

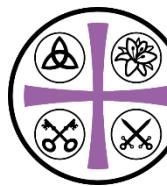


# Holy Week

## A Brief Guide

**What we do and why we do it**

**The Revd Canon Bruce Saunders**



## Landmarks in a spiritual landscape

Just as the natural world has its annual cycle of returning seasons, its changing colours, its beginnings and ends, so the Church's liturgical year has its seasons and festivals. The story of God's love, from creation to salvation, is too big to be told at any one time, so the Church focuses on each part of the story in sequence through the year.

Beginning afresh each year (in the late autumn) on Advent Sunday, the Church has crafted a rhythm of prayer and worship that continues to shape much of Christian life and thought. To some the Church's festivals and fast-days are anachronisms, echoes of an antique drum we no longer follow; but to others they constitute ancient and trusted landmarks on a spiritual landscape by which Christians have plotted their course and focused their prayerful attention, and which – like other rhythms in our lives – we do well to heed.<sup>1</sup>

This brief guide is chiefly about the seven days of Holy Week, which is both the climax to the season of Lent and a bridge to Easter and to where Easter is leading.

## The Season of Lent

In the early days of the Christian Church, the 40 days before Easter (excluding Sundays) were observed as a season of penitence. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and takes its name from the ash made from the burning of some of the Palm Crosses from the previous year's Palm Sunday. A cross is

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Atwell in *Celebrating the Seasons* Canterbury Press 1999



marked in ash on the penitent's forehead with grim words that recall human mortality: 'You are dust and to dust you shall return.' In Genesis (3.19), they were words of condemnation, following the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Covering your head with ashes, or dressing in sackcloth and ashes was a familiar sign of penitence in the Old Testament.

For us, the ash and the accompanying words remind us of our human dependence on the grace and mercy of God, for we cannot save ourselves. The cross of ash on the forehead is also a visible reminder of the invisible cross of water placed there at baptism, that other great sign of God's redeeming love.



Allowing ourselves to be ashed year after year indicates that although Christ died 'once for all', we recognise that we continue to mar God's image in us, and therefore continue to need God's saving grace.

The 40 days of Lent also echo Jesus' 40 days in the desert at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee (Mark 1.12). That was in itself an echo of the Hebrew people's 40 years' pilgrimage from slavery to their Promised Land recorded in the Old Testament book of Exodus. Both were times when human obedience to divine will was tested and proved. In Lent, we are invited to join Jesus in the desert by practising self-discipline (hence the tradition of fasting and giving something up). In church during Lent, the starkness of Jesus' desert experience is reflected in the subdued colours on the altar and



in dark clergy vestments. The church is bare of flowers. Crosses, crucifixes and other sacred images around the church may be veiled in solemn purple. Alleluias and the triumphant *Glory to God in the Highest* are silent until Easter. Special penitential prayers and hymns are used.

The Stations of the Cross is a devotion derived from the practice of early Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem who retraced the route of Jesus through the streets of the city along the Via Dolorosa (The Way of Sorrows) from the judgement hall of Pilate, where Jesus was condemned, to the site of his crucifixion. There are 14 stations or stopping places (some biblical, others traditional). These are depicted in images or by simple numbered crosses on the walls of churches today so that we, individually or as a group, may make our own pilgrimage of meditation and prayer as we follow Jesus, step by step, to the Cross.

The old English word *Lencten*, from which we get the word *Lent*, means 'lengthening' and 'growing', like a young plant responding to the springtime warming of the soil. So, Lent is far from being a barren time. It is a time for growth. Early Christians went through a strenuous time of preparation during Lent in readiness for their baptism and confirmation as dawn broke on Easter Day.

For us all, it can be a precious time each year when we 'learn to be God's people once again', and as the Church prepares to enter again into the mystery of God's dying and rising in Holy Week and Easter.



