



## TABLE SERVICE –

*Fuelling friendship,  
by looking at  
lunches and liturgy*



*This little set of discussion topics looks at the general “shape” of many services, as seen in the context of a recent actual meeting between two friends – the things we might do and say, and the reasons why we might do so... In each case, the interactions between the two women are used, first, to reflect on the nature of strong human relationships, and then to reflect how similar words and actions might enhance our relationship with God.*

*This is not to trivialise the solemnity and glory (or the importance) of worship, but simply to reflect on the fact that – at their best – our human relationships echo, in some small way, our relationship with God and his with us.*

*The ideas below are offered simply as a “jumping-off point” to allow us to think more deeply about what it is that we believe we are doing when we come to worship God, and to enjoy and nurture our relationship with him. Different questions may have varying relevance to you – take from them what you can; our prayer is that you will find blessing in the process. At the start of the process, do agree among you, some ground rules about issues such as confidentiality and respect for the opinions of others, so that everyone will feel safe and happy to speak freely.*

*We have used the components of a service of Holy Communion as examples; other services may have the sections in a different order, but most of them will occur at some point in any act of worship.*

## 1. COMING TOGETHER

*Several times a year, Tracey and Sue meet for lunch in a café halfway between their homes. On this occasion, Tracey was already sitting at a table when Sue rushed in, five minutes late as usual, full of hugs and apologies – for being late, for not allowing for tractors, for not having set the meeting up weeks ago – but thrilled to see her friend. as, indeed, Tracey was to see her. Having cleared the air, the two friends settled down to catch up and chat.*

### POINTS TO PONDER

1. How important is it to admit fault – and to forgive fault – if we are to have a healthy relationship with someone?
2. What do we mean by “forgiving” – is it the same as forgetting?
3. Is it easy to do? Can we forgive someone who isn’t really sorry for what they’ve done?
4. Is there someone we may need to forgive – maybe simply for the sake of our own peace of mind, to allow us to move on?
5. Is there someone we may need to ask to forgive us?

*We often start our services with what’s called “The Confession” – bringing God our apologies for the things we’ve done, since we last came to meet with him, that we should not have done, or the things we’ve omitted to do that we should have done. Once we’ve cleared all that away – and been forgiven – we can focus on building our relationship without letting past messes and mistakes get in the way, and try to do better in the future. Having been forgiven, we may find a new lightness of heart, without any shadows of guilt hanging over us.*

### Sections of the Service:

**We are made welcome**

**We set aside all that separates us from God and from one another**

**We are forgiven**

**We give glory to God**

## POINTS TO PONDER

6. “Sin” could be defined as anything that spoils our relationships with God and other people. How important to us is a sense of God’s forgiveness?
7. What do we mean when we say that Jesus died in order that our sins might be forgiven? Do we feel a sense of guilt?
8. Do we bring “real things” to God at the start of a service, seeking peace of mind and the possibility of a new start, or is the prayer of Confession something we just say because it’s there in the service sheet?
9. Do we sometimes lay our apologies before God without any real commitment not to repeat past mistakes? “Repentance” means a turning round and a re-thinking of what we do, a change of heart. Are we honest with God about our failings and our desire to do better? What’s the difference between that and just constantly beating ourselves up over things we actually can’t change?

## 2. “CATCHING UP” ON THE STORY AND GROWING IN UNDERSTANDING

*Having ordered their meal, the two friends settled down to have a good chat. They caught up on news about their families – the husbands, children and grandchildren, what had been achieved and the successes and failures of the past months – they talked animatedly, sharing stories and emotions. Each time they met like this, they each discovered more about their friend’s story – how she had arrived at this time and place, and how she’d become who she is – and each of them stored away ideas about how they might tackle problems in the future, on the basis of the experiences and wisdom of their friend. The sharing of stories cemented the already strong bond between them.*

### POINTS TO PONDER

1. How important is it to really LISTEN to others, hearing not just what they say, but also the subtext and the implications?
2. Are we sometimes so focused on our own story, that we discount or ignore the stories of others?

