

What is the 'Easter Triduum'?



TRIDUUM

..... and is it for me?

Holy Week starts on Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter Sunday. Of all the weeks in the entire liturgical year, this is by far the most important for Christians around the world and is often referred to as the “Great Week”. We see Jesus come to the end of his public ministry and, indeed, life. We watch him enter Jerusalem on a donkey, apparently being hailed and accepted; we watch him gather his friends together for what he knows will be his last meal and their last time together as a group of friends; we see his anguish and fear in the Garden of Gethsemane as he awaits what he knows lies in store; we see Jesus’ unnecessarily violent arrest and witness his mistreatment and torture; we see him as he receives the heavy wooden cross onto his bruised and bloodied shoulders and we follow him as he struggles up the hill to Golgotha with his cross; we hear his anguished cries and the crack of the hammer as it drives the huge nails through his hands and feet; we hear the creaking of the wood and the howl of pain as the cross is lifted up; we watch for the dreadful three hours that it takes for Jesus to bleed and suffocate to death. We wait. We hold our breath.

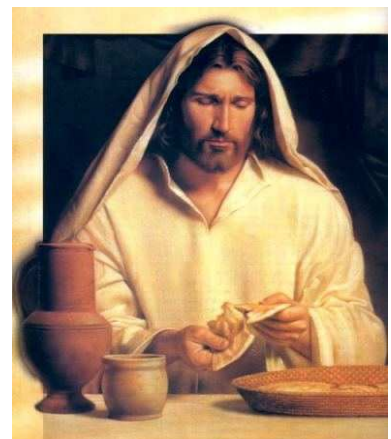
All these things we experience in Holy Week and, particularly, during the *Easter Triduum*. A ‘triduum’ is three consecutive days of public devotion, and the Easter Triduum begins with *Maundy Thursday*

On **Maundy Thursday** we revisit and re-enact the Last Supper. Jesus knows very well, as he gathers his friends together, that this will be the very last meal he will eat



before he dies. His friends have no idea at all that this meal and the next 24 hours are going to change the entire course of the history of man’s relationship with God. As far as they are concerned, they have gathered for just another meal together. But, on this occasion, Jesus does some things he has never done before. First, he washes his friends’ feet, an action which caused a real stir amongst these men who were still struggling with the idea of humble service. Then, most importantly, he institutes the Eucharist. He takes some

bread and wine and, having given thanks to his Father, he transforms the bread and wine into his body and blood, telling his friends that “*This is my body*” and “*This is my blood*”, and instructing them to “*Do this in memory of me*”. This was a truly historic moment: he was showing his friends how to carry out what has been carried out in every Mass around the world since that meal. On Maundy Thursday, then, the Church revisits this final meal in a deeply special and significant



way, and we see priests across the world bringing to life the humility of God by getting down onto their knees and washing the feet of 12 of their parishioners. This is followed by the wonderful Eucharistic Prayer in which the bread and wine are turned into the Body and Blood of Jesus, so much more poignant on this day than any other.

At the end of Mass we see the tabernacle being emptied, the Holy Water being removed from stoups, the altar being stripped and all crucifixes being removed or covered in purple, and there is a real feeling of foreboding, a sense of Jesus about to be removed from us.

Maundy Thursday invites us to meditate ...

- ❖ Have I understood that at the heart of Christianity is *humble service*?
- ❖ The first shall be last and the last first
- ❖ Jesus comes back to me, to be with me, in a deeply personal way through the Eucharist
- ❖ Do I take this sacrament for granted?
- ❖ Do I receive it carelessly?
- ❖ Do I give myself to him to the degree that he gives himself to me?

Through the events of Maundy Thursday Jesus is telling us ...

