

St George's Church



Eucharist
Gathering
Creed

Feeding
Lord's Prayer
Confession
Bread
Greeting
Collect

Absolution
Readings
Intercessions

Offertory
Bible
Peace
Sermon
Homily
Wine
Breaking
Sending Out

A Series of Five Sermons looking at
What's Going On in our Church Services?

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Introduction

It's been a great joy to have newcomers joining us at St George's over the last few years. Some who've joined us have very little previous experience of worshipping in an Anglican Church and a few have come from very different faith backgrounds.

This series of sermons was born of a desire to help our newcomers make some sense of what is going on from week to week and hopefully to offer new insights and something of a refresher to our 'old timers'. I had planned for it to be a series of three sermons, but it quickly became five and could have been more if I hadn't put some limits on it. It's therefore not comprehensive and there are elements missing, the prayer of humble access and the final blessing for example. I had intended to cover the subject over a month or two, but what began in January 2011 was only completed by the October.

The sermons were written purely as sermons and without the intention of them becoming a booklet. I mention that because sermon notes don't always cut and paste easily into a booklet format...this is a long lead up to a confession of poor grammar; my grateful thanks to Alan Pook for trawling through and tidying it up. I'm afraid to say that there is need for a second confession, to the more serious charge of plagiarism! I have quoted often in this series from Timothy Radcliffe's excellent book, *Why Go To Church?*, and being sermon notes, quotes have not been footnoted, nor for that matter have other quotes from *The Eucharist* by Michael Perham and *Celebrating the Eucharist* by Benjamin Gordon-Taylor & Simon Jones; apologies.

Anyway, I hope you find this of value and that it helps to deepen and enrich your worship.

Revd. Paul Cowan
St George the Martyr, Newbury
Christ the King 2011

Sermon 1 – Gathering & Greeting, Collect

What's going on in a church service?

I'm sure you, like me, have things that you've been meaning to do for ages and never got around to doing them. For probably two years, I've been meaning to do a series of sermons that simply look at what goes on in our usual Sunday services. In other words, section by section, to ask "what's this about?" What are we doing and why? And before I go any further, I need to admit that these talks rely heavily on the book by Timothy Radcliffe, *Why go to church?* So here's part one and I'll hopefully get around to part two next week. Let's start at the beginning then.

The Gathering

The very first thing we do is we gather in this place. We come together as a community.

This is more fundamental to the Christian faith than maybe you realise. It's not uncommon to hear people talking of having a Christian faith but not being part of a worshipping community. That's an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. In the words of the old Latin saying,

'Unus christianus, nullus christianus' - 'The single Christian is no Christian'

If our faith has no grounding, or rootedness in the Christian community, then our faith remains limited to our own perceptions of God. God doesn't get much bigger than ourselves. Where's the challenge, the stretching, and the link with the wisdom and tradition passed down to us through the centuries? Our faith begins with belonging, relationship, togetherness. And it's there in the very first words we say, the core of our worship, I begin by pronouncing that we meet

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity may be a difficult one for us to get our heads around, but if we understand nothing else, we need to understand that the Trinity is all about relationship. God is a relationship, bonded in love. For God 'to be' is 'to be related'. We come to church with our fragile identities, often enough constructed over against each other. Even our loves often contain tinges of rivalry, defensiveness and insecurity. We begin by invoking the Triune God, a home in which we may

flourish and find happiness, at home here and at ease wrapped up in the uncompetitive and equal love of the + Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹

And what's that crossing yourself about? A few here in this church cross themselves at various times in the service, many of you don't. I come from a church background where no-one crossed themselves but I've come to value this action as part of my worship. It's not a superstition that makes something magical happen. Rather, and speaking just for myself, it has a number of values,

- it's prayer and praise with my body and actions not just my lips
- it's a constant reminder that the Christian way is via the cross, not an escape to some fluffy easy spiritual plane
- it's almost a marking or branding of myself with the symbol at the heart of the Christian faith, much like I talked of last week as we anointed Isabel Pook
- and finally, it's also an action that silently expresses a desire for my whole being to be part of my worship – my mind, my body, my heart and my soul.

If you've never crossed yourself, why don't you try it occasionally in our services? If you value it, continue with it, if you don't then don't.

