

*A guide to the services of*  
**Holy Week**





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# 1 Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week. Like an overture to an opera which familiarizes listeners with the musical themes to come, the liturgy of Palm Sunday prepares the Church to meaningfully observe our Lord's passion, death, and resurrection by touching on themes that will be more deeply explored all Week, especially during the *Triduum* (the "sacred three days") of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday.

Most literally, Palm Sunday recounts Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where He was welcomed by joyful crowds who waved palm branches and strew their garments to make a path before Him. The Church joins with them in welcoming Jesus as king, even "the great King upon all the earth" (PSALM 46:1-2); so since the fourth century, Palm Sunday liturgies have opened with a celebratory procession with palms around the town or the church grounds. The hymn traditionally associated with this procession, *All glory, laud, and honor*, is the Anglican version of the early ninth-century Latin hymn text *Gloria, laus et honor*. In Anglican churches it is usually sung to a seventeenth-century German tune that was originally written to honor the suffering of Christ on Calvary. This mixing of Catholic and Protestant contributions unites Anglicans to the whole Church and perfectly expresses Palm Sunday's dramatic irony: Jesus arrives in Jerusalem as a conquering king, but will win the victory only by giving His life for the ransom of many.

The procession has a destination: the church doors. Understanding the significance of the chain of events Jesus unfolds by willingly entering the gates of Jerusalem, the Church connects this moment to the psalmist's great words, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates... and the King of Glory will come in" (PSALM 24:7) . His meek entry on a donkey is in fact "the LORD mighty in battle" (PSALM 24:8). This moment is inseparable too from what the Church observes on Holy Saturday: our Lord in His death boldly confronts the gates of Hades, and ransacks them to set free the captives of sin; and He Himself begins the inexorable path toward that victory on this day.

After all enter the church, the liturgy focuses on the cost of Jesus coming to take His throne. The epistle first reminds us of how He did it: Christ "became obedient [for us] unto death, even the death of the cross" (PHIL 2:8). This saying (*Christus factus est*) was repeated through Holy Week in the ancient monastic services, with a few words being added each day until Holy Saturday, when the full unfolding of the Triduum's purpose was finally stated: "wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name" (PHIL 2:9). The Palm Sunday epistle therefore sets out this route in full before the Church travels it with her Lord. All traditionally genuflect at the words "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (PHIL 2:10), an action so rare during an epistle reading that it must mark in the mind of the Church the ultimate purpose of the painful journey Jesus began on this day.

The Passion of our Lord according to St. Matthew is always read on Palm Sunday, as the emphasis of the liturgy turns further toward anticipating the days that lie ahead. Since the fifth or sixth century, this Passion has been set apart by its presentation, being said or sung by additional clergy or laypeople apart from the deacon who normally reads the Gospel. Traditionally, the words of the

angry crowds are spoken by the congregation. Just after placing herself among Jesus' joyful welcomers in the procession, the Church immediately pictures herself among the furious multitudes baying for His execution. This tonal tension is a major part of the Palm Sunday observance. By putting these words in her own mouth, the Church recognizes her own ironic hypocrisy, her own part in the overall sinfulness of man that provokes the need for Christ's redemptive sacrifice. In a foreshadowing of Jesus' abandonment by the disciples on Maundy Thursday, and in an acknowledgement of our manifold sins and wickedness, we who hail Jesus as King one moment in the next deny Him.

Though we highlight today that the Son of God went not up to joy but first He suffered pain, and entered not into glory before He was crucified, we are not left without hope. The presence of the Eucharist at the Palm Sunday liturgy highlights key themes that will be further developed in the Week. Our Lord deigns to dwell with us in the Blessed Sacrament that He instituted on Maundy Thursday, and in it we remember He is the true Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*) who feeds us with the spiritual food of His Body and Blood, given as He suffered death upon the cross for our redemption on Good Friday. But the greatest comfort is the knowledge that we, as the Palm Sunday collect begs, might be "made partakers of His Resurrection", that Easter joy lying at the end of the Week for which we prepare now, and of which we are heirs through hope.

## 2 Tenebrae (Holy Wednesday)

Wednesday in Holy Week is the last day before the *Triduum* (sacred three days) of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. It is often called *Holy Wednesday*, or sometimes *Spy Wednesday*, because on this day Judas Iscariot arranged in secret to deliver Jesus up to the Sanhedrin in exchange for thirty pieces of silver (MATTHEW 26:15).

