With a few exceptions, if you visit an Anglican church anywhere in the world, the worship will follow a recognisable pattern or liturgy.

The dictionary defines liturgy as, ‘a church's formularies for public worship’. Like so many of the Church's technical words, liturgy comes from the Greek language. It is a compound of laos (people) and ergon ('work, deed, action') and it means, quite literally, 'what the people do'.

The people of God worship God and in the Anglican Church this ‘work, deed, action’ is set out in the Prayer Book; our manual of liturgy; our working document. The clue to understanding Anglican worship lies in the Prayer Book and to understand the Prayer Book we must understand where it came from.

Worship in the early Church was a very simple affair involving the whole Christian community. They met together to break bread, they baptised converts, anointed the sick, confessed their sins and prayed for the forgiveness of others.

But by the 16th century all that had changed. Worship had become the exclusive domain of the clergy. The Priests celebrated the Mass in Latin while the people said their own prayers down in the body of the church. The Daily Prayer Offices had become so involved that only the clergy could follow the elaborate and time-consuming instructions. Superstitions abounded. The people seldom received Holy Communion and when they did they refused to take the cup for fear of spilling the precious blood of Jesus.

Imagine then the effect of the revolution which took place on Pentecost Sunday, 1549. On that day the Book of Common Prayer was introduced into the parishes of the Church of England.

The Book of Common Prayer

The Book of Common Prayer was almost entirely the work of one man, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, and it contained all that a Christian might need for the public worship of God and the working out of faith.

There was a Calendar of Holy Days. There were services of prayer for morning and evening, Matins and Evensong. There was a service for Holy Communion together with Collects, Epistles and Gospels to be used throughout the year. And there were services for life’s critical times: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Matrimony, the Visitation of the Sick and the Burial of the Dead.

The most striking thing about the book was that it was in English, a language 'understood of the people'.

It also provided for the reading of the Bible as never before. Chapter by chapter, every morning and every evening, the Bible was to be read from beginning to end.

As well, the Prayer Book instructed that Baptism was to be celebrated in public, on Sundays, and at the Holy Communion the people were to receive both the bread and the wine.

The Prayer Book of 1549 was not perfect but it did restore the liturgy of the Church to the place where it belongs - among the people of the Church. And it provided the people with a working manual by which they could worship God in common and live out the life of faith.

That principle - that the liturgy of the Church belongs to the people of the Church - has caused the original English Prayer Book to be revised on a number of occasions since 1549 and in recent times the national Churches of the Anglican Communion have produced their own Prayer Books, each reflecting the language
and the worship of God’s people in that place.

A New Zealand Prayer Book

In 1964 the General Synod of the Anglican Church in New Zealand established a Commission ‘to plan and prepare a revised Book of Common Prayer, either in stages or as a whole, in the light of the needs of the Province and of contemporary liturgical development’.

It sounds easy but this was no small task. The Commission had to take account of New Zealand’s significant Polynesian population and produce services in Maori, Fijian and Tongan. It had to recast the services in modern English and it had to recognize that: ‘The Anglican Church has a genius not so much for compromise, but for forbearance, for sensing when it is God’s will that we all agree to differ’. (Martin Thornton).

It therefore took 25 years before A New Zealand Prayer Book – He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa was finally launched on the Church. It was an immediate success and was lauded internationally as one of the most inspiring and innovative national prayer books. And there is no doubt that it has changed the Anglican Church in New Zealand.

The Prayer Book Calendar

Most religions mark the seasons of the year, especially the seasons of seed time and harvest. But in the Hebrew religion these nature festivals were overshadowed by the annual commemoration of an historical event; the deliverance by God of a slave people from Egypt. In this respect the Christian calendar follows the Hebrew calendar. We have nature festivals but they are overshadowed by the commemoration and re-enactment of a supreme historical event; our deliverance from slavery and sin through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Christian Year follows this pattern:

Advent: Four weeks before Christmas when we prepare for the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

Christmas: Twelve days beginning with Christmas Eve when we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Epiphany: From one to six weeks following January 6 when we proclaim the glory of Jesus.

Pre Lent: Three weeks before Ash Wednesday to prepare for the season of Lent.

Lent: Six weeks beginning with Ash Wednesday when we prepare for the Easter Drama.

Maundy Thursday: The Thursday before Easter when we commemorate the institution of the Lord’s Supper.

Good Friday: We recall the death of Jesus.

Easter: Seven weeks beginning with Easter Day when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

Pentecost: One week during May or June when we recall the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birthday of the Church.

In addition to this annual re-enactment of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Church sets aside certain days for the commemoration of the Saints.

Red Letter Days celebrate the Saints who are noted and recorded in scripture. Black Letter Days celebrate the many other Saints of God.

And we still have our nature festivals. Most parish churches, even those in the world’s largest cities, still celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving as an integral part of the Church’s Year.

Think about it

Matins at Westminster Abbey ... the service was straight, decent, and well-oiled; no High Church frills, no Low Church fulminations, just the soothing, tasteful, uncontroversial splendour of the Church of England’s famous ‘Middle Way’; the broad valley between the opposing mountain peaks.

- Susan Howatch in Mystical Paths