

Epiphany Lecture 4 – The Holy Eucharist

Last week we went back through the history of the entire Book of Common Prayer. This week we are going to look at the central act of worship of the Episcopal Church – The Holy Eucharist.

It is only since the adoption of the 1979 prayer book that the Eucharist definitively became our central act of worship. This was made clear with the addition of a section in the Prayer Book entitled. In the 1928 book, this section began:

The Order for Holy Communion, the Order for Morning Prayer, the Order for Evening Prayer, and the Litany, as set forth in this Book, are the regular Services appointed for Public Worship in this Church. and shall be used accordingly

In our book this section now begins:

The Holy Eucharist, the principal act of Christian worship on the Lord's Day and other major Feasts, and Daily Morning and Evening Prayer, as set forth in this Book, are the regular services appointed for public worship in this Church.

Since 1979 it has become almost universal that all Episcopal Church's that have access to a priest celebrate the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, each and every Sunday. But that was certainly not the case before hand.

We talked last week about the Liturgical Renewal Movement and the Oxford Movement and how they took root in the United States. By the turn of the last century, different dioceses under the leadership of their bishop's had each adopted a certain approach to worship and churchmanship.

Certain bishops and seminaries had fully embraced the Oxford Movement and had moved their worship toward a much more catholic expression.

This was true at a seminary called Nashotah House and in the dioceses of what became referred to as the Beretta belt, named for a beanie had

priests wore if they were “high church”.

This was in a stretch of dioceses from across Northern Indiana and Chicago through Wisconsin. These dioceses would have been worshipping using the Holy Eucharist from early on. Meanwhile in what were called “coat and tie” dioceses like Virginia, Ohio and Southern Ohio, worship would have focused on Morning Prayer with communion only being offered quarterly or monthly. This was still true in my first church in Columbus Ohio when I began my ministry in 1980.

But today, high church or low church, we all are using the Eucharist as our central act of worship.

Where did this sacrament come from?

Well the first time we hear it described is by St. Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians written around 56 AD:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Nearly these same words are shared by Matthew, Mark and Luke in their Gospels written between 70-90 AD. So the use of the eucharist by Christians dates back to the earliest times. There is a close link between our Eucharist and the Passover feast of Judaism. Most likely Jesus words over the bread and wine were his new revelation through prayer over the unleavened bread and one of the four cups of wine that have been part of the Seder for millennia.

Very early writings sometimes set the Eucharist in the context of an Agape

Meal or Love feast. At these not just bread and wine, but the whole bounty of the table would be blessed and shared in an actual feast, and those in need who couldn't attend would be taken a portion. This still remains a part of our liturgy when we send out a Eucharistic visitor at the end of each service.

Last week I mentioned an ancient worship manual from 140 AD called the Didache that describes a Eucharist with suggested prayers over the cup and bread. Justin Martyr writing in 155 AD describes the Eucharist this way:

And on the day which is called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits.

Then, when the reader has concluded, the president verbally instructs and exhorts us to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray. And as I said before, when we have ended our prayer, bread and wine and water are brought. And the president in like manner offers up prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability, and the people give their assent by saying 'Amen.' And there is a distribution to each and a partaking by everyone of the Eucharist, and to those who are absent a portion is brought by the deacons.

It is a far cry from this folksy description to what became the established prayers of the church in Latin that became the Mass. Also, whereas in these early cases everyone received, by medieval times it was often that only the priests received, with people taking communion only a handful times a year, or even a life time.

These evolving practices – the Eucharist in a language people didn't understand, only clergy receiving communion, led to a very distorted piety around the bread and wine. For example lay people only got bread and not

the wine.

Another example was a worship service called “Benediction” where people didn’t receive bread, but only gazed upon it secured in a beautiful jeweled case called a Monstrance.

So it was this evolution toward exclusion that was one primary impetus for the Reformation. Worshipping in the language of the people and receiving communion regularly with both bread and wine were important new expressions. And many Protestants wanted to move entirely away from the eucharistic theology of the Mass being an actual reenactment of Christ’s sacrifice with “hocus pocus (do you know where that comes from?)” to being a simple memorial.

