

The Eucharist in an Anglican Perspective

In my parish we meet Sunday by Sunday as a community to share in the Eucharist. It is a fundamental part of our identity as Anglicans as well as something that we share with many other Christians who also place the Eucharist at the centre of their communal life. But what is the Eucharist? Literally the word means thanksgiving, so we could say simply that, but it wouldn't be a very informative reply. As we experience it in our worship life, we can say that the Eucharist is a liturgy (more about that later) but more importantly it is a sacrament.

The wonderful thing about sacraments is that they work both physically and spiritually at the same time. So baptism, for instance, is both a symbolic cleansing with water and an act of spiritual renewal that orients the person being baptised toward the wholeness that comes from right relationship with God, one's neighbours, and oneself. A sacrament is actually a vehicle, or channel, for the Holy Spirit who comes into our hearts to heal and empower.

In the case of the Eucharist, we take part in a meal that symbolises our fellowship and communion with our brothers and sisters within our own parish community and also with all our brothers and sisters in the faith, living and dead. But it is also an act of spiritual transformation that makes us part of a gathered community, what St Paul calls 'the one Body' and empowers us to act in God's world in ways that will help to bring about the Kingdom that Jesus preached.

When we share the bread and wine of the Eucharist we are intentionally reaffirming that we are part of that gathered community of faith and its work for God's Kingdom. It is a community that exists across barriers of space and time, for the unity of the one Body

transcends both to create bonds with our fellow Christians in many different places as well as with our forebearers in faith. As a sacrament of unity and fellowship it like baptism is a vehicle for the Spirit who fills us with love for God and our neighbours.

The way that all this happens is through the Eucharistic liturgy, our principal worship service as Anglicans. Liturgy is structured worship, through which we are able to give form to our deepest beliefs and our Easter hope in prayer. The earliest Christian liturgies still show links with Jewish liturgies and prayers; the Eucharistic liturgy, for example, has links with the Jewish Passover service.

In most Anglican parishes in Canada the liturgy that we're most familiar with is taken from the BAS (Book of Alternative Services) and its ongoing additions and refinements, part of a liturgical reform movement that has been ongoing now for decades. The idea behind this movement is to create liturgies that reflect both the richness of Christian practice over the centuries and the energy and spirituality of the early Christians. After a rocky start, the BAS has proved to be popular with many Anglican congregations, who use it at all or most of their services.

The basic structure of the Eucharistic liturgy is simple. The central part is the actual Eucharistic prayer, but the celebration of the Eucharist proper is preceded by two introductory sections: the Gathering of the Community and the Proclamation of the Word. The Gathering of the Community works in two ways. On a practical level its prayers and dialogue between the presider and the congregation give us an opportunity to catch our breath, so to speak, and shift gears from our everyday lives to our community life as the People of God. Through the collect of the day it also provides the theme for the day's worship. The Proclamation of the Word lays a foundation for the rest of the service: in this part of the service we listen to the readings from the Bible, two from the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) and two from the New Testament. The readings are accompanied by a

sermon, or homily, in which (theoretically at least) the preacher interprets the texts and relates them to the community's life and mission. These introductory sections conclude with the exchange of the peace, which completes not only the Proclamation of the Word but also our gathering as a community.

The celebration of the Eucharist is the heart of the Eucharist service, and the heart of that celebration is the Eucharistic prayer. The celebration begins with the offertory in which we offer back to God the gifts which God has given us, represented by the bread and wine that will be used in the Eucharistic meal and also by our almsgiving. The offertory is important because it is the beginning of what theologians call the four-fold act, our reenactment of what Jesus did at the Last Supper and also at the Feeding of the Five Thousand that helped to give those meals their special symbolic importance.

The four-fold act is: Take, Bless, Break, Give. In the offertory and the preparation of the gifts that follows the clergy take the bread and wine offered by members of the congregation on behalf of all of us and put it on the altar. In the course of the service, we will carry out the other three aspects of Jesus' action as well. We need to recognise not just the importance of the action and its sacramental symbolism, but also the importance of the actors: the Eucharist is not something carried out by a priest while the rest of us watch devoutly from a pew or while standing near the altar. It is the offering of all of us, over which the priest presides. But we all have an active part to play. The way in which the offertory and presentation unfold emphasises those parts.

With the offertory and preparation over, the Eucharistic prayer begins. The BAS provided six Eucharistic prayers, of which we regularly use three in my parish church. There are also new Eucharistic prayers, written since the BAS was published and made available to parishes to try, and from time to time we use these as well. Most commonly we use Eucharistic Prayer 3 from the BAS, and I will use that for the analysis below.

