

Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer

Holy Eucharist



The Holy Eucharist, also referred to as the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, is the chief act of Christian worship. "Eucharist" comes from a Greek word that means thanksgiving because the entire meal is our offering of thanks to God for the many blessings we receive and because, in Holy Communion, we receive Christ himself and we are grateful. The centerpiece of the eucharistic service is the Great Thanksgiving.

The Holy Eucharist is the sacrament that Episcopalians experience most often. We celebrate it each Sunday. Along with Baptism, which we explored last week, Holy Eucharist is one of the two sacraments instituted by Jesus himself. The story of the first eucharist, the last supper Jesus ate with his friends, is well known to us. It is found in all four gospels and in writings of St. Paul. The sacred ritual of eucharist has been the centerpiece of Christian gatherings from the earliest days of the church.

Sometimes, perhaps because we experience the Holy Eucharist so frequently, we can take it for granted. But there is a very real power in this experience. As stated in "Walk in Love": "In the Holy Eucharist, we are summoning the presence of the Word made flesh among us, the Christ who was present at the moment of creation. We Episcopalians believe that Jesus Christ becomes truly present in the bread and wine. Christ's presence is objectively and spiritually real, not merely a psychological experience. That is nothing to yawn through or mutter by rote."

But at the same time, we should not act as if we must understand everything about it before we can fully partake and receive the sacrament. Theologians disagree on the details of *how* the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. We do not have to claim that we know everything to express our belief that they *are* his body and blood. As Episcopalians, we believe that Jesus Christ is really and truly present in the bread and wine as they are blessed and shared by the priest and people. Simply put, we receive Jesus when we receive communion.

Now, with this understanding of Holy Eucharist, we will look at some of the common elements that are almost always included in celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. Although some details may vary from place to place, the shape of the service will generally match what we will discuss here. If you have The Book of Common Prayer, you might want to follow along starting at page 323 for Rite I or page 355 for Rite II.

The eucharistic liturgy consists of two main parts: the Word of God and Holy Communion.

The Word of God (Liturgy of the Word) section begins with the gathering of the people and an Entrance Rite. After a procession of the choir and ministers, the priest begins with an opening greeting and prayer with responses by the congregation. There is music and prayer,

called the collect. After the collect we move to the primary focus of this first half of the eucharistic liturgy: the proclamation of the Word of God. There are normally four lessons read in a Sunday celebration of the Holy Eucharist: one from each of the Old Testament, the Psalms, the New Testament epistles, and the gospels.

Since the reading from the gospel is the climax of this portion of the service, the church has long accompanied the proclamation of the gospel with special ceremonies. At Good Shepherd, there is a gospel procession, and the Deacon proclaims the gospel in the midst of the congregation before the gospel is returned to its prominent place on the altar. By longstanding custom, only a deacon, priest, or bishop may read the passage from the gospel.

The sermon then immediately follows the readings. The assembly then recites the Nicene Creed, participate in the Prayers of the People and the Confession of Sin. The exchange of peace finishes this first half of the eucharistic liturgy.

The second half of the liturgy is The Holy Communion (or Liturgy of the Table). Holy Communion begins with the Great Thanksgiving. As mentioned earlier, the Great Thanksgiving is the centerpiece of the Holy Eucharist. There are four main actions within the Great Thanksgiving, and each is based upon the actions of Jesus in the Last Supper: we offer bread and wine, we bless them, we break the bread, and we give the bread and wine to all who come to the table. These four actions are called the offertory, consecration, fraction, and communion.

“Regardless of form or style in the eucharistic service, Jesus Christ is made known to us in the breaking of bread. In worshipping as Christians have worshiped for hundreds of years, we too hear God’s word in scripture, we too offer our prayers for our community and our world; we too offer our gifts to God; we too are nourished by Jesus Christ’s Body and Blood; and we too know the transformation of God’s saving grace at work in our lives. Thanks be to God, indeed.”
Walk in Love, Episcopal Beliefs and Practices, p. 66.

Thank you for spending another week with me. See you next week as we explore Reconciliation of a Penitent. See you then.

Together in Christ. Deacon John

“Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer” by Vicki K. Black, Morehouse Publishing, 2005

“Walk in Love, Episcopal Beliefs & Practices” by Scott Gunn & Melody Wilson Shobe, Forward Movement, 2018

“Praying Shapes Believing, A Theological Commentary of the Book of Common Prayer” by Leonel L. Mitchell (updated by Ruth A. Meyers), Seabury Books, 2016