CHAPTER 2

WORSHIP IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Christians accustomed to more reformed Protestant denominations are often a bit bewildered upon straying into an Episcopal worship service, even a wedding or a funeral. They may recognize few if any hymns. They have difficulty with the “Episcopal aerobics” of standing, kneeling, and sitting. Our book juggling, with prayer book, hymnal, and a sheaf of bulletin pages with inserts, also challenges Protestants, who aren’t accustomed to working so hard in worship. “I don’t see how anyone could get a nap in your church,” lamented one. (Some people do manage.)

In recent years, a good deal of diversity has crept into Episcopal worship. You might find anything from a medieval-style, Pontifical high mass in a stone Gothic church with magnificent stained glass windows and mighty pipe organ, to simple, vestment-less celebration in a store-front, with guitar-led, renewal-style singing. We probably should expect even more such variety in the decade or so to come. Even so, we would hope that in any Episcopal church, every visitor would notice several characteristics of Anglican worship that would be identifying markers of our worship anywhere in the world. When the liturgy is done properly, all of these elements should be clearly in place.

- Use of the Book of Common Prayer, or other approved forms (we have some supplemental liturgies now), means that our worship text is relatively uniform, predictable, and of high quality. Though we now have multiple choices for worship forms, and the prayer books of other national churches vary in details, they are all similar and contain the same elements. This means that Anglicans the world over pray together in pretty much the same way—in common prayer. It also means that we are not at the mercy of our clergy to determine what we pray for and how we pray. And it means that our prayers are composed as carefully and as beautifully as our best writers know how.

- Anglican worship is orderly. Some would say “formal,” but that need not mean stuffy, as in a stilted dinner party; rather we mean that things happen in a particular order and at an appointed time.

- The prayer book tradition is biblically centered. Whereas in some Protestant services, the sermon text would be the only scripture read, in our liturgical tradition, it is customary to read an Old Testament lesson, an Epistle reading, and a Gospel passage, with at least one Psalm—in a planned cycle, so that most of the scripture is read in church during a three-year period. For celebrating Eucharist at any occasion, a reading from the Gospel is required.

- Reverence should be a hallmark of Anglican worship. That usually means kneeling for prayer upon entering the pew, keeping silence prior to worship so
that others may pray or meditate also, and participating fully in the songs and responses. (In some places, standing is substituted for kneeling.)

- Worship in the Episcopal Church is participatory. We are not “consumers” of worship when we attend church; we are “doers.”

- Anglican worship is a celebration of God’s love. Even in Lent, it is not about how bad we sinners are, but about how wonderfully good, gracious, and forgiving God is. It always involves thanksgiving, and should always lead to greater joy, peace, and dedication.

- Anglican worship is directed toward God, not one another. This is one of the great principles of liturgy (worship): God and the angels are the primary audience; ALL the people of the church are the “performers.” The clergy and other worship leaders are merely the principal speakers, since reading everything in unison does not work effectively. This speaking leadership is to be shared, however, with laity taking an active role as well as those in holy orders. By the way, liturgy comes from Greek words meaning “work of the people.” (If a Greek citizen built a bridge at personal expense for community use, that was a liturgy.) Worship is something we do, first to honor God, and second to build up and support our fellow Christians. What we “get out of it” may be good and helpful, but in last place of priority.

**A WALK THROUGH THE PRAYER BOOK**

Whereas other denominations have a brilliant theologian as their founder, the chief architect of our independent communion is renowned primarily as a liturgist. Thomas Cranmer’s revolutionary idea was to place all of the regular services of worship in one book, in the language spoken by the people, and in the hands of the worshipers themselves. That is why he called his work *The Book of Common Prayer*: it is “common,” not in the sense of “ordinary,” but “the property of all.” Archbishop Cranmer did not write the prayer book, or at least he contributed proportionally little. His genius is expressed in his glorious translation of existing liturgical prayers from Latin into the magnificent English of his day. The language of Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer* has resonated through the churches, homes, literature, and minds of English-speaking people since he completed his work in 1549 (first revised, 1552). Its language is almost as influential as that of the King James Bible. The prayer book is not under copyright; anyone is free to borrow from it, and other Christians have done so with relish. Prayers you hear in other churches often have their origins in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Sometimes the more radical Protestants criticize us for “reading made-up prayers.” All prayers are “made up” by someone, and some rather amateurishly (and painfully ungrammatically)! But Episcopalians often note that the prayer book is almost half quoted scripture. Largely, that is because it has always contained the entire Psalter.
The rest of it, however, drips with Bible quotations and references. One of our traditions, which is revealed as well in church buildings and appointments, is the principle of “always offering to God our best.” That means good quality, well-composed prayers, and protection from repetitious, inarticulate, self-serving prayers—and sermons disguised as prayers--from uninspired prayer leaders.

