

Celebrating Holy Week by Ian Forrester

An article written in 2007, based on a previous article published in Sunday by Sunday Issue 11 (2000).

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 (<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/worship/liturgy/commonworship/texts/>).

The events of Holy Week are commemorated in a variety of ways by those of differing Christian tradition. Not all these ways are liturgical, and Good Friday is often marked by processions of witness and extended periods of preaching. In 1986 the Church of England published *Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Services and Prayers*. These forms drew heavily on historical liturgical patterns, and especially, in an ecumenically aware age, upon the way that these rites have evolved in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, a number of Anglican Parishes were already using both the older and more modern Roman Catholic rites, and interpolating them into the Anglican Eucharistic forms. It was made clear in 1986 that this was a perfectly legitimate thing to have done and to do.

2006 saw the publication of *Times and Seasons*, one of the *Common Worship* resources available to churches. This is a collection of worship material which in some cases updates and in others supplements that already available through *The Promise of His Glory*, *Enriching the Christian Year* and *Lent, Holy Week, Easter*.

The article I wrote some years ago about the Holy Week Liturgy has stood the test of time and offers a taste of the liturgical thrust and direction of the week. The provisions for Holy Week given in *Times and Seasons* offer a variety of approaches to the liturgical forms, with alternative sequences of form and the chance to nuance the theology in different ways. Some of the basic texts have been re-written or re-translated (not always, I have to say, to their advantage). But it is an admirable piece of work and should help more people to engage in the events of the Great Week.

What follows, then, is not an exploration of all the possible ways of doing these services, but an exploration of what are common traits in the various forms now available.

Palm Sunday begins with the gathering of the people somewhere other than in church. Ideally they come with branches (cut locally) and these, together with any palms or palm crosses, are blessed in order that they might be carried in procession. The use of some local, live greenery emphasizes the essential message that the Holy Week liturgy is no mere historical exercise. Our Palm Sunday 'hosanna!' is to be our cry of genuine, present and urgent discipleship. The procession goes into the church building as into Jerusalem and the events of the Passion. In a sense, the procession continues throughout the week and throughout our lives.

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.

There are some musical challenges concerning the procession! The hymn 'All glory, laud and honour' (*Gloria, laus et honor*) is the most suitable processional hymn but is also difficult to keep synchronized and in tune. Possible solutions include:

- the choir or other singing group lining the processional route or spread throughout the procession
- amplification
- singing a simpler item

Let us know what works in your own context!

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 command of Jesus, 'Love one another as I have loved you'. 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?'

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; it reminds us that the Maundy Thursday liturgy flows seamlessly into that of Good Friday, something which is also emphasized by the fact that there is no blessing or dismissal at the end of the Maundy Thursday liturgy.

Good Friday is a day when the liturgy should begin, and end, in silence. There is a choice of forms for the service. Some will think it inappropriate to receive Holy Communion; others will wish to celebrate the Eucharist; others will follow the oldest practice and receive Communion from the sacrament consecrated at the Maundy Thursday Eucharist. It is this latter option that I now describe, while assuming that the points I make will still be of use to those who use just parts of the service or who celebrate 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. (An excellent resource for this is *Proclaiming the Passion*, Church House Publishing, 2007.) 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 placed where all can see it and offer their own devotions. *Times and Seasons* 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 is a much 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. The service begins outside the church with the blessing of the new fire. Light scattering darkness symbolizes the triumph of life over death, and the Paschal Candle (lit from the new fire) leads a procession into the church. The Easter proclamation (*Exsultet*) is sung in one of a number of forms while the congregation hold individual candles lit from the Paschal Candle.

There is a sequence of readings which rehearse the way in which God's love has been constantly shown to his people. (The readings may be the first component of the service). These vigil readings give way to the Gloria in Excelsis, Collect, Epistle, Gradual Psalm and Gospel.

Attention then moves to the font where new 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 familiar eucharistic pattern resumes at the Peace. The Easter cry of 'Alleluia' is added to a variety of familiar texts including the dismissal.

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