

## PREPARING COMMUNION FOR A RURAL PARISH

I have hesitated to follow up my article on Preparing Morning Services for a Rural Parish with a further one about Communion Services, because I am well aware that this is a subject about which many have strong views. I feel, however, that some account of what I do may be helpful to some who, like me, believe in order in worship, and at the same time value and use the practice of extempore prayer. Without seeking to be controversial, I should like simply to put down what I do and why I do it.

Certain things have influenced my practice: probably most decisive has been Millar Patrick's booklet on The Order of Holy Communion, which I read first in 1947; then Goold's booklet on First Communion, and particularly his chapter on the Meaning of Communion; Dr Stuart Mechie's lectures on the Reformation, which showed me the significance of Knox's omission of the First Benediction in Calvin's Order of Service; work in the Liturgical Commission of the Church of Pakistan, which taught me to value particular emphases in the Presbyterian service; and the need, in classes for First Communicants, to introduce them to the service beforehand, so that they can take part in it with understanding.

The congregation to which I minister, Resolis and Urquhart, sprang from a union in 1977. Communion in both congregations had been twice a year - February and July in Resolis, March and August in Urquhart. I had little difficulty in getting both summer Communions accepted in the united parish - "if people are on holiday in July they can come in August(!)" - but it took longer to establish a fourth Communion. A predecessor, in the 1950's, had tried four Communions in Resolis, but the "extra" ones had drawn very small attendances. The Kirk Session agreed to allow a Communion in November as an experiment, and figures of attendance at the four Communions showed no significant variation: as a result, November Communion is now established practice. Increase in Communicant Membership - from 26 to 68 - has of course helped. One of my elders, however, has conscientious objections to coming to Communion oftener than twice a year, and others only go to Communion when it is in "their" Church. I have toyed with the idea of having Communion at Easter, but so many of my congregation go on holiday at Easter weekend that I have not made any move.

Perhaps the best way of introducing the Order of Service I use would be to quote the typed outline which I give to my Communicants' Class:

### The Communion Service

Three characteristics of the Scottish Communion Service:

- a It comes as the climax of a full act of worship.
- b This climax is a dramatic presentation, step by step, of the actions in the Last Supper.
- c Our communion with one another is demonstrated by "giving and receiving".

A It comes as the climax of a full act of worship

Contrast say the Anglican Service, and others, where it is a separate service, often after Morning Prayer (though Anglican practice is changing.)

Reason - dismissal of catechumens with blessing.

Our regular service: Coming to God, Hearing God, Responding to God.

The order of the first part of the Communion Service is very similar: Psalm - often 23 or 43: 3-5

Sentences

Prayer - for the Holy Spirit's cleansing  
confession and assurance of forgiveness  
petition

Old Testament Reading

Hymn

New Testament Reading - Epistle and Gospel

Hymn

Prayer for Illumination

SERMON (Shorter than usual)

Prayers of Intercession

B This climax is a dramatic presentation, step by step, of the actions in the Last Supper.

Remember the four actions: "took", "prayer of thanks", "broke", "gave"

Communion Hymn - Psalm 24: 7-10, or Para 35 (hymn 312), or some other hymn like 313, 320, 323, 324. During the hymn the tokens are collected; the offering (and in Urquhart, the bread and wine) is brought forward, and the Minister and Elders take their places behind the Communion Table.

Prayer of Offering the bread and wine, and our gifts

Invitation (and warning)

"The GRACE of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all"

Reading of the Words of the Institution

- 1 First Action - taking the bread and wine
- 2 Second Action - giving thanks and asking blessing
  - a THANKSGIVING - in fellowship with saints and angels, to God, especially for Jesus
  - b COMMEMORATION of the Lord's death
  - c Prayer for the Holy Spirit's blessing, so that we may have real COMMUNION
  - d Prayer of Self-CONSECRATION - body, soul and spirit
  - e Lord's Prayer
- 3 Third Action - breaking the bread and lifting up the cup
- 4 Fourth Action - giving the bread and wine to those taking

Communion

"The PEACE of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all"

Short Prayer of Thanksgiving (and of Mission)

Psalm or Hymn of Thanksgiving - often Psalm 103: 1-5

Benediction

C Our Communion with one another is demonstrated by "giving and and receiving"

- a Minister gives to elders.
- b Elders give to Minister.
- c Elders take the bread and wine to the congregation, who serve one another.

I shall comment on the above sections A, B and C

A The Worship up to the Intercessions

I prepare this part of the service in the same order as I would a Morning Service, starting with the Sermon, and going back to the choice of the Readings and Praise, and then the Scripture Sentences and Prayers.

