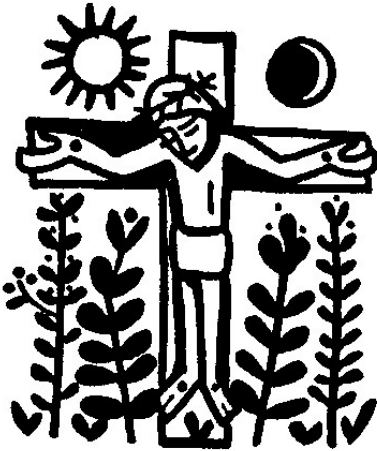


ST ANNE'S CHURCH, WANDSWORTH

COMMENTARY ON THE MASS



This service goes by many names. Some call it the Lord's Supper because Jesus is the real host and is present with us. Others call it Holy Communion because of the theme of sharing and oneness together. Our church notice board calls it the Mass, a name which grew up in early centuries around the Dismissal at the end with its emphasis on us going out into the world with God's blessing. Our service books call it the Eucharist, which means thanksgiving. We come here to give thanks to God. The blessing of bread and wine was originally a meal grace at which the host gave thanks to God for all his blessings. Jesus would have done that daily with his disciples. At the Last Supper he commanded them to do it in memory of him. And we fulfil that command still, especially on Sundays, the first day of the week, when Jesus rose from the dead, and we celebrate his risen life among us.

The service is not something the priest does alone. It is something that the whole church, the whole congregation, does together, entrusting the leadership to the priest.

Many of the Church's customs are purely practical. Some actions and objects are chosen for their symbolic resonance, in others the symbolism has developed around the actions which were originally practical. There is nothing timeless or unchanging in them. They vary from church to church, and in the same church from year to year, decade to decade and century

to century. What is continuous is our unchanging devotion to our Lord and our desire to fulfil his command, to do this in remembrance of him.

THE GATHERING

The first part of the service is called the Gathering, because it recognises that we cannot just rush into church and go into top gear worship! We need to prepare ourselves and collect ourselves together. And so we ask God to cleanse our hearts in the prayer of preparation, we confess our sins, and collect together our thoughts in the Collect, or Prayer for the day.

The Confession and Absolution

Anglicans believe that Christians can confess their sins and be forgiven directly by God, but that it is important for the community of faith to remember the importance of confession and forgiveness and to practise it by asking for God's forgiveness in public and as members of a community.



Her many sins are forgiven because of her great love.

The Church of England also believes that bishops and priests have been empowered to declare absolution (God's forgiveness) to those who are penitent. People are encouraged to have something specific in their minds when they say the confession. Many find it helpful to make a private confession to a priest. It is not required. But all Christians are commanded by God regularly to

examine their conscience, ask for forgiveness of their own sins, most importantly to forgive others, and to try their best to live a life of justice and mercy.

Glory to God (“Gloria in Excelsis”)

The opening words of this song echo the angels at Bethlehem, announcing that God is now born a human child and earth is joined with heaven. And so we praise God at the beginning of this service in which we celebrate Christ’s presence with us.

The Collect

The Collect is a different prayer for each Sunday or Holy Day, and is meant to ‘collect’ or gather up our prayers in one as we come before God our Father.

LITURGY OF THE WORD

The word “Liturgy” means “service”. The Liturgy of the Word is a time when God serves us with his riches. We listen to readings from scripture, not only to learn about God, but by celebrating the story of his love towards his people down the ages. Often the readings are familiar; sometimes they are obscure. But we should keep our ears open to what God has to say to us here and now.

Usually we have three readings: from the Old, from the New Testament, and finally a reading from the Gospels. The Gospel has always been treated with special honour as speaking of Christ himself and is seen as a symbol of the presence of Christ the Word of God among us, which is why it is read in the middle of the congregation. So at the beginning of the service the Gospel Book was carried in with the cross and lights. We stand to hear the reading and the book is censed with incense. We honour through the Gospel Christ present with us.

The Sermon

The sermon is meant to apply in some way the message of God in the Bible to the present day. This may happen in very many ways or styles.

The Creed

The word “Creed” comes from the Latin, “Credo”: “I believe” and is a corporate statement of the Church’s belief and trust in God. It is bigger and different from a personal statement of faith. And so

the Creed we use on Sundays does not emphasise what “I believe” myself but the common heritage of what “we believe.” Some things we ourselves might like to say about God are not included; phrases that are there we might find strange. But the Creeds are very much part of the Christian heritage, important summaries of our conviction that God was revealed in Jesus Christ. Creeds originally used just when people baptised, and we use a briefer creed at baptisms, the so-called Apostles’ Creed. Our ordinary Sunday Creed is called the Nicene Creed because it is based on one adopted at the Council of Nicaea in 325AD.

The Prayers

The Prayers are, like the sermon, a space for bringing the “here and now” before God. They are mainly Prayers of Intercession, that is, praying for others. While we naturally come to God with a huge list of our own needs and cares, we should also think of the needs of others.

