

Praying the Eucharist

Introduction

J Glenn Murray SJ said, "Liturgy should take us by the hair and hurl us into the mystery of God." Often though our experience of awe and wonder on a Sunday morning is non-existent and we find it difficult to pray. Lots of prayers are read by others or us; the words are uttered but they don't feel at all prayerful. Maybe you identify with one or more of these:

- being distracted by errors in the loudspeaker system,
- perhaps someone is leading intercessions very different from those we might pray,
- possibly we can't relate to the formality of words not our own,
- being distracted or anxious about our duties as sidesperson, or reader, or being in the choir and focussing on getting the next piece of music in place, or whether we turned on the oven timer for Sunday lunch!

Maybe also we come with low expectations and our lack of expectancy can be a major hurdle to encountering God. God is there waiting for us and always ready to meet us, but we are not ready to meet God. We could instead come full of hope, our hearts filled with the desire to meet the living God and our ears attuned to hear his voice. ***Think for a moment about the expectations you have of worship and what it might feel like to raise the bar, as it were....***

The Eucharist – corporate and private

The Eucharist is prayer that we engage in corporately and our aim should be to attend to and concentrate on the words which draw us together as one body. There are spaces though, before and during the service where it is appropriate to be thinking one's own thoughts and prayers. These spaces and our own prayers help to heighten our awareness of God's presence, to bring our self into the service, lifting our hearts to worship and engaging more deeply with what we listen to, sing and say. It helps that we know and make our own the structure of the service and explaining that structure, what we say and do and why, is what this talk is primarily concerned with.

Common Worship is 'common'

You can go into a Eucharistic service in any Anglican church and it may feel very different from the outset, in what it is called, in how formal or informal it is, the content and style of what is sung and how the Eucharistic prayer is said or performed. At heart however, there is always the same overall dynamic structure and flow with some small variations. If the pattern or structure you experience is not what you expect then it is not Anglican! The Eucharist, Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, Mass, whatever it is called, has a fourfold structure of:

The Gathering

The Liturgy of the Word

The Liturgy of the Sacrament

The Dismissal

Each of these four sections in the service comprises different elements.

The Structure and Flow of the Eucharist

So now we start the Eucharistic journey, but first though, we arrive at church:

Before the Service

Sometimes the general hubbub before a service makes it difficult for those who wish to pray to do so. There is the old adage:

Before the service, speak to God

During the service, let God speak to you.

After the service, speak to one another.

It is natural that we might wish to catch up with people on a Sunday morning and it might be a cultural step too far for us not to speak with each other when we come into church. Perhaps though we could be more aware of the needs of the people around us and whether they are trying to sit quietly and pray.

The Gathering

The president welcomes and we greet each other in the Lord's name.

The president (and the word is used in the sense of the one who presides over the liturgy) may say, 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. These words and others used similarly at different points in the service remind us that our worship is Trinitarian. They call us to worship the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit which comes to us through our union with Christ Jesus.

Then follows one or other formal **greeting**, 'The Lord be with you', or 'Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you', or, at Easter, 'Alleluia, Christ is risen'. And we make the appropriate response. Whilst 'Good morning' is often said, it should never replace one of those greetings; they remind us of why we are there and call us into relationship with each other and with God. We are never mere spectators at worship, but active participants. The greeting and our response draw us into relationship with the president, who is not merely an actor or performer on stage.

We sing a hymn

The **first** hymn may come before or after the welcome and Greeting. All the hymns should be chosen with regard to where they are in the service as well as be related to the readings or season in some way. The first or opening hymn is a hymn of praise to God such as 'Praise to the Lord, the almighty, the King of creation'. The **second** hymn before the gospel is a shorter hymn and related to one of the liturgical readings for the day, whether or not they all are included in the service. It is still called the Gradual but for no current reason. Someone who knows Latin and liturgy might correct me but I understand that it was derived from the Latin word for step and from where it might have been read or sung by a cantor, that is the chancel step. The **third** or Offertory hymn is much longer and, guess what, it should be about offering. For example, 'Take my life and let it be'. There may also be a **Communion** hymn which is quieter and more reflective in tone. The **final** or sending out hymn has the theme of sending us back out into the world to live out the gospel life, charged once again with the living food of Word and Sacrament. An example might be, 'Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us'.

