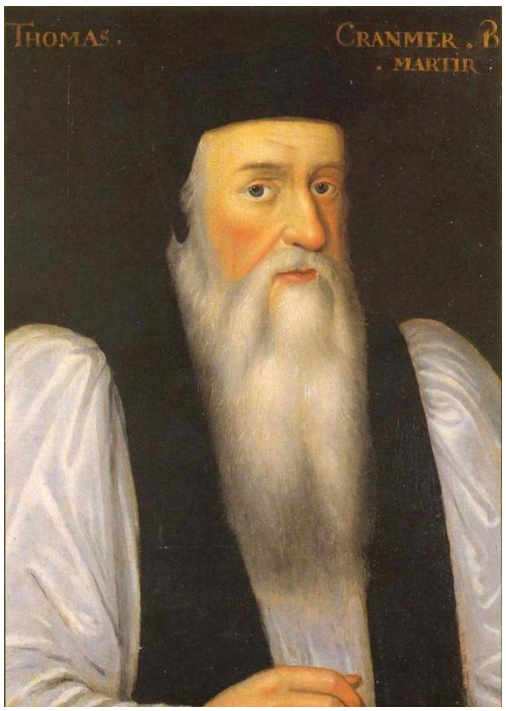
By Heart: Prayers of the Communion Service

1. Introduction

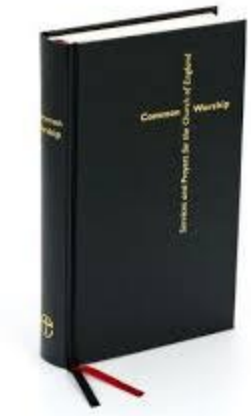
Our little group of six village churches have an unbroken chain of Christian worship going back over a thousand years. We planned to celebrate a thousand years of worship at St Mary's Whitchurch, perhaps the first of the churches to be built in the Stour Valley, back in 2022, but Robert Howe, who is the historian of the parish, threw everything into confusion by saying 'I think you're probably 250 years too late!' It is extraordinary to think of our forebears coming into these church buildings and praying faithfully, year by year, century by century.



In many cases the words they used were the same as the ones we still use, though they have sometimes been slightly updated. Many of the familiar prayers in our Communion service especially were adapted from Latin originals or created anew by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1533 to 1555. Cranmer produced the *Book of Common Prayer* in two versions, 1549 and 1552, the second more radical than the first but both offering for the first time in history worship and Bible readings in the English language instead of Latin. This was because one of Cranmer's deepest desires was for ordinary people to be able to worship in words which they understood, so that their prayers were genuine communication with God rather than phrases they didn't understand in a language which most of them didn't speak.

This was very controversial at the time, and struggles about worship, particularly the words that should be used, went on for over a century, being a major factor in the English Civil War in the 1640s. Cranmer's Prayer Book was the basis of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* – which remains the standard for all Church of England liturgy.

After such a long struggle it's perhaps not surprising that there was little appetite for change after 1662 (though a revised Prayer Book was proposed and rejected in 1689). But by the later 19th century the same desire for the use of 'common' language that everyone understood which had motivated Cranmer led to a movement to reform the language (and the format) of worship in the Church of England. Beautiful as Cranmer's 16th century English remains, it was no longer the way people spoke in normal conversation. A long process of revision began, with modern-language services first being used widely from the early 1970s, and culminating in 2000 with the introduction of *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, which has now been the norm for a quarter of a century.



This Lent we shall be exploring some of the prayers which form part of our Communion services: prayers which most of us know by heart, even if we don't realise that's the case. As we look into these words that trip so easily off the tongue I hope we'll discover a new depth to them, and be able to think how we might use them in our daily prayers too.

The overall progress through Lent follows the pattern of a Communion service, so we start on Ash Wednesday with Thomas Cranmer's great Collect which is traditionally used throughout Lent and focuses on penitence and faith.

2. Ash Wednesday – 'You hate nothing that you have made'

((The Collect for Ash Wednesday)

Almighty and everlasting God,
you hate nothing that you have made
and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:
create and make in us new and contrite hearts
that we, worthily lamenting our sins
and acknowledging our wretchedness,
may receive from you, the God of all mercy,
perfect remission and forgiveness;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Last week I let down a good friend rather badly. He was due to speak at an afternoon event in Leamington, and as he's only recently moved to the area I had offered him a lift. But it was a busy morning, which began with a difficult visit to my dad in a Home in Chipping Campden, then a complicated funeral and burial, followed by a race to pick my friend up on time. I just made it and we set off, and I was very pleased with myself that we arrived with 10 minutes to spare. I dropped him off and went to find somewhere to park. But just as I did so he phoned: 'I can't find the room we're meeting in anywhere', he said. I suddenly realised that I had taken him to the wrong church. So I jumped back in the car and we raced off to the right church – which was about 10 minutes' drive away, very angry with myself. By the time we arrived it was past the start time, and a whole room of people was waiting. There wasn't time to get the projector he wanted for his presentation working, and I felt terrible. I had messed up.

Of course I apologised. Several times. And again by email the next day. His response was very gracious. 'Really no need for apology' he said. 'I was glad of the lift because I don't know Leamington. It was a conversation instead of a presentation, which all worked out fine in the end.'

Well of course that's what old friends do when you let them down. He is as aware of what's happening in the bigger picture of my life at the moment as almost anyone, and though I felt bad, as I should have done, that I had let him down, his response was generous, gracious and understanding. Without using the word specifically, he forgave me.

But what should I do with that forgiveness? It would be easy to let the shadow of my messing up affect our relationship. I might keep trying to make amends. (That would probably be rather irritating to him!) I might reduce or cut off contact with him, because he now knows what a mess I can make of things and that's rather embarrassing for me.

