The Eucharistic Prayer

For many Christians, Holy Communion or the Eucharist is the centre of the practice of their faith.

At the Last Supper Jesus takes bread and wine, blesses, breaks and shares it with his disciples and invites them to continue this in memory of him.

Communion has been both a source of great unity and a source of great division in the Christian Church. What happens and how has been debated by theologians down the ages - but what is important is that this action is a place to meet with God and people are touched by it day after day and week after week. The Eucharistic Prayer is at its heart.

Currently, in the Church of England, we have several forms of words available to us.

There are eleven prayers for use with Common Worship and one in traditional language. The Book of Common Prayer is also still authorised for use.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed analysis of each prayer, instead in this chapter three prayers are printed in parallel form with a few comments – these are Prayer B, Prayer H and one of the new prayers for use with children. We will look at the Biblical origins of the Eucharistic prayer and consider some of the sights and sounds of the Communion service.

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetich because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonisation of S. Joan of Arc—one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta Dei—the holy common people of God.

Dom Gregory Dix
The Shape of the Liturgy
The Gospels

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.’

Matthew 26:26-29

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’

Mark 15:22-15

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

Luke 22:19-21

1 Corinthians

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

1Cor 11: 23-26

The Bible

Three of the four Gospels and 1 Corinthians contain an account of Jesus words at the last supper. John would have had the other three accounts and uses the material very differently weaving in a Eucharistic theme throughout his Gospel and giving us the wonderful and astonishing High Priestly prayer of Jesus at the time of the Last Supper.

The precise how and where of communion is not explained to us in the Bible. It is likely that followers would have gathered in homes initially. We know that later, under persecution, they gathered in caves and catacombs and only emerged really emerged into settled churches in the fourth century.

However, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is clear that this meal is at the heart of radical community, committed to Jesus but also to a way of life which will challenge followers and those around them.
And so, Father, calling to mind his death on the cross, his perfect sacrifice made once for the sins of the whole world; rejoicing in his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension, and looking for his coming in glory, we celebrate this memorial of our redemption. As we offer you this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, we bring before you this bread and this cup and we thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you.

Send the Holy Spirit on your people and gather into one in your kingdom all who share this one bread and one cup, so that we, in the company of [N and] all the saints, may praise and glorify you for ever, through Jesus Christ our Lord;

by whom, and with whom, and in whom, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory be yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever. Amen.

With your whole Church throughout the world we offer you this sacrifice of praise and lift our voice to join the eternal song of heaven:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord,**
**God of power and might**
**Heaven and earth are full of your glory.**
**Hosanna in the highest.**

Father, as we bring this bread and wine, and remember his death and resurrection, send your Holy Spirit, that we who share these gifts may be fed by Christ's body and his blood.

[Amen, Amen, Amen.]

Pour your Spirit on us that we may love one another, work for the healing of the earth, and share the good news of Jesus, as we wait for his coming in glory.

[Amen, Amen, Amen.]

For honour and praise belong to you, Father, with Jesus your Son, and the Holy Spirit: one God, for ever and ever.

[Amen, Amen, Amen.]

In this section of the prayer we tie together God's gift and our service. We remind ourselves that we are one Church, with one bread and one cup throughout the world. Again, the different prayers will put different emphases on things.

You will notice that in the shorter, responsive prayer H (the middle one) the Sanctus has moved to the end of the prayer rather than its more traditional place somewhere in the middle. This is interesting because usually this part of the prayer calls the whole church to unity and action through the table of the Lord – this prayer then calls us to adoration and praise with the heavenly host as part of our action – unceasing worship. The theological implication is subtle but it is important, when looking at liturgy, to see subtlety – position can be as important as the words themselves.

Read the prayers through – you might like to go back and read them as a unity. Note anything below that intrigues or puzzles you.
Sursum Corda
The Lord be with you
and also with you.

or

The Lord is here.
His Spirit is with us.

Lift up your hearts.
We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give thanks and praise.

Sanctus
Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.

Sanctus means Holy in Latin. As we saw earlier
the Sanctus comes from words in Isaiah and
Revelation. We feast our imagination on the
vision of God reigning in glory, surrounded by
heavenly host singing 'Holy, Holy, Holy'

Benedictus
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

The Benedictus, the name from the Latin for
blessed) recalls the words which were shouted
as Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.
Some people make the sign of the cross at this point.

