

HOLY WEEK

REDEMPTION CELEBRATED IN SPIRITUAL KINSHIP



AN ESSAY BY PASTOR BRETT R. SISLEY, ThM.

INTRODUCTION

All Christians share a common spiritual lineage through Abraham. Paul attests to this at Galatians 3:7 by saying: “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.” This means a person who accepts Jesus as Lord of their life today inherits a family history stretching back some 3500 years; the stories of those who came before have become his/her story. Think of it: the stories of Jacob, Isaac and Joseph, Moses, the Exodus from Egypt, and the giving of the Law – all chapters in a book that God is writing. We are blessed to find the events of our own lives recorded on the pages of this same book.

As with any book, the appreciation of context is necessary for understanding. Context is the common fabric into which diverse ideas are woven. Context tells us how various pieces of the story fit together. The context of our spiritual family’s story is God’s love for humanity expressed in His continual saving grace. That *our God saves* is the context which adds order and gives meaning to the understanding of who we are. The person of Christ personifies this context. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”¹ God loves. God saves. And He goes on saving.

In observance of Holy Week this year, let us broaden our perspective to consider the historical richness of God’s saving work throughout human history. It may seem matter of fact, but have you ever stopped to consider *how* and *why* the events of Holy Week became “the events of Holy Week?” What about the Disciples, one year following Christ’s death and resurrection – were they on their own in remembering Christ’s death until His return – or were they influenced by cultural & historical traditions? In the next few pages, we will examine the events of Holy Week and Easter by uniting ancient remembrance with modern practice. The purpose of this undertaking is also its reward: to celebrate the manifold joys of redemption through the bonds of spiritual kinship.

¹ Jn. 3:16, NKJ

PALM SUNDAY

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your King is coming to you;
He is just and having salvation,
Lowly and riding on a donkey,
A colt, the foal of a donkey.²

The last week of Christ's earthly ministry began with celebration. Worshippers crowded the entrance to Jerusalem's *Beautiful Gate*. They waved palm branches in the air, and strew them on the ground. As Jesus rode in on the back of a donkey, the people shouted "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"³ When some of the Pharisees called on Him to rebuke the crowd for lauding Him the Messianic King, He said: "...if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out."⁴

On Palm Sunday, worshippers still remember Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. The *Procession of Palms* is one of the oldest practices honoring this occasion. A pilgrim to the Holy Land named Egeria recounts one such procession that occurred in approximately 380.⁵ According to this account, a large group of people gathered on the Mount of Olives. The ceremony began with a reading of Christ's entry into Jerusalem from one of the Gospels. The bishop who led the procession walked in the place of Christ. And as in Jesus' time, worshippers carried olive and palm branches along with them.⁶ Today this practice continues in Catholic and Protestant churches. Palm branches still wave. In some churches, palm leaves are woven into the form of a cross and given to parishioners as a token. Other congregations save and dry the palms following the ceremony. Then, on *Ash Wednesday*⁷ of the following year, they are burned and their ashes applied to the foreheads those present.

² Zech. 9:9, NKJ.

³ Lk. 19:38, NKJ.

⁴ Lk. 19:39, NKJ.

⁵ Gulevich, Tanya. "Encyclopedia of Easter, Carnival, and Lent." Detroit: Omnigraphics, 2002, 431-36.

⁶ Cornides, Augustine. "Lent and Holy Week." *Worship* 36, no. 4. Mar. 1962. 266.

⁷ Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent in the western church.

It may be surprising to learn that the liturgical core of Palm Sunday lies in the *Reading of the Passion*, and not in the Procession of Palms. Fr. Augustine Cornides explains:

In Rome, on the contrary, the reading of the passion – continued on Wednesday and Good Friday – was the only liturgical element of this day [...] Theologically, the climax of the Mass is always the sacrifice of Christ which renews and makes present His passion [...] Liturgically, however, and according to the texts of the Mass, the reading of the passion is the central element on Palm Sunday.⁸

In Catholic tradition, the person of Christ is bodily present in the sacrament of Eucharist. His presence, in the bestowal of His body and blood, makes the recitation of His Passion come to life. This emphasis on the Reading of the Passion was strengthened by reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1959.⁹ Here, church officials changed the name of this final Sunday of Lent – from Palm Sunday to Passion Sunday. Since then, church leaders have continued to seek ways of connecting the corporeality of Holy Week with the hearts of their parishioners. Standing at the door of Holy Week, Palm / Passion Sunday provides an opportunity for modern worshippers to join with those who have come before in proclaiming the Kingship of Christ. If we do not, the stones will cry out. Given the eternal magnitude of this week, it is fitting that worshippers acknowledge all that transpired. Many who proclaimed: “blessed is He who comes...” would but five days later shout: “Crucify Him!”