Thomas Cranmer presided over the dismantling of the monastic system in England, at the behest of Henry VIII. Yet his prayer book is a great tribute to the monastic life, with time set aside for prayer, work, study, and rest. In fact, *The Book of Common Prayer* is an adaptation of the Benedictine daily cycle of life. Cranmer took the prayer offices of the monastery from early morning to noon, and combined them to form one daily morning office which he called “Matins” (later, “Morning Prayer”). Those from early afternoon into the night, he combined to form “Vespers” (later, “Evening Prayer” or, if it is sung, “Evensong”). His idea was that, instead of a few monks and nuns praying “heroically,” dedicating their whole lives to prayer, he would make the entire nation of England into a great monastic community united in prayer, punctuating the work, rest, and other activity of each day. He might well have imagined the church bell ringing in every village, calling the faithful to their prayers at morning and evening, every day. Of course, there would be elderly and infirm persons remaining at home; there would always be farm workers in the fields, and house workers busy in the homes. But the ideal was that even then, the morning and evening church bell would call all the people to pause reverently in their place and say their own prayers, as others prayed the offices in church on behalf of all. Surely, that was an idealistic notion bordering on the naïve. Yet there have been periods of English history when this ideal has come amazingly close to being met. Readers of English novels by Jane Austen and Anthony Trollop will easily recognize the patterns of morning and evening prayer ordering and punctuating the daily lives of the characters. Even today, there is something very comforting about knowing, when you read your daily office and lessons in the morning or evening, either alone or with a small group, that elsewhere in your time zone or the next, many other Anglicans are doing the same thing at that very moment. Because we hold our prayers “in common,” we never pray alone!

The plan was for Morning and Evening Prayer to be a daily occurrence, with Holy Communion added on Sundays. However, as more English people adopted more radically Protestant attitudes, with corresponding anti-papist ones, aversion to the Roman Mass became commonplace. This fear was largely an extreme reaction among the Protestant-minded to the Roman Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation, by which the transforming of bread and wine into the literal body and literal blood of Jesus was looked upon with some horror. Perhaps that dread was augmented by the reform of offering the chalice of wine to everyone, not just to the priest, as was Roman Catholic practice at the time. In any case, for several centuries, Anglicans tended to receive Communion only a few times a year. Then, by the late nineteenth century, most parish churches offered Communion every Sunday, but at an added early celebration, usually 8:00 a.m.—so that those who wished to do so could avoid it at the later worship! Later, Holy Communion became more accepted, and it was commonly alternated with Morning Prayer at the later, “principal” service in many places. Only in the second half of the twentieth century did
the Eucharist begin to be widely accepted as the proper Sunday celebration by Episcopalians. Now, alas, the daily offices are the ones falling into disuse, because most parishes cannot muster a congregation to pray them regularly on weekdays, since church members generally live at some distance, and work schedules do not mesh.

Our present prayer book (1979) was the most controversial one ever (since the first one!), because it was planned during the 1960’s and 1970’s, when the cry for “cultural relevance” was heard loudly throughout the land. After 400 years, it truly was about time to update the language; otherwise, we soon would have been in a similar situation to the time when the liturgy was in Latin: few would have understood what the prayers were saying. To placate the many traditionalists (i.e., everyone over forty), a traditional-language version of the old prayer book services was retained, called Rite I. Contemporary language versions were called Rite II. The 1979 prayer book has expanded the daily prayer possibilities, though. For the first time, it has a short service for prayer at the middle of the day (page 103). There are also extra forms for prayer in the evening, and a service for the close of the day, called by its monastic name “Compline” (p. 147). These added services do not have a Rite I form, because they did not occur in the older books.

**CHURCH JARGON**

One might think that a church that had been activist in holding worship in the vernacular would have vigorously driven out all vestiges of Latin language. That is not the case with us Anglicans, though. Not only do our names for the parts of the church continue to be derived from Latin (narthex, nave, sanctuary, transcept, etc.), but our terms for the canticles of morning prayer, the service music of the Eucharist, and several pieces of the Eucharist come from the first few words of the piece in Latin (though a few parts of the Eucharist are even older, derived from Greek). Here are some examples:

**Canticle names:**

- *Venite* = “O come”
- *Jubilate Deo* = “Be joyful in the Lord”
- *Benedictus es, Domine* = ”Blessed are you, Lord”
- *Gloria in excelsis* = “Glory in the highest”