## Holy Week

During Holy Week, the rhythm of the Church's year slows down, so that we can attend in unusual detail to the final days of Jesus' life on earth. Holy Week is also sometimes called Passiontide. In English, the word 'passion' has appropriate overtones of divine love, but the Latin word from which it derives emphasises suffering, as in English words like 'patient' and 'passive', speaking of someone to whom dreadful things are done, like a lamb to the slaughter.

## Palm Sunday

The week begins on Palm Sunday, commemorating Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. He was welcomed by crowds waving branches from the trees, and shouting Hosanna (Mark 11.1–11). In church, palm crosses are blessed and carried in procession as we too welcome Jesus. The long Passion Gospel recounts the story of all that happened over the following days, when the crowd's 'Hosanna' quickly turned to 'Crucify'. Members of the congregation identify themselves with the people in the story by speaking the parts of Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate and the crowd.



On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, the Eucharist is celebrated with Bible readings that take us deeper into the darkness of Jesus' Passion. The final three days of the week are known as the Triduum (The Three Days), and are days of unique solemnity.



## Maundy Thursday

On the night before he died, Jesus kept the Passover with his friends. The Jewish feast of Passover has roots that go back to the Exodus experience of the Hebrews in Egypt when the angel of death passed over the Hebrew homes and allowed them to escape from slavery in Egypt in God's great act of salvation (Exodus chapters 12 and 13). The Christian Eucharist celebrated on Maundy Thursday evening is filled with the memory and the significance of the Jewish Passover, for here again, in Christ, God redeems, saves and frees us from those parts of our own nature that enslave us to selfishness and sin.

For Jesus and his disciples, it was to be their last supper. For us, every Eucharist is a precious opportunity to experience God's grace as intimately and as personally as if we had been there with him at the Last Supper that night.



On this special occasion, which commemorates Jesus' institution of the Eucharist, the church is bright with light, and the altar and clergy are clothed in white or gold.

While the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke tell the story of the Last Supper, John's Gospel (chapter 13) tells us that during supper, Jesus took a towel and, like a servant, washed the disciples' feet, showing them what Christian service looks like, and telling them to do the same for one another, in a mutual giving and receiving of love.



The liturgical foot-washing that takes place during this service is both a practical reminder of Jesus's action and an opportunity to respond. His commandment to 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 13.34) is the 'mandate' that gives Maundy Thursday its name.



The service ends as Jesus and his disciples go out into darkness on the Mount of Olives. As we remember him, kneeling in desperate prayer to the Father about his coming ordeal, the church is darkened and stripped of all its decoration, while penitential psalms are sung. Like the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, we are bidden to stay awake and watch with him. Some of the bread and wine consecrated at the Eucharist is solemnly carried to an Altar of Repose where, surrounded by candles, it becomes the focus for a vigil of silent prayer until midnight. Having watched with Jesus as long as we are able, we leave the darkened church, like the disciples slipping fearfully into the night.

## Good Friday

Like the world, the church is empty, dark and desolate. Clergy wear black. As people gather quietly for worship, the church bells are muffled. Organ music is restrained.

The Good Friday Liturgy is unlike any other service in the year. It is timed to coincide with the final three hours of Jesus' suffering on the Cross. In some churches, there is a three-hour devotion, with Jesus' Passion the subject of preaching, prayers



and hymns. In churches of a more Catholic tradition, the ancient Good Friday Liturgy provides the framework for our worship.

John's long account of the Passion story is sung or recited in all its tragic beauty.

A bare wooden cross stands in front of the congregation. The cross is no mere trophy, but is the sign of God's costly love for us, with the challenge to take up and carry its weight at the cost of our own pride and selfishness.



We are invited not just to 'survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died', but in an unusually personal way to respond to its presence. We are invited to stand or kneel, one by one, before the cross. Some touch its rough wood for a moment, some observe the tradition of kissing it, some make the sign of the cross over their heart. All use this precious moment to offer a prayer of thanksgiving for love so amazing, so divine.

