

By Heart: Prayers of the Communion Service

The Downs and Valley Churches, Lent 2026

4. Lent 2 - 'We give you thanks and praise' (The Eucharistic Prayer)

The Lord be with you (or) The Lord is here
All **and also with you.** *All* **His Spirit is with us.**

Lift up your hearts.

All **We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

All **It is right to give thanks and praise.**

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.

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*:

All **Holy, holy, holy Lord,**

God of power and might,

heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

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 and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it,
in remembrance of me.

Great is the mystery of faith:

All **Christ has died:**

Christ is risen:

Christ will come again.

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.

All **Amen.**

A former colleague of mine was once asked to take the funeral of one of his predecessors as vicar of the parish he was serving in. He described going to see the widow of this old priest, who had been much loved by his parishioners. As so many people, rightly, do, she asked that this should not so much be a funeral as a thanksgiving for his life. 'Because' she said, 'thanksgiving makes the world glow.'

The prayer we are looking at this week is from the *Common Worship* contemporary language communion service, 'Eucharistic Prayer B'. It is a prayer of thanksgiving.

In this series I'm trying to choose prayers which most of us know 'by heart', but this one is the exception. I doubt that you will know these words by heart, apart from the opening dialogue. The main reason is that in the Church of England today we have Prayers A to H in the contemporary Communion service, another one in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and two further shorter Eucharistic Prayers authorized for use when children are present – making a total of eleven possible prayers! That's one reason why the prayers are often not printed on service sheets: it allows the priest to vary the prayer which is used for different occasions, as each has its own distinctive flavour. But I've chosen this prayer because the focus today is not primarily on the *words* of the prayer concerned, but on the *actions* that accompany them.

Before we think about actions, though, let's look at the text in front of you, and think about the Eucharistic Prayers generally. This prayer has only been used in the Church of England since 1980, but it is based on words which many scholars think came from Hippolytus, a theologian in Rome who died in 235 AD. So this prayer may have its roots in the very earliest churches, a

century or so before Hippolytus himself, close to the time of the apostles of Jesus themselves. If so, we can imagine these words which we use also echoing through the catacombs of Rome as the earliest Christians gathered to share bread and wine, often in secret for fear of persecution.

Its keynote is thanksgiving, as is the case for all the eucharistic prayers. The word 'eucharist' is Greek, the language which the early church spoke, and worshipped in. If you've been to Greece on holiday you'll know that it is pronounced *efcharisto* in modern Greek – I'm not sure why! - but the spelling is the same. So the eucharistic prayer is the 'Great Thanksgiving Prayer'.

The eucharistic prayer lies right at the heart of our communion service. Where the earlier parts of the service tend to have a fairly local focus - sermon and intercessions for example, interacting with our daily lives - now the focus shifts, and it opens with this familiar dialogue (though the first couple of lines are left out of the *Book of Common Prayer* Communion service):

The Lord be with you (or) The Lord is here
All and also with you. **All His Spirit is with us.**
Lift up your hearts.
All We lift them to the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
All It is right to give thanks and praise.

'Lift up your hearts' is a wonderful phrase; and this is the first action we're called to do. But how do you 'lift up your heart'?

Actually, most of us have felt our hearts lifted up this week, as the sun shone (for a few days at least!) and the Spring really seemed to have taken hold. You have to look up and out to see it, but when you do, your heart lifts of its own accord, doesn't it? This command, 'lift up your hearts' is rather the same, I think, as the feeling you have looking out over a wide, spacious and beautiful landscape, and it takes your breath away.

This is a prayer of thanksgiving which takes a broad and wide view. Earlier in the service we have heard small portions of the Christian story in our readings, the Gospel especially focusing tightly on one or two small incidents or sayings in Jesus' life. But here, suddenly, the great vista of what God has done opens up before us, painted in a few deft brush-strokes: we give thanks and praise for Jesus, the 'living Word' through whom all things were created, who was sent by the Father to be our saviour, born of Mary;

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.

Amazingly, this great panorama of the life of God, narrowed down in Jesus, ends in the 'holy people' – the Church – and comes back to us. All this was for us, and of course also for the church throughout the world and throughout the ages. We have a place, however small and insignificant, in the story. This is summed up nicely in Eucharistic Prayer D, which includes the phrase, 'This is *his* story', to which the congregation replies, 'This is *our* song. Hosanna in the highest.' We are giving God thanks for what he has done and for drawing us into his action in the world. Not only that, but as we do so, the prayer reminds us, we join with 'all the company of heaven...for ever praising you'. Our small and insignificant prayers join with the cosmic and universal praise of God.

The prayer continues with the story of the Last Supper. Now we are drawn into ‘the night before he died’, and hear again of how Jesus said, ‘This is my body’, ‘This is my blood’. And then, in the third part of the prayer (not in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which ends with the narrative of the Last Supper), the priest prays for the Holy Spirit.

