

Morning Prayer on Sunday?

The use of Morning Prayer as our central Sunday service may seem novel to those of us familiar only with our most recent prayer book (1979). Isn't Holy Eucharist (Holy Communion) what we are "supposed" to celebrate together as the church? Isn't the centrality of the Eucharist and weekly Communion what distinguishes us as Anglicans from other Protestant churches? To answer these questions, we need to take a look back into history.

While the early Anglican reformers did hope to recapture the ancient church's practice of Holy Eucharist as the central service of the church, the Eucharistic culture they inherited from medieval times was far from ideal: most Christians in the west received communion only once or twice a year. The Reformers wanted everyone to receive communion when it was offered, so as to highlight the corporate nature of the Sacrament. However, the habits of centuries were hard to break, so in order to have communion be the full experience of the Body of Christ, it wasn't celebrated weekly.

In fact, in the 16th century, most English parishes had Communion quarterly... and even this model increased how often people received the Sacrament! This meant that all but four weeks a year the central liturgy of the parish was Morning Prayer. During the Wesleyan revival in the 18th century, there was a movement toward monthly communion, and by the end of 19th century, this was the norm in the Anglican world, including the Episcopal Church: the central service was Morning Prayer three Sundays a month, and Holy Communion once a month. This norm remained in place for many years after the introduction of *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, and only gradually moved toward a central, weekly celebration of Holy Eucharist in most parishes. Thus, "for the better part of four hundred years, Morning Prayer has provided the vehicle by which Anglicans were nourished by the Word of God." (C. Price & L. Weil, *Liturgy for Living*, p. 118)

So in moving to Morning Prayer, we not only are choosing a liturgical form that will help us maintain safe distancing during the pandemic; we have an opportunity to experience the worship that has been so formative to our identity as Episcopalians/Anglicans ever since the English Reformation in the 16th century!

Fun Fact: Morning Prayer is a combination of two very early traditions: the "cathedral office" that highlights the Psalms and corporate prayers, and the "monastic office" of Upper Egypt that highlights Scripture and contemplative experience.

Fun Fact: The Psalms as translated by Miles Coverdale (1539), pre-dating the King James Bible, have been used in Anglican worship since the first *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549... and we will be praying them in our Morning Prayer services!