

Exploring The Liturgy

*A brief introduction to the main elements
of our Sunday eucharist service*



The Greeting

Have you ever been sat in church and found yourself thinking, “what is actually going on here?” “What is worship all about?” Well, please don’t report me to the Bishop, but I’ve certainly had these thoughts myself from time to time! But I also think they’re good questions to be asking!

These 9 articles, originally published in 2022 as a monthly series in our parish magazine, explore the liturgy of our Sunday worship service. The idea is to provide an insight into the different parts of the service, what they’re for and why we do them.

So, in this first article we are beginning with “The Greeting,” which is also described as “the Gathering” or “the Welcome.” Here the service begins:

*In the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.
All Amen.*

*The Lord be with you
All and also with you.*

These words might be very familiar. Yet, we can easily miss the significance of these words, which declare why we are gathered. We are not primarily gathered in the name of building friendly community, or in the name of being good Christians, or even in the name of lovely music. Rather we, the church, are a community of people who gather in the name of God; Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And we follow this assertion of gathering in the name of the Trinity with the further affirmation that when we gather, God is present with us: “The Lord be with you.” A reminder right at the start of our worship that God is with us. We do not simply gather in God’s name like a godly fan club or divine appreciation society, but we trust God to be with us, as the present force who is drawing us together.

When I was training at theological college, I had the wonderful experience of visiting Russia to learn about how priests are trained and formed in the Orthodox tradition. Whilst I was in Moscow, I visited the Tretyakov Gallery where I saw the Rublev Icon. (This icon will be familiar to those who attend Christ Church, as a similar version is painted behind the altar there.)



The icon depicts the three divine persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as three angels gathered around the table for a meal together. Gazing at the icon, you realise that there is an empty place on the viewer’s side of the table. The insinuation is that we are invited to take up this place and commune with the Trinity.

Indeed, our central act of worship, Holy Communion, is this invitation to the table of God where everyone has a place, because it is the radically welcoming God who is the host. In gathering in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit we are welcomed and invited into the life of God, to share in his self-giving and other-receiving life. It is as if the Triune God, whose very identity is one of unity through otherness and difference, makes room for us to share in his life.

Often a good marker for a healthy church is when you look around and realise that nowhere else would you find these people gathered together, except for their shared sense of having been welcomed and drawn-in to worship God. This is why a diverse church is a healthy church. Not because it’s good for “optics” or because it makes us feel progressive, but because a diverse church reflects the radical welcome and hospitality of God, who invites us all to gather around the table and share in his heavenly banquet.

So, at the beginning of the service as we greet one another and gather together, we realise that we have already been greeted and gathered in by the life of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

SAMUEL RYLANDS

Confession and Absolution

Jesus repeatedly tells people to repent. Unfortunately, the word 'repent' has become very churchy. It simply isn't used in everyday parlance, yet it just means to turn around.

When we gather in church we enter into a different type of space. While it is true that we can worship God anywhere, we usually gather in a sacred place. A place where people have felt close to God, where worship is offered every day and, somehow, prayer seems to suffuse the very stones of the building.

Crossing the threshold of the church building enables us to take a step into a different realm. Here is a place where we feel safe enough to be honest with God, to be silent, to reflect, to speak, whether with thoughts or words. It is a place where we seek security, affirmation or – and here is another churchy word – forgiveness.

So it is only natural that when we gather in church for worship, as the Body of Christ in this place, that we should do as Jesus of Nazareth asked his hearers to do: repent. This is what confession is all about. Reviewing, reflecting, assessing our words, actions and thoughts, and the impact they've had on us and on others.

In the Church of England, like in both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, this confession is generally made together, every Sunday, as we worship. However, the tradition also exists in the Church of England for individual confession. Indeed, the Book of Common Prayer expressly states that the priest should say:

"If there be any of you... who cannot quiet his own conscience, but requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me... and open his grief, that by the ministry of God's holy word he may receive the benefit of absolution."

So individual confession, acknowledging brokenness, pain, disquiet, is a distinct possibility alongside our corporate repentance, or turning.

In the older liturgies of the Book of Common Prayer, that turning or confession was

placed much closer to the Thanksgiving Prayer, in which the priest takes the bread and wine and, through God's agency, consecrates them as the body and blood of Christ. It was as if no chance of further slippage ought to occur between the words of absolution and the receiving of communion.

Twentieth century liturgical reform, however, has brought forward the confessing of our shortcomings to near the beginning of the service of Holy Communion. This follows the ancient tradition of the very early church in which the cry, "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy", was the first act of corporate approach to God.

