

## Instructed Eucharist: We Proclaim and Respond to the Word of God

The next part of the service focuses on the Word of God as it comes to us through Holy Scripture. At Ascension we have two readings, plus a psalm. The first reading is generally from the Hebrew Scriptures, what has been called the Old Testament. Sometimes, however, we have a lesson from the New Testament. Today's lesson is from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, which tells the story of the earliest days of the Christian Church. The psalm follows. Psalms are ancient songs of praise or prayer or petition to God that come out of the Hebrew Scriptures. They would have been the songs Jesus sang when he prayed or worshipped. A reading follows from one of the four gospels that tell the story of the life and death of Jesus. We stand for the gospel reading to indicate our honor and respect for the life and teachings of Jesus.

We do not choose the readings for the day. They are pre-determined for us. We use a schedule of readings called a lectionary. The Episcopal lectionary can be found in the back of the Prayer Book. It runs for three years, then we go around again and again. In the course of those three years, we probably get a chance to hear about 2/3 of the entire Bible. We are strongly grounded in the words of Scripture.

After each reading, we say "thanks be to God" or "praise to you Lord Christ." Even when we don't find the readings to be much cause for thanksgiving or praise, when the lessons startle us or offend us in some way, we still proclaim that the words we have read have come to us from God and that we must wrestle with them until we discover their meaning for us.

That is why a sermon is always part of the service of Holy Eucharist. The preacher breaks open the text to try to discover what its meaning is for us here, today, gathered in this place. Writing a sermon doesn't happen just on Saturday night, although that is often when the words are typed out. It begins weeks in advance, as the preacher studies the lessons, researches what they meant at the time they were written, and thinks about how they apply to our every day life. The preacher's job is to draw out the meaning of the lessons and proclaim the good news that is found there. Your job as listeners is to wrestle with the same lessons along with the preacher to hear what God is saying to you.

### PART III – Instructed Eucharist: The Creed, Prayers, and Confession of Sins

Our response to the reading of the scripture and the proclamation of the sermon is to recite the Nicene Creed. Creed comes from the Latin word “credo” which means to believe, to set your heart to, or to put your trust in. It grew out of gatherings of bishops in the fourth century AD, as they struggled to understand and explain the story of God as they had received it. This is their consensus statement on what we might know about God, and it is accepted as a statement of faith across all the Christian denominations.

Sometimes people have trouble with the Creed. They get hung up on the Virgin Birth or the resurrection of the dead. It is helpful to remember that this is the creed of the whole Christian Church, not something each one of must sign onto individually. That’s why we say, “we believe.” It is a statement of the one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church scattered across time and around the world. It is a record of our past and a statement of hope for our future. When we say it, we accept the traditions that were handed on to us from generations long ago, and we promise to pass those same traditions on to future generations.

The Prayers of the People follow the Creed. At Ascension and at many churches, they are read by a layperson who rises up from a seat in the congregation to lead all the worshippers in prayer. Our Book of Common Prayer gives six different forms of this prayer. When we pray together, we always include prayers for the entire Church, for our nation, for the welfare of the world, for the concerns of our local community, for those who suffer or are sick, and prayers for the departed. When we pray, we join in the great round of prayer that is always being offered up to God. We become intercessors for the whole great web of life to which we belong. The celebrant ends the prayers with a collect, which “collects” all our prayers up into one single offering to God.

Then we kneel, priests and people together, to confess all the ways we have fallen out of relationship with God and with each other. We confess our sins corporately, all of us together at once. This reminds us that we are all sinners together, and that we fall short of God’s goal for us as individuals and also as a community of faith. We say that we have failed out loud before God and each other, and we ask God to lift us up off our knees so that we can do better, so that we can delight in God’s will and walk in God’s ways.

The priest announces that God has forgiven us, and we all stand to exchange the sign of peace. It indicates that we are all OK ... with God and with each other. God has forgiven us and made us worthy to stand up in God’s presence, to greet each other as forgiven people. The passing of the peace is an ancient part of the liturgy dating from the very earliest days of the Christian Church. It is not a social time, but a moment for us to acknowledge our fallen natures, our forgiven natures, and to wish each other God’s peace.

## Part V – Instructed Eucharist: The Great Thanksgiving and Eucharistic Prayer

With the table prepared, we now begin the part of the service called the “Great Thanksgiving.” The word Eucharist comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving, and this part of the service offers thanks for the way that God saves us through Jesus Christ, and offers us that saving life through the bread and wine made holy at this table.

We begin by lifting up our hearts to God, which is the part of the prayer called the *Sursum Corda*, in Latin. It follows with the singing of the *Sanctus*, which means “holy” in Latin. The words of the *Sanctus* come from the prophet Isaiah’s vision of God in the Temple. When we say them together, we join with angels, archangels and all the company of heaven. Whatever those words mean to you, the *Sanctus* is a time to remember that the veil between God and humanity can become very thin, and that we join in praising God with everything inside and outside of the created world.

We continue with the main section of the Eucharistic Prayer. It is appropriate to stand or kneel during this prayer. At Ascension, most of us kneel. But standing is also accepted, especially during the season of Easter, because it indicates that we have been set back in right relationship with God, and that God has made us worthy to stand before him. Standing is also the position that Jesus would have used for prayer, and when we stand to pray, we echo his own prayer life.

In the Bible, it tells us that Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave the bread. That is the pattern we follow in the prayer. We take the bread and wine, bless them, remember the story of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection, then the bread is broken in remembrance of Jesus’ saving death. Then it is given to the people. This is the pattern God calls us to follow in our own life, to be people who are taken, blessed, broken, then given away for the sake of the world.

In the middle of the prayer we say together a statement of faith. It is called the *anamnesis*. *Anamnesis* is a Greek word that means re-mem-bering, literally putting all the members of the body together in such a way that Christ’s whole story is present to us right here, at this moment.

Sometimes people wonder if there is a cosmic moment, when the bread and wine become more than bread and wine. The Eucharist is not some kind of spiritual magic, but it is worship and encounter with God. The entire prayer, prayed by priest and people together, sanctifies the bread and wine. We end the prayer together using the words Jesus taught us to pray, and say the Lord’s Prayer. Then the priest breaks the bread, an action called the *fraction*, to remind us that Jesus was broken first, before he was given as a gift to the whole world.

We receive the bread and wine together. It binds us to God and to each other. It strengthens us for the days ahead. It becomes an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace that God grants to each one of us in this common meal.