

Explaining the Church of England

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Holy Communion

The Church of England COMMUNICATIONS UNIT

Jesus' life on earth brought him into conflict with the religious and political authorities of his time, a conflict which led to his crucifixion on the first Good Friday. Two days later, on the first Easter Day, God reversed this defeat and humiliation by raising Jesus from the dead.

These events took place at the time of the Jewish passover, a festival which spoke to the Jews of deliverance. Jesus' death and resurrection give fresh meaning to this theme and offer deliverance from the oppression, principally, of death, sin, guilt and fear.

On the night before Jesus was put to death on the Cross, he had his last supper with the disciples.

During the meal, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in the Jewish fashion. He broke it into pieces and gave it to his friends saying it was his Body. After the meal, he took some wine, gave thanks to God and gave it to them saying it was his Blood. He commanded them to continue this simple ceremony in remembrance of him.

The church has obeyed that command for two thousand years. In churches and cathedrals, in schools, prisons, hospitals and private homes, on board ship and on battlefields, the words and actions of Jesus have been repeated.

The sacrament of the bread and wine has been given to young couples on their wedding day as they start their new life together and it has brought comfort to the dying and the bereaved. For many Christians through the centuries, it has been the central act in their lives from which they have drawn their strength.

Many names

This action has been called by many names, each of which illustrates one of the truths about it.

The simplest is The Lord's Supper, which particularly recalls the fellowship between Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. As Jesus was the host then, so we believe he is the unseen host at the Lord's Supper and the worshippers are his guests.

The Book of Common Prayer uses The Lord's Supper and also Holy Communion, which is the name most often used in the Church of England. This emphasises the way a person

receiving communion, the communicant, is drawn into close communion with God in Christ and so with all Christians at all times and in all places.

The name Eucharist is increasingly used by Anglicans. The word means thanksgiving and, in the central (or Eucharistic) prayer of the service, we give thanks to God for his gifts in creation and for all that he has done through Jesus Christ, praying that the bread and wine may be for us the Body and Blood of Christ.

Mass is derived from the dismissal of the congregation at the end of the Latin service. The word refers to the sending out of the worshippers to their daily life. It is commonly used in the Roman Catholic Church and by many Anglicans, as well.

The Liturgy, meaning the service or work of the Church, in which every member has his or her appointed part, is sometimes used, particularly by the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Occasionally, people will just refer to the Sacrament because the Holy Communion is one of the two main sacraments of the Church (the other is baptism) that Jesus instituted himself.

The shape of the service

In the Church of England, as in the other Churches of the mainstream catholic tradition, the Holy Communion may only be celebrated by an ordained bishop or priest.

However simple or elaborate the service, it always includes four acts. The celebrating priest, often now called the president as the one who presides at the service,

- takes the bread and wine
- gives thanks over them (including Jesus's words at that last supper)
- breaks the bread
- distributes the bread and wine to the communicants

There is, of course, more to the service than this. As Communion focuses for the worshipper the mystery of God's work in Christ, so people who come to receive communion need to prepare themselves beforehand.

The ministry of the word

The first part of the service concentrates on teaching: readings from the Bible, including a passage from one of the Gospels, and normally a sermon. Very often, the congregation recites the Creed -- the basic statement of Christian belief.

A more personal part of the preparation is when the congregation confess together that they have sinned against God by doing things they should not have and by not doing things they should have. The president assures them of God's forgiveness.

There are also prayers of intercession for all the concerns of the church and the world, for fellow Christians and especially the bishop, for peace among nations and for those in need. People known to the congregation who are sick or troubled may be prayed for by name. Those who have died will be remembered.

The offering

The central part of the service often begins with the exchange of Peace, a very ancient Christian custom which has been revived. The president always exchanges a spoken greeting with the congregation. Members of the congregation may then turn and greet each other in friendship and as a demonstration of Christ's love which should be present among Christians. This greeting is often expressed by a hand clasp.

It is essential to the Communion that those who come to it are, as the Book of Common Prayer says, 'in love and charity with their neighbours'.

The bread and wine are placed on the holy table or altar, sometimes brought there by members of the congregation in procession. A collection may be taken of the people's offerings of money for the work of the church.

The service then approaches its climax. The president gives thanks to God for his gifts and especially for the gift of his Son. He uses Jesus' own words at the Last Supper and prays for the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is a very holy moment as the congregation joins silently in the prayer before the president invites them to partake of the bread and wine.

Immediately before or after receiving the sacrament, the president and congregation will say the prayer Jesus taught us: "Our Father ...".

The service ends with prayers of thankfulness, a commitment to living the Christian way of life in the world, a blessing and the dismissal.

The meaning

Over the centuries, Christian people of different traditions have come to emphasise and to treasure particular features in the understanding of this great mystery. Disagreement and disputes about the Holy Communion have been some of the saddest chapters in Christian history. However, what unites Christian people of different traditions, Anglicans among them, is far deeper and more extensive than what divides us.

For instance, all Christians agree that Jesus' offering of himself in his life and in his death was done perfectly and for all time; and that the Holy Communion commemorates his life and death.

Further, all Christians believe that, in the Holy Communion, God offers to renew the fellowship and communion with him to which he has already called us. We respond to God's invitation by faith and trust in Christ who died for us and in whose risen life we have already been given a share. Thus he feeds us with his life.

Compared with these great truths on which all Christians agree, the various ways for example in which the bread and wine may be understood to be the Body and Blood of Christ are far less important. Put more simply, all Christians agree Christ's sacrifice on the cross to be the fundamental reality which underlies the entire Christian life, the Eucharist included. The service of Holy Communion is not just the commemoration of something which happened in history. It is the celebration of a person who is our Lord and Master and of events which have eternal significance.

Welcome

In the Church of England, it has been customary to have been confirmed by a bishop before receiving Communion. Whether this rule will continue is now under discussion. In some parish churches children who are baptised and are old enough to have some understanding of Holy Communion are allowed to partake when they come to the altar rail with their parents.

Since 1972, any Christian of any other Church who has been baptised in the name of the Trinity -- God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit -- and is a communicant member of that Church is welcome to receive Holy Communion in the Church of England. This is an expression of our hope that, one day, all Christians will be united.

This is one of a range of leaflets available explaining the working and beliefs of the Church of England

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