



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Feast of Pentecost, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010  
*Commonly called Whitsunday*

## **In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.**

Whitsunday, the Feast of Pentecost, is the day upon which Anglicans celebrate the publication of the first Book of Common Prayer in the English language. Like that first Pentecost, the publication of the first English language Prayer Book – a work patently inspired by the Holy Spirit – is an event that changed the world.

To be sure, the publication of a mere book is nowhere near as dramatic an event as the coming of the Holy Ghost on that first Whitsunday almost 2,000 years ago. A group of ordinary people – not so different you folks in the pews: businessmen, a retired tax collector, construction workers, fishermen, academics – were locked in a private house waiting apprehensively for something to happen: Something they knew not what, but something Jesus promised would radically change their lives.

Suddenly, Luke says, the house was filled with a sound from heaven like a rushing mighty wind. Forked tongues flame leapt about the room – settling on one person's head, then another's. Soon, they discovered they could speak foreign languages – and not just speak these languages, but preach,

debate and exhort in them, too. It was the most extraordinary, most compelling experience, they'd ever had.

By the end of the first Whitsunday, their Spirit-inspired testimony had added three thousand converts to the church's rolls. And by the end of two decades, these very ordinary people had taken the Gospel of Christ from one end of the world to the other – from the mysterious Tin Isles in the North to India in the South; from Spain far in the West over the Silk Road to Asia in the East.

Today it's fashionable to reject with contempt any suggestion that Christianity has played a vital role in civilizing the world, shaping our concept of the worth of the individual and the value we place on human freedom. The history of the Book of Common Prayer gives the lie to that.

Dismissing the publication of Cranmer's Prayer Book as a happening of relatively minor importance – a technical change in the mode of worship in an obscure island off the coast of northern Europe – is the intellectual equivalent of asserting the earth is flat. It is a denial of history.

Four and a half centuries ago, when Holy Spirit inspired Archbishop Thomas Cranmer to put pen to paper to construct an English language Prayer Book, he was not merely creating an easily comprehended liturgy. His Prayer Book isn't just a liturgy, it is the spiritual expression of a new way of life: a wholly Christian way of life. The Prayer Book gives ordinary people an easy means of talking to God.

In creating the Book of Common Prayer, Cranmer brought into being the English language. Generations upon generations English-speaking people have plundered it for similes and metaphors – and not only preachers and poets and writers and scholars and jurists, but ordinary folk conveying their daily thoughts to those they loved. Male, female, rich, poor, educated and unlettered, all of them, whether they knew it or not, drew inspiration from Cranmer's Prayer Book, and by no means solely in the realm of language and religion.

The thoughts expressed in the Book of Common Prayer have had a major political impact – radically changing the way people think about themselves and the world in which they live. In England, the Prayer Book created a literate people, imbued with the Christian ethic. And they, in turn, used its ideas and concepts to create this nation – and in doing so changed the world.

The ideas that inspired the American Revolution sprang from the Prayer Book. It gave us our concept of universal suffrage. It expressed the idea that all people are equal before God in a way so compelling slave owners were forced to recognize their slaves as beloved of God as they were, themselves.

The concept of all human beings being endowed with unalienable rights by their

creator, of equality before the law, of being innocent until proved guilty, all are Prayer Book ideas. But, then, this shouldn't be entirely surprising. For two thirds of our founding fathers were Anglicans, and many of the others belonged to churches that in those days either used the book or at least liturgies derived from it.

It is no exaggeration to say that today the Holy Spirit working through the Prayer Book still enables ordinary people to do remarkable things. Take as an example the people who founded this parish just over 25 years ago. They lacked not only a building but most of the basic necessities: altar linens, candle sticks, an altar cross. The one thing they did not lack, however, was the Holy Spirit, which happens to be the one basic necessity that's absolutely essential for building Christ's church.

The Holy Spirit takes ordinary people and, he enables them to do extraordinary things. He gives them courage to overcome the fears. He inspires the trust in Christ that enables them to act generously and open-handedly when prudence would seem to dictate otherwise. He gives them the faith to recognize that in the dim light of worldly wisdom, God's ways always seem foolish and impractical compared with our human instincts and inclinations.

To be sure, one small parish is hardly likely change the world. It could, of course – because when the Holy Spirit makes up his mind to do something, anything and everything is possible. But the Holy Spirit probably has rather more modest plans for us. If we keep the faith so sublimely expressed in Cranmer's Prayer Book, and pay heed to the Holy Spirit talking to us through it, we can do the work God has mapped out for us in our small corner of Baltimore County – and that should be more

than enough to keep us occupied . . . at least  
for the time being. *AMEN*