

Easter 5  
May 10, 2009  
Fr. Bill McGinty

## “Can Episcopalians Sing?”

Today’s readings are all about love. It is a theme that runs through these weeks after Easter. Love is used like a by-product of Resurrection and the Holy Spirit, to show what is possible when evil dispelled, sin defeated and people move from darkness to light.

Scholars speak about these early days of the Christian church as being a sort of honeymoon period. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that the Christians met together sharing everything they had in common. We are told that they broke bread together and repeated the Lord’s Supper. Persecution of the Christians has not begun and they are really trying to re-assess what has happened to them and the part Christ now plays in their lives.

The season for each of us should also contain this sense of celebration and Euphoria. The hymns and music of the Easter Season is more uplifting than at any other time of year.

I for one am taken back by the season to years long gone by and remember it as a time of celebrations, parades, processions, baptisms, confirmations and weddings. The church and church always seem to be at their best in the spring. It has a dignity of its own.

Only a few days ago, I met with two friends and they began to ask me a very strange and penetrating question about faith, Christianity and being Anglican. What made the conversation interesting was that the other two were from different denominations.

My friend Tom, a Methodist asked: “We know just how much you know about Christianity and Anglicanism, but what about the people in your congregation? How knowledgeable are they?”

“That is what I want to know,” said Eric, the Baptist. “I mean Episcopalians have this Book of Common Prayer, but I wonder how many really know it?”

“That’s the problem with writing everything down,” said Tom again. “Once the rules and beliefs are committed to paper, just about anyone who can read can hold you to them. For example how many of your parishioners know there is a Catechism of Anglican belief at the back of the Book of Common Prayer?”

“Most people” I replied, at the same time wondering how true that was? But I hoped I was right and that most of us know there is a catechism of faith starting on page 845.

“How does the Book of Common Prayer start?” asked Eric?

“Well” I said feeling like a junior in High School taking his road test. “It starts with the daily office, morning, noon time and evening prayer. Then it continues with collects and **propers** for the year. Then it

outlines the special services in detail: Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Great Vigil of Easter.”

“So what comes next” asked Tom.

“Baptism rites” I replied “And before you ask, that is followed by the main section of the Red Book, the Eucharist, Rite One and Rite Two.” I was beginning to feel a little defensive.

“So how does the Eucharist section start?” said Eric. I had been waiting for this. “It actually starts with something called the exhortation. It’s a collection of prayers on page 316 to 318 to help people prepare for the Eucharist, quiet their minds and place them in a prayerful state.” I was really pleased with myself for avoiding what I knew was a trap, he expected me to say: “Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

“So how come, every time I enter an Episcopal church, even yours, just before the service everyone is chattering” replied Eric?

I felt like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Episcopalians are a gregarious bunch,” I said, “back in the 1770’s they were probably just as bad fermenting the Revolutionary War. Oh we have our prayers, but I’m afraid we have our chatters too.”

I knew it was pretty feeble as replies go. I could see from their faces they were not impressed.

“Wouldn’t happen in my church,” said the Baptist. “Especially since you guys believe in the real presence of Christ on the Altar. What do you call that?”

“Transubstantiation,” I replied.

“Yes, that’s it, transubstantiation,” Eric continued. “We don’t hold with that as Baptist, but we do respect the building as the House of God. You wouldn’t see people holding a conversation over four or five pews. I mean come on. Where’s the dignity in that?”

“Romans bless themselves, you know,” said Tom. “Just as they enter the door of the church, they dip their fingers in a bowl of water and make the sign of the cross. What about you? Do you do that?”

“No. We have Holy water, but not at the church door. Some churches have an Asperses, where the priest starts the service by coming down the aisle to bless the people with water from the sprinkler while the choir sings.”

“What about genuflecting” said Eric? “You see we don’t have genuflecting, that’s sort of too Catholic. We show our respect with silence. We are silent. What about you? Any genuflecting?”

“Well we could” I said, “but we don’t. We bow to the cross; the Altar and before communion and we bow to the Book of the Gospels. We also stand or kneel for the Eucharist and Communion, but we sit for the readings with exception of the Gospel.”

“Well that’s something” said Tom in a sort of condescending way. “But, it looks bad to me. All that bobbing up and down. We don’t go in for too much bobbing. And then there are the colors. Every time I go into an Episcopal church, they have changed the color, red, white, pink, blue, green, orange. What goes with all the colors? Why can’t you just settle on a color?”

“We only have five colors, blue, white, green, purple and red.” I replied, “they correspond to the seasons, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and Easter, Pentecost and Lent. Not hard. We change color with the seasons. They tell s which part or season of the churches calendar we are presently in.”

“If you asked a member of the congregation to name the two major sacraments do you think they would pick out Baptism and Eucharist?” said Eric.

“I think so,” I said.

“So if you are all so Catholic with the sacraments, why don’t Episcopalians go the confession?” said Tom with his eyebrows raised.

“We do” I said.

“No, you don’t” said Tom. “My cousin is Episcopalian. He has never been to confession.”

“We have something called General Absolution that takes place just after the Prayers of the People. We say our act of sorrow for sin together and together we receive God’s forgiveness. It is a condition of receiving the Eucharist. But we can go for private confession at a retreat or the like. It’s more like a counseling session with God in the room.”

“See, I never knew that,” said Eric. “I just thought you Episcopalians were a sort of anything goes gang.”

“No, you didn’t” I replied determined to get my own back. “You two crooks went through the Bok of Common Prayer with a magnifying glass before you came along to quiz me. I bet you even read the Constitutions.”

“Not the Constitutions,” said Tom, “too boring. But yes, we read the Book of Common Prayer and I have to say there really is some good stuff in there. They give you your morning and evening prayer each day. I tried it. They each took about ten minutes. I also liked the psalms and the prayers of Thanksgiving that come after them.”

With that our conversation came to an end. It left me wondering just how well we do know our beautiful Book of Common Prayer and the Legacy it gives us.

As he left through the door, Eric turned to ask: “Can Episcopalians sing?”

Today’s Gospel spells out for us what it means to be a disciple and follow Jesus. It tells us that somewhere in Pike County children are cold tonight. Somewhere in our hearts, is the Christian warmth they need to see them through the winter.

Amen+