

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BEING WITH GOD



Session 4: Being with God in Worship

I want to grow in being with God and becoming like Christ...how does this happen?
What are practices?
How does this change happen?
What is worship and why do we do it?
Why do we worship God?
How else is worshipping God good for me?
How does God's character encourage this?
What are two ways to grow in joy?
What is the effect of doing this?
How do I worship God on my own?
What habits make worshipping God in daily tasks more likely?
Why do I worship God with others?
What is important in worshipping with others?
What will worshipping together always involve?
Why do we worship by singing together?
Why are sacraments important in worship and being with God?
Where does breaking bread and sharing wine at Holy Communion come from?
What was Jesus doing at the Last Supper?
Why is remembering so important?
What are the meanings of breaking bread and sharing wine?
How is this presence known?

I want to grow in being with God and becoming like Christ...how does this happen?

In every Way of Discipleship module the first sessions help shape our understanding while the next sessions are much more focused on how we live because of that understanding.

We have seen how being a disciple is about staying close to the 'rabbi' – being with Him, becoming like Him, joining in with Him. Paying attention to God and responding to Him, putting God's teaching into practice in our choices. Being with God means keeping Him before our minds.

How does this happen? Put simply, on a day by day basis, we get to experience this being with God by developing the kinds of habits, practices or rhythms that develop this focus.

So as we look for the rest of this module at the everyday practices of worship, prayer, Bible reading and a balanced life, we will be learning and experiencing ways of living that help us to 'Be with God'.

We do not have to make this up from scratch – these habits are ways in which disciples have grown for millennia and are ways of living found in Jesus' life. Sometimes they have been called "spiritual disciplines".

These days, more people are adopting the language of habits or practices to avoid splitting life up into a "spiritual" and a "non-spiritual" part (God calls us to be with Him in all of our lives), and to avoid making "Being with God" sound like a duty.

What are practices?



We are familiar with the idea of good and bad practices.

Things that over time become a natural part of our lives and focus the way we live. These habits are the ones which draw us into a life of love and joy with the God who loves us!

The other thing practices do is change us. (This is obvious in our physical bodies in terms of our eating, exercising, personal care habits, but it is just as true for our inner person as well). We will explore this in more detail in the Module 'Becoming like Christ', but we have already seen if something is genuinely true it will transform us.

As disciples we learn in order to become like our teacher. Paul and other New Testament writers describe this as changing into the image or pattern of Christ. The hope is that everyone can grow to be "mature in Christ".



God doesn't want us to be people who can just do the right thing in our behaviour. Most people find it hard to keep to every rule! The picture the Bible gives us is that He wants to do something far deeper - to change our inmost being (the heart).



“

Over time we do the things Christ does because they become things we want to do, and the natural choices we make will be to do what He would do if He were in our situation...

...in the strength that He gives. Our habitual thoughts, feelings and actions will become more like His. This isn't cloning - God made and loves variety. Instead, as each human being becomes more like Him, we become more fully the people God made each of us to be.

This is what Paul means when he prays that Christ would be "formed in you".

Daily discipleship is gradually becoming the kind of person who will naturally live a life like the Master. If joining the Way of Discipleship has no impact on shaping us to become more like Christ, then it will not be discipleship.



How does this change happen?



Most people want to change in some way. But 95% of New Year's resolutions do not last past the end of January.

We can't change by just saying, "I want to change." Most people know that while we might be able to tweak our behaviours a little, for the deeper patterns of our personalities to change we need a power beyond ourselves. (See the AA Twelve Step programme).

Genuine change is a lifelong journey of letting God transform us. Very briefly, disciples are changed as two things happen.

Our minds are renewed so we see the world and people more and more as God sees them.

To have the 'mind of Christ'. The Way of Discipleship offers this.

Our innermost selves (hearts) are changed by allowing God's Holy Spirit to change us from the inside out.

