



Passiontide & Holy Week: Introduction to the Season from Common Worship Times and Seasons

It is still uncertain when Christians first began to make an annual (as opposed to a weekly) memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ. This *Pascha* (a word derived indirectly from *pesach*, Hebrew 'Passover') was at first a night-long vigil, followed by the celebration of the Eucharist at cock-crow, and all the great themes of redemption were included within it: incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection, glorification. Over time, the *Pascha* developed into the articulated structure of Holy Week and Easter. Through participation in the whole sequence of services, the Christian shares in Christ's own journey, from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the empty tomb on Easter morning.

Palm Sunday: The procession with palms, which was already observed in Jerusalem in the fourth century, is accompanied by the reading or singing of the Passion Narrative, in which the whole story of the week is anticipated.

Maundy Thursday (from *mandatum*, 'commandment', because of the use of John 13.34 in the Antiphon) contains a rich complex of themes: humble Christian service expressed through Christ's washing of his disciples' feet, the institution of the Eucharist, the perfection of Christ's loving obedience through the agony of Gethsemane.

Good Friday: After keeping vigil ('Could you not watch with me one hour?') Thursday passes into Good Friday with its two characteristic episodes. The veneration of the Cross is older; the sequence of meditations and music known as the Three Hours' Devotion was introduced into the Church of England in the nineteenth century. The first is now sometimes incorporated into the structure of the second. It is a widespread custom for there not to be a celebration of the Eucharist on Good Friday, but for the consecrated bread and wine remaining from the Maundy Thursday Eucharist to be given in communion. The church remains stripped of all decoration. It continues bare and empty through the following day, which is a day without a liturgy: there can be no adequate way of recalling the being dead of the Son of God, other than silence and desolation. But within the silence there grows a sense of peace and completion, and then rising excitement as the Easter Vigil draws near.

Holy Saturday and the Easter Vigil: From earliest times Christians have gathered through the night of Easter to recall the story of God's saving work, from creation through to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, the Easter Liturgy is not merely a presentation of God's work. It is meant to be a real experience of new life for the worshipper, a passing from darkness to light which offers hope to all the faithful. It is therefore important that the preparation is prayerful and thorough.

The Easter Vigil marks the end of the emptiness of Holy Saturday, and leads into the celebration of Christ's resurrection. The singing of the Exsultet, the ancient hymn of triumph and rejoicing, links this night of our Christian redemption to the Passover night of Israel's redemption out of Egypt. Christian baptism is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, a dying to sin in order to be reborn in him, and the Easter Vigil was from early Christian times a preferred occasion for baptism. It is fittingly a time when those who are already Christians may repeat with renewed commitment the promises of their own baptism, and strengthen their sense of incorporation into the royal and priestly ministry of the whole people of God. The Easter Gospel is proclaimed with all the joy and splendour that the church can find.

The Easter Eucharist may follow immediately on the Vigil, or be deferred until Easter Day. All the resources of the church – music, flowers, bells, colours – are used to celebrate Christ's resurrection. The 'Alleluia', which has been silent throughout Lent, returns.

Now the queen of seasons, bright
with the day of splendour,
with the royal feast of feasts,
comes its joy to render.

(John of Damascus)