We of course as Anglicans sought a middle way and a great latitude in Eucharistic theology. And so what that means is that you could be sitting in the Pew next to someone who’s a former Catholic, who has a very, what I would call high view of the presence of Christ in the elements and, and you see how that is part of our worship. Or you can have a very low-church

Protestant view. You are free to be as Protestant as you or you can out Catholic the Catholics if you want to.

Here is a hand out for the next part of our discussion so we can make some comparison.

Remember last week when I said that the American Church based its Prayer Book upon the Scottish Prayer Book rather than the English Book of Common Prayer of 1662? The major difference between the two is found in the Communion service in a special prayer of the Holy Spirit called the Epiclesis.

While in the Roman Catholic Church, the Words of Institution are considered to be the moment of Transubstantiation (when, according to

religious tradition, the eucharistic elements would change from bread and wine into the actual Body and Blood of Christ), the Eastern Orthodox Churches do not hold this belief. Instead, the Epiclesis is believed to be the moment at which this change is completed.

On the sheet are some examples of the Epiclesis. This is an invocation of the Holy Spirit. This isn't in the Book of Common Prayer in England. This is only in the American prayer book and the Scottish prayer book. And this is a point in the service where the priest puts his or her hands over the bread and wine and actually invokes the Holy Spirit upon them. And you'll see three different examples at the bottom of the page from the 1928 prayer book and the right one, we most humbly beseech thee, almighty father to hear us and up they are mighty, goodness vouchsafed to bless and sanctify with I word and Holy Spirit, these thy gifts and creatures of bread and wine, okay, that's where it is and right one and then the 28 per book you'll hear today. 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. The plainest and clearest signifier of the Epiclesis is in our Rite II prayer, see, sanctify these gifts by your Holy Spirit to be the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.

If you believe this meal is just a memorial or if you believe through this liturgy we are actual partakers in the body and blood of Christ, the climax of the service is in the words of the Epiclesis.

Let's now look at some differences in our communion celebration between the 1928 prayer book and the 1979 prayer book.

In the old 1928 prayer book, there was only one Eucharistic prayer, we now have four Eucharistic prayers plus what some people call affectionately Rite III, which is a very informal way that you're allowed to do a communion

service. We have said as Anglicans as we pray, so we believe, so your theology is in what you're praying at the Eucharist.

Let's look first at the 1928 and Rite 1 preface to Communion. Okay, this is like the thesis statement of Holy Communion:

"ALL glory be to thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father, for that thou, of thy tender mercy, didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world; and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to continue, a perpetual memory of that his precious death and sacrifice, until his coming again:

That's the thesis statement of communion under Rite I. God sent Jesus, not as a teacher or to heal people, but to die on the cross for our sins, and then commanded us to continue a memory of that sacrifice until this coming again. Okay?

That's very much atonement theology. It can be seen to imply that Jesus' life didn't matter as much as his death did. And in his death on the cross, He saved us from our sins and all that we are asked to do in return is to remember that with our weekly commemoration.

Okay, now look on the second page under Rite II prayer B. Here's a new thesis statement for the Eucharist.

We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love

which you have made known to us in creation; in the calling

of Israel to be your people; in your Word spoken through the prophets; and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son. For in these last days you sent him to be incarnate from the Virgin Mary, to be the Savior 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.

I've always thought it would be great in the Eucharist if we were all on our knees until that sentence came along, "you have made us worthy to stand before you" and then we all rose at that moment.

There isn't a lot of atonement theology in that mission statement. We are talking about the goodness and love and creation we're honoring our Jewish roots. Through the calling of Israel, we're honoring the prophets. And rather than being atonement based, we're being incarnational based – "and above all, in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your son."

There's a very different theology in the Eucharistic prayers that we have. So what this did in the new prayer book, by offering these alternatives, it gave even more honor and expansiveness to this idea of the via media, that we are a middle way that there are many ways in which people as Christians can be faithful to what God has called us to do.

I think I am going to stop here, though there is so much else we could cover. Let's see what questions you all have, not just from today but from all our sessions.