Or I can accept the forgiveness. And accept that I've done nothing to earn it – quite the opposite – and can do nothing to put right my mistake or atone for it. And also accept that he knows me as I am and that I can't hide my real self or pretend to be better than I actually am. To do this is actually to strengthen our friendship rather than weaken it.

The important thing is for me to focus on my friend's forgiveness, not on my letting him down.

Well, you will have seen the point of this little personal drama already. Ash Wednesday is the day when we begin Lent, which, in the words of the Church of England's introduction to the season, has the 'characteristic notes' of 'self-examination, penitence, self-denial, study, and preparation for Easter'.[1] But while there does need to be some reflection on ourselves, the greater focus surely needs to be on the grace of God.

I have a hunch that Thomas Cranmer, who wrote the prayer which forms our Collect for Ash Wednesday for the 1549 Prayer Book, would have agreed with me. If you look at his prayer, you'll see that there are 12 lines, and of them only two focus on us: the rest focus on God.

This was a new prayer when Cranmer wrote it, but, like many of his prayers, it sprang from a phrase he was familiar with from the services in Latin which had formed the basis of worship until his time. In this case it was the prayer of blessing over the ashes at the beginning of Lent, which began with that wonderful phrase, 'you hate nothing that you have made.'

Pause for a moment and take it in. God hates nothing that he has made. If he made it, he loves it. If he made you , he loves you.

And so, in the next phrase, the collect goes on, 'and [you] forgive the sins of all those who are penitent.' God does not hate what he has made, so he yearns to forgive sins. Human beings, made in the image of God, are always called to come back to him, and the door is always open. The image echoes the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), of course. But to fully experience the love of God we must turn towards him, as sunflowers turn towards the sun. It is this turning that we call penitence. Without apology, sorrow at what we have done, even guilt and the recognition that we have messed up, forgiveness has no meaning. Timothy Radcliffe has a lovely way of explaining what is going on in this process of penitence. 'One icy January evening,' he writes,

> I bicycled across London…Stupidly I had forgotten to put on gloves. When I arrived, my hands were so numb that I was unable to feel anything. I had to use my elbow to ring the doorbell. My hands only began to hurt when I came into the warmth of the house and blood returned to my fingers. Similarly sorrow is a sign that we are touched by God's forgiving warmth. We feel pain because we are unfreezing. This sorrow is often called 'contrition'. The word comes from *tritura*, the rubbing of things together, as in the threshing of grain, breaking the outer inedible husk. So contrition is the threshing of our hearts, softening them, breaking down the hard husks of our hearts, making them hearts of flesh, able to feel sorrow and joy.[2]

Accepting the forgiveness which God is always ready to give us can be painful. That is what Cranmer's collect recognises in its next line: 'create and make in us new and contrite hearts'. The 'threshing of our hearts' is what God does in us, as we turn to him and accept his love and his forgiveness. To do so means giving up the false images of ourselves which we often cling to so seriously. The truth is that we are only small fish in a great pond. I sometimes, rather pompously and seriously, pride myself in being effective and efficient (don't laugh). In fact I am rarely either of those things, as days like the one I had last week show from time to time. Yet that is all right, because I have learned over many years to accept who I actually am, and find that

[1] *Common Worship: Times and Seasons* (Church House Publishing 2006) p.211.
[2] Timothy Radcliffe *Why Go to Church? the drama of the Eucharist* (Continuum 2008) p.19.

my friends still love me through it. Learning not to take ourselves so seriously stems from accepting the love and forgiveness of God, and recognizing that he knows us better than we know ourselves. Herbert McCabe writes that 'When God forgives our sins, he is not changing his mind about us. He is changing *our* minds about him. He does not change; his mind is never anything but loving: he *is* love.'[3] The collect speaks of creating and making, and this is not just repetition for effect, I think. It helpfully draws a distinction between original creation and continuing making, rather as the two stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 do.[4] God *has* created us in his image, but God also *continues* to make us, shape and form us – and this is a lifetime's work and beyond. Our task is to submit to the maker's hand.

'[|W]orthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness' is part of that submission to the process of making and re-making. 'Worthily' here means, I think appropriately – neither too much or too little. Lament over sins might mean apology, saying (and meaning) that we are sorry, but not dwelling on it too long: too much lamenting takes the spotlight from God and leaves it on ourselves if we are not careful.

'[A]cknowledging our wretchedness' is what we do on Ash Wednesday when we receive the sign of the cross in ashes on our foreheads. We are dust – no more, no less – and yet, in Robert Hughes' evocative phrase, 'beloved dust'.[5] The gift of confession, as we begin Lent, and as we begin our Communion service throughout the year, is that we 'may receive from…the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.' Receiving is key, says Herbert McCabe again:

> Forgiveness is what matters most of all; to be forgiven, to be contrite…is the most tremendous thing that could happen to you in your life – so of course it is very easy. You do not have to work at being forgiven: you only have to accept it, to believe in the forgiveness of God in Christ, in his eternal unconditional love for you.[6]

Allowing this insight to work within us afresh will change us and re-make us, whatever stage in life we have reached.

Lent is a good time to do this. You might take a simple phrase like 'beloved dust' and spend a few moments before the mirror each morning saying to yourself that, though you are dust, you are *beloved* dust in Christ. Or you might pray this collect each day in Lent, slowly and carefully, savouring each phrase, examining how it emphasises God's part in forgiveness rather than ours, and claiming that for your own.

They say that if you do something for six weeks it forms a new habit, and it is perhaps therefore no accident that Lent lasts for six weeks. Using these simple or more complex prayers through Lent may help us to form new habits both of mind and heart, so that we learn to know, more deeply than ever, that God truly hates nothing that he has made.