**Service music:**

- *Kyrie eleison* = “Lord, have mercy” (in Greek)
- *Sanctus* = “Holy”
- *Agus Dei* = “Lamb of God”

**In the Eucharist:**

- *Eucharist* = “thanksgiving” (Greek)
- *Sursum corda* = “lift (your) heart”
TRADITIONAL CEREMONIAL

New regular worshipers in the Episcopal Church notice that not only the clergy, but many lay worshipers as well, make certain signs at various times during the service. The bulletin contains no instruction on these gestures, and it can be pretty alienating to feel that everybody, or at least a core group, is in the know except oneself. We don’t mean to leave anyone out of any secret lore. Rather, we would prefer to make the point that any such motions are completely optional, and no one should feel less faithful or participatory in not making them. Perhaps it is best to teach everyone how and when such things are traditionally done, and then each person can decide whether to observe them or not.

As to “rightness,” some people would feel foolish or attention-seeking if they did them; others would feel less prayerful if they did not. So it is no sin to make the sign of the cross, nor is it a sin not to make it—perhaps it might be a sin (or at least unconducive to prayer) to take note of who does and who doesn’t, and to judge them one way or the other on that basis! Remember that these movements or postures are simply prayers in sign language, which are intended to express one’s assent or reverence. At the very least, they may remind us that words are not the only way to express our prayers to God. For some gestures, their meaning, and their traditional placement in the liturgy, see the table at the end of the chapter.

OTHER CEREMONIAL ACTS AND THEIR MEANING

COLOR...

has always been used in worship, but it has not always had prescribed meaning. For the past several centuries, however, the colors used in worship have become standardized. Each season of the liturgical year has its own color(s), as does each day in the calendar of saints and other observations.

GREEN, the color of vegetation, is the basic color for “ordinary” time. It is used for the entire season of Pentecost after Trinity Sunday, and for the season of Epiphany as well.

WHITE is the color for celebration, for purity, and for saintliness. It is the color for Christmastide, Eastertide, and the feast days of those saints who died of natural causes. It is used on Trinity Sunday and All Saints Day and the Sunday following. It is the color for both weddings and funerals. SILVER and GOLD can substitute for white.

RED is for the Passion, for fire, and for the blood of the martyrs. It is used for only two Sundays, Palm Sunday and the Feast of Pentecost. Those
saints who died as martyrs for their faith are honored with red vestments. It may be used throughout Holy Week, and most ordinations use red.

**PURPLE** is for penitence, though dark **BLUE** (sometimes called “Sarum Blue”) may be used instead. These colors are used for Advent and for Lent. Some places may use unbleached silk or linen for Lent, perhaps with black and/or “Ox-blood” decorations.

**BLACK** is for mourning, and it used to be used for funerals. But funerals have become Easter celebrations, and black is usually now used only on Good Friday.

**VESTMENTS…**

signify the role of the worship leader and give him or her a certain anonymity. The emphasis is on the role, not the person. Vestments have ancient historic roots.

**ALB** is the basic white tunic garment of the ancient Mediterranean world.

**CINCTURE** is the belt, either rope or sash.

**CHASUBLE** is the poncho-like outer garment worn by the celebrant alone.

**CASSOCK** is a medieval style under-robe, in black, red, or blue. Buttons up the front signify Roman style, a double-breasted front the Anglican style. These are worn today for daily offices or burials without communion. Choirs often wear cassocks.

**SURPLICE** is the white over-garment worn on top of the cassock. It comes at least to the knee. You rarely see the cassock worn without a surplice for worship (perhaps on Good Friday).

**COTTA** is a short form of surplice, worn by choirs and acolytes only.

**COPE** is an elaborate cape worn on high celebratory occasions.

**CAPA** is a black wool cape, usually with hood, worn as a very warm outer garment by clergy for outdoor observances, such as funerals, in winter.

**INCENSE…**

Practically speaking, it may be that incense first came to be used in churches because large crowds of ancient people did not smell very good. Historically, incense
was used both in Hebrew and in pagan rites as well. Ceremonially, it also has useful symbolism.

- It rises visibly, reminding us of our prayers, which rise to God invisibly.
- It pervades a space, as the Holy Spirit does.
- It smells “heavenly.”

Incense is used to “bless” the altar, either at the singing of the *Gloria in excelsis* or just prior to the *Sursum corda*. The Gospel book may be “blessed” with incense before the reading. It also “blesses” the people; the appropriate response is to bow.

