

St Thomas. 6 June 2021. A teaching eucharist

Celebrating the eucharist goes back to the very earliest church. We hear in Acts how the disciples met together to break bread. The shape of what we do is ancient and we have records and accounts from 1900 years ago about how the early Christians were meeting together to break bread and share wine as Eucharist. The service has a shape. It's in two parts and the first part is the ministry of the word where we hear scripture and listen to a sermon and say our prayers.

1. We gather together as the president greets us. It reminds us (as I reminded you at the very beginning) that we come together in God's presence to worship him and him alone. The greeting can vary with the seasons. At Easter we proclaim Christ is risen...
2. The collect we say here is known as the Collect for Purity and it's odd as collects are said more frequently at the end of the morning or evening prayers. However in the first Book of Common Prayer the priest says the opening Lord's Prayer and the Collect for Purity alone in front of the altar, while the clerks sing the Introit – it forms a preparation for the priest. This has its origins in the practice of the Church in the centuries that went before, where the Eucharist was celebrated following one of the 'Lesser Offices'. During this relatively short service, taking place in the chancel, the priest and altar party left to 'get dressed' – missing the prayers. To make up for this they then said a shortened version of the prayers as they walked in to their places – 'catching up' on what they had missed out by saying the Lord's Prayer and a suitable Collect – often what became the Collect for Purity. Far from being the beginning of the service of communion – the Collect for Purity is the end of what has gone before – it is the end of the preparation, getting ready for communion. It's a nice way to start and the practice has stuck.
3. Confession. We start to get to the meat of the service. As we approach God we should be realising how everything we say and do that doesn't reflect God's perfect love is a failing. We start by saying sorry to God. The priest responds by assuring us of God's forgiveness.

4. The Gloria is a hymn of praise. It goes back at least to the 3rd century. Historically, the Gloria is known as the "Angelic Hymn" because it contains the words sung from the Heavens by the angels on the night of Christ's birth. Luke 2:13 reads: "And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."
5. The collect is a special prayer that sets the scene for the eucharist. Every collect follows a similar pattern. See if you can work out what that pattern is as you hear the collect. The collect is printed on the leaflet for you to take home.
6. We hear the scriptures read to us. We listen and God speaks to us through the words of scripture. There's an interaction between listener (congregation) and the reader and God speaks to us through the scripture.
7. At every eucharist there MUST be a reading from the gospel. We follow a lectionary where someone (or some people) have chosen a diet of scripture for us to hear day by day or week by week. It's a three year cycle in our lectionary so we get some variety and if you attend morning and evening prayer every day and the eucharist regularly, over the course of three years, you'd read or hear a huge part of the bible. Certainly all the important bits!.
8. On good days, God speaks to us through the words of the preacher as well. St Thomas breaks with tradition slightly here as after the sermon we have an anthem. The idea is that having heard the word read to us and the sermon preached, then we have time to think things over or simply relax in God's presence as worship through music is offered.
9. The creed is next. Very simply, it's a weekly reminder of what we believe. CVreed comes from the Latin Credo, "I believe".
10. We come to the prayers of intercession. To intercede means to 'go between' and we ask God for things on behalf of others. There's a set pattern usually. It starts with the world and the church and then moves to our neighbours and the sick and finally to those who have died.

11. In our Anglican Eucharists, the peace is in the middle of the service and joins the ministry of the word with the ministry of the sacrament. Sharing the 'kiss of peace' goes back to the very first eucharists at least 1900 years ago and it's certainly something that the early Christians did. It's not some new fangled thing brought in by the church of England!

12. The offertory is not the offering of money but the offering or bringing to the altar the bread and wine. We are getting ready to celebrate the eucharist and so we bring God's gifts to him. The deacon prepares the altar (Deacon – to serve)

13. The priest ritually washes his or her hands and says a quiet prayer asking that God helps them to make this offering of praise and thanksgiving in the eucharist that follows.

14. And so we come to the Eucharistic prayer. Eucharisto in Greek means 'I give thanks'. That's why the prayer is sometimes called the great prayer of thanksgiving. Sometimes people ask, "What makes a Eucharist a Eucharist?" Which bits are the bits we cannot leave out? Eg Do we have to have the 'words of institution'? (In the same way after supper etc...). Dom Gregory Dix wrote a book called "The shape of the Liturgy" and he argued that a Eucharist must have four elements. We must 'take the bread and wine', we must give thanks, we must break the bread and we must give it. If an ordained priest does this, then it's a eucharist. Take, give thanks, break, give. Follow week by week and you will see that's exactly what happens. And so first the prayer of thanksgiving. It's broken into parts. There's a greeting (The lift up your hearts bit) and there will be lots of thanks and praise. We will be reminded in the words that we do this at the command of our Lord himself, "...who on the night that he was betrayed..." At some point there will be an invocation (special request) for the holy spirit. This invocation has got a fancy name; it's called the epiclesis. There's usually a final prayer for the world and the church and some words of praise to end when priests often raise the bread and wine to remind us how important they are. See if you can spot all these things happening

and I'll keep quiet for a few minutes as this most important part of the service proceeds.

15. The disciples asked Jesus what they should say when they pray. We follow Jesus's teaching and we say the Lord Prayer. There are various versions, but before you get too het up, I'll remind you of a little old lady who came up to me in a previous parish. I'm so glad we didn't use the new fangled version of the Lord's prayer and we used the words that Jesus used. I had to try to explain to her that Jesus almost certainly spoke aramaic and perhaps a little Greek and he certainly didn't use the old English version of the Lords Prayer.

16. The breaking of bread is sometimes called the 'fraction'. We follow ancient practice and break bread together and prepare to share it.

17. The agnus dei is an ancient hymn. The Syrian custom of a chant addressed to the Lamb of God was introduced into the Eucharist by Pope Sergius I (687–701). (The church had been having an argument about whether Jesus should be pictured as a lamb!)

18. We distribute the bread (and normally the wine). We use wafers, but we could use bread. The problem with bread is that the crumbs go everywhere and that's not very dignified or respectful to something that is so special. I'm not going to get carried away with any theology of the eucharist and 'transubstantiation' and 'real presence' What I will say that for those who receive it, God feeds us through that bread and wine in a way that happens nowhere else. I don't really mind much how you see it, but I know how much receiving the sacrament means to so many of you here.

19. After the distribution, the rules say that the elements must be 'reverently consumed'. They are not to be poured down the sink or thrown out to the birds. Cyril of Jerusalem in about 350 ad describes the Bread/Body as more precious than gold or costly gems and admonishes them not to let a crumb of it fall to the ground. At about that time, a 12-year-old boy in Rome, called Tarcisus, was charged with carrying the consecrated bread down the street to some shut-ins. "When a wicked group of young fanatics flung themselves on Tarcisus who was carrying the Eucharist, not wanting to profane the sacrament, He was beaten to

death rather than let the Communion bread fall on the ground. He is buried in the Catacomb of Callixtus

20. We end with a prayer of thanksgiving and a blessing.