In Luke 6, Jesus points out that "there is no good tree which produces bad fruit... Men do not gather figs from thorn bushes...." (vv. 43-44) It is the inner nature of the tree that determines its outward product. Likewise, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart." (v. 45)



Habits and practices are about giving space in our lives for God's Holy Spirit to shape our minds and our innermost desires, so that over time our natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ."

They give us ways of "abiding in Him", or "walking in the Spirit." As we do so, as well as knowing what to do, we gradually want to do it.

James Smith writes, "Jesus is a teacher who doesn't just inform our intellect but forms our very loves. He isn't content to simply deposit new ideas into your mind; he is after nothing less than your wants, your loves, your longings."

Practices change us *indirectly*.

We do what we can in order to enable us to do what we can't do directly.

We can see this reality in any physical training. The more you train, the easier it becomes, for example, to run a marathon. And the more natural marathon-running will be.

As we are being with God through worship, prayer, study and rest, we become the kind of people who want what God wants.

Sometimes we get transformed in moments of 'breakthrough', like Saul on the road to Damascus. But most of the time it is through the process of living.

Because we are covenant partners, we have a part to play in this. We make ourselves available and open. But it is God who does the work, through His Spirit. "Without Him we can't, but without us He won't."

We are making an effort, but we aren't earning. We are training, but we aren't trying. Richard Foster calls this 'the path of disciplined grace.' It is 'grace' because it is free; it is 'disciplined' because there is something for us to do."

All the practices create the environment for the Holy Spirit to change us.

What is worship and why do we do it?



Worship is the first practice of any disciple.

Maureen Collins is a modern example of a worshipping creature. Her home is a shrine to Barry Manilow, and she is so obsessed that she doesn't have time for full-time employment. The walls are covered with posters from different parts of Barry's career. She doesn't listen to music by any other artist, she has seen him all over the world and written him hundreds of letters.

She has a scrapbook filled with newspaper and magazine cuttings, and calls radio stations all over the UK requesting his songs. Her family and friends have long since given up trying to dissuade her from her obsession.

While Maureen may be a somewhat extreme example, she illustrates a point: People from all tribes, cultures and nations worship and have been worshipping someone or something since the beginning of humanity.

Some worship out of awe, some out of fear, some to keep their gods happy (or at bay), some out of duty, some out of love. In reality everybody worships something.

The English word 'worship' comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'weorthscipe' which literally means to ascribe worth to something. You worship what you most love, give attention to, or desire.



“

Worship is how we respond to what we value the most.

Who or what we worship is the deepest expression of our humanity.”

Who we worship also shapes us. This is why the Bible warns against idolatry so often. Psalm 115 says, “...their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands...Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.”

The things we base our lives on are the things which make things normal for us. If you worship money, greed becomes normal. If your god is violent, killing becomes normal. Worship expresses what we value, but also shapes it.

Why do we worship God?



God (alone) is worthy of our worship.

Throughout the story of the Bible when people encounter God, they worship. Abraham offers a sacrifice. Moses leads the people out of Egypt so they can worship. Samuel's mother, Hannah, offers a song of praise as she dedicates him. David dances.

Forty one psalms say "Sing to the Lord!". Job praises God in the midst of trials. Mary worships when she becomes pregnant. The wise men worship the child, the disciples worship the Messiah, Peter and John praise God after being flogged, Paul and Silas sing hymns in prison.

Endless crowds in the book of Revelation sing "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

Worship is the only appropriate relationship we can have when we see God for who He is. As Matt Redman writes, "When we face up to the glory of God, we find ourselves face down in worship."

In the book of Deuteronomy, God's people are told, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." and "serve him only and take your oaths in his name. ...Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you."

The writer to the Hebrews encourages people to, "offer sacrifice of praise to God continually...let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:28-29)

Worship is the deepest expression of who we are. As we have seen - everyone worships (gives ultimate worth) in some way. Worship is the practice that makes us most human and reveals our deepest longings.

