

Holy Week and Easter

Christianity's most important festival occurs each year in Holy Week. Beginning with Palm/Passion Sunday, Holy Week commemorates the last week of Jesus' life.

Through a series of public services of worship, Christians everywhere join with Christ as he enters Jerusalem, shares a last meal with his disciples, is arrested, tortured, crucified and buried. Finally, at the Easter Vigil after Sundown on the evening of Holy Saturday, Christians all over the world gather to celebrate Christ's resurrection and renew their baptismal promise to follow Christ faithfully.

Palm/Passion Sunday

There are two parts to this opening service of Holy Week.

The first part is familiar to most Protestants. It is the *Liturgy of the Palms*, commemorating the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem to cries of 'hosanna' and the waving of palm branches. The second part of the service is not, perhaps, so familiar. The *Liturgy of the Passion* is a reading of the whole story of Christ's suffering and death, interspersed with the extinguishing of candles to symbolise the ebbing away of Christ's life. Because the service is best completed in almost total darkness, the darkness at the moment of Christ's death, many gather for this service in the evening.



Maundy Thursday



The Maundy Thursday service commemorates the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples. According to John's gospel, Jesus took a servant's towel at the evening meal and washed his disciple's feet. He did this to show that he had come amongst them as a servant, and that they, too, were called to serve one another. In memory of this event, the liturgy gives opportunity for the worshippers to wash each other's feet. Afterwards, worshippers share the Eucharist together, in memory of that first Eucharist Jesus shared with his friends.

Because the Last Supper occurred in the evening, this service usually takes place in the evening as well.

The Maundy Thursday service should not be regarded as an event that stands on its own. It is part of one great act of worship that lasts for three days, in a multi-service liturgy known as the *Paschal Triduum*, or *Great Three Days of Easter*. For that reason, there is no blessing or dismissal at the end of the Thursday event. Instead, the church is stripped of all colour and light in preparation for the next part of the *Triduum* on Good Friday.

Good (or Great) Friday

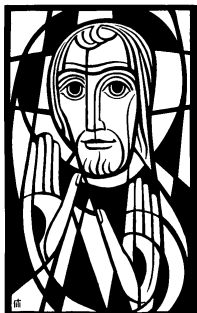
There are two services on Good Friday. The first, an ecumenical *Stations* or *Way of the Cross* procession, has its origins in a private devotional practise from fourth century Rome. There the journey of Christ to Golgotha, carrying his cross, was commemorated by a rhythmic movement of walking, reading and prayer. Today it has become a means by which separated churches may come together to publicly share their sorrow at Christ's death. An ecumenical *Way of the Cross* is often planned for the late morning of Good Friday.



The second service of Good Friday is often celebrated at 3 pm, in memory of the hour of Christ's death (Matt 27.45). This second component of the *Easter Triduum* incorporates a reading of the story of Christ's death, a series of 'reproaches' as from God the Father towards a world that would crucify his son, and a final movement of silent prayer that is known, traditionally, as the 'veneration of the cross'. Here a great wooden cross is laid on the floor of the church and people are invited to stand or kneel before it, to touch the cross and offer their prayers of penitence and thanksgiving for Christ's great sacrifice. It is a very, very moving service.

Again, there is no dismissal or blessing at the end of the service. Instead, the participants are invited to continue their worship at the final component of the *Triduum*, The Great Vigil of Easter.

The Great Vigil of Easter



The Great Vigil is the most important service of the Christian year because it celebrates what, for Christians, is the central event in human history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The service begins after sundown with a *Liturgy of Light*. Worshippers gather outside the church around a fire from which a new Paschal candle is lit. The Paschal (Easter) candle is a symbol of Christ's resurrection. It burns in the church every Sunday during the Easter season to remind us that Christ is risen. Following behind the

candle, worshipers then process into a darkened church where they are seated for the *Liturgy of the Word*, a reading of selected passages from the whole history of salvation. As each reading passes, they say a prayer and light a new candle. The church gets gradually brighter. At the final reading, an account of the resurrection, all the lights go on and the congregation rises to sing a joyful song of praise to God. What follows is a *Liturgy of Baptism*, in which each worshipper renews the vows made at their baptism or confirmation: to turn from evil and to follow Christ. The congregation is sprinkled with water as a sign of renewal in that vocation and mission.

Finally, worshippers share the *Liturgy of the Lord's Supper* as a sign that Christ is amongst his people as the crucified and risen one, feeding and nurturing his people for their mission in the world. A blessing and dismissal indicates that the *Triduum* of Easter is now over. At this point, the champagne is often opened and enjoyed!

Feast of the Resurrection

The morning service on Easter Day is often relatively informal. Because many worshippers will have been up late the night before, the service is built around a breakfast meal of bread, fish and wine. The service commemorates John's account of the appearance of the risen Jesus to seven of his disciples on the beach of Lake Galilee where they were fishing (Jn 21). Worshippers may be invited to bring some bread, fish and wine (or grape-juice, if you prefer) to share with others. The service includes the ancient greeting 'Christ is risen: *He is risen indeed!*' and there are stories, prayers and Easter hymns aplenty. This is a morning of great joy and celebration at the new hope of resurrection.



Garry Deverell
www.deverell.net