The words are important, because they help us first to see the great vista of God’s purpose and then to feel that we are with Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. In the words we are saying ‘thank you’, *efcharisto*. ‘Thank you’, in the ancient words of Prayer B, ‘for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you...’

But in the end the words are secondary, because Jesus’ command was not ‘Say this...in remembrance of me’, but ‘Do this...in remembrance of me.’

Though you will probably not know all the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, apart from its opening dialogue, by heart, I suspect you will know its actions. There are four of these, and they follow what Jesus did at the Last Supper with the bread and wine: he *took* bread and wine, *blessed* them, *broke* the bread, and *gave* the bread and wine to his disciples. The Apostle Paul mentions this sequence less than 25 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection (in 1 Corinthians 11.23-26), and in the story of Jesus’ Easter appearance to the disciples at Emmaus, we hear how the risen Jesus blessed and broke the bread, and then the disciples recognised him (Luke 24.30).

Taking, blessing (or thanksgiving – they are the same thing in this context), *breaking* and *giving* are the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper that we repeat every time we celebrate communion together. These are actions that speak louder than words. The bread and wine stand, said Jesus, for his body and blood. For he too was taken and blessed by the Father, then broken and given on the cross. These four simple actions tell almost the whole story of his life.

In the Middle Ages these actions were usually performed behind a screen, hidden from most of the worshippers, and accompanied by prayers in Latin. Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury who produced the *Book of Common Prayer* in the mid-16th Century, turned the prayers into English so they could be understood, but just as importantly he brought the Eucharist out from behind the screens so that all could see its actions.

Instructions went out in 1552, in the most revolutionary change to liturgy that has ever happened in this country, that the wooden communion table which had replaced the old stone altar in each parish church, should be removed from the east end of the church and placed longways at the head of the nave, close to the chancel step. The priest was to be on the ‘north side’ (that is, on the left, long side as the congregation saw it), and the people invited to gather around the table with the

words ‘Draw near with faith’ before the confession. In this version of the BCP Communion, after confession, as the people kneel around the table, comes the reassurance of the ‘Comfortable Words’, and then the people sit for the thanksgiving or eucharistic prayer.



(Woodcut from 1578)

It's a completely different dynamic, unmistakably bringing the people together exactly as they would be for an ordinary meal, but just as unmistakably recreating the configuration of the Last Supper. The action in this version of the service emphasised brilliantly how God has come amongst us in Jesus. Not distant or hidden, but here, amongst the people, in the simple meal of bread and wine.

But it was too radical, and it didn't last! Before long altars went back against the east wall of most churches, and the pattern we know today reasserted, though the screens had gone and prayers remained in English. Of course, God is both far above us and transcendent, and we get some sense of that when the eucharist is celebrated at a distance from us, in a different part (in many churches what is, in effect, another room). But God is also, as Cranmer wanted to stress, amongst us and within us in Jesus, who was taken and blessed by God, and broken on the cross, his life given for the world.

These four actions – *taking, blessing, breaking, giving* - can seem remote from us, but watch for them. Most congregations keep their noses in their books or leaflets, and don't look up! Let me encourage you to look at this drama of salvation acted out before us, and watch the actions.

These four actions are done by the priest, but there are also actions for the congregation. The first is that 'lift up your hearts', but there are two more key ones as we come to receive communion. The first is simply walking up to receive. The Church of England quite likes processions. (I sometimes think this is the ecclesiastical equivalent of our national love of queuing!) But as you come from your pew and join the line, patiently waiting for your turn to receive, this may not just be a practical necessity. An American monk, Jeremy Driscoll, musing on the way in which as a monk he processes into church and out again daily, writes that as he does so,

I am reminded again and again that I am not just vaguely moving through life. In my life I am inserted into the definitive procession of Christ. I am part of a huge story, and huge movement, a definite exodus. I am going somewhere.¹

Thought of this way, queueing for communion may be an action that becomes a prayer. A moment to reflect on the people who have walked this way before, and to pray for those that may come after us, long after we ourselves are gone.

The second action is holding out our hands to receive. I find that there is something deeply moving about the row of open palms, naked and empty, waiting to be filled with the body of Christ, at the altar rail as I give the bread week by week. Everyone is equal here, all are in need – and God promises that all will be satisfied.

We bring nothing with us to make us worthy to receive, yet God still invites us to his table. For this, as for so much else, we give thanks. And perhaps we can reflect how these prayer-actions rather than words may also remind us that following Jesus is about putting words into action, that faith without action is meaningless. There will be a final action for the congregation at the end of the service, as we are sent out, committed to 'live and work to your praise and glory'.

That rather neatly gives us four actions for the congregation to do, balancing the four actions of the eucharistic prayer itself: lift your hearts, walk forward, open your hands, go back out in to the world as people who are transformed by thanksgiving – and as the widow I began with said, 'Thanksgiving makes the world glow.'

¹ Quoted in Radcliffe *Why Go to Church?* p.101.