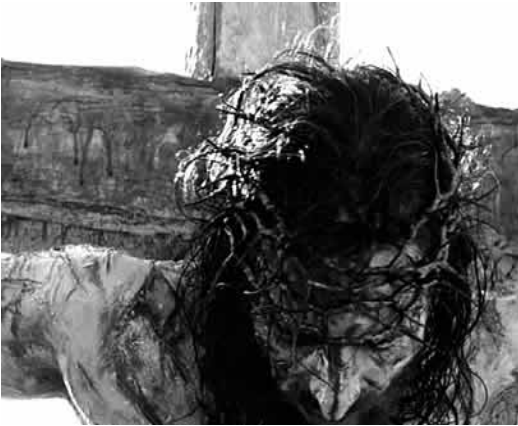
- ❖ I am with you
- ❖ I come to you still to strengthen and enlighten you
- ❖ I will help you in all that you have to do
- ❖ I am sharing my divinity with you

The very next day is *Good Friday*, the second part of the Triduum.

On **Good Friday** the faithful will gather in churches all around the world at about 3pm, roughly the time which marks the start of Jesus' passion. We hear readings from the Old Testament which foretell of a time when "*a thing despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering, a man to make people screen their faces; he was despised and we took no account of him. And yet ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried*" (Isaiah 53:3).

Then we hear, again, the account of Jesus' torture and crucifixion. This is by far the most solemn day in the Church's calendar, and the vestments worn by the priest will be red to bring to mind the blood which was spilt and poured out upon the earth on

that day. The faithful are invited to 'venerate the cross', perhaps to the words of one of the most haunting and thought-provoking of songs ...



"My people, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? What more could I have done for you? I led you from slavery to freedom, but you handed me over to your high priests ... I opened the sea before you, but you opened my side with a spear ... I led you on your way in a pillar of cloud, but you led me to Pilate's court ... I bore you up with manna in the desert, but you struck me down and scourged me ... I gave you saving water from the rock, but you gave me gall

and vinegar to drink ... I gave you a royal sceptre, but you gave me a crown of thorns ... I raised you to the height of majesty, but you have raised me high on a cross..... My people, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me...."

The altar and sanctuary, already bare, now feel even more bereft as the tabernacle is empty and left wide open: Jesus has gone, he is no longer with us. The faithful leave the church on Good Friday with a sense of desolation and loss and, perhaps, a fresh understanding of their own contribution to the suffering and death of Jesus.

Good Friday invites us to ask ...

- ❖ What part was I playing on this day?
- ❖ Was I one of the soldiers? Mocking Jesus by claiming to be a Christian but not living like one?
- ❖ Was I in the jostling crowd, afraid to speak up for him?
- ❖ Am I remain silent about my faith?
- ❖ Which of my sins contributed to his suffering? My selfishness? My pride? My untruths? My anger and irritability?

What would Jesus say to me?

- ❖ I know what it is like to be afraid and to feel alone
- ❖ I know what it is like to be treated unjustly
- ❖ I want you to pick up your cross and come after me
- ❖ Be patient in your suffering for I am with you
- ❖ All will be well ...

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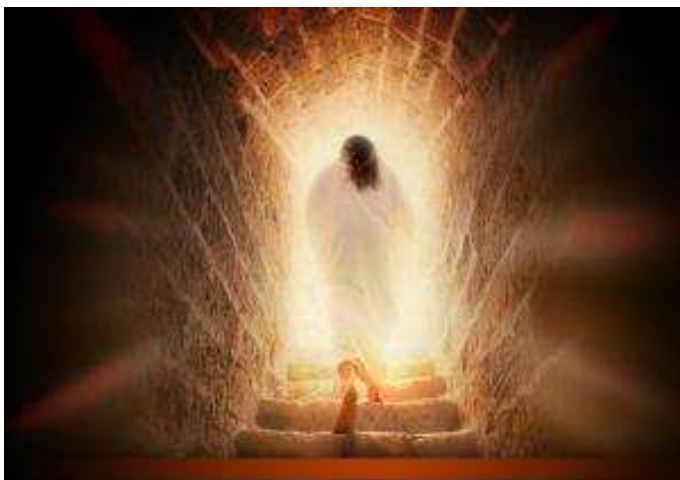
The day after Good Friday is *Holy Saturday*, the third part of the Triduum.

