

Morning Prayer: What is it, What is its purpose, How did it come about, and How do I/we do it?

Early in the Christian era the church emphasized Sundays by celebration of the Eucharist. Both the day and the rite spoke of creation, resurrection, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the Coming of the Kingdom. The day and the rite reinforced each other.

The weekdays—times in between—were marked by daily devotions at sunrise and sunset as the day was offered up to God in prayer and praise.

During the spiritual upheavals of the Reformation, in the mid-16th century, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, developed the first Book of Common Prayer for use throughout the British Kingdom. At that time, many of the wealthy had the leisure time to faithfully pray the Divine Office, which is comprised of prayers every three hours starting around 6 a.m. Many in the working class also desired to follow this process but lacked the leisure time or resources to do so. Archbishop Cranmer thus combined the three morning offices [Lauds, Terce, & Sext] into “Morning Prayer” and the afternoon and evening offices [None and Vespers] into “Evening Prayer.”

It was Cranmer’s intent that, following the breakfast meal, the head of the family household would lead the entire family in a pattern of worship that praised God, creation, and the new day with appropriate prayers and intercessions that also included the daily reading of psalms and scripture.

This was a highly radical concept in an environment where the English translation of the Latin scripture remained largely forbidden and only “The Church” was authorized to interpret scriptures. If you wonder why the Psalms printed in our Book of Common Prayer often seem different from modern translations, that is because they were done by the first English translators: Miles Coverdale and William Tyndale.

Following the family Morning Prayer, each member set out to their respective jobs or apprenticeships for the day. At the close of the day, when the family reunited for the evening meal, the family conducted Evening Prayer with a continuation of Psalms, Readings, and Prayers.

Archbishop Cranmer intended Morning and Evening Prayer to be a Lay-led service conducted during the weekdays. However, during the Colonial Period, Morning Prayer became the normative Sunday worship in the Virginia Colony. The Colonies lacked sufficient ordained clergy to conduct Holy Eucharist in every church, hence the clergy were expected to “Ride the Circuit” each Sunday and lead the Holy Eucharist in as many churches as possible. All other churches were expected to lead Morning Prayer until a priest became available.

Since COVID-19 has forced us to suspend all public worship and gatherings and to dictate social and physical distancing, conducting “Sunday Morning Prayer,” either solo or as a family provides a natural connection with our historical Anglican roots and the spiritual reformation that was sweeping the Western Church of the 16th Century.