

A Ghost Liturgy – David Williams’ Evensong

Below is the text of a Deist Evensong liturgy which was composed by the clergyman and teacher David Williams (1738–1816).

Williams was a proponent of what might be described as the natural religion of the Enlightenment. A Welshman by birth, he washed up in London in his 30s and ended up running his own chapel off Cavendish Square in London. Before a small congregation of about 20 people, he celebrated for a time a set of rites which he had composed with the assistance of Benjamin Franklin. These were published in 1776 under the title *A Liturgy on the Universal Principles of Religion and Morality*. Copies of the text were sent to Voltaire and King Frederick the Great, who apparently both liked it.

The order for Evensong below was one of the rites in Williams’ collection. It has a typically Deistic focus on a single omnipotent god. It also breathes something of a spirit of optimism: it is addressed to a *good* god who presides over a well-governed universe. We have here a Newtonian outlook in which the world works with regularity under the oversight of a benevolent deity.

The rite uses Christian forms of prayer and contains various Biblical references – there are even directions for Psalms to be sung – but, perhaps surprisingly, it does not follow the Anglican Evensong service especially closely. There is a prayer for clergy of all denominations.

The political edge of the Enlightenment does not really intrude into the text. There is a reference to “the subversion of tyranny” but also a prayer for the king and the royal family. God is asked, *à propos* of the king: “let him ever be preserved from weak or vicious counsels”.

In all, this is a liturgy of a fairly specific time: the Enlightenment. It comes after Newton and Voltaire but before Darwin and Einstein. Hence the description “a ghost liturgy”. It pertains to a style of religiosity that came and went a long time ago. There is no real living tradition that preserves Williams’ outlook, with perhaps the exception of the small Unitarian subculture. There are not many people who would be interested in celebrating Williams’ Evensong today.

The Order for Evening Prayer

To be introduced by this Address from the Minister to the People, the Congregation standing.

MINISTER. Hear, ye people; give ear, ye inhabitants of the world; for the Lord God, omnipotent reigneth. Let the heavens and the earth praise him; the seas, and every thing that moveth therein. Sing unto the Lord, and give thanks at the remembrance of his goodness. Trust in him at all times, ye people; pour out your hearts before him; for God is our refuge.

PEOPLE. The Lord God omnipotent reigneth.

MINISTER. It is good for us to come before the Lord, and with hearts full of gratitude, to bless his name, who is mighty in power, excellent in working, and abundant in goodness and truth. By contemplating and admiring his perfections, we hope to excite and improve the best dispositions in our own minds. May no mean affections or cares interrupt our delightful employments: let our minds be wholly engaged in the exercises of devotion: may we worship the great author of life, the universal spirit, in spirit and truth.

PEOPLE. Amen.

The following Hymn, or one of those at the end of the Liturgy, is to be recited by the Minister and People alternately, all standing.

HYMN I

Glory be to God the Father Almighty! we knowledge him to be the Lord, the fountain of being, the giver of life, and the sovereign of the whole creation. With admiration and joy, we behold the beauty, wonder, and magnificence of his works; acknowledge his eternal being and providence; and worship him, the creator and preserver of all things.

PEOPLE. O God; thy perfections fill our hearts with gladness, and our lips shew forth thy praise.

MINISTER. The Lord in wisdom hath stretched out the firmament, and the heavens are the work of his hands; the sun, moon, and stars, he hath ordained to fulfil his pleasure; the air which we breathe, is his wise provision; he covereth the heavens with clouds; he prepareth the rain, and the dew; he causeth the winds to blow; he sendeth forth his commandment; all things are obedient to the voice of his word.

PEOPLE. O Lord, thy ways are past finding out, and thine understanding is infinite.

MINISTER. The Lord hath laid the foundations of the earth; He hath cloathed it with grass; furnished it with herbs; adorned it with flowers; and enriched it with every thing necessary for the support and happiness of his creatures.

PEOPLE. The earth is thine, O Lord; thou hast filled it with the riches of thy goodness.

MINISTER. The world is subject to his power, and conducted by his wisdom in all its changes and revolutions. The constant succession of day and night, and the grateful return of summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, are the gracious appointments of his providence.

PEOPLE. The day is thine; the night is also thine; thy goodness endureth for ever.

MINISTER. The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the birds of the air; the fishes of the sea; and the cattle upon a thousand hills. He sendeth forth his spirit, they are created; he reneweth the face of the earth. He is the creator and father of mankind; he hath placed us high among his creatures, to contemplate his works, to discern his justice, to admire his providence, and to promote the ends of his dominion; he hath adorned our nature with reasoning powers and virtuous principles; made us capable of a moral temper, and all the happiness of a right and useful conduct. Great and marvellous are the works of God! He hath made the heavens with all their hosts; the earth and all the things that are therein; the sea, and all that is in it; and he preserveth them continually.

PEOPLE. O Lord! how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all.

MINISTER. But who among his creatures can shew forth all his praise? - We behold the monuments of his power; we trace the footsteps of his wisdom; and every moment of our lives partake of the riches of his goodness; but none can say how great and wise and good he is: no man can find out the Almighty unto perfection.

PEOPLE. O God! thy perfections are above all praise, universal as thy works and infinite as thy nature.

Here a Psalm may be sung; and the first Lesson read; and then the Service proceed with the following Thanksgiving, the Congregation standing.

MINISTER. Rejoice in the Lord, all ye people; come into his presence with thanksgiving, and be devout and joyful in his service. Sing praises unto him and bless him: for he is good, and his mercy endureth for ever.

PEOPLE. We will give thanks unto the Lord; and celebrate his goodness with joyful hearts.

General Thanksgiving.