“

The Christian faith says, "I worship, therefore I am."

We are made for God. The human heart is restless until it finds its rest in God."

When we worship God, we are expressing in the deepest way the relationship we are made for with Him.

As the famous statement says, "The chief end of people is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." To worship is a natural response to God which completes our enjoyment of Him.

C.S. Lewis puts it like this. "But the most obvious fact about praise -- whether of God or anything -- strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. ... The world rings with praise -- lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game. ... I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation."



Worship is the opposite of sin.

Pope Francis has said, "The most dangerous idol is our own selves when we want to occupy the place of God." The original human problem, and the root of all the brokenness in society, is the way we have replaced God with ourselves, living our lives, and ruling the world, as if He does not exist.

To worship God is to reverse this, by placing God at the centre. When Jesus said we should worship "in spirit and in truth" He wasn't recommending any method or place, but showing how God was looking for the worshipping people who will truly make Him the centre of their lives.

That's why William Temple, an archbishop, wrote, "This world can be saved from political chaos and collapse by one thing, and that is worship." True worship does not look for any benefit to ourselves (that would be repeating the problem) but worshipping God for Himself.

St Augustine explained, "The heart is not pure if it worships God for a reward. What then? Shall we have no reward for the worship of God? Certainly we shall, but the reward will be God himself whom we worship. God's very self will be our reward."

Worship is joining in with the activity of earth and heaven, now and forever.

To worship God is to join in with a creation which gives glory to God, making us more at home with the rhythms of earth.

"All the earth worships you and sings praises to you; they sing praises to your name." Psalm 66:4
"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." (Psalm 19:1)
"Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars" (Psalm 148:3).

It is also to join in with the unseen parts of creation, 'the heavens' God made – spiritual beings such as angels, who are revealed as living lives of worship.

"And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.'" (Revelation 7:11-12.)



To worship is also to anticipate the time when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”

We get glimpses of that future in some Old Testament prophecy, which paints God’s promised new creation as a feast: “On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.” (Isaiah 25:6). It will be a time when “the ransomed of the Lord will return And come with joyful shouting to Zion, And everlasting joy will be on their heads.” (Isaiah 51:11)

In the picture-language of Revelation this worship is never-ending and involves everyone, as God’s glory is seen fully. To worship now is to both join in with this unseen reality, and look forward to its fulfilment.

Worship connects us with God and changes us.

When we worship, we seek to give our full attention to God, and to place Him at the centre. As this happens, not only is our love expressed, it is also strengthened, and we open up our lives to the work of God’s Spirit. Worship changes us, as it helps us grow in love for God.

A writer called Baron von Hugel said worship is like kissing his daughter. He kissed his daughter to show he loves her (expressing), but as he kisses her his love grows (strengthening).

So while the English word for worship describes how it is about ascribing worth to God, the Greek word in the New Testament describes worship as connecting intimately with God.

The word (*proskyneo*) literally means to come towards and kiss the back of the hand. It’s a word of intimacy and reverence. Worship connects us to God, aligning what we want with what He wants, submitting who we are to Him. As we draw close in this union, God can change us from the inside out.

One writer says, “Worship isn’t just something we do; it is where God does something to us. Worship is the heart of discipleship because it is the gymnasium in which God retrains our hearts.” James K.A. Smith.



This is why when people in the Bible worship God, they have an expectancy that His presence will become real to them.

There is a sense in which God “delights in and inhabits the praises of His people”. Our worship gives God a ‘place’ to live in our lives.

When the early church prayed and worshipped, they experienced the room shaking. They had a deep sense of God’s presence.

It is not that God is an egotist who needs our praises, but for all the reasons above God knows we are shaped, completed, and drawn into His love through worship, and He delights in that relationship.





How else is worshipping God good for me?