The Greeting

The very next thing we do is we pray for each other and proclaim *The Lord be with you, **and also with you.***

Our faith is not in anyway in a distant God but, as we celebrate especially at this time of year, in our incarnate Emmanuel - God who came to live amongst us and continues by his Spirit to live amongst us. Not exclusively as we meet to worship, but certainly and definitely as we meet here. As Jesus said, *Wherever two or three meet in my name, there am I amongst them.* The silence before the service, and these words at the start especially, are here to jolt any complacency, any distractions. It's an awesome truth; we are here in the presence of God almighty.

¹ Much of this paragraph comes from Timothy Radcliffe, *Why God to Church*, p.16

Prayer of Preparation

Sometimes we say the Prayer of Preparation [there in the grey box], sometimes we don't. It acts as a bridge or preparation to what comes next, the confession, *cleanse the thoughts of our hearts*, why? so I feel good? Not primarily, the answer comes next... *that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name*. We're here with the wise men, to pay him homage².

Confession & Absolution

The confession comes within 1 minute of the service starting. This can be much misunderstood and seem a gloomy start to our celebration. The confession is about clearing the decks of our lives before we go any further, removing the baggage, the burden. It's about being loved and made new, not condemned or made to feel guilty. It's simply a fact that we are broken goods in a broken world. I often fail in simple acts of love even, or maybe especially to those close to me. I fail in my love and devotion to my God, and, whether I like it or not, I am part of this broken, angry, greedy humanity that is too often quick to war and slow to peace. I'm generally phlegmatic about the growing divide between wealth and poverty in Britain, and I'm part of a system that gobbles up the world's resources and pays a pittance for much that comes from the southern hemisphere. For me, there is good reason to pause, to grieve and confess mine and our corporate failures to love our neighbour. The confession comes onto us in a rush, and there is never really the time to reflect on the depth of what we are doing here. So now we have a brief pause after the introduction to the confession, just to give the slightest chance for reflection. But I want to say again that the goal is not to feel bad, but it is to face the truth. The goal is not to be burdened, but to be set free. *The truth will set you free*, Jesus said. *For him who confesses, shams are over and realities have begun*. If our love is going to deepen, our sins and the sins of the world are going to grieve us. Our grief is not a sign of being far from God, rather it's a sign that God's healing grace is already at work in us, sharpening our conscience, softening our hearts, making them hearts of flesh rather than stone.

² Gospel was Matthew 2, the wise men visiting at Bethlehem

And how does God respond to our confessions? I believe that God, as a parent, can't wait to forgive us, forgives us before we ask.

*When God forgives our sins, he is not changing his mind about us. He is changing our minds about him. He does not change; his mind is never anything but loving; he is love!*³

When one of my sons does something wrong, knows it, feels it and says sorry, it moves me deeply. I just feel so touched and grateful and can't wait to thank them and give them a hug. My response is tragically not always that healthy or loving, but I hope it gives you a picture of God's response.

Then I, as priest, pronounce the words of absolution. It's God rather than me that is doing the forgiving. But I find it a profound privilege to be pronouncing God's forgiveness and healing. Again, at this point, some people choose to mark that healing with the signing of the cross.

Gloria

I've spoken for long enough, but here's a quick skim of the Gloria and Collect before we end. The natural response to God's love for us, God's presence with us, our sins forgiven and salvation, is to break out in praise. The words partially come from the song of the angels amongst the shepherds as they proclaim the birth of Christ.

In our seasons of repentance and waiting, that's Advent and Lent, the Gloria is omitted from the service.

Collect

Last of all, for today, the Collect. It's said by the person leading the service but it's our collective prayer to God and it also collects into one prayer the focus of our worship according to the Christian seasons. There are set collects and post communion collects for each Sunday of the year. We'll stop there. If that's posed more questions than answers for you, I'm sure Piers and George would be delighted to field difficult questions!

Amen

9th January 2011

³ Timothy Radcliffe, *Why God to Church*, p.18

Sermon 2 - Readings, Sermon, Creed

Okay, this is sermon number two in the series. We're looking, step by step, at each part of our usual Sunday service and asking, "what's this about?" What are we doing and why? Last week we looked at the opening words of our service, the confession, Gloria and the collect. Next up come our Bible readings.