LITURGY OF THE SACRAMENT

We now come to the Liturgy of the Sacrament. A Sacrament is traditionally described as an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”. In an action and in ordinary objects God communicates to us his love and grace.

The two greatest Sacraments are baptism, in which, by washing with water, we are adopted as God’s children, filled with his Holy Spirit and granted the forgiveness of our sins, and this service, the Eucharist, in which we feed on Christ in bread and wine. Traditionally we speak of seven sacraments: the others are Confirmation, in which we affirm our baptism and are strengthened for the Christian life by prayer and the Holy Spirit; Marriage, in which our love is blessed by God’s love; Penance, in which we make a special confession of our sins to a priest who pronounces God’s forgiveness; Anointing, in which in times of illness – and not just at the time of death! - we receive God’s blessing and grace; and Holy Orders in which bishops, priests and deacons are ordained to lead Christ’s Church and administer his sacraments.



Doing what Christ did

The Breaking of the Bread has been part of Christian worship ever since the Last Supper in which Christ commanded his disciples to “Do this in remembrance of me”. On the first Easter Day, we hear in St Luke’s Gospel how a stranger joined two disciples on their way to the village of Emmaus. Later when he was eating with them, he took bread,

blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then they recognised Jesus and he vanished from their sight. They rushed back to Jerusalem and told the other disciples how Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. We share this same encounter with Christ today.

The Peace

The Peace is an act of preparation for this most holy part of the service which we approach in unity and love. In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ told us that if we came to the altar and remembered that a fellow Christian held some grudge against us, we must first make our peace with them and only then come to the altar, so that our prayer is not defiled by discord or rivalry.

The present custom of shaking hands with people came from the Church of South India in the 1940s, where they wanted to make clear (in a country with an ancient caste system) that in Christianity there are literally no untouchables.

The Offertory

The Offertory is when we offer ourselves and our gifts to God. We only offer what he has already given us – bread and wine made from the natural foods of wheat and grapes. These are poor gifts which he enriches by returning them to us as the Body of Blood of his Son.



The collection of money serves to enable the work of the Church, but it is most importantly a symbol of our offering of our selves and lives in God’s service.

Sometimes we use ordinary bread, but often special wafers of unleavened bread. These are made of wheat flour and water without yeast, and are a reminder of the Passover season at which Christ died for us. In Jewish custom only unleavened bread was eaten at Passover. By ancient custom the wine is mixed with a little water. This was originally the standard way of drinking wine, and often happens today in Mediterranean countries. But the mixing of water and wine has taken on a symbolic role, expressed in the priest's prayer: "By the mixture of this water and wine may we share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity".

The Eucharistic Prayer

The Eucharistic prayer means a prayer of thanksgiving. Everything in this long prayer is in the context of giving thanks to God.

We lift our hearts and minds to God, and join in the heavenly hymn sung by the angels: Holy holy holy...

God's gifts to us are recounted, and the prayer includes the whole of salvation's story from the creation, God's relationship with Israel, his love for us in the Church today and the fulfilment of his kingdom in the future. Of course the whole story is focussed on his mercy and love in giving us Jesus his Son.

Christ's love for us and obedience to the Father are focussed in the account of his Last Supper, and we fulfil his command to eat and drink in memory of him.

We pray that the bread and wine may be consecrated (made holy) as Christ's Body and Blood, so that we may receive his life-giving power and know his presence with us, and we pray for the whole world that it may be perfected according to God's will.

Some people find the language of eating the Body of Christ and drinking his Blood difficult. It is the language Jesus himself gave us at the Last Supper and implies the most close and intimate relation with him. He gives himself totally to us.

And St Paul speaks of us, the Church, being the Body of Christ. And so the ordinary bread of life is used by God to become the bread of eternal life. Human beings are transformed into the

likeness of Christ. The bread and wine become the sacramental Body and Blood of Christ so that the Christian community may become more truly what it already is, the Body of Christ.

The Lord's Prayer

Our greatest privilege as Christians is to call God our Father; we do so in the presence of Christ our brother.

Breaking the bread and Communion

Breaking the bread was originally purely practical for sharing it together, but even in St Paul's day it gained symbolic significance: "We who are many are one body because we all share in the one loaf of bread". It is in the one bread and one cup of wine that we realise our identity together as Christians – hence this moment is spoken of as communion.



At this point Jesus, present sacramentally in bread and wine, is spoken of as the Lamb of God. Narrative ceases and the language of poetry takes over: the Passover lamb who was sacrificed for us, and also Christ represented as the lamb in the Book of Revelation, glorified and victorious.

We come forward and receive the consecrated bread and wine: the body and blood of Christ, and like the disciples at Emmaus on the first Easter Day we meet Christ in the breaking of the bread. We pray that we may know his presence with us in our lives, and be filled with the life of his resurrection.

Final prayers

Giving thanks for this service we pray for God's grace and presence in the week ahead, and for his blessing on us as we seek to do his will and live his life in the world.