Some Notes on the Sunday Service

This past Sunday at St Catherine of Siena and St James, we had a *teaching eucharist*, which is a slightly adapted version of our usual Sunday service, with commentary at various points. The following are lightly edited notes, for those who want to revisit them as well as those who could not be there on the day.

The first thing to point out, before we get to the service proper is the *Prayer of Preparation* now included as an optional prayer for personal use:

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer is quite old, at least a thousand years old. Its earliest known use is in votive masses dedicated to

the Holy Spirit, which are often a priest's first Mass. It is found in, among other places, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, that great mystic text of the 14th century. Thomas Cranmer then included it into the Book of Common Prayer, where it is called the *Collect for Purity*.

The Gathering

We begin every Mass in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is a reminder that everything we do here begins with God. There is nothing we do, and certainly nothing we can offer to God, that does not first come from God.

The Trinitarian formula also reminds us of our baptism, as we are baptised with those same words: and so, as we prepare for Mass, we recall that we are one people baptized into one Body, and are called to live accordingly.

And speaking of bodies, the *Sign of the Cross* itself has us touching our foreheads, chests, and shoulders, reminding us of the commandment to love the Lord our God with all our mind, heart, and strength.

It is a simple thing, this first moment of the Mass, but it contains multitudes.

And then, we greet one another, by saying:

PRIEST The Lord be with you.

ALL **And also with you.**

This greeting is taken from the Old Testament, but may be more familiar from the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary in Luke 1.28, and adapted for the Hail Mary: *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.*

With a few exceptions, in the Bible, the greeting usually comes as a statement of fact: the Lord *is* with you. But here, the verb is modified: the Lord *be* with you. This makes it a blessing of sorts, first from the priest to the people, which the congregation then returns to the priest.

We are then invited to confess our sins. One implication of this practice is that confession and absolution are first required to make us worthy to receive holy communion: there is certainly a strong element of this in the tradition. But there is another strand also, captured well by something Pope Francis likes to say, which is that the Sacrament "is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak." Thus, holy communion itself is a part of the absolution we receive.

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Except in Advent and Lent, we sing or say the *Gloria*, which is very ancient indeed, from around the fourth century. The opening line–*Glory to God, in the highest, and peace to his peace on earth*–is even older, coming from the angelic hymn before the Shepherds at Christmas.

Like the Collect for Purity, the Gloria has always been used by Anglicans, who retained it from Catholic usage. But its location in the service has shifted. Originally, Cranmer placed it early, acting like a gathering hymn; but in his second edition of the Prayer Book in 1552, he moved it to the end of the service, where it remains in the Book of Common Prayer even now. This is peculiar among denominations, and no one really knows why it was moved. In the 20th century, the Gloria was moved back earlier, where it is now in *Common Worship*: the fact that it comes after the Absolution adds to it a sense that it is a hymn that celebrates God's mercy and forgiveness.

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There are many ways to think about the structure of the service, and one way is as a drama in three acts. In

the first act, we–the people of God–are gathered together. This first act therefore ends with the gathering of our prayers together, which is why the prayer located here is called the Collect.

The Ministry of the Word

The second act in our liturgical drama is usually called the Ministry of the Word, which begins appropriately enough with the reading of Scripture.

The pattern of readings is specified in the Lectionary: or rather, a lectionary, as there are a few. The idea of a lectionary goes back to ancient Jewish times, and it is likely that the synagogues Jesus attended used them. Indeed, early Christian lectionaries were adapted from Jewish ones.

For much of Christian history, most lectionaries worked on an annual basis, trying to cram in as much of the Bible as possible within one year, and repeating that every year. To accomplish this, people either had to attend services very frequently or listen to very long readings whenever they attended services, or both.

For example, the traditional Sunday lectionary in the Book of Common Prayer only contains an Epistle and a Gospel. To hear the Old Testament read, one would have to attend Morning and Evening Prayer. And anyone who did so daily would hear most of it in the course of a single year. In fact, they would hear all of the psalms every month; and most of the New Testament thrice within a year. We would know our Bible very well indeed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this traditional lectionary is now rarely used.

Since the 1960s, different churches–starting with the Roman Catholic Church– decided that people should be able to hear most of the Bible even if they only attended Sunday services. So we moved to a system that covered most of the Bible in three years' worth of Sundays. That is the system most commonly used now in the Church of England and elsewhere. According to the Prayer Book Society, even churches that use the Book of Common Prayer tend to use this new lectionary system.

