

When we burn Incense

The most natural and appropriate time to burn incense is when the Lord comes among us in Person in the Eucharist. In the same way, if you are fortunate enough to attend a church in which the service of Benediction* is available, you will find incense burned then. Incense is traditionally burned at particular points during Divine Service, notably during the Te Deum and Benedictus at solemn celebrations of Mattins, and during the Magnificat at Solemn Evensong. It is occasionally used at other times also, such as at funerals, and when objects and places are blessed.

* BENEDICTION is a particularly beautiful and moving service in which Our Lord is worshipped, present in person in the Blessed Sacrament, and in which His blessing is sought.

Like burning incense O Lord.
Let my prayer rise up to you.

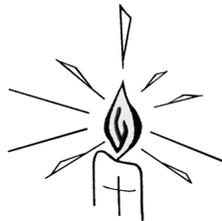
I have called to you, Lord;
hasten to help me!
Hear my voice when I cry to you.
Let my prayer arise before
you like incense,
The raising of my hands
like a pure morning offering.

Like burning incense O Lord.
Let my prayer rise up to you.

*© and Written by
Father Edmund N. Straszak SSC*



**Let my
prayer
come
before
you, Lord
as incense**



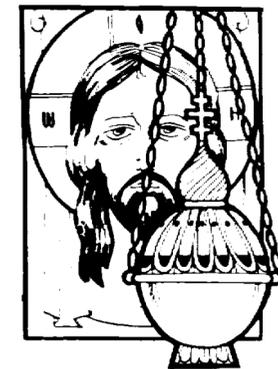
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Holy Trinity Church



What we do in Church and Why!



Burning Incense

What is Incense?

Incense is made from various aromatic resins and gums taken from trees and other plants. When burned it gives off scented smoke. In church it is normally burned in a CENSER or THURIBLE. Because it is difficult to burn on its own, it is burned along with charcoal.

Which Churches Use Incense?

Most of Christianity use, or have used, incense in worship. All the Eastern Orthodox Churches burn incense at most of their services, or liturgies. In the 'west' the Roman Catholic Church burns incense at many of its services.

The Church of England used incense throughout its history, until the mid 1600's, when it fell into disuse generally. From that time, though, it continued to be used in worship in isolated churches such as York Minster, and since the mid 19th century its use has spread and increased. Nowadays many churches are rediscovering the benefits to be gained from burning incense as part of their worship.

Why Burn "Incense?"

Incense and Liturgy

Liturgy is the formal public worship of the Church, its work. The Liturgy of the Church is made-up of the liturgy of each individual Christian, and should be the best that we can possibly offer to God.

Christian worship erupts out of our love of God and our desire to express that love. As such we should worship Him with 'all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength.' Good liturgy is designed to stimulate just such a response in us, by

exciting the senses and feeding our imagination.

One of the elements of good liturgy is, for example, the use of colour and movement provided by the use of colourful vestments, processions and the like. Singing and chanting is another important element of liturgy, stimulating as it does the sense of hearing. The use of incense enables even fuller participation in the liturgy by stimulating the sense of smell. It also provides colour, movement and sound as the thurible is swung and its chain 'chinks' and 'tinkles'.

Incense as Symbol

Symbols help to point our minds in the direction of invisible realities, and speak to us in a language often richer than words alone. As a symbol, incense is exceptionally rich in associations. Of its many possible associations, two are particularly worthy of mention here.

1. In Matt ch.2 v.11 we read of the three kings bringing Frankincense (a particular type of incense) as a gift to the Christ child. In the words of that well-loved Christmas carol "Incense owns a Deity nigh", which means that incense is a sign of our belief in the Real Presence of Christ, the Son of God. What was good enough for the three kings is surely good enough for us!

2. In the Book of Revelation the burning of incense appears to be an important part of the worship of heaven. In ch.5 v.8 we read of "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the Saints".

This whole book is symbolic, and was never intended to be taken as literally accurate. Many commentators, though believe that the writer of the book was strongly influenced by the worship, or liturgy, of his own church. When we burn incense we remind ourselves that our

prayers, like the incense, ascend to the throne of God and mingle with the prayers of the Saints in heaven.

The Offering of Incense

At the heart of worship in the Temple at Jerusalem was sacrifice. The sacrificial offering was usually a living thing such as a lamb or bird, but the fruits of the earth were also offered, including incense. In the Temple there was even an altar specially set aside for the burning of incense.

With the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70 the sacrificial worship of the Old Testament came to an end. The necessity for much of it had already been brought to an end, several years before, by the all-sufficient sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Our human need to offer thanksgiving and sacrifice to God remains. In our daily lives, Christians have the opportunity to give the best of themselves back to God in the service of each other. In our worship we have the opportunity to offer tokens which represent ourselves. Incense is a token of the best that we have to offer. In 2 Cor ch.2 v.15 we read "We are indeed the incense offered by Christ to God both for those who are on the way to salvation, and for those who are on the way to perdition: to the latter it is a deadly fume that kills, to the former a vital fragrance that brings life".

In the Eucharistic Sacrifice we join our offering with that of Christ Himself on the cross, as He offers Himself to the Father on our behalf. The burning of incense in the Eucharist reminds us that Christ's sacrifice is real, and just as effective for us who are alive today as it was when He died on the cross.