

Easter Past & Present

By M Norridge

I must start this article with a small *confession*: in my brief time as a church leader, Easter has proved to be frustrating. In our churches we celebrate two Christian Festivals, Christmas and Easter, which combine with main UK holidays, but the demands of modern life mean that these holidays are opportunities for relaxing and escaping from all aspects of life, often including church. Of course Christmas is the main festival and there is no way of escaping it. Therefore we fight to continue to find meaning in it for ourselves and others. Easter, however, does not seem to afford itself the same luxury. Is it possible it is fading from our church calendar?

Why frustrating though? Well, because as I plan for the gathering on Easter Sunday, I begin to get excited about Jesus' resurrection, only to find that we as community are not ready for it or have taken the opportunity for a holiday. It is frustrating because, at the end of it, Easter has been a profoundly dissatisfying experience.

What am I to do about this? Is it *commercial success* that makes Christmas such a big deal? Are there more possibilities for the Festivals than the opportunity for another guest service? Is it possible to allow the festivals to become deeply enriching experiences, feeding our lives and imaginations, enabling us to live more dynamically and faithfully following Jesus?

Festivals for the Jews

For the Jews, festivals punctuated their life, engaging them with God's dealings through their history, shaping their present identity as a people, as well as forming and capturing their hopes for what God will do in the future. For the Jews, to forget was the deepest unfaithfulness, to remember was to allow the past to shape their future.

The festivals were "enacted remembrance" that put them into the story and allowed them in some way to experience it. Passover, their most important festival, celebrated the deliverance from slavery in Egypt by 'reliving' the experience of their forefathers. As the rabbis' said: "in every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt".

The First Easter and the early church

The "First Easter" took place at the time of Passover. The last supper was a Passover meal, significantly and surprisingly changed by Jesus' explanations of the symbols. He took the Passover story and wove in his own story, redefining the meal around himself, fulfilling the Jewish hope of redemption and covenant renewal through his own one-time sacrificial death.

This link was not missed by the early church and they soon adopted this as their own festival, their own opportunity to relive story of the new Passover. Initially the Early church celebrated this central event *weekly*. Their regular gatherings were on the first day of the week, the Sunday [a working day], to celebrate the day of the Resurrection. Friday, conversely, became the day of penance, fasting and sorrow.

They also kept a *yearly* celebration which tied into the period of Jewish Passover. The Easter Sunday celebrations were often accompanied by baptisms of new believers, and a

day of recommitment for those already baptised. In a similar way to the weekly celebrations, there was a time of preparation. For example, the week before baptism candidates wore sackcloth to mark the period of fasting and repentance – a look that may work well today with a few rips and exposed seams! All believers joined them in reconsidering their life and need of forgiveness.

An Easter Festival and points to ponder.....

We see in this early experience the seeds of what developed into standard church practice. The period of Lent, reflecting Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, is a time preparation and identification with Jesus. Is there room for us to consider a long preparation for Easter day? A time to take stock, to re-prioritise, to recover a sense of dying to self, in order that the resurrection life of Christ might be more fully ours. Palm Sunday, a week before Easter, remembers Jesus' welcome into Jerusalem, and anticipates the hope of a new victorious King. Maunday Thursday remembers the Last Supper and Jesus' subsequent arrest.

The extremes of the Easter story are most stark on Good Friday as the focus turns to Jesus' suffering and death. Many churches use some or all of the 14 Stations of the Cross (the basis for Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion') to walk through and fully appreciate the realities of Jesus' experience. In it there is opportunity for connection for their own experience of struggle and suffering both personally and in this world.

From the depths of the suffering of Good Friday, and the quietness and waiting of Easter Saturday, Easter Sunday explodes with resurrection life: the celebration of the victorious Resurrection of Jesus, resurrection life for those in Him, and future resurrection for the whole of creation. Over centuries on Easter morning people have gathered on hilltops, beaches and open meadows to greet the rising sun, a visual reminder of the risen Son of God.

In the midst of the Easter story and the possibility of reliving it as a Festival, people can find their own journey. They can rediscover again the reality of Jesus' transforming work in their own lives. The journey of suffering and rejection through to victory and resurrection.

As I write this I wonder if I have found a reason for my own frustration and dissatisfaction with my Easter experience. We love the dramatic salvation stories. The reminder of the depths of God's grace is so encouraging to our faith. The rags-to-riches stories are so powerful because they deal with both the downs and the ups of the story. The flow, the texture, the depths and the heights of the Easter story is what gives it such a dynamic, and its power.

Is it possible then to resurrect Easter, to increase its place and significance in our church communities? Honestly, I am not yet sure. But giving people the chance to engage in an experiential way with the flow of the story, as in the Passover feast, is surely worth a try.

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Mark's spare time is spent lighting the fire (and other things), playing with the kids, and watching films. As well as his church responsibilities Mark works part-time as an IT manager.

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