In other words, to engage in worship, first we need to acknowledge and renounce all that mars God's image in us and separates us from God – pride, selfishness, anger, lack of trust and so on. This is rather like taking a shower first thing in the morning; it washes away yesterday's grime, the residue of the past, so that we may approach God afresh, unfettered by all that sticks to us and all that we would cling to.

And then comes the speaking of God's words of acceptance, love and forgiveness, which we call the absolution. This too is rooted in the Good News of Jesus, where he assures his apostles that whosoever's sins they forgive, they are forgiven. The laying on of hands in ordination, sometimes called apostolic succession, is a visual sign that the priest is God's vehicle of forgiveness and restoration. It's not that I, Brian, forgive you. No, but rather, the priest speaks God's promise of forgiveness which Jesus of Nazareth fleshed out in his own life, death and resurrection.

When we gather in church on Sunday, the liturgy moves quickly. So, might I suggest an ancient habit, which is to prepare on Saturday what you might want to be saying to God on Sunday. This allows us to enter more fully into turning from ourselves and hearing the words of God's acceptance and renewal of us, his children.

BRIAN LEATHARD

The Gloria

How do you celebrate someone you adore? Maybe by doing something nice for them, like cooking a meal. Or you might write them a card, or give them a hug. You will also, surely, sing their praises – not just to them but to anyone who will listen. At such moments, we just can't keep the celebrations to ourselves.

That's the kind of feeling I like to imagine in the angels who appear to the shepherds after Jesus's birth: they are so full of joy that they can't keep it to themselves. And it is the words of the angels that we repeat at the start of the Gloria when we celebrate the eucharist: "Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men" (Luke 2.14).

For the Gloria is a hymn of exuberant praise. It has been part of the eucharistic liturgy since the fifth century, though it may well have been written before then. It offers a string of statements about who God is, praising God's glory and mercy, and affirming the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is meant to be sung with a smile.

I love the energy with which so many musical settings of the Gloria communicate this joy, whether by Stanford, Mozart or Haydn. At Christ Church we enjoy our own special congregational setting, composed by Jon Streeting, a past associate vicar. But – to add a personal note – I also love the moment at the end of the Gloria, just after the organ and choir finish their final notes. The last chords fade replaced by the sound of silence. God is celebrated in the heavenly host singing of God's glory with all their might, and God is celebrated in the stillness.

So the Gloria is a celebration of the One we adore. It is not the only way we show our love, just as we show our love for another person

Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace,
goodwill towards men.

We praise thee, we bless thee,
we worship thee, we glorify thee,
we give thanks to thee for thy great glory:
O Lord God, heavenly King;
God the Father Almighty.

O Lord, the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ:
O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father;
That takest away the sins of the world,
have mercy upon us.
Thou that takest away the sins of the world,
receive our prayer.
Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the
Father, have mercy upon us.

For thou only art holy; thou only art the Lord;
thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost,
art the Most High in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

not simply by words but also by our actions. But as we sing, or listen, to the words of the Gloria, we affirm our thanksgiving for all that God has done. And we ask that we may, like the shepherds on that wonderful night in Bethlehem, respond to God's call with eagerness and joy, wherever it may lead us.

SAM HOLE

The Liturgy of the Word: Why Do We Listen to the Bible?

Comedian Milton Jones once joked, “The Bible should be read carefully. For instance, recently I found out that a lot of the Ten Commandments have the word ‘not’ in them. I wish I’d known that earlier!”

The Bible should indeed be read and listened to carefully, precisely because it is not a straightforward book. In fact, it is not actually a book, but a collection of books with an incredibly diverse range of genres: from codes of law to letters, hymns, poetry and genealogies, to collections of cultural wisdom and visionary political critiques, to name a few.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes, “The diversity of the Bible is as great as if you had within the same two covers, for example, Shakespeare’s sonnets, the law reports of 1910, the introduction of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, the letters of St Anselm and a fragment of The Canterbury Tales. All within the same two covers. And remember that the chronological span of the books of the Bible is even longer than that of the examples I have just given.”

And yet, this strange collection of books we call the Bible forms a central part of our worship together. Almost all the liturgy we say throughout the service is taken either directly or indirectly from different parts of the Bible. But we also dedicate space in our worship, “the Liturgy of the Word,” to hear directly from the Scriptures -- an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a New Testament reading and a Gospel reading. So, why do we give such a central place to the Bible in our worship and Christian life together?