The practice of worshipping God is strongly linked to the practice of celebration and to joy. In a time and culture in which many struggle with anxiety, stress and depression it is important to experience the practice of worship as key to better mental health and well-being.

The early church “ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God” (Acts 2:46/7). Nehemiah tells the people, “Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Nehemiah 8:10)

How does God’s character encourage this?

As we will explore more fully in 'Becoming like Christ' the greatest insight we have into what God is like is through looking at Christ – He is the “image of the invisible God.”

To understand God’s character, then, we look at Jesus. A common perception is that Christ has little to say about joy or happiness. Yet, while He was prophesied to be a “man of sorrows”, fully aware of the world’s pain, he was also foretold to be “anointed with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

In other words, the most joyful person alive!

And while Jesus experienced the full force of evil and sadness, it was in the context of knowing that joy was set before Him – that it had the last word.

In his life we see the joyful character of God in the extravagance of His first miracle, making water into the best wine. It was in creating this celebration that He 'revealed God’s glory'. We regularly read about Jesus parties, eating and drinking to the extent that he’s accused of being a “glutton and drunkard” (Mt11: 19).

Of course he wasn’t these things, but the point was He was so celebratory that He created that impression.

He told His disciples that His joy would be in them, and that it would be complete – literally “full to the brim”. (John 15). God wants disciples to be as joyful as Him – the God who announced at creation “It is good!” again and again.



What are the two ways to grow in joy?

Whereas pleasure is responding to something in the moment, and so is temporary, joy is a deeper commitment that comes through ways we live and attitudes we have.

So while it's possible for this joy to come upon us unexpectedly as a gift, there are ways God gives us to cultivate joy in our lives.

In a specific sense, God called His people to worship Him through festivals and celebrations.

For example, three times a year they were to celebrate for seven days. They were to spend a tenth of their income on one celebration and make sure it was accompanied by strong drink! (Deuteronomy 14: 22-27).

While as Christians we might not obey that joyful command so accurately, there are a number of celebrations and feast days spread throughout each year for the same reason – the most famous being Easter and Christmas. The more important ones have a long period of preparation.

In a general way, God calls us to worship and celebrate by giving thanks in all circumstances, and at all times.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say: rejoice,” Paul wrote from prison.



What is the effect of doing this?

It's important to say that some people have a genetically more cheerful character than others. Worship and celebration is not about pretending to be a different person.

Nevertheless, numerous writers affirm that worshipping God by choosing to be thankful and to celebrate opens us up to being more joyful.

William Law: “If anyone would tell you the shortest, surest way to all happiness and perfection, he must tell you to make a rule to thank and praise God for everything that happens to you.”

Henry Allen Ironside: “Thanksgiving is the enemy of discontent and dissatisfaction.” Thanksgiving stops us from taking ourselves too seriously and opens up space for God.

It reminds us that life is a gift. It helps correct ways in which we see God negatively and instead expresses our trust in God's goodness. Thanksgiving is the least selfish prayer.

As William Temple wrote, “It is more important to thank God for blessings received than to pray for them beforehand. For that forward-looking prayer, though right as an expression of dependence upon God, is still self-centred in part, at least, in its interest; There is something which we hope to gain by our prayer. The backward-looking act of Thanksgiving is free from this. It is quite selfless. It is akin to love. All our love to God is in response to his love for us.”



How do I worship God on my own?



We often think of worship as something we do with others in church. But God is present in all of our lives, and can be worshipped through all of our lives. Worship doesn't split life up.

In fact, to worship God in church, but not to offer that worship in the rest of life is a contradiction. St John Chrysostom (c.347-407) preached, "Do you wish to honour the body of the saviour? Then do not despise it when it is naked. Do not honour it in church with silk vestments while outside you are leaving it numb with cold and naked. He who said, 'This is my body', and made it so by his word, is the same that said, 'You saw me hungry and gave me no food. As you did it not to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it not to me.' Honour him by sharing your property with the poor. What God needs is not golden cups but golden hearts."

