



ST MARGARET'S ILKLEY



The Liturgies of Holy Week

a brief guide to the principal services

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WEEK

The first Christian regular celebrations were Sundays, which were held as the beginning and the end of the week, all on one day. The whole of the human experience of time was encapsulated in this day: looking back to what God has done, what God is doing now, and what he will do.

Out of this weekly remembrance of the resurrection developed the annual celebration of Easter, or 'Pascha' – adapted from the Jewish Passover.

Like Sundays, the day on which to celebrate the end and beginning of all things, the whole mystery of Christ was celebrated on Easter Day—the incarnation, the passion, the resurrection, the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Soon, though, the joy and wonder and solemnity of this 'day of days' began to spill out to consecrate the time either side of it. First, forward with a whole 50 days of rejoicing; then backwards too, with at first a day or two, then a whole week, and finally a forty day season of preparation for Easter.

Easter was joined early on by the Christmas-Epiphany cycle, and the liturgical calendar continued evolving from there, especially through commemorations of saints and martyrs, local and universal.

The development of the liturgies of Holy Week, specifically, is tied to Jerusalem, and the popularity of pilgrimage to the holy city in the Fourth Century. As the different locations of the Gospel events were discovered, pilgrims began to visit the sites of the events at the times they were thought to have taken place.

So traditions connected with the final days of Christ started to be held in these last days before Easter. For example, the day before Palm Sunday, pilgrims would go to the tomb of Lazarus; then on Palm Sunday to the Mount of Olives, and come back to the city in procession with palm branches (following St John's chronology). The week ended with the adoration of a relic of the cross, worship commemorating the passion, and a visit to the Holy Sepulchre in memory of the burial of Jesus.

PALM SUNDAY

We begin the Holy Week with Palm Sunday, and the Gospels tell us that the people spread their palm branches or their cloaks on the ground as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

This is the symbol the Church has taken up for our liturgical actions, and is what gives the day its name. Palms, though, were tricky to get hold of in northern and western Europe, so branches of whatever could be found were used: box, willow, yew, that sort of thing. And we see in this a central truth of our Holy Week observance: that we are not simply re-enacting an historical event when we do this; we are not trying to recreate this scene frame for frame. Rather we are bringing Jerusalem to us, entering into the drama as if it were happening in Ilkley, today, with whatever we have to hand. The church building becomes our Jerusalem.

After the blessing of palms and the Palm Gospel, we go in our own procession through the grounds and into the church, to 'enter the city' as Jesus did. And we sing our 'hosannas,' just like all those gathered around Jesus.

It is the triumphal entry into the city that forms the liturgical focus of the day. But we also hear a dramatic reading of the full Passion account. It is this juxtaposition of triumph and celebration, with death and darkness, that makes it such a rich beginning to Holy Week. We are brought into the mystery of the Passion that will continue to unfold before us over the week; and we see in the interplay between cross and resurrection that we are taken out of our neat sense of linear time, and into the extra dimensions of God's time. We are not 'waiting' for Christ to be crucified, later in the week; the cross is now. But in the same way, Easter is now, as each Sunday of the year reminds us. All the events of Holy Week take place in the light of the Resurrection.

We begin with Jesus the King riding into Jerusalem in royal procession; in the Passion Gospel we hear of him dressed up in royal robes to mock him. And so the Holy Week begins.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Maundy Thursday begins the Sacred Paschal Triduum ('three days'), and in a sense all the liturgies from now until the Easter Vigil are one single act of worship as we walk with Christ through his Passion (broken only by our need to eat and sleep).

An important part of the liturgy includes the priest washing the feet of members of the congregation, calling to mind the command that Jesus gave his disciples at the Last Supper; that command, the Latin 'mandatum,' gives us the name 'Maundy' Thursday. The choir will sing the traditional antiphon for the foot-washing, 'Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est' ('Where charity and love are, there God is.')

Another key feature of Maundy Thursday is the stripping away of all decoration in the sanctuary at the end of the service. We can see this as analogous with the stripping of Christ's garments on the way to the cross. But perhaps it is best seen as an expression of casting away all distractions, all the comforts to which we have become accustomed, so that we might walk with Christ, focussed solely on him.

Finally, we go in procession to the Lady Chapel, beautifully decorated like a garden, singing a hymn, in the same way as the disciples went with Jesus to Gethsemane. Just as the church becomes our Jerusalem for the week, the chapel becomes our Gethsemane. We will keep watch with Christ until midnight (you are welcome to come and go as you wish through that time).

On Maundy Thursday we set aside the red vestments of the Passion and wear white. We even sing 'Gloria' again, after so long without it. This might seem strange, but it is of course deliberate. This meal is an occasion for joy, Christ's gift of his very presence with us in the Eucharist for ever, even as he goes to his death.

But, like Palm Sunday, we enter into the tension between joy and pain; light and darkness. What begins in white with joyful singing, ends in darkness, stripped of colour and indeed any sound at all. It brings us into the atmosphere of that last and first meal together; how the disciples must have felt as Judas suddenly left them, and Peter's betrayal was foretold, along with Jesus' own death.

