

## Understanding Evensong

26/2/17

**I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.**

Perhaps it is good theological and liturgical practice to regularly ask the question within the context of our church experience:

“Why do we do what we do?”

Do we really understand and appreciate the underpinnings and contextual background, as well as the evolution of Evensong within the modern Anglican Church? Do we merely treat evensong as just another liturgy that we inherited from someone in the past, or do we treat evensong with the respect and value that it deserves, both as individual Christians and within corporate worship?

These are some tough questions. Tonight I would like to explore a little around the origins of our Evensong service, what it means to us as a Church of God and finally to ask some questions about the future of our liturgy going forward.

Traditionally, Evensong has been a popular service. It has often appealed to people in a refreshing manner. The actual origin of Evensong could be said to be from the monks, much like the traditional Matins. (Matins is a service forming part of the traditional Divine Office of the Western Christian Church, originally said or chanted at or after midnight). Some scholars have argued that the roots of our Evensong service lie more in priestly practice outside of the monasteries. Perhaps, for the sake of this précis, we could suggest that both parties influenced the formation of the Evensong that we have today. It does, however, need to be said that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cranmer, played an instrumental role in the liturgy that we use today. He founded a system of prayers for different times of the day. These prayers were called the Hours, but they were complex, said in Latin and not enough Scripture was read. In many ways they were also to elaborate for simple people to follow.

The typical day in the monastery consisted of a set of prayers and services, known as the Hours. Two of these prayers, namely the Vespers at sunset and the Compline (which means completing the day) were said last thing at night.

These prayers, namely number Seven and Eight, Cranmer made our Matins and Evensong. The early morning offices were eventually turned in Matins and the Vespers/Compline into Evensong.

You might be wondering where the monks actually got their services and prayers from? Many of the prayers come from the earliest ages of the church. The Apostles themselves used a liturgy that consisted of psalms, scripture readings and prayers. The Old Testament reading were omitted.

Cranmer then went about streamlining the Evensong service by:

Having fixed Psalms

Generally speaking, the lessons were very short

Readings from both the OT and NT were now included

The Evensong was then finally printed in the first English Prayer Book in 1549. It began with the Lord's Prayer. The Magnificat came from the Vespers, the Nunc Dimittis from the Compline and so did the creed. The first collect was that of the week, the second a Vespers prayer and the third, "Lighten our Darkness" as the collect of the Compline.

Three years later a second edition of the Prayer Book was published. This now included a penitential introduction. Where the organ plays and where it does not is a careful copy of the offices as used in history.

Some traditional Anglo-Catholic parishes include the Benediction as well when they have an Evensong service. Here certain hymns or litanies are sung before the Blessed Sacrament, which is exposed upon the altar in a monstrance. This service is often used as a conclusion to Vespers and Compline.

The Reverend Dr Bruce Monroe Robinson had this to say about Morning and Evening Prayer:

"As a pastor and priest deeply rooted in the traditions of Anglican worship who serves in a modern, 21st Century urban and cosmopolitan American parish I find that the full choral services of Morning and Evening Prayer continue to have a compelling power to shape and to express in corporate worship

a distinctively Anglican approach to the values and virtues of Christian life and Christian community. This remains true despite recent trends of so-called liturgical reform that seek to redefine the Holy Eucharist as not the "principal" but rather the "exclusive" service for worship on the Lord's Day"

There is no doubt that every time we celebrate Evensong as an Anglican Parish within the Church of God that we draw on the centuries of Christian faith and tradition as practiced and believed by thousands of Christians over the millennia. This is not to be taken lightly. We are in essence, drawing upon the collective consciousness of the Christian Church over the ages as we celebrate these traditional liturgies. We are called, as contemporary Christians, to show both respect and dignity, for what is part of our heritage and culture.

The challenge for us as Anglican Christians going forward is to never forget our liturgical roots and where we come from. This is part of who we are. Even now the new Anglican Liturgical Committee is meeting to refine and reform our current 1989 Prayer Book ready for release around 2025. Will there still be a place for Evensong? These are some of the questions that we as Christian body will need to face and debate in unison. What we can be sure of is that no matter how much our liturgy and style of worship changes over the ages, God's love for us does not change. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last. He is constant. He is love. Our changing liturgy over changing times is merely humankind's way of innovating and refreshing as understandings and foci change with the times.

For now, in this church, we have the privilege of celebrating a fairly traditional Evensong to the Glory of God.

May God bless you this week ahead as you reflect upon His unchanging love in a changing world.

Amen.