Readings

We often have 2-4 readings at our services, an Old Testament, a psalm is sung, a New Testament reading and a Gospel reading as the finale. Some of you may remember me briefly causing a bit of a shock when I stood in this pulpit, held up a Bible and announced, 'This is not the word of God!' I saw in front of me a few wide eyes and deep intakes of breath. How can you say that Paul? Don't we say at the end of each reading, *'this is the word of the Lord'*? Yes we do, but let me ask you a question, Do we believe that this book is the word of God, or is Jesus Christ the Word of God? It's a bit of an unfair question, because I expect that you, like me, want to answer yes to both. There is a subtle but profound difference. If you have a look on page 4 of the service booklet you will see there the sentence for the end of the reading, *This is the word of the Lord*; 'word' is with a small 'w' not a capital. But look just below it, a sentence from John's gospel, 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us' Capital 'W'. This may all sound totally pedantic, but bear with me because the ramifications are huge. We do not worship this book, we worship the living God to whom it points and teaches. This Bible becomes holy when God speaks to us through it. When the living Word meets us through the word, our lives are stretched, challenged, comforted and transformed. Without the living God meeting us, this book...is just a book.

Much of the earlier part of the service that I covered last week was about getting us ready to be spoken to by the living God. We're not here to learn some facts about God. Instead we hope to hear in those readings the story of God's relationship with humanity through the centuries and know it as our own. We need to listen receptively and prayerfully, with our hearts and souls as much as our heads.

Our services are a game of two halves, Word and Sacrament, and the high point of the first half is the Gospel being processed to the middle of the church. If you think we're honouring the book, you've got the wrong message. Symbolically, the deacon brings the life of Jesus into the heart of our community. The deacon is living out their calling to take the good news to the people. Most importantly, they say, 'The Lord be with you'. This is back to my point; it's the Lord being with you that makes this Bible holy. But there is, here in this drama, the potential to be spoken to personally by our Saviour. So we stand, turn inwards, and give our undivided attention. Again, at this holy moment, some choose to cross themselves. At the end of the service, the gospel book will be carried out of the church, the good news taken into the world.

Sermon

Right, if I don't move on this is going to become a series of 10 sermons! Next comes just that, the sermon, also called the homily.

Defined by the Websters Dictionary as,

'to give moral or religious advice, especially in a tiresome manner'!

And in *Barchester Towers*, Anthony Trollope wrote,

There is perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries, than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but the preacher has the power of compelling an audience to sit silent and be tormented.

Preaching is an awesome responsibility that I, and I know others who preach from this pulpit, certainly don't sit light to. Your time is precious and you are gracious enough to sit and listen to us week by week. So may I take this opportunity to say thank you to you for putting up with us! ☺

The sermon rightly begins with a short prayer. Like the readings, there is the potential for our hearts to be spoken to. Maybe also it's a prayer both for the preacher and the congregation, to encounter the baby amongst too much bath water from us who preach! So you need to listen prayerfully and with discernment. The preacher's task is to endeavour to break open the scriptures, maybe especially the 'hard to crack' bits, and to make the scriptures relevant to our lives today. I hope I'm stating the obvious when I say that you don't have to take everything you hear, hook, line and sinker. Do feel free to respond to

the sermons you hear. Come to us with questions, things you didn't understand or don't agree with. Come also and tell us when something we say is valuable, speaks to you, challenges you. One of the tough things to get used to as a preacher is spending lots of time preparing sermons, and more often than not getting no response, positive or negative. When someone challenges or questions what I say in a sermon, part of me may feel a little defensive, but another part of me is simply delighted to see that my words have been heard and thought about. I also think that it's valuable and important that we have a variety of people who come here and preach for us. If it were the same person each week, our teaching and understanding of our faith would start to narrow and lose colour.

Creed

Next up we recite the Creed...hooray I hear you say! As we stand for the Creed you can almost sense the excitement and anticipation....hardly. The Creed can often feel like a trudge through some dry words of dogma. And in our post modern age we are probably less enamoured with dogma than ever before. One amusing description of post modernity that I once heard was, 'My karma has run over my dogma'. In other words, we're more interested in experience than we are dogma and rationalism.

But the Creed is very important to us. As I said last week, our faith is bigger than just ourselves, bigger than St George's and bigger than the Anglican Communion. We are part of a world-wide church, not only spanning very different cultures but also spanning two millennia. The roots of the Creed are actually in baptism. From the earliest days of the church, those coming for baptism first affirmed their faith with the reciting of the Creed. The early church grappled long and hard, literally word by word, for what we have today. One of our church fathers, Athanasius, was prepared to endure exile and death for one word of the Creed that asserts that Jesus is of one being with the Father. Our faith is founded not just on the scriptures, not just our personal experiences, nor just our rational thoughts, but also on the traditions that have been passed down to us. The Creed is not a straightjacket; it does nothing to limit our journey into deeper relationship with the living God, but it does give a framework for our identity and faith as Christians and it has served us well since the 4th century. The Creed is the fundamentals of our faith.

