

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	2 August 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Ninth Sunday after Trinity
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

When we do something regularly, such as going to Church, it can be a valuable exercise sometimes to explore the familiar words we get used to saying every week. It's not that familiarity breeds contempt but repetition can dull our awareness of what we are saying – and what we are saying in Church every week is quite stupendous. Paying attention to our words is always a valuable exercise, but never more so than with the words we speak to God. Today therefore let's briefly reflect on two of the most significant ones we use almost every Sunday in our worship. Those words are Amen and Alleluia.

They are of course not originally English words but Hebrew ones. That underlines what St Paul says in today's reading. He reminds us that the Law of Moses, the covenants between God and his people, the Temple worship and the great patriarchs, were all ways in which God prepared the Jewish people to receive Jesus the Messiah when he appeared. The Christian Church did not just spring up out of nowhere. As Christians we are always rooted in our Jewish heritage. For that reason, all the historic Christian churches have always retained those two little Hebrew words that we are going to consider.

Western Catholics (Roman and Anglican), Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and all the Eastern Orthodox churches – Greek, Russian, Syrian, Coptic, Armenian and Indian – all sing those two little words in their worship. But as well as reminding us of our Jewish

roots, each word tells us something deeply significant about God and our faith in Christ. One is about God's fidelity; the other is about our praise.

Let's take the word Amen first. It comes from a Hebrew root-word meaning firmness and stability. It is the fundamental 'yes word.' Amen means essentially, 'That's the way it is, and I give it my full assent.' It is the word of affirmation and that is why we say it at the conclusion of every prayer.

Take its association with the Collect for example, which we hear sung every Sunday. The priest calls us to pray, then gathers up all our silent prayers – collects them, hence the name - and presents them aloud to God the Father in the words of the Church's worship. They are offered through Jesus Christ, God's Son, the real priest High Priest. We reply with Amen, meaning, 'Indeed, that's it, let it be so!'

But there are two other special occasions among the many others when we say Amen in our worship. One is to conclude the most important prayer of the liturgy, the Eucharistic Prayer, or Great Thanksgiving. By the power of the Holy Spirit bread and wine are consecrated as our spiritual food and the power of Christ's death and resurrection made present among us once more.

At the end of the prayer, the priest praises God, offering all glory and thanksgiving and we respond with an Amen, traditionally called the 'Great Amen.'

It is called 'great' because we have just voiced our thanks to the Father for all that Christ has done – his saving death, resurrection, ascension, and sending the Holy Spirit. Those are the mighty works of God by which he saved the world and we recall them at every Eucharist. In 4th century Bethlehem, St Jerome recorded that the 'Great Amen' was so loud that he thought it would raise the roof. So it should be, because we are crying out our grateful assent to what God has done for us in his love.

The other important Amen is the one we say when the consecrated bread and wine are offered to us at Holy Communion, with the words, 'The body of Christ' and 'The blood of Christ.' At that moment, in and through those simple elements of food and drink, which have been consecrated and charged with new meaning, the risen Jesus comes in a special way to dwell in us and make us one with him and one another.

Therefore, we say Amen because at that moment God is giving us a unique gift – his beloved Son. While it is certainly polite to say 'Thank you' as some people do, it is not at that moment the appropriate response. We say Amen because we are saying yes to God's gift. It is not the minister giving us the gift. He or she is merely an instrument. It is God who gives, and by saying loudly and clearly Amen, we profess, 'Yes, I believe that it is true!'

But there is also a deeper reason why Amen is such an important word for Christians. It is because Jesus calls himself that in the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible (Revelation 3.14), describing himself as 'The Amen, the faithful and true witness.'

He calls himself that with good reason. St Paul tells us (2 Corinthians 1.20) that in Jesus all God's promises were kept. Jesus is God's Amen to us, his 'yes-word', to assure us of his love. Jesus echoed that Amen back to him. He is the only person in history who ever fully said 'Yes' to the Father in an unconditional way, without holding anything back. For you and me and for everyone, there is always some degree of wavering in saying yes to God's will, not to mention that outright rejection of God is always a terrible possibility.

But once and for all, Jesus said the perfect Amen to the Father. In his agony in the garden and his death on the cross, that Amen, the greatest of all, that 'Yes!' opened the gates of mercy for the world. Every yes to God that we utter as Christians has already been said once and for all, fully and perfectly, in him. Christ's great yes was

perfected when he offered his life on Calvary – the only perfect Amen ever uttered in this world.

For that reason, Amen is always the purest form of Christian prayer because it is our assent to God's will. It was the prayer of Mary, Mother, and first disciple of the Lord: 'Let it be to me as you have said!' It may be, as with Christ in Gethsemane, that it is wrung out of us in suffering and pain, but it is always the source of the deepest peace of heart.

If we learn to say yes to God today and every day in our prayer, we will be ready to say it fully in the hour of our death, when God calls us to pass over to him with Christ.

The other great Hebrew word in our worship is Alleluia. In English that is one word but in Hebrew it is two: the word 'Praise' and the word 'God.' It is a cry, a shout, an acclamation, which occurs many times in the Scriptures, meaning 'God be praised!' It occurs regularly the psalms but we Christians associate it above all with Easter, when it is sung so frequently. In that little word all the joy of Christ's resurrection is expressed.

But Alleluia is not confined to Eastertide. We sing it every Sunday because every Sunday is the Day of Resurrection, a little Easter. We omit it in Lent not because Jesus isn't risen but so that it can come back with a bang on Easter Sunday and echo for fifty days. Alleluia is particularly appropriate as the Gospel Book – the symbol of the risen Christ accompanied by lights and incense - is carried in solemn procession into the midst of the assembly, so that the Gospel can be proclaimed. In that moment the risen Jesus stands invisibly among us and his joyful message of salvation, the Good News, is announced afresh. So, we greet him with a cry of praise. Alleluia is an exclamation, an outpouring from the heart.

In the ancient Gregorian chant still sung in many Benedictine monasteries, the final 'A' of the word Alleluia is carried forward as a

prolonged act of praise. It is known as the jubilus because it is jubilant. That is why Handel also concluded his Messiah with a jubilant Halleluiah Chorus.

And as well, in our cathedral Mattins on Sundays, the choir sings the canticle Jubilate as the culmination of our morning praise.

The word Amen speaks of God's faithfulness to us in Jesus. It calls forth from us our response, our grateful yes to him. But the word Alleluia translates that yes into a cry of joy. It soars ecstatically up to God, before dying out in wordless silence. What is prayer in the end after all but rejoicing with jubilation at the vision of God's beauty and glory, in Jesus Christ our Lord, his perfect yes to us? And so we sing and pray, Alleluia, Amen!