Some years ago I knew a musician who hosted the French composer Olivier Messiaen for a weekend's visit to conduct an orchestra. If you search for pictures of Messiaen you will find that

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[3] Quoted in Radcliffe, p.18.
[4] See Peter Moger 'The Ash Wednesday Collect' https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/basic-page/sermon-transcript-ash-wednesday-ash-wednesday-collect
[5] Robert Hughes *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life* (Continuum 2008), see especially p.109: 'Jesus is God's ultimate declaration that the dust we are is beloved.'
[6] Herbert McCabe *God Matters* (Mowbray 2000) p.245.

in old age he was a rather crumpled figure, who usually wore enormous knitted scarves on top of a rather shabby overcoat. He was also a very devout Roman Catholic. After the first night's rehearsals Messiaen suddenly announced to my friend that he must go to Mass early the next morning. My friend duly found a church nearby (not easy in pre-internet days) and they got there just in time for him to drop Messaien off, agreeing to pick him up half an hour later on the way into the morning's rehearsal. I'll never forget his description of Messiaen as he came down the steps of the church after Mass. 'He looked like he'd been ironed,' he said. That's not a bad way to look at Lent, I think.

3. Lent 1 - 'Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts'

(The Collect for Purity)

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Through Lent this year we are looking at some of the prayers which we say regularly in our Communion service. Prayers which we have said so often that, without ever meaning to, we know 'by heart'. Today we look at the 'Collect for Purity', which begins that service. I guess that, in the almost 53 years since I was confirmed, I have said this prayer most weeks at least once. That's over two-and-a-half thousand times. It ought to be woven into the fibre of my being.

It is, and it probably is into yours as well. But it is so woven into me, and perhaps you, that it's easy to say almost automatically. It's just what we say when we come to church. Yet this prayer, like all the prayers we use, has its own story and its own truths. What are they?

Sometime in the late 14th Century a little anonymous book called *The Cloud of Unknowing* was written. It was a guide to prayer, in English, that sidestepped the increasingly sterile philosophical debates of the day about God, which were conducted in Latin, and emphasised that Christian faith was fundamentally about love. It opened with this prayer, in English:

> *God, unto whom alle hertes ben open, and unto whom alle wille spekith, and unto whom no privé thing is hid: I beseche thee so for to clense the entent of myn heart with the unspekable gift of thi grace that I may parfiteliche love thee, and worthilich preise thee. Amen.*

It was a prayer that had been written in the 8th Century by the Abbot of Canterbury in Latin. It was used through the Middle Ages in England by the priest, quietly, by himself, before he celebrated the Mass or Communion in Latin. The *Cloud of Unknowing* translated it into English, and therefore opened it up for anyone to use.

So it is a peculiarly English prayer with a history stretching back almost 1300 years, first in Latin and later in English. When we pray these words, therefore, we join a procession of what the Letter to the Hebrews calls 'the great cloud of witnesses', who have used these same words as they come to worship and pray. Think of it that way, and the 2500 times I have used it begins to seem rather puny in an ancient church. It must have been prayed literally millions of times by people in our churches.

Until the mid-16th Century, though, it was a private prayer, whether in Latin or English. But when Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, came to write the text of the Communion

Service for the first *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549 he included the prayer, more or less as we know it, still said only by the priest but in the hearing of the congregation. Gradually congregations, over the centuries, began to join in, and when the services were revised in the later 20th Century it became the 'Prayer of Preparation', to be said by everyone. It's a threshold prayer, as we enter worship, a 'Here I am again, Lord' prayer, a kind of 'checking in' at the beginning of worship.

It's called a Collect – which is a specific kind of prayer that gathers our many prayers together into one and points them in the same direction. We come to worship from different experiences, directions and lives, yet here we are drawn together, gather our lives and thoughts from many different trajectories and point them in the same direction towards God.

Sometimes we think that in order to pray, to have sense of meeting God, we need a quiet room, a dark church, in order to find God. But this prayer begins with the reminder that God is everywhere, not just in church – 'Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden'. We may not have been aware of God in the busy-ness of daily life, but God has been there in the hurly-burly of whatever we have come from, whatever we have been immersed in this week. The American Social Activist Dorothy Day once dropped into St Joseph's Church amidst the mad bustle of Sixth Avenue in New York. She said she had realised that 'sooner or later I would have to pause in the mad rush of living and remember my first beginning and my last end.'[7] This prayer begins that pause in everyday life, but it does not mark something completely different from everyday life, moving into a place where God is instead of a place where God is not. God has been with us in oir outside-church life just as much as God is with us when we stop to worship.

But then when we think about it, we might become rather uncomfortable with this thought. God sees and knows everything: all hearts are open books to him, all our desires clear and there are no secrets from him. How does that make you feel?!

It can be scary. It sounds like George Orwell's 'Big Brother is watching you', or J.R.R.Tolkien's 'Eye of Sauron' in *The Lord of the Rings.* This is the ultimate surveillance system! Before God we are naked, transparent, completely laid bare. Ike Adam and Eve in the garden, according to the Book of Genesis, we naturally squirm away and try to hide in the beam of this blazing searchlight.

Or do we? That might be our first reaction, but if we think about it perhaps we might also begin to feel some relief. Nothing is hidden, everything is known. There are no secrets from God. So there's no need to hide – hiding would be useless anyway. Those things which you're ashamed of, that you'd hate even your best friend or your spouse to know about you – God already knows. And actually it's all right.

I remember really getting to grips with this for the first time at a Quiet Day when I was at Theological College. There was a little secret, not very important but it felt embarrassing, that I had hidden away from everyone. The speaker for the day talked about how nothing was hidden from God, and that he still loves us anyway. Nothing at all. And it was as if something shifted in me. This thing which I was so embarrassed about, my little secret thought, was known by God. And he still loved me. After that the secret thought didn't really bother me any more, it sort of

[7] Quoted in Radcliffe *Why Go to Church?* p.20.

fizzled away like an old sparkler. When I spoke to an old friend about the secret that had tormented me a good few years later, he just laughed. 'Really?' he said.