In Colossians we read, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him....Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters." (Colossians 3: 17;23)

To worship God in our everyday tasks is to do it in His name.

In other words, for His glory and not ours. At the Glastonbury Festival in 2019, with millions of people watching him, the artist Stormzy said, "Let all the glory go to God."

There is a humility in worshipping God, in which we don't need recognition, but want others to see Him in what we do.

The composer Bach was not widely recognised in His lifetime. Whenever he wrote a piece of music he would always sign it 'S.D.G.' "To God alone be the glory." (Soli Deo Gloria)

To worship God in our daily tasks is to "work for the Lord".

We express God's worth in our tasks by making obeying Him the priority. The poet George Herbert wrote a poem called 'The Elixir' - a potion which changes ordinary things into something wonderful. The "elixir" is worship. He writes that doing things "for Thy sake" can make "drudgery divine".





What habits make worshipping God in daily tasks more likely?

Worship will only be our priority if we choose to make it so. God does not force us to worship him.

Richard Foster writes, 'If the Lord is to be Lord, worship must have priority in our lives.' While we often find it hard to control our emotions and feel joyful, feelings generally follow thoughts, and we can make choices about what we set our minds on.

We can't will joy. But we can will a thought life that opens us up to joy. These habits may help:

Focussing our attention on what is good.

It is too easy for our minds to be dominated at the beginning and end of the day by negative headlines - news thrives on conflict, difficulty and challenge. But constant bad news is not an accurate picture of the world. While not ignoring difficult things, we can resist letting our news feed set our emotional temperature,

Paul writes, "...brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." Cultivating this habit above all else will help us be with God in worship.

Slowing down.

It can take time to notice the goodness of God. To consciously give Him glory as we go about our tasks.

Being childlike.

Matthew writes, "He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Children have humility, but in terms of worship they demonstrate a great capacity for wonder. This wonder is at the heart of gratitude and worship.

Seeing worship as a gift rather than a task.

It is easy to experience worship as something we do. Going to church, reading the Bible, praying, helping people, giving. This can burn us out - we are never finished - but also runs the risk of putting ourselves at the centre of worship. A different way of looking at worship is as a gift and a privilege. As C. S. Lewis says,

“

In commanding us to glorify him, God is inviting us to enjoy him.”

Why do I worship God with others?



In contrast to a culture which can be about the individual, from the beginning, God calls a *people* to be the best sign of His presence in the world.

This continues through the gospels as Jesus forms a community of disciples. The early Christians clearly had a habit of worshipping together: “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God.” (Acts 2: 46-47).

Paul has a clear expectation that Christians will come together: “In the first place, when you come together as a church...If, therefore, the whole church comes together.” (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:23). When he encourages Christians to “Rejoice!” he uses a plural verb - in other words he is speaking to them as a community.

Among the many good reasons for worshipping God with others, key reasons would be:

As those who are united with Christ, we are a sign and image of Him by being together.

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:27). Jesus’ final prayer was that we may be one. Worshipping together is an expression of this unity, and the fulness of His image in us as His body.

When we worship together it encourages an expectancy of God’s power and presence in our lives.

When Moses entered the tabernacle he knew he was entering the presence of God. In the early church when people prayed and worshipped together, sometimes the buildings shook. Coming together can heighten our awareness of God, and help us to focus on Him.

As we worship together, we can encourage each other to continue to worship God in our individual lives.

The letter to the Hebrews encourages Christians to worship together with these words: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing...” (Hebrews 10:24-25)





What is important in worshipping with others?

Worshipping together involves everyone. The word which describes the script or form of group worship is *liturgy*. The original meaning of the word is “the work of the people.”