This is a day of waiting. On **Holy Saturday** the Church – that is you and me – waits at the Lord’s tomb, thinking about his suffering and death. Is this the end? What is going to happen next? If Jesus really had been God, why didn’t he save himself? How did it come to this? Will we ever see him again? The altar is left bare and Mass is not celebrated: it is all very quiet and still. The only service on this day is the Easter Vigil, often called the “mother of



of all holy vigils” and starts after sundown on the night before Easter. This service begins with a ‘Service of Light’ when all the lights in the church are put out and the faithful gather outside the church around a fire – the New Fire – holding candles. The flame from the fire – which the priest will bless – is used to light the Paschal or Easter Candle and is a symbol of Jesus, the Light of the World, risen in glory and sharing his light and glory with us.

Once the Paschal candle has been lit, the faithful move quietly back into the dark church and light their own small candles from the flame of the Paschal candle, and the church is gradually filled with light. We then embark upon the ‘Liturgy of the Word’ when we listen to several readings which move us through the Old Testament, all the time building up an awareness of the promise of the coming of a Saviour. This part culminates in what is one of the most joyous ten minutes of the year – the altar and sanctuary which have been bare for days is brought to life: the altar and sanctuary candles are lit, the altar and tabernacle are dressed and flowers fill the sanctuary for the first time since Ash Wednesday. There is a tangible sense of



newness of life, a reawakening and rebirth. The bells are rung, the Gloria is sung and our hearts are filled with a real joy. We hear passages from the New Testament and, at last, an account of the risen Jesus appearing to his friends and revealing to them that death has been destroyed for ever.

This is the point when we meet and remember the risen Lord, and we can at last lift up our voices in all those glorious Alleluia's which we have not been allowed to utter since Ash Wednesday. It is with joy and wonder that during the Vigil we revisit our Baptismal Promises, reminding ourselves of our belief in the risen Lord.

The final day is, of course, Easter Sunday and *'this Mass is our 'Alleluia': our song of praise to the risen Christ who is our life and whose triumph over death we proclaim to all the world'*. (Sunday Missal)

The events of Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday tell me to ...

- ❖ Rejoice! ... do I come across as a rejoicing person?
- ❖ Believe! ... does my belief stop short of really accepting that God loves me and is taking care of me, despite all of my worries?
- ❖ Embrace! ... have I properly embraced my Baptismal Promises by rejecting all that is evil and living a holy and spirit-filled life?
- ❖ Proclaim! ... does my way of life proclaim that God is love?

Clearly, Holy Week, is a busy week in terms of going to church. The joy of Easter is made all the more joyous when we have entered fully into the sorrow and anguish which precedes it, so it is a good thing to try to attend all of these services if we possibly can.

Entering into the Easter Triduum is important for us on an individual level because, as Christians, our aim must be to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. To walk in his footsteps does not mean that we can pick and choose which bits of his journey appeal to us: he invites us to embrace them all. In walking with him through *his* suffering we soon discover that he is with us in *our* suffering – he can relate to everything. To greet and acclaim the risen Lord at Easter is to greet and acclaim the risen and living Lord in our day-to-day lives, and to recognise the many and varied ways in which he so devotedly walks with us.

He was treated harshly, but endured it humbly;
he never said a word.
Like a lamb about to be slaughtered,
he never said a word.
He was arrested and sentenced and led off to die,
and no-one cared about his fate.
He was put to death for the sins of our people.
He was placed in a grave with the wicked,
even though he had never committed a crime
or ever told a lie.

Isaiah 53:7-9

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The LORD says,
It was my will that he should suffer;
his death was a sacrifice to bring forgiveness.
After a life of suffering, he will again have joy;
he will know that he did not suffer in vain.
My devoted servant, with whom I am pleased,
will bear the punishment of many
and for his sake I will forgive them.

Isaiah 53:10-12