

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

Easter

Easter is the great essential celebration which makes Christianity what it is. Although it's a single feast, it takes three days (called "the Sacred Triduum") to spell out its meaning. The liturgy of those three days is the most dramatic of the whole year, and it is in the name of this feast that we keep Sunday, the day of the Lord, holy, like a small Easter each week.

Everything we've said about Christ and the Cross is important for the meaning of Easter, and all our Christian theology is dramatised and experienced anew in the Easter liturgy. The reverberations of the feast spread out into the rest of the year, and all other feasts, doctrines, and articles of faith find their meaning in it. If there's anything in the Catholic faith that isn't integral to Easter, it isn't integral to the faith.

The centre of what happens in Easter is perhaps to be found in the reading of the Passion according to John on Good Friday, and especially at the moment where Jesus speaks his last words: *It is accomplished*. At that moment, when Jesus brings his earthly ministry to its completion, he breathes out the Holy Spirit in his final breath, and the Creation is made alive with the life of God. At this moment, the incarnate Son, God and Man, launches himself into the eternal, into the hands of his Father. He returns to the timeless world where he is constantly filled with divine life, and as constantly returns his divine life to the Father.

From this point, Jesus Christ is speaking to us from eternity, and is no longer confined by earthly conditions - like space and time - which he accepted by emptying himself of glory and becoming human - in other words, by the Incarnation.

When we speak of actions or processes in eternity, our language falls down constantly, because it is built only for our temporal world, and not for eternity.

This is very important, because we do spell out the meaning of Easter in temporal terms: that Jesus lay in the tomb for three days refers to his earthly body, but not to his eternal self: there are no days in eternity. To say that he ascended to the Father after forty days imports forty days and a journey - two strictly temporal realities - into eternity. There are no physical distances or places in eternity, and no forty days. When Jesus crosses the threshold of death, his journeying is over and his timebound existence is over, and his work on earth is accomplished.

The day before Good Friday is Holy Thursday, where Jesus is living out his last day as a free man: he will be arrested late that night in the Garden, and what he does thereafter will always be against the background of earthly power: that of the high priests, or that of Pilate, the Roman Prefect of Judaea. Jesus spends this Thursday teaching his last lessons, opening up to his disciples everything that is in his mind about the death he is about to die. Above all, he teaches them in signs, which they are commanded to do again and again in his memory: first, he washes their feet, making himself lower than a slave for them. Then, using deeds they will have to reproduce every day for the rest of their lives, the breaking of bread and the sharing of a cup of wine. He teaches them that his capture, condemnation and death are an act of service for them, a self-giving that is total. And he shows them that his gift of himself will be their food and drink until they reach their own fulfilment in the Kingdom of Heaven.

After Jesus is taken down from the Cross and buried, there follows a day of complete calm, when the church seems to have died with him. There is no liturgy, there are no sacraments. It is the traditional day for scrubbing the altars, and the sanctuaries are plain of ornament. But Jewish days end with sunset. And as the sun sets, the Christian Church does not go to bed. Instead she contradicts the darkness with a new fire, and from it she lights the Paschal Flame, passing it to the candles of the whole congregation, and by this Easter light the Church keeps vigil, singing a great and ancient proclamation: that *Christ is risen from the dead*.

Then, starting with the books of Moses, and going through all the prophets, the Church begins to re-read the Scriptures, searching in them for the promise of the Resurrection: again and again she finds it, and sings triumphantly of the power of God, who never lets his promises lapse, and who keeps faith with his people. As we reach the reading of the New Testament, the Paschal flame spreads to the lighting of the Christian Altar, and the death of Jesus is recognised as the ultimate sacrifice of the Old Testament, and the beginning of worship for the Church; and then the story of the first Easter is read from the Gospel.

It's really important to note how unexpected this feast is. In meditating on the Cross last week, we remembered how crucifixion habitually eliminated its victims from the human record, especially in Jewish eyes. The scattering of the disciples was exactly according to plan, and the authorities probably congratulated themselves on a job well done. There was nothing new about this; the system was tried and tested, it had always worked, and the signs were that it had worked this time too.

It's hard to be certain just how things changed for the Twelve and the other disciples. The Gospels, written several decades after the events they describe, tell the story very variously. Some factors are constant: every Gospel relates how the tomb of Jesus was found to be empty; Matthew alone tells us that it was guarded by a detachment of soldiers precisely to prevent any robbery, which would in any case have been entirely alien for Jews to contemplate. One Gospel tells how the disposition of the grave-cloths powerfully suggested, not a robbery (who *unwraps* a body to steal it?) but the marks of a bed from which someone has risen. All four Gospels recount a meeting with unexpected figures dressed in white, who commentate in different ways on what has happened. Then three Gospels recount meetings with the risen Christ, told in various stories, some of which have been mutually copied by later hands into the first Gospel.

The most powerful witness to the Resurrection is certainly the fact of the Church itself. Every reasonable response to the crucifixion was already present as it ended: the scattering, the feeling of utter defeat, the resignation of the hopes that had been stirred up; and this response is reported in the Gospels themselves. There should have been no Church; it had been crushed.

Even when the extraordinary events of Easter morning have begun to unfold, the response of those who see is not to speak of Resurrection, but simply of the violation of the grave. They were not prepared for this.

The facts of the death of Jesus should have been enough to loosen his hold as a religious leader; his life had terminated in ignominious defeat, with the entire religious authority of his people firmly condemning him, and the invincible might of the earthly Empire eliminating him.

One thing which remained unanswered in the enigma of Jesus was his insistence that his death would come in this way, that his death was necessary, and that his disciples would only progress in understanding after it was over. That, if you like, was the loose end that was waiting to be tugged. In some way it already bore witness to a different, opposite way of interpreting some awful facts. And they knew it was *his* way of seeing them, the one they had never shared or understood. To get hold of this loose end, and to start to pull at it, would require a religious revolution in them, of massive proportions. Whatever they saw or experienced in the first Easter was enough to effect that transformation.

It was in their effort to make sense of all that they had experienced that the Christian faith was first formed. They bear constant witness to the fact that this was no work of personal fantasy. They said that they were being led by the Holy Spirit, and the strangeness of what they evolved into is proof to them (and therefore to us) that they were not inventing anything of their own. That they died in bearing witness to this new-formed faith gave it an authority which was felt by all, including non-believers, opponents, even persecutors. The transformed lives of pagan converts was another witness to the truth of the creed: *See how these Christians love one another*. The four Gospels are drawn from the world where the consequences of the life and death of Jesus were being slowly worked out; fascinatingly, we can even watch the development between the writing of the first Gospel and the writing of the last. So explosive was the power of the new faith that fully-armed Pharisees like Paul found themselves dizzy with its implications: they abandoned beliefs and practices they had cherished all their lives in order to make room for the needs of the infant Church and its Gentile converts. We're often tempted to see Paul's authority proceeding from an evolved system of theology, when there was no such thing in the world. Instead, we should see him thinking on the hoof, in a situation evolving so rapidly that he could hardly keep up with it.

Easter takes the words of Jesus seriously, and looks for the meaning that remained when he had laid down his whole life in this world in obedience to the Father. It was in that utter emptiness - as if they themselves had died when he died - that the Eleven found themselves venturing beyond the grave in their search for meaning. That was where they met the risen Christ: they saw him, they touched him, they ate and drank with him, he taught them, and most tellingly their hearts burned within them as he opened the Scriptures to them.