Paul describes what should happen when Christians worship together by saying, “When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” (1 Corinthians 14:26)

The more worshipping together includes and involves everyone the more we reflect the fulness of being Jesus’ body. Our ‘Common Worship’ resource echoes this by emphasising:



“Holy Communion is celebrated by the whole people of God gathered for worship. The unity of the liturgy is held together by the president, who in presiding over the whole service holds word and sacrament together and draws the congregation into a worshipping community.” (from the General Notes introducing Common Worship Holy Communion).

Worshipping together involves all of who we are.

The greatest commandment is to, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30) In other words, to joyfully use every part of who we are – mind, body, spirit – in worship. For example, Paul says, “I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.” (1 Corinthians 14:15) In other words, there may be times when I am worshipping when I allow parts of myself which I don’t understand or control to worship God.

Worshipping together celebrates variety.

For this reason there are many different ways to worship God together, which involve different parts of who we are, and are more natural to who we are. Some are more physical, some are more cerebral, extrovert or introvert. It can be easy to feel threatened by this, or to feel that other ways of worshipping God are not as valid.

For example Saul’s daughter, Michal, saw King David “leaping and dancing before the Lord” in a worship procession, and “she despised him in her heart”. (2 Samuel 6:16)

It is extremely unlikely that everyone in our church will naturally express worship in exactly the same way. The best group worship would enable people to express their love for God fully without embarrassment or judgment, and to rejoice at variety.



What will worshipping together always involve?

Whether worshipping together by eating round a table, confessing, praying, studying the Bible, singing, or sharing bread and wine, these elements will always be present in some way

Being gathered – we are coming together as Christ's body.

Hearing God's word – we are here to encounter God.

Being at peace with God and each other – we are here to remember who God is, and who we are as His people.

Thanksgiving – we are here to give thanks together.

Being sent out – we come together so that we can be sent out to be with God in the rest of our lives.

Why do we worship by singing together?

While singing in choirs has become more popular in recent years through TV programmes, and people sing at concerts and sports events, regular singing in a group is unusual for most people.

Yet worship through singing is shown as a natural expression throughout the Bible, with Paul writing that we should address "one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord". (Ephesians 5:19)

In an interview (which is available as a handout) John Bell explains that we worship God in song...

"Because everyone can join in doing it.

That sense of being a corporate body comes out in the song of the church more than anything else. We are doing something together for God.

"Congregational singing is an identity-shaping activity. In the past...we defined our communities by the songs that we sang...I think we now are in an era in which communities can be reshaped by what we sing. It will also tell us whether we are male-dominated or whether the body of Christ is made in God's image as much through its female members as its male members.

"The church's song also reminds the world that voices are meant to do other than just talk. A repeated phrase in the Psalms is: Sing to God a new song. The expectation is that this directive applies to everyone, not just the choir or the temple musicians.

"You sing primarily to give a gift to God, but you also sing to shape discipleship. If a song is specific about what it means to be a disciple of Christ in the 21st century, it should lead to a change in the way we behave.

"My frustration is that the church's singing is full of churchy words. We don't have songs with a word like economics in them, or a word like kitchen. A substantial amount of biblical witness tells us God is interested in economics. We know that much of Jesus' time was spent in kitchens. But we are disenfranchised from singing about some realities in his and our lives."





Why are sacraments important in worship and being with God?

A significant way of worshipping God, indeed for some Christians the central way of worshipping God, is through sacraments.

We can't see God, or fully understand Him. Sacraments are a way in which, through physical and material realities which we can see and take part in, we can meet with God in worship. They are a gift which reveals God's love in making it possible for us to worship Him in ways we can understand and relate to.

They also remind us that the world God made is good because He is pleased to use material things to be with us and among us. Jesus would often link His words with actions that showed the reality of those words. For example, having told a paralysed man that his sins were forgiven (which shocked the religious leaders) he demonstrated it by telling him to take up his mat and walk. (Matthew 9:2-5) The action showed that the spiritual change was real.

Sacraments are a combination of word, sign and action. The classic definition of a sacrament is that it is **an outward sign of an inward grace**.