SERMON - I try to shorten the Sermon from the usual 15-20 minutes to about 10-12 minutes. I find some difficulty in being "fresh" in my approach to the Lord's Supper, as I sometimes also do at Christmas and Easter: it is difficult, and perhaps not necessary, to avoid going over the same ground. In a Highland parish, where many undervalue Communion or fear it, I put a great deal of emphasis on the Real Presence, and on our faith that the Lord is going to feed us spiritually.

READINGS - At least one of these springs from the Sermon. I follow the discipline of having Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel; the individual readings are usually shorter than in the regular Morning Services; they will be read from both the AV and the Good News Bible. I usually have a hymn after the OT Reading, but occasionally I precede all three readings by a hymn, and take them together.

PRAISE - This consists mostly of specifically "Communion" Psalms, and Hymns from RCH. I follow Millar Patrick frequently in using "Just as I am, without one plea" or "I heard the voice of Jesus say" as the second singing. Another I have used at this point is "I hear thy welcome voice". I have "educated" my congregation to sing "Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness" and "And now, O Father, mindful of the love" by getting them first sung at a Communion by a group of Young People, and then repeating them at subsequent services. I also found it easy to introduce Wesley's "Author of life divine" by singing it to "Love Unknown", which not only fits the words, but has helpful overtones. If I use Psalm 23 to open the service, I prefer to sing it to Wiltshire, as Crimond is so much associated with funerals.

SENTENCES - I do not vary these a great deal, but usually take from The book of Common Order. Others I have used are:-

"I am the Lord your God. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it!"  
Jesus said: "Can you drink the cup of suffering that I must drink?  
You will indeed drink the cup I must drink!"

Jesus said: "This cup is God's new covenant, sealed with my blood.  
Drink it, all of you".

"We will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord!"  
"God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. The darkness is passing, and the real light already shines. Christ has made this true, and it is true in your own experience. Come, and let us walk in the light of the Lord!"

"You prepare a banquet for me, where all my enemies can see me; you welcome me as an honoured guest and fill my cup to the brim!"

PRAYERS - I almost always begin the opening prayer with the Collect for Purity. I have made my own translation into modern English:

"Almighty God, all our hearts are open before you, all our wishes known to you, and there is nothing we can hide from you. Send your Holy Spirit into our hearts to purify our inmost thoughts, so that we may love you without holding anything back, and give the thanks and praise due to your name,"

The prayer of confession is usually extempore, sometimes helped by an outline; as often as not, following Millar Patrick, I use the Agnus Dei here, in modern English: "Lamb of God, you who take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us" etc. Sometimes instead I follow the confession with the Kyries "Lord, have mercy upon us, Christ....."

For assurance of forgiveness I normally use one or more of the "Comfortable Words" - John 3: 16, etc.

The petition following is usually short and extempore, but I have used helpful prayers from Worship Now, e.g. on p 52.

The intercessory prayer is shorter than usual, and omits the Communion of Saints, which is an element in the opening part of the Eucharistic Prayer.

#### B From the Communion Hymn to the Benediction

I always find this part of the service very real and very moving. Some 35-40 communicants, all of whom I know by name, are seated in the pews immediately in front of the Communion Table, expectant. Most of the adherents, alas, stay away, but a few are there, sitting further away or in the gallery, and there are sometimes one or two young people.

When I came here, I found that it was the custom at Resolis to have the bread and wine on the Table at the beginning of the service; in Urquhart the elements were brought forward by minister and elders during the Communion Hymn, and removed after the benediction. I have accepted the two practices. The layout in Resolis would mean that if I were to arrange a "bringing-in" it would have to be from the side, and in front of the congregation. During the hymn the offering is brought up, as are also the Communion Tokens, in a bag that has been passed round the communicants in the pews. Here is an example of the kind of Offertory Prayer I use:

"Father, receive our offering of bread and wine, these our gifts,

and the tokens that represent our presence at your Table. Make them a channel of your blessing, to ourselves and others, through Jesus Christ our Lord"

In a Highland parish where so many are afraid of the Lord's Table I feel it is better to invite, rather than to warn, leaving the element of warning to be implied sometimes from the terms of the Invitation, e.g. "In Jesus' name I invite you to his Table. He is here to bless all who repent of their sins and are in love and charity with their neighbours. He has invited us to do this in remembrance of him"

Often I use part of Dr Barclay's Invitation in Worship Now p 56: "Come, not because you are strong ..... he loved you and gave himself for you"

To me the reading of the Words of Institution as a warrant, and the carrying out of the Four Actions clearly, seems at the heart of our Reformed Communion Service. In the Actions I find the wording of BCO 1940 verbose and repetitious. An Anglican missionary friend's reaction to that service was that the "canon" of the Words of Institution was repeated needlessly, and I found it very hard to explain to him that we were following our Lord's example "in word and action"! I tend therefore to simplify, e.g.