So though our first reaction to this sense of exposure may be panic, once we work with it perhaps we recognise that it is a gift. Desires can be good as well as bad: what is the deepest desire of your heart, the thing you most long to see happen? You might not dare to say it to someone else because it seems too mad to hope for. But God knows and doesn't laugh. You have no secrets from him. The Sufi poet Rumi wrote, picking up Jesus's words from the end of Matthew's Gospel:

> *Lo, I am with you always* means when you look for God,
> God is in the look of your eyes,
> in the thought of looking, nearer to you than yourself.[8]

And just as this prayer gathers our various prayers, and we pray together, its 'Collect' nature might also point to something else here. For we are not only drawing near to our fellow-worshippers, but also drawing closer to God. The medieval hermit Julian of Norwich wrote that God is the 'endless fulfilment of all true desires'[9], and in recognising that God knows our desires to we perhaps also find, little by little, that those desires move in a new direction; we begin to sense more deeply which are right desires and which are not.

So now we move on to the next bit of the prayer. You might think that after that opening it would be time to confess sins, but there's a deeper wisdom here. We're not going there yet.

Because here we reach the heart of the actual prayer: 'cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit'.

I have been having trouble with my car recently. The cam belt needed replacing, but after that had been done the engine didn't run properly: when you accelerate, from time to time the car judders and won't pick up speed and all the warning lights come on. The garage decided that bits had got into the fuel delivery system and needed to be cleaned out in order for the car to run smoothly. It's been back to the garage twice since then.

I can't help seeing a connection with this prayer. Before we're even in a position to confess our sins, we need our systems to be cleaned out first. The embarrassing, but also liberating truth, is that unless we ask God to repair us first, unless God makes the first move, we're not yet in a state to pray the prayers of penitence. We can't even do that on our own. So we ask for the 'inspiration of your Holy Spirit'. It's a lovely image: 'inspiration' literally means 'breathing into', and again its taken from the Book of Genesis, where God breathes life into the first human being (Genesis 2.7). We ask for nothing less than a re-creation, a new start.

Fonts are usually placed close to the entrance of a church, so that you have to pass them in order to come to worship. Although this prayer doesn't mention water, or baptism, I often think that the idea is lying beneath it somewhere. In baptism we come with empty hands, simply offering ourselves. One of the reasons I love infant baptisms is because they so graphically illustrates that we have no qualification for the grace and love of God, other than our need. This prayer is a kind of re-enactment of baptism as we come, nakedly, openly, asking God to give us

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[8] Rumi *Selected Poems* (Penguin 2004) p.13. See also Augustine *Confessions* 3.6.11, 'You were more inward to me than my most inward part.'
[9] Julian of Norwich *Revelations of Divine Love* (OUP 2015) Ch. 59, p.128.

even the capacity to worship him. So that we may 'perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name: through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

Our love is, of course, never perfect, and we can never 'worthily magnify your holy name' – unless we recognise our need and that our love and worship is somehow transformed 'through Jesus Christ' into something worthy. Even in our little village churches, bumbling along as we do, making our own links in the unbroken chain of worship over twelve or thirteen centuries, our unworthy worship is made acceptable and joins the worship of heaven.

Last year we had a day for Rural Churches in the Diocese, and Sally Gaze, who is an Archdeacon in East Anglia, came to speak. One thing she said particularly stuck with me. What does God think of our often rather homespun worship in village churches? she asked. It doesn't bear comparison with a great Cathedral or many of the town churches with larger congregations, beautiful choirs, and grand buildings, she said. They are like the pictures you might have on the wall of your sitting room, she said. Rural churches? Well maybe to God, she said, they are like the pictures by our children or grandchildren that we put on our fridges or blu-tac to the wall. Far from perfect, but painted with love and kept in the place where we see and value them. Because they are painted with love.

It is God's love, through Jesus Christ, that makes it possible for us to worship perfectly and worthily. God sees us as we are, knows us through and through, has given us life and breath and gives it to us again, so that we may join with the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

And now we can get down to the work of confession, hear words of forgiveness, listen to the great stories of what God has done in our Bible readings and in the sermon, pray for the world and then come to give thanks and praise in the 'Great Thanksgiving', the eucharistic prayer, which is what we look at next week.

Lent usually coincides with the coming of Spring for us (in fact the word 'Lent' originally meant Spring, rather than a Church season). It is the time when, as you look up, you can see migrating birds scudding across the sky in formation. That, it seems to me, is a wonderful image of what we are doing as we pray this Collect for Purity together. Gathering, as the birds do, moving into formation and finding common direction as we move deeper into the awareness of the presence of God – who has, of course, been there with us all along.

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.[10]

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

[10] Quoted in Radcliffe *Why Go to Church?* p.101.

the world as people who are transformed by thanksgiving – and as the widow I began with said, 'Thanksgiving makes the world glow.'

5. Lent 3 - 'Whose nature is always to have mercy'

(The Prayer of Humble Access)

We do not presume
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.
Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ
and to drink his blood,
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body
and our souls washed through his most precious blood,
and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.

I've been thinking quite a lot about memory recently, partly because my Dad, aged 94, moved last summer from his own house to a Care Home in Chipping Campden. He's always had a very good memory, able to remember with extraordinary precision details of the past, for example. But just recently his memory has begun to fade. Some things are very sharp still (we had a good conversation last week about how he watched the 1948 Australian Touring Team, spurred by a phot he took of Don Bradman at the time), but many are just beginning to drift away. Yet I find that when I take him communion occasionally, the words of most of the prayers are still there. I've often found this before with other people, and I remember taking communion one Maundy Thursday to a woman who had had a terrible, incapacitating stroke. She didn't seem to understand who she was or where she was any more. Yet as I prayed some of the words of the communion in her home, she quietly whispered a few of the words and seemed to recognise the actions.

