

## Liturgical Notes on Incense and Bells

Our Episcopal worship is steeped in the history of the ancient Christian Church – words, gestures, and symbols – and is intentionally meant to engage all of our senses: sight, sound, and smell. The symbols and elements of our worship had practical (i.e., candles were needed to see and a meal nourished the community) and symbolic significance (i.e. candles signified the light that Christ brings to the world, and the meal of the Eucharist is the sign of our unity in Christ). Judgements made about what we use in worship and what things represent are part of our ongoing discernment as the church.

We have been invited as a parish to consider the use and significance of incense and Sanctus bells, and I hope what follows will assist our understanding and provide some recommendations as we move forward. The use of incense and bells are intentionally linked here. The reason for this is that both have significance as signs of God's holiness and our response through acts of prayer and devotion.

To begin, as symbols, both incense and the bells are there to *focus* our attention (and our bodies) on words and actions that have particular significance in our worship. The center of our worship is the altar. It is, if you will, the center of our gravity. That Christ died and was raised through the power of the Holy Spirit is why we gather at all. How we are oriented to this confession is why an altar (as a site of sacrifice, that is, the making-holy of things) stands front and center. It is the making-holy of our words, songs, and gifts that much of our worship takes place in and on the altar. It should not be a surprise, therefore, that people bow or pause before the altar, and why the central action each time we worship is an act of making-holy the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ that is the gift of God for the people of God.

The words and gestures used in relation to the altar are scripted in the Prayer Book and (generally) well defined. Even to someone without previous knowledge of our tradition, it should be clear that something significant is happening at the moment of the Eucharist. The incense and bells are meant to clarify this significance; the smoke and bells ring as if to say, "hey, something important is taking place!" This calls from us not only our attention but more importantly, our devotion. The bells, for example, not only mark certain crucial moments in the Great Thanksgiving prayer, they call forth from us a response, and for some this means bowing or making the sign of the cross. These activities are part of our devotional actions that are forms of embodied prayer. Both incense and bells form part of our symbolic universe that orients us to the God, who in Christ infuses our human ways with divine importance. As creatures we experience God through our senses and we find deep meaning in this very act of worship.

Having said all of this, we are not *required* to use incense or bells to worship God. It is true that for some, their use can be distracting if not disturbing. Likewise, for others, their use delights and even invigorates the act of corporate prayer. We will never likely be of one mind on this matter. Our use of incense and bells does not make us more holy (only God makes things holy); they are, however, means within our Christian tradition to deepen our human way of coming before God. They should not obscure our worship or take the place of our practices of hospitality that forms the foundation of *how* we are church. If the use of incense and bells are to continue beyond the following recommendations, they have to take place against a backdrop of faithful witness to the One in whose memory and by whose grace we are able to worship in the first place.

Going forward, we will link the use of incense and the bells, and make use of both on the Principal feasts and Holy Days of the church (see here for which days are counted as such: <http://www.bcponline.org/General/calendar.html>). In addition, we will use both on the Evening of Remembrance (All Souls Day) and Ash Wednesday, as special days of devotion. The idea is that these celebrations and commemorations most clearly define the contours of the drama of our salvation in Christ, and call forth bold language, gestures, actions, and music as our “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving”. At the service where incense and the bells are used (most likely, this means the 9am and 11am liturgies on Sundays) we will also incorporate some kind of liturgical notes in the bulletins to help frame why and what we are doing. Finally, we will announce ahead of time the services with incense so that those with sensitivities may attend an alternative service.

The Rev'd Lyndon Shakespeare, PhD  
Interim Rector