

SYMBOLISM IN THE LITURGY

FAITH FORUM, 28 JUNE 2026



Axioms of the talk

‘Symbolism’ identifies a kind of *communication*

Words or actions or items or ways

As with all communicative behaviour, *context* and *clarity* matter

For particular signs (words, actions, items) to do symbolic work, we should attend to contexts, ordering, and role (in the liturgy)

There are no effectual standards for liturgy in the Church of England.

Rubrics in *CW* and *BCP*

Standards in (non-binding) liturgical sources

What do we mean by *symbolism*?

Not an arbitrary one-to-one correspondence to some ‘real meaning’

An *evocation* of *more than* just what is said/done/implicit

In this it coheres with church teaching that the world is real, and good, but it not *all*; there’s more going on than meets the eye.

We evaluate claims about symbols by how they *join-up* with other senses

We recognise symbolic effects *or not*; they may act below our awareness

Symbolism *in action*

Reverence

Acknowledging that here we stand in the presence of Christ

Attention and *care* rather than indifference and neglect

Reverence communicates awe and majesty

Walking

Going to the altar of God; “Let us go to the house of the LORD!”

Biblical journeys — Abraham’s family, Moses and Israel, Exile and

Return, Flight into Egypt, *Via Dolorosa*

‘Walk’ as biblical metaphor for conduct of life

Space

Altar at [liturgical] east

Height of church to convey heavens

Microcosm of the world, here sanctified

— *visible signs used by the liturgy to signify invisible divine things* —

Symbolic signifiers

Cross

Sums up Christ's sacrificial character, points to resurrection
Fully human Christ subject to torture, death; righteous Son couldn't die
Sign of baptism, anointing, blessing
'Cross marks the spot' on altar, corporal, purificator
Sign of the cross invokes unity with Christ, protects from evil

Bread and Wine

This is my Body, This is my Blood
Manna, bread of heaven, bread of angels
Nourishment for the Body of Christ, which is the Church
In his body-bread broken for us, we become united with him

Water

Holy Spirit at creation, led from slavery to freedom
Jesus baptised in water and anointed by the Holy Spirit
Buried with Christ in baptism, share resurrection, reborn by the Spirit
Water as necessary nourishment for life, cleansing from impurity

Candles

Light, warmth
Christ as the light of the world
Light shines in the gloom, and gloom cannot overcome it
Like oil lamps of Bible, signifies our lives (glow with vitality, burn out)
Like our bodies, burn with brightness but at consummation of all things, will need no light, the glory of God and Lamb will light us

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Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning: A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity*. (CUP, 2003).

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