

Lent Brings Change to Worship

By Bill Stroop

The church year is divided into six major seasons. Beginning with Advent, the seasons are Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and “Ordinary” time, that long season of the church year that follows the feast day of Pentecost. The seasons of the year are bounded by or contain Principal or Major feast days and Holy Days such as Christmas Day (during Christmas); Holy Name, The Epiphany and The Presentation (during Epiphany); Ash Wednesday, The Annunciation, Palm Sunday, and Good Friday (during Lent); Easter Day and Ascension Day (during Easter); The Day of Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, The Transfiguration, Holy Cross Day, and All Saint’s Day (during Pentecost).

It has become traditional to mark the seasons of the church year through the use of colors, and changes in the Sunday Eucharistic liturgies and music. It should be noted, however, that traditions change over time, and what the church once considered traditional (and perhaps unchangeable) in fact did change over time. Consequently, what we consider “traditional” today might not be the same ten or one hundred years from now. For example, the “traditional” practices for distributing bread and wine during Holy Communion have changed considerably over the centuries, and have involved such varied procedures as passing the cup of wine from person to person in the congregation (no Eucharistic servers) to the use of a common “straw” (called a fistula) to the administration of the holy supper with a spoon containing a “slurry” of consecrated bread and wine.

Lent, being the most penitential season of the year is marked by the use of the color purple or lavender. On Ash Wednesday, the hangings, altar decorations, and vestments change from the green color of the post-Epiphany period to purple, and they remain purple until Lent ends on the Saturday before Palm Sunday. Oftentimes, if a church does not normally have a vessel of holy water out during the rest of the year, such a vessel is placed in the church during Lent so that as people enter the nave (church) they may dip their fingers in it before crossing themselves. Such gestures are not for everyone, but some people find such gestures meaningful, spiritual actions especially during the Lenten season.

Another change you will notice in church during Lent is the use of unleavened wafers of bread instead of baked communion bread. The use of leavened or unleavened bread for communion is another of those “traditions” that has changed over time. For about 1000 years, unleavened bread was the norm for the church, but for the past 1000 years, the Eastern Catholic churches (except the Armenian) use leavened bread, while the Roman Catholic Church in the West uses unleavened bread. This change came about gradually, but by the time of the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054, the divergence over the leavening of communion bread was a cause of dissention. In the Church of England tradition, leavened bread has been the custom since 1552 (and indeed supported by a rubric in that prayer book). A number of Anglican liturgies today specifically permit the use of either kind of bread, but most make no mention of the matter, leaving the choice up to local custom. I like to change from leavened bread to the wafers in Lent as a way of marking the season of Lent as different from the flanking seasons of Epiphany and Easter.

Lent is often characterized by austerity and somberness. A common thing that many churches in the Anglican tradition do at this time of year is to put away the silver and the brass or gold fixtures and vessels of the altar and use less ornate, simpler implements made of wood, glass, or ceramic. Sometimes the number of candles is reduced as well. At Trinity this year, we will put away the silver Eucharistic vessels and replace them with simpler glass ones. And when the silver returns on Easter, it will seem even more glorious when it is surrounded by all those Easter lilies. Another austere way we will mark the Lenten season is by processing in and out of the services in silence.



*Title page from the
1549 Prayer Book*

The language we use and the musical settings during Lent are also more subdued. We “put away” the Alleluias, and the *Gloria in excelsis* is replaced with the *Kyrie eleison* or the *Trisagion*. The servers switch the words used to administer the sacraments of bread and wine to remind us of the season of the year. Beginning with the second Sunday in Lent at the 10:30 am service, we will sing the *Trisagion* at the beginning of the service, just before the silent procession. Instead of the customary priest’s blessing at the end of the service during Lent, the church commends the use of the solemn blessing for Lent from *The Book of Occasional Services* (seasonal blessings are also used during Advent, Epiphany, Christmas, and certain other seasons of the church year).

On the First Sunday in Lent, we chanted the Great Litany in Procession. The litany, as a prayer form, is a set of supplications said or sung by a cantor, deacon or priest, and followed by set responses from the people. Predating Christianity, this prayer form was used by other religions, including Judaism.

The Great Litany was in use in the Roman Church long before the reformation, but with the 1549 Prayer Book prepared by Thomas Cranmer, the litany was to be used as part of the daily offices for Eucharistic celebrations, and for rogation days, times of emergency, and other special occasions. The litany we use today was assembled by Cranmer from many sources including the Roman litanies, Luther’s litany, the litany for rogation, and the litany of St. John Chrysostom. The current rubrics call for the Great Litany to be “said or sung, kneeling, standing, or in procession...” Indeed, in the earliest days of Anglicanism, it was prescribed that the Litany be chanted in procession.



Thomas Cranmer in his later years.

On subsequent Sundays in Lent, we will begin the service with the Penitential Order from the Prayer Book. This effectively “moves” the confession to the front of the service.

We will also observe the ancient traditional service of *Tenebrae* during Holy Week. This is a very ancient liturgical expression of our sacred story involving the reading of antiphons and psalms.

The form of the Eucharistic Prayer (the Great Thanksgiving) during Lent we will use at Trinity is Form C, found on page 369 (cf) of the *Book of Common Prayer*. This prayer is considered by church liturgists to be the most penitential of the Eucharistic Prayers in the American prayer book, and particularly well suited for the Lenten season.

I hope that this helps you understand some of the changes that will occur in our worship during this season, and that you have a holy and productive Lent.

From the Preface of the 1549 Prayer Book:

THERE was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so surely established, which (in continuance of time) hath not been corrupted: as (among other thinges) it may plainly appere by the common prayers in the Church, commonly called divine service: the firste originall and grounde whereof, if a manne woulde searche out by the auncient fathers, he shall finde that the same was not ordeyned, but of a good purpose, and for a great advaancement of godlines: For they so ordred the matter, that all the whole Bible (or the greatest parte thereof) should be read over once in the yeare, intendyng thereby, that the Cleargie, and specially suche as were Ministers of the congregacion, should (by often readyng and meditacion of Gods worde) be stirred up to godlines themselves, and be more able also to exhorte other by wholsome doctrine, and to confute them that were adversaries to the trueth. And further, that the people (by daily hearyng of holy scripture read in the Church) should continuallye profite more and more in the knowledge of God, and bee the more inflamed with the love of his true religion.