Terry Waite, who was kept hostage in Lebanon for almost five years from 1987, was once asked how his faith had kept going. He said that he had

> been brought up with the Book of Common Prayer. The language of that was very, very helpful. I had unconsciously memorised it as a choir boy. If I can just give you an example of what I mean from one of the great old collects of the prayer book:
>
> *Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night . . .*
>
> That is very, very meaningful when you're sitting in darkness. That collect not only has meaning, but it also has poetry and rhythm. There is a relationship between identity, language and prayer; somehow they help you hold together at your centre.
>
> Some people may find this strange, but I never engaged in what is called extemporary prayer during that time. I felt that if I did I would be begin to, sort of, go down a one-way track, reveal my own psychological vulnerability and just get into the business of saying, 'Oh God, get me out of here'—which isn't prayer at all. That's just being like a child. So

> by falling back on that which I knew, the Prayer Book and the balance of that, I was able to keep a bit more balance in my mind and also maintain some degree of inner balance.[11]

These prayers that we, often accidentally, know by heart may be more important than we think.

Here we reach what is called the 'Prayer of Humble Access': 'We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord…' It's a prayer that was added to the Communion service by Thomas Cranmer when he wrote the first version of the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1548-49, a fresh creation that has stood the test of time. It was placed immediately before the congregation received the bread and wine. Paula Gooder and Michael Perham comment that Cranmer's 'intention seems to have been to create for the laity an equivalent to the priest's private prayers before Communion…essentially a prayer for worthy and fruitful reception of the sacrament.'[12] That intention certainly seems to have been fulfilled, and for many over the centuries it has become a favourite prayer.

But there have been arguments about where it should properly go in the communion service, and liturgists – experts who are the technicians and theoreticians of worship – have often either been ambivalent about it, or wanted to remove it altogether. This is because some argue that its theology is muddled: the distinction between souls and bodies close to the end, for example, doesn't make theological sense, and those lines were either removed or put in brackets in services from the 1970s to the 1990s. Gooder and Perham note that they were restored in *Common Worship* in 2000 because they were understood 'as poetic rather than doctrinal' and conclude that 'these two phrases must be read poetically and together if they are to make any theological sense.'[13] But it is, perhaps, the poetic nature of the prayer which makes it appealing and memorable.

In his 1552 revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*, Thomas Cranmer moved it from being just before receiving communion to a place in the middle of the long eucharistic prayer. The reason seems to have been because (as mentioned last week) in 1552 Cranmer wanted the communion table to be placed in the nave of the church, lengthways, so that it was clear that this was a real meal, and the people were to gather round it for the eucharistic prayer. That's why the prayer speaks of coming to the Lord's table at that point in the service. But this way of doing communion proved too radical for most churches to cope with, and the buildings were re-ordered to the way they (mostly) still are today, with the communion table at the far, east, end, distant from the congregation. But the prayer remained there, some would say interrupting the flow of the eucharistic prayer, in successive versions of the Prayer Book. When the services were revised from the 1960s onwards, however, this prayer was moved back to Cranmer's original place for it in his 1549 service, to come immediately before the congregation comes up to receive communion.

The placing of the prayer may have changed, but Cranmer's language hasn't, really. For some liturgists what seems to be the emphasis on the congregation being miserable sinners, unworthy to receive, has been a reason to suppress this prayer, but the focus is not, in fact, on our unworthiness, but on God's generosity and mercy. There's an important point here, as the

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[11] 'Terry Waite: Faith held hostage' https://hope1032.com.au/good-news/terry-waite-break-my-body-bend-my-mind-but-my-soul-is-not-yours-to-possess/

[12] Paula Gooder & Michael Perham *Echoing the Word: The Bible in the Eucharist* (SPCK 2013) p.104.

[13] Gooder & Perham p.106.

prayer opens, that we are not 'trusting in our own righteousness.' God does not invite us to this supper that Jesus gave us because we've done anything to deserve it. You don't have to clock up so many points to get in. It's like the banquets mentioned in Jesus' parables: all you need is an invitation, and the invitation is open to all.

'We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs from under your table' we go on to say, echoing the words of the woman who came to Jesus and asked him to heal her daughter (Mark 7.24-30). It's a funny little story, because Jesus at first refuses to help her, but she appeals to the mercy of God – and wins the argument! Jesus himself seems to realise in a new way that the Father is mercy all the way through.

Two of our grandchildren will be 4 on Thursday (born on the same day, 45 minutes and 90 miles apart!). Four is a great age. Everything is 'Why?' 'Why is the sky blue? Why are elephants so big? Why have you got hair on the wrong end of your head, Grandpa?' And a lot of the time the answer is, 'Well, it's just like that!' This is the same. Why does God invite us to this table? Because he does. He is the God of 'many-fold and great mercies…whose nature is always to have mercy.' Let that sink in for a moment. The focus here is not on whether we are worthy. Forget that. Stop 'trusting in our own righteousness' (easier said than done, I know), seeking to earn acceptance, and just let God enfold you. We're not coming because we know we've made it, Lord, we say, but because you've asked us: 'you are the same Lord, whose nature is always to have mercy.'

A couple of years ago I was having a conversation about the language we use in our worship with someone in one of our parishes, and this was the prayer she homed in on. 'The Prayer Book has, "whose *property* is always to have mercy"' she said, "and that's much better than "whose *nature* is always to have mercy."' I asked why? – I'd never thought about it before. 'Because nature can change,' she said, 'but the *property* of something always stays the same.' I saw what she meant. Strictly speaking, *nature* means what something or someone is made or born with. *Property* means something intrinsic to something or someone, like the properties that chemical elements have. A property is unchanging, whereas nature can be tamed or altered. If mercy is God's property, then he is always merciful. Mercy runs through God like the letters in a stick of rock. It will never change.

That, rather than human unworthiness, is what this prayer celebrates.

And so the prayer ends as we recognise that as we 'eat the flesh of your dear son Jesus Christ and…drink his blood', it is by God's mercy, awesomely given to us by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, 'that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.' And then we come to receive that flesh and blood, remembering that God is always mercy.