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After the readings comes the sermon, and I thought I might say something about how they are written. Different people write sermons differently, of course: and some don't write them at all. I have a lot of admiration for people who can preach off the cuff, but I don't allow myself to do so mostly because I want to be very very careful about what I say in this pulpit.

I usually write on Monday afternoons, from around 1pm. First, I read the lectionary readings several times, beginning with the Gospel. Usually, something in it will pop out at me, which requires further investigation. This is done by consulting the Greek text, and by reading commentaries, both by modern scholars as well as by the Church Fathers like St Augustine and St Gregory of Nyssa, and medieval theologians like St Thomas Aquinas. The point of the sermon emerges at this stage: and there is always only one point. The writing then begins, which always also involves more consulting of other sources, in the manner of fact-checking. By around 5.30pm I will have a draft, roughly 1,200 words long, and I will leave it as it is until Saturday, when the editing is done.

Opinions differ about what sermons are for. Many preachers think that they are to help people

understand the Bible better. This is not what I think. I think sermons are to remind us what the Christian faith is about, and the Bible readings are a jumping off point for this. This is why my sermons are often quite tenuously related to the readings: they are not really about them, though they are inspired by them.

Another way to think about this is to consider the location of the sermon, between the readings and the Creed, almost like a bridge. The aim of the sermon is therefore to link what we have heard from the Bible to what we confess in the Creed. The Creed itself is a subject that deserves its own session of teaching, and that will have to wait for another day.

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Just as the first act ended with the gathering of prayers together in the Collect, so the second act also ends with the prayers of the people, this time of intercession. I have recently preached on prayer, so I won't repeat that here: except to remind us that our prayers should be honest. They are not occasions for proving to God how pious we are, but for being vulnerable and open before God and indeed ourselves.

The Ministry of the Sacrament

The third act, containing the climax of the liturgy, is the Ministry of the Sacrament, beginning with the exchanging of the Peace.

If I am allowed an observation about the British: people here don't much like exchanging the Peace. In fact, the Book of Common Prayer basically got rid of it altogether, which I consider one of its main deficiencies. Even now in Common Worship, at least before COVID-times, we just sort of awkwardly shook hands, as briefly as possible. Very few congregations exchange a kiss of peace–which is what the Bible suggests–or even a hug. In contrast, if you were to attend a Caribbean-majority church, you would notice that the Peace goes on for much longer, and people kiss and hug and even chitchat. That's not quite what the Peace is for either, but it's a lot closer to the original intention.

The biblical mandate for the exchange of the Peace comes from the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus says that when we are making an offering at the altar and remember that someone has something against

us, we should leave the gift and make peace with them before coming back to offer it. Its original intention is reconciliation between people.

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After the Peace, while the Offertory hymn is sung, a few things happened at altar, rather far away from the congregation: this is a regrettable aspect of the way old churches are laid out.

Old churches are built to face east, with the altar flush against the wall. Before the Reformation, the priest would celebrate the Mass facing the altar, which is to say with his back to the congregation. Of course, the priest would face the people when addressing them, but would then turn around when addressing God on the people's behalf as their representative. It has always seemed to me a poor description to say that the priest has his back to the congregation: another way of putting it is to say that the priest is facing east *together with* the congregation whom he represents.

After the Reformation, the priest would stand at the north end of the altar, rather than face the congregation from behind the altar, as we have it now. This still happens in some parish churches: those particularly serious about celebrating the Lord's Supper exactly as the Book of Common Prayer dictates. I have great admiration for such rigorous purity of vision.

I confess the old east-facing setup is my preferred practice, but its drawback is obvious: the congregation is less able to see and hear what the priest is doing. This problem is exacerbated when the altar is far away, as it is in many churches. For this reason, I would prefer to have the altar much closer to you, such as in the crossing between the chancel and the nave. But don't worry, I won't secretly move the altar when the Churchwardens aren't looking.

