

A very short Guide to the Service of the Lord's Day

Introduction

When we cross the threshold into a service of worship, we bring with us the concerns and joys of our lives. In other words, we bring the concerns and joys of the mission field in which we live. The Sunday service does not provide 'time out' from our daily mission; liturgy and mission are integrally related. 'Liturgy'^[1] is our graced response to God's gracious acts. It is best to think of liturgy as the work of God in which God graciously enables us to share. Through it we are brought into relationship with the triune God and we offer worship as the body of Christ in the Holy Spirit.

In worship, we speak to God in a direct way in praise and adoration, confession and lament, intercession and thanksgiving. It is the primary speech of the community *to* God, rather than speech *about* God, the secondary speech of reflection and discussion. It is also God's speech to us – for example, in the word of grace at the declaration of forgiveness, in the proclamation of the Scriptures, in the blessing that rings in our ears as we leave. The speech of worship is nonverbal as well as verbal, including such things as gesture and movement, colour and sacrament, silence and music.

The nature of worship gives rise to the shape of the Service of the Lord's Day, just as the shape of the Service of the Lord's Day helps us to appreciate the nature of worship. Knowing the structure of worship gives space for creativity.

The liturgy should give expression to the life of a local worshipping community. It may be enhanced by such things as drama, dance, the visual arts, music and the use of multimedia. A whole congregation may be involved e.g., through the use of percussive music and/or movement. Readings and prayers may be offered by more than one voice. Creative presentations may be helpful; they should be well-prepared and thoughtful. They should be a vehicle for the worship of the people, rather than a performance. Participatory worship is always the guiding principle; the congregation is not an audience.

The ministry of the leadership of worship is crucial; the leaders simultaneously lead the people in worship and worship as part of the body of Christ.

The Service of the Lord's Day

The Service of the Lord's Day has four parts, which could be briefly characterised as: gathering, hearing, being fed and being sent.

The Gathering of the People of God/

Gathering as God's People

The leader greets the people in God's name, and calls them to worship. Here, we cross a threshold – we move into a sacred space, and a sacred time, a space and time 'set apart' for the purpose of communal praise.

At this point, we pray in particular ways. Some of these ways may include:

- asking for God to be present with us in a prayer of *invocation*;

- praising and adoring God for being God in a prayer of *adoration*;
- confessing our sins in a prayer of *confession*, and hearing the *declaration of forgiveness*;
- pouring out our hearts to God in a prayer of *lament*.

This is honest conversation with God; God's greatness and God's care for us bring our response into being. In worship, we are formed as a people of faith, receiving our identity as people who call for God to come to their aid; who praise God in adoration; who confess their sins to the God of mercy and grace; who cry out to God for justice.

The Service of the Word/Receiving God's Word

People are shaped by story, by narrative. When we want to get to know a person, we listen to their story. When we hear stories again and again, we are shaped and re-shaped as the stories are told and re-told. As Christian people we are shaped by the story of Jesus, the Incarnate Word; the story of God's dealings with Israel; and the story of God's people through history. As we hear this story, we are formed by an alternative perspective on life – the perspective of the gospel.

The story is told through proclamation of the gospel. This includes a reading or an alternative presentation of the Scriptures, preaching or another form of reflection on Scripture; it may also include drama/movement, symbolic action, art, multimedia resources, and silence. We hear Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, in the 'unique prophetic and apostolic testimony' of the Scriptures (*Basis of Union*, 5).

Hearing the story requires a response, for it is God's Word addressing us. The immediate response is often one such as 'In this is the Word of the Lord/**Thanks be to God**'. Yet the response does not end here. It can take various forms, such as a time of silent reflection or some form of action. It may continue in saying together the Nicene Creed or another statement of faith, which is a corporate re-telling of the story. It also includes making an offering (of ourselves, our gifts, our money, and our prayers for others); and the notices and concerns of the community.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper/ Celebrating the Lord's Supper

Baptised into Christ in his death and resurrection, we are invited to share in the meal of thanksgiving. An invitation to the Lord's table is given. This invitation requires pastoral sensitivity; all baptised Christians are welcome to share the meal, but not all may be permitted by the laws of their Church to receive communion with the Uniting Church. This needs to be respected as we continue to pursue the unity to which Christ calls us.

The various names given to this meal by our traditions show something of its meaning: it is the *Lord's Supper*, instituted by Christ on the night of his betrayal; it is the *Holy Communion*, a sacrament of union between Christ and believers, and of the union of the believers themselves; it is the *Eucharist*, from the Greek word meaning 'thanksgiving'. Indeed, its primary note is **thanksgiving** – honouring God for all that God is, and giving thanks for all that God has done in the work of creation and salvation.

We use bread and wine which are the work of human hands. More than this, they are the gifts of God for us in the sacrament. They are the signs of God's work for our salvation in Jesus Christ. They are most fitting for the purpose when they are used boldly: a single loaf of bread and a common cup are most appropriate. After the

service, what remains of the elements should be consumed or otherwise reverently disposed of. Respect for these means of grace, as well as sensitivity to our ecumenical sisters and brothers, require this care.

The centrepiece of this part of the liturgy is The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. The origins of this central Christian prayer lie in Jewish prayer at Passover and in the grace at every meal. Jesus built on these at the Last Supper. Our present sacrament also derives meaning from other meals hosted by Jesus – e.g. after the resurrection at Emmaus (Luke 24), or by the seashore (John 21). Its essence is thanksgiving to God for the mighty acts of God. It is a 'Great' Prayer because it is the expression of all the gifts of God for our salvation, above all in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is important that the significance of the prayer is not diminished, and that it is offered prayerfully.

Here, we remember Christ; indeed, we are '**re-membered**' in Christ, 're-joined' to him as he is present with us in the action of this meal.^[2] We are 're-called' to the presence of Christ in our midst. This meal anticipates and makes real the reign of Christ; in sharing it we are reconciled to one another. This part of the liturgy often begins with the greeting of peace. This action is about being reconciled in Christ, and with one another in Christ, rather than exchanging a personal greeting.

We tell the **narrative of the institution** of the Sacrament at the Last Supper by Jesus, whether in The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, or before it; this is part of the story that shapes us as a people of Christ.

We **invoke the Holy Spirit**.^[3] that the bread and wine may be the body and blood of Christ for us, and that we may have a deepened awareness of and participation in the reign of Christ. As we pray for the fullness of the Spirit, the hope of the full reconciliation of all creation with God is enacted.

Having given thanks, we break the bread and lift the cup and share the meal as the community of Christ.

The Prayer after Communion has similarities to a grace after a meal; it is also a self-offering, and a prayer that God will continue the blessing.

The Sending Forth of the People of God/

Being Sent on God's Mission

Having heard the word and shared the meal together, we are sent forth on mission; we are again on a threshold. We typically sing a hymn/song of mission. The act of singing helps to confirm our identity as a community.

The leader gives a blessing to the people in the name of the triune God; this is a blessing for the next stage of the journey, a proclamation of the Word of God, an assurance that God's promises are always made new.

This part of the liturgy encourages us to continue the worship of God in our witness and service; in the words of the Iona Community, we see that 'worship and work are one'; or as the Eastern Orthodox tradition has expressed it, we go to 'the liturgy beyond the Liturgy'. We go in peace to love and serve the Lord in the name of Christ.

[1] 'Liturgy' (Greek *leitourgia*) literally means 'the work of the people', which was understood to be public service to God.

[2] The Greek term for this 'remembrance' is *anamnesis*.

[3] This 'invoking of the Spirit' is the *epiclesis* in Greek.