This prayer, if we remember it by heart, will help us in the years to come not to remember our unworthiness, but God's property of mercy, which we call grace.

6. Lent 4 (Mothering Sunday) - 'Our Father'

(The Lord's Prayer)

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

This is the prayer which, even if you remember no others by heart, you will know! It's also, of course, the oldest of the prayers which we use in Church services, going right back to Jesus himself, and found in Matthew 6.9-13 (part of the Sermon on the Mount), and Luke 11.2-4 (in response to the disciples' request, 'Lord, teach us to pray').

The two texts are slightly different, with Matthew's being the form we're familiar with (though it lacks the 'For thine is the kingdom' ending). Luke offers a shorter, pithier, version which most scholars would agree is probably the oldest form of the prayer. Matthew's wording seems to have expanded the original so that it runs more easily as part of liturgical prayer, an argument strengthened by the fact that the same wording is found in a little book called the *Didache*, which means the 'teaching', produced near the end of the 1st century for those entering the Christian faith. There the Lord's Prayer is to be said three times a day, and was clearly one of the first prayers a new convert needed to learn by heart. When we pray this prayer, then, we are united with those early Christians, and indeed with Jesus himself.

In the Anglican communion service the Lord's Prayer comes either just before (*Common Worship*) or immediately after (*Book of Common Prayer*). Either way, its position is pretty much at the heart of the service, the point at which we receive bread and wine, the moment when we feel closest to God. As such it is a prayer of intimacy.

Intimacy is the key to this prayer. It is short by comparison with most liturgical prayers of Jesus' time, and its opening address to God is striking: 'Our Father…' While speaking to God as Father was quite normal in Jewish worship in Jesus' day, it was usually as 'Father of creation', or 'Father of Israel', but these titles tend to emphasise distance and grandeur. They would also be said in Hebrew, the ancient, formal language of synagogue and Temple. Jesus seems to have prayed in the everyday language of Aramaic, and spoke to God as *Abba*, an Aramaic word which was transliterated into Greek in the New Testament (see Mark 14.36; also used by Paul in Romans 8.36; Galatians 4.6), the language of the family setting. Luke begins his version of the Lord's Prayer simply with 'Father…', and this tends to reinforce the point of closeness. G.B.Caird sums the significance up well when he writes that Jesus 'transformed the Fatherhood of God from a

theological doctrine into an intense and intimate experience; and he taught his disciples to pray with the same family intimacy.'[14] The addition of '*Our* Father' takes this a little further, broadening the intimate relationship out into the wider family. We do not pray on our own.

The end of the main part of the prayer also emphasises the parent-child relationship, though this may not be immediately obvious. 'Lead us not into temptation' is the phrase which I find people are most often puzzled by. (When I lived in Bristol I found that some people, when they learned the Lord's Prayer were even more puzzled than most by this line because they heard it as 'Lead us not into Temple Meads Station'.) 'If God is good, why would he *lead us into* temptation?' they ask. Matthew's longer version adds the familiar line, 'but deliver us from evil', and this fills out the meaning more clearly, but on its own 'lead us not into temptation' does seem strange. The attempts to revise the prayer in the 1970s tried to substitute 'do not bring us to the time of trial', and this is probably a better translation of the original. In other words, this is a prayer for us to be protected from temptation/time of trial/testing. Read in that last sense it comes suddenly into focus if we think of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night before he died. 'Father, let this cup pass from me' he pleads (Matthew 26.39; Mark 14.36 [note the use of *Abba* here]; Luke 22.41). Here is Jesus praying that he is not brought to the moment of testing. He makes no further plea to be delivered from evil, but that is, of course, what happens. Yet it does not happen in the obvious way. Jesus goes to a horrific death on the cross. And on the third day he is delivered from evil, set free from death, raised to life again.

This is a far cry from our mundane temptations. Instead it speaks again of intimacy, a cry for protection by the loving heavenly Father. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' final words are 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23.46). This is the prayer children learned to say before going to sleep, in case they did not wake in the morning. A prayer of trusting love.

Not everyone finds the Father imagery helpful, especially if there has been a hard relationship with an earthly father. The image is not meant to be masculine: this is an example of how our metaphors for God can take us so far, but never quite capture the complete truth, for God is always greater than our minds and our language can grasp. The deeper truth here is the intimacy of relationship with God, and in the Middle Ages, for example, it was not so unusual to use Mother as well as Father imagery for God. I love in particular the words of Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 12th century, addressed to 'Jesus, like a mother…' He writes like this:

> Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you;
> you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.
> Often you weep over our sins and our pride,
> tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.
> You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds,
> in sickness you nurse us, and with pure milk you feed us.[15]

Anselm's words get to the heart of the intimate relationship which the Lord's Prayer offers.

So this prayer, given to us by Jesus, prayed by him, is what we say as we approach, or as we have received, communion. We come as children of the heavenly Father, close to him, aware of his presence, cherished and loved unconditionally.

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[14] G.B.Caird *Saint Luke* (Penguin 1963) p.152.
[15] 'A Song of Anselm' in *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* (CHP 2005) p.639.

7. Lent 5 - 'We offer you…a living sacrifice'

(The Post Communion Prayer)

Almighty God,
we thank you for feeding us
with the body and blood of your Son Jesus Christ.
Through him we offer you our souls and bodies
to be a living sacrifice.
Send us out
in the power of your Spirit
to live and work
to your praise and glory. Amen.

The Communion service in Latin, used throughout Western Europe until the 16th Century, and then still in the Roman Catholic Church until the 1960s, ended with this terse, enigmatic dismissal of the congregation by the priest: '*Ite, missa est*'. Its literal meaning is 'Go, it/she is sent'. But no one really knows exactly what that means, or where it came from.