It is more than a symbol (which links to something by having an association or quality similar to what it represents) because through a sacrament a person can meet with God in such a real way that they are changed and equipped as a disciple.

There are many things that are 'sacramental' in that they draw us towards God's presence.

But when we worship together there are two main sacraments that focus us on what God is doing – baptism (the sacrament that reveals our covenant identity as God's children) and regularly sharing in the breaking of bread and wine.



Where does breaking bread and sharing wine at Holy Communion come from?

Jesus had a habit of breaking bread and sharing it – two of his disciples at Emmaus recognised Him after His resurrection as He broke bread. But it was at His last supper with His disciples that He associated the bread and the wine with his own death and gave to them a significance that continues to shape us.

The first Christians met regularly in the Temple at Jerusalem, but they also took part in the “breaking of bread”, probably weekly, in their homes. They would have a shared meal, during which they would pass round the bread (probably at the beginning) and the cup (probably at the end). Before passing round the bread and the wine they used a particular form of Jesus’ words and imitated Jesus’ actions remembered from the Last Supper. They were even accused by early opponents of being cannibals – but their defence was that their leader was not dead!

In doing this, Paul said, they wanted “to proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes”. This is very early practice – the description of the meal from 1 Corinthians 11, which quotes the words of Jesus (known as the ‘Words of Institution’) (1 Corinthians 11:26) from the Last Supper was written before the Gospels.

What was Jesus doing at the Last Supper?



On the night he was arrested, three out of the four gospels say that Jesus was celebrating a Passover meal with His disciples.

This was the annual meal in which Jewish people remembered how God had rescued them from slavery.

Importantly, through bread and wine they remembered how the blood of a lamb (they ate lamb at the meal, and used bread and wine to act out the story) was used to mark their homes, and save them from death as it ‘passed over’ them.

At the last Supper, Jesus shockingly reinterpreted the Passover meal to reveal how God’s purposes were being fulfilled in Him. Jesus identified the bread with his body; the cup, his ‘poured out’ blood – pointing to what was going to happen to him on the cross.

The words and actions Jesus used to reinterpret the bread and cup became the foundation for the Lord’s Supper in the early Church. The handout ‘Jesus and the Passover’ explores the links more fully.





Why is remembering so important?

Jesus told His disciples that now, when they broke bread and drank wine, it would no longer be to remember being rescued from slavery in Egypt, but, through Him, being rescued from death.

It was no longer to remember the defeat of their Egyptian enemies, but to remember that through His death God's victory over evil was going to be achieved. (We will explore this more in module 2.) He told them, "Do this to remember me."

It is a remembering of what God had done, telling the story again (and it is often good to be reminded), but it is far more than that. It is more than something symbolic like a ring. It is more than a visual aid. It's more than a sign that points to something different. It is an active remembrance.

In the Passover meal everyone who took part was imagining themselves to have personally been part of the rescue from Egypt. People would say you should tell your son that "I am celebrating Passover because of what God did for me when I came out of Egypt."

Remembering like this is taking part in a living way in that same story of being rescued. It is similar to receiving a piece of wedding cake through the post if you were unable to be at the ceremony. As you eat it, you receive more than a reminder of the event - you are able to take part in the experience of it in a tangible way.

So remembering Jesus in bread and wine is our way of receiving Christ's victory in the present. It's a sacrament that carries with it the living reality of what it signifies.

What are the meanings of breaking bread and sharing wine?

Over time, the way we share bread and wine has developed in various ways - from simple and informal to more complex and structured.

There are common elements to each expression (Word / People - peace / Sacrament / Sending out) but different names have been used which highlight the many gifts of this sacrament.

Breaking bread. As Luke writes in Acts (about A.D. 70) the early Christians used this description. The fact that they celebrated weekly showed that the link with the annual Passover meal was soon replaced.