MINISTER. O God, thou art the giver of all good: thou delightest in the happiness of thy creatures, and art daily imparting the riches of thy bounty. Thou hast exercised a wise and gracious care over us ever since we came into the world: by thee are all our wants supplied; from thee all our enjoyments proceed; thou crownest our days with thy goodness; thou givest us food convenient for us, and appointest refreshment for our wearied powers: to thy providence we owe the raiment with which we are clothed, our comfortable habitations, and all the fruits of our industry and labour. O that men would praise the Lord for his goodness!

PEOPLE. Blessed be the Lord our God! for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men.

MINISTER. We thank thee, O God, for the noble and excellent constitution of our minds; for reason and understanding; for all the treasures of knowledge which lie open to our view; that thou hast formed us for the practice of virtue and true religion, and given us opportunities for the improvement of our minds, and the attainment of happiness.

We thank thee that we are placed in a social state; are endowed with social affections; and enjoy such a variety of pleasures from the esteem and friendship of our brethren.

We ascribe to thy goodness all the happiness we receive from the practice of virtue, and the just exercise of our powers; the variety of trials thou hast appointed for our improvement, and those noble rewards, both present and future, which are the certain consequences of well doing.

O give thanks unto the Lord, ye his people; rejoice before him with thanksgiving; for the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations.

PEOPLE. All glory and honour, blessing and praise, might, majesty, and dominion, be unto God for ever.

Here a Psalm is to be sung: the second Lesson read: then the Service may proceed with the General Confession and the Litany; to be read by the Minister; the Congregation kneeling, and saying Amen to each Collect.

MINISTER. Let us, with humble and contrite hearts, confess and lament before God, the manifold errors and follies of our lives.

General Confession.

O most pure and holy God! glory belongeth unto thee; but unto us belong confusion and shame. Should we attempt to justify ourselves; our own hearts would condemn us. We own, with deep concern, our many and great offences. We have been deaf to the voice of thy works, and regardless of the glorious majesty of thy kingdom. O Father! we have sinned, and we are no more worthy to be called thy children. But a contrite heart thou wilt not despise. We earnestly desire never to repeat our offences; but as a testimony of our sorrow for them, to renounce every thing displeasing to thee; may our abhorrence of vice be increased; and every good purpose of our minds be firmly established.

PEOPLE. Amen.

The Litany, or General Supplication.

MINISTER. Almighty God! who hast ordained that our happiness should consist in a freedom from irregular and evil passions; may the bad effects which the past disorders of our lives have had on our understandings and dispositions, guard our future conduct; that we may ever pursue what our hearts can approve, and maintain an inviolable regard to the dictates of conscience, and the duties of religion.

PEOPLE. Amen.

MINISTER. O God of love; who hast given us humane and generous affections; may our conduct be distinguished by all the kind and friendly offices by which we can promote the happiness of society. May the misfortunes and evils of life humanize and sweeten our tempers; heighten our compassion for the unhappy, and hasten our endeavours to relieve them. We are all subject to those misfortunes and those follies which cover human life with confusion and misery. May we consider all mankind as brethren; may an uniform principle of justice and benevolence inspire all our words and actions. May no difference of sects, parties, or opinions, lessen that brotherly affection we owe to all men. May we be slow to anger, and of great mercy; just in our dealings; true to our promises; faithful to our engagements; sincere and honest in our professions; and generously answer, as well the reasonable expectations, as the legal and just demands, of all our fellow-creatures.

PEOPLE. Amen.

MINISTER. Almighty and everlasting God! In all our endeavours to improve in virtue, we would have our eye continually on thee; imitate thy goodness, and act from the clearest views of thy glorious perfections. When we survey the beauties of thy creation, may we feel a devout veneration of thy character. May a firm persuasion of thy presence ever possess our minds, and keep them free from all unworthy thoughts, and all vicious desires - Thy kingdom is everlasting; - we cheerfully submit to thine authority in all things. We willingly follow whither thou leadest; and humbly submit to whatever befalls us in the course of thy providence. We ask not for riches, or honors; we wish to act well the part assigned to us, and to adorn our several stations by a virtuous conduct.

PEOPLE. Amen.

MINISTER. Almighty God! we rejoice in the various blessings which thy providence hath bestowed on mankind; and hope for the continuance and increase of them, out of thine abundant goodness. In all the kingdoms of the world may thy perfections be acknowledged, and thy will be done. As friends to the prosperity and happiness of mankind, we would rejoice in the subversion of tyranny, oppression, and every thing unfriend to the liberties of the world. May a spirit of order, harmony, and peace, go forth among the nations, and all men freely enjoy the blessings of thy providence.

PEOPLE. Amen.

MINISTER. Under a wise administration of government may our happiness be continued. May the King walk before thee with a perfect heart; let him ever be preserved from weak or vicious counsels. May his happiness, and that of our most gracious queen, the Prince of Wales, and all the royal family, be continually increasing.

PEOPLE. Amen.

MINISTER. May the great council of the nation; and our judges and magistrates be in all cases faithful to the interests of their country. May our archbishops, bishops, and the ministers of religion, of every sect and denomination, succeed in their endeavours to improve the hearts, and reform the manners of men.

PEOPLE. Amen.

MINISTER. O God of all goodness! we sympathize with all who are in distress; and weep with those who weep. May our hearts be ever warmed with the most compassionate and friendly wishes for those whose afflictions are alleviated by our remembrance of them, and our attention to their situations; our relations and friends; the poor, the fatherless, and the widow; those who are travelling by land or by water; women labouring with child; sick persons and young children; the captive, the aged, and the dying.

PEOPLE. Amen.

MINISTER. In every duty, may our minds be inspired with zeal for the public good; and our hearts united in mutual charity and love.

PEOPLE. Amen.

Psalm sung.

Sermon.

The Minister may conclude with these Words,

The Lord be with us, and bless us.