Simply put, in these strange words we expect to hear God speaking. The Bible communicates what God wants to tell us. It is the Word of God. Though, it is rarely as

simple as picking a random page and knowing exactly what it is God might be communicating. Landing on Ezekiel 4:15, for example, (“Then he said to me, ‘See, I will let you have cow’s dung instead of human dung, on which you may prepare your bread.’”) it might leave you with more questions than answers...

But having more questions is no bad thing because the Bible is not, on the whole, a text where we go to extract information or facts. If this were the case, we would not need to return to it day after day, week after week, year after year. We might know the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection well, for instance, but this does not mean we no longer read those passages.

Instead, we continually return to the Bible because it is a place where we are addressed and confronted by God. In reading or listening to the Bible, we soon realise that the initiative is no longer ours but that the text itself is speaking to us, and not necessarily in ways we expect. Like an icon, the perspective is turned back to the reader, as we realise that we are not studying a static object, but are being met by God’s living Word, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is not just one part of the story, but the central weight around which the whole text orbits. To paraphrase Luther – like the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling bands, the texts are infinitely precious, and unfolding them reveals more of Christ. Without Christ, however, they are rags. We make space for the Bible to speak to us in our worship together, so we can hear God’s living Word, Jesus Christ, confronting and comforting us.

This is the story of God’s love for his world and our response to that love, and it continually asks us: “Where are you in this story?”

SAMUEL RYLANDS

The Creed

The church, as we know it, didn't just happen. In its earliest days it spread, rather Covid-like, along the routes and networks of social interaction. With communication being so tricky and slow, the churches, springing up in the first and second centuries were isolated from one another, so there grew a need for the church to be recognisably one, whether in Jerusalem, Rome, Antioch, Alexandria or even Iona.

From a very ordinary Greek term, meaning 'general' or 'whole', developed a crucially important word for the church, namely 'catholic' – which we might best say means 'universal'. So Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, writing to Christians in Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey) in about 110 AD, assumes they understand the need for the church to be, like Brighton Rock, the same all the way through.

This hinged on three elements – first, agreeing what should be in the canon of scripture, what we call The Bible, which wasn't secured until 367 AD. Second, agreeing on the embodiment of authority in the church's ministers, particularly bishops, priests and deacons. Third, agreeing on creeds, the statements of belief.

The advantage of creeds – the word is just Latin for belief – is that they could be learnt by heart and didn't need expensive writing resources. They fenced in what the catholic church believes, standardising such belief, across hugely divergent cultures, languages and peoples.

There is evidence that new believers had to learn the creed verbatim before baptism (remember, in the early church, most of the baptised were adults!). We also find evidence of some basic credal statements in the epistles of the New Testament. Certainly as Christianity spread, the tone of the creeds

became more assertive, both in response to growing diversity and in light of the persecutions Christians were enduring across the Roman empire.

The creeds of the early church stabilised by the end of the 4th Century and remained universal until the late 20th Century (just don't ask about the Filioque clause). It was then, as churches revised their liturgies to cope with a very different world and to be accessible to the majority who were 'unchurched', they needed to diversify and shorten their credal statements.

Thus Common Worship (the Church of England's modern liturgy), for example, in addition to the traditional words, also authorises a question and answer creed, which we use at Baptisms, as well as some of those New Testament elementary creeds, very useful in Family services, or where the language of the fuller creeds seems too verbose or obscure.

I regard the creeds as rather like walking through a family portrait gallery in a stately home. Just as the family nose or chin is recognisable in the portraits, so too do we, the Christian community, recognise the core of our faith in all the types of creed we use.

Most Sundays we say the words of the Nicene Creed, endorsed by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which sets out the substance of faith as taught by the apostles, recognising that the phrases are a mixture of language and thought from the Bible and the early christian communities, containing differing types of statement, some historic, some symbolic, some poetic. Woven together in this way, the creeds, in contemporary jargon, are the christian family's mission statement.

BRIAN LEATHARD

The Intercessions

“In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, let us pray to the Father.” With these words from the celebrant, we sit or kneel and prepare to pray. Except, of course, much of our service so far has already been an act of prayer and worship. We have already, for example, stood and prayerfully sung hymns in praise and adoration of God. We have probably prayed with thanksgiving for all we have been blessed with. We have certainly prayed in penitence for our sins, and been reminded of God’s forgiveness.

