

An Instructed Eucharist

Pamela Grenfell Smith

This commentary on the Eucharist takes the form of five tropes, to be read at specific points in the service.

Readers:

A Worshiper, dressed for church

A Choir Member, in a choir robe

A Scholar, in an academic robe

A Body, in sweats

The Voice of God, a child, dressed as usual for church

Note that these readers should be visually and vocally distinct from one another.

Readers are asked to prepare for this service by prayer and by reading through the script.

Setting/production details:

The readers will need an elevated area near the front of the nave. Please arrange readers and microphones so as to minimize the wait between readings. Some provision should be made for gathering the questions of the congregation after this service and responding to them - possibly in a newsletter article, a talk, or a special leaflet.

Acknowledgements

All the people of Saint John's Episcopal Church in Lafayette, Indiana, have shaped this work - and this writer - in the eighteen years or so that I have worshiped there. Special thanks go to Joel Robinson, who decided it was time for a new instructed Eucharist and convinced me to write one, to Deacon Jan Rybka, who generously shared her materials with me, and to the Theophilites Bible Study, who were enthusiastic readers. My husband, Eliot, and my children, Miranda and Thomas, have been the best of companions in this and all my enterprises.

Katherine Smith Collett, of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Clinton, New York, and the Rev'd Randall Warren, of Christ the King Episcopal Church, Lansing, Illinois, gave thoughtful and helpful comments. I hope I have taken all their advice. The Amaryllis Prayer Group were a fine pit crew, tuning me up again and again for one more lap. Finally, the Rev'd Edward J.

Tourangeau is present throughout this work as a perceptive, intentional presider, as the most tactful of editors, and as a patient friend.

An Instructed Eucharist Copyright 1999, 2000 by Pamela Grenfell Smith

This work is made available to you under a Creative Commons Level 3 License. This means that you are free to use and adapt it so long as (1) you attribute authorship and copyright to Pamela Grenfell Smith, (2) your use is non-commercial, and (3) you may not copyright your adaptation of this work under a more restrictive copyright. For more information, please see creativecommons.org

An Instructed Eucharist
Pamela Grenfell Smith

Before the Voluntary, the five Readers take their places at the front of the nave.

Voluntary

The first trope begins at the end of the Voluntary, before the Processional Hymn. All Readers stand to read, and sit after they have read.

Worshiper

Welcome to [name] Church. Today we are holding an instructed Eucharist, and at several points in the liturgy, we'll ask you to listen as we read some comments on what's going on. As we've prepared for this day, our prayers have been that this experience would increase our parish's joy in worshipping together. Since worship engages so many levels of the mind and heart, you'll be hearing observations from several perspectives. My perspective is that of a member of the congregation. I closed my front door this morning on a collection of undone chores - maybe you did, too. I found a reasonably good place to park - I hope you did, too. I didn't drift into church on the autumn wind; I wanted to be here. I chose to be here. I'm glad you chose to be here, too.

Scholar

Today I'm dressed in the regalia of a scholar to talk about the words and structure of worship. Let me begin by introducing the word liturgy. The Episcopal Church in the United States is part of a worldwide collection of national churches in the Anglican tradition, and all around the world these churches use a liturgy, an ordered pattern of worship, like the liturgy we'll use today.

In the book rack at your pew you'll find the Book of Common Prayer, first published in England in 1549. The word common says it all; the book provides our shared language and our shared structure for liturgy, for assemblies as uncomplicated as Compline after an evening meeting and as grand as the consecration of a Bishop. A hundred and fifty years ago, when this building was new, there were prayer books in those book racks - and a hundred and fifty years from now, there will doubtless still be prayer books in the book racks. We revise it from time to time, but Episcopalians are a bookish people and we hold tight to our beloved Book of Common Prayer.

