

Origins of Sunday Worship

Did you ever wonder how our Sunday services came to be the way they are? What's the origin of the elements and sequence of our liturgy?

In the past century Biblical scholars have discovered some remarkable documents from the early church communities. Justin Martyr was a Christian leader in Rome, a little more than a hundred years after the death of Jesus. He wrote an extended treatise to the Emperor to explain the mysteries of the faith, including as an afterthought a section describing weekly worship:

“on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and... when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president...” (*First Apology of Justin Martyr, chapter 67*)

The incredible gift of this document is that it tells us exactly how this group of early Christians worshiped on Sunday, and it's no accident that it describes the order of our worship today. In an effort to faithfully “Do this for the remembrance of me,” the compilers of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* followed Justin's observations almost exactly.

People gather, Scripture is read, the Presider verbally instructs the people, prayers are offered. Then thanks are given over the bread and wine, after which the people partake of the sacrament and a portion is set aside for those who are absent. Finally an offering is presented, of “what each thinks fit.”

Do you see that when we come together on Sunday we're following a very ancient tradition? If a Roman Christian from 1900 years ago was somehow dropped into our midst, they wouldn't understand the language, but our actions would be completely familiar.

On every Sunday of every year and decade and century, Christians have carried on this tradition and offered it to the next generation. Our worship means nothing less than responding to the sacred command given to the first apostles, “Do this for the remembrance of me.”

Rev. Michael