When the celebrant invites us to pray, he or she is inviting us to begin a very particular kind of prayer – the intercessions. Intercessory prayer is the kind of prayer in which we bring before God the needs of ourselves and others. The choice of prayers is up to the person leading the intercessions (though the clergy provide a framework if desired). It is that person’s role to ponder the week’s readings as well as all that is going on in the world, our local community and the church, so as to put into words our parish’s heartfelt prayers to God. We are always open to new volunteers putting themselves forward, and provide training: please speak to a member of the clergy if you would be interested in helping with this ministry.

What does intercessory prayer change? At the least, it changes us. When we intercede for the world, we are, in part, asking God to help us to

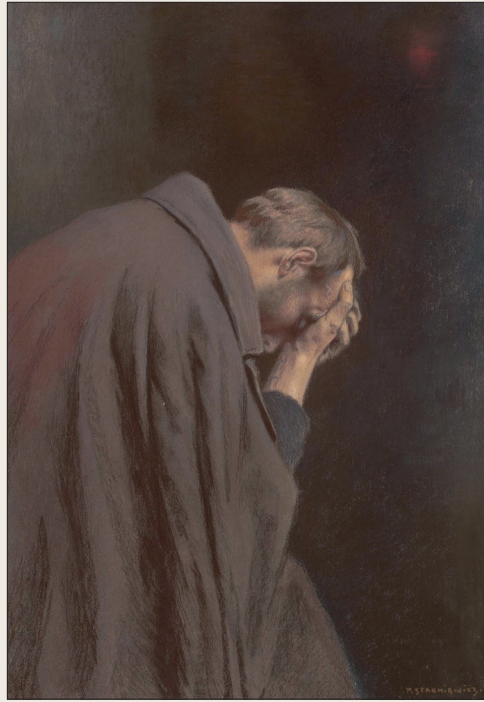
see the world through God’s own eyes. And so, as we pray, we may sense a pull on ourselves to respond: to send money to those in need; to petition our government for a matter of justice;

to forgive someone we believe has wronged us.

But we also hope that prayer does more than this. When we see the horrors in Ukraine and cry out in prayer, we cannot but hope that God will act to bring about peace and justice. The idea that God gets involved is, it must be said, fraught theological terrain. Why should God expect us to pray before God gets involved? Why would a loving God get involved in some horrifying situations and not others? We may never know the answers to these

questions this side of heaven. We may always pray, not knowing quite what is happening. But we trust that in prayer we are being bound in one community in love of God and love of one another. We ask that God’s kingdom come, and God’s will be done. We pray in hope.

SAM HOLE



'The Lord's Prayer. Pilgrim'. Drawn by the Ukrainian artist Piotr Stachiewicz (1858-1938).

“The Peace of the Lord be always with you.” “And also with you.”

One of the silver linings of Covid regulations for some church attendees has been the avoidance of awkwardness during the peace! The peace is a crucial aspect of our worship, however, and grasping this helps take it beyond being a socially-awkward greeting or simply a break in the service to catch up with each other.

You will have noticed that the invitation to share the peace comes just before the priest moves behind the altar to begin the Eucharistic prayer. The exchanging of peace at this point shows it is an act of preparation for offering ourselves to God and receiving Holy Communion.

In St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus warns, “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24).

The peace or shalom of God is holistic. To be at peace with God is to be at peace with our neighbour, and with the whole of creation. Or, as the First Letter of John bluntly puts it, “Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20).

Jesus' commandments to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves, cannot be separated. This is what the exchanging of peace reminds us. How can we approach the altar of God, seeking forgiveness, reconciliation and communion, if we are not willing to live in

communion with our neighbour? If we are unwilling to offer peace to our neighbour, how can we claim to live in peace with that person's Creator and Redeemer?

The current situation in Ukraine, our destruction of the planet, as well as the broken relationships in our own lives, all tragically remind us of our inability to live in peace. Indeed, even when we do establish ‘peace’ it is often a false or uneasy peace. A ‘peace’ based on a logic of mutual suspicion that says, “I'll watch your back, if you watch mine; but if you stab my back, I'll stab yours!” Here, peace is not healing or transformative, but simply the absence of war or conflict.

The peace we are called to share in our worship, as in our own lives, however, is not a peace of our own making or bargaining. Rather, it is the peace already won and achieved in Christ. We receive and share this peace as a gift, because we cannot generate it ourselves – it is the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding. We offer one another the peace that we have been offered by God in Christ, through whom he has reconciled all things to himself. This is not cheap or fragile peace, precisely because it has faced and overcome the depths of death and hell. The risen Christ stands before his disciples in the locked room and declares, “Peace be with you!”

