

A Reflection on Holy Week

Holy Week, in the Christian church, extends from Palm Sunday until Easter Sunday. It is the final week of Lent, which is the 40 days (excluding Sundays) leading up to Easter Sunday, a period during which we reflect on the life, suffering and death of Jesus Christ, and our role in placing him on the cross. It is a time of quiet reflection, penance and abstinence – when we choose to deny ourselves.

I was raised in the Methodist church, taken there weekly by a loving grandmother. And I became a Christian in a reformed evangelical church, where I spent the first 13 years of my Christian journey and where my understanding of the faith was formed. In those years, to the best of my memory, Easter went like this: On Palm Sunday we celebrated the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem – “Hosanna to the Son of David, the King of Israel; Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!” It was a great, happy, festive service, with palm branches and singing and joy. And then the next Sunday was Easter – “Christ the Lord is risen today, hallelujah” – accompanied of course by Easter eggs and hot cross buns. These two Sundays were great celebrations!

But it was as if we jumped from one celebration to the next without recognising that in between Jesus has been crucified. Of course, this would play an important part of the Easter Sunday sermon; but this was by way of introduction to the resurrection, a story of hope and new life and an invitation to respond to the Gospel. (I admit that my memory may be doing an injustice to what really took place in these churches – it is best to read this as my impression rather than a critique of other churches. And it seems to me that the nonsacramental churches have been reclaiming various elements of the sacramental tradition of late, including the observance of Lent and Holy Week. So I am really writing a personal reflection here.)

When I joined, largely by ‘accident’, the Anglican Church 14 years ago, I could not understand all the intensity over Lent and Easter. Indeed, many newcomers to an Anglican expression of the Christian faith (and perhaps also to Catholic or Orthodox, though I do not have personal experience of these churches) are puzzled by this. Why spend every night of Holy Week in church? And three hours on Good Friday? And a 5 or 6 am service on Sunday? It all sounds crazy.

But I have come, over the years, to recognise the deep and important value of doing just this. It has hugely deepened my faith and confronted me with the horror of human sin, and of my sin. And it has opened my eyes, in ways not before, to the enormous, radical, passionate and risky love of God the Trinity for humanity, for me. And so I wish here to share my own reflections on Holy Week, using this year’s readings, influenced partly by the Holy Week liturgies and partly by my personal experience of Holy Week.

Palm Sunday: The Sunday of the Passion

The Palm Sunday service has two main sections. In the first half, we celebrate Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This is a big celebration. We often start outside the church in the car park, calling out “Hosanna to the Son of David, the King of Israel; Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!” We read Matthew 21:1-11, which tells this story. We receive crosses made out of palm leaves. We process around the church (this is something some don’t like as it can get rather chaotic) singing hymns and then into the church. It is festive and joyous.

But within 10 minutes of the service, we are reading Isaiah 50's narrative about the Lord's suffering servant and Philippians 2:5-11's hymn of Christ (the second person of the Trinity, who became human, and suffered death at the hands of humanity). Not quite the celebratory mood of the procession. And then we traditionally launch into a very long reading from Matthew 26:14 to 27:66 – 128 verses in total, which takes a good half hour to read! Strictly speaking, we would be standing for that. This reading covers the narrative from the Last Supper, through the Gethesemene, the betrayal, the trial, Peter's denial, the crucifixion, the death and the burial of Jesus. And there we stop.

The first few times I participated in this service, I could not get my head around the radical contrast between these two readings. I felt this reading of the Passion was totally misplaced for Palm Sunday, which was supposed to be triumphant. Why were we reading about Christ's death, a week before it happened?

It was only a couple of years ago, when I preached on Palm Sunday, that I finally realised that the whole point of this service is this stark contrast. It is to help us recognise how quickly and how easily we as communities, and I as individual, can swing from praising God to crucifying God. The contrast is intended to shock – how is it possible that Jerusalem went from 'Hosanna' to 'Crucify him' in a matter of days? How do I go so easily from 'Hosanna' to 'Crucify him', from 'Praise God' to 'I choose to sin'?

