

AN INSTRUCTED EUCHARIST – 2 Lent, February 17, 2008

(Bob-Bold)

Introduction (KPC)

The Episcopal Church is a “liturgical” church. The word “liturgy” literally means “the work of the people”. That means that we, like our Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran counterparts, worship in a form where we engage in sometimes elaborate ceremonials. These ceremonies have a definite structure that has developed over thousands of years and has its foundations in Scripture, history, and theology. It seems that for us, as humans, the most significant of life’s events deserve the greatest amount of ceremony. And nothing is more significant than the way we worship God. The work of the people that we call liturgy is to offer ourselves and our substance as an oblation to God, made acceptable by virtue of the offering of Jesus Christ himself.

Many of you came into the Episcopal church for the first time because of the liturgy. It is what defines us as Episcopalians. At the seminary where I work, the usual comment among the Lutheran students is that, to understand Episcopalians, you have to worship with them. It is not something you can learn from a book. Ritual, refers to the words of the liturgy-the use of hymns and psalms and prayers, furnishing us with the capacity which our own imaginations lack to say what we should say. Ceremony refers to the actions in the liturgy. (If we say a liturgy has “full ceremonial”, it means we include all of the most elaborate actions and vestments, bells and smells, chant, copes and chasubles, the works.) Every movement-kneeling, standing, processing, gestures by the ministers and the people- is significant.

In order for our liturgy to be worship and not mere theater, we must all participate and understand what we are doing. We are all participants, not spectators. The liturgy is an action of the whole People of God. We share in the liturgy by virtue of our baptism. And, for us, The Holy Eucharist is the principal act of worship in the church, the one we do every Sunday and feast day of the Christian year. It is a sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ himself at the Last Supper. It is filled with mystery and meaning. It is the most significant thing that we do. It is endlessly repeatable and endlessly satisfying.

We will begin by describing the church, the liturgical seasons, including vestments and colors, and some of the equipment and paraphernalia that accompanies our liturgy. Each has a story and a place in completing the mystery of the Eucharist. But today, for the most part, my intention is to give a running commentary on the Eucharist itself, to describe each step as we go along , ie. What we are doing and why we are doing it. The commentary in no way diminishes the validity of the Eucharist itself. It is acceptable to the church to do this from time to time. For some of you, I hope it will increase your awe and wonder at what is actually taking place when you come to the altar. For others, it may help you to understand the flow and action of our worship, and perhaps satisfy your curiosity.

Because of the commentary, there will not be a normal sermon this day. And since it is Lent, I will try to point out the differences in the liturgy from what you might be used to in “ordinary time” such as Pentecost or Epiphany or during the Easter season.

The Church Building itself (Bob)

Most people refer to the interior of the worship space as the “sanctuary”, which is a sacred space. But that is not entirely accurate in an Episcopal church. You are sitting in the nave, the place for the congregation. The entry or foyer in the back is the “narthex”. The elevated area for choir and ministers is the “chancel”, which may be separated by a screen. You will see this in some of the great cathedrals. The “sanctuary” is a holy place or safe place. Although the whole interior of the church might be called the sanctuary, we usually reserve the use of the word for the area around the altar, behind the rail if there is one. The meeting and eating place below the worship space is the undercroft. The wall safe for the reserved sacrament is called an Aumbry. Some churches have a space set aside, usually in the back near the entrance, for a baptistry. Ancient churches had these in a separate building.

Things

The church contains many objects used as essentials or accessories to our worship. Central are the chalice and paten, the symbols of the Holy Eucharist and the vessels of the elements. In this church, it is customary to set up the altar in advance with a “stack” consisting of chalice, purificator, paten, pall, veil and burse. They sit on a Corporal. It might be useful to have a dictionary of terms for all of these things. It is mostly just Episcopal jargon. Important furniture includes the Altar, central to our worship, font (usually near the entrance), stoup for holy water, pulpit and lectern, bishop’s chair (after all, we are a church of bishops), thurible and boat for incense, aspergillum and bucket for broadcasting holy water. Among vestments worn by altar party and clergy, the most significant are stole, a sign of ordination, and chasuble, a covering garment used only for the Eucharist. (KPC will add a comment about the chasuble.) Colors of hangings and vestments change with the seasons: Pentecost and Epiphany=green, advent and Lent, violet or purple, Pentecost Sunday, Holy week and martyrs days=red, and the high holy celebrations of Christmas and Easter, with their seasons to follow are white (or even gold). We also wear white for weddings, baptisms, and funerals.

Candles are used extensively in our worship. Two candles, and only two, are lighted on the altar at every Eucharist. You won’t believe this, but in earlier times, this was controversial. Low churchmen disapproved of this. They also disapproved of music, stained glass, frequent Eucharist, vestments, and anything considered a distraction or “too catholic”. I am glad they did not prevail. We carry torches in procession with the gospel to illuminate the good news as people gather around to hear it proclaimed by the deacon.