*The next thing we generally do in our worship is to listen to the story of God’s family from the Bible, “collecting together” the ideas in the readings into a summary prayer. Then we think about those events and writings, trying to understand them better and thinking about what we might learn from them to help us in the future.*

### Sections of the Service:

*The Collect*

*We read from the Bible*

*We hear the Gospel reading*

*We reflect on the readings*

## POINTS TO PONDER

3. How well do we know our Bibles? The Bible is a library rather than a single book, written over thousands of years. It includes history, poetry, myths, theology, proverbs, instructions for living a life of faith, ... How literally should we read the books, and does this apply differently to different genres?
4. Are all the various books of this great “library” of equal value? How much do we know about when, how and why they were written? Do the writers’ circumstances and intentions have a bearing on our understanding of their words? Might there have been a purpose and a relevance for example, for the people of their own time, that might speak differently to us today?
5. Do you try and read your Bible daily? If not, might you be better tackling a book at a time and reading longer chunks, maybe with some sort of commentary to hand, rather than trying to read a daily snippet, possibly with no context?
6. Would discussing your reading with others be helpful, even if none of you is expert?
7. How do you feel about reading different translations of the Bible? What is the trade-off between the beauty of, say, the Authorised Version (King James Bible) and the possible fresh insights and easier understanding of more modern translations?
8. Having read the Bible, do we ask the “so what?” questions – trying to discern how the things we have read might affect how we think and act?

### 3. AFFIRMING THE RELATIONSHIP

*“Oh Tracey,” said Sue, “It does me such good to be with you! The time we spent together at Theological College seems such a long time ago, but being together reminds me of the talks we’ve had in the past, and the good advice you’ve given me – you’ve really been a rock in troubled times sometimes, and I’m really grateful to have you as a friend...”*

#### POINTS TO PONDER

1. How good are we at telling people how important they are to us and how much we value their friendship and love? Would it embarrass them if we did, and if so, how can we make it clear without resorting to words?

*Having thought about God’s word and tried to understand better what it means for our daily “faith lives”, we stand together and affirm our trust in God in the words of one of the Creeds*

#### Section of the Service:

**We affirm our shared belief in God**

#### POINTS TO PONDER

2. The short version of the Creed used at Baptisms uses the words “believe and trust” (rather than just “believe”). Do you think of the Creeds as a series of literal statements that need to be accepted purely intellectually, if we are to be “good Christians”? Or are they a declaration of where we place our allegiance and trust, the basis on which we build our lives?
3. The Baptismal Creed is the shortest version, paring things down to the bare essentials. The longer versions (e.g., the “Apostle’s Creed” in Morning and Evening Prayer, or the “Nicene Creed” in longer versions of the Communion Service) include a lot more detail. Maybe look them up; are there statements in them that – hand on



heart – you find difficulty in saying, and how do you deal with that?  
Or is this just “what we say, because it’s in the book”?

4. If you were to write a Creed that laid out your core beliefs about God and your life of faith, what would it say?

#### **4. ACKNOWLEDGING PROBLEMS AND ASKING FOR HELP**

*Both the women, as busy parish priests, were facing the inevitable ups and downs in their churches as well as their own private lives, dealing with relationships, practicalities and the wide-ranging demands of parish life. In the safe environment of their friendship, they could each lay their problems and dilemmas before their friend, and ask for guidance and help. Tracey had access to resources that Sue hadn't known about, while a previous experience of Sue's gave Tracey some help with a particular conundrum, leaving them both with a fresh sense of encouragement and purpose, an acceptance of things that were beyond their own capability to achieve, and a renewed ability to access sources of help outside themselves.*

#### **POINTS TO PONDER**

1. How ready are we to admit inadequacies or gaps in our knowledge/experience, and either ask for help or hand the problem over to an expert?
2. Can it be a real relief to know we don't have to struggle on our own?
3. Conversely, do we sometimes land other people with problems we could actually sort out ourselves if we thought things through properly and/or put in more effort?

