

The First Sermon on Morning Prayer

Things have gotten quite busy around St. Anselm, so I'll use the beginning of the sermon as it was used in 16th and 17th century Anglican churches and put community announcements there. Makes things simpler.

(Local announcements)

Early next year my job at St. Anselm will become part time. I'll be available to substitute in other churches one Sunday month. On that Sunday Morning Prayer will be said here. Since this is a change in worship pattern, and such changes can be unsettling, it might be worthwhile if, during Advent, I took the time normally spent on sermons and gave you an introduction to Morning Prayer. This is an academic community, and in academic communities there is nothing quite so useful as a good theory backed by a competent lecture.

Opinions about Morning Prayer vary greatly. Some find it a pale substitute for Eucharist. There's no way around that fact. Others prefer Morning Prayer to Eucharist, its contemplative nature fits their spiritual style. I happen to know that members of both groups exist in this community. You're about to have a chance to practice Christian charity to each other. I encourage us all to think about this change as, first, an educational opportunity. This regular use of Morning Prayer will expand our communal knowledge of the Anglican tradition of worship.

What's called the Daily Office, which includes not only Morning Prayer, but also Noonday Prayer, Evening Prayer, Compline and a series of shorter services designed for use in families and in informal settings (Book of Common Prayer p. 136-140), is a series of services which form a separate aspect of the complete life of worship recommended in the Anglican Communion. In such a life of worship there are three elements. The first element is the sanctification, the making holy, of things, of that which we encounter in the universe. These services tend to be sacramental, and at the heart of sacramental worship there are things: Bread and wine in the Eucharist, water in baptism, oil in healing, human hands in ordination and confirmation. And all these have to do with the condition of another thing, our human selfhood as it relates to the rest of the universe and to God. The basic direction of sacramental worship is to place before us in different ways the importance of using the universe that surrounds us properly.

The second element in Anglican worship is the sanctification of time. I don't know how physicists would view this, but in the spiritual life time is not considered a thing, but a matrix within which things relate to each other. The holiness of the matrix, relating the matrix to God, is the task of worship which deal with the sanctification of time. Morning Prayer is the primary example of this. If you look carefully at each service in this category (Morning Prayer, Noonday Prayer, Evening Prayer, Compline) you will discover that the basic direction of the service is aimed toward what human beings do with things **at that time**. Morning Prayer, for instance, focuses on beginnings. Noonday Prayer focuses on what God does in our lives when we are in the midst of things (so to speak). Compline, the service at the very end of the day, focuses on our surrender to God of the day we've just experienced.

So, sacramental services first. They deal with the holiness of things. Then the Office, in its different forms, which deals with the sanctification of time, with the holiness of things as they pass through time. The third element of the classical Anglican picture is called “Colloquy,” a fancy word for something simple, an ordinary, personal, conversation with God. For a number of you I know it goes on pretty much most of the time. Colloquy is simply God as conversation partner. It’s generally informal, on occasion embarrassingly blunt. And it’s a separate category of worship. So remember these three: Sacramental worship, the sanctification of time, and ordinary conversation with God (colloquy). We tend to express the first two formally, in services of public worship and the third informally in our private inwardness. It is colloquy to which Jesus refers in Matthew 6:5-6.

The healthy worship life of communities in our tradition depends on finding a balance of these three modes of worship which is appropriate not only for the community, but also for you as a person. Some people find it rewarding to focus in one area or another. I know people, for instance, with such highly developed senses of colloquy that it is the main form of worship in which they engage. They attend Eucharist a couple of times a month only. But colloquy is constant. And it suits who they are. This is why the Episcopal Church doesn’t tend to hard and fast rules for when and how you ought to pray and why we leave so much up to the individual. Does one stand or kneel? Well, says th Episcopal tradition, we’re going to make some recommendations that experience shows may be helpful. But finally, it’s up to you. This is true of a great many things in our worship. The reason is the discovery that the spiritual texture of people’s souls varies a great deal and those variations need to be respected.