Many people are, or believe themselves to be, allergically sensitive to the odor of incense. We sometimes hear people begin to cough when they see the incense pot, and it hasn’t even been lit yet! Sometimes, the charcoal used to burn the incense is the culprit, not the incense itself. Today, there are actually battery-operated thuribles available, which use no charcoal or flame; and there are “hypo-allergenic” blends of incense, too, which might be helpful. It is also a good idea to use incense only in lofty, well-ventilated spaces, and only where it can be kept mainly away from where the congregation is sitting. Use of a stationary incense burner in front of the altar can be a good compromise, too, rather than the swinging pot that is moved around among the people.

**SANCTUARY BELLS…**

When the liturgy was in Latin, people needed a cue to know when the holy moment of *epiclesis* came, when the bread and wine were transformed. Today, we understand the words, but the ringing of the bell can still emphasize and set apart key points of the prayers. It is customarily rung three times at the *Sanctus*, and three more times at the “elevations” of the bread and wine. It may also be rung as the clergy enter the church to begin the Eucharist. Basically, the bell means “listen up, this is important.”

Of course, any or all of these elements might or might not be present in any particular celebration in any particular Episcopal church. They are all, however, part of our common tradition, whether used or not. In any case, the key word is *celebration*. That is what we do when we gather to worship God in an Episcopal congregation—we celebrate God’s love for us and for all of his creation, and our common life together in Christ.

**HOLY WATER…**

Is just water, made holy by the reminder of our baptism associated with it. The priest or bishop has “blessed” it with a prayer that it may help us make that connection in renewal of our baptismal commitment. The water of baptism reminds us that we are adopted children of God, buried to sin and candidates for resurrection. Sometimes, it is kept in a bowl in the baptismal font, and sometimes in a stoup near the entrance to a church. People might dip their fingers into it and make the sign of the cross as the come or go from a church, as a form of prayer.
CANDLES LIT FOR PRAYER…
Some churches have a candle ("votive") stand at which persons who wish to do so may light a candle as they offer their prayer of petition, intercession, or thanksgiving. The light of the candle (the Light of Christ), the upward thrust of the flame and rising of wisps of smoke (prayers rising to God), and the lasting flicker of burning candle (ongoing prayer of the Holy Spirit) all represent meaningful spiritual realities of prayer.

RESERVED SACRAMENT…
The bread and wine of Communion, consecrated as the Body and Blood of Christ, left over from a celebration of Eucharist, may be kept in a special box or wall niche called an Aumbrey (or Tabernacle), for use in visiting the sick and home-bound. Usually, there will be a candle or small electric bulb left burning beside it if the reserved sacrament is present, so that anyone entering the church can tell quickly that “Jesus is here,” in the form of the consecrated sacrament. A worshipper might acknowledge that by genuflecting or bowing upon entrance, often also making the sign of the cross. Many people find the presence of the reserved sacrament to be helpful in their own private prayer.

MANUAL ACTS…
The Sign of the Cross means, essentially, “Amen,” indicating personal assent. The cross is Christ’s victory sign, and Christians have long used it to claim identification with his triumph over sin and death. To make the sign, one touches fingertips to forehead, abdomen, left breast, and right breast. Traditional times are: after dipping fingers into the blessed water upon entering a church; upon concluding private prayer, before and/or after receiving the elements of Communion; during worship, at the Opening Acclamation, end of the Gloria in excelsis, end of the Creed, at “blessed” in the Benedictus est, Domine which is attached to the end of the Sanctus, and in the text of the Eucharistic prayer, and during the blessing concluding the Eucharist. In other words, watch other participants, and follow their lead. You catch on quickly.

At the Gospel, a special version of the sign of the cross is used, tracing the cross with thumb on one’s forehead, lips, and heart. This represents the ancient prayer, “God, be in my head and in my thinking; God be in my lips and in my speaking; God be in my heart and in my understanding.” Sign language is not altogether a recent invention, and God has understood it all along!

GENUFLECTING, or dropping to one knee, likely while making the sign of the cross, is an appropriate form of Reverencing upon entering a church where the sacrament of Communion is reserved, or upon approaching the sanctuary to receive Communion.
REVERENCING the altar, honoring the place where the simple bread and wine of Communion become Christ’s Body and Blood, involves bowing from the waist upon passing in front of the altar. Less nimble persons use it as a substitute for genuflection. The congregation bows similarly after being “censed” by celebrant or thurifer using the swinging incense pot (thurible), and often upon speaking the name of Jesus in the Creek or Gloria in Excelsis, as a sign of reverence.

REVERENCING THE CROSS, a peculiarly Anglican tradition, is bowing from the waist as the processional cross passes by.