



## 5. Why Use Wafers For Bread At The Eucharist?

At St Mary's the practice at Anglican Services for many years has been to use Communion Bread in the form of small round wafers. This is not the case in all Anglican churches – indeed, there is wide variation in practice between the Christian churches. Eastern Orthodox Churches, except the Armenians and the Lebanese Maronites, use leavened bread; Catholic Churches (and the Armenians and Maronites), unleavened. Among Continental Protestants, Lutherans generally use unleavened bread, and Calvinists leavened.

In Cranmer's first Anglican Prayer Book of 1549, which changed as little from Roman Catholic use as possible, the use of unleavened bread was required. By the time of the second Prayer Book of 1552, Cranmer had come further under the influence of the more Protestant reformers, and stipulated that to 'prevent superstition' the bread 'should be such as is usual to be eaten; but the best and purest Wheat Bread as may conveniently be gotten'. This continued to be the general practice of the Church of England until the influence of the nineteenth-century Oxford movement led to a revival of interest in the Catholic heritage of Anglicanism.

The practice among the Eastern Orthodox churches is that the loaf used at the Eucharist is cut (not broken) by the Priest, before consecration, into pieces some of which are arranged in the form of a cross, while others signify the Virgin Mary and the disciples present at the Crucifixion. This is part of the Eastern view of the Eucharist as a re-enactment of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

In the West, the practice from about the ninth century was to use separate small round wafers of unleavened bread. The bread was unleavened to signify both the link with Jewish Passover bread, and also the sinlessness of Christ - leaven being traditionally (and, to some, surprisingly) viewed as a symbol of sin.

The divergence in practice between East and West was one of the irritants which led to the split between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The reason for the difference is not clear - it has been suggested that it may depend on whether the Eucharist is taken to be a celebration or thanksgiving (Jewish *Kiddash*) - leavened bread, or

as the Passover sacrifice (*Seder*) - unleavened.

Passover bread is unleavened in commemoration of the original Exodus from Egypt, when the bread had to be made and eaten in haste, without time for it to rise.

The marking on the wafers of a cross is very ancient - Greek Eucharistic loaves are also marked with a cross - and originally this may have been to make a large bread easier to break. Since the twelfth century in the West, the cross has often been in the form of a crucifix.

The great practical advantage of the use of wafers is that they are easier to handle and less likely to make crumbs. Any unused consecrated bread and wine should be consumed immediately after the service by the celebrant, and this should include any pieces that have fallen on the floor.

In the Methodist Church, ordinary wheat bread is normally used. In this, Methodists are faithfully and correctly following the custom of the Church of England at the time of John Wesley. However, as mentioned above, in communicating large numbers of people, the use of 'ordinary' bread does have some practical disadvantages.