

Every Parish in the country is required to have at least one communion service in one of their churches on a Sunday. Recounting the words of Jesus at the last supper, and doing this in remembrance of him is central to the teaching of the Church of England. Many of you had questions about what we do and why.

For Christians, to share in the Eucharist, means to live as people who know that they are always *guests* – that they have been welcomed and that they are wanted. It is, perhaps, the most simple thing that we can say about Holy Communion, yet it is still supremely worth saying. In Holy Communion, Jesus tells us that he wants our company.

There are different words to describe this service:

The name 'the Lord's Supper' is found in 1 Corinthians 11: 20 which was evidently a meal of some sort taken in obedience to Christ's command as a means of remembering and proclaiming His death. Earlier in 1 Corinthians 10: 16 and 17 the author speaks of the cup being the 'communion of the blood of Christ' and the bread being the 'communion of the body of Christ'. In modern translations the word 'communion' sometimes becomes 'fellowship.'

The title Holy Communion draws from this verse but is peculiar to the Protestant Reformation, it highlights the fact that in taking the bread and wine in faith we are united with Christ and he with us and, of course, with each other. The word Holy means 'set apart.' The company of the people next to us is wanted and valued by God too – everyone who comes round the table, and that's very important for our unity and love of each other. Even Judas, who had the capacity to betray. All are wanted.

The title 'Eucharist' is a Greek word meaning 'thanksgiving' which captures one of the prime elements of the service.

Finally, in Roman Catholic and high Anglican churches the title 'The Mass' predominates. This title comes from the dismissal sung by the Deacon at the end of the service which in Latin was 'Ite, missa est', translating as 'Go, the (congregation) is dismissed.' This is a missional term, like dismissal and sending out.

Acts 2: 42 and 20: 7 both speak of 'breaking of bread' but this seems more like a simple description rather than a title.

Each of these, I think, has its advantages.

This is the *Lord's supper* (not ours) we participate in what he is doing, we come into *Communion* with one another and with him, it is a *Eucharistic* act – the supreme way of thanking God by remembering, and it should always be about *Mass*- we are not in the business of keeping this little ceremony as a special and mystical thing for inside the church but it is to strengthen us for mission. We will look at the different parts of the communion service next week as we walk through the service explaining things as we go, but this morning let's look at the beginnings of holy communion, what happens during the Eucharistic prayer, and what it means to us.

First we need to go back to the book of Exodus which tells of the origin of Passover. God promised to redeem His people from the bondage of Pharaoh (Exodus 6:6). God sent Moses to the Egyptian king with the command that Pharaoh "let my people go" (Exodus 8:1). When Pharaoh refused, God brought ten plagues on the land of Egypt. The tenth and worst of the plagues was the death of all the firstborn in Egypt.

The night of the first Passover was the night of the *tenth plague*. On that night, God told the Israelites to sacrifice a spotless lamb and mark their doorposts and lintels with its blood (Exodus 12:21–22). Then, when the Lord passed through the nation, He would "pass over" the households that showed the blood (verse 23). In a very real way, the blood of the lamb saved the Israelites from death, as it kept the destroyer from entering their homes. The Israelites were saved from the plague, and their firstborn children stayed alive.

Along with the instruction to apply the Passover lamb's blood to their doorposts and lintels, God instituted a commemorative meal: fire-roasted lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread (Exodus 12:8).

It was at the usual Passover meal which Jesus was celebrating as a Jew that became the *Last Supper*. But it was the blood of Jesus on the cross that was to save us from death because of our sin. This is why Jesus is called the Lamb of God.

Jesus took two symbols associated with Passover and gave them with fresh meaning as a way to remember His sacrifice, the bread and the wine. His body and blood. Rooted in the old Jewish Covenant Jesus gives a New covenant for all people.

Holy Communion is one of the sacraments of the church. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Here we have bread and wine, outward signs of something happening in us when we receive, that we are touched by the Spirit. We consume not just the material thing, but the Spiritual reality of God's grace.

So, what happens during the Eucharistic prayer?