The name *Tenebrae* (the Latin word for “darkness” or “shadows”) has for centuries been applied to the ancient monastic night and early morning services (Matins and Lauds) of the last three days of Holy Week, which in medieval times came to be celebrated on the preceding evenings. Apart from the chant of the Lamentations (in which each verse is introduced by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet), the most conspicuous feature of the service is the gradual extinguishing of candles and other lights in the church until only a single candle, considered a symbol of our Lord, remains. Toward the end of the service this candle is hidden, typifying the apparent victory of the forces of evil. At the very end, a loud noise called the *strepitus* is made, symbolizing the chaos surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus as well as the earthquakes at the times of His death and His resurrection (MATT 27:51; 28:2). The hidden candle is then restored to its place, and by its light all depart in silence.

According to parish custom, provision is made for Tenebrae on Wednesday evening only, in order that the proper liturgies of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday may find their place as the principal services of those days.

# The Triduum

*or “sacred three days”*

### 3 Maundy Thursday

The evening of Maundy Thursday begins the *Triduum* (the “sacred three days”) observing the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Paschal mystery which is at the heart of the Christian Gospel. The services of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday form a single liturgy; thus, the final blessing and dismissal is reserved for the conclusion of the Triduum at the Great Vigil of Easter.

Maundy Thursday receives its name from the *mandatum* (“mandate”) given by our Lord on this day: “A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (JOHN 13:34). Jesus showed His love for His disciples at the Last Supper by sharing with them His Body and Blood in the bread and wine; for this reason the Church often uses celebratory white vestments on Maundy Thursday to honor the institution of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Also at this Supper, Jesus humbly washed His disciples’ feet and instructed them to love and serve one another as He had done. The Church follows His example and command by washing the feet of her parishioners on Maundy Thursday. The celebrant, the priest in the highest position at the head of the feast, takes the position of a servant as Christ did by washing the feet of the congregation. *Ubi caritas*, a hymn describing Christian unity in the midst of charitable acts of God, has been sung during this footwashing since the ninth century. Congregants desiring to participate in the footwashing may come forward at the invitation with their foot (it is typical for only one to be washed) uncovered.

Although Maundy Thursday commemorates the servant ministry of Christ and the institution of the Eucharist, it also marks the betrayal of Jesus that led inexorably to His crucifixion. This tension is expressed liturgically by a generally downward arc. The *Gloria in excelsis*, restored for the first time since the beginning of Lent, is sung near the beginning of this service with great joy, the bells ringing throughout; but this is the last time the bells will be heard until Easter. Thereafter, the bells are replaced by the sound of the *crotalus* (“rattle”, after the sound of a rattlesnake), offering a stark auditory reminder of the ongoing desolation and temptation of our Lord.

This downward arc of the liturgy is also expressed in its Eucharistic piety. Following the footwashing, a double portion of the communion elements are consecrated. After half has been distributed, the remainder of the Blessed Sacrament is carried out of the sanctuary in a solemn procession to the flower-adorned Altar of Repose, recalling how Jesus went out from the upper room after the Last Supper with His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. *Now, my tongue, the mystery telling*, the 11th-century hymn traditionally sung during this procession, describes Jesus “giv[ing] Himself with His own hand,” apparent both in the Eucharist and in His voluntary decision to continue to the cross. When the procession returns to the sanctuary, the typical post-communion thanksgiving prayers are not said; instead, the Stripping of the Altar begins. The altar party remove any adornment of the sanctuary in haste, representing the abandonment and denial of Jesus by His apostles, and anticipating His being stripped of His garments and abused upon his capture (MATT 27:28).

(cont’d)



After the service, a prayer vigil is traditionally held before the Blessed Sacrament at the Altar of Repose, giving congregants an opportunity to “watch with [our Lord] one hour” in remembrance of His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (MATT 26:40).

## 4 Good Friday

Good Friday is the second day of the *Triduum* (the “sacred three days”). This most somber of all days is appropriately marked by fasting, abstinence, and penitence, leading us to focus on Jesus and the meaning of His cross. The stark appearance of the church, still laid bare from the Stripping of the Altar of Maundy Thursday, serves as a reminder of the solemnity and the sorrow of the day.

