



Saint Matthew's Parish Church
Big Lamp ~ Summerhill Street
Newcastle

The

Eucharistic

Community

A note on terms

The Liturgy, which we call the **Mass**, has had a variety of names over the centuries. We adopt the use of the word "Mass", because unlike the other names, it does not isolate one aspect of the complex reality.

None-the-less, we must remember that a common term amongst early Christians was the **Eucharist**. "Eucharist" is a word for "thanksgiving", which is the framework of the prayer at the centre of the Liturgy.

Even people who choose the word "Mass" as the noun often use the adjective "eucharistic" when speaking about the Mass.

This Booklet

It is not the purpose of this booklet to try and give a comprehensive account of the Mass. Rather, it is an attempt to give a brief account of why Christian communities are also Eucharistic communities: to explain why the Mass is so important and central to the life of a Christian congregation.

Why the Mass?

The main service at Saint Matthew's on Sundays is always the Mass. In fact, it is the main service on every day except two (Good Friday and Holy Saturday¹). The pattern of the Mass was given to us by Jesus Himself:

When the hour had come, Jesus sat at table and the Apostles with Him ... And He bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them saying, "This is My Body, Which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." And likewise the cup after Supper, saying, "This cup, which is poured out for you in the New Covenant in My Blood."

Luke 22: 14ff

At the Mass, we copy this pattern. We take bread and wine, we bless them, we break the consecrated Bread and we share the consecrated Bread and Wine.

The prayer we use to bless the bread and wine is called the *Eucharistic (= thanksgiving) Prayer*. During the prayer, somewhere in the middle, you will hear what we call the *Dominical Words* - the account of Jesus instituting the Mass at the Last Supper:

On the night before He died He had supper with His Apostles and, taking bread, He praised You. He broke the bread, gave it to them and said: Take, eat; this is My Body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me.

(continued)

¹ When, traditionally, the Church does not celebrate Sacraments *except in extremis*.

When supper was ended He took the cup of wine. Again He praised You, gave it to them and said: Drink this, all of you; this is My Blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

The Dominical Words² from the Eucharistic Prayer we use on Sundays and many other days.

At the time of the Reformation, some of the reformers removed these words from their prayers. Instead, they placed a quotation from one of the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper before their Communion Service began. They did this, because they wanted to say that we celebrate the Mass, because it says we should in the Scriptures; but they were mistaken.

Whilst it does indeed say that we should celebrate the Mass in the Scriptures, this is not why the Church does it.

In his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, Saint Paul writes:

I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My Body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way, also, the Cup after Supper, saying, "This Cup is the New Covenant in My Blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of Me."

1 Corinthians 11: 23ff

² The "quotation" of the words used by Jesus at the Last Supper over the bread and wine.

One of the important points from this text is that Saint Paul, who was writing before most of the New Testament (certainly the Gospels) had been written, speaks of receiving the tradition of the Mass from the Lord. In other words, the place of the Mass in the life of the Church does not rest on the authority of Holy Scripture; it has its own authority directly from Jesus' command.

The Mass and the Sacrifice of Christ

The connexion between the Mass and the Sacrifice of Christ is clear for all to see:

The Cup of Blessing, which we bless, is it not a communion in the Blood of Christ? The Bread, which we break, is it not a participation in the Body of Christ?

I Corinthians 10:15f

However, the link is closer than many Christians think. The underlying model of the Last Supper and the Mass is the *Passover Meal*.³

Christ, our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed.

I Corinthians 5: 7

At the Passover Meal, the final part of the Sacrifice of the lamb was its consumption by those taking part in the meal. To understand how this translates into the Christian context, we need to consider the *Easter Triduum* celebration.

³ The Passover is the Jewish festival, which commemorates the flight of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. From the earliest times, Christians have seen our liberation from slavery to sin in this context - as suggested by the Last Supper.

The Easter Triduum comprises three great liturgies through which we commemorate the Death and Resurrection of Christ, culminating in the Easter Vigil and First Mass of Easter.

The first of these liturgies is the *Mass of the Lord's Supper* on Maundy Thursday. At this Mass, amongst other things, we keep back some of the Hosts (bread consecrated at the Mass). At the *Solemn Liturgy of Good Friday*, after we have venerated the Cross, we use these Hosts for Holy Communion.

The point of this is that after we have stood at the foot of the Cross and seen the Lamb slaughtered, we complete the Christian Passover by eating the resulting meal from the Hosts kept back the evening before.

The Sacrifice of Christ has an eternal existence; and the Mass is, as it were, Its outcrop in the temporal realm. Every time we celebrate the Mass, we connect ourselves with the perpetual Sacrifice of Christ and complete the Passover rite in Holy Communion:

O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world;
have mercy upon us.