But in addition, the long reading is the only time in the Christian calendar that we are required to take in the whole passion story. Typically, we read only about 10 verses of Gospel at a time, and through that we get snippets of the story. And indeed, the liturgy allows us to read just Matthew 27:11-54 (which itself is a long reading), as a short cut. I don't like short cuts! There is something important in facing up to the whole story, of hearing the whole narrative, of journeying the whole distance. And reading it on one's own is not the same as hearing it read in community. In the reading of the passion story, we can find ourselves among the crowds, among the disciples, among the servants, among the onlookers. And in that, we gaze upon the face of the loving Christ and upon the greatest darkness that humanity, that we, are capable of.

These terrible things are not to be glossed over. I only noticed yesterday that in an Anglican Prayer Book, Palm Sunday is also called "The Sunday of the Passion." This is very apt. And it helps us to transition into Holy Week, and to recognise that something tragic is about to unfold. And it is particularly important for those who hop from Sunday to Sunday, because it breaks the happy illusion that the triumphal entry is followed easily by the resurrection.

Holy Week: Monday to Wednesday

We hold daily services during the week. Some churches do this year round, but at our church this is something specific to Holy Week. From Monday to Wednesday, the services serve to prepare us for the passion. We take our Gospel readings from John 12 and 13:

- ❖ On Monday we read John 12:1-8, about the anointing of Jesus with perfume by Mary. Among other things, this anointing is a kind of type of the preparation Mary will later give to Jesus for his burial. It is a present act, but points down the road to Saturday.
- ❖ On Tuesday we read John 12:24-36, where Jesus speaks about his pending death, and says, "But I, when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself."
- ❖ And on Wednesday, we read John 13:21-30, which speaks about Judas' betrayal of Jesus.

Each reading has its own intrinsic value. But the sequence of the three readings is also important and is only recognised when we participate in all three services. We start with an act of great love and reverence for Jesus – it points us to our own love for Christ and our high esteem for him. On Tuesday, we begin to recognise that something is not quite right, as Jesus talks about dying. But most strongly we are presented with Jesus' great love for the whole of humanity – "I will draw all people to myself". And on Wednesday, despite our love for Christ and Christ's love for us, we are suddenly slammed with the betrayal, for just a bag of coin. Like with the juxtaposition of the Palm Sunday readings, the juxtaposition of the Monday/Tuesday readings with the Wednesday reading is very powerful and helps again to alleviate us of our complacency and self-righteousness, and to recognise again how Jesus died because of my sin. That I helped to put him on that cross.

If one is in any doubt of this, then we can use the alternate reading for Wednesday, which is Mark 12:1-11, about the owner of the vineyard who sends various messengers to the tenants of the vineyard. They are all murdered by the tenants. Then the owner sends his own son, thinking, "Surely they will respect my son." But instead they seize the opportunity and kill him also.

Maundy Thursday

The Maundy Thursday service is the observance of the institution of the Last Supper (Holy Communion, Eucharist, the Divine Service) and the washing of the disciples' feet. The Eucharist is central to Anglican spirituality, and is celebrated every Sunday and also during the week. In some Anglican churches it is celebrated daily. This is often seen as odd to those from the nonsacramental churches, who often celebrate Holy Communion only once a month.

The reason why the Eucharist is central to us is explained most fully in the Maundy Thursday service. It is Jesus' last meal with his disciples before his death. It is later replicated, to some extent, by the other meals he shares with them after his resurrection and before his ascension. So, in some ways, the Eucharist is simply our sharing in this kind of intimate fellowship with Jesus, particularly during this time of crisis.

But the Eucharist also embodies the whole of the passion story, as Jesus simply says, "This bread is my body" and "this wine is my blood". And since the passion is the heart of the Christian faith, so too is the Eucharist. In the Eucharist I personally experience three things simultaneously: (1) a deep awareness of my own brokenness and need, (2) an overwhelming confrontation with Christ's suffering at my expense, and (3) a tender and intimate encounter with Christ's great love for me and for the whole of the world.

The Eucharist is paired with the washing of the disciples' feet, which we usually reenact – our priest will wash the feet of 12 members of the congregation. It is kind of awkward, but also an authentic expression of service and servanthood, which Jesus models so well, and explains explicitly to the disciples.

But at the end of this service everything goes south, as we recite Psalm 22, which opens with the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" During this reading the sanctuary, usually decked out in colours, candles and flowers, is stripped bare, until all that remains is the empty wooden altar. Even the crosses are covered with purple cloth. The sanctuary lights are switched off and we leave in darkness, in silence. It evokes the stark emptiness and desolation of Gethesemene, when Jesus wrestles with God about the painful path that he has to follow. There can be not doubt at this point that we are truly entering the passion of Christ.

