

Holy Communion

(The Eucharist)

What we do, and why we do it



Introduction

The purpose of this booklet written by Paulette Stubbings is to explain what Holy Communion (sometimes called The Eucharist or the Lord's Supper) is, and why and how we celebrate it in the way we do at St Alphege, Seasalter.

You might be preparing to take Holy Communion for the first time, you might be new to the Anglican church and find the way we celebrate Holy Communion is different from experiences you have had in other Christian churches, or you might have questions you have always wanted to ask about the way we do things here.

Although there are some Church of England rules about Holy Communion that all Anglican churches must honour, you'll find what Holy Communion 'looks like' will vary from one Church of England church to another depending on the style and tradition of the church, so this is very much a local guide.

Our hope and prayer is that this guide will help you understand more about this amazing gift to the Church, and help your own connection and journey with God to grow and deepen.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve". The signature is written in a cursive style and is enclosed within a thin black rectangular border.

Steve Coneys
Vicar, St Alphege, Seasalter

What is Holy Communion?

Holy Communion is the name we give to the sharing of bread and wine in the gathered church community, most often as part of a church service, whether in the week or on a Sunday. It's sometimes called 'The Lord's Supper' because it was Jesus who started it off, at the 'Last Supper' he had with his disciples before he was crucified. Here's the account of that in the Bible, from the Gospel of Luke:

Luke 22:

¹⁷ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, 'Take this and divide it among you. ¹⁸ For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'

¹⁹ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'

²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.'

So, it's partly an act of remembrance – we use the bread and wine to remember what Jesus did for us when he gave his life by dying on the Cross, and to remind us that we can all be part of the promise (or covenant) he made through his death – that all who believe that he died and rose again for us are forgiven and have a new and eternal life in Jesus.



The Last Supper by Harry Anderson

But it's even more than that...

John 6: 32-35:

³² Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'

³⁴ 'Sir,' they said, 'always give us this bread.'

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

Sharing the bread and the wine regularly reminds us of our ongoing need for Jesus – the 'bread of life'.

When we share in Holy Communion, we believe Jesus is present with us in a special way that strengthens our faith and our relationship with God and with each other. We are not only remembering Jesus' death and what that means for us, but celebrating his ongoing risen life with the whole Church, and looking forward to his return. During communion, we also find that we are discerning Christ's presence in each other – this is very much an emphasis of St Paul's teaching on the Eucharist in his first letter to the Corinthians.

A Sacrament

Holy Communion is one of the Church's SACRAMENTS. A sacrament is 'an outward visible sign of an inward grace' – in other words, an event or ritual that symbolises something special that God is doing in us when we take part in it.

The Church of England recognises two sacraments – The Eucharist, and Baptism. Both are occasions where something going on the outside is a sign of a transformation happening on the inside.

When do we have Holy Communion in this church?

We have Holy Communion every Wednesday at the service in the Old Church, every Sunday at the 08.45 service, and once a month on the first Sunday at the 11.00 all-age service. It is also held on first Sundays at the 11.15 traditional service at the Old Church. We have Communion every couple of months at Lighthouse, and on special days or occasions such as Easter Day and Christmas Day.

What happens in a service of Holy Communion in St Alphege, Seasalter?

What's on the table?

In our church, we call it the Communion table rather than an altar. It is covered with a plain white linen cloth. During the service, the chalices (cups) will be filled with wine and baskets with the bread or communion wafers (round papery discs sometimes used instead of bread) will be put on the table. These cups and baskets are covered with folded white linen cloths until they are used later in the service.

We use several chalices (cups) similar to this one when there are large numbers of people celebrating Holy Communion wafers



You will see the priest touch and lift up the bread and wine, and say the words of the 'Eucharistic prayer' reminding us that what we are about to do was begun by Jesus in the Last Supper, what Jesus has done for us in his death and resurrection, and asking God to bring us the living gift and presence of Jesus through the bread and wine.



At various times we all join in with singing or saying prayers and responses to what is being said.



Breaking the Bread

Just before the bread and wine are distributed, the priest breaks the bread. There are several occasions in the Bible when Jesus breaks bread before sharing it. It reminds us of his broken body when he died on the cross, so that we might be set free from sin and have life. But it also is a sign of his presence – after Jesus died, God raised him to life again and for a short time he appeared to his followers before returning to God. On one of these occasions, they knew it was Jesus because of the way he broke the bread. Jesus will return again one day, and we also look forward to that when we celebrate Holy Communion.

Distribution of the Bread and Wine

You will be given directions in the service about how and where the bread and wine will be distributed, so relax! If you are not sure, ask someone or follow the person in front of you.

Each person steps forward to receive the bread first. Most people hold out one or both hands (crossed palm upwards with one hand over the other, like the picture here).

As a small amount of bread (or wafer) is placed into the person's hand, words are spoken – usually something like: *'The body of Christ, broken for you'*, and often people reply *'Amen'* before eating the bread.

Having received the bread, each person receives the wine. They take the chalice and take a sip of the wine. As they do this, the person administering the wine will say something like *'The blood of Christ, shed for you'*, and the one receiving replies *'Amen'*.

Having received the bread and wine, you usually return to your seat. It's an opportunity to sit quietly for a moment and take in what you have been part of.



Some FAQs

Does the bread and wine change in some way during Holy Communion?