Choir Member

Right next to that Book of Common Prayer you'll find a hymnal - and more hymnals, tucked in a corner of the pew. On either side of you, stained glass windows glow with sunlight. The cross above the altar shines. The flowers are splendid. Episcopalians are not a plain people! These beautiful things, and many more, are part of our tradition. Art and music in worship help us to get unstuck from the ordinary, so we can respond more deeply to the holiness of this extraordinary activity called liturgy.

We came into the Nave today as individuals, alone, or a few at a time. As we sat in silence and listened to the organ play the Voluntary, our separateness from one another started to dissolve. Slowly, imperceptibly, just as we do every Sunday, we became an assembly of people doing something together. Soon we'll stand up together and sing a hymn. Sing out! It is the sound of our unity.

Body

I speak today for our bodies. The building and the liturgy and the music could give you the idea that not much changes in here from one year to another. In the continuing cycle of liturgical worship, next to the flowers, we are what changes most. You can see it most clearly in the children, but we all are changing. We aren't here only as disembodied minds or souls, floating around up there near the fans. Each of us is here in a body, maybe a young restless body with a runny nose, maybe an old, achy body with stiff knees. Each body is a unique and holy gift from God. And how remarkable it is that all these bodies have collected in this one room, at this one time, to be together in God's presence!

Voice of God

And I - I speak for the one who is always here in this church - and always everywhere else, too. I speak for the one whose voice we seek in Scripture, the one who listens to our prayers. I speak for the huge love that is always showing itself to us more completely. Because God is always moving, always creating, and hard to pin down, I must not speak as though I have some kind of inside track on the Voice of God. I have to talk in holy possibilities, informed by revelation, teaching, experience, and faith. After all, who knows for sure what God is really doing? Not me.

So - maybe God knows how often every day we look at our watches, how many times every day we check the lists of things we absolutely have to do. Maybe God wants to give us more insight and wisdom about those burdens. Maybe God hopes that when we worship together, we might be filled with joy and strengthened by trust. Or maybe God is entirely unconcerned about all those future possibilities. Maybe God is like our grandparents at Thanksgiving dinner, just delighted that we're all here.

Worshiper

All my blessings, all my hopes, all the things that worry or grieve me came with me to church this morning. They sit with me. During the music before the Procession, I wrapped them up in prayer. They will be part of my offering. My heart is ready for worship. And I look at you, the people who sit near me, Sunday after Sunday. On our journey of years and years of Sunday mornings, you are precious companions. Although I cannot know all your griefs and joys, I prayed for them as well.

The Organist begins the Hymn.

Hymn

Acclamation and Opening Sentences

Gloria in Excelsis

Collect for the Day

The First Reading

Psalm

The Second Reading

The second trope begins at the end of the Second Reading, before the start of the Gospel Procession. All Readers stand to read and sit after they have read.

Scholar

Anglican worship has always included a schedule of readings from the Bible. We call this schedule a lectionary, from the Latin *lectio*, the act of reading, and you will find the current version of the lectionary in the back of your Book of Common Prayer. The Bible readings for the Eucharist are on a three-year cycle, and today's readings are those for Proper 20, the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, in Year B.

The Episcopal Church doesn't teach that everything in the Bible is factually true or that there is one and only one correct way to interpret the Bible. Nevertheless, since reading from the Bible is part of every liturgy, we could conclude that we are always accountable to the Bible; and because the three-year lectionary takes us through most of the Bible, we could conclude that we are accountable to the whole of it, not just the parts we like. These are reasonable and appropriate conclusions. How should that accountability to the Bible be lived out? One of the functions of the sermon is to speak to that issue, but a sermon should not send you home with all your questions neatly answered. Listening to the Bible is supposed to awaken difficult questions in our hearts, and working on those questions is part of a Christian life.

Worshiper

Sometimes people think of church as all listening and no talking, but we speak out together again and again. At the start of the liturgy we joined [Celebrant's name] in blessing God and God's kingdom. We sang the Gloria in excelsis - an act of praise - and we've added our "Amen" to every prayer and our thanksgivings to each reading. Our liturgy is not something done to us or for us or in front of us; we worship together. Our individual voices blend to create a new voice, the voice of our church at worship. With all the memories it carries and all the hope it promises, this voice grows more dear to me each year. The prayers and the readings from the Bible are old friends, too. Like the best old friends, they can always surprise me with something new.