Agnus Dei
Lamb of God, you take away the sin
of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin
of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin
of the world, Grant us peace.

Agnus Dei is Latin for Lamb of God. The image
of the lamb comes from Passover when the
lambs were sacrificed. Jesus then becomes the
last sacrifice once and for all. This theology is
difficult for some people but the image which is
important is that God longs for freedom for and
relationship with his people. This can only
happen through Jesus.

It is all too easy to come to church week by week
and let these words just fall off our tongues.
However they actually contain some depths of
images which are worth pausing to consider. For
example “lift up your hearts” what does that
mean – it is obviously not literal, but what does it
mean to lift up your heart to God? Is it a small
phrase or is it about lifting up all that makes us
who we are.

Even the simple phrase, the Lord is here which
trips off our tongue tells us that indeed God is
here - the maker of heaven and earth is here and
now.

The name Sursum Corda comes from the Latin
for lift up your hearts. As we come to the
beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer we are
invited to remember God's presence and “lift
up our hearts” before God. Then we are invited
to give thanks – the first part of the Eucharistic
prayer is called the Great Thanksgiving and so
this is a very immediate invitation.
Lord, you are holy indeed, the source of all holiness; grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit, and according to your holy will, these gifts of bread and wine may be to us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ; who, in the same night that he was betrayed, took bread and gave you thanks; he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way, after supper he took the cup and gave you thanks; he gave it to them, saying: Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

These are the words of consecration (making holy). Consecration is a twofold act of remembering the words which Jesus spoke (anamnesis) and asking the Holy Spirit to bless and inhabit these gifts (epiclesis). You will notice that the two pieces come in either order in Common Worship. This order and how the two things hold together (strange arguments like were the priest to be struck by lightning after one or the other would it work) have been the subject of many tomes of theology. The important things to hold together are that this is God’s gift and not our right – although God promises that the consecration will work, it is only through His generosity that it does. The Church has been given this gift to look after, carefully, and we have to do our part in taking it seriously. Have a look at the prayers and note any comments or questions.
It is always right to give you thanks, God our Creator, loving and faithful, holy and strong. You made us and the whole universe, and filled your world with life.

[Holy, Holy, Holy]

You sent your Son to live among us, Jesus our Saviour, Mary's child. He suffered on the cross; he died to save us from our sins; he rose in glory from the dead.

[Holy, Holy, Holy]

You send your Spirit to bring new life to the world, and clothe us with power from on high.

And so we join the angels to celebrate and sing:

It is right to praise you, Father, Lord of all creation; in your love you made us for yourself.

When we turned away you did not reject us, but came to meet us in your Son. You embraced us as your children and welcomed us to sit and eat with you.

In Christ you shared our life that we might live in him and he in us. He opened his arms of love upon the cross and made for all the perfect sacrifice for sin.

Father, we give you thanks and praise through your beloved Son Jesus Christ, your living Word, through whom you have created all things; who was sent by you in your great goodness to be our Saviour.

By the power of the Holy Spirit he took flesh; as your Son, born of the blessed Virgin, he lived on earth and went about among us; he opened wide his arms for us on the cross; he put an end to death by dying for us; and revealed the resurrection by rising to new life; so he fulfilled your will and won for you a holy people.

Short Proper Preface, when appropriate

Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven we proclaim your great and glorious name, for ever praising you and saying:

Shorter Christmas preface

And now we give you thanks because, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he took our nature upon him and was born of the Virgin Mary his mother, that being himself without sin, he might make us clean from all sin.

Prefaces:

Prefaces are added into the prayer of Thanksgiving (in some of its forms) to give special thanks and seasonal content.

The first part of the Eucharistic Prayer is called the Great Thanksgiving. The first sentence follows on from the last phrase of the Sursum Corda – it is right to give Him thanks and praise and the priest comes in with a phrase which echoes – absolutely it is right. Into this Thanksgiving are poured remembrances of God's interaction with humanity. Some of the prayers scan right back to creation, others choose themes of covenant and relationship but all will wind their way to Jesus and to His saving work on the cross.

