

**‘For everything a season’:
Theology through the church year
Session 6: Passiontide – *Demands my life***



We adore you O Christ and we bless you,
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world
(refrain from Stations of the Cross)

1. Passiontide

‘Passiontide’ is from the Latin ‘passio’ (suffering). It is a two-week period beginning on Passion Sunday (fifth Sunday of Lent), continuing into Holy Week. It is not a separate season but an intensification of the season of Lent, as the liturgy zooms in on the final events of Jesus’ earthly life and his journey to the cross. Some churches ‘veil’ crosses and other images during these two weeks, creating a stark stage for the drama of salvation.

2. Holy Week: the ‘week of weeks’

Palm Sunday

By the fourth century, a ‘palm procession’ took place in Jerusalem on the Sunday before Easter, from the Mount of Olives back into the city. This was imitated in other parts of Christendom, in England by the 7th Century, and in Rome by the 12th. The procession would traditionally begin outside the main church, and could involve a live donkey!

Maundy Thursday

The three-day period from the eve of Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday is referred to as the Easter ‘Triduum’ (‘three days’). Maundy is from the Latin ‘Mandatum’ (commandment, John 13: 34). In the daytime there is a Chrism Eucharist at the cathedral, where the Bishop blesses the holy oils to be used in sacramental rites during the year (baptism, confirmation, holy orders, anointing the sick). In the evening a Eucharist of the Last Supper commemorates: the Passover, the institution of the Eucharist, washing of feet, Jesus’ betrayal and arrest. It begins joyfully but ends in darkness and anguish, as the sanctuary is stripped and an Altar of Repose is set up for the Watch of the Passion (until midnight).

Good Friday

‘Good’ is from an archaic word for ‘holy’. In German speaking countries it is called ‘Karfreitag’ (‘mourning Friday’). The liturgy is sometimes spread over three hours and comprises: passion readings and music, veneration of the cross, communion from the reserved sacrament.

Holy Saturday

An ‘aliturghical’ day, where there is calm, quiet, silence and waiting, although necessary preparations for Easter are made. ‘Saturday is that in-between day of stillness and doubt and despair’ (Brueggemann).

3. The Cross and the Drama of Salvation

Passiontide and the Easter Triduum enable us to reflect on the great mystery of Christ's saving death on the cross. Soteriology (from the Greek 'soteria', 'salvation') is the branch of theology which focuses specifically on this mystery. Broadly speaking, there are four themes or images which theologians have identified (McGrath, Ch. 13) and which our liturgies bring out:

Sacrifice

This approach views Christ's death as an effective and perfect sacrifice for sin, accomplishing fully what previous ritual sacrifices could only accomplish in part. (Rom 3:25, Heb. 10). In liturgical observance, Common Worship Eucharistic prayers carefully use the word 'sacrifice' in relation to Christ's death (see prayer C: 'full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice ...' following Cranmer). Note also the Eastertide invitation to communion: 'Christ our passover has been sacrificed for us'.

Victory

The motif of *Christus Victor* (Christ the victor) expresses a confidence in Christ's decisive victory over death, evil and oppression (1 Cor. 15:15), expressed in the Easter hymn 'Thine be the Glory'. Recent emphasis (e.g. Bultmann, Tillich) has been on the subjective experience of victory within the life of the believer (a victory over the forces which threaten to deprive us of love, hope, joy ...).

Forgiveness

The cross is a demonstration of God's forgiveness of human sin (Luke 23: 43; 24: 47), and at every Eucharist service we hear that Christ's blood is shed for the 'forgiveness of sins'. This is clearly a central part of Christ's teaching, but the exact means by which the cross achieves this is a matter of debate (representation, participation, substitution?).

Love

God 'demonstrates his love for us' through the cross (Rom. 5: 8), a view developed in particular by Peter Abelard (1079-1172): 'our redemption through the suffering of Christ is that deeper love within us ... in order that we might do all things out of love rather than out of fear'. In the words of the famous hymn of Isaac Watts: 'love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all'.

Next talk: Sunday 15th April: Easter and Raised Expectations

References:

- Brueggemann, W. *A Way other than Our Own: Devotions for Lent*
Cobb, P. 'The history of the Christian year', in Jones, C. et al, *The Study of Liturgy* (SPCK, 1992), pp. 455-472
Gordon-Taylor, B. and Jones, S. *Celebrating Christ's Victory* (SPCK, 2009)
McGrath, A. *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2007)