The Paschal Candle symbolizes the risen Christ. It is lit at the Great Vigil and remains lighted for all services until Pentecost. Some churches extinguish it on Ascension Day. It will be lit for baptisms and funerals and is usually placed near the font.

Gestures and actions (KPC) *Bob go to center aisle and demonstrate*

It is typical in Episcopal worship to kneel to pray and make confession, sit to listen, and stand to proclaim something in word or song. In recent times, it has become more acceptable to stand for prayer, including the Eucharistic prayer, as it was done in the synagogues and the early church. But kneeling is still the custom in many churches and either is acceptable. But we always kneel for the confession, and, in Lent, for the prayer over the people at the end. For those who are not able or comfortable kneeling, sitting with bowed head is just fine. If you cannot stand, then sit. It is not likely that God will care.

The most common manual act, by priest and people, is making the sign of the cross. (show how). It dates back to at least 230 AD. The sign is Trinitarian, as it makes you think of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit when making the sign. It is appropriate to make the sign whenever the Trinity is named. The gesture is also a manual “amen”, an outward sign of your inward assent, saying “yes” to what has been said. As the worship begins, you assent outwardly showing that you are moving inwardly into worship. In ancient times, it simply meant that you were a Christian, like wearing the cross around our necks or on our clothes.

At the reading of the Gospel, many persons will make a threefold sign of the cross on their forehead, lips, and breast that this gospel “be on my mind, on my lips, and on my heart”.

Throughout the liturgy, I will point out the places where making the sign of the cross is appropriate if you wish. But none of this is in the rubrics of the book of common prayer, and none of it is required or expected of the congregation. Indeed, though the instructions in the prayerbook may ask for standing, sitting, or kneeling, no other actions by the people are so instructed. It is entirely up to you. And you will discover that congregations all may have different habits and customs.

Other actions that you may observe or do yourself during the liturgy are the simple bow, solemn bow, and genuflection. I do them all at one time or another, you may do them from time to time or not at all. In simple terms, we bow to honor the altar or the cross. We genuflect in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. In churches where the sacrament is reserved in the tabernacle, it is appropriate to genuflect when entering or passing in front of it. The priest will genuflect at the words of institution. If there is no sacrament in the church, a simple bow to the altar will suffice.

The structure of the Mass

The basic structure of our liturgy consists of the Liturgy of the Word followed by the Liturgy of the Table, Holy Communion.

The Liturgy of the word begins with an Entrance rite, usually a procession with music, a salutation appropriate to the season, gathering prayers, a hymn of praise or Gloria, and the collect of the day, a simple prayer recalling the scripture lessons.

SALUTATION, GLORIA AND COLLECT

“please be seated for the readings”

We then hear (usually) four readings from Scripture: OT lesson, Psalm, NT lesson, and Gospel. These are prescribed for each Sunday in a Lectionary which follows a three year cycle during which virtually all of the New Testament and Gospels are read in church, with Old Testament readings that relate. The cycle is repeated every three years. The Gospels follow a pattern: Year A-Matthew, Year B-Mark, Year C (this year)-Luke. John is read during Christmas and Easter seasons. There is no choice in this. We cannot pick and choose the readings because we like them or to make some favorite selective point. To be true to the Word, we must consider it in its entirety, not selectively and reflect on all of it. That results sometimes in having to preach on some unpleasant realities in the Gospel, but that cannot be avoided or omitted.

THE LESSONS

(After the Gospel is read, in place of the sermon..)

The Sermon is a continuation of the proclamation of the Good News of the Gospel. It is a continuous action from Gospel to sermon. Thus there is no music or extra action between them. We process back to the pulpit in silence. In our tradition, sermons are only given by ordained persons or persons especially licensed by the bishop to preach. They must be based on good theology, education in Scripture, Gospel oriented, and relevant to the people in the pews. They are not a bully pulpit for political rants, personal prejudices, or standup comedy. It is not a personal performance.

The sermon is followed by a statement of faith, the Creed. For the Eucharist, we now use the Nicene Creed which is a collective statement of the faith. We understand that for many of you, it is not a personal statement of your faith. There are many times when you have to admit that you don't believe every part of it, though few will admit that in public. It doesn't matter. You cover for each other by saying "we". Among all of you, the full creed is affirmed.

THE CREED

The prayers of the people are never read by the priest. They come from the people and are offered by the people. It is an appropriate time to give personal intentions, either silently or aloud. If space permitted, it would be best to be given from a prayer desk in the aisle, by a reader kneeling and facing the altar or from someone in the pew.

THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

The confession of sin necessarily precedes Communion. Without reconciliation of our sins against God and our neighbor, the Communion is not authentic. We must be cleansed in order to receive the gift of Christ's body and blood with integrity and an open heart. In today's liturgy, you will note that the confession is omitted. Following the extended penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, the joyful seasons that follow usually omit confession and absolution. During Holy Week, the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross was itself the great absolution and is not repeated during the Great Fifty Days.

Absolution in our tradition is granted only by a priest. The authority to do that is conferred by the bishop at ordination in the succession from the apostles. If a layperson leads the confession, he or she will request absolution at the end (have mercy on US). If a priest leads it, he or she grants absolution (have mercy on YOU). It is a significant difference.

The Peace is an extension of the reconciliation with neighbor expected before receiving the Holy Eucharist with integrity. It is very ancient and was restored in the 1979 prayerbook.

THE PEACE ANNOUNCEMENTS

(after the announcements, Describe the offertory and setting the table)

(KPC) The Liturgy of the Table is the climax of our worship, the Holy Communion itself.

It begins with an offertory, the offering of our gifts of bread and wine, and the alms given by the congregation. They are brought forward and presented or placed on the altar. It is at this point that the table is set and we begin the sacred rite of Holy Communion.

The table is most properly set by a Deacon if one is present. He spreads the corporal, lays out the paten and chalice, and places the bread and pours the wine. We always add a little water to the wine. A large wafer, priest host, is provided for the fraction and elevation. Kitty does not bless the water since it is blessed with the wine later. At the Eucharist, we believe in a common paten and common cup. Separate ones are never consecrated at the table. If more is required, we consecrate the wine in the cruet which may remain on the corporal and other chalices filled later as needed. Extra wafers may be placed on the paten or directly on the corporal. We can also go to the reserve or consecrate additional as needed.

THE OFFERTORY

(after the gifts are received and Doxology sung...)

The consecration and communion begins with the Great Thanksgiving, the literal translation of the word “eucharist”. There are several versions of this great prayer which vary slightly in language and emphasis. But they all contain the essential elements of consecration of the bread and wine to become the body and blood of Christ himself. What the priest is doing is recalling, in the words of Institution, the institution of the sacrament by Christ himself at the Last Supper. There is an additional action, the epiclesis, at which the priest calls the Holy Spirit down upon the bread and wine, making them holy and investing them with the Real Presence of Christ himself. We don’t know how or when this really happens. Some think the words of institution are sufficient. We ring the bell at that point to tell you something special is happening. But we prefer to add the invocation of the epiclesis. You will see me at that point making the sign of the cross over the elements and then holding my hands over them in a gesture of invocation. It is a very special moment in the liturgy.

THE GREAT THANKSGIVING

(before the Great Amen-)

We conclude this part by offering these elements back to God as a sacrifice for our sins, the elevation at the time of the Great Amen. This is the sacrificial element of the mass.

THE GREAT AMEN

We will say the Lord's prayer in union with him and all others who partake of the Holy Communion.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

The Fraction recalls the breaking of bread by Christ at the Last Supper. For some, it recalls the broken body of Christ on the Cross, although his legs weren't broken, or the tearing of the curtains of the temple. In that sense, it is more solemn in its meaning. I like to hear the snap of the wafer, one reason I prefer wafers to bread.

THE FRACTION

You are then invited to come to the rail for communion. The Eucharist is valid in either kind, bread or wine or both. You may receive the wafer in your hand or directly in your mouth. You may sip the wine from the cup or dip the wafer into it. Or you may pass the wine by and receive only the wafer. All of these are acceptable and valid.

THE INVITATION TO COMMUNION

(After all have communed during the ablutions)

Remaining consecrated bread and wine are consumed at the table or in the sacristy or they can be reserved in the Aumbry to be carried to those at home. There are also ritual actions for cleansing the vessels and linens. Once consecrated, these elements are treated with the respect given to Christ Himself. If you accidentally drop a wafer, do not worry or be embarrassed. Do not pick it up. The priest or deacon will pick it up and consume it. You will be given another. It is intended that the wafer be immediately consumed and not saved for later or taken back to the pew. Sometimes children don't understand that.

ABLUTIONS AND RESETTING THE TABERNACLE

When all is done and the elements put away, we offer our thanks in a final prayer of thanksgiving. We have been the recipients of one of the most profound gifts that God can give—the body and blood of his son, given for us, and for the Grace that comes with it. In our gratitude, we must now go out and share the grace and good news with the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

POSTCOMMUNION PRAYER

You will be given a final blessing by the priest, although, after the great gift of the Eucharist, some priests find it totally unnecessary.

BLESSING

As we depart, the deacon and I will kiss the altar in greeting and good-bye.

From the back of the church you will be sent forth by the dismissal by the deacon. Once dismissed, you may get up and leave immediately. You need not wait for the candles to be extinguished. “The mass is over.....”

RECESSIONAL

DISMISSAL