

CHAPTER 10

The Preparation of the Gifts

The people and presiding priest prepare the table and set bread and wine on it

Every significant Jewish meal involved seven actions: (1) bread was taken, (2) a prayer of blessing was said over it, (3) it was broken, and (4) it was shared; then there was a common meal; then (5) a cup of wine and water was taken, (6) a prayer of thanksgiving, the "Birkat ha-mazon", was chanted over it, and (7) all drank from the cup. The Last Supper (whether Passover or chaburah meal) included these seven actions. It is these actions which were given a new significance. When Christians did them, they did them to remember Christ - the action of God's eternal Word in creation, the incarnation, birth, life and ministry of Jesus, his death, resurrection, exaltation, giving of the Spirit, and the promise of his coming in glory.

The separation of the meal from the seven actions contributed to their conflation into the four classical eucharistic actions: (A) bread and wine are taken, (B) a prayer of thanksgiving is made, (C) the bread is broken, and (D) the bread and wine are shared. Of these (A) and (C) are preparatory. The bread and wine are placed upon the holy table in order that the Great Thanksgiving may be offered. The breaking of the bread prepares for the administration of communion. This chapter concentrates on the first of these actions - the Preparation of the Gifts.

The altar is best kept as bare as possible until the Preparation of the Gifts, when the focus moves from the lectern to the altar.

Items such as the chalice and paten, purificators, and corporal are not gifts, and so these are not brought forward from the congregation. Before the service they are placed on a credence at the side of the chancel. Traditionally, the water is placed on the credence as well, as it

is not the work of human hands. There is no need to use a burse or veil.

The white altar cloth and the candles could be placed on the altar at the time of the Preparation of the Gifts. This highlights the Eucharist as a meal, an aspect often obscured by our inherited architecture and ceremonial. Placing the corporal on the altar may be unnecessary if this practice is adopted as the corporal is a shrunken vestige of an altar cloth. In some churches it is possible to have large candle sticks (or candelabra) next to the altar rather than on it.

There are a variety of ways of taking the collection and bringing forward the gifts. A collection plate may be placed on the oblations table, at the entrance of the nave, with the bread and wine. A food basket could be placed by this table. In this way the people can place their gifts of money and food in the plate and basket as they enter church. These are then presented at the Preparation of the Gifts.

It is easy for the symbolism of objects to be lost when there are too many on the altar. The Prayer Book assumes that there will only be one chalice and one paten on the altar during the Great Thanksgiving in accordance with the symbolism of one bread and one cup. A clear glass pitcher or a flagon with wine may be placed on the altar at the Preparation of the Gifts if more wine will be needed for communion. Further empty chalices and baskets or patens can be brought up as needed at the time of the distribution of communion. The consecrated bread and wine is then placed in these.

Supplementary consecration is normally unnecessary. "Care should be taken to ensure that sufficient bread and wine is placed on the holy table" (page 516). Although the Roman Catholic Church normally reserves the Sacrament, liturgists of that church deprecate the practice of administering from the reserved Sacrament in a Eucharist. Our Prayer Book also emphasizes that people have a right to receive the Sacrament which has been consecrated during that celebration. It highlights the purpose of reservation as being "for the communion of persons not present" (page 516).

Only in the Eucharistic Liturgy *Thanksgiving for Creation and*

Redemption does the Prayer Book require a prayer at the Preparation of the Gifts. The other rites all allow for this preparation to be done without a verbal prayer. This simplifies and clarifies a part of the liturgy which, through centuries of accretions, had developed much complexity.

At the Preparation of the Gifts bread and wine are taken in order that thanks may be offered with them. Any prayer at the Preparation is in danger of anticipating the Great Thanksgiving. It is in the eucharistic prayer that thanks is given and the gifts are "offered" (hence the Greek word for the eucharistic prayer is the "anaphora" - the "offering").

It is because of this that the Roman Missal encourages the priest to pray the prayers during the Preparation of the Gifts *quietly* rather than aloud. At this point our own Prayer Book seems to depart from modern liturgical consensus when it instructs that "the priest may offer praise for God's gifts in the following or other appropriate words" (page 420). The prayer which follows obviously derives from the Roman Missal. However, scholarly liturgical opinion would have the Great Thanksgiving as being the prayer in which the priest offered "praise for God's gifts." Furthermore, there is no description of what sort of words would be "*inappropriate*." In defence of the rubrics it is to be noted that the prayers on page 420 are all optional, and so may normally be omitted.

In some communities there is more ceremony associated with the collection of money than would ever be considered appropriate for the eucharistic bread and wine! In the way that the collection and/or bread and wine is passed from person to person some places may appear to give the impression that the chancel and more especially the sanctuary are clerical spaces which only clergy (or at least those who are robed) may enter. Such practices merit serious reflection.