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Maundy Thursday is the final Thursday of Lent, and remembers in various ways, the last meal shared between Jesus and those closest to Him. The Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke identify this meal as a Passover supper. John’s account does not. All four writers however do demonstrate that this meal marked the Eucharist’s birth (Mt. 26:26-29; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:19; Jn. 13:1-17:30). Most notable regarding the differences between John’s Gospel and the Synoptics is the amount of time paid to recording these final moments between Christ and His chosen Twelve. The accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in total, comprise less than half of John’s. For John, these vanishing moments in the upper room foreshadow the coming church age. That Jesus is going away – and that His disciples cannot follow; of the Holy Spirit,

⁸ *Ibid*, 266.

⁹ The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council addressed relations between Catholic Church and the modern world.

His person, being sent, and role in ensuing ministry; each of these are elements critical to the life of those who follow in the steps of Christ.

The English word *maundy* most probably derives from the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning “commandment.” This refers to Jesus’ words at John 13:34, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” The context for this statement pictures Jesus with a towel around His waist, on His knees washing the Disciples’ feet. For this reason, footwashing services have traditionally been practiced on Maundy Thursday. The sixth-century *Rule of Benedict* also speaks of the importance of welcoming guests by washing their feet.¹⁰ Some scholars associate *maundy* with a medieval English custom, where the king or queen would bestow gifts to the poor on the final Thursday of Lent.¹¹ Such gifts were distributed in baskets called “maunds,” or “maundy purses.”

The overriding significance of Maundy Thursday is that it commemorates the initial sharing of the Eucharist. The Latin *Natalis Calicis* means “birthday of the cup,” and speaks of the cup blessed by Christ and passed among His disciples. Christian brothers and sisters of the first-century saw the sharing of this symbolic meal against the backdrop of the Hebrew Passover. By the first century, this feast (which honors God’s freeing of His people from slavery in Egypt) had been practiced by Hebrew people for 1500 years.¹²

There was only one “original Passover.” Yet each year following, God’s people (first by blood and later by Spirit), celebrate God’s provision past, present, and future. Some Christians remember this event by partaking in a *Christian Seder*. This is a reenactment of the Passover meal which couples historical relevance with the blessings of the New Covenant in Jesus’ blood (the cup shared by Christ with His Disciples). In accordance with Hebrew tradition, verses from the Torah (Pentateuch) are read aloud. Among the most common passages is Deuteronomy 26:5-5,¹³ which reads:

¹⁰ Vincie, Catherine, “A History of Holy Week.” *Liturgical Ministry* 13. Summer, 2004. 114.

¹¹ Gulevich, 386-7.

¹² Valkanet, Richard. Bible Timeline. <http://biblehub.com/timeline/>. 2010. Ap. 5, 2017.

¹³ Silber, David. *A Passover Haggadah: Go Forth and Learn*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1. 2011.

A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders (ESV).

GOOD FRIDAY

Good Friday is the second day of the Triduum, or last three days of Holy Week.¹⁴ Good Friday remembers Jesus' arrest, trial, suffering, and crucifixion. In Catholic tradition, no Mass is said on this day. Professor of Liturgical and Sacramental Theology at the Aquinas Institute of Theology, Catherine Vincie comments: "In its place, another service developed, that of a word service with solemn intercessions, the veneration of the cross, and reception of the pre-sanctified Eucharist."¹⁵ This basic format has been observed since the fifth century and was but slightly modified by the reforms of Vatican II. That worshipers reflect upon the suffering of Christ is the sole purpose of these solemn gatherings.

Good Friday services structured around the *Seven Last Words of Jesus* are examples of a "word service with solemn reflections," (to which Vincie refers). Such services are common, in various forms, in both Catholic and Protestant churches. These services feature selected scripture readings, brief homilies, and prayer interwoven with the seven last words (or statements) Jesus spoke while suffering on the cross.¹⁶ Time for private, silent reflection punctuates each of these liturgical elements. Fr. Cornides conveys the heart of this practice:

Since there is no Eucharistic sacrifice, the liturgy of the word, which preserves almost unchanged the basic structure of the worshipping Christian assembly of the second century, occupies an exalted position: it makes present the passion of Christ.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 393.