That’s a bit of background. So to introduce Morning Prayer as a regular part of the worship life of this community is to move toward a recognition of this variegated pattern of worship which the Anglican tradition recommends to us. From this standpoint, what we’re about may actually improve the spiritual life of St. Anselm.

Congregational Observation:

Jon, many of us here grew up in the church at a time when Morning Prayer was the normative service and Holy Communion happened once a month. Would you comment on that as a skewed balance? Are we coming to something different?

Yes, the topic you bring up is a big one and couldn’t be settled even if I gave a whole sermon on it alone. But a couple of quick points. First, the historical.

Thomas Cranmer, who wrote the first Book of Common Prayer, back in the 16th century (1549 was the publication date), intended the regular Sunday morning service to be Eucharist. For that service to be Eucharist for us is, from one perspective, simply respectful to the man who was, after all, the origin and founder of our liturgical life in the Episcopal Church. But he had reasons for his preferences. Cranmer was a deep student of liturgy and knew not only his own western tradition, but was one of the few men of his age to know something of eastern worship traditions also.

Services of the sanctification of time feed and support sacramental services. Ultimately, what's real in the universe, those things with which we have most to be concerned, are each other and God. Then the rest of the universe around us. All these things, the universe and ourselves, pass through time and it is within time that they find meaning. Try finding meaning outside of time. We're stuck inside time and yet there is, in the church, the recognition that our meaning as human beings surpasses time, that there is an element of the eternal about it. It is in sacramental worship that we acknowledge passing through time as rooted in the eternal. Passing through time we acknowledge that it also needs to be related to God. But the ultimate grounding of it all is your eternal reality. The church teaches, and I believe, that all of you are going to last forever whether you like it or not. (Or even whether I like it or not.) Always, who we are in this life is grounded in, is referred back to, that eternal being. That's what sacramental worship, especially Eucharist, does. It acknowledges the rootedness of the eternal in time. (And it is here that The Office becomes supplementary to the Eucharist. The services acknowledging time buttress the service pointing to our eternity.) Who we are as we pass through time feeds into that eternal being, helps to make it what it is and will be. Eucharist first, because it acknowledges the eternal foundation. Then the office because it acknowledges how that foundation is structured and created in time. Our eternalness is reflected in what we do with the times in our lives. So Eucharist, to root us in eternity. Then the Office to root us in and acknowledges the constant passing of time.

Congregations Comment: So, in a sense the church of my boyhood had it the wrong way around?

Well, backwards, yes. Historically that practice (the primacy of Morning Prayer in Sunday morning worship) grew out of the constant tug of war between the catholic tendencies in the Episcopal Church and its Protestant ones. Protestant tendencies moved us toward Morning Prayer; Catholic tendencies toward the Eucharist. As the church, through history, tried to develop an appropriate balance of Eucharist and Office we found the pendulum swinging. As usual, once the pendulum starts swinging, it swings too far in both directions. I have been concerned, and have voiced it to a couple of you, that Saint Anselm is, I don't want to say too focused on Eucharist, but that there is a thin spot in our collective spiritual life. That thin spot is the acknowledgment of the passing of time – we don't do much of it. By the way, this has practical applications. Some of the weaknesses in this community's ministry reflect a weakened sense of finding God within the passing of time. What we are strong in, the recognition of the holiness of creation around us and of our eternal souls within us, reflects our focus on Eucharistic worship. These things do make a difference. Now that's just Jon Goman's opinion and there are probably other ways to construct the scene.

But what I'm interested in right now is that you begin to develop a sense of this three-fold nature of spiritual life in the Episcopal communion. Like many things we don't initially welcome with open arms but which are, in the long run, good for us, Morning Prayer can be also, if we desire to make it so -- even though we begin it because we must, there's no denying that. But we can learn even from that which we're forced to do.

Now a couple of pieces of historical background about the service.

