

WHY IS THE BOOK OF THE GOSPELS CARRIED IN PROCESSION?

Sunday school teachers use a popular children’s action song to teach the value of Scripture. One well-known version, popularised by Colin Buchanan, goes as follows:

*Oh, the best book to read is the Bible,
The best book to read is the Bible.
If you read it every day,
It will help you on your way,
Oh, the best book to read is the Bible.*

Such a simple song—yet what an impact it has on Christian life. In sermons, we sometimes hear concerns about why the Good News is not shared more widely. Is there a correlation between what we preach and how we worship? How is this translated into practice? During the Holy Eucharist, carrying the Gospels in procession is meant to demonstrate how central it is in our worship.

Is carrying the Gospels in procession something new? Do all churches have a procession before the service begins? In some churches, both the processional cross and the Gospel book are carried; in others, only the cross leads, followed by those taking part in the service.

During the Eucharist, a deacon or priest lifts the Gospel book high and walks just before the celebrant through the congregation like someone bearing treasure. Is it merely Scripture? No—it is not merely Scripture. It

signifies the voice of the Word made flesh dwelling among us (John 1:1–3: *“In the beginning was the Word... ”*). We see and hear Christ coming to speak to His people.

The Old Testament and the Covenant

Going back to the Old Testament, we see a pivotal moment in the establishment of the Mosaic Covenant, when God gave the Law to Moses. This revelation was not delivered privately or confined to a select few; it was solemnly proclaimed before all the people. As Exodus 24:7 records, *“Then he took the book of the covenant and read it aloud in the hearing of the people.”* Likewise, in Deuteronomy 31:9–13, Moses commands that the Law be read publicly before Israel—men, women, children, and even the foreigner among them—so that all may hear, learn, and grow in reverent obedience to the Lord.

The public proclamation of the Word is not merely the sharing of information but a **“divine speech-act”** through which God’s presence and purposes are made known. It is not simply reading; it is God speaking to His people.

The New Testament Fulfilment

In Luke’s Gospel (Luke 4:17–21), Jesus is handed the scroll of Isaiah, reads it publicly, and declares: *“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* He did not merely read it; He fulfilled it. The Gospel is therefore not just read in the service—it is proclaimed,

because it is Christ Himself who speaks. That is why we stand to hear the Gospel and why candles are often carried: they signify that Christ is among us.

When the Word Comes Among Us

When the Book of the Gospels is carried in procession, it is not merely symbolic. Theologically, it proclaims that Christ comes among His people. The Living Word is present as the Gospel is proclaimed and God speaks to His Church: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*”(John 1:14).

John Chrysostom insisted that readings in the liturgy are not mere narration but the living voice of God addressing the congregation (*e.g. Homilies on Matthew opening exhortations*). In the same manner, Origen described Scripture proclaimed in the assembly as a divine encounter in which Christ himself teaches the Church. (*Homilies on Leviticus; Homilies on Luke*)

Lifted High: The Living Word Proclaimed

During the procession, the Gospel book is lifted high and the congregation stands. This posture expresses attentiveness and reverence: the Lord is among us, and we listen because God is speaking. This is not a classroom reading; it is a liturgical proclamation. The one who carries the Gospel—usually the deacon—traditionally asks for a blessing before reading, because he proclaims not his own words but the Word of God, the Word of Life, and the Eternal Truth.

The next time you see the Gospel carried in procession, remember Jesus in the synagogue proclaiming God’s word. This is not mere ritual or dramatization; it is a moment of revelation and expectation as we await what God will say to His people through the Gospel. As Anglicans, we now use *Common Worship* as a framework for public prayer, and later authorized liturgical books allow greater ceremonial flexibility. Modern Anglican liturgies state that the Gospel may be proclaimed from among the people and may be accompanied by an acclamation. Anglican liturgical historians consistently observe that ceremonial surrounding the Gospel developed from medieval Western practice and is retained where customary but is not required by Anglican rubrics (a standard conclusion in Anglican liturgical studies, reflected in the work of Percy Dearmer and Marion Hatchett). There is no universal Anglican canon or rubric requiring a Gospel procession; where it exists, it is a venerable custom grounded in the Church’s practice rather than in strict legal obligation.

Therefore, carrying the Book of the Gospels in procession is far more than an aesthetic addition to worship; it is a visible proclamation of our theology. It declares, before a word is spoken, that Christ comes to meet His people, that His Word is living, and that the Gospel stands at the very heart of the Church’s life. What is permitted by the rubrics becomes, pastorally and devotionally,

a powerful act of witness. When the Gospel is borne among the congregation, lifted high and honoured, the Church does not merely remember that Christ speaks—she enacts it. Such a practice teaches without a sermon,

forms faith without argument, and impresses upon every eye and heart that when the Gospel is proclaimed, the Lord Himself addresses His people.

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RESOURCES:

1. *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, Holy Communion – Order One, The Liturgy of the Word “The Gospel is read... It may be read from the lectern or from the midst of the congregation.” This rubric explicitly permits the Gospel to be proclaimed from within the assembly, not only from the usual reading place.
2. *Common Worship: Times and Season. “Processions” pp 248-249.* “The Gospel book may be carried in processions at the entrance, at the reading of the Gospel and at the procession at the end of the service.” *Rubrics permit the use of customary ceremonial actions, including the carrying of the Gospel in procession with appropriate reverence.*”
3. Marion J. Hatchett — *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*
4. Percy Dearmer — *The Parson’s Handbook* “ Dearmer explains that many ceremonial actions surrounding the Gospel (lights, procession, position, etc.) come from medieval Western tradition and are retained where customary and pastorally fitting.