

A Voice from the Desert and the Prayer Book in the Face of COVID-19
By The Rev. Canon Dr. Kevin Moroney

As we all struggle to discern how to be the Church and how to worship as a Christian community in light of this pandemic, it may be helpful to see that we have more resources in our tradition than we may realize. In his books, *Early Christian Worship* and *Two Ways of Praying*, liturgical theologian Paul Bradshaw shows how the history of Christian worship has always been informed by two broad traditions: that of the town or city, and that of the desert or wilderness. The city gave us our sacred spaces, our trained clergy, our large gatherings and celebratory Eucharists, and most of our Sunday worship today is shaped by that tradition. The desert was more lay oriented, people praying the psalms through the day for spiritual formation. It is a slightly different notion of community, one that had social distancing built into it to a certain degree, and it is where the monastic tradition was born. Both traditions did have daily prayer and both did have the Eucharist, but they had slightly different points of emphasis concerning how to be a Christian community. The desert may be of help to us now.

So can the Prayer Book. In the Preface to the very first *Book of Common Prayer*, Thomas Cranmer articulated a vision of how to be the Church that was largely ignored at the time. He wrote of clergy and people hearing the scriptures daily, set within the common prayers, morning and evening, with a belief that doing so would lead to deeper godliness and devotion:

that the Cleargie, and specially suche as were Ministers of the congregacion, should (by often readyng and meditacion of Gods worde) be stirred up to godlines themselves, ... And further, that the people (by daily hearyng of holy scripture read in the Churche) should continuallye profite more and more in the knowledge of God, and bee the more inflamed with the love of [God's] true religion. (brackets mine)

Inflamed with God's love by learning scripture through Morning and Evening Prayer. Granted, Cranmer's vision involved gathering in the church each day, so it would have to be adapted to our circumstances. Perhaps, instead of trying to find ways to make the city model work through experiments like drive by communions, it might help to look to the combined witness of the desert and the Prayer Book for guidance and inspiration. I am currently a supply priest at St. Peter's in Clifton, NJ, where we are praying a simplified form of Morning Prayer each day that is crafted from the Prayer Book, we are reading our way through Luke's gospel day by day as the readings for Morning Prayer, and when we gather virtually on Sunday we are praying MP and having virtual discussion on what we have read all week. As was true in the desert and in Cranmer's vision, it is a slightly different way to be community: the clergy/lay curve is flattened a bit because we are doing something as a body, and it keeps us together both during the week and on Sunday. Members can either email questions anytime or text them in during MP on Sunday. I am not suggesting that this is a specific model for everyone; I am suggesting that we all might benefit from thinking more about how our desert roots and Cranmer's original vision might help us be the Church during COVID-19.