GOOD FRIDAY

Our devotions begin at 1.45 pm and last until around 3.00 pm, the time of Christ's death on the cross. The service consists of three principal elements: the account of the Passion in St John's Gospel, sung to plainchant with choral segments by Tomás Luis de Victoria; the solemn prayers, praying for all those for whom Christ died; and reflecting on and reverencing a physical cross, as the choir sings the traditional 'reproaches.' We will also sing some of the most beautiful hymns of the Passion together.

The cross is carried into church in a solemn procession, as we sing 'Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the salvation of the world;' a very different procession from that which began the week on Palm Sunday.

There is no celebration of the Eucharist on Good Friday, but the sacrament from the Liturgy of Maundy Thursday, before which we kept watch the previous evening, is distributed to those who wish to receive; a reminder of Christ's sacramental presence with us, even through the terrible darkness of Good Friday.

The priest ends the liturgy by singing the Gospel of the Burial of Christ. The cross will rest on the high altar to remain as a focus for devotion throughout the remainder of the day.

THE EASTER VIGIL

Holy Saturday is characterised by absence. There is no liturgical focus; indeed, there are no liturgical ceremonies whatsoever, beyond the daily office, and even those are stripped down to the bare minimum. It is a day on which we come face to face with the emptiness of the world when Christ was killed; what life would be like without the loving presence of God in the world. It is the only day on which the blessed sacrament is not reserved in church.

In the evening, however, as night falls, we will celebrate the triumph of light over darkness, and life over death, as Christ rises from the tomb. The Easter Vigil is the liturgical cornerstone of the whole Church calendar.

The focus from earliest times has been the journey from death to life: our 'Exodus,' our liberation from the captivity of sin and death, and entry into the new life of the resurrection. The first part of the service consists of vigil readings, accounts of God saving his people in the Old Testament, and the climax is the reading from Exodus 14, the parting of the Red Sea.

The Paschal Candle, lit from a fire kindled outside the church, leads us in procession into the dark church, and the priest sings the 'Exsultet,' the ancient and beautiful song in praise of the light. We acclaim the resurrection with an organ fanfare, and the ringing of bells and clashing of pots and pans, and the church lights are raised as we throw open the doors of the reredos above the high altar in joyful celebration. A moment of high drama not to be missed!

The Paschal Candle leads us to the font and is dipped into the water to bless it. Gathered around the font, the symbol of the empty tomb, we renew our baptismal vows and are sprinkled with the waters of resurrection; a reminder of our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ.

The joyful celebration of the Eucharist crowns the liturgy. This is one of the longer services of the year, but certainly one of the most powerful, and the most glorious.

WHAT IS LITURGICAL WORSHIP ALL ABOUT?

It is very easy with our perfectly ordered liturgical year to take each season in isolation, and see them as bearing no relation to each other. Here is one week when we remember Christ's birth; here is another when we remember his death.

But the idea of a fixed liturgical year as we know it is a relatively recent invention. There was no order to these different seasons; they were kept at different times in different places, in different ways; they would often overlap and conflict in wonderful and chaotic variation.

And in that we have a key to understanding what we are doing when we worship. We are not beginning and ending something time-limited, when we begin an act of worship, and conclude it. We are entering into the constant and unlimited work of God, which is past, present, future, and continuous: not tied to any one place or time.

Our continued entering into this 'liturgical time' begins to consecrate the way we approach our life outside of worship, and reorientate our relationships with God and each other. We experience Good Friday in the light of Easter Day, and in doing so, we can know in our own times of terrible darkness and despair that God has power to turn those situations around; indeed, he already has.

Equally if we are tempted to see the life of faith as just about 'me and God,' then entering into these Gospel events powerfully draws us towards others: those Christians worshipping with us, and Christians who have worshipped in the same way before us; and Christians worshipping in the same way around the world today, who might be in desperate need of our prayers and practical support.

And this is what makes Holy Week, in particular, so special. We are not simply re-enacting historical events; nor is it just an intellectual exercise. We are entering in body, mind, and spirit into Christ's Passion: his death, his resurrection, his continued prayer and work for the world.

This is part of what St Paul means in Romans 6, which we will hear at the Easter Vigil, about our being baptized into the death of Christ, so that we too might be raised with him and walk in newness of life. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." This is not just food for the mind, something to think about or remember: this is the food of life, the very stuff of our human redemption.

If our aim as Christians is to become like Christ, then entering as deeply as possible into the events of his life and death help to form him within us. These liturgies do something more than just help us to understand, they will help us to *become*.

And we do it again and again each year because, as human beings, we cannot yet comprehend the totality of the mystery of Christ—or, indeed, know completely the whole of ourselves. We might ‘do’ Holy Week 50 or 60 times; but from that point of view, the work of Holy Week is never done. Each time we do it Christ is formed a little more within us; each time we can discern in real and tangible ways the unfathomable and indefinable mystery of our redemption.

Fr Alexander Crawford, 2023



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