Time to stop; I had wanted to get as far as the intercessions and peace, but they will have to wait for next time. Let me finish with a bit about the Creed from Timothy Radcliffe,

Our society is, of course, just as dogmatic, but unconsciously so. G.K. Chesterton remarked that 'there are only two kinds of people, those who accept dogmas and know it, and those who accept dogmas and don't know it'. We have lost a sense that the right words matter, in faith as in everything else. I was once stopped outside Blackfriars by two men conducting a survey. They asked me if I believed that Jesus was literally the Son of God. I replied that it depended upon what they meant. If they meant: was Jesus the son of the Father in exactly the same sense that I was the son of my father, then 'No'. If they were asking whether he was truly the Son of the Father, and was 'begotten and not made', then 'Yes'. They looked at each other, puzzled, and then one said, 'Put him down as "don't know"'. The purpose of the dogmas of the Church is not to shut down further discussion. Quite the opposite: they evolved in opposition to heresies which did just that, wrapping up the truths of our faith in narrow theological positions which betray the mystery.⁴

Amen

16th January 2011

⁴ Timothy Radcliffe, *Why God to Church*, p.66

Sermon 3 - Intercessions, Peace, Offertory

Most of you will be aware that I've been putting together a series of sermons looking in detail at the various parts of our usual Sunday services and the significance and meaning behind them. So now for sermon number three and today we're looking at the intercessions, the peace and the offertory.

This section of our service acts in some ways as a middle point, or bridge, between the Word and the Eucharist. It's that point between our two courses, fed through the Word and soon to be fed in the Eucharist. But we're by no means passive receivers, like customers being waited on in a restaurant. Amazingly, we are called and challenged to participate in God's work. In our Old Testament and Gospel reading (and threaded throughout the Bible) there is a call to care, especially for the poor and vulnerable, and to love even those who hate us. We have our part to play in God's work of hope, new life and salvation. And we get on with that work during the service, in between our first and second courses. Having been forgiven and fed in the Word, we're immediately being called to put our faith into action. I could sum up our order of service very simply as: baggage discarded, fed in Word, then action by us, fed in Eucharist, then action by us. We now begin to participate in God's work in the Intercessions, Peace and Offertory.

The Intercessions

They might not seem to you like a jumping into action, but I'm here to tell you that they really are. First of all, they're called the intercessions and not simply 'the prayers' for a good reason. The Bible calls and encourages us to pray, to share and cry out to God for our neighbours, even (and maybe especially) those we struggle to love. We also intercede for our world's cares, worries and needs. Jesus went further, he not only told his disciples to ask and seek, he told them to pester even. He used the analogy of a neighbour persistently banging on the door till eventually the householder gives in and comes to the door. He also told the story of a widow who eventually gets justice from the local judge, not because the judge is a good bloke, but simply because she doesn't give up and pesters. They are stories that bring up for me as many questions as answers but the message is clear: pray, pray often, pray together, persist in prayer. I

don't know the correct words to use here, but it seems that God desires or needs or responds to our heartfelt prayers. We pray even (or maybe especially) for situations that seem hopeless, because we as Christians know what comes after hopelessness...Easter morning! It is easy to get despondent when our prayers don't get the immediate response that we want, but our faith and trust needs to ride above the choppy waters of disappointment and confusion when things don't work out. Our Renewable Energy Project is a very apt and present case in point at this time. There are also wonderful examples of miracles; answers to prayer that I hope spur you on in your commitment to prayer. Who would have predicted Paisley and McGuinness sharing government together and getting named the 'chuckle brothers' for their friendship and shared jokes in Northern Ireland? It's a miracle, an answer to prayer. When Nelson Mandela was on Robben Island who would have predicted that he would one day be president of a very different South Africa? God heard the persistent prayers of so many across the globe. It's not that our prayers are a twisting of God's arm; rather it is participation with God in his desire for justice, wholeness and peace in the world. The intercessions are a place of action.

