

How to become absurdly well informed about the Services of Holy Week in five minutes flat!

Stations of the Cross

Jesus would have carried his cross from Jerusalem through the city gate to the municipal dump to be hoisted on it to suffocate. Pilgrims have since followed in his footsteps stopping from time to time to pray. The Franciscans promoted the local re-enactment of the Jerusalem experience often on Fridays in Lent. Often walked penitentially anticlockwise within a Church, we'll drive round stopping at each church to reflect on one of our set of 14 pictures painted for us in 2024 by Iain McKillop. Some are based on the Bible. For instance we read that Simon the Libyan was made to carry the cross. Some on probability: Jesus must have fallen a number of times. Then some are conjecture or tradition: such as Veronica wiping Jesus' face. Each is used as the basis for a short time of prayer and meditation framed within a short responsory.

Palm Sunday (Holy Communion)

Our Holy Communion service on the Sunday before Easter is in two parts. Its Palms Gospel makes reference to Jesus 'Triumphal Entry' into Jerusalem. We give out and bless palm crosses as we walk up to church from the Library. The waving of branches is similar to waving flags or scarves at a procession of Royalty or sports-people today. Some may have gathered to celebrate what they thought would be the overthrow of the Roman occupation by this renegade band of revolutionaries. Others may have seen hopeful religious prophecies played out in the event. The service then takes a turn for the worse with the mighty Passion Gospel, here read by our Open the Book team. It recounts the full details of Christ's final hours from the Passover Meal in the upper room to his being laid in the tomb.

Maundy Thursday (Holy Communion)

This service; one of our few weekday evening communions; looks back to Jesus' final meal with his Disciples. The writers of Matthew, Mark and Luke describe it as a Passover Seder Meal. In John's Gospel, the evening before, the main event is the washing of the disciples' feet. In explaining his action Jesus says 'a new commandment I give to you'. Maundy has the same root as the word 'Mandate' or command. So that is where the day gets its name. In our service a representative twelve people will have their feet 'washed'. Though it is likely that there were more than just 'the twelve' at the Last Supper. The liturgy ends with a loud noise and the stripping of the altar. The one reminding us of the earthquake at Christ's death. The other, of his mocking by the Roman soldiery. In some places consecrated host (blessed communion wafer) is taken to be exposed in a monstrance on an altar surrounded by candles and flowers. People may keep vigil over night or for an hour praying in Christ's presence after this service.

Good Friday

A number of events will take place on Good Friday. Our three remaining Christian denominations join together for the Walk of Witness through the town. St Andrews, Wissett, host a truncated Stations of the Cross (see above). There are many reasons suggested as to why such a bad day has come to be known as 'Good'. Perhaps, it is because Jesus' death - though apparently pointlessly bad - turns out to be restoratively good for believers. In the evening, there will be a Tenebrae or Darkness service at St Peters, Spexhall. It is a version of evening prayers along the lines of a Seven Last words reflection. The scripture readings and prayers accompany a gradual extinguishing of candles, traditionally borne on a triangular candelabra called hearse. It may end with a strepitus or loud noise recalling that earthquake a Jesus dies!

Easter Vigil

Somewhat bizarrely perhaps, liturgically, tomorrow starts today at sunset. So though the Easter Vigil works particularly well at sunrise on Easter Morning, it may also be celebrated on Holy Saturday evening as we do it here.

The service is in four parts. The Paschal or Easter Candle is lit at a brazier outside the Church. It is carried up to a position at the high altar in darkness lighting the candles of the faithful as it goes. It stops three times for the acclamation 'Christ Our Light' and is the focus for the rendition of the Exsultet or 'Easter Proclamation'. Traditionally, this is sung solo by a Deacon.

There is then a sequence of readings giving a potted history of God's work of redemption. In that sense, they are not unlike those at the popular service of Nine Lessons and Carols. Traditionally, after the Hebrew Scripture readings and their attendant Psalm or song and prayer candles are lit, bells are rung and the Gloria is sung. There is then a reading from Romans and Psalm 118 is chanted after which Alleluia is sung for the first time since Lent began. After the Gospel there is a sermon.

If there are Baptisms or Confirmations to be celebrated in the parish these are incorporated here traditionally. Otherwise, as we do, Baptismal vows are renewed with a sprinkling of water from the font. Finally, Holy Communion is celebrated.

Easter Sunday

There is not much to say about the Holy Communion celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus. Most of the words used in the liturgy are the same as are used every Sunday. This is not surprising, perhaps, as we always celebrate his death, resurrection and imminent return on the first day of the week every week. Though there are some seasonal changes for the Easter period. Look out for them at the confession, the peace, the preface to the Eucharistic Prayer and the blessing. There is also a collect and post-communion prayer for Easter. The service is usually very well attended and has a tangible feel of real joy and hope.