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## *Thomas Bray for Us Today*

**An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith**  
**The Feast of Thomas Bray – Year A**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and our redeemer. Amen. —Psalm 19:14 (adapt.)*

### **Thomas Bray for Us Today**

The Rev. Theophus “Thee” Smith

Thomas Bray | Evensong | February 9, 2017

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and our redeemer. Amen.

—Psalm 19:14 paraphrase

There’s been some interesting discussion among our canons both for ministry and for music about our choice to observe the commemoration of Thomas Bray at this service here today. That’s because at this time of the month in February there are a few other observances that are more compelling. For one thing tomorrow, February 13, is the feast day of Absalom Jones, the first African American ordained an Episcopal priest—born a slave in 1746 and ordained priest in 1804, dying fourteen years later at the age of 71 on February 13, 1818. And after all, the month of February in the U.S. is Black History Month.

But if we were looking for more popular devotional observances we could celebrate yesterday’s February 11 anniversary of the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the French village of Lourdes. That was the beginning of popular devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes, when she appeared to a fourteen-year-old peasant girl in the year 1858.

And another better-known choice with secular appeal comes with the holiday of Valentine’s Day, February 14. So today we could also be celebrating the feast of St. Valentine himself, a Catholic priest and martyr in the year 273. The suggestive legend associated with St. Valentine is that he was executed for refusal to sacrifice to pagan gods. “Being imprisoned for this, Valentine gave his testimony in prison and through his prayers healed the jailer’s daughter who was suffering from blindness. On the day of his execution he left her a note that was signed ‘Your Valentine’” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Valentine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Valentine)).

So why would we choose, instead of those alternative devotions, to highlight the life and ministry of Thomas Bray? In a few minutes I will share with you why it’s an excellent choice in view of those verses in first lesson that I read earlier in the service—the lesson from Philippians. But first here’s a brief account of Bray’s life which will vindicate why he is occupies a comparable position on the calendar of saints alongside Absalom Jones, Our Lady of Lourdes, and the martyred St.

Valentine.

**Thomas Bray** (1656 or 1658 – 15 February 1730) was an English clergyman and [abolitionist](#) who helped formally establish the [Church of England](#) in [Maryland](#), as well as [two missionary societies that remain active to this day more than two centuries later:] the [Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge](#) and [Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts](#) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Bray](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Bray)).

In 1696, Thomas Bray, an English country parson, was invited by the Bishop of London to be responsible for the oversight of Church work in the colony of Maryland. Three years later, as the Bishop's Commissary, he sailed to America for his first, and only, visitation. Though he spent only two and a half months in Maryland [that's just 90 days!], Bray was deeply concerned about the neglected state of the American churches, and the great need for the education of clergymen, lay people, and children. At a general visitation of the clergy at Annapolis [where I attended St. John's College, by the way], before his return to England, he emphasized the need for the instruction of children, and insisted that no clergyman be given a charge unless he had a good report from the ship he came over in ... His understanding of, and concern for, Native Americans and Blacks were far ahead of his time. He founded thirty-nine lending libraries in America, as well as numerous schools. He raised money for missionary work and influenced young English priests to go to America ...

When the deplorable condition of English prisons was brought to Bray's attention, he set to work to influence public opinion and to raise funds to alleviate the misery of the inmates. He organized Sunday "Beef and Beer" dinners in prisons, and advanced proposals for prison reform. It was Thomas Bray who first suggested to General Oglethorpe the idea of founding a humanitarian colony for the relief of honest debtors, but he died before the Georgia colony became a reality (<https://standingcommissiononliturgyandmusic.org/2011/02/15/february-15-thomas-bray-priest-and-missionary-1730/#comments>). [By the way, as a schoolboy growing up here in Atlanta I attended Oglethorpe Elementary School and was quite proud of my youthful knowledge of who he was as the founder of Georgia, but equally proud of my ability to pronounce his name correctly.]

Well, having heard that biography of Thomas Bray, now we can begin to see why his life might be comparably observed alongside other, more popular saints and devotions. But as I promised we may also see how the signature text for such a life is that verse 5 from Philippians 2:

<sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

alongside the preceding verses that fill-in the content of that verse:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ... (Phil. 2:1-5)

Well, church friends, when I hear impactful scriptures like that I like to point them out to my listeners as one more biblical texts that few of us choose to take literally! Rather, here and with similar verses we are full of ingenious ways to interpret scripture symbolically or metaphorically; with abstractions or qualifications or conditions. Here it is key to recall that our Lord Jesus Christ is the prince of unconditional love. And the genius of the life of a saint is that she or he takes to an extreme some key virtue of our Lord's character and lives it out in ways that we find awe-inspiring and winsome.

Thus we can affirm that in his care and advocacy for native peoples and enslaved Africans in the American colonies, and in this devotion and legacy to the poor and imprisoned of England, Bray lived out the Philippians text:

<sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

*Blessed Thomas Bray*, in order that we may go and do likewise, *pray for us!*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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