Hymns are foundational in our spirituality and beliefs and they become ingrained in us because we remember words far better when they are sung than spoken. When they are well-chosen they can do more than any spoken word to uplift and inspire us in worship.

Maybe you prefer different kinds of hymns and they might be a barrier or an aid to worship. I wonder what you prefer. ***Have a moment or two to think about that and we can share in discussion later on....***

After the first hymn we say the **Prayer of Preparation**, praying that our hearts be open to God's cleansing touch as we come to worship. Then we move into the **Prayers of Penitence**.

The **Summary of the Law** reminds us of the two great commandments to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. When I was confirmed, over 60 years ago, we were given a devotional book which contained a form of self-examination to be used on a Saturday evening. It was a very good aid for reflecting on all the specific ways in which we have failed to love God and neighbour. Our worship is made more meaningful to the extent that we are engaged with what we are doing and saying and the **Confession**, that follows the Summary of the Law, is a prime example. It is a general confession said by all and, at best, it is also a personal confession as we hold in mind our specific faults and failings. ***I wonder to what extent we reflect on our lives and the choices we have made day by day and week by week and bring that into our confession.***

Confession is not to grovel in self-loathing but to be grounded in God's love and to know that we are loved and accepted as we are. We all fall short; it's what it means to be human, but to the extent that we truthfully and humbly recognise and acknowledge our faults, we become more grateful for the love that we are given. The words of God's **Absolution** given by the priest assure us of God's forgiveness and acceptance.

From the Confession and Absolution, we can then move confidently and with thanksgiving into the words of the ***Gloria in Excelsis*** – glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth. In Lent and Advent, the Gloria and Alleluias are not used. These are seasons where we focus on waiting, preparation and on our faith as a pilgrimage journey. In Advent the time of preparation before Christmas, before Christ was born the Gloria had not yet been sung. And in Lent we are preparing to participate in Christ’s death and then once again on Easter Sunday morning we can sing out in praise his new birth from the tomb.

This Gathering section of our liturgy ends with the **Collect**, which is a different prayer each week. It is a literally a prayer to gather and collect us. We came into church with all our personal concerns and gradually we have been gathered together as one body ready to worship as one people of God. ***I wonder how your respond to that idea of coming as individuals with our own personal concerns and being drawn together through what we do and say and where we are...***

I find the collects are much more rewarding when read or listened to again. The same Collect is generally used throughout the week. I use it at the end of each Questions of Life and Faith session and it always seems relevant to what has been discussed and perhaps more meaningful than on a Sunday.

After The Gathering, ***The Liturgy of the Word*** is the next section of the Eucharist. It is where we proclaim and respond to the Word of God, and it variously includes:

- an **OT Reading**
- a portion of a **Psalm**
- a **NT Reading**
- a shorter **hymn** linked to the readings and introducing the Gospel as mentioned earlier.
- the **Gospel**, which must always be read. When we hear the Gospel, we stand and face the reader and it is better not to have our noses in the printed word. When a person speaks to us, do we keep our backs to them or only give them a sideways glance? The Gospel is giving us the word of the living Christ and we listen to him. The person reading the Gospel, normally a priest or deacon, will either pray themselves or bow before the president to pray for them, that God may be in their hearts and on their lips as they proclaim the living Word. It is why also the Gospel reader may make the sign of the cross on the gospel book, on their head, lips and heart. The sign of the cross is a bodily prayer, a physical reminder of how we long for God's Spirit to fill and inspire every part of us. ***Think for a moment about how you respond to physical prayer, making the sign of the cross or raising your hands or bowing your head. What makes you feel uncomfortable or at ease with what you are doing?...***
- Scripture readings are prescribed for us by the compilers of our Lectionary. They are in common with most other mainstream Christian denominations and based on the Revised Common Lectionary, but at certain times and in different seasons there are denominational deviations. The Anglican version is the Common Worship lectionary, unless of course one is using the Book of Common Prayer readings! Overall, Sunday by Sunday, the common lectionary is a symbol of unity. All around the world in the Anglican Communion, in the Methodist Church, in the Roman Catholic church, Christians everywhere are, that day, thinking about and reflecting upon the same passages of Scripture common to us all. I find it a very powerful reminder that I belong to a much larger community of faith.