"The first thing Jesus did was to take the bread. In the same way I take this bread and wine to be set apart ....."

"After taking the bread Jesus thanked God and asked his blessing. Let us now....."

"When he had prayed, Jesus took the bread, and broke it (action) saying ..... In the same way he took the cup (action), and said..."

In my explanation to first communicants of the outline of the Eucharistic Prayer, I stress Goold's chapter on the Meaning of Communion as THANKSGIVING, COMMEMORATION, COMMUNION and CONSECRATION, and show that these come in that order in the prayer, though of course they cannot be completely isolated from each other. I use a similar outline to guide me in my praying. In one sense the prayer is extempore, for it is not read and has a certain freedom and variety of expression, but it follows a predictable pattern, and includes the Sanctus, and usually remembered phrases from BCO 1940, especially in the Epiclesis and Self-Consecration.

After the Fraction, I sometimes call attention to the Fourth Action by saying something like this: "When he had broken the bread, Jesus gave it to his disciples" - and then handing the bread to the elders. Later, when I give the elements to the elders for distribution to the congregation, I use the words "Take, eat; this is the body ...." etc.

The post-Communion prayer is always brief, and may be pure thanksgiving, but often, following a suggestion I once heard Tom Torrance give, I include the idea of mission - "Now send us out into the world with renewed strength to be your servants and witnesses."

The closing Praise is usually Psalm 103, but I have used others, like Psalm 26: 6-9 "For ever blessed be the Lord", and hymns like "When I survey the wondrous Cross", the second part of Bonar's hymn "Too soon we rise", "Father of peace and God of love", or "For ever with the Lord".

#### C Giving and Receiving

For me, a particularly precious feature of the Reformed tradition is the "giving and receiving of bread and wine" which represents the "horizontal" part of Communion. In the Church of Pakistan after union, when the custom was to come forward and kneel to take Communion, I always insisted that the kneeling communicants should serve each other in this way. When I came to this parish, I found that the practice was for the minister to serve the elders; then one elder served the minister with the bread and another with the wine. I have made no attempt to change this. I am well aware that many consider that in a dramatic presentation of the events of the Last Supper, the minister represents Christ, and therefore should partake first, because Christ would partake of the bread before handing it to his disciples. Two considerations, however, hold me back from insisting on this. One is a real doubt as to whether Jesus did in fact eat the bread: I find Jeremias's exposition of Luke 22: 15-16 difficult to refute. The other is that I feel it fitting that in the communion between minister and congregation there should be "giving and receiving" both ways.

Finally a word about the Tokens and the "Communion Season". When I came here, I found that the 18th Century lead Tokens were nominally given out at the poorly-attended Preparatory Service on the Friday, but most were in fact handed out at the door on Communion Sunday. I changed the

Preparatory Service to the Sunday before Communion: attendance and offerings at once dropped because the adherents stayed away! The Kirk Session then decided to drop the Preparatory Service, and to have the District Elders distribute the Tokens personally in the homes of communicants. Unless there is a Confirmation, therefore, all that is left of the "Communion Season" are the Communion and Thanksgiving Services on the Sunday. Some of us, however, have attended pre-Communion Services in the neighbouring Free Church, and I know that in Resolis in particular my more old-fashioned members value the tradition of having Communion in February and July on the same Sunday as Resolis Free Church.

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## A DIP IN THE ARCHIVES

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CHURCH SERVICE SOCIETY, MAY 26 1870

Mr Sprott (Chapel of Garioch): among the Society's opponents were "worthy people, who wished to be very loyal to the past, but who made the great mistake of supposing that a number of Brownistic and sectarian fancies of the seventeenth century, which the Presbyterians of that time seriously opposed, belonged to Presbyterianism."

Mr Wright (Madras): "I could never defend prayers which I have heard offered up by a great number of ministers both here and in India: and I venture to state that the style of prayers which they adopt has driven many members of the Church from their communion to the Church of England. I was highly delighted, therefore, when upon some of our young ministers arriving in India, I noticed a decided improvement in their form of worship. I asked them where they had received such an important stimulus in the right direction and they told me of the existence of the Church Service Society and gave me a copy of the "Euchologion".

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