O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world;
have mercy upon us.

O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world;
grant us Thy peace.

The Agnus Dei

The anthem sung at the time of Holy Communion

A Sacrifice once and for all

Of course, we need to be careful not to suggest that Christ's Sacrifice is offered again, since we are told clearly that His Sacrifice was offered once and for all:

Christ ... offered for all time a single Sacrifice for sins.

Hebrews 10: 12

So, we speak of "pleading" Christ's Sacrifice at the Mass:

Father, we plead with confidence
His Sacrifice made once for all upon the Cross;
We remember His Dying and Rising in glory,
And we rejoice that He intercedes for us
at Your right hand.

From Eucharistic Prayer G of Common Worship

The Mass, therefore, is not a new event every time. Rather, so to speak, it revivifies, in time, that one perpetual Sacrifice.

In this way, Heaven breaks into time - or, to put it another, for a brief moment God's "Kingdom comes on earth as it is in Heaven." As it says in Prayer G (quoted above), in Heaven Christ intercedes for us. This picks up on an idea in the Letter to the Hebrews:

[Christ] is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Hebrews 7: 25

The Priesthood of the New Covenant

Christ's intercession is ascribed in the Letter to the Hebrews to His priestly character:

... We have a great High Priest, Who has passed through the Heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.

Hebrews 4: 14

A little bit later it says:

Let us then, with confidence, draw near to the Throne of Grace.

Hebrews 4: 16

In other words, through Christ's Presence, we can, too, can enter the Heavenly Sanctuary. This we do, by virtue of the priesthood, which is bestowed by Baptism:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood ... that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him, Who called You out of darkness into His marvellous light.

1 Peter 2: 9

This priesthood is not separate from Christ's - indeed, it is Christ's priesthood, in which we participate after we are baptized:

For as many of you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Galatians 3: 27

It is this priesthood, which corporately offers worship to God - pleads Christ's Sacrifice at the Mass. The people we commonly call "priests" have a particular, presidential role, within the Christian community, which is reflected in the part that they play within the Mass. However, it is the community as a whole in which inheres the priestly character we receive by being baptized into Christ.

A Eucharistic Community

The Sacrifice of Christ was the defining characteristic of His Ministry. The miracles, His preaching and the other aspects of His earthly life prepared people for that Sacrifice; explained its need and significance; and outlined the sort of human society it was intended to encourage in place of the broken one He found at His Incarnation.

In the same way, the celebration of the Mass is the defining characteristic of Christian discipleship. By Baptism, we are incorporated into Christ's priesthood so that we can sustain the Eucharistic Community and make visible in this world, His perpetual Sacrifice.

This does not mean that celebrating the Mass is all that there is to Christian discipleship - far from it; but it is in the Eucharistic assembly that the Church is seen in its fullest form; and through the celebration of the Mass that we proclaim the continuing Presence of the risen Christ amongst us.

The Sacramental Presence of Christ

The Church is aware of the enduring Presence of the risen Christ in the life of the Church:

[Jesus said,] "Where two or three are gathered in My Name, there I am in the midst of them."

Matthew 18: 20

That Presence is believed to be intensely focused in the celebration of the Mass. We are told that at Emmaus, to Cleopas and his companion, Jesus ...

... was known to them in the Breaking of Bread.

Luke 24: 35

This finds further confirmation in the Gospel of Saint John. Although the text does not include a narrative of the Institution of the Mass, the work is pervaded by Sacramental allusions:

Jesus said ... "I am the Bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst ...

John 6: 35

"I am the living Bread which comes down from Heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is My Flesh.

John 6: 51

"My Flesh is food indeed and My Blood is drink indeed.
He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood abides in Me
and I in Him."

John 6: 58

This Sacramental Presence is often termed "the Real Presence" of Christ in the Sacrament. The point of this phrase is to emphasise (as Saint John did) that there is a continuity between the incarnate Christ and His Presence in the Sacramental elements.

So we return to the idea that the Mass presents the Church in her fullest form: the people of God gathered around their Lord; and through His Presence able to draw close to their God and find union with Him in Holy Communion. This union is, of course, fleeting: just a foretaste of that everlasting union with God for which we hope and pray. The Mass is a glimpse not just of who we are, but of who we aspire to be.

The Eucharistic Community is, therefore, the manifestation of the Body of Christ in the world; and the framework and context of Christian discipleship. As Saint Paul says:

As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you
proclaim the Lord's Death until He comes.

I Corinthians 11: 26