

# EXPLORING OUR FAITH

## A Walk Through the Sunday Service Session 10 – The Word of God: Furniture

*This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.*

**About furniture.** We're continuing this week our look at the central section of the first part of the Eucharist: the Word of God. Let's start with two things we may be very used to, though if we think about them may seem a bit peculiar: Why is the gospel read from a separate book that resides on the Altar while the other two lessons are read from a book on the lectern? And why is the sermon sometimes preached from a pulpit, sometimes from a lectern and sometimes by the preacher moving around – even walking down among the congregation?

**A bit of history.** The answer: we're looking at tradition in motion. When Jesus read from the "scrolls of the Law" he simply stood or sat "in the midst" of a synagogue congregation and engaged his hearers in teaching from there. When Christian worship moved from house churches to great basilicas, readings and preaching became reserved for the ordained. In these vast churches, readings and preaching were done from an elevated pulpit so that all could hear (and for the same reason readings were sung). Later, as we move into the Middle Ages, the Word of God portion of the service shrank down until it was all or almost all done by the priest at the Altar. The liturgy, including Bible readings, was in Latin a language few if any in a congregation could understand. In Britain, parish churches adopted "three-decker" pulpits: the bottom level was for the clerk who led the responses, the middle level was for the Scripture readings, and the top level was for the sermon. The gospel book had resided on the Altar in basilicas as a symbol of Christ present in the Word. It returned to the Altar in the Anglo Catholic revival of the nineteenth century because the priest read all the lessons and conducted the whole Eucharist from the Altar. The development of a separate lectern and pulpit replaced three-decker pulpits, the lectern being for lay readers and the pulpit for the ordained.

**Current thinking.** Liturgical authority today favors a single "locus" for the Word, usually referred to as an ambo. And of course many preachers like the freedom to move around as they engage a congregation. Use of a separate gospel book is also falling out of favor, with preference for one Bible or lectionary volume for all readings, from one place: an ambo. It is all a matter of symbolic clarity, which in liturgy generally is an important goal.