

Introduction to Holy Week and Easter

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.

Step 1 - Palm Sunday

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

Step 2 - Maundy Thursday

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.

Step 3 - 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, 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.

Step 4 - The Easter Vigil

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.

Step 5 - The Season of Easter

The Great Fifty Days of Eastertide form a single festival period in which the tone of joy created at the Easter Vigil is sustained through the following seven weeks, and the Church celebrates the gloriously risen Christ:

*Triumphant in his glory now,
his sceptre ruleth all,
earth, heaven and hell before him bow,
and at his footstool fall.*
(Fulbert of Chartres)

Early Christians gave the name Pentecost to this whole fifty-day span of rejoicing, which Tertullian calls 'this most joyful period' (laetissimum spatium). It is sometimes also called 'Great Sunday'. In those places where the custom of lighting the Easter Candle at the beginning of Easter is followed, the lit Candle stands prominently in church for all the Eastertide services. The Alleluia appears frequently in liturgical speech and song; Morning Prayer begins with the traditional collection of Pauline texts known as the Easter Anthems, and white or gold vestments and decorations emphasize the joy and brightness of the season.

On the fortieth day there has from the late fourth century been a particular celebration of Christ's ascension. He commissions his disciples to continue his work, he promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, and then he is no longer among them in the flesh. The ascension is therefore closely connected with the theme of mission. The arrival of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost completes and crowns the Easter Festival.