The preparation of the altar begins with the bread and wine being brought to the altar. This is sometimes done by a server, who also represents the whole congregation. In some churches, the bread and wine are brought down the aisle up to the altar, much as offerings of money are. Both moves symbolize the same thing, which is our offering of ourselves. This is a

mutually redundant symbolism is deliberate fudge, dating back to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. In previous editions, the money collected went directly into an almsbox, while the bread and wine came up to the altar: starting from 1662, however, both were placed on the altar, in part to dissuade the faithful from viewing the bread and wine as "offerings". I broadly disapprove of this fudge.

Wine is poured into the chalice, and so is a bit of water. This reminds us of the blood and water that flowed from Jesus's side when he was speared on the Cross. The mixing of the water and wine also reminds us of the mingling of Christ's own divinity and humanity that in turn unites us to God.

In this Benefice, at St Catherine of Siena, the bread and wine are censed at this point, as is the altar itself. This is a symbol of reverence, an acknowledgement that these are holy things. The holiness of the bread and wine is obvious: they are to be consecrated to mediate the presence of God. The holiness of the altar may be less obvious. Traditionally, altars also symbolize the body of Christ, and these can be seen in old altars that have marked upon them five crosses, in the corners and the centre, signifying the wounds on

Christ's hands, feet, and side. In most churches where incense is used, the priest is also censed, as are the people. This too is to acknowledge that we are holy people, made holy by Christ who is present among us in the Eucharist.

The incense we use in churches is still often made of frankincense, sometimes with myrrh: and the thurible we use for censing is usually gold in colour. These are, of course, reminders of the Nativity, and the gifts brought from afar. Since biblical times, the smoke from burning incense has also been a symbol of our prayers rising to Heaven. The liturgical use of incense is incredibly rich in meaning, and also has the virtue of connecting us to our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, who have always used it.

Once all this is done, we are ready for the Eucharistic Prayer, which is the climax of the liturgy.

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One particularly stupid bit of partisanship within the Church of England has to do with what we call this

service. The terms “Lord’s Supper” , “Holy Communion”, “Mass” and “Eucharist” all have their own connotations of churchmanship, so much so that certain churches have an allergy to some of these terms. This is ridiculous and childish, as they are all meaningful in different ways. The term “Lord’s Supper” reminds us of the historical origins of what we are doing. The term “Holy Communion” reminds us of what is being accomplished here, which is unity with God and with one another. The term “mass” comes from the word “dismissal”, which is in turn related to the word “mission”, and reminds us that what we do in church is preparation for what we do out in the world. The term “Eucharist” simply means “thanksgiving”, which reminds us that the dominant emotion here should be one of gratitude. This is reflected in the opening dialogue of the Eucharistic Prayer, which we are about to hear: in it, we are called to give thanks and praise to God. Indeed, the whole eucharistic prayer is a response to this call.

Right after the opening dialogue comes the Preface, which varies from season to season and on special occasions, and summarizes what we are giving thanks for, focussing on God’s gift to us of Jesus Christ.

The preface ends with the Sanctus and Benedictus. The “Holy, holy, holy” of the Sanctus comes from the books of Isaiah and Revelation, from their visions of heaven, which reminds us that the Eucharist is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. The Benedictus is taken from the proclamations of the people when Jesus enters Jerusalem, which we reenact on Palm Sunday, and is a way of welcoming Jesus into our midst here and now.

After this, proceeds what many people think of as the Eucharistic Prayer proper, when the consecration of the Bread and Wine happen. Five things happen in the course of this part of the Eucharistic Prayer as we have it here. Opinions differ on which, if any, of these are essential for consecration. The Church of England supplies eight different eucharistic prayers to choose from, and not all contain all five elements. The one we use–Eucharistic Prayer B–does, which is partly why we use it, to be as comprehensive as possible. Much more can be said about the different options, but that will have to be left for another day.

The five elements have been given unfortunately abstruse names, which are *institution*, *anamnesis*, *oblation*, *epiclesis*, and *doxology*.

The institution refers to the most familiar part, repeating the words of Jesus at the Last Supper.

"Anamnesis" just means "memory", and is a response to Jesus's command to "do this in remembrance of me". Notice later that right after those words of institution, we recall the "mystery of faith", and then say that we are "calling to mind" Christ's death and celebrating the "memorial of our redemption".