¹⁵ Vincie, 114.

¹⁶ Jesus's seven Last Words (statements) are found in the following passages, in order: Lk. 23:34; Jn. 23:43; Jn. 19:26-7; Mt. 27:46; Jn. 19:28; Jn. 19:30; Lk. 23:46.

¹⁷ Cornides, 270.

To make “present the passion of Christ” is to acknowledge His person as the keystone of human history. Jesus, the “lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,”¹⁸ was envisaged in the first Passover. The blood of a perfect lamb, which the Hebrews applied to the door frames of their homes, foreshadowed the blood Jesus would shed for humanity while hanging on the cross. The flesh of that same Passover lamb was eaten; it was His body, broken and given in our place.¹⁹ “I am the living bread... [Jesus says] ...that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”²⁰

The *Veneration of the Cross* and *Stations of the Cross* are traditional Good Friday practices which help believers grasp the terrible price paid for their salvation. To venerate means “to regard or treat with reverence.”²¹ Given the horror attached to the Roman practice of crucifixion, it stands as testament to Christ’s prevailing love that the cross should become an object of honor. The Stations of the Cross direct adoration toward fourteen points of Christ’s passion. As the cross is venerated, each of these is remembered.

1. Jesus being condemned to die
2. Jesus taking up His cross
3. Jesus falling under the weight of the cross (first time)
4. Jesus meeting His mother
5. Simon of Cyrene being compelled to carry the cross
6. Veronica wiping Jesus’ face²²
7. Jesus falling under the weight of the cross (second time)
8. Jesus meeting the women of Jerusalem
9. Jesus falling under the weight of the cross (third time)
10. Jesus being stripped of His garments

¹⁸ John 1:29.

¹⁹ The original Greek text of 1 Cor. 5:7 transliterated reads: “Cleanse out the old leaven that you might be a new lump as you are unleavened also. Indeed the Passover Lamb of us all has been sacrificed, Christ. So that we might celebrate the feast not with leaven old, not with leaven of malice and wickedness, but with unleavened [bread] of sincerity and of truth.”

²⁰ Jn. 6:51.

²¹ “venerate”. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc.
<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/venerate>>5 Apr. 2017.

²² According to Church tradition, Veronica was moved with pity when she saw Jesus carrying his cross to Golgotha and gave him her veil that he might wipe his forehead. Jesus accepted the offering, held it to his face, and then handed it back to her – the image of his face miraculously impressed upon it. This piece of cloth became known as the Veil of Veronica (*Notes and Queries*, Volume 6, July–December 1852, London: 252).

11. Jesus being nailed to the cross
12. Jesus dies
13. The descent from the cross
14. Jesus' body being laid in the tomb

The essence of this Good Friday liturgical form²³ can be traced through church history to a seventh-century book of Christian liturgy, entitled *Gelasian Sacramenary*. This is the second oldest liturgical book in existence (the eldest being the *Verona Sacramentary*).

HOLY SATURDAY

Holy Saturday, a Sabbath, remembers the day Christ's body lay in the tomb and His spirit descended into hell.²⁴ Late on the first Good Friday, following Jesus' death, His body was removed from the cross, wrapped in fine linen, and laid in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea²⁵ At this point, the Synoptic accounts of Mark and Luke note the Sabbath was quickly approaching – which meant that *this* Friday, the “day of preparation,” would end for them abruptly.²⁶ Their pain went with them as they, shell-shocked, shuffled their way home. That Sabbath was one of grieving. Their faith was tested. Who was this man Jesus they had come to know and love? Was He truly the One spoken of by the prophets?²⁷ How, now, would He save His people?

From then until now: Jesus' closest friends²⁸ hold a sacred vigil on this, the holiest of Saturdays. The Psalmist writes: “weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning,”²⁹ and Jesus urged His followers: “Watch and pray that you may not fall into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Owing to human limitations and God's faithful provision, our Christian brothers and sisters have, since the beginning, spent the hours of Holy Saturday in fasting and prayer.

²³ A traditional Good Friday liturgy as outline above: Word Service, Veneration / Stations of the Cross, ect.