We will know from our own experience that sometimes we are engaged with a reading and sometimes not. The process of reading is an active one depending on both reader and listener. If the reader has prepared well and understands what they are reading, then that will come across to the listener and allow us to engage more readily. For example, reading the epistle as one might read a letter aloud to a group of family and friends will come across more than reading it as prose in a rather boring book. Equally, it is for the congregation to be truly attentive and to listen as though it were a long-awaited letter from a very dear but distant friend. It's a two-way process. I'm sure we all know those readers that are easy to be attentive to and those with whom we struggle.

- The **sermon** follows on from the readings and is the word of God interpreted and developed for us in a way that helps us to relate God's story to our story, to our own lives here and now and to the life of the world. The preacher may say a prayer and we too might pray that we will hear and receive God's word, a word to understand, to ponder and to act upon; a word that brings us to know ourselves better before God and to hear what God might be calling us to do and to be for others. We may not recall what we've heard a day later, but my hope is that somehow we absorb the message and the thoughts that are expressed and they become part of us. It may be a vain hope but I hope all my efforts don't go entirely to waste! Sometimes it feels like a sermon is especially directed to you, as if the preacher knew what is going on in your heart and soul. That is the Holy Spirit at work and the time when we do well to pay most attention. ***I wonder if you've ever felt that way about a sermon and what, if anything, came of it?...***
- We then stand together to make a declaration of our faith in the words of a **Creed**. This is normally the Nicene Creed at a Sunday Eucharist, but it may from time to time be another affirmation of faith. Most of us don't fully understand or necessarily literally believe all that we say in the Creeds but they were carefully formulated and agreed in the early centuries of the Church as statements of the commonality of our faith and core beliefs. They are part of the church's tradition on which our common faith is built, but they can certainly need unpacking.

The statements in the creeds might be compared to an heraldic shield where each emblem is a symbol with an underlying meaning. We might not understand the symbolism of the animals and their postures, or plants or birds that we see on shields, but they are a kind of shorthand that tell their own story. The Creeds remind us, week by week, of the shorthand essentials of the church's faith.

- After the Creed we have the **Prayers of Intercession** where we bring our concerns for the needs of the church and the world to God. This is not the place to be praying for ourselves, or hearing another sermon or giving God a shopping list or telling God what is on the news! Sometimes they can be more effective if the intercessor gives space for the congregation to pray silently, for example, for a particular place in the world which is of most concern to them or a friend or relative who is ill or suffering in some way. This helps us, the congregation to engage in the prayers for ourselves rather than only listen to the prayers read by another. Apart from how God responds to our pleas, a valuable outcome of the Prayers of Intercession is that we may well be moved to reflect on how we can respond to the needs of those for whom we pray. The Prayers of Intercession can change us and move our hearts and minds to share God's love in our lives. Karl Barth, a famous Swiss theologian in the first half of the 20th Century wrote that, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." ***Pause for a moment to reflect on how you relate to that statement***

The service then moves from The Liturgy of the Word into ***The Liturgy of the Sacrament***

- the **Peace** marks the transition for Anglicans between Word and Sacrament. It can be in different places in the service. Roman Catholics have it at the point just before receiving the sacrament. It could also be at the start or the end of the service. The important thing to say about the Peace is that it is not about saying hello to each other. We are sharing the Peace of Christ that he gave to his disciples. Giving and receiving the Peace is far bigger than what we may or may not feel for the person with whom we share. It is a sign that God calls us all together as one body to share and live the life of Christ. Even if we don't particularly care for someone and find them difficult, the Peace reminds us that they too are loved by God, and they may think the same about us.
- After the Peace we have the **Offertory hymn** where we bring ourselves and our offerings in word and deed before the Lord's table. In some places, and I think for example of the Franciscan Friary at Hillfield just over the border in Dorset, this is the time where the congregation get up from their pews or benches and gather around the altar in a circle for the Eucharistic Prayer. That is not practicable in most churches but the dynamic of moving our attention away from lectern and pulpit and towards the altar is something to think about.
- The president or a liturgical Deacon **Prepares the Table**. This often goes on in the background unnoticed by the congregation as they sing a hymn. Laying the table is a very practical act, but God is in all things and there are prayers, so called silent prayers, the priest says, such as over the wine and the water, that we may come to share in Christ's divinity as he humbled himself to share in our humanity. When the hymn has ended, we may feel like onlookers waiting for the action to start, but this is a space where we too can pray. We bring ourselves and our gifts to place them on that table where we, like the bread and the wine, might be blessed, transformed, and used in Christ's service.