It's from this phrase that the name 'Mass' for Communion comes, which may be one reason why in Thomas Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* the phrase wasn't translated into English and the Communion service as he designed it ended simply with a blessing. But the two alternative prayers which Cranmer included after Communion both have some sense of going out into the world beyond the church in them. The first says, 'here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto thee…', picking up on the language of Romans 12.1-2; the second asks God 'so to assist us with they grace, that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in…', this time echoing Colossians 1.10. The focus has switched from drawing close to God in the sacrament of bread and wine, to reflecting that presence in the everyday world beyond the church walls.

That sense of going out from the cocoon of worship into the hurly-burly of daily life may be what the ancient dismissal phrase, *Ite, missa est*, was trying to convey. It's sometimes translated, 'Go, *you* are sent', taking the 'she' as meaning the church as whole. Whatever is referred to here (and originally it may have referred to the bread from communion being sent out to smaller churches or to those who could not attend), the focus is on being 'sent'.

'Sending' words are very important in the Gospels of the New Testament, particularly at their endings. John's Gospel most clearly shows this. Throughout that Gospel it is clear that Jesus has been sent by the Father, and so the risen Jesus, on the first Easter day, commissions the disciples with the words, 'As the Father sent me, so I send you' (John 20.21). When I used to teach a course on John's Gospel I called it 'The Gospel of the "sending Sent One"' to try to catch this fundamental theme.

'Sending' is important in the other Gospels too. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus takes the disciples up to a high mountain and commands them to 'Go into all the world, making disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28.19), sending them out. Luke's Gospel closes with Jesus telling the disciples that they will be his witnesses to all nations (Luke 24.48), something repeated in the

Acts of the Apostles, also by Luke, which continues the story (Acts 1.8). Mark's Gospel doesn't quite conform to the others, at first sight, because this Gospel doesn't end in the same way. It finishes apparently in mid-sentence with a group of women who find the empty tomb on Easter morning and flee the scene: 'And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid' (Mark 16.8). But if we think about it for a moment we realise that if they really never told anyone anything about this, we wouldn't know…and we do! So somehow they must have overcome their fear and carried the astonishing news of Jesus' resurrection out into the world.

One of my least favourite Christmas Day phone calls was after I'd taken five or six services in 24 hours, reached home and was just preparing for Christmas Dinner at about 2pm. Sometimes people will phone on Christmas Day because they are lonely or desperate, so it's important to answer. But in this case a slightly slurred voice, which suggested to me that drink had already been taken, asked, 'Vicar, could you help us with a family argument? What were the names of the twelve apostles?' The fact is, I said, that there isn't full agreement on who the apostles were, and more than twelve people are identified. I was hoping this might mean everyone could be satisfied that they were right, but my questioner went on, 'And are they the same as the twelve disciples?' Well, the answer to that was yes, they are – whoever exactly they may be. The words are used more or less interchangeably for Jesus' companions, but there is a difference between the two terms of disciple and apostle: they don't mean exactly the same thing. Rather, they refer to the same people - but going in different directions. Disciples gather round Jesus, they are coming *to* him; apostles are sent out, they are going *from* Jesus. (Some years ago someone in a group of students I was teaching pointed out that 'Apostle' has the word 'post' in the middle of it: apostles are the ones 'posted' out. There's no actual link with the origin of the words, but it makes an easy way to remember what apostles are for!) There is a two-way dynamic here, again expressed most strongly in John's Gospel, which has been summed up in a phrase taken from John 15, where Jesus' followers are called both to 'abide in me' (John 15.4) and to 'go and bear fruit' (John 15.16). As one theologian puts it, 'The phrase "abide and go" – or "stay put and depart" – indicates the creative theological paradox in John's Gospel that unites spirituality ("abide") and mission ("go").'[16] We often keep spirituality (the inner life of prayer) and mission (following Jesus in our outer life in the world) in separate boxes. But there are no such boxes in the New Testament. Both aspects of our life with God belong together. If we follow Jesus it means we are called to be both disciples *and* apostles.

At point in the Communion service after receiving the bread and wine a transition begins. As worshippers we are begin to shift from being disciples, coming in and being fed by God, to becoming apostles, sent out to reflect the presence of Jesus in the world around. It's not always a transition we want to make.

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The profound intimacy of receiving bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, as close as we can be to the heavenly Father in this life, can be overwhelming. As the hymns say, we may feel, even on an ordinary Sunday, that we are 'lost in wonder love and praise', and that 'here might I stay and sing…This my friend, in whose sweet praise, I all my days would gladly spend.' But that is not what we are called to do.

[16] Michael J. Gorman *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John* (Wipf and Stock 2015) p.25.

Some of Jesus' disciples knew something of this. Jesus invited a few of them to accompany him up a mountain where 'he was transfigured before them and his clothes became dazzling white', and Moses and Elijah appear, speaking with Jesus. As you may remember, Peter fails badly to read the room and volunteers to put up tents, clearly intending to prolong the experience, but is cut off by a voice saying 'This is my Son, my beloved, listen to him' (Mark 9.2-8). This is truly a 'mountain-top experience', where Jesus is seen by Peter and the others as he really is, in his glory. But immediately on coming down the mountain the disciples are thrust into a situation where those they have left behind are unable to cast out an evil spirit from a boy, and all is chaos and failure (Mark 9.14-29). The glimpse of Jesus in glory was just that: a glimpse; and it is followed by a stern challenge of reality.

When the 17th century Carmelite nun and mystic, Teresa of Avila, found that some of the younger sisters in her convent became desperate to receive communion almost hourly, so close did they feel themselves to God when they did so, Teresa suggested that they should be given tasks that would benefit the community around them and distract them, for then they would be following Jesus in his humility of, as she put it, leaving heaven for the sake of others. Leaving heaven for the sake of others is what the incarnation of Christ is about.