²⁴ That Jesus descended into hell after His physical death; and that He offered salvation through His name to those imprisoned there. Accepted into official church doctrine in the 8th century. Attested to in the Apostle's Creed. See: Eph. 4:9; Rom. 10:7; 1 Pt. 3:19;

²⁵ Lk. 23:50-56.

²⁶ Per Jewish custom, day begins at sundown, Gulevich, 286.

²⁷ Is. 7:14, 9:1-2, 6-7, 35:5-6, 40:3-5, 42:1-6, 52:13-53:12; Jer. 31:31; Dn. 7:13; Mic. 5:2; Zech. 9:9, 11:12-13, 12:10;

²⁸ “no longer do I call you servants [...] but I have called you friends” Jn. 15:15.

²⁹ Ps. 30:5

Services for Holy Saturday are quiet and contemplative. The Eucharist is not served. The early Catholic church practiced *Redditio Symboli* (“return of the creed”) on this day of waiting. As part of this practice, baptismal candidates conferred with priests and were summarily exorcised of evil spirits. After then dedicating themselves to Jesus, these pledging believers returned home to prayerfully ready themselves for Easter morning baptism.

The practice of lighting of lamps, candles, and torches on Holy Saturday dates back to the earliest Christian history. Weiser notes that the Emperor Constantine “transformed the night of the sacred vigil into the brilliance of day, by lighting throughout the whole city [...] pillars of wax, while burning lamps illuminated every house, so that this nocturnal celebration was rendered brighter than the brightest day.”³⁰ In the early stages of the church, the Easter Vigil service was held Saturday evening (thus honoring the aforementioned Hebrew custom). However, as time progressed, the time of this service migrated earlier and earlier. Vincie comments:

By the twelfth century it had been advanced to noon; in 1566 Pius V forbade its celebration after midday; and after Trent the celebration of the Easter Vigil was mandated to the early morning hours.³¹

The effect of this evolution was the gradual (and eventually near) extinction of Holy Saturday. In 1948, Pope Pius XII created the Pontifical Commission for the General Liturgical Restoration. And in 1951, this commission restored the Easter Vigil to its original time, at the close of Saturday.

Orthodox tradition remembers Jesus’ *Descent into Hell* on Holy Saturday.³² In contrast to the somber mood of Catholic observance, Orthodox services joyfully anticipate the coming resurrection. As part of the proceedings, Orthodox priests change the color of their robes, from dark to light. Then, flower petals are scattered around the church, while the words: “Arise, O God, to the world” ring out.³³

³⁰ Weiser, Francis X. *The Easter Book*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954.

³¹ Vincie, 115.

³² Orthodoxy split from Roman Catholicism in 1054 in an event known as “the Great Schism.”

³³ Gulevich, 287.

On Holy Saturday, Christians strain to reconcile the weight of death with the promise of new life. As we prepare for Easter, regardless of our church tradition, let us not be hasty to rush from the searching of Saturday. For only through a coming-to-terms with the lostness of Saturday can we truly embrace the joy that is Easter morning.

EASTER

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live."³⁴ On Easter we celebrate Jesus' victory over death and the life eternal it bestows upon us. This essay has discussed (and restrained by scope, alluded to) the rich, spiritual heritage shared by all descendants of Abraham. The Passover feast shared by this family, stretching back more than 3500 years, embodies the loving grace of a just God who yearns to live among His people. On the cornerstone of Christ, some family members may have stumbled, and even suffered separation. But in the words of Paul, "Do not be haughty, but fear [...] For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree, how much more will these, who are the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?" The historical observance of Easter is reflective of these two branches, each belonging to a single family tree.

The early Christian community understood Jesus' death and resurrection in terms of the Passover feast; they acknowledged the typological significance of Old Testament events that pointed to Christ. Despite this awareness, how best to commemorate this jewel in the setting of God's redemptive plan would take centuries to develop. Early Christian writings³⁵ indicate that nascent Easter observances focused on Christ's death as opposed to His resurrection.

The etymology of the word *passion* (within Christendom) coincides with the coming of age of Easter as we know it. Today, the word *passion* is inextricably linked with the events of Holy Week. The concept of *passion*, stems from two ethnic fount heads: Hebrew and Greek. The Hebrew *pesach* means "passage" and refers to the angel of death's "passing" over the Hebrew homes in Egypt. The Greek *pathein* on the other hand, means "to suffer." From *pathein*, we receive *pasch* or *pascha*; a word with the same meaning, from which the English *passion* derives. In his book, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, Thomas Talley points out that *pascha* is "a transliteration of the

³⁴ Jn. 11:25.

