



An Instructed Eucharist, Part I
Church of the Holy Communion, Memphis Tennessee
November 8, 2009

AFTER THE PRELUDE, BEFORE THE OPENING HYMN:

This morning, we are presenting what is known as an “Instructed Eucharist.” Several parts of our service will be introduced by brief commentaries; including a bit of history, theology, and the function of a portion of our liturgy. Although the flow of our service will be supplemented by several opportunities for instruction, please remember that all we do is worship as respond to God with our spirits and our minds. If you have questions about our liturgical practices which emerge from today’s commentary, you are invited to use the Episcodoodle cards in the pew racks to write your questions and place them in the offering plate. We hope that this experience will enrich your understanding of liturgy and deepen your experience of worship.

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Our worship follows the ancient Jewish practice of gathering weekly on the last day of the week, the Sabbath---though from the earliest times, Christians met weekly for worship on the day of Jesus’ resurrection, the first day of the week. When we gather for worship in the Episcopal Church, we come together for **liturgy**. The word “liturgy” is derived from Greek words that literally mean “work of the people.” Liturgy is not something the priest does to the congregation, but rather something the entire body of worshipers do together . And it is work. Liturgy is the work of remembering and giving thanks to God for God’s work of creation, and redemption.

In other traditions, our Sunday liturgy has been called The Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, the Mass, and the Divine Liturgy. We call it Holy Eucharist. “Eucharist” comes from a Greek word meaning “thanksgiving.” It is one of the oldest names for this service and describes what we are doing: offering thanks for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. In a way the Eucharist is like a family gathered around a table for Thanksgiving dinner. We gather around the altar to hear our sacred stories, share our concerns and hopes, sorrows and joys, to celebrate our blessings, and to share a common meal that nourishes us with God’s love.

This liturgy is like a two act drama in which we all participate. The first act is the “Liturgy of the Word.” In this part, we recall our salvation history through hearing and responding to Scripture. The second act is the “Liturgy of the Table” which focuses on the thanksgiving meal that nourishes us with the grace needed to live our faith. Today we will focus on the first act of this divine drama.

Our liturgy begins with what is known as an Entrance Rite. It really begins as each of us gets up in the morning and prepares to come together for worship. The procession begins when we start our trip to church. Once here, we are invited to enter quietly for a moment of private prayer while respecting others’ need for moment to collect themselves as we prepare to hear and receive God’s Word. The focus of the procession then shifts to a formal procession of the choir and ministers of the liturgy who have particular leadership functions in our liturgy. Our procession

serves not only to get these leaders in place, but, as they follow the processional cross down the aisle toward the altar, their movement also symbolizes for us that the Christian life is a common spiritual journey that we share with other pilgrims. The gospel book is given an honored place in the procession and is carried prominently to symbolize the importance of the Word for a pilgrim people who follow the way of the cross. Our singing helps to move us from our individual thoughts toward our focus of our shared, Common Prayer.

PROCESSION & HYMN

Following our procession, the priest welcomes worshipers and invites us deeper into worship through an opening acclamation of praise that extols God and calls us all to our common work of worship. Again, it reminds us that it is the whole community engaged in worship that celebrates the Eucharist.

The priest then offers on behalf of the community a prayer called the “Collect for Purity” that comes from medieval liturgies. It originated as a prayer the priest said privately before worship, but the second Book of Common Prayer in 1552 moved it into the public domain of our liturgy. It reminds us that true worship begins when we drop our masks before God and open our hearts to his indwelling Spirit. The congregational “amen” at the end of prayers led by the celebrant is the liturgical avenue through which we affirm that it is our collective prayer, not just that of the celebrant—“amen” literally means “so be it.”

WELCOME

ACCLAMATION

COLLECT FOR PURITY

Again, the Entrance Rite opens us to God’s presence. We are invited into deeper praise as our attention is focused on God and not ourselves. The rubrics (or directions in *italics* in the Prayer Book) designate a song of praise is sung at this point. The “Gloria in Excelsis” (Latin, for “Glory to God in the Highest”) was the song the shepherds heard the angels sing as they proclaimed the birth of Christ. It has been used in western liturgies in a variety of forms for over a thousand years. The Gloria is not used in Lent when a more penitential song is used such as the Kyrie, (a Greek word meaning “Lord have mercy.”).

The Collect for the Day which follows is a different prayer each Sunday that summarizes a part of the Christian story relevant to the season. As the term “collect” suggests, its purpose is to collect or gather up the themes of the day. This prayer does for liturgy what a magnifying glass does with the rays of the sun: focusing them in one succinct prayer offered to God. Many of our collects have been used in worship for centuries. It is introduced by a salutation “The Lord be with you.” This greeting comes from the Book of Ruth (2:4) which we will be reading today. The congregation responds by saying, “And also with you.” This reciprocal blessing between priest and people reaffirms the nature of liturgy as a work of all the people. It is also a subtle reminder of the equality of *all Christians* – whether lay or ordained – before God, thereby underscoring the “priesthood of all believers” by virtue of baptism.

GLORIA COLLECT FOR THE DAY

Reading from scripture during worship goes back to ancient Jewish traditions. We see this reflected in Jesus’ practice of attending synagogue and reading from the scrolls of scriptures. This tradition took hold in Christian communities, where Jewish scripture was read, as well as the letters of Paul. Over time, a systematic pattern for the readings called a **lectionary** was adopted in the Church. The discipline of the lectionary is important because it serves as a safeguard against the clergy choosing only those portions of scripture for reading and preaching with which they feel comfortable. Our lectionary runs on a three-year cycle for Sundays and appoints four readings from Holy Scripture for each Sunday service. This means that in an Episcopal Church service, you’ll hear more scripture read than you will in many other churches.