Choir Member

We sang a hymn and a psalm. Soon we'll sing a psalm verse and alleluias to greet the Gospel. The words and music that we sing are a curious mix; old words, new words, old music, new music. The vestments and altar furnishings are a mix, too -- some are new, some are old. One Sunday the altar is decorated with a formal flower arrangement, another Sunday it's fruits and vegetables, or maybe even rocks. Every Sunday, we draw from a heritage of art and music that spans about three thousand years.

Why do we hang on to the past like this? Why don't we replace this old stuff with something more up-to-date? Please don't think that it's because we believe that the past was a more holy time than today. We mix up time here to reduce the authority of the urgent, busy present. Here, now, we can turn off our cell phones and enter the timelessness of worship, an hour or so away from the clocks, calendars, and deadlines of ordinary life. In this holy timelessness, all our art and music is completely and perfectly up-to-date.

Body

People say we Episcopalians move around a lot in church, and that's true. You could think of liturgy as a long, slow dance. Worship began with a cross leading a procession, saying with bodies, with movement, that this place, this time, and these people are claimed for Christ. Some of us bowed when the cross went by. [Demonstrate] Soon we'll have a procession out to the middle of the congregation to hear the Deacon read from the Gospels, and we'll all stand up and turn towards it, turn our whole body towards the Gospel. Some of us might mark crosses on our bodies, [Demonstrate] on the mind, the lips, and the heart.

What does all this movement mean? Not everything can be put into words, and many things have different meanings at different times of life. What does it mean to kneel at this altar rail? Does it mean something different after you've done it ten times? How about a thousand times? Stand, sit, kneel, bow - together, in church, our bodies show our reverence - or our faith - or our willingness to be changed - or maybe just our concern that we do what everybody else is doing, our wanting to belong. Meaning changes as people change, meaning grows as people grow, and the body's reverence cannot always be put into words.

Voice of God

Maybe, as we worship, God is full of questions. Maybe God wonders, every single Sunday, if we are hearing something to hope for - something to long for - something to remind us that we belong to God and to each other. Will each life be changed by being here today? Will the life of this church be changed? Could we be more compassionate? More patient? Could we have more courage? Will we know more deeply that we are loved? Or maybe God has ultimate confidence that small changes will gradually add up to big ones. Maybe God knows us so deeply and so lovingly that God has no questions and is just relaxing and enjoying the get-together.

Gospel

The Sermon

The third trope begins after the Sermon. All Readers stand to read and sit after they have read.

Scholar

I want to introduce you to another fine word - rubric. 'Rubric' comes from the Latin word *ruber*, red, by way of the Middle English word *rubrike*, a red-ocher pigment. In the earliest prayer books, instructions on how to carry out the liturgy were printed in red ink. So, liturgical instructions are called rubrics. We can't afford to print rubrics in red any more, so in the current Book of Common Prayer you'll find the rubrics in italics.

All Episcopal public worship is given structure by rubrics. Sometimes the rubric tells us exactly what to do, sometimes it gives us choices. If you'll take a look at page 356 in the Book of Common Prayer, you'll see that the rubric tells us we can choose what song of praise we use to begin our Eucharist - but we're supposed to sing it standing up. On page 357, the rubric tells us we must have at least one Lesson and a reading from the Gospel, and that we may have a second Lesson and a Psalm or hymn. Rubrics tell us what Bible readings to use, what the Collect for the Day should be, and the Proper Preface for the Eucharistic prayers.

The rubrics on page 358 tell us that, since this is Sunday, it's time to stand up and say the Creed. Then the rubrics tell us to offer prayer for the Universal Church, its members and mission; for the Nation and all in authority; for the welfare of the world; for the concerns of the local community; for those who suffer or are in any trouble; and for the departed.