Nevertheless, for Christians the sense of the sacrificial act celebrated through bread and wine is central, with some seeing it as an actual sacrifice.

In the Eucharistic Prayer, our worship is called 'this our sacrifice of thanks and praise'.

Lord's Supper. Paul used this in his letters from 45-60AD to describe the meal which included a liturgical recital of the words of Jesus.



Eucharist. This comes from a Greek word meaning 'Thanksgiving'. It is found in an early document known as the Didache (Teachings) from as early as 60 AD. By 90AD this was the usual title being used, and the celebration no longer took place within a shared meal but as an act of worship on the first day of the week. (See the quote from Justin [100-165 AD] with a description of how the eucharist was conducted.)

It emphasises that at the heart of sharing in it is gratitude to God. We give thanks for all He has done, is doing and will do, and we give thanks to God for all our life experiences as individuals and a community.

Mass. This name was possibly used as early as the 5th century, but definitely by the 7th century. It probably comes from a word meaning sent.

It emphasises how gathering to receive bread and wine leads to us being sent out to be with God and be disciples in the world. As Pope Francis says, "Worship is not worship if it doesn't change us."

Holy Communion. To be holy is to be set apart, and to commune is to have union with.

This emphasises how when we share in the bread and wine that has been set apart, our union with Christ and with each other is strengthened in our lived experience. We are not observing something, but we are guests who are fed spiritually.

Love Feast or 'Agapé' (a Greek word meaning 'love') meal. By the second century this would be a shared meal, separate from the Eucharist, often linked with providing food for the poor. It died out by the eighth century, but was revived by Methodists in the 18th century.

It emphasises the hospitality of God - how in sharing bread and wine we are a family where all are invited in. A table signifies that you are welcome and that there is a place for you. It's very human and it brings people together.



Through the Eucharist God gives us a sacrament in which we find

Healing. In the broken bread, Jesus' brokenness is remembered, and we can identify our brokenness with his. But through His brokenness He brings salvation (or wholeness of life) and continues to do so. So, as we identify our brokenness with Christ's, we can meet with Him through bread and wine in a way that can lead to wholeness again.

Hope. At the last Supper Jesus looked forward to when He would "feast" with His disciples again. A common picture in the Bible of our future hope beyond death is one of a banquet.

For example the prophet Isaiah writes that, "the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines". (Isaiah 25:6)

In the same way that for Jesus the Last Supper was a way of looking forward to a time when He could drink with His friends "in my father's kingdom", sharing bread and wine can point us to our promised future banquet with God. Sacraments should help us imagine the world differently as the creation God is in the process of renewing.





Everyday life is valued. Jesus takes ordinary things like bread and wine, transforms them and gives them out. In the same way the ordinary stuff of our lives is taken up into Jesus and given back to us.

A heightened sense of His presence. God's presence is everywhere, all the time. So how are sacraments different? They remind us specifically of how He has and is acting in our lives to make us whole. And they can intensify our 'being with Him'.

If God's presence in creation is like fire, sacraments can perhaps be like the tip of a bunsen burner flame - the same presence, but experienced in a focussed way.

(Yet it's also good to know that the Eucharist doesn't split life up - the result of encountering God here should be that we become more aware of God's presence in our everyday lives, not less.)



How is this presence known?

Christians have different understandings of exactly how God's presence is known in bread and wine.

For some it is about a heightened sense of memory, and the presence of Christ is known through the whole service, and His people gathered together.

The word and the sacrament are linked together. (Luther called the sacrament a 'visible word'.)

For others, the presence is particularly located in the bread and wine itself in a spiritual sense.

For others, the bread and wine become the physical body and blood of Christ during the thanksgiving prayer. He is "truly present: body, blood, soul and divinity."

While this had led to disputes down the centuries, within the Anglican church these perspectives are held together. It is possible to hold all or a combination of these beliefs together. The key thing is that through sharing in the bread and wine we can be with God in a unique way.