Theologians have been trying to explain this one for centuries! There is difference of opinion across the different world-wide Christian denominations about what actually happens to the bread and wine during Holy Communion.

But most Christians agree that God works mysteriously through ‘ordinary’ bread and wine (food and drink that is a combination of God-given natural growth and fruitfulness, and human creativity) to do something extraordinary in us.

The bread and wine are most than just symbols – they actually somehow deliver to us the very things they point to, as we eat and drink.

Through the bread and the wine, we are united with Christ and with each other, we are fed physically and spiritually, our faith is strengthened, and we are made more whole.

So something happens during the act of Holy Communion that doesn’t happen with wine and bread at other times, but it’s hard to pinpoint exactly what and when. *This is God’s activity through his Holy Spirit – we are simply invited to join in, and receive this gift with thankfulness.*

Why do the people who have administered the bread and wine eat and drink up whatever’s left?

The bread and wine are consecrated by the priest during the prayers before they are given out to the people (administered). This means they are set apart and dedicated to God for the special and holy purpose of Communion. Once that has happened, it is usual for any leftovers to be carefully consumed – that was the reason they were set apart and dedicated, so it would seem strange just to throw them away. The care we take with the bread and wine in this way shows that what they symbolise is important, and we don’t want to waste it.

Why does a priest lead Holy Communion?

It’s in the Church of England rules (and has been for centuries) that a priest leads or ‘presides’ over Holy Communion, leading the church family in praying certain prayers that set apart the bread and wine for this special and holy purpose.

Clergy are first ordained into the role and order of Deacon. Once they are ‘priested’ a year later, they may preside over Holy Communion.

In this way, a priest serves by helping the gathered Church community (of which they are also a part) encounter Jesus through Holy Communion.

Denise is dressed for leading ('presiding' over) Holy Communion in a black cassock and a white surplice. The white clerical collar shows she is an ordained priest.

The long scarf is called a stole. It is purple because this photo was taken during Lent, which is a 'penitential season': a time of the year before Easter when we remember how we cannot stay free from sin without the help of Jesus. Purple is the colour for Lent.

In some churches, priests wear a plain white robe called a cassock alb for Holy Communion services.



Could we have our own Holy Communion in our Cell Group?

In some Christian denominations where the sharing of bread and wine has traditionally happened in more informal ways, this may happen. In the Church of England, a priest is required to consecrate the bread and wine. If you are keen to share Holy Communion as a cell group for a special reason, that's great! Talk to one of the clergy and something can be arranged.

What about people who can't get to church because they are ill or housebound?

Either a member of the clergy or somebody authorised to do so by the vicar can take Holy Communion to people who are sick in hospital or at home and unable to get to a service. They use a portable set with a cup and paten (plate) in it, a small flask containing consecrated wine, and a pyx (small box) with consecrated bread or wafer in it, taken from one of the services of Holy Communion that has already been held in church. They will say prayers and a shorter version of some of the words spoken at a Holy Communion service, with the person they are visiting.

Are there any times when I shouldn't receive Holy Communion?

If you are too unwell you might choose not to – we share the same cup, so if you have a bad cold for example, you could choose just to have the bread. If

you need to have *either* the bread or the wine (but not both) for a medical or other good reason, then the ‘benefit’ of Holy Communion is just the same as if you had had both.

Christians try and come to Holy Communion thoughtfully and humbly, and in peace with one another. One of the reasons we share a ‘sign of God’s peace’ (usually a handshake) with one another during a Communion service, is to remind each other to look after our relationships. We also have a time of ‘confession’ near the beginning of the service – a time when we acknowledge the wrong things we have done, said and thought that damage our relationship with God and with each other. Holy Communion is one of the signs of God’s forgiveness and of our restored relationship with him.

Can anyone have Holy Communion?

All are welcome to come forward during the distribution of the bread and wine in Holy Communion. All who have been baptised into the Church as a child or an adult (that is, the Church of God, not just the Church of England) take the bread and wine.

Alternatively, you may come forward for a prayer of blessing – come up with everybody else, but keep your hands down to show that you do not wish to receive the bread and wine, and you will receive a prayer of blessing instead.

Can younger children take Holy Communion?

We happily support any child who has been baptised and wants to take Communion. We teach them about what it means and what happens by running some helpful sessions prior to the first time they take Holy Communion – which is traditionally on Easter Sunday.

How often should we have Communion?

The Bible doesn’t say how often, but it is such a wonderful gift to the Church, and such an important part of our faith and growth that it is good to do it fairly regularly, but without letting it become ‘routine’.

Did Jesus mean for it to get so formal?

Jesus didn't say HOW we were to do it, just that we should. The apostle Paul challenged the church in Corinth about the way in which they were going about it because they were eating and drinking greedily when they met rather than thinking about each other and what it was meant to represent.

It's fair to say that what we do today is more like a symbolic ritual than the kind of meal Jesus and the disciples shared. But it makes it clear that something important is happening when we meet to share bread and wine in this way. At St Alphege, Seasalter, we meet in a modern building and our style of worship tends to be contemporary and relaxed. Elaborate ceremony and ritual would feel out of character, but we do want to be very thoughtful and intentional about what we are doing.

Got more questions? Find a member of the clergy and ask.

Text by Paulette Stubbings, 2015

 St Alphege, Seasalter
making disciples of Christ, growing the church of God

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