Peace

Next comes the Peace. Allow me to read 2 short verses for you. Firstly a verse from Peter's first letter (1 Peter 5:14),

Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

Secondly a verse from our reading today from 1 Corinthians 6:19. As I read, I want you to know that the 'you' is in the plural. Not you personally so much as all of you together.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

In different ways, these verses are saying that our relationships with each other are intrinsic parts of our faith. My relationship with God is not just a vertical personal thing just between me and God alone. God is to be found, experienced and shared in our relationships together. God is here amongst us. We together, not this building but us as a community, are God's dwelling place. Our relationships and how we treat each other are therefore very important. It's therefore a nonsense, a contradiction, to come here to worship and meet God

whilst being in fall-out with any of our fellow church members, or for that matter any of our neighbours. In our disrespect or rejecting of others we also disrespect and reject the God who dwells amongst us.

In our sharing of the Peace, we each become God's channels or ambassadors of His peace. We each become ministers one to another. Giving and receiving God from one another. Don't let the Peace be for you just a handshake or kiss and some mumbled words. It's not the interval in our worship. Mean it and may it be a prayer when you say, 'Peace be with you'. May it also be a commitment to our fellowship in God together. Be aware that God is being brought to you in that exchange. And may it be a challenge and commitment on your part to love those that you struggle to get on with.

Offertory

Lastly for today, and last action before the Eucharist, is the offertory. Each week we, like the magi, bring gifts to God at the front of the church. We bring our gifts, not just of money from our pockets but also bread and wine.

I'm reminded of the story of the four-year-old in a church at the altar rail who wanted some of the bread and wine. The mother explained that in that church children weren't allowed to receive communion. Near the end of the service, around came the collection plate and the mother leaned over and encouraged the boy to put a bit of his pocket money onto the plate. But the child wouldn't be budged and said loudly,
"If I can't eat, I'm not paying!"

In one of the Gospel stories we hear of another boy who gave away his few fish and bread. We too bring our humble gifts to Jesus; Jesus blesses them and gives them back to us as we are fed in the Eucharist. I, in the Eucharistic prayer, will offer these gifts to God. The boy's five loaves and two fish were not meagre offerings; like the widow's mite they were small but they were all that he had. They were in fact massive generous acts of faith and love. The offertory is your opportunity to put your money where your worship is. It's one of the basic litmus tests of faith. Our giving is an act of faith, devotion and surrender. It's an expression of the depth of our love and devotion to

God. And if you find yourself resistant to generous giving, you need to ask yourself where your heart and faith are. Martin Luther said, *‘There are three conversions necessary: conversion of the heart, the mind, and the purse.’*

So please, please don’t see the collection as the church putting the squeeze on you. If it was just a practical issue of fundraising, we’d put it with the notices near the end. But it’s not, it’s a part of your worship. So think carefully about what you give, because it’s not a donation to a rattling tin. And if you, like me, give by standing order, when you hold and pass the plate on be mindful of what you privately give, be reminded that it’s part of your love and worship.

Yet again I’ve gone on way too long! I’ll stop there; in sermon number four we get to the Eucharist.

Amen

20th February 2011

Sermon 4 – Eucharistic Prayer

Many moons ago I began a series of sermons where, week by week, I took a close look and preached about the different pieces of our worship that, put together, make up our Sunday service. In the first we looked at the Gathering, Greeting and Collect; in the second the Readings, Sermon & Creed; in the third the Intercessions, Peace & Offertory.

I had planned that this be the last in this series of sermons, but I'm not going to get to the end today. There is a lot to be said about the Eucharist, Holy Communion, the Mass, and the Lord's Supper. It has a variety of names, but is essentially the same thing. I said in the earlier sermons that our service is in some ways a two course meal. In the first course we are fed through God's Word to us in the Bible, and in the second course we are fed through the Eucharistic meal.

But what's actually going on at this point in the service? At the simplest and most obvious level, there is a re-enactment, a replaying of Jesus' last meal with his closest friends. But what Jesus said and did at that last supper is so, so much more than just a final meal. And what we do here is so, so much more than just a re-enactment. According to the Synoptic Gospels the meal that Jesus was sharing with his friends was the Jewish Passover, the celebration and remembrance of how God saved the Hebrew people from their slavery in Egypt. The Passover was for the Jewish people much more than just a remembrance. It was an act of remembering, a memorial that brings God's saving power from the past into the present. Put simply, it brings God to the meal. The technical theological word for this is the Greek word, anamnesis. In English we translate it as 'memorial', but that just doesn't do the word justice. It's making the past event real in the present moment.

At the last supper, Jesus did something very conventional and at the same time totally radical and subversive. He made himself the sacrificial lamb, he made himself the meal.