The liturgy of Good Friday takes place between the hours of noon and three o'clock in recognition of the three hours Jesus hung on the cross before He died. It is called the *Mass of the Presanctified*, since the Eucharist is not celebrated anew on this day, in deference to the true full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice offered by Christ on the cross to which that Sacrament points. Instead, communion is offered from the elements consecrated on Maundy Thursday; the liturgy therefore is a modified form of the usual Order for Holy Communion that amplifies the serious themes of the death of our Lord.

After the Liturgy of the Word, the Solemn Collects are chanted in place of the Prayers for the Whole State of Christ's Church. These prayers are some of the oldest in Christian history, dating to as early as the second century. Using these prayers, which intercede for various categories of men, on Good Friday underlines the longstanding Christian understanding that the perfect oblation of Jesus' death is indeed offered for the sins of the whole world.

A central feature of the Good Friday liturgy is the Veneration of the Cross, a practice which can be traced back to fourth-century Jerusalem. A cross is shown to the congregation, who may come forward and make a *veneration*, or a gesture of respect. This practice makes its way into Anglicanism via St. Ælfric, Archbishop of Canterbury, who urged parishioners in medieval England to “greet God's cross [on Good Friday] with a kiss.” Henry VIII preserved this practice, then called “creeping to the cross,” through the English Reformation, noting that it “signifi[es] humility and the memory of our redemption.” It is therefore important to note that venerating the cross is not the worship of an object, but the use of an object as a focal point to intensify and contextualize our devotion to our Lord. The cross is a sign of God's neverending love for us; it is a sign of life in the midst of death; it is the weapon that wins Jesus the victory over the powers of Hell; and by it we are redeemed, set free from bondage to sin. It is therefore deserving of our meditation and veneration during our worship of Jesus Christ.

Parishioners desiring to venerate the cross may come forward at the invitation. Any gesture of respect is appropriate to make. Some common or historical modes of veneration include genuflecting thrice or kneeling before the cross; kissing the feet of Jesus, if there is a *corpus* on the cross; touching one's forehead to the cross; or simply offering a brief prayer before the cross.

The Reproaches recited during the Veneration of the Cross are shared by Eastern and Western Christianity and remind the faithful of the role their own sin played in the suffering and agony of Jesus as he took all sin upon himself. *Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle*, the sixth-century hymn that closes the venerations, exalts the “faithful cross” and casts it as the location of a final wartime conflict from which Christ emerges Victor. This theme is further carried by the contem-

poraneous *The royal banners forward go*, sung in kingly procession as the Blessed Sacrament is retrieved from the Altar of Repose. Palm Sunday's recognition of Christ as King is fulfilled in this Good Friday singing: "God hath reigned and triumphed from the Tree."

## 5 Holy Saturday

Holy Saturday is the final day of the *Triduum* (the “sacred three days”). On this day, the Church recalls how Jesus laid in the tomb after His death on Good Friday. The simple service of antecomunion brings the theme of apparent hopelessness surrounding the death of Jesus forward, as no candles are lit and no Eucharist is celebrated.

Christians have confessed since the ancient creeds that after His death on the cross, Jesus “descended into Hell [Hades],” understood to mean the place of the dead. Since Christ was truly man as well as truly God, His death as a man necessitated His descent to the place where all dead men were consigned. As one collect says, when on Holy Saturday Jesus “[did] rest in the sepulchre, [He did] thereby sanctify the grave to be a bed of hope to [His] people.” He experienced death as we all have or will, a fact underscored by the liturgy’s minor propers (“My soul draweth nigh unto hell,” Ps 88:2 ; “the snares of death overtook me,” Ps 18:3 ) and its use of the Graveside Sentences usually reserved for the Burial service in the Book of Common Prayer.

Since Christ was truly God as well as truly man, He descended into Hell not as a captive but as a liberator. He comes to knock at its gates, fulfilling the door-knocking performed on Palm Sunday at His entry into Jerusalem, before breaking them down, ransacking and emptying that place of its prisoners, and leading the saints who were dead out of their bondage. An ancient narrative of this Harrowing of Hell is read as the homily during this service. A popular scene from the early Christian imagination suits well this day when the Church lies in wait for her Lord to free the captives of Hell: John the Baptist announcing Jesus’ imminent arrival there just as he did on earth, surely urging the dead to “prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (LUKE 3:4-6).

