

# EXPLORING OUR FAITH

## A Walk Through the Sunday Service

### Session 23 – The Eucharistic Action, Step 3: Breaking

*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.*

**Following the eucharistic action.** In our exploration of the Holy Communion half of the Eucharist we have noted that all eucharistic prayers (prayers of consecration) have a common four-fold pattern: 1) Take (take to the Altar); 2) Bless (give thanks and invoke the power of the Holy Spirit); 3) Break (symbolic of sacrifice and the Crucifixion); and 4) Share (distribution of Communion and dismissal for service as Christ's body in the world). This morning we explore the third of these steps, "Breaking": what is symbolized in the breaking of the bread, formally known as the Fraction.

**Liturgical actions.** The second action in the Eucharist, the Blessing, ends on a triumphant note of praise, the Doxology (Greek for words of praise). The consecrated Bread and Wine are elevated by the presider and the congregation gives its great AMEN (printed in all capital letters in the Prayer Book to signify its importance). This action is sealed, as it were, by all joining in the Lord's Prayer. What follows -- the third eucharistic action, Breaking -- can seem almost anticlimactic. But that would be a mistake. For the Fraction signifies two things central to the Eucharist: the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and the outreaching of God in love and hospitality to all. So let us take a look at these two.

**Sacrifice.** The Prayer Book rubrics (instructions) specify first that the presider break the consecrated Bread, and then that silence be kept. This is the only place in the Prayer Book where silence is required. The reason is that the Fraction symbolizes the death of Christ, his sacrifice, to which our response must be first and foremost reverent silence. This silence is followed by the singing or saying of what is known as a Fraction Anthem. There are many alternatives for this Anthem, but the two most common are the *Agnus Dei* (O Lamb of God) and the *Pascha Nostrum* (Christ Our Passover). Both of these ancient hymns are about Christ as the sacrificial Paschal or Easter Lamb. His death is the ultimate outreaching in love by the God whose saving works we remembered in the preceding part of the eucharistic prayer.

**Hospitality.** The Eucharist has its Scriptural root in the Last Supper. It is also foreshadowed in the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mt. 14:13-21) and the Road to Emmaus story (Lk 24:13-35). In all of these, the four steps of eucharistic action appear. In all, the breaking of the bread is preparatory to its being shared in a meal that speaks of the hospitality of God: his forgiveness, his love, his comfort, his hope. So too in Step 3 of the Eucharist. The Bread is broken that it may be shared in Step 4.