It was as if he was saying this,

I am going to be God's lamb, I am going to be killed, I am going to save you from your slavery, (not slavery to the Egyptians, but your slavery to yourself, to the world, to your brokenness and sin), I am going to be your saviour; I am going to die for you, and after that I am going to show that God's life in me is bigger and stronger than sin and death. So from now on, whenever you eat this bread and drink this wine, by the grace of God, may you feed on the life of God in me.

Here is the crucial point: in the Eucharist we pray that the Jesus of the last supper becomes present to us now in the bread and wine that we receive; we pray that that past moment becomes a present reality to us now, our anamnesis, our memorial. Remembrance and Memorial are for us therefore words loaded with meaning. We are then in a moment of 'Holy Communion' with the living God, who gives us this meal as a gift and meets and feeds us through it. Here the crucified and risen Lord offers himself to his people. In this Holy Communion our attention is drawn to the past, the present and the future,

*we look back with thanksgiving to what Christ has done for us,
we greet him present among us at this table,
and we look forward:*

*our meal here being a foretaste of a future celebration
when God will be present to us in a new way in his kingdom.*

All of that gets expressed each time in the Eucharistic prayer. I'd encourage you to pay particular attention for remembrance and memorial when we come to the Eucharist Prayer today. But before we look at the Eucharist stage by stage, here's an important question:

So what is it that we eat here at the altar rail?

Here are three options to consider:

1. Is it our belief that we are actually physically consuming Christ, that the bread and wine have fully become Christ's body and blood?
2. Or is it that in our physical feeding, we are spiritually fed by Christ, in other words the bread and wine are outward signs of an inward grace?
3. Or is it just a prayerful remembering of what Christ did for us in his death and resurrection, that there is nothing especially sacred as we eat the bread and drink wine?

The answer is that there are faithful Christians in each of these three camps and I know that, if we were to ask everyone at St George's what they believe, each of these answers would be represented. What the Eucharist is for you is for you to prayerfully consider. For me it's the middle one of the three, my prayer and my faith is that in receiving the bread and the wine I am spiritually fed by Christ. I think I'd also want to say that the third option, just a prayerful re-enactment, isn't in fact Holy Communion. It's a bit like Harry Potter's uncle, aunt and cousin, oblivious to the huge events taking place in front of them. Like any sacrament, the Eucharist is more than words. In a relationship, a single hug can sometimes express more than many words.⁵ In the Eucharist Jesus gives us this physical expression of his love, this out pouring of himself. Up to this point we have sought God's forgiveness, we have listened and received God's word, we have declared our faith in the creed, we have prayed, we have shared God's peace with each other, and we have brought and given our offering of money, bread and wine. At Holy Communion we must, as it were, climb inside that story and make it our own.⁶ There is a footnote that I'd want to add though to this discussion of how we variously understand Communion. The footnote was our reading from Romans 14: 1-12, which acknowledges that there has always been a variety of religious understanding and observance amongst the Christians. Paul says that we mustn't judge each other for differences of understanding and the ways in which we worship. This is especially important for us at St George's because we are a broad church.

Right that's the overview, the big picture; let's before I end have a brief look at the various parts that make up the whole. It might be useful to have your service booklet open on page 7. We begin by 'taking the bread and wine and thanking God for them'. Here we are modelling what Jesus himself did at the last supper, but also on various other occasions. You will remember that he thanked God for the 5 loaves and 2 fish before feeding the crowds. We thank God that these very basic things are themselves a gift from God.

⁵ Timothy Radcliffe, *Why God to Church*, p.??

⁶ Timothy Radcliffe, *Why God to Church*, p.??

Then the Eucharistic prayer itself begins by praying for each other, that the Lord might be with us at this time, and we lift our hearts to the Lord in thanks and praise. After that, as you can see at the top of page 8 and on page 10, come what's known as the 'Preface'. That sounds boringly like an introduction. But it comes from the Latin and means a lot more than that; it means 'to proclaim in the presence of'.⁷ In the presence of God we proclaim our thanks and praise for God's mighty acts of love. Eucharist literally means, 'thanksgiving'. The words of the preface change with the seasons, so for instance at Christmas it celebrates Christ birth, and at Easter Christ's resurrection. And we end the preface by breaking into a song of praise with the words of the Sanctus, 'Holy, holy, holy Lord'!

