

Celebrating Holy Week by Ian Forrester

An article written in 2007, based on a previous article published in Sunday by Sunday Issue 11 (2000).
(Revised by Peter Moger March 2017)

The provision for Holy Week and Easter published in *Common Worship: Times and Seasons* (2006) is available for free download from the Common Worship pages of the Church of England's website <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/times-and-seasons.aspx>

At the heart of the celebration of seasonal time in the Christian Calendar lies the truth that God, in Jesus, shares our life, and changes it. The Paschal (or Easter) cycle of time which runs from Ash Wednesday, through Lent and Passiontide, Holy Week and Easter, to Ascension and Pentecost points to that change, brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The events of Holy Week are commemorated in a variety of ways by those of differing Christian traditions. Some are rooted in ancient Christian liturgical practice; others are less obviously liturgical. Good Friday, for instance, is often marked by processions of witness and extended preaching of the Cross. In the Church of England, prior to 1986, there was no official distinctive provision for Holy Week. In some parishes, Roman Catholic material was incorporated into Anglican liturgical forms, and in others, a range of local practices prevailed. The publication in 1986 of *Lent, Holy Week, Easter* made official commended material available for the Church of England, drawing heavily on existing Roman Catholic models. Subsequent publications in the Church of Scotland (the *Book of Common Order*, 1994) and the *Methodist Worship Book* of 1999 provided distinctive material for these churches.

As part of the *Common Worship* family of resources, *Times and Seasons* (TS) was published in 2006 as a resource to enrich worship in seasonal time. This collection draws on three pre-existent resources: *Lent, Holy Week, Easter*, *The Promise of His Glory* and *Enriching the Christian Year*. The provisions for Holy Week given in *Times and Seasons* offer a variety of approaches to the liturgical forms, with alternatives offering opportunities to nuance the theology in different ways. It needs to be remembered that the fully-worked models of services offered in TS are examples of how these services *might* be done, not a directive as to how they *must* be done.

Palm Sunday begins with the gathering of the people somewhere other than in church. Ideally they come with branches (cut locally) and – after the reading of the Palm Sunday Gospel – these, together with any palms or palm crosses, are blessed in order that they might be carried in procession. The use of local, live greenery emphasizes the essential message that the Holy Week liturgy is not an historical re-enactment exercise but something which makes present the significance of the events of Holy Week for us here and now. The procession enters the church building as if it were entering Jerusalem for the events of the Passion, and marks the beginning of the week's journey.

It is good to recall that the ashes for Ash Wednesday are made by burning these branches and crosses, acknowledging that our pledges to follow Christ as our King are often consumed and spoiled by human sin.

The procession provides some musical challenges! The ancient hymn 'All glory, laud and honour' (*Gloria, laus et honor*) is the most suitable processional hymn but is difficult to keep synchronized and in tune, especially with a large congregation. Possible solutions include: the choir or singers either lining the route or placed at points within the procession, a brass ensemble playing from the middle of the procession, or singing a simpler item.

The mood of exultation changes once everyone is in church. The Collect and New Testament Reading point to the death and self-emptying of Christ, and the Gospel is a Gospel of the Passion. The passion accounts from Matthew, Mark and Luke are read in Lectionary Years A, B and C on Palm Sunday, with John's Passion being reserved for Good Friday. There is a long-standing tradition of reading (or singing) the Passion Gospel in semi-dramatic form. This may be done very effectively even with a small congregation, and enables worshippers to become fully immersed in the passion story, as members of a crowd which shouts 'hosanna' at one point, and 'crucify him' the next. (An excellent resource for this is *Proclaiming the Passion*, Church House Publishing, 2007.)

Maundy Thursday is a day when we turn our thoughts to the upper room and the Last Supper. Just as important as the institution of the Eucharist is the commandment of Jesus, 'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 13.34). Thus it is common for a number of people present at the service to have their feet washed by the President. Christian service is to be self-giving, and those who would exercise power are to do so in a new spirit of humility. Some will find that it is just as demanding to allow themselves to become the object of the self-giving of others.

After the administration of Holy Communion, the Sacrament may be reverently carried to another altar or place in the church. As it is carried, the hymn 'Of the glorious body telling' (*Pange lingua*) is sometimes sung. A watch of prayer may be kept until midnight or, if resources allow, throughout the night. This reminds us of Jesus' question to the disciples, 'Could you not watch with me one hour?' (Mark 14.37).

The now utilitarian stripping of altars and other ornaments that happens after the service is less about the scattering of the disciples from Gethsemane than about a visible bridge to the desolation of Good Friday. This, and the fact that there is no dismissal at the Liturgy of Maundy Thursday, reminds us that from now until Easter is one continuous act of worship, with each service flowing seamlessly into the next.

Good Friday is a day when the liturgy should begin, and end, in silence. There is a choice of forms for the service. Some might think it inappropriate to receive Holy Communion; others will wish to celebrate the Eucharist; others will follow ancient practice and receive Communion from the Sacrament consecrated at the Maundy Thursday Eucharist. This is the option assumed in TS, and described here, though it is possible to use the TS material if using only parts of the service or if celebrating the Eucharist.

The service begins with the Collect, recalling us to a rule of liturgy that in special forms we are most likely to encounter primitive tradition. The readings with their psalm follow in the usual way, and the Passion from John's Gospel is read or sung by one, three or many voices. (Once again, *Proclaiming the Passion* is an excellent resource for this.) This is best followed by further silence.

The next feature of Good Friday is the bringing into the church of a wooden cross. Sometimes this is done processionally with three stops being made and the cross lifted for all to see. The cross is carried upright – not over the shoulder in imitation of Christ on the way to Golgotha – so as to emphasize the cross as a sign of Christ's victory (cf John 12.32). The cross is placed where all can see it and offer their own devotions. TS offers two versions of the Reproaches, traditional Good Friday scriptural texts, spoken as from the mouth of Jesus, which challenge our failure in discipleship and hardness of heart. In some traditions, these might be sung.

Lengthy and solemn Intercessions follow and, after these, the altar is covered with a cloth and the Sacrament is brought back from the place to which it was carried the night before. The Lord's Prayer is recited before the Invitation to Communion. Holy Communion is distributed and, after a Post-Communion prayer, the ministers depart in silence.

Easter Eve/Holy Saturday TS offers a reduced version of the primitive pattern in which the Vigil of Easter occupied most of the night before giving way to the first Eucharist of Easter. There are five elements to this liturgy:

- the Vigil Readings (of which there should be at least 3 in addition to the New Testament and Gospel and which must always include the account of the Exodus (Exodus 14.10–15.1a))
- the Service of Light, which begins outside the church with the blessing of the new fire (light symbolizing the triumph of life over death), lighting (from the new fire) of the Paschal Candle and procession of the light (with lighting of congregational candles), and the singing of the Easter Proclamation (*Exsultet*)
- the Liturgy of Initiation, in which baptismal water is blessed. Baptisms and Confirmations may take place, and there should be a renewal of baptismal promises by all Christians who are present
- the Liturgy of the Eucharist
- the Dismissal

TS offers two Patterns. One places the Service of Light before the Vigil readings; the other begins with the Vigil readings in darkness. Either of these may be used, whether the Easter Liturgy is celebrated at night, or very early on Easter morning.

A traditional feature of the Easter Liturgy is a loud organ fanfare and/or the playing of loud percussion instruments or handbells after the traditional Easter acclamation 'Alleluia. Christ is risen / he is risen indeed. Alleluia.'

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