Good Friday

On Good Friday, we hold a three-hour service, which begins at noon (when Jesus was crucified) and ends at 3pm (when Jesus died). It is a long service, and because it is also a very slow and quiet service, some people do not enjoy it. But I have witnessed increasing numbers of people who stay for the full three hours, and who choose to engage in the whole experience. This is a vital part of our experience of Holy Week and of the passion of Christ.

Matthew's Gospel (27:36) tells us that the Pilate's soldiers, after they had assaulted and crucified Jesus, sat down (presumably at the foot of the cross, or nearby) and "kept watch over him". For me, this is what the Good Friday service is – we sit at the foot of the cross and keep watch over Jesus during his last hours. It is ironic and tragic that the people who kept watch over him (which implies a caretaking function, as one might keep watch beside the bed of someone we love who is dying) are the same people who tortured and mocked him and ultimately murdered him. And this irony speaks strongly to me personally, because while I love and keep watch over Jesus, I am also aware – increasingly aware as the three hours progress – that he died because of my own brokenness and sin. Holding these together is very painful. And the service helps me to grasp and not shy away from this horrible truth.

There are various liturgies that can be used at this service. This year we will be reflecting on the last words that Jesus spoke, as recorded in the four Gospels, while he hung on the cross. At the end of this service, we recognise that Jesus died – "And Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, and died." This is not just Jesus dying, but also the Son of God dying, and also the second person of the Trinity dying, and thus, in an important though mysterious way, also God dying.

Holy Saturday

After that, what can one do but stand in shocked silence.

There are no words. There is no comfort. There is no light, no life, no breath. Nothing.

On Holy Saturday we don't have a service.

On Holy Saturday we do not celebrate the Eucharist.

For me it is a day in the grave. God has died. We have killed God. And there is nothing but death.

It is also for me as if the whole universe is holding its breath. I have an experience of suspense, of waiting, of barely daring to hope for the third day.

The Easter Vigil

Early on Sunday morning, before sunrise, we gather in the Garden of Remembrance (where the ashes of those who have died are scattered – in effect, our community graveyard). It is dark. And cold. There is a fire – a sign, albeit feeble, of hope.

In ancient times and in some churches today (alas not in ours) a vigil is kept throughout the night, during which we pray and meditate and hope that Christ may be victorious over death.

From that fire, the Easter Candle is lit and we say, "May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds." And from that candle we all light candles – "Christ our

light. Thanks be to God!" In the darkness and coldness of the grave, light dawns, the light of Christ. Dim and flickering at first, uncertain. But light!

We process into the church and sing,

Rejoice, heavenly powers. Sing, choirs of angels! Exult, all creation around God's throne!
Jesus Christ, our King, is risen! Sound the trumpet of salvation!

Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendour, radiant in the brightness of your King! Christ has
conquered! Glory fills you! Darkness vanquished for ever!

Rejoice, O Mother Church! Exult in glory! The risen Saviour shines upon you! Let this place
resound with joy, echoing the mighty song of all God's people!

This celebration, which coincides (more or less) with sunrise, as the light of God begins to shine through the windows of the church, dispelling darkness, is followed by a series of readings that tell the story of God's great and enduring work of salvation, starting with the creation of humanity in Genesis 2, humanity's fall in Genesis 3, Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac in Genesis 22, the liberation of Israel from Egypt in Exodus 14, God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai in Exodus 24 and culminating in God's promise to restore and enliven Israel in Ezekiel 22.

After this the candles in the sanctuary are lit, revealing the white linen and exuberance of flowers, and we celebrate the Eucharist, the thanksgiving for Christ's great gift of himself to the world.

And then (though at St Martins this takes place in the second service) we baptise children and renew our own baptismal vows. The baptism is a symbol of our transition from death to life, just as Christ himself transitioned from death to life. It is our participation with Christ in this journey.

The suspended breath of Holy Saturday is released, the grief of Good Friday is soothed, the desolation of Maundy Thursday is dispelled. And we discover that Christ has indeed risen, and brought with him hope and joy and new life. And we take in that we have been invited, wholeheartedly and lovingly, to participate in this new life. That we are forgiven and accepted and beloved. And that God is God, that God is life, that God is love – extravagant, radical, risky, all-giving love. That God is good and life is good.

And then we party!!

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