There are seasonal variations on the prayers called prefaces - these do not fit well into the shorter more responsive prayers but into the more traditional forms. There are short prefaces and proper prefaces which will focus in on a certain aspect or seasonal concentration.

Have a look at the prayers, look at their styles and language and compare where they are saying pretty much the same thing – this will give you a good idea of what has to be there (!).

Which ones do you like or not like. If you are interested in the others they are in the Common Worship book or available for download on the Common Worship website.
Take, bless, break, share

We began this section with a quote from Dom Gregory Dix about communion. As we close let’s think about another of his ideas - the shape of the liturgy.

Liturgy is the work of the people of God - it is not designed primarily as a work of emotion but is, nevertheless, a work of drama. At its best is has word and music, movement, light, colour, stories, silence all combined into this central act of worship.

Dix breaks this down into four main movement - take, bless, break and share. This is clear in the action of Jesus in the Last Supper, it is clear in the Eucharistic prayer but it is also true for the holy common people of God as we come to the altar week by week.

We are taken and blessed, in a very real sense we are broken open to God’s love and presence as we receive the bread and wine and we are sent to share.

I talking about liturgy it can be difficult to see where one thing ends and another begins, where symbol and action run into life and meaning and this is the way it should be as we enact and live into God’s mystery.

Thinking Further:

There is so much that we could say about the Eucharistic prayer and the Eucharist in general. We hope that this little booklet has been a helpful introduction. As with any introduction there will probably be areas which you wish we had covered but we did not. There are plenty of good books around which you can read - we recommend starting with the Grove Booklets liturgy series as they are quite accessible, cheap and have a wide range of subjects. Most will provide a decent bibliography for further reading should you want to learn more.

What is in a name?

You may have noticed that throughout this booklet we have moved between two names - Eucharist and Communion. This is because it is local tradition which usually assigns a name to this great invitation of God and not a sense of wrong or right. We could equally have used the word Mass or the phrase The Lord’s Supper.

Each name emphasises a slightly different aspect of the service - so to get a balanced picture we might try to use them all (although I can feel some blanching at this).

The Lord’s Supper reminds us that this is something Jesus did, reminds us that this is God’s table and sets us in our Biblical historical roots.

Holy Communion emphasises that promised union with the community of God which is Trinity and therefore also reminds us of our bonds to each other as children of God.

The Eucharist comes from a Greek word meaning Thanksgiving. The whole action of Eucharist thanks God by laying ourselves before Him and offering our lives in service.

The Mass comes from the last words in the Latin Mass (although the actual translation is a little bizarre if you know Latin!) The reminder is “being sent” we are sent out at the end of the liturgy to be Christ’s body in the world.
Mystery

In some of the Eucharistic Prayers there is a pause after the bread and wine are consecrated and the congregation responds using one of the forms below.

It is to the first one of these we will turn, the mystery of faith, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again and ponder a little the significance and meaning of this most holy of moments in the life of the Church.

[Great is the mystery of faith:]  
All  
Christ has died:  
Christ is risen:  
Christ will come again.  
(or)  
Praise to you, Lord Jesus:]  
All  
Dying you destroyed our death  
rising you restored our life:  
Lord Jesus, come in glory.  
(or)  
[Christ is the bread of life:]  
All  
When we eat this bread and drink this cup,  
we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus,  
until you come in glory.  
(or)  
[Jesus Christ is Lord:]  
All  
ord, by your cross and resurrection  
you have set us free.  
You are the Saviour of the world.

Meditation

Think for a moment about those words

Christ has died
Christ is risen
Christ will come again

Usually be fly through them without thinking too much about what we are saying so read them over a few times but let the verbs linger in your mind has, is and will. Let the truth of that sit with you.

In the Orthodox Church there is a picture which says that time stands still at the moment when the bread and wine are made Holy. Ponder that picture the has and is and will of God inhabiting these gifts.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. John 1

Let that sit, the has and is and will of God is in Jesus. Imagine how big and how close that might be.

We don't understand and we never will, not really, how God became human, how Jesus dies for our sins and how the Holy Spirit blesses and makes holy bread and wine as food for the people of God. But God did and does and will. Contemplate for a moment how God has and is and might in your life.

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise,  
that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home.  
Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.  
May we who share Christ's body live his risen life;  
we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world.  
Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us, so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name;  
through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

Common Worship