Firstly, we recount what God has done and join in thanksgiving with the whole company of heaven, then the Holy Spirit is called down upon the bread and wine, then we remember the last supper with the words of consecration and proclaim the mystery of our faith, the Holy Spirit is called down again – this time on the people, there is brief intercession and praise and the seal of the Great Amen.

During this prayer the bread is Taken, blessed, broken and given and this is also a pattern for our lives.

But what actually occurs when the bread and wine are consecrated?

There are three main theologies (all with their own subsets- but let's just stick with three for today) about whether the bread and wine change.

Firstly, Transubstantiation which has its origins in Aristotle's distinction between 'substance' and 'accident.' The 'substance' being the essential nature of something, and the 'accident' being its outward appearances i.e. its colour, shape, smell etc. The bread and wine's form remain unchanged at the moment of consecration, but their substance becomes the actual body and blood of Christ. This was heavily criticised by Protestant theologians at the Reformation, but at the council of Trent in 1551 the Roman Catholic church set this as their position.

*"After the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ is truly, really and substantially contained in the venerable sacrament of the Holy eucharist under the appearance of those physical things."*

Secondly, Consubstantiation, which is especially associated with Martin Luther, insists upon the simultaneous presence of both bread and the body of Christ at the same time. For Luther, the crucial point was that Christ was really present in the Eucharist not some particular theory of how, or rationalisation of the mystery. He says:

*“For my part, if I cannot fathom how the bread is the body of Christ, yet I will take my reason captive to the obedience of Christ, and cling simply to his words, firmly believing not only that the body of Christ is in the bread, but that the bread is the body of Christ. My warrant for this is the words which say ‘He took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said. ‘take, eat, this is my body.’ (1 Corinthians 11:23-24).”*

Finally, Memorialism which is especially associated with Zwingli, where the Eucharist is a memorial of the suffering of Christ and not a sacrifice. Zwingli insists the words ‘this is my body cannot be taken literally’ and the ‘is’ means signifies. The presence of Christ, he argued was in the mind and nothing happened to the bread and wine – they are symbolic and the service is a commemorate ceremony.

The church of England has tended to adopt the middle ground of ‘the real presence.’ That Christ is really present in the Eucharist, but allows for multiple explanations or no explanation of how that is the case. For my part I believe something really happens at the consecration.

I believe the bread and wine are made Holy, set apart for us, to feed us, to nourish us Spiritually, sometimes I can almost feel my hands burning as the bread is placed into them. It’s like an iron that has been made hot in the fire, it has power which it didn’t have before. Each crumb is special, Jesus is present in it and being *in the presence of the sacrament* means Jesus is especially close, we are carrying him, and as I give the bread to you, you cradle Jesus in your hands just as Mary did – God is giving of himself to you the same way he did in the incarnation by the transforming power of the Spirit. You are fed by his very presence and empowered to be Jesus as you leave this place.

*“Every day He humbles Himself just as He did when from His heavenly throne into the Virgin's womb; every day He comes to us and lets us see Him in lowliness, when He descends from the bosom of the Father into the hands of the priest at the altar.” Francis of Assisi*

It is not just that we ask the Holy Spirit to effect a miraculous change in the bread and wine. We ask the Holy Spirit to effect a miraculous change in all of us, to make us capable of receiving these gifts, and as we receive them to go out, ‘in the power of the Spirit to live to God’s praise and glory’. So the Holy Spirit, who always brings Jesus alive in our midst, is very specially at work in the Eucharist, making it a means of spiritual transformation.

Because of this we go from the table to the work of transfiguring the world in God's power: to seeing the world in a new light, to seeing human beings with new eyes, and to working as best we can to bring about God's purposes.

Jesus wants us at the table -we are guests, and it is at the breaking of the bread on the road to Emmaus the disciples who were with him suddenly knew who he was. Could this happen to us? Could we really come to know Jesus in this sacrament, then as freely as we have received freely to give?

*"I want all of the holiness of the Eucharist to spill out beyond church walls, out of the hands of priests and into the regular streets and sidewalks, into the hands of regular, grubby people like you and me, onto our tables, in our kitchens and dining rooms and backyards." — Shauna Niequist*