

## LEX ORANDI, LEX CREDENDI, LEX VIVENDI<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Evensong on the Ninth Sunday after Trinity (Eighth Sunday after Pentecost), 3 August 2025, being the occasion of a celebration of the life and work of Jane Austen in the 250<sup>th</sup> year of her birth**

If we know anything about Jane Austen's religious beliefs, we know that they were established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Church of England and its *Book of Common Prayer*. This service of Evensong would have been more familiar to her than it is to us, and she would have seen her father, the Reverend George Austen, dressed as I am now.<sup>2</sup> We should note, however, that St Nicholas, Steventon had no organ until a small harmonium was installed in 1875 and a pipe organ in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. If there was any leadership for the singing it would probably have come from the rear by what is known as a West Gallery choir and band, a group of parishioners with whatever instruments they had; except that there was no gallery in St Nicholas Church.<sup>3</sup> Choir stalls did not arrive until the Victorian period. The sum of this is that Jane's experience of Evensong was very different from our service today.<sup>4</sup>

In his preface to the 1549 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*, Thomas Cranmer said that its ceremonies were intended to

Serve to a decent Order and godly Discipline, and such as be apt to stir up the dull mind of man to the remembrance of his duty to God, by some notable and special signification, whereby he might be edified.<sup>5</sup>

In saying this, Cranmer echoed a 5<sup>th</sup> century saying of Prosper of Aquitaine:<sup>6</sup> *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*, "as we pray, so we believe, and so we live". It is customarily quoted as *lex orandi, lex credendi*, but for Jane's sake, we should read the full version to conclude that she prayed in a decent and disciplined way, believed in a decent and disciplined creation, and sought to live a decent and disciplined life, despite what she observed in the world around her. Indeed, we may think that the difference between what she believed and what she experienced was part of the genesis of her writing. She would have appreciated the words that we heard from Ecclesiastes.

Jane came from a clerical family and lived in the centre of a functioning parish. She knew the clergy too well to hold them in awe. But even the egregious Mr Collins of *Pride and Prejudice* reminds us of the precarious position of clergy dependent on the whims of patrons.

The principal 18<sup>th</sup> century disturbances in the Church of England came from the evangelical revival led by John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield. But those figures and their followers concentrated on larger towns and cities, particularly those affected by the developing industrial revolution. In May 1738 and March 1739, John Wesley visited Dummer, a village about 7 km from Steventon, where he was warmly received by the rector, his long-standing

---

<sup>1</sup> Readings: Ecclesiastes 3:1-17; Psalm 49:1-12; Colossians 3:12-17 For the title, see [Lex orandi, lex credendi - Wikipedia](#) and [MACHRAY REVIEW #2: Lex Orandi or Lex Credendi](#)

<sup>2</sup> "Every week rose to a sort of climax on Sunday when Mr Austen, transformed by his black gown, presided in church." Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen, A Life*, Penguin Books Ltd, p. 30

<sup>3</sup> [West gallery music - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Jane Austen's Family Churches: St. Nicholas', Steventon | Jane Austen's World](#) and [St Nicholas About – Steventon Village Hampshire](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Concerning Ceremonies, why some be abolished, and some retained | The Church of England](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Prosper of Aquitaine - Wikipedia](#)

friend, Charles Kinchin.<sup>7</sup> George Austen, Jane's father, was then only a boy. Kinchin died in 1742, and Wesley never came to the district again. It seems that Jane's life was free from this dangerous "enthusiasm".<sup>8</sup>

Of more importance in Jane's world were the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and slavery, all of which are part of the social fabric of her novels. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, poor harvests and population growth made grain prices high in England with a consequent increase in rural poverty, particularly in the south. The Elizabethan Poor Law made parishes responsible for poor relief and Steventon cannot have been free from the rising poverty levels.<sup>9</sup> Given that George Austen's income was largely dependent on farming his glebe, he shared both ends of this issue; his own income would have been affected, and he was responsible for the poor of his parish.

We know how Jane prayed because some of her prayers survive.<sup>10</sup> In our reading from Colossians, St Paul exhorted his readers to act with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience". All these words or their synonyms appear in her prayers.

One of the themes in Jane's prayers was a sense of thankfulness for all the benefits of her life. While she was certainly more blessed than the rural labourers in her father's parish, it cannot be said that everything in her life was perfect. Her father was constantly in debt. A member of her extended family perished by the guillotine.<sup>11</sup> What threatened her benefits, she thought, was discontent or indifference, a lack of gratitude or unthinking acceptance.

Jane's thankfulness led her to pray for others:

May the sick and afflicted, be now, and ever in Thy care; and heartily do we pray for the safety of all that travel by land or by sea, for the comfort and protection of the orphan and the widow and that Thy pity may be shown upon all captives and prisoners.

What is notable about the text of this prayer is that it mirrors the Biblical injunctions identifying those most vulnerable, showing her familiarity with the scriptural text and the way it was reflected in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Jane was concerned about good behaviour, not in terms of propriety and etiquette, but in terms of righteousness. She prayed that we may not, "by our own neglect, throw away the salvation [that God had] ... given us, nor be Christians only in name." This desire is reflected in her acute observations of human behaviour in her writings. As Claire Tomalin says, she thought that

there were times when affability, good humour and compliance must be set aside for the greater virtues of honesty and a clear conscience.<sup>12</sup>

Such concerns led to self-examination. Jane acknowledged that bad behaviour is often habitual:

---

<sup>7</sup> [Wesleyan Methodism in Villages near Basingstoke – articles, videos, audio recordings on Evangelical and Methodist themes](#) and [DMBI: A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland](#)

<sup>8</sup> [DMBI: A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Speenhamland system - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>10</sup> Terry Glaspey (ed), *The Prayers of Jane Austen*, Eugene, Oregon, Harvest House Publishers, 2015

<sup>11</sup> [Eliza de Feuillide - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>12</sup> Tomalin, pp. 62-63

Pardon, O God, whatever Thou has seen amiss in us, and give us a stronger desire of resisting every evil inclination and weakening every habit of sin. Thou knowest the infirmity of our nature, and the temptations which surround us.

We could, therefore, see her as a believer in a virtue ethic, a way of life that developed good behaviour as a habit, in the same way as bad behaviour could be a habit. This would lead to a “benevolent spirit toward every fellow-creature”.

Nevertheless, she sought not to be judgemental.

Incline us, O God, to think humbly of ourselves, to be severe only in the examination of our own conduct, to consider our fellow-creatures with kindness, and to judge of all they say and do with that charity which we would desire from them ourselves.

The editor of Jane’s collected prayers sums up their implications by saying how they have worked out in her writing:

Jane shows us that it requires great strength to live out a life of moral character in our world, and she reveals this in the most subtle ways. She writes with a tone of gentle irony aimed at our common human character flaws. We often find ourselves laughing at the people in her novels because she is such an on-target observer of human folly. And soon we realize that there is much of ourselves in those at whom we chuckle. She holds up a mirror to our sometimes ridiculous arrogance, desire for status, and unrealistic hopes and expectations. Her biting wit uncovers the many ways we delude ourselves.

Today, we do not often turn our minds to the ways in which faith affects our lives. Unbelief is our default position. We are, therefore, accustomed to think of faith as a private preference; something that we indulge in for our own benefit, if, indeed, there is any benefit to be obtained. Jane Austen might persuade us that we are wrong.



The Reverend George Austen (1731-1805)



Jane Austen (1775-1817)