³⁵ Specifically: Pseudo-Tertullian and Pseudo-Cyprian.

Aramaic form of the Hebrew *pesach*.”³⁶ These two etymological roots stand like goal posts at either end of the field of historical Easter observance.

It must be emphasized that the suffering of Christ (*pasch*), and His passage from death to life (*pesach*) are of equal theological importance. In our remembering, both points must be acknowledged. For while Christ’s sacrificial blood cleanses us from sin, eternal life would not be ours had He not passed from death to life. Even so, early Christian observance tended toward the acknowledgement of Christ as the Passover Lamb, slain for the salvation of God’s people. Not until Augustine (354-430) did the significance of these two concepts become intertwined. He states: “For by suffering the Lord made the passage of from death to life.”³⁷ The work of Augustine, Clement, Origen, Ambrose called the church to embrace the Pasch of Christ in its fullness.³⁸ This shift was bolstered by edicts issued by Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicaea in 325. By decree, Constantine established that all Christians celebrate Christ’s victory over death on Sunday. He also stipulated that Resurrection Sunday (later, *Easter*) be forever separated from the Jewish observance of Passover.³⁹

SUMMARY

The fallout from these developments was the eventual creation of Holy Week as we know it. The Biblical account of the Last Supper (as Passover) would be observed on Maundy Thursday. Its observance would draw upon Christian and pre-Christian, Jewish tradition (as it did for the Disciples). The following day would come to be known as Good Friday, and would remember the Passion: the suffering and death of Christ that buys our freedom. Holy Saturday would remain what it was for Jesus’ closest friends: a day of waiting, a time of contemplating the darkness of a world without redemption – and daring to hope in the promise of salvation. Saturday also signifies the passage from death to life: of God’s people, from beneath the angel of death; and of the Lord Jesus Christ, who passed through death so that all might live. All descendants of Abraham have joyous cause to remember these events. For on this, the holiest of weeks, God’s faithful provision is extolled in its fullness: past, present, and future.

³⁶ Talley, Thomas. *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, second emended edition. Collegeville: Pueblo/The Liturgical Press. 1986, 1.

³⁷ Augustine, Exposition of Psalm 120, 6 in Cantalamessa, *Easter*, no. 126.

³⁸ Chupungco, Anscar J. *Handbook for Liturgical Studies*, vol. V: Liturgical Time and Space. Collegeville: Pueblo/The Liturgical Press. 2000, 150-52.

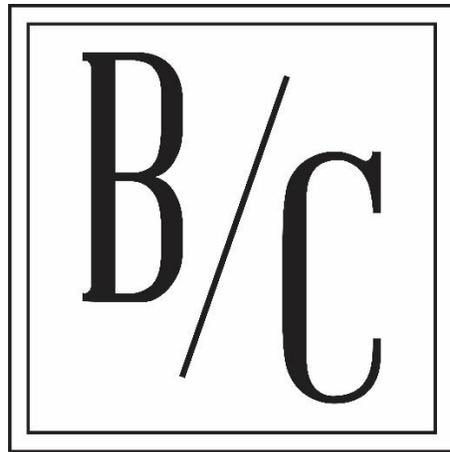
³⁹ Gulevich, 85-7, 138.

The center of the New Testament is the “from death to life” mystery of the “Pasch of our Lord,” which is not merely “like” the ancient phase, but is its full unfolding, its blossoming in immortal and eternal beauty, bestowing that unending liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.⁴⁰

As we drink in the events of Holy Week this year, may we draw from a well deeper than personal relevance alone. The events of Holy week remind us of the terrible price paid for the freedom we enjoy year ‘round. But lest we fall short of experiencing the depth of this life-bearing truth: We who are in Christ are new creations! We have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us.⁴¹ The events of Holy Week unite believers of today with brothers and sisters of ages past. We are partakers in one body and one blood: Christ’s. We are family.

⁴⁰ Hellriegel, Martin B. “Holy Week: Some Reflections and Pastoral Suggestions.” *Orate Fratres*, 24 no 5 (Apr 1950): 216-223.

⁴¹ Gal. 2:20, emphasis added.



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