



**The Anglican Church of  
St. John the Baptist, Cobble Hill**

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany ~ Year A

*An address given at Evensong,  
4:00 pm on Sunday January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011,  
at St. John's, Cobble Hill, BC*

*by  
Archbishop Andrew Hutchison*

***“An historical perspective on Evensong”***

In last week's bulletin there was a short description of the difference between Morning Prayer (*Matins*) and the *Eucharist* – the two morning services offered here at St. John's, and how we use them. There is a third public liturgy enjoying a periodic resurrection at St. John's, and I have been asked if I would write a few words about *Evensong*

For centuries the principal, if not the only, public liturgy was the mass – always in the Western Church celebrated in Latin, which once was the common language of the Roman Empire. A largely illiterate laity would come to hear mass, and to receive the holy sacrament. From time to time – but by no means at every mass – there would be a sermon. Preparation for Baptism was a lengthy process of at least two years, known as the *catechumenate*.

From the fourth century clergy began to come together in communities supporting one another in a common rule of life. In time these communities came to be known as monasteries, and lay brothers were admitted to many of them. Women's communities were of course exclusively laity, since at the time women could not be ordained. The principal work of monks and nuns was (and is) prayer – the *Opus Dei*, or Work of God. As the religious life spread through the western Church the *Rule of St. Benedict* came to dominate the regulation of the daily prayers in the monasteries. It was a regimen few of us would welcome today. The Divine Office, as it was called, consisted of seven short services a day. The first was shortly after midnight, first known as *Nocturn*, then as *Lauds*, and now *Matins*. The other six were *Prime*, *Tierce*, *Sext*, *Nones*, *Vespers* and *Compline* at 1, 3, 6, 9, 11 and 12 respectively. These little services were sung, and therefore known as “choir offices”.

That was the resource material for the services of *Morning Prayer* and *Evening Prayer* in our *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP). The first Prayer Book (1549) was a radical departure from the tradition. It ordered just two services a day – *Matins* (Morning Prayer) and *Evensong* (Evening Prayer). The restoration of *Compline* from the monastic tradition is a later addition. Three particular features of the book are noteworthy.

- First, the Prayer Book was in the vernacular (English) rather than Latin.
- Second, it introduced the reading of large portions of Scripture in English.
- Third, it included the use of the whole of the psalms, rather than the short selections used in the mass as *introits* and *graduals*.





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Morning and Evening Prayer were to be read daily by all clergy, and where possible the clergy were instructed to ring the church bell so that the laity might be able to come. That instruction survives into our own time (BCP lvi). It was ordered that the *Psalter* (book of psalms) was to be read through every month, “as it is appointed for Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer”.

The Old Testament was appointed for the first lesson of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer so that “the most part thereof shall be read every year once. The New Testament was appointed for the second lesson at Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer “to be read over orderly every year thrice”. These instructions as well survive in the rubrics of our modern books (BCP xvi and BAS p.452), but reducing the length of the lessons by dividing the calendar into Year One and Year Two.

Anglican clergy are known (among other things) as Clerks in Holy Orders – “Clerks” meaning simply that they can read and write. For services of Matins and Evensong and for funerals where there is no Communion they wear “choir habit”, which is cassock, surplice, and academic hood with clerk’s tabs. The white alb and stole were reserved only for the Eucharist.

Now I wonder if you can imagine just how exciting and revolutionary all this was in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The Bible – a book written in Latin, incomprehensible to most, containing mysteries accessible only to scholars and clergy – was now opened to all God’s people and read publicly every day in the parish church.

That tradition continues in Cathedrals and religious houses across the land and throughout the Anglican Communion, as well as in some parish churches. When I was invited to become Dean of Montreal, I asked each member of the Search Committee what they considered to be the most important thing about the Cathedral. One Professor from McGill University said without hesitation “The Daily Office; I am not always there, but to hear the bell ring, and know that prayer is being offered up on behalf of the whole city means a great deal to me”.

Some years ago I was driving home through rural Ontario after a difficult hospital visit. At about 5:00pm I heard a church bell ring. I turned off the highway and found a lovely little stone church. I went inside, and there was the Rector kneeling at a prayer desk at the front of the Church in his cassock saying Evening Prayer aloud.

Now let us look at the shape of the Service of Evening Prayer. It begins with an **Exhortation**, inviting us to prepare ourselves for worship, and setting out what we are about to do – to render thanks, to offer praise, to hear God’s word, and to ask God to provide for our physical and spiritual needs.

There follows the **Confession & Absolution**. No longer are we required to make a private (auricular) confession, although that is still available to those who wish it. As a preparation for coming into God’s presence we say together a general confession, which is both personal, and corporate. As we say it we consider our individual need for forgiveness, and we consider as well how the church has missed the mark of God’s expectations. Then follows the **Lord’s Prayer**, which is a kind of gathering prayer for the whole community before we begin the Office.





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Where the office is said daily, it begins with the **Versicles & Responses**, with the words “O Lord open now our lips”. The exhortation, confession & absolution, and the Lord’s Prayer are normally used only at the public services on a Sunday.

What follows is a very large dose of Scripture – the **psalms, the First Lesson, the Magnificat, the Second Lesson and the Nunc Dimittis**, after which we affirm our faith in the words of the **Apostles’ Creed**.

Now we move to the work of prayer, beginning with the prayer our Lord taught us, then a short litany, and three collects, one being a particular collect for the day, and the other two (for peace and for protection against all perils) said at all services. The word “collect” connotes a collection of the prayers of the whole Church for that moment.

After the third collect there may be either a hymn or an anthem before the **State Prayers**. It is at this point that we pray for the Church, and for the State and local authorities. We are reminded of the direction in 1 Timothy 2:

*I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions  
And giving of thanks be offered for all men; for kings and for all in authority,  
that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life.*

It is sometimes said that the liturgy is there to protect the laity from the clergy. The prayers and the form of the liturgy are carefully set to be all inclusive both in the Daily Office and in the Eucharist. They may be introduced with a number of biddings to focus our attention, and then we bring to the general prayer our own particular concerns. At the end of the State Prayers we say **the Grace**, officially bringing to an end the Office of Evening Prayer.

Most often, however, following the State Prayers at a Sunday service there is a sermon. There is a strong tradition of the sermon for Evensong being a teaching event. When I was younger, it was usually at Evensong that there would be a series of sermons on the sacraments of the Church, or on Christian marriage and family life etc.

A further addition is a **Collection** for the support of the Church and its ministries, and a blessing as we go on our way to love and serve the Lord.

Amen.

**Archbishop Andrew Hutchison**