Morning Prayer, along with the rest of the office, is a descendant of the old medieval monastic services which monks and nuns usually read or chanted seven times a day. The proof text always mentioned was Psalm 119:164: “Seven times a day will I praise thee.” So the old monastic communities said, “Ah ha! There is the pattern for our worship!” And seven times a day the monks and nuns would stop whatever they were doing and engage in worship and then return to their work. During the Middle Ages this monastic way of existence was viewed as the ideal way. If a human society were an ideal society everyone in the society would stop work seven times a day, pray as a community and then return to work. Since for most people this wasn’t practical (After all, what do you do with the oxen while you’re on your knees?) the monks and nuns came to be seen as praying **for** the rest of society. This is very medieval. Note that it’s not that these folk over here pray so that the rest can be excused, but their prayer is effective for us because of the solidarity of human society in its sin and its being loved by God. The virtue which accrues from the monastic life is shared by the rest of the community. This intense communal focus tends to be lost in our present worship. But, every time we worship in this basement, every time we celebrate Eucharist or recite Morning Prayer, it is done on behalf of all the rest of the cosmos. We do not do it just for ourselves or for this community, but for the whole of the universe.

Now along comes the 16th century Reformation and all kinds of problems arise.

1. Henry VIII closes the English monasteries. He does this largely for economic reasons. He’s spent his way through the money his parsimonious father, Henry VII had managed to save. The monasteries collectively controlled about a quarter of the revenue producing land in England, so they were, potentially, a mammoth revenue source. By the way, the Tudors managed to spend it all by the time of James I. That’s what investment in foreign military adventures gets you. But Henry closed down the monasteries, which meant worship focused on the sanctification of time was not going on in the Christian community of England in anything like the way it had been. The pattern didn’t die, but it was certainly crippled. Daily worship by a monastic community became daily worship by a priest and perhaps a parish clerk – and communal worship by a monastic community on behalf of the whole community became daily worship by the parish priest on behalf of his own holiness.

So Cranmer realized that the ordinary man plowing his field and baking his bread, the ordinary woman spinning yarn or chasing the children would not stop seven times a day to pray. But maybe, thought Cranmer, they can stop twice a day. So he cleverly, in fact, brilliantly, took the morning monastic services, condensed them into the single service of Morning Prayer; the afternoon and evening services and condensed them into Evening Prayer. He intended that daily Office plus Sunday Eucharist would become the worship pattern for all English Christians. In the First Prayer Book of 1549, what we call Morning Prayer has the title, “An Office of Mattins Daily throughout the Year.” So the expectation was that one would say the service before going out to plow and evening prayer on the way back home for your dinner. The constant awareness of your life as related to God created by the Daily Office would then constitute the offertory at the Sunday Eucharist.

This was Cranmer’s hope – noble, far sighted, utopian. It did provoke a great deal of

spiritual growth among those clergy and laity who accepted its discipline. Clergy in the Church of England were for centuries legally required to say Morning and Evening Prayer every day. If you held a church with a congregation or were a chaplain, you were required to ring the church bell before beginning the service so anyone in the community who wanted to join you could. The power of Cranmer's ideal continued to affect worship in the Church for a long time after it was clear his original vision was overly optimistic.

Point 2. Morning Prayer has three parts. In fact, all services for the sanctification of time have three parts. The first is praise to God for the **time in which we are**, praise to God for the present. Then there is instruction, focused around the reading of scripture. This instruction is to teach us what to do with the time we are in. The third element is prayer, which is an attempt to form our relationship with God in this time based on the praise and instruction in which we have just participated. What do we need to be given in order to act as we should act at this particular time of the day, at this particular time in our lives?

So three basic parts: praise, instruction and petitionary prayer. Once you begin to appreciate this rhythm, Morning and Evening Prayer ought to hold no terrors for you, you have the structural framework on which everything hangs.

Confession, creeds, passing the plate are all imports from the Eucharist and did not exist in the service as Cranmer first wrote it. The Morning Prayer service in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer has no confession. Cranmer placed one in the 1552 service under puritan pressure. (You can't be a good puritan without confessing constantly.) But in 1549 it wasn't there because confession wasn't the function of morning prayer. That function was to recollect your life as it passed through time so one could make an adequate offering of your life at the Sunday Eucharist.

That's probably more than enough of that. Next week we'll start to examine the separate parts of the service.