So in this post-communion prayer we thank God for feeding us, but at the same time recognise that that we have received food for the journey he now sends us to make. The next phrase echoes the words of Cranmer's post-communion prayer: 'we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.' This language is borrowed, as we saw above, from Paul's letter to the Romans. There, after he has laid out the foundations of the Good News (chapters 1-8), and wrestled with the role of Israel (chapters 9-11), Paul earths everything in practical advice and instruction on how to follow Jesus (chapters 12-15). 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship' (Romans 12.1) is virtually the headline to this section of the letter.

Paul's phrase 'spiritual worship' is a very difficult one to translate, and some Bible versions say 'reasonable service' here, which is why Cranmer's prayer speaks of being 'a *reasonable*, holy and lively sacrifice unto thee'. The Greek word Paul uses for 'spiritual' is *logikos*, related to *logos*, which in the beginning of John's Gospel, of course, is rendered as 'the Word': Jesus. It's really to do with how understanding and reasoning result in action. A commentary on Romans says, 'Paul means, a worship consisting not in outward rites but in the movement of…inward being, resulting in concrete outer action'[17] and this catches the sense well. Another commentary reflects that Paul is 'modifying ordinary understanding of worship itself. This worship is not carried out in a temple…but rather is carried out everyday in one's living….*logikos* worship could be understood as a worship that conforms to the *logos* incarnated in Jesus the Christ. This worship is embodied and enacted daily as we seek to be more and more Christlike.'[18] The phrase could be out like this: 'Word-like worship/service'. Paul is talking about how worship is not just for Sunday, but every day of the week, and how it reflects Jesus, the Word. The world beyond the Church is where our worship is worked out.

The early Christians' adoption of Sunday as their day of worship underlines this. Sunday was the day for worship primarily because it was the day of the week on which Jesus rose from the dead, but as it was also the first day of the week, worship became the prelude or introduction to the

[17] C.K.Barrett *The Epistle to the Romans* (A&C Black 2nd ed. 1991) p.215.
[18] Sarah Heaner Lancaster *Romans: a theological commentary* (WJKP 2015) pp.204-05

return to working life, an anticipation of what was to come. This was a contrast to worship on the Sabbath, which was the last day of the week, and tended to focus on thanksgiving for what was past, perhaps with a measure of relief for having survived.

Paul asks the Romans to be 'living sacrifices'. Worship in the 1st century was predominantly based on the sacrifice of animals. Here, Paul encourages the Romans to think of themselves as dedicated to God, not as dead and inanimate offerings in a temple, but as living and active beings who constantly offer themselves for God's service in whatever circumstance they find they are in. This is a big thing for us to offer in the post-communion prayer, for, as someone pointed out, the problem with living sacrifices is that they do have a tendency to wriggle off the altar! That is perhaps a good reason why there is a constant movement in and out, as disciples and apostles, in our worship, in a weekly rhythm. Jesus speaks of his followers as salt, light and yeast in the world around them. These are all things where a small amount makes a big difference. In the same way, being salt, light and yeast, catalysts of the Kingdom of God, is our calling.

So in this prayer we pledge to go out, 'in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory.' Going 'in the power of your Spirit' reminds us that we do not go alone. God is not confined to our worship, even if that is where we are likely to encounter him most intensely. God goes before us in the world, and that too is where we shall encounter him. In the church where I was vicar years ago, one Lent we encouraged people to speak every Sunday about where they encountered God outside Sunday – where they worked or spent their time. We got a big map of the city and put it on a notice board; then we asked people to put a pin in it for where they would be at 10am on Monday, rather than 10am on Sunday. Suddenly we saw the reach of where God was at work across the whole city. And that was just our church. If all the churches in the city had done the same thing there would have been pinpricks of light all over the map. On Sunday we were disciples. On Monday, apostles.

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Whatever the words of dismissal, *Ite, missa est*, once meant precisely, it is clear that 'sending out' is central to them, and from the 'sending' word – *missa* – we get the term 'mission'. Pope Benedict XVI wrote in 2007 that,

> the deacon or the priest dismisses the people with the words: *Ite, missa est*. These words help us to grasp the relationship between the Mass just celebrated and the mission of Christians in the world. In antiquity, *missa* simply meant "dismissal." However in Christian usage it gradually took on a deeper meaning. The word "dismissal" has come to imply a "mission." These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church. The People of God might be helped to understand more clearly this essential dimension of the Church's life, taking the dismissal as a starting- point.[19]

The doors should perhaps stand open. As Pope Benedict says, this is not so much the end of a service as the starting point of – well, our service. Timothy Radcliffe sums it up succinctly when he asks, 'Why Go to Church?' and replies: 'To be sent from it.'[20]

[19] Benedict XVI *Sacramentum Caritatis* §51.
[20] Radcliffe p.208.

I find that this dismissal is often given very politely and nicely by the celebrant. We don't like to be very directive in the Church of England, and after all, usually the congregation will stay on to chat and drink coffee afterwards - perhaps to eat biscuits and cake as well, if they are lucky. So the dismissal becomes '*Let us* go in peace, to love and serve the Lord', which to my mind is not quite the same thing at all. The old Latin phrase is not ambiguous, nice or soft. It is an imperative, a direct command. So I think this ending to the communion service should be firm and directive: : 'GO!' There should be no beating about the bush here.

The dismissal has two dimensions: *loving* and *serving* the Lord. Loving may best be described as vertical. We go conscious of God's presence, loving and worshipping him as living sacrifices in all of our lives throughout the week. Serving may be described as horizontal. We serve God in others, and this is our worship too, embodying the life and presence of God in our families, communities and the wider world.

The prayers of the communion service that we may have picked up 'by heart', and which we've explored here become woven into our beings and our lives. Phrases from them may echo in our hearts in daily life, when we are far from a church building or a communion service. They help to form us into who God wants us to be, lovers and servers of the God who has made us, who feeds us, and who sends us out to live and work to his praise and glory.