



Using Hymns With Holy Communion

Short Guide No 11: Using Hymns With Holy Communion

“The Holy Communion” is generally recognised as the distinctive act of Christian worship, arising as it does from the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper with his chosen disciples on the night he was betrayed.

For many churches, the Holy Communion service (known by various names) is the central act of worship on Sundays and principal Feast and Festival Days. Of those churches which do not follow the above pattern, the majority will, nevertheless, have their own arrangements for the administering of the Sacrament, perhaps on a monthly basis. Denominational and local practices vary widely; this paper suggests some general principles applicable in many contexts.

The Holy Communion service

A Eucharist will normally have four or five hymns (possibly including metrical psalms or more informal worship songs) which should be in keeping with:

- the theme of the service;
- the Bible readings;
- the season of the Church year;
- the gathered worshippers’ offering of prayer, praise and thanksgiving; and
- the worshippers’ needs to be inspired to go out to their homes, communities and places of work in the service of Christ.

Choosing appropriately for the occasion and for the various identifiable moments within a Eucharistic celebration is no easy task, nor to be undertaken lightly.

The opening hymn

This could be a general hymn of praise to God; a hymn of adoration; a call to worship; one that acknowledges our failures and need for grace and forgiveness; one that fits the season (e.g. Christmas or Easter); or one that focuses on the theme (for example, Christ the Light of the World, or Harvest). The choice of hymn is wide but whatever hymn is chosen, it should be sung to a familiar tune and be one that naturally leads the assembled body forward from where they are to where, in worship, they need to be.

Before and after the sermon

There may be a hymn or metrical psalm sung around the chosen or set Bible readings and before the sermon. At this point, if possible, the hymn needs to reflect the importance of scripture, to make reference to one of the chosen passages (ideally the Gospel reading), or to set the scene for the sermon or address which is to follow. There should be a conscious realisation of the special place of the ‘ministry of the word’ and of the congregation’s hunger for instruction and learning.

In some churches, there is a strong tradition for a hymn to follow the sermon. If this is the case, the hymn chosen should reinforce the message of the preaching and enable the congregation to respond appropriately to what they have heard, whether by prayer, praise or renewed commitment.

Hymns leading to preparation for the Sacrament

Those using a set order of service may well have provision, after the sermon, for the recitation of the Creed, for intercessory prayer and for the sharing with one another of Christ's peace. A hymn can then be sung during which preparations are made for the 'ministry of the sacrament'—the receiving of the bread and wine—and a collection may be taken. However, for some churches both the singing of a hymn and the preparation of the Holy Table are liturgical acts demanding total dedication, and these will be kept separate.

This point in the service allows for a longer hymn, which should have clarity of message and a singable tune. This hymn may be linked to the season, or may be a general hymn to help the congregation remain focused. Hymns that remind us of the needs of the world, of our responsibilities towards God's creation, and of our calling to care for those who suffer, put our worship into its wider context as we prepare to receive the sacrament.

A communion hymn

In some settings, hymns or other music may be used during the distribution of the elements; but any selection at this stage needs great care. Silence may be preferred.

When those present have made their communion, a hymn is often sung. This could be from the Communion section of the hymn book and could refer to the institution of the Eucharist, the sharing of the bread and wine / Body and Blood, the washing of the disciples' feet, or the connection with Christ's suffering and death. Any hymn intended to deepen one's faith is apposite. A hymn of reflection on what Christ has done for all and how his followers are fortified by the sacrament would also be an excellent choice.

The final hymn

The hymn before the blessing and dismissal can readily be a hymn of thanksgiving (such as 'Now thank we all our God'), of response to receiving the bread and wine (like 'Now let us from this table rise') or a rousing hymn (such as 'And can it be') which will bring the service to an inspirational conclusion; any service should finish on a positive and memorable note. If such a hymn offers a challenge to those assembled, so much the better.

Conclusion

- There is a need for **sensitivity** in the choice of hymns. A church school or young person's Eucharist, for instance, would demand hymns which speak to them in language and imagery with which they can identify.
- There also needs to be **balance** in the selection of hymns. Five rousing hymns with choruses or five common metre hymns would not provide sufficient variety, and it would be tedious if most of the hymns were new to the congregation.
- A **carefully considered offering** such as that outlined above (a hymn of praise, one inspired by the Bible readings, one reflecting the need to serve, a devotional hymn, and a concluding hymn of thanksgiving) has a greater chance of making the Communion Service a joyful experience and foundation for being 'sent out into the world'.
- Worship needs to be both a **spiritual feeding** and a **springboard for action**. Hymns thoughtfully and prayerfully chosen by someone who knows intimately both their own hymnal and other resources can go a long way towards fulfilling both requirements.

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