Choir Member

Now, some people think it's wrongheaded that the Episcopal Church has all these rubrics about what prayer to say when, and so forth, but we don't seem to have any rules about how to behave outside of church. Other churches may give you a list of do's and don'ts to guide your your personal conduct, but here we are fussing around with Proper Prefaces. Why is that?

Of course it would be wonderful for all of us here to be good, honest, kind, and to be people of integrity. But our tradition teaches that we can't construct wholeness in people by issuing a set of rules. Instead, we worship together, with care and attention.

When you worship with us, we Episcopalians don't demand or expect an immediate improvement in your conduct. Instead, we trust that worship changes people, slowly and deeply. Together here on Sunday morning we experience the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Welcoming one another into worship is the surest way we know to open our hearts to God's work in us. Each one of us here is being brought gently back to the true self of God's vision for us. Each one of us, growing into our true self, discovers kindness, goodness, integrity, and truth.

Body

The human mind wants to understand and regulate the algebra of belief and prayer. How many of these prayers will get me that result? Do I have to believe every single word of the Creed for my prayers to be heard? Does it make any difference if I shut my eyes while I pray? How about if I cross my fingers real tight? The busy mind may question and try to bargain, but the body just prepares itself, alert and ready to pray.

Worshiper

Without the Prayers of the People, I might think that I was the only person in town who struggles with illness, grief, or disappointment. Without the Prayers of the People, how could I share my joys with you? When would I speak out loud the names of those who have been taken from me by death? Over the years, we've prayed for babies who now are college students. We've given thanks for the weddings of people who now are into double-digit anniversaries. The Prayers of the People have taught me that we all are yearning -- for healing, for safety, for love, for security, for forgiveness, for grace. These prayers open my heart to Jesus's way of looking at people.

The Voice of God

After the Creed, after the prayers, we will share the Peace of the Lord with one another. Maybe God watches the Peace with great hope. Will we be able to open our hearts wide enough to really receive the shalom of Jesus, and share it with each other? Or maybe God just watches calmly as peace settles over us like early snow on the fields.

The Creed

The Prayers of the People

Exchange of Peace

Announcements and Blessings

The Offertory Anthem

The fourth trope begins after the Offertory Anthem. All Readers stand to read and sit after they have read.

Choir Member

You've seen the ushers gather the offering of money, and soon they'll bring it up to the altar. But that's not the only offering. The choir's anthem is an offering, part of the church's sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. The wine, water, and homemade bread that the Deacon sets out on the altar are offerings, too. Soon [Celebrant's name] will call to us, "Lift up your hearts!" and we'll answer, "We lift them up to the Lord." Our lifted hearts are also part of our offering - the best part.

Scholar

With these offerings we commence to make Eucharist, a distinguished word from the Greek eucharistos, meaning 'thanksgiving'. The structure and actions of our liturgy for Eucharist come from the earliest years of the Christian tradition, before the Gospels were written down. These brothers and sisters of ours experienced a profound connectedness joining their own sacred meal to their stories of Jesus' words and acts. They made that sacred connectedness clear for us in the Gospels, in Paul's letters, and in documents from the earliest days of the Church. The first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians describes Jesus's actions in these words.

...the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Our liturgies for Eucharist are obedient to Jesus's words, "Do this in remembrance of me." There are several liturgies for Eucharist in the prayer book, and although their words differ from one another, they have a common structure -- take, give thanks, break, and give. We bring offerings to the altar, including bread and wine, to make the table ready - that's the 'take' part. Then we give thanks in the Great Thanksgiving, a dialogue between the priest and the people. We begin by agreeing to bless God and to give God thanks and praise. We remember God's actions in creating and redeeming the world and tell the story of Jesus's last meal, asking God to bless and sanctify the bread and wine. [Celebrant's name] breaks the bread, and then the bread and wine are given to us all.

