

Grace Episcopal Church Sermon
#9 Instructed Eucharist Series

The Rev. Ann Wood
Post-Communion Prayers, Blessing and Dismissal
August 29, 2010

“LET US BLESS THE LORD. AMEN”

No – it’s not quite time to leave just yet – but you will recognize in that invitation, one of the sentences of dismissal at the end of our Eucharistic service. This morning, we’re coming to the conclusion of our instructional series, so we’ll be looking anew at the post-communion prayers, the priestly blessings and the dismissal sentences – but in reverse order.

Just to refresh your memories – or for those who may have missed out on a few topics – so far, we’ve heard about the opening acclamation, hymn of praise and the collect, followed by the liturgy of the word and sermon, the creeds, prayers of the people, the confession and peace. Then Susan introduced us to a different way of looking at the offertory. This was followed by the words of institution and finally Holy Communion itself. In other words, we’ve heard God’s word, been made aware once more of God’s promises to us, been pardoned for our sins and been fed in the sacramental mystery of God’s love. The post-communion prayers capture all of these themes. Prior to the dismissal, we have the Priestly blessing, which is to safeguard and strengthen us, and the sending out of any Eucharistic Visitors. The dismissal is generally and appropriately said by the deacon – if there is one – since the deacon’s role is to have one foot in the church and the other one out in the world – bridging the two. We’re being sent forth from our service, where we came to be renewed, strengthened and inspired, as the People of God and as members of Christ’s body, to face the outside world, where Christ is also present to us. The dismissal marks the Eucharist as a missionary service, commissioning and empowering all of us to be missionaries and examples of the Gospel of Christ.

The first evidence of the dismissal was in early Eastern liturgies in the 4th century, when the people were invited to “Depart in peace”. The people responded “In the name of Christ”. The sentence we heard earlier “Let us bless the Lord” was – and still is – used during times of penance – Advent and Lent, for example. Alleluias (meaning praise the Lord, or praise Jahweh) were added at Easter and a typical response was – and still is –

“Thanks be to God”. This response was used during medieval times as an acknowledgment of having heard what was said. Hopefully, it still is! If you flip between pp. 339 and 366, you may notice that a dismissal is permitted in Rite I, and required in Rite II . Four possible texts are provided. The first two - “Let us go forth in the name of Christ” and “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord” are the ones recommended for general use.

To be “sent forth” suggests that we’re open to the journey. To be sent forth “in the name of Christ” literally means that we take on the character of Christ – Christ’s value system, his righteousness and his love. In the words of Paul in 1st Corinthians “Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.” When we think of the dismissal in this way, it becomes far more important an invitation, than just being allowed to leave church at the end of the service.

We should also note that as we’re being sent forth, we’re called to love and serve the Lord as well. What does it mean “to love and serve the Lord”? Do we go where God sends us; speak to those we don’t like; to people who ignore us? We’re sent forth as Christians to proclaim Christ in our everyday lives. What does that mean for each one of us? In what ways do we love and serve Christ each day? How do we treat others – the poor, or those who are different from us? How do we treat the ‘crabby’, the bossy, those who tread on our toes or who gossip about us? Do we love our neighbor as ourselves? These are just a few things to reflect on as we’re sent forth.

The third sentence, “Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit” is most often used around Pentecost and at ordinations. I think this one is my favorite and I will use it today. The power of the Holy Spirit gives me the where-with-all

to even attempt to love and serve as we're called to do. According to Luke's Gospel, the disciples were told by Jesus to wait in the city until they'd received the gift of the Holy Spirit, before trying to go out and preach and heal in Christ's name.

The fourth sentence, "Let us bless the Lord", with which we began this homily, is French or Gallic in origin. In Hebrew, the word for 'bless' is 'ba(w)rak', which means to kneel. This implies an act of adoration towards God.

There's another dismissal sentence, which may sound familiar "Let us go forth in peace", followed by the response "In the name of Christ. Amen". This is an early Eastern dismissal. Does anyone recognize it? (PAUSE) Well, it's used on Palm Sunday at the procession of the liturgy of the palms. What does it mean for us to "go in peace"? – that is to have a sense of well-being or wholeness in all aspects of one's life? What does it take for us to "go in peace"? How easy or difficult is it to be peaceful – in our neighborhood, at work, or even at church? Do we not need the strength and empowerment which we can receive in this service?