Special prayers and readings, not heard at other times, are used. Since we are so close to the Cross and to the vivid reality of Christ's redemptive self-giving, the Eucharist is not normally celebrated, but we are invited during the Good Friday Liturgy to receive the bread and wine from the Altar of Repose consecrated on Maundy Thursday evening.



## Holy Saturday

The Church is still technically dark and naked. The Eucharist is not celebrated. The First Letter of Peter (3.19 and 4.6) and later tradition suggest that at this time Christ descended triumphantly into the realm of the dead, to bring salvation to the righteous who had died since the beginning of the world. The Aumbry, the wall-safe where the sacrament of Christ's presence is usually reserved, stands open and empty. But the earlier part of the day is usually busy with flower-arranging, brass-polishing and re-dressing the Church for Easter.

## Easter Eve and Easter Morning

After the horror of Good Friday and the emptiness of Holy Saturday, the Church gathers in darkness, keeping vigil, waiting to see what God will do. In ancient times (and in an increasing number of churches today), the service takes place as dawn is breaking on Easter morning, leading directly into the first Eucharist of Easter. Alternatively, the Vigil takes place on Saturday evening.

Our Vigil begins in the darkness with *The Service of the Word*. Bible readings from the Old Testament recall the prophecies and promises of God's salvation from the very beginning, and New Testament readings show how these promises are fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

Then, *The Service of Light*. With prayers to the Father who is the creator of light, and to Christ, the Light of the World, a spark ignites a fire from which the great Paschal (Easter) Candle is lit. The candle bears the picture of the cross, and five



sharp studs are pressed, like the nails of the crucifixion, through the cross into the wax.

The Deacon carries the candle into the church, which is still in darkness, followed by the congregation with candles lighted from the flame.

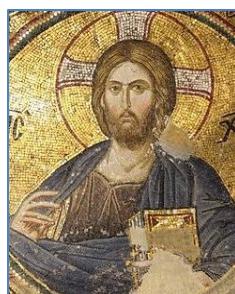
Three times, the deacon stops to sing 'The Light of Christ' – at the west end, the middle end and the east end of the church – signifying Christ's birth, passion and resurrection....



The Easter Proclamation (*Exsultet*, or 'Rejoice!') is said or sung, joyfully declaring that 'this is the night' when God's ancient promises are fulfilled. The lights go on, revealing the church in all its Easter beauty; flowers have returned; the altars are dressed in gold or white; the organ thunders; bells are rung. *Alleluia* and *Glory to God in the Highest* are heard again.

Even if there are no candidates to be baptised or confirmed, the congregation may renew its own baptismal vows, rejoicing that we have been born again with Christ, and committing ourselves anew to his service.

There follows the first Eucharist of Easter, the supreme climax of the Christian year.





## HOLY WEEK SERVICES

### **PALM SUNDAY**

8.00am	Said Eucharist
9.45am	Sung Eucharist with a procession, beginning at The College, College Road
6.30pm	William Lloyd Webber's <i>The Saviour</i>

### **MONDAY**

7.30pm	Service of Meditation and Eucharist
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### **TUESDAY**

7.30pm	Said Eucharist
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### **WEDNESDAY**

7.30pm	Said Eucharist with Penitential Rite
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### **MAUNDY THURSDAY**

7.30pm	Sung Eucharist, followed by The Watch
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### **GOOD FRIDAY**

9.15am	Craft for Children at The College, College Road
10.30am	Children's service in church
1.00pm	Meditation – a quiet service of reflection
2.00pm	Sung Good Friday Liturgy

### **HOLY SATURDAY**

10.00am	Help to make our Easter Garden, an activity for children and families
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### **EASTER SUNDAY**

5.30am	Dawn Service
8.00am	Said Eucharist
10.00am	Sung Eucharist
12.15pm	Said Eucharist
6.30pm	Solemn Evensong