Worshiper

Exactly what happens to the bread and wine, and when? In early medieval times, people answered this question in terms of magic. In the age of faith, the Eucharist was to be taken on

faith, no questions permitted. When reason came to prominence in human discourse, the Church developed a metaphysics that claimed to explain exactly what the Eucharist did, and now you can read anthropological discussions on Eucharist as a symbolic ritual sacrifice. None of these explanations can satisfy the mind, much less the heart.

We call the Eucharist a sacrament, and the Episcopal Church teaches that the bread and wine we receive are the outward and visible signs of our receiving God's inward and spiritual grace. The question of whether the bread and wine really become something else misses the point entirely. The important action is inward, spiritual, and invisible, the presence of the risen Christ, made real now in our human hearts.

How much does God love us? Look! This much. How deeply can God forgive us? Look! This much. Coming to church, year after year, we get to understand that sharing this sacrifice does not entitle us to be rich, or handsome, or to live long, safe, lucky lives. Coming to church, year after year, by the sacramental grace of God we will grow in our ability to love and be loved, to forgive and to accept forgiveness.

Body

And we receive this Eucharist with our bodies. We don't have to understand Eucharist a certain way, or say a certain thing about Eucharist, or qualify to receive the bread and wine by passing a short exam. Our bodies act. We get up, walk up the aisle, kneel, and open our hands. By sharing these uncomplicated acts -- taking, giving thanks, breaking, sharing the bread and wine -- we believe that we are experiencing the real presence of Christ. We act in obedience and in trust, as in this poem from the sixteenth century..

He was the Word that spake it,
he took the bread and brake it,
and what that Word did make it,
I do believe, and take it.

Voice of God

Maybe God is hoping we think all this is really weird and mysterious. Jesus talked about an alternate reality called the Kingdom of God. In that alternate reality, we can find a path of sacrificial love has nothing to do with successes and achievements. We can feel a power of life that makes death meaningless. Maybe God hopes we'll get confused enough to let go and jump into that alternate reality -- for the first time, for the tenth time, for the thousandth time. Maybe God knows our human need for explanations simply cannot be met. Maybe God thinks, for Heaven's sake, just open your mouths and eat.

Sursum Corda

Sanctus and Benedictus

Eucharistic Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

Fraction Anthem

Post-Communion Prayer

The Fifth Trope begins before the closing hymn. All Readers stand to read and sit after they have read.

Choir Member

Very soon now, the prayer books will slide back into the book racks, the voice of common prayer will be silent. Soon the anthem scores will be gathered and filed. The vestments and altar furnishings will be carefully put away. The flowers will fade. Some patient person will take home the linens to be washed and ironed with prayer. We'll disentangle our hearts from this holy timelessness and reconnect to our busy, ordinary time -- which is also holy.

Body

Just one more procession and our common dance will be over. Soon, we'll settle back into our individual lives. We'll take off our church shoes. We'll drive, or dig, or hug; we'll peel carrots, or type, or dribble a basketball. Together, we are the body of Christ. Our bodies will take us in different directions, but we are a holy people, and all our paths are holy, and the sacramental presence of Christ goes with each one of us.

Scholar

After the closing hymn the Deacon gives the Dismissal, a fine old word from the Latin words *de* and *mittere*. To be dismissed is to be sent out, each of us on a mission, even, yes, a mission from God. We can get the nuances of Dismissal by borrowing the language of old movies. The briefing is over -- it's time to go operational!

Worshiper

At the end of worship, as always, I've remembered who I am, part of the Body of Christ, by God's grace. Soon we'll say that church is over, but that isn't really true. Today's liturgy will be finished, but the church continues, wherever we go.

Voice of God

There's a distinct possibility that during this liturgy God spoke a word to each one of us, a word of healing or calling or cleansing, and maybe now God is wondering. Did we hear it? Did we understand it? What will we do about it? Or maybe God is just looking forward to coffee hour, because God knows we can hardly wait to start talking to each other. After all, who knows for sure what God is really doing? Not me!

Closing Hymn

Dismissal