"Oblation" is an old-fashioned way of saying "offering", as in "we offer you this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving". The theology of eucharistic offering is complicated, and a subject on which people have disagreed since the Reformation. We all–Catholics and Protestants–agree that Christ has offered the sacrifice for sins once and for all: and we all agree that, in the eucharist, we are offering something too, not least praise and thanksgiving. What we disagree about is how these are connected. Protestants tend to draw a sharp distinction between the two: Christ has made one offering, and–in response–we make another. Catholics tend to bring them together: Christ has made one offering, and in our offering, we join in his.

Anglican liturgy tends to be fuzzy on this point, permitting both interpretations.

“Epiclesis” means “invocation”, and is when we call upon the Holy Spirit. Eucharistic Prayer B has what is called a “split epiclesis”. At the beginning of the prayer, the Holy Spirit is called upon the gifts–“grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit”–and then later, there is another invocations, this time for God to “send the Holy Spirit on your people”. These serve a similar function as the Benedictus. There, we are inviting Christ to enter; here, we are inviting the Holy Spirit to do the same. In both cases, what we are insisting upon is that God is present in the eucharist, and not just in the way that God is present everywhere, but in a special though admittedly mysterious way.

Finally, “doxology” means praise, and refers to the very end of the Eucharistic Prayer, during which we give all glory and honour to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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After the Eucharistic Prayer comes the Lord’s Prayer, and it may be interesting to reflect on the relationship

between the two. One way to think about it, which I commend to you, is to consider one of the traditional names of this prayer: the "Our Father". It is important to remember that "the Father" is first and foremost a Trinitarian name, referring to the Father of the Son, Jesus Christ. It is only by adoption that we then call God our Father. In the Eucharistic Prayer, we recall what Christ has done for us to adopt us into this divine life, thus now permitting us to call God "our Father".

Then, the focus turns to the bread and wine themselves. Ideally, one piece of bread and one cup of wine are consecrated, and then shared among the people. In most churches, however, small pieces of bread are used: but they are placed in one vessel–either a plate called a "paten" or a stemmed vessel called a "ciborium"–to symbolize the "one bread".

I use the word "bread", but you will no doubt have noticed that what we use bears very little resemblance to bread. It is in fact *unleavened* bread, that is bread without yeast: so it is just water and flour. There are two reasons for this. The first is that unleavened bread is what is used at Passover, which is what the Lord's Supper is partly modeled upon. Unleavened bread is

used at Passover because, in the Book of Exodus, the Israelites had to prepare their meal and eat in haste, so there was no time for the bread to rise. Furthermore, in the New Testament, leaven–yeast–is sometimes used as a metaphor for sin: so we avoid it in this bread that is consecrated to be the body of Christ who is sinless.

In any case, even in churches that use small pieces of bread rather than a single large one, at least one piece of bread needs to be broken. This is first because Jesus broke bread at the Last Supper, and we are imitating him. But it is also because Jesus's own body was broken–flogged and pierced–for the sake of the world, and the breaking of the bread reminds us of this. For me, this is the most poignant action in the whole liturgy, which is my profound albeit strange privilege to perform: here, I am acting as Judas and as Pilate and as the mob baying for Jesus's death, and as the soldiers who executed him, breaking his body.

After the bread is broken, the priest raises up Christ's body broken and blood outpoured for you to behold, you who are the onlookers and witnesses to the Crucifixion. You are Mary his mother, and the women with her. You are John and Peter, and the other

disciples who were there. You are the bandits crucified alongside him. You are the Roman Centurion who acknowledges that he is God's Son. And you are all invited to receive him.

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Despite the well-known disagreements between Catholics and Protestants about exactly what happens to the bread and wine in the Eucharist, we all treat the consecrated elements with respect. The Book of Common Prayer tells the priest to reverently consume what is left over, though the unconsecrated remains may be brought home by the Curate for personal use.

At some churches, some consecrated bread is reserved in a wall-safe called an "aumbry" or a cabinet placed on the altar called a "tabernacle". This is a sign of Christ's continued presence in the church. The only day of the year when that aumbry is empty is on Good Friday, signifying Christ's absence from the world.

After the consecrated bread and wine are reverently consumed or placed in the aumbry, we come to the conclusion of the service. We greet one another again,

and this time the words “the Lord be with you” take on a slightly different shade, because we have just received him into our own bodies.

God’s blessing is then pronounced, and we are sent out into the world with a mission: to go in peace to love and serve the Lord.