## 6 The Great Easter Vigil

The Great Easter Vigil is the most ancient service of the Christian calendar in addition to being the most important. Keeping this vigil as a liturgical observation unites Christians to their earliest first-century forbears among the communion of saints. Its character as a Vigil is one of *watching*, waiting together through the night for the glorious news of the Resurrection, anticipating together that first break of Day. The service therefore begins after sunset on Holy Saturday.

The shape of the liturgy is ancient, and consists of four main parts. First, during the *Service of Light*, a new fire is kindled in the darkness outdoors. Traditionally, this fire was struck from flintstone, the striking of the rock symbolizing the first rising of our Lord in His rock-hewn tomb. From this primitive fire the Paschal Candle is lit, symbolizing Christ's light, which is the light of the world (JOHN 8:12) and that light which the darkness could not overcome (JOHN 1:5). The Paschal Candle leads the congregation in procession into the darkened church, where the deacon sings the *Exultet*, the first Easter proclamation that effusively praises this night "wherein Christ hath burst the bonds of death." Lamps throughout the church, as well as the congregation's candles, are lit during this proclamation which identifies this very light with the fiery pillar that led the Israelites through the desert after their liberation. By hearing the Exultet sung by the deacon, who usually bears tidings to the congregation during the liturgy after the manner of the angels, the Church situates herself as hearing the first news of the Resurrection from the angels at the tomb.

Second, the congregation recalls together the history of God's many saving deeds that culminate in the Resurrection during the *Service of Lessons*. These lessons are also called the *Prophecies*, since they each foretell some aspect of Christ's ultimate saving act. Moving through the history of salvation together, illuminated by the collective light of the Paschal candle, the Church keeps watch, preparing herself to fully appreciate and celebrate the coming joy of the Resurrection.

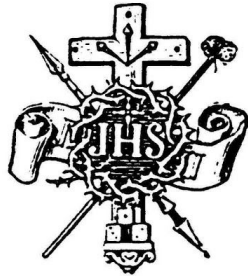
Third, a special rite is observed: the *Blessing of the Font*. Easter is deeply connected with the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, by which we die to sin with Christ and are raised to new life in Him, regenerated by the cleansing of water and purged from our sins by His Blood and the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. The baptismal font is therefore traditionally blessed at the Great Easter Vigil. This blessing is performed in the darkness to underscore the somberness of the pre-baptismal state, as the liturgy identifies those desiring baptism with those "athirst for God... as the hart desireth the water-brooks" (PSALM 42:1-3). The priest blesses the font by recalling the institution of Holy Baptism, asking the Holy Ghost to operate in it. The Litany is then prayed by all together, with special intention for any catechumens who are about to be baptized.

Fourth, the *First Mass of Easter* is celebrated as the climax and culmination of the service. The service moves from the fervent and somber prayers of the Litany to the joyous and overflowing singing of the *Gloria in excelsis*, the hymn suppressed during Lent that is now restored in full. The bells are rung throughout, restored for the first time since Maundy Thursday; all images veiled through Paschontide are uncovered; and the sanctuary is adorned in its finest array of flowers and linens to celebrate this most joyful moment of the Resurrection of our Lord.

“Alleluia,” the characteristic exclamation of the Easter season which has not been said since Ash Wednesday, is proclaimed in full. The Order for Holy Communion is celebrated with full glory and ceremony, save for the acolytes who do not carry torches at the reading of the Gospel. We Christians celebrate in the full joy of the knowledge of the Resurrection – but in this reading, the Church situates herself among the women who have just received the news, sent out to carry it to the disciples, who have not yet beheld the resurrected Light of the World.

If there are candidates to be baptized, they are baptized during this Order for Holy Communion in the newly-blessed font, becoming united to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (ROMANS 6:3-4). If there are no baptisms, the congregation joins together in a Renewal of Baptismal Vows. At the end of the liturgy, all depart joyfully, being dismissed with a final “alleluia”, remembering that “by His death [Jesus has] destroyed death, and by His rising to life again [has] restored to us everlasting life.” As we keep this holy Feast of feasts, we share the joy of our Savior’s triumph and are strengthened by his grace to walk in newness of life.





*St. Benedict's Anglican Church is a parish of  
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