects and dimensions of the appropriate relation of worshipers to God in praise, thanksgiving, petition, confession and intercession. It is a work in progress. Meanwhile the traditional English language of prayer is still available for those who wish to take the time to find and test it.

[for further reading on the language of Bible and Prayer Book see: Ian Robinson, Who killed the Bible? and P. Toon and L. Tarsitano, Neither Archaic nor Obsolete, from <http://www.edgewaysbooks.com> The second book by Toon and Tarsitano is available in the USA from www.anglicanmarketplace.com and 1-800-PBS-1928]