According to scholars of liturgy the Eucharistic prayer falls into ten parts (some of them very short!) Here's a breakdown of Eucharistic Prayer 3 showing all the parts:

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| <p>1. Opening Dialogue This is also known as the Sursum Corda (Latin for 'Lift up your hearts')</p> | <p><i>Celebrant</i> The Lord be with you. <i>People</i> And also with you. <i>Celebrant</i> Lift up your hearts. <i>People</i> We lift them to the Lord. <i>Celebrant</i> Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. <i>People</i> It is right to give our thanks and praise.</p> |
| <p>2. Preface: this varies according to the liturgical season (with choices for the season of so-called 'ordinary time' after Pentecost). Since the Eucharist is a thanksgiving prayer (as its name implies), the Preface often includes reference to God's blessings to us. It ends with the invitation to join angels and archangels and all those who have gone before us in the Sanctus hymn.</p> | |
| <p>3. Sanctus Hymn</p> | <p><i>All Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.</i></p> |
| <p>4. Post-Sanctus This is the opening of the Eucharistic prayer proper, giving thanks to God for God's saving work in God's covenant and in the Incarnation. It positions Jesus' action at the Last Supper properly within the</p> | <p><i>Celebrant</i> We give thanks to you, Lord our God, for the goodness and love you have made known to us in creation; in calling Israel to be your people;</p> |

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| <p>history of God's interaction with humanity</p> | <p>in your Word spoken through the prophets; and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus your Son.</p> <p>For in these last days you sent him to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Saviour and Redeemer of the world. In him, you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to stand before you. In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.</p> |
| <p>5. Institution Narrative We repeat the story of Jesus' blessing of bread and wine at the Last Supper, recalling his own words as they have been recorded for us in our tradition. This narrative also recalls for us the four-fold act of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving.</p> | <p>On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, a death he freely accepted, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: this is my body which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me." After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me."</p> |
| <p>6. Anamnesis This section takes its name from a Greek word that means remembrance. The New Testament accounts of the Last</p> | <p>Therefore, Father, according to his command, <i>All we remember his death,</i> <i>we proclaim his resurrection,</i></p> |

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| <p>Supper (and thus the Institution Narrative in the Eucharistic Prayer) here draw on the Passover rite that underlies them. Just as participants in the Passover meal affirm that their experience is as though they had been present at the events of the Exodus, in which God delivered their forebearers from slavery in Egypt, so here we in obedience to Jesus' command for remembrance affirm our active remembrance of his death, participation in his resurrection life, and our future hope for his glorious return. Note that in this prayer, the anamnesis is the prayer of the entire gathered community, not said by the priest alone.</p> | <p>we await his coming in glory;</p> |
| <p>7. Offering</p> | <p><i>Celebrant</i> and we offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to you, Lord of all; presenting to you, from your creation, this bread and this wine.</p> |
| <p>8. Invocation (epiclesis) 'Epiclesis' is Greek for 'calling upon'. Here we call upon God to send down the Holy Spirit to transform the bread and wine as Jesus said into his spiritual body and blood. Thereby our ritual meal becomes a sacrament, a means of grace that can make us one with Jesus in his sacrifice and provide us with the blessing of the Spirit ourselves. It is because of the work of the Spirit that we say the bread and wine of the Eucharist are the body and blood of Christ. As Anglicans, we affirm that this means that Jesus is really present for us in the</p> | <p>We pray you, gracious God, to send your Holy Spirit upon these gifts, that they may be the sacrament of the body of Christ and his blood of the new covenant. Unite us to your Son in his sacrifice, that we, made acceptable in him, may be sanctified by the Holy Spirit.</p> |

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| <p>Eucharistic meal whenever we share it, joining us to himself as parts of his Body on earth.</p> | |
| <p>9. Intercession In Prayer 3 the intercessions are very short, which is appropriate if we have made intercession for the church, the world, ourselves, and one another earlier in the service. In some of the other Eucharistic prayers, a full set of intercessions are provided at this point.</p> | <p>In the fullness of time, reconcile all things in Christ, and make them new, and bring us to that city of light where you dwell with all your sons and daughters; through Jesus Christ our Lord, the firstborn of all creation, the head of the Church, and the author of our salvation;</p> |
| <p>10. Doxology</p> | <p>by whom, and with whom, and in whom, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory are yours, almighty Father, now and for ever. <i>People Amen.</i></p> |

In this prayer we carry out the second part of the Eucharistic action that we perform in remembrance of Jesus's actions at the Last Supper and the Feeding to the Five Thousand. We bless the bread. Part three, the breaking of the bread, follows the saying of the Lord's Prayer (right after the Eucharistic prayer) and comes immediately before the fourth and final action, when the presider and the other communion ministers give the bread and wine to the people.

In these prayers we participate in this great thanksgiving, we share the sacramental bread and wine, and are incorporated into Jesus' actions at the Last Supper and into his sacrifice. We are also empowered for service in the world and incorporated into the one Body, Christ's Body. None of this would be possible without the gift of the Holy Spirit, which

makes our worship and actions into a sacrament, a channel of grace for ourselves and God's world.