The first lesson normally comes from the Hebrew Scriptures. A psalm follows, which may be either read, sung, or chanted. After the Psalm, a lesson from a New Testament letter or writing is read. [It is omitted at the 9:00 service due to time limitations.] The Gospel lesson culminates the reading of scripture. In our liturgy, the readings from the Old Testament and the New Testament epistle belong to the ministry of laypersons, while the reading from the gospel is designated as a ministry of clergy (particularly deacons). At the end of the readings, we respond, “Thanks be to God” because we are grateful for God speaking to us through the words of scripture.

OLD TESTAMENT READING PSALM NEW TESTAMENT READING (ONLY AT 11:15)

People have stood to hear the reading of the Gospel since the 4th Century. The gospel is processed down the aisle into the midst of the congregation by a deacon or priest, often accompanied by a crucifer and torchbearers. During this movement, we sing a simple “alleluia” chant that, in one form or another, has heralded the reading of the good news for centuries. The procession symbolizes the mystery of the Incarnation: God’s coming among us in the world as the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. [The torches carried by acolytes symbolize the illumination of the gospel for our lives.] The congregation turns to face the gospel book in the midst of the congregation both to focus our attention on the centrality of the gospel reading and as a reminder that it is the gospel that turns our lives around. The sermon or homily is a creative human response to the Word we have heard and a way to apply it to our lives. The preacher’s job is to form a bridge between the world of the scripture text(s) and our world so that we can hear the living Word of God in what might otherwise be the dead letter of an ancient text.

ALLELUIA AND VERSE
GOSPEL READING
HOMILY

After the sermon, the congregation stands to affirm the Faith of the Church using the words of the **Nicene Creed**. The word “creed” comes from the Latin word “to believe.” The Nicene Creed is a conciliar creed, formulated during the 4th century by two Ecumenical Councils taking place in Nicaea in 325 & in Constantinople in 381. It was developed to clarify the fundamental beliefs of the Church. Each of the three portions of the Creed refers to one of the persons of the Holy Trinity. We stand for this corporate recitation, thus symbolizing that we stand up for our faith as one body.

Another basic response to the Word of God is prayer. As we open ourselves to the presence of God, we are invited into a dialogue with our Lord. As early as the 2nd Century, the prayers of the gathered Christian community followed the scripture readings and the sermon. The Prayer Book offers the discipline of specifying that prayer is to be offered for several areas of concern so that our prayers not be too narrow or self-absorbed. These include prayers for the mission and members of the Universal Church, for the nation and all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the concerns of the local community, for persons who suffer or experience any form of trouble, and for the dead. The Book of Common Prayer offers six different forms of the prayers, and permission is given to write other versions as occasions warrant. Opportunity is given for members of the congregation to offer their own intercessions. This may be done silently or aloud. Parishioners are invited to stand or kneel for the prayers. The ancient posture of Christian prayer followed the practice of the Jewish synagogue in standing for prayer. Kneeling was introduced later in medieval times as a more penitential practice. The Prayer Book suggests both are acceptable postures of a heart turned toward God.

**NICENE CREED
PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

At the conclusion of the Prayers, we offer up our need for forgiveness and renewal through the Prayer of Confession. This is an opportunity to let go of that which binds us or prevents us from fully receiving God's grace and living in the power of His Spirit. In the Episcopal Church, confession takes place both in the context of public worship and in a private confessional setting with priests. Literally meaning "to loosen," to absolve means "to set or pronounce free." Just as the confession reminds us of our own brokenness, so the declaration of God's absolution reminds us of who God is as our forgiving Father. Following our corporate prayer, the priest stands and pronounces God's forgiveness, making the sign of the cross to point us to the reconciling power of the cross of Christ to bring new life and hope. Some worshipers may make the sign of the cross on their bodies, tracing the breadth of God's love for them in their lives. Again, the congregation's response of "amen" is their acknowledgment and reception of the grace offered by God.

Following the Absolution, the congregation rises as those reconciled with God. The priest then proclaims "The Peace of the Lord be with you." It is this Peace which the risen Christ offered his disciples following his resurrection. The priest's greeting is an invitation to take that spirit of reconciliation and share it with others. Worshipers may turn to one another and extend the Peace to one another. The Peace was part of the earliest Christian liturgies, though worshipers in ancient times customarily exchanged a kiss of peace instead of handshake or hug. The sharing of the Peace is not merely a social time of greeting, it is a profoundly spiritual action that is taking place. In sharing the Peace, we are acting out what we are called to do in our daily lives.....to convey the Peace of God to a conflicted world.

**THE CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION
THE PEACE**

At this point we have heard the Word of God and have been given the opportunity to respond. We are now ready to approach God's altar at peace with God and with one another.....this is truly an offering that is pleasing in God's sight.

Our instruction continues next Sunday as we reflect on the 2nd part of our liturgy. If you have questions about our liturgical practices that have emerged from today's commentary, you are invited to use the Episcodoodle cards in the pew racks to write your questions and place them in the offering plate. Our goal is to help us better appreciate the nature of our common prayer, so it is even more meaningful for all. May the words we have heard bear fruit in our lives.