So, despite our often awkward and blundering exchanging of it in our worship and life together as Jesus' disciples, it is nonetheless this eternal peace of the risen Christ that we declare and share.

SAMUEL RYLANDS

The Eucharistic Prayer

How do you like to say Thank You? A smile, a hug, flowers or perhaps just words themselves. The eucharistic prayer begins with a conversation between priest and people:

The Lord be with you:

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts:

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God:

It is right to give thanks and praise.

(this is usually known as the **Sursum Corda**, Latin words meaning 'Lift up your hearts')

This exchange sets the scene for the expression of thanks, indeed already it hints where the rest of the prayer is going – an extended thank you.

In Common Worship we use seasonal variations on this 'Thank you' in what are called the Propers – that is the appropriate words for the season – Easter, Advent, Christmas, Saints Days etc. So in Lent, the priest thanks God on behalf of us all saying 'we give you thanks and praise that in these forty days of Lent you call us'. The prayer bids us be so thankful for all God's gifts that we are, like Isaiah, almost dumbfounded by the realization of our total dependence upon God – so we sing Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Hosts, Heaven and earth are full of your glory (**Sanctus**) and Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the Highest (**Benedictus**) as we move into the core of the eucharistic, or thanksgiving prayer. The core remains the same with scene-setting words "In the night that he was betrayed..." as the priest re-enacts the events of the Last Supper. Here the priest presides on behalf of the whole community, representing Christ as s/he, in words and actions, consecrates the bread and wine offered by the community, to be received

back by the community transformed into the very body and blood of Christ.

Endless words have been written, arguments made and wars fought over what "happens" here. Since the Reformation, divergent views have emerged in theology over the issue of Transubstantiation - Is bread and wine changed into the body and blood of Christ, or are we simply using these elements as tokens of remembrance? For me, there is clearly no molecular change. At an objective level the elements remain bread and wine, but there is a profound change in substance, in purpose, in effect, such that I am convinced that the efficacy of these elements is to feed us, imbue in us and challenge us with Christ's love and healing. That is why we pay reverence to the way we treat, handle and transport the elements.

This thank you prayer concludes with the President asking God to "send the Holy Spirit on your people" placing us along with all God's saints caught up in the hymn of praise and thanks of all creation:

"Blessing and honour and glory and power
Be yours for ever and ever. AMEN"

And this last little word AMEN (meaning Yes it is so) is crucial, as it is the response of the whole community in thanks. So please don't mumble or forget AMEN. Proclaim it in what we say and do. That's the Thank You.

BRIAN LEATHARD

The Dismissal

We conclude our series exploring the various parts of our eucharistic liturgy

When the celebrant begins to pray the words 'Almighty God', the congregation member who has forgotten where we are in the service might be rather confused. For there are three congregational prayers that begin with these two words: the Prayer of Preparation at the very start of the service ('Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open...'); the Prayer of Penitence ('Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we have sinned against you...'); and, finally, the Prayer after Communion ('Almighty God, we thank you for feeding us...'). The prayers to 'Almighty God' bookend our service. Just as we have begun by acknowledging our need that God help us worship, so too at the end we use the same words to give thanks to God for the spiritual sustenance with which we have been provided in the eucharist.

This repetition of the 'almighty' character of God might seem to imply that the distinguishing characteristic of God is God's power – as if by getting close to God we were cosying up to the largest child in the class, and so protecting ourselves from all the bullies. But look more closely: exactly what kind of power are we dealing with in God? Two clues present themselves in the final words of our service.

First, quoting Paul's letter to the Romans (Rom 12.1) we pray that we offer God 'our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice'. Being a 'living sacrifice' hardly seems like earthly power – indeed, it surely reminds us of our calling to live like Christ, 'who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mt 20.28).

Second, we pray for peace. As the celebrant asks God's blessing on us, he or she prays for us to be filled with 'the peace of God, which passes all understanding'. And in the final words of our service, we pray that we 'go in peace to love and serve the Lord'.

Being a 'living sacrifice'; experiencing and living out the 'peace of God'. This is what it looks like to live in the power of the almighty God. And if you want to see what that kind of life looks like, just look around the congregation. For here we see people who are living out God's call on their lives in a whole multitude of ways. We see parents and carers; people in all kinds of employment and volunteering; individuals offering acts of friendship, forgiveness and compassion; acts of mission and evangelism for God's presence in the world.

As the prayer attributed to Teresa of Avila puts it, 'Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.' In the Dismissal we are sent out to be the people of God in the world, living and working to the praise and glory of God.

SAM HOLE