- The President **Takes the Bread and Wine**, that is lifts the patten and the chalice from the altar reminding us that Christ took the bread and the wine before blessing them and transforming these very ordinary gifts into the bread of life and the cup of salvation. There are a number of options for the President to choose from for the **Eucharistic Prayer** and with different prefaces or introductions for each liturgical season. I don't think I'm alone though in finding it hard as a member of the congregation to attend to all that is said at this point. I find it easier and more engaging to watch what is happening. I do notice though that so many have heads down in private prayer and devotion or eyes on their books during this prayer. We might participate more fully by having eyes and hearts lifted to the drama being played out before us, afresh each time we share it. The word, Eucharist, comes from the Greek word **to thank** and we all participate in and contribute to this corporate and personal chorus of thanksgiving of all that God has done for us in Christ. ***Consider where you are during this Eucharistic Prayer, reimagining the last supper or with the priest at the altar or somewhere else....?***
- We then say the **Lord's Prayer**, the core of all our praying, which contains all possible petitions. We are going to think about the Lord's Prayer more specifically throughout Holy Week. Suffice to say here that it is a place where the president, and we too, can open not just our mouths but our hands and hearts in an act both of supplication and of receiving God's blessings. Holding our hands open is another way of using our body in prayer.
- The President then **Breaks the Bread** before we say or sing the **Agnus Dei**. When the risen Christ on the day of resurrection broke the bread before the disciples at the supper in Emmaus, the scales were lifted from their eyes and they recognised who had been with them on the road from Jerusalem. Breaking the bread reminds us of the suffering of Christ for us all. In the Agnus Dei we ask the suffering lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. Christ gave his all and all is redeemed in the giving. We pray that God may show mercy not only for our individual sins, but that God has compassion and pity on the sin of the whole world. It is a bit like saying the grace before meals, that God may make us thankful for all we are about to receive.

- We come to what many regard as the climax, the point of the whole service, the **Giving of Communion**. We may have spent the previous 40 mins or so with wandering hearts and minds but, as we approach the sacred gifts before us we know our destination. We may have strayed, but now we come home to share in the heavenly feast. There are different words we might use of this moment – some receive communion, or take communion, or make their communion. ***The words, ‘receive’, ‘take’, ‘make’, may reflect something of how we relate to God and we might reflect on our own response, how we refer to this giving of Communion and what it means for us ...***

We might reflect too on where our hearts and minds are as we return to our pews. For some it can be an idle time, even of talking quietly to neighbour, as they wait for everyone else, but it can be a precious time of silence and space for personal prayer, in devotion and with humble thanks for all we have been given. We have not so much eaten bread and wine that we absorb into our bodies, but have offered ourselves to be taken into, absorbed into, and become part of Christ’s body. In the silence we rest in God’s presence with and within us and we in Christ, as we have been fed and transformed by Christ’s divine life, ready to be a sign of God’s presence in the world.

- The **Prayer after Communion** said by the president changes week by week in relation to the season and the lectionary and, like the Collect, is one of those prayers that can pass us by unheeded unless we are attentive. Yet there is a wealth of riches in them to inspire us in our journey back into the world. We then say together one of two prayers. Either ‘Almighty God we thank you for feeding us...’ or ‘Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home.....’ I find the second more poetic and affective. I think it also pays to learn and to know these and other prayers off by heart, because I think we are more aware of what we are praying than when merely reading the words off the page.

The service ends with the fourth and last section of our Eucharistic service, ***The Dismissal***

- We sing a final Hymn that sends us out into the world refreshed and renewed in God's service,
- We hear God's Blessing upon us, and
- We are sent out with the words of Dismissal to 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord'.

Then what do we do? Instead of putting on our coats and going out as directed, we sit back down again for some last private prayer. It always slightly amuses me that the words never match our actions at this point. And even then, we don't go, but might gather for refreshments. We need that time together and it reflects the adage I gave earlier on, to speak to God before the service, to listen to God speaking to us during the service and to speak to each other after the service. Maybe it's the words of the Dismissal that need to change.

This has been a longish talk, and I have deliberately steered around the hurdle of trying to objectify what we think happens to the consecrated bread and wine. It is enough to say here that the Eucharist is a transformative process that takes us, re-forms us and leads us back out into the world to share the food we have been given.