Next, as you will see at the top of page 9, we pray that Christ might become present to us by the Spirit, *may the bread and wine be to us Christ's body and blood*. After that we remember exactly what Jesus said at the last supper as we heard in our Gospel reading⁸, *Take and eat, Drink this, in remembrance of me*. These words are what are known as the words of institution. At this point of remembrance, we at St George's ring a bell, a call to attention at this significant moment. I both value the bell and also have a slight theological problem with it. The whole Eucharistic prayer is sacramental but the bells at this point can wrongly send the message that this point is solely the important bit of the entire service.

Next the deacon responds, *Great is the mystery of faith*, and now we affirm the past, present and future nature of our faith, *Christ has died, Christ is Risen and Christ will come again*. The priest briefly unpacks the meaning of this and before ending reminds us of the purpose of this meal. It's not a selfish, private, greedy consuming, rather it is to draw us together as one body, as God's people called both to worship our Lord and to live our lives in service of him.

Last but not least comes the doxology, final words of praise, and the priest raises the consecrated elements up for all to see. And we all together say 'Amen', which literally means, 'Let it be so'.

⁷ Timothy Radcliffe, *Why God to Church*, p.110

⁸ Luke 22: 15-29

Please remember that it is not me but rather our Lord who invites you to this table. It was Jesus who made the preparations for the Last Supper, giving instructions to the disciples about its preparation. This is the Lord's Table, he is the host and we are his guests.⁹ We are invited but never forced, we put our hands out in faith, and here we are spiritually fed. This is also an altar, where we are reminded that Jesus gave his very self for us. Here we feed in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

Amen

11th September 2011

⁹ Timothy Radcliffe, *Why God to Church*, p.188

Sermon 5

Lord's Prayer, Breaking, Feeding, Sending Out

I'm at last getting to the fifth and final sermon in my series looking at the various elements of our Sunday services. Last time around we looked in detail at the Eucharistic Prayer; and I asked you to think about what it is that you are actually receiving when you consume the bread and the wine. I kind of jumped the gun a bit with that, as there are a few important things that happen after the Eucharistic Prayer and before receiving communion. The first of which is the Lord's Prayer.

Lord's Prayer

The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples could be a series of sermons on its own. I'm only going to look at it briefly this morning and in the context of the Eucharist. As we come close to receiving Christ, it's a natural step to say the prayer he taught us. The words 'give us our daily bread' certainly are a prayer asking God to meet our basic physical need for food to eat. But at this point in the service these words take on a spiritual meaning as we prepare to be spiritually fed. After that, we ask for forgiveness and we forgive those who have sinned against us. This acknowledgement of our need for forgiveness is here in the Lord's Prayer, but then expanded on in the pieces of liturgy that follow.

Breaking of the Bread & the Agnus Dei

The breaking of the bread and the words of the agnus dei are loaded with ache, lament and yet also full of hope. Let me try and explain. Like our physical food, we really need this spiritual meal. Agnus Dei literally means, 'Lamb of God'. We have looked at the history and theology of Jesus being called the Lamb of God earlier in the year but, just to recap, Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus shared his last meal with his disciples at the time of the Jewish Passover; at which a lamb was sacrificed and eaten. Passover was, and is, the Jewish feast commemorating the exodus of Israel from Egypt. This meal was a remembrance or re-enactment of the lamb eaten in haste by the Israelites before their escape to freedom. The lamb has another meaning for the Jews. Animals were sacrificed ritually as an act of atonement, the animal taking the punishment, paying the price for the people's sins.

Jesus sits down to eat with his disciples, he takes bread and wine, thanks God for them, and then moving radically away from the ancient traditions says the most abhorrent of things, “take and eat, this is my body, take and drink, this is my blood.” For the disciples all of a sudden, the lamb has been forgotten about. Jesus has put himself in the place of it. All of a sudden, Jesus’ death becomes more than just a horrific tragedy. He is giving his life for our escape and freedom. He is going to show us God’s response to the worst evil and excesses of our human nature. He’s not going to fight, kill, take revenge or run away from our hatred and brokenness. Instead he’s going to embrace it, take it upon himself. And not just the hatred of those who will crucify him but, remembering that it is God being crucified, he is going to take yours and my sin too, yours and my selfishness, hatreds, brokenness and suffering upon himself. For me these words hold such an ache, we are in such need and we cry out for God’s mercy and healing.

Our brokenness and our need for God’s mercy, this need to be saved as individuals, corporately as communities, as businesses and as nations are the focal point. Often we suffer so unnecessarily from war, poverty, inequality, and famine. All are unnecessary and self inflicted.

*Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world,
have mercy on us,
Lamb of God, grant us peace.*

Jesus broke the bread and gave it to his disciples. As we break the bread, we are reminded of our brokenness. As the bread is pulled apart, we are painfully reminded of our disunity and factions as Christ’s church that is meant to be one in unity and love. As we break the bread, we are reminded of Christ’s broken body on the cross. And yet in all this tragedy there is hope, that Friday is always for us Good Friday.

*We break this bread
to share in the body of Christ.
Though we are many, we are one body,
because we all share in one bread.*

We may be broken, like this bread, but although broken, it is shared amongst us. The Christian church may have broken into many denominations, but it is the same Christ who feeds us all and is the bridge between us all.

*Though we are many, we are one body,
because we all share in one bread.*

There is also a further meaning in these words. They hit me with a real force shortly after my mother died. I was standing at the rail to receive communion, and all of a sudden I realised that the 'many' included all those who have gone before us; what we call 'the communion of saints'. For a long time, and still occasionally now, I find comfort in knowing that this meal is shared with many, many more than just those living now, through Christ I share this meal also with my mum.

Feed

And all that I've tried to say is summed up in a few words as we are all invited to the Lord's meal:

*Jesus is the Lamb of God
who takes away the sin of the world.*

Blessed are those who are called to his supper.

***Lord, I am not worthy to receive you,
but only say the word, and I shall be healed.***

I've already spoken last time about what the bread and wine becomes to us as we receive. All I'd want to add is that the giving of the bread and the cup is a solemn moment of encounter with Christ. We come to have communion with our Saviour, and to be spiritually fed with the life of Christ. After we have all received the bread and the wine, or a blessing, what is left is consumed or put in the aumbry, the safe in the wall that we have in the Lady Chapel.

Post Communion Prayers

After communion we pray, remembering what we have just received and thanking God for it.

Blessing & Dismissal

But we are not finished yet! Lastly there is a very, very important point to be made. Our two course meal is over. Having received and been fed through word and sacrament, we have become that sacrament. Christ dwells in us and we are sent out into the world as Christ's ambassadors.

Let me tell you a brief story that you may have heard before. A statue of Christ was badly damaged in a church. When they came to repair it, the hands of the statue had broken off and would be particularly difficult to repair. In the end they decided to re-erect the statue and leave it without the hands repaired. At the base they put these words, *'I have no hands but yours.'*

This is a reference to a poem by St. Teresa of Avila that begins: *'Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours.'*

We have become the body of Christ and, as Jesus sent out his followers into the world, so we are sent out from here into the world.

Go, the harvest is plentiful but the labours are few.

The service is over; you have received Christ; go and be Christ to all those you meet in the world. Don't hang round here, 'Elvis has left the building'. There's no point hanging around here; there are no more encores; no further courses to this meal. Christ has left the building, or will once you leave! When Mary Magdalene reached the empty tomb on Easter morning, she was told,

He is not here, go and tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them.

It's time for us to follow and be Christ in the world! He is not here, go, and don't worry, he has gone out ahead of you! This ending is a high point not a low point. That's why we've begun to sing the final words of response to, *'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.'* We sing, **'In the name of Christ. Amen.'**

The traditional name for the Eucharist is The Mass which comes from the Latin, *Ite Missa est-* 'Go she is sent'. She being the church, us. We gather as individuals with our need, thirst and brokenness; we leave forgiven and fed as a community, Christ's body.

But what are we to do? I've run out of time to answer fully, but here's the briefest of answers; the simplest and most basic.

- To love people; in doing so you become Christ to them, and they become Christ to you.
- Whether on your own or with them, to pray for people. When someone is struggling in any way, and they tell you, have the courage to simply say, 'I'll pray for you'. As we heard in our Old Testament¹⁰ reading, 'Strengthen the weak, and say to the fearful to fear not because here is your God'.
- And finally to live openly as a Christian, simply let it be known in passing and, if anyone shows any interest, invite them along. One of the questions in our recent congregation wide questionnaire was, 'What first brought you to St George's?' The answer for quite a few has been simply that "someone invited me."

So: love people, pray for people, and in simple ways live your faith openly.

The End! It's taken me most of the year and 3 sermons became 5, but it is finished! Our services are so, so rich, full, multi-layered and multicoloured. There is enough food here for all and for a lifetime.

Amen

23rd October 2011

¹⁰ Isaiah