Before we're dismissed, however, comes the priestly blessing. Again, there's no evidence of this practice in the liturgy before the 4th century. Early Eastern liturgies made provision for the individual laying on of hands at this time. For larger groups, the laying on of hands was symbolized – as it is today – by the Priest extending the hand or hands over the congregation during the prayer. In our current prayer book, a text is provided for Rite I, but none is given for Rite II, where a blessing is permitted, but not required. This gives the celebrant the freedom either to compose one, or to choose an appropriate one that uses contemporary language, from the prayer book. So, if you've ever wondered why the blessings in Rite II vary, this is the reason.

The words that are familiar to us in Rite I today, actually date from 1548. The Order of Communion then used the blessing “The peace of God which passeth all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord”. The following year, the words “And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you alway” were added.

Even though there may not have been much evidence of a priestly blessing in the liturgy, before the 4th century, we have evidence of blessings being given frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures. One of my favorites is the quite familiar Aaronic benediction God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai, which Aaron and his sons were to use to bless the Israelites. This is found in the Book of Numbers and is now used in the Order of Worship for the Evening. It’s “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” One translation which I rather like and enjoy imagining is “the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace”. Archaeologists have found two silver cylinders containing portions of this blessing, written in Hebrew and dated to 600 BCE. To me, there’s something rather special about knowing the history behind and the age of this blessing.

Another very old tradition, which is a precursor of our present day blessings, is one which we use during Lent. They’re special blessings, introduced by the deacon with the words “Bow down before the Lord”, thus acknowledging God’s sovereignty and power, and are typically prayers asking God to look upon God’s family with mercy, to help and protect us.

Moving backwards in our service once more, we come to the post-communion prayers. We're blessed with three – one in Rite I and a choice of two in Rite II. If you still have your Prayer Book open to pp. 339 and p. 366, you'll see that the second prayer in Rite II is a condensed and slightly different, contemporary version of the one in Rite I. Post-communion prayers were a 4th century development. The 1549 prayer book provides one fixed common prayer, which incorporated many themes and summaries of doctrine. According to Massey H. Shepherd, Jr. – and I quote - “It gathered up the varied meanings of Holy Communion – thanksgiving, mystery, grace, incorporation into Christ, fellowship in the church, and anticipation of the Kingdom of God.” (end quote) Since that time, the language has undergone some changes, but the prayers we use today, basically contain those same themes. We, in keeping with the mission aspect of the service, also pray that we may continue to do “all such good works as God has prepared for us to walk in.” Rite II is more specific regarding our being sent out. We pray “And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do”, and then we state what that work is, which is “to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.” What does it mean to you “to love and serve as faithful witnesses of Christ”? What do you think about when you pray those words? What do you think about when you ask God to send you out to do the work God has given you to do? Do you ever stop to ask God what God has in store for you, rather than being caught up in the frantic rush of daily living?

In our first prayer option in Rite II, (p. 335), we also ask God to “Send us now into the world”, but add “in peace”, asking that we be granted strength and courage to love and serve God. However, there's another stipulation - we're to love and serve “with

gladness and singleness of heart”. No moaning and groaning doing God’s work.

Sometimes that can be a tall order. I guess that’s why we ask for strength and courage!

What’s your world like? Are some days wonderful, others so-so, or others just plain awful? I’m reminded of a recent reflection in the current edition of “Forward Day by Day”. It was actually written in 1947, so please forgive the non-inclusive language. I quote:

“Several mornings in a row I woke up with a headache. My job was very distasteful then. Conversation and adapting myself to people seemed impossible. I would have given anything to be able to avoid living those days.

Then it dawned on me that if *my* doings had no significance, God’s had. He was trying to make the world a better place that day. He was trying to get people to live together in friendship. If I could take some part in his work, then *my* life would be worthwhile. It might be difficult to meet people in Christ’s spirit of friendship and to do the details of my work carefully, when my head felt as though an engine were throbbing inside it. But all that was of small importance if, by that effort, I could fit into God’ great task and be an agent through whom some of his love could flow to people.” (end quote)

I hope that by our spending time today reviewing in some detail the prayers, blessings and dismissals, that it may have reinforced for you the power behind these ancient words; that you will hear the dismissal with different ears, receive the Priestly blessing in a new way and pray the post-communion prayer with new understanding.

Joyce Hardy, the President of the North American Association for the Diaconate, always concludes her article in the diaconal publication, “Diakoneo” with the words:

“Go in peace; Go in love; just Go!”. So, following her words, as we go into the world in

peace, having had the opportunity to worship together, to be refreshed, renewed, pardoned, strengthened, commissioned and empowered, may we rejoice in God's love for us and serve God with gladness and singleness of heart.

AMEN