

# And Also With You

## Liturgy and the Anglican Communion

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The love of good liturgy lies at the core of my understanding of being an Anglican. At its best, liturgy weds the finest elements of worship, prayer, poetry, ritual, scripture, drama and music. For example, in the Eucharist, we act out the drama of the Last Supper and meditate on its redemptive significance. On Maundy Thursday, we re-enact the narrative of the Upper Room and the symbolic washing of the feet as we work through Jesus' message of love and service. In the Baptismal rite we live into the story of the Exodus and the role of water in the story of the salvation of God's people. Virtually every Anglican worship service draws heavily on the Psalms, the sung poetry of the people of Israel. In our liturgy, we find the courage to worship the Lord who told us "be ye perfect," and we come to Him again and again although we have always fallen short of this instruction.

Our worship mirrors our theology in that it is incarnational. Our worship requires bread, wine, water, good Christians, and the stuff of God's creation for its completion. We worship a God who is all-powerful, eternal and invisible. In order to bridge the gap between us and Him, God became flesh and walked on this world. Perhaps a good example of what I mean by "incarnational" worship lies in one of my favorite parts of the service, the sign of peace. Our task during this part of the liturgy is not simply to shake hands and say good morning. That's common courtesy and happens every day in the secular world. But in the liturgy, we are to become the hands, face and smile of Christ, assuring our brothers and sisters of God's love.

Anglicanism relies heavily on liturgy for its self-identity. Rather than assent to a particular set of doctrines or theological statements, Anglicans look to our worship for our identity and our common bond. Our faith has made room in worship for local variations in the style of worship based upon variations in piety or language. We still struggle to create the same space for each other theologically.

Even a modest study of Anglican liturgy, however, reveals that our liturgies within the Communion vary widely. A Morning Prayer service in the Anglican Church in Kenya may not appear to have much in common with an Anglo-Catholic Eucharist at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. In fact, different services at the same church may reflect diverse sorts of piety which in turn result in very different liturgies. Our Communion has grown in size, spread across the globe, matured, and encountered various cultures and different ways of giving voice to the Christian experience. As with the Communion itself, the Anglican liturgy found room to accommodate the varieties of needs, experiences and pieties of God's children as it found them.

We can hardly discuss Anglican liturgy without mentioning the centrality of *The Book of Common Prayer*. Virtually all our liturgies, from Holy Baptism to the Burial of the Dead, play out within the structure of *The Book of Common Prayer*. We find comfort in the ritual, in the familiarity of the language and the litany, and in the traditions of the Church. Of course, the Church has revised the prayer book several times to accommodate local needs and update its language. The liturgy, the work of the people, has changed because the people have changed, as have their needs, hopes and experiences. Anglican liturgy now reflects the diversity we find throughout the people who are God's special creation. The fundamental task, however, remains the same: we rise to give witness to a broken world of the love and saving power of Christ crucified. In this task, the prayer book acts as more than the framework for our liturgy; it is woven into the very DNA of Anglican liturgy.

Sometimes, those from non-liturgical churches suggest that our worship is formal or stilted. I think of Anglican liturgy, however, as rhythmic and guided. Because we follow the church calendar, the scriptural readings follow a regular cycle, beginning with Advent and ending with Ordinary Time. That cycle follows the life of Jesus. Similarly, the lectionary progresses along a three-year cycle, insuring that we neither dwell obsessively upon nor carelessly omit certain passages of Scripture. The prayer book guides our liturgy, compelling us to embrace the whole experience of the people of God. Thus, we do not consign our worship to the unfettered discretion of a given priest, or a given congregation. Rather, we find our guidance in the community of the Church. And because tradition provides one of the legs of Hooker's stool, the saints who have gone before us (like Thomas Cranmer) have a voice in that worship as well.

Within the Anglican tradition, both prayers and sermons are important, but neither is the sole or perhaps even central component of our worship. The clergy have a role in the drama of salvation which our liturgy acts out, but the people of God share that work in a role that carries no less import than the clergy. We raise our voices together, along with all the saints, in worship. My own personal prayers might be poetic and glorious; on the other hand, they may at times be stammering, half-hearted or even insincere. Thus, I need to come together with my brothers and sisters to experience the depth, breadth and wisdom of the whole body of Christ. And when I pray the Holy Creed of Nicea, I know I pray with the whole church, including those saints who are no longer with us.

Further, while the text of the prayer book can be studied and read silently, it does not serve that purpose primarily. Like the Psalms and all good poetry, the contents of the prayer book are, and have always been, meant to be read aloud. Moreover, the prayers and services therein are generally meant to be spoken in community, with God's other children. C.S. Lewis underscored the theological underpinning of this view when he noted that aside from the Blessed Sacrament, there is nothing more holy in the church than the Christian sitting in the pew next to you.

Perhaps most importantly, our liturgy (*leitourgia*) is public work, the work of the people. We are compelled to come together for this task, the work of the people of God. We may pray alone, but we worship together, in community, in communion. Through the prayer book, we join our worship with the faithful who have gone before us, with that "cloud of witnesses" St. Paul spoke of in Hebrews. We come together in liturgy and bear witness to both the muck and the glory of the body of the Church, its great pain and its

great celebration. Our brothers and sisters in the Orthodox tradition believe that liturgy functions to bring heaven to earth. For me, the Anglican liturgy helps create that point of intersection, that “thin place” the Celtic tradition talks about, in which the people of God join together to work out the drama of our salvation.

The Lord be with you.

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