

EASTER and the Great 50 Days



The Easter season is framed by the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. It is a time for us to celebrate the mystery of the risen presence of Christ.

The season of Easter is a period of eight Sundays comprising fifty days, and has often been described as the "Great Fifty Days". The word 'Easter' is an unfortunate one for the Church as it was originally drawn from a festival to the Teutonic goddess of spring and fertility. In the early church the name given to this festival was 'Pasch' - derived from the Greek word we translate as Passover. It is a word that connects us with the ancient celebration of

Passover which the early Christian community adopted and re-framed in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection.

The first Christians saw a symbolic continuity between the slaughtered Lamb of the Passover Seder and the crucified Lamb of God. In a similar way the imagery of the Exodus was re-interpreted. As Moses led the Israelites through the sea to freedom from bondage to Pharaoh, so Jesus Christ through the resurrection provides the way out of bondage to sin and death.

The opening week of Easter in the ancient church had a distinctive character. Each day those who had been initiated into the Church at the Great Vigil attended worship wearing the new white robes given to them after their baptism. In the daily sermon, the preacher interpreted for them the meanings of Christian life and faith implied in the rites of initiation. For example, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, addressed newly baptized Africans in this way:

Regard yourselves as delivered out of Egypt from a harsh servitude where iniquity ruled over you; and as having passed through the Red Sea by baptism, in which you received the seal of Christ' bloody cross. Prune yourselves therefore of past sins, those enemies of yours which pursued you from the rear. For as the Egyptians perished in the very waters traversed by the people of God, so your sins were blotted out in the waters in which you were baptised...

Easter week was a time to reflect on the meaning of their baptism and the Eucharist in which they had participated for the first time.

Today Easter is the most appropriate time for the church to celebrate Baptism and Eucharist. Even when there is no one prepared for Baptism, it is appropriate that the Church consider participating in a congregational re-affirmation of Baptism, where we are reminded of our dying with Christ, and our sharing in his risen life. If members of your congregation are away on holiday

remember that Easter is a season not simply one day, there is plenty of time to re-affirm our baptism in the weeks of Easter.

Throughout the season of Easter we are invited to share in the risen life of Christ, and called to faith along with the women at the empty tomb, the disciples locked behind doors, or fishing on the Lake. We are invited to share in the story of Thomas, and to grow through our doubts and fears into the life of Christian discipleship.



The Emmaus road story among others helps us reflect on the presence of Christ in the Eucharistic celebrations of the community. Leo the Great made a wonderful assertion about the mystery of Christ's presence when he said, *"What Christ did visibly during his earthly ministry has now passed over into sacrament"*

The Church's celebration of Easter is not simply a looking back to an empty tomb in Jerusalem over 2000 years ago, it is about reawakening here and now our sacramental life in Christ, our baptismal death and resurrection in Christ, and our being fed to become the body and blood in the world.

From very early on the Third Sunday of Easter was known as Good Shepherd Sunday. The Shepherd as a metaphor of divine care seems to remain popular even in cultures that know almost nothing about the ways of sheep or shepherds.

The Ascension

By the late fourth century the Lord's ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit were commemorated as two distinct aspects of Christ's redeeming work. John Calvin placed great importance on the Ascension He argued that Christ is Lord of the world and head

of the church, so Christ's ascension concerns not just the church but the whole of life; it engages the church in political and social involvement. If Christ is ascended, then there are no other rulers - all others are merely pretenders. Christ reigns supreme.

Easter in some traditions has been called the "Alleluia Season" as the community throughout Lent had refrained from singing alleluia's and now all the stops are pulled out to express in music and song the joy of Easter. The Colour also is to express that Easter Joy in brilliant white or gold