There is a wide variety of ways of preparing the gifts. The following description is only one of a number of possibilities, and not every celebration needs to be identical.

Having concluded the sign of peace, the presider may return to the presider's chair while others bring up the gifts from the congregation.

Because of the long period of standing which follows, from the beginning of the Great Thanksgiving until coming forward for communion, communities may wish to experiment with being seated during the Preparation of the Gifts. A hymn might be sung (texts need not speak of the bread and wine, nor of offering, they might be joyful, reflect the liturgical season, or speak of community). There might be an anthem, instrumental music, dance, or silence. On occasion (such as Harvest Thanksgiving) the whole community might be involved in a procession, all bringing forward some gift.

The bread, wine, money, and food offerings for the poor are brought forward together. If it was desired to use one of the optional prayers from the Preparation of the Gifts, the presider, still at the presider's chair, could pray one of these. Certainly those bringing the gifts present them directly to the deacon, priest, or other minister who is preparing the gifts rather than handing them to servers who in turn present them to the deacon or priest. Assigning the presentation of the gifts to a particular group such as children, servers or the ushers, can detract from the realisation that this presentation is on behalf of the whole community.

The deacon, if there is one, or an assisting minister oversees the whole preparation of the table: the covering of the altar with the altar cloth, the positioning of the altar book or cards of the Great Thanksgiving flat on the altar, and the placing of the bread and wine (in chalice and flagon) on the altar. Preferably this minister filled the chalice with the wine and water at the credence.

The chalice and paten (or bread basket) are best placed side by side so that they can be seen by all. Placing the chalice on the right of the paten allows it to be close to the deacon who stands to the right of the priest. The chalice is only covered with a pall if there is a danger of flies, for example.

The church's tradition is that there is nothing on the altar during the Eucharist apart from what is actually needed. Since 1662, however, money has been an exception to this rule in Anglican practice. If the

continuation of such a practice is desired, a suggestion is that the money be placed on the altar, but removed to the credence before the Great Thanksgiving begins. An alternative location for the money offering is at the foot of the altar where the food basket could also be placed.

If incense is used, the presider puts some into the thurible and censes the gifts and altar. This may be very effective if done in silence. The deacon or thurifer then censes the ministers and assembly without making hierarchical distinctions. Those in the sanctuary and those in the congregation are censed collectively and in the same way. The thurifer may swing the thurible gently during the Great Thanksgiving and the Lord's Prayer.

Ritual hand washings were customary at Jewish meals and from earliest times the presider washed the hands immediately before proclaiming the eucharistic prayer.

The Bread

Someone once said to me, "I have no problem believing that it's Jesus, it's believing that it's bread that I find difficult!" Another time I heard someone explaining, "it's not *supposed* to be bread, it's just supposed to *symbolise* bread." In the early church, Christians used the same baking techniques and same ovens for both their daily bread and that which was to be used in the Eucharist. For about a thousand years the bread of the Eucharist was ordinary, leavened bread. Then, in the Western church, there came a growing distinction between the "symbolic" and the "real." This resulted in changes to the theology of the Eucharist. A dichotomy grew between our daily bread and the "bread of angels," the "manna from heaven." The eucharistic presence was too holy to occur in ordinary bread. Furthermore, the growing practice of reservation of the sacrament required the bread to be unleavened.

If what we receive in communion appears neither as bread nor as broken, how can we say that "We break this bread to share in the body of Christ"? If children are not encouraged to receive, and if we don't

share from a common loaf, how can we say "We who are many are one body, for we all share the one bread"?

If wafers are used, it is worth reflecting what clericalism is communicated by distinguishing between "priest's" and "people's" wafers. If a larger wafer is used for visibility it is preferable that it is shared with communicants other than the presiding priest.

Using a ciborium or something else that looks like a cup or chalice as a receptacle for the bread confuses the symbolism of eating with drinking. So also does the visible "pouring" of wafers from such a vessel onto (into?) another container. Bread requires a plate, wine a goblet.

Breaking or cutting a loaf before the liturgy (into cubes, for example) also obscures the symbolism. A very exciting ministry for many is the chance to bake the bread for the Sunday Eucharist.

Some Questions

In this chapter the author presents some clear reasons for proposing the ways that the preparation of the gifts may best happen. Some of the reasons for the practice may be unfamiliar. Review these carefully in the light of your own understanding of what you believe this part of the liturgy is designed to achieve.

Are there ways that you would like to change your practice? Have other thoughts and ideas come to mind?

Who would it be best for you to discuss these with?