*Having acknowledged our trust in in God, we bring before him our own needs and those of his world. Having entrusted ourselves to him, we share his Peace.*

#### **Sections of the Service:**

**We pray for ourselves and for God's world**

**We share God's peace**

## POINTS TO PONDER

4. What are we actually trying to do when we pray, especially in our intercessions for others? Do we sometimes risk descending into “shopping lists” of all the things we want God to sort out? Are we simply telling him things he already knows?
5. Someone once said, “you should never pray unless you are prepared to be changed.” What do you think they meant? To what extent do our prayers need to try to get things straight in our own heads, so that we can play our part in finding solutions, even if only partial ones?
6. In our prayers, what is generally the balance between “thank you’s” and “please’s”?
7. How do we understand God’s peace (“shalom”) as more than simply the absence of conflict?

## 5. RE-MEMBERING THE PAST.

*The meal always ended with “Sfogliatelle” – delicious little Italian pastries, the speciality of the house. Sue had recently been offered them elsewhere, and the taste had vividly brought her friend to mind, reminding her of the value she set on this relationship, and prodding her into making the phone call that had led to the current meeting*

### POINTS TO PONDER

1. Are there tastes or smells that bring past experiences vividly to mind for you?
2. Are our friends “out of sight, out of mind”, or do we think of them often and enjoy the memory of them?

*The culmination of the Holy Communion Service is our remembering of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples the night before he died. As we recall his words and remember his sacrifice for us, we give thanks for God’s love, mercy and forgiveness, and Jesus’ triumph over death and sin. By re-enacting the past in this way, we bring it into the present.*

### Sections of the Service:

**We take bread and wine, and offer it to God,  
giving thanks for all his gifts to us**

**We remember Jesus’ sacrifice for us,  
and we ask for God’s blessing**

**The Lord’s Prayer**

**The Bread is broken**

**We receive the one bread**

### POINTS TO PONDER

3. Jews of Jesus’ time believed that by re-enacting the past, it became a part of the present. How would you apply this to what we do when we “do this in remembrance of” Jesus?

4. He said: “where two or three are gathered together, there I am in the midst of them.” In what sense is Jesus “present” to you in Holy Communion?
5. How important is it that we come together to worship and support one another? What implications has this for a congregation as more than just a collection of individuals?
6. Does any particular type of service have a greater significance for you, compared to other types of service? If so, why? What is the interaction between what you bring to worship and what you are given, to take away?
7. How important is it to you to do things “the way we’ve always done them”, and how open are you to possible insights that might be gained by approaching familiar rituals in a different way? Are there any “non-negotiables” for you?

## 6. POSTSCRIPT – DEPARTURE

*At the end of the meal, the two women hugged and went their separate ways – cheered, encouraged and heartened, deeply grateful for their friendship and much the better for their meeting, feeling more able to cope with what life might throw at them.*

...oooOOOooo...

*Having been nourished at the “Lord’s Table”, we are sent out into the world to share God’s love and do his work.*

### **Sections of the Service:**

**We receive God’s blessing**

**We are sent out to share God’s love in the world**

### **“COFFEE TO GO”**

How, specifically, might God be wanting us now to “love and serve the Lord” – possibly, in new ways?

*We hope this exercise has been helpful to you, and we wish you every blessing as you walk the way of faith and love, having been reminded that just as our human relationships need care and cherishing, so does our relationship with God.*

*If it has raised questions in your mind, or if there is something you need to talk through with someone else, please do talk to one of the clergy or another Christian you trust – it's all about relationships, and we are all travelling the way of life and faith in company together!*

# Love

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
    If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'  
    Love said, 'You shall be he.'  
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
    I cannot look on Thee.'  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
    'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.'  
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'  
    'My dear, then I will serve.'  
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'  
    So I did sit and eat.

*George Herbert*