

The Liturgy of Holy Week

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We are at the start of Holy Week, the holiest week of the year.

There are many different ways to mark the events of this week, which have evolved and changed over the centuries and continue to be done differently in different branches of the Church, and indeed, of the Church of England.

However, there is a series of traditional liturgies, which has been distilled for us by CW Times and Seasons, following a pattern which has developed from the earliest Church and which is largely held in common with all the churches which share a Catholic tradition.

There are two basic ways in which to interpret the liturgies of Holy Week as it is practised today.

One is about re-living an experience, making it one's own, so that we experience the events of Jesus' final week on earth afresh every year, in the way that Jewish people re-live the Passover. It brings the past into the present and reminds us that both contain an eternal truth central to our faith. It also reminds us of the full gamut of emotion and human experience Jesus went through and confirms for us once again that the Incarnate Christ really did share in everything we go through, and that he really is "God with us."

From fourth-century Jerusalem we have examples of the liturgy being a re-living of Christ's footsteps in this way – on Palm Sunday pilgrims would walk from Gethsemane to the gates of Jerusalem carrying palm branches and on Good Friday the commemorations would end with a walk to Golgotha. This kind of relatively stripped-down liturgy presumes that we know the story inside out, and we can re-live it in our heads.

The other is a more missional or evangelistic way of doing things, which explains the significance of the narrative in detail and brings it alive to those who are experiencing it without much prior knowledge. An element of this is essential in modern secular society, in which perhaps the majority of people who come into our churches are not fully versed in every tiny detail of the Passion, but who can be drawn by the beauty, the mystery and the story itself into the heart of faith.

Oddly, both the medieval Passion plays and the large chunks of the Passion read after the Reformation and still laid down in the Book of Common Prayer for every day in Holy Week fulfil this second aim in different ways.

They tell the story, the whole story, and this is perhaps why we read the whole of the Passion Gospel on Palm Sunday as well as Good Friday, and why the Book of Common Prayer involves a large part of the story every day.

We don't want to make it so mysterious that only the initiated and the theologically learned can understand what is going on. In fact, we do want to include elements that draw others in to find out more.

Using a donkey in a procession on Palm Sunday is a case in point.

The early Christians never did this, and it isn't mentioned as an idea in any of our liturgies, but large numbers of churches do use a donkey, in order to teach the details of the story, and frankly to catch the attention of children and passers-by, who might then become curious about what is going on and follow along.

There are lots of other elements in the story of Holy Week, and in particular of the Triduum, the Great Three Days from Maundy Thursday evening to the Resurrection, which could be seen as mere "props" to help us to re-live and understand the story, but which also, in some sacramental sense, are MORE than just a gimmick – they contain some essence of Christ's story within them. The water at the foot-washing on Maundy Thursday, the bread and wine of the Last Supper, the wooden Cross on Good Friday and the Paschal Candle, which represents Christ, the Light of the World, as he rises from the dead during the night before Easter Day... all these are vital to the telling of the story, but also bring us in some special way into the presence of the Crucified and Risen Christ himself.

So we begin on Palm Sunday, with the procession which re-lives Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding on a beast of burden. We are encouraged to wave palm branches and to sing Hosanna, as we are told the people did as he arrived.

And yet, the sudden change of temperature, as we get to the second half of the service, the reading of the Passion, shows how very quickly a crowd can be infiltrated and turned from friendly to hostile, as we have seen in so many demonstrations in recent times. Suddenly those who have shouted "Hosanna" seem to be shouting, "Crucify him.."

Perhaps we are left wondering what we would actually have done if we were there.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week continue the story into increasing darkness, as we meet every day for simple Eucharists, reflections or night prayer.

Today we heard the story of how, early in that final week, Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus' feet with her hair, anticipating his death.

Tomorrow we shall be reminded of Jesus' declaration that "The hour is come", and the phrase, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it bears no fruit." We are being slowly prepared for what is to come.

And on Holy Wednesday, we are traditionally reminded of how Judas Iscariot, after sharing in the Last Supper with Jesus and his friends, suddenly goes out alone into the darkness to betray him. The scene is set for a single liturgy which, in the earliest Church, was all completed during the night of Holy Saturday and Sunday morning, but is now divided over three separate stages.

