

THE BEAUTIES OF THE PRAYER-BOOK

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The Beauties of the Prayer-Book by Anonymous

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THE
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MORNING PRAYER.

"HABIT is second nature," saith a wise old saw, so it must be from custom that it has become natural to Church people to repeat placidly, week after week, the same palpable self-contradictions and absurdities. A sensible, shrewd man of business puts away his papers on the Saturday night, and apparently locks his mind up with them in his desk; certain it is that he

"Goes on Sunday to the church,
And sits among his boys;
He hears the parson pray and preach,"

and yet never discovers that his boys are repeating the most contradictory responses, while the parson is enunciating as axioms the most startling propositions.

When the preliminary silence in church is broken by the "sentences," the first words that fall from the clergyman's lips are a distinct declaration of the conditions of salvation: "When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive;" and we are further instructed as to our sins, that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." These very plain statements take high and comprehensible ground. God is supposed to desire that man should be righteous, and is therefore naturally satisfied when

"the wicked forsakes his way and the unrighteous man his path." We proceed, then, to confess our sins, and after Mrs. A., whose eyes are straying after her neighbour's bonnet, has confessed that she is erring and straying like a lost sheep, and Mrs. B., who is devising a way to make an old dress look new, has owned plaintively that she is following the devices of her own heart; and Squire C., of the rubicund visage and broad shoulders, has sonorously remarked that there is no health in him, and his son, with the joyous face, has cheerfully acknowledged that he is a miserable sinner—after these very appropriate and reasonable confessions to a Divine Being who "seeth the heart," and may therefore be supposed to take them for what they are worth, have been duly gone through, we are somewhat puzzled to hear the clergyman announce that God "pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent, and unfeignedly believe His holy Gospel." What is this sudden appendix to the before-declared conditions of salvation? We had been told that if we confessed our sins God's faithfulness and justice would cause him to forgive us; here we have duly done so, and surely the language is sufficiently strong; we are yet suddenly called upon to believe a "holy Gospel" as a preliminary to forgiveness. But we are not yet, to use a colloquialism, out of the wood; for while we are moodily meditating on this infraction of our contract the time slips on unobserved, and, it being a feast-day, we are startled by a stern voice conveying the cheerful intelligence, "Whosoever will be saved, before all things, it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly." "Before all things?" before repentance? before turning away from our wickedness? before doing that which is lawful and right? And what is this "Faith" which we must keep whole and undefiled

if we would save our souls alive? A bewildering jumble of triplets and units, mingled in inextricable confusion. But as he that "will be saved must thus think of the Trinity," we will try and disentangle the thread of salvation. "The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God," says the parson. "They are not three Gods, but one God," shout out the people. We are compelled "to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be God and Lord," reiterates the parson. "We are forbidden by the Catholic Religion to say there be three Gods or three Lords," obstinately persist the people. Then, after some rather intrusive particulars about the family (and very intricate) relations of the Father to the Son, and of both to the Holy Ghost, we are told that "so"—why so?—"there is one Father, not three Fathers, one Son, not three Sons, one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts." In so far as we have been able to follow the meaning, or rather the no-meaning, of the preceding sentences, no one said anything about three Fathers, three Sons, or three Holy Ghosts. The definite article *the* had been used in each case with a singular noun. We imagine the clause must have been inserted because all ideas as to the meaning of numerals must have been by this time so hopelessly lost by the congregation, that it became necessary to remark that "the Father" meant one Father, and not three. The list of necessaries for salvation is not yet complete, for "furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation, that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ." So far, then, from its being true that the wicked man who turns from his sins shall save his soul alive, we find that our sinner must also believe the Gospel, must accept contradictory arithmetical assertions, must think of the Trinity in a way which makes thought a ludicrous impossibility, and must believe *rightly* all the details of the method by which

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a Divine Being became a human being. If a sinner chanced to go out of church after the first sentence, and from being a drunkard becomes temperate, from being a liar becomes truthful, from being a profligate becomes chaste, and foolishly imagines that he is thereby doing God's will, and thus saving his soul alive, he will certainly, according to the Athanasian Creed, wake up from his pleasant delusion to find himself in everlasting fire. As sceptics, we need offer no opinion as to *which* is right, the creed or the text; we only suggest that *both* cannot be correct, and that it would be more satisfactory if the Church, in her wisdom, would make up her venerable mind which is the proper path, and then keep in it. After all this, we are in no way surprised to learn from a collect that being saved is dependent on quite a new support, namely, on the knowledge we have of God. How many more things may be necessary to salvation it is impossible to say at this point, but the office for Morning Prayer, at any rate, gives us no more. It would be rash to conclude, however, that we have fulfilled all, for the Church has some more scattered up and down her Prayer-Book; the end of all which double-dealing is, that we can never be sure that we have really fulfilled every condition; sad experience teaches us that when the Church says, "do so-and-so, and you shall be saved," she is, meanwhile, whispering under her breath, "provided you also do everything else."

We fail also to see the reasonableness of the constant cry, "for the sake of Jesus Christ," or "through Jesus Christ." We ask that we may lead "a godly, righteous, and sober life" *for His sake*; but this is just what we are told God wishes already, so why should He be asked to grant it for some one else's sake, as though He were unwilling that we should be righteous, and can only be coaxed into allowing us to be so by a favourite son? In the same way we are

to come to God's "eternal joy" through Jesus, which is, by the way, another of these endless conditions of salvation. We ask to be defended from our enemies "through the might of Jesus Christ," as though God Himself was not strong enough for the task; and God is urged to send down His healthful Spirit for the "honour of our advocate and Mediator," although that very advocate told His disciples that God would always give that spirit to those who asked for it. To the outside critic, these continual references to Jesus, as though God grudged all good gifts, appear very dishonouring to the "Father in Heaven."

Is it considered necessary to press God vehemently to hurry himself? "O God, *make speed* to save us. O Lord, *make haste* to help us." Will not God, of His own accord, do things at the best possible time? and further, is it possible for a Divine Being to make haste?

It will, perhaps, be considered hypercritical to object to the versicles: "Give peace in our time, O Lord, *because* there is none other that fighteth for us but only thou, O God." What more do they want than an almighty reinforcement? "None other?" Well, we should have fancied that God *and* somebody else were really more than were needed. At any rate, it sounds very insulting to say to God, "please give us peace, since we cannot count on any assistance except yours."

We have nothing to say about the prayers for the Royal Family, except that they do not show any very attractive results, and that it must have much edified George IV. to hear himself spoken of as a "most religious and gracious king." Never surely was a family so much prayed for, but *cui bono*? If the "Bishops, Curates, and all congregations" truly please God, he is about the only person that they succeed in pleasing, for the Bishops abuse the clergy, and the clergy abuse the Bishops, and the congregations abuse both.