So on Maundy Thursday, the first of the Great Three Days, we gather in church for a Eucharist which begins with the powerful symbol of foot-washing. We hear the Gospel reading which describes Jesus himself taking the bowl and towel and washing his disciples' feet, telling those who protest, "Unless I wash your feet, you have no part in me." He is showing us all how to love one another, as he has loved us. People are often quite squeamish about having their feet washed – or indeed from the priest's side, about washing lots of grubby little children's feet which turn the water and the towel black(!), but it is a hugely powerful gesture, and it is sad we can't do it this year. True humility is about baring our vulnerability and suppressing the vanity that reminds us we haven't had a pedicure recently, and more than one person has said to me, "When you were washing my feet, I didn't see you, I could see Jesus."

Cleansed, we move to the Eucharist, re-living those events of Maundy Thursday, whilst in the elements of bread and wine, encountering the mystery of Jesus' broken body and blood.

But the Maundy Thursday service ends in darkness and chaos, as Psalm 22 is sung or said, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me..." and the altar is stripped of all its light and beauty, just figures moving about in the darkness as we imagine it must have been in Gethsemane at the time of Jesus' arrest.

In many churches, the remaining consecrated hosts are taken to a separate little Altar, the so-called Altar of Repose, surrounded by flowers and candles. We are encouraged to keep vigil before this altar, remembering the abuse and imprisonment following his arrest, as Jesus rebuked his disciples in the Garden as they waited for his captors, "Could you not even watch one hour with me...?" I don't know whether you have visited the underground dungeon in Jerusalem, which is traditionally associated with Christ's imprisonment, but it is a place of utter, utter darkness.

We leave Christ there, alone in the darkness as we go home in silence.

As we return the next day, we find the altar still stripped bare as we come to share in the three hours between 12 and 3 when we recall Christ's Crucifixion. Often, there are reflections or music before the Cross, and we are then led into the liturgy itself, as a wooden Cross is brought in. Here we sing the words, "This is the wood of the Cross on which hung the Saviour of the world."

Veneration of the Cross may take place – not to be thought of as worshipping the Cross itself, as we kneel before it one by one (in less hygiene-conscious times, kissing or touching the wood) but to bring home to us the suffering, and to encounter within it something which acts almost like a sacrament, "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." We remember the grace offered to us through this act of self-sacrifice on the Cross.

When I was at theological college, we were each offered the chance to hammer a nail into the Cross. It brought with it a visceral horror, a sadness and particular sense of involvement I have never since encountered.

Some churches will then distribute to the congregation the remaining bread left from Maundy Thursday. When everything is gone, the locked aumbry or tabernacle, in which any

consecrated hosts are normally kept, is left wide open to emphasise the stark emptiness of Holy Saturday, when Christ's body has been laid in the tomb. We wait, with the disciples...

And then, the final Day of the Three, we come to Easter Eve. Some of us celebrate this on Saturday evening, some before dawn on Easter Day. We are, of course, only told that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb very early before it was light, and the body of Christ was gone. We don't know at what time the mystery of the Resurrection itself took place, so we are allowed some leeway!

This third part of the liturgy in any case begins in darkness, reminding us of the dark ending of Maundy Thursday and the emotional darkness and sadness of Good Friday.

But now the light begins to dawn. We hear the story of God's salvation of his people, we light an Easter Fire to symbolize the beginnings the return of light to the world, and we light from it the Paschal Candle, marked with nails to show Christ's scars, but shining brightly in the darkness as we glimpse the hope and glory of the Resurrection.

The Exsultet is often sung as the most ancient of Resurrection hymns, and as the candle is carried into church, candles and lights are lit to dispel the darkness of the past days.

The Gospel reading describes the women coming to the tomb, but uncertain what has happened. It is the beginning, but not the final glory.

This was traditionally the moment when baptism candidates who had spent Lent preparing to be initiated into the Christian faith were cleansed from their sins, and together with Christ, rose to new life on Easter Day. Today we may still baptize people at that most special moment, or the full congregation may renew their baptismal vows together.

And finally, straightaway or early on Easter Day, we celebrate the Resurrection in full, with beauty and music and lilies and the first Eucharist of Easter. Christ has risen from the dead, but we can only fully appreciate the joy of the moment if we have walked with him the way of his Cross, experiencing the foot-washing, the Last Supper, the betrayal and abandonment of Gethsemane, the watch in the darkness, the long-drawn out pain and suffering of the Cross, and the emptiness of Holy Saturday.

It is then that we can shout together, "Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, Alleluia!"