

HOLY WEEK AND EASTER LITURGIES EXPLAINED



*Christ Church Cathedral,
Newcastle*

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At the end of Lent, we observe Holy Week as a time of special attention given to the commemoration of Our Lord's Passion.

Liturgy is more about celebration and commemoration than re-enactment. The rich use of symbols helps us do this.

The Eucharist, the celebration of Christ's saving death, is the primary focus of our liturgies this week. The liturgies of the Easter Triduum: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Great Vigil of Easter, comprise one great liturgy rather than three separate events, as they together celebrate the great drama of our salvation in Christ. This is why the Liturgies for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday do not conclude with a Blessing, as is normally the case at the Sunday Eucharist.

It is therefore far more meaningful if we attend all three major liturgies in order to enter more fully into the movement of the Paschal Mystery.

PASSION (PALM) SUNDAY

There are two main emphases on this Day: the Procession with Palms commemorating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, and the Eucharist, which includes the dramatic reading of the Passion. Palm crosses are blessed and distributed to the congregation.

This pattern had its origin in Jerusalem, when pilgrims processed from the Mount of Olives into the Great Church in Jerusalem. The dramatic reading of the Passion sets the major theme for the rest of Holy Week.

MONDAY IN HOLY WEEK – CHRISM EUCHARIST

At **7.00pm** a special **Eucharist** is celebrated in the Cathedral at which the holy oils used in the Church's sacraments are blessed. These are then taken by the priests who have gathered, back to their own parishes.

Three oils are blessed by the Bishop: the **oil of the sick**, used, as the name implies, when visiting the sick as a sign of God's healing and forgiveness; the **oil of catechumens**, originating from the early church when new Christians were anointed as they were admitted to the catechumenate, a period of instruction and preparation for baptism into their new faith; and the **oil of the Chrism**, used after baptism to sign the newly-baptised on the forehead with the cross, during confirmation, and on the hands of those being ordained priest. The Chrism is mixed with spices during consecration, making it fragrant. It is the sign of the Holy Spirit who anoints all who belong to Christ, the Anointed One.

WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK – TENEBRAE

Tenebrae means ‘darkness’ and is the Office (prayer said at different hours of the day) with candles gradually extinguished to symbolise the approaching darkness of the cross. This is a service of reflection and meditation where readings from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, the writings of St Augustine and the Letter to the Hebrews are interspersed with the congregational recitation of psalms, with responsories and anthems by the choir.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

The name ‘maundy’ comes from the Latin *mandatum*, which means ‘commandment’. This is the day Jesus gave his disciples the new commandment that they love one another, and washed their feet as a sign of that love.

The liturgy we use is full of rich symbolism. The Gospel reading speaks of love and service, which are vividly expressed in the washing of the feet of twelve people, remembering Jesus’ washing the feet of the twelve disciples.

This is also the night we remember Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples, when he instituted the Holy Eucharist. This is why the service is held in the evening. At the conclusion, the Altar and Sanctuary are stripped of their hangings and ornaments as a sign of the desolation of the cross. The Blessed Sacrament (the consecrated bread and wine left from communion) is carried to the St Michael Chapel and placed on the altar – the ‘Altar of Repose’ - and stays there all night. A Vigil of Prayer is kept before the Blessed Sacrament until midnight as a way of sharing with Jesus who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest. The sacrament is then used for communion on Good Friday.

GOOD FRIDAY

Over the years a variety of services have been held on Good Friday in Australian Anglican communities. These have expressed different aspects of Christian belief.

At the Cathedral we first gather at **8am** for **Morning Prayer** and say the **Litany** – a form of responsive prayer for all people and the needs of the world and the church. Then a **Service for Families and Children** is held at **10 o’clock** with the St Nicholas Choir. The **main liturgy of the day** is at **Midday** and provides an opportunity to meditate on the cross as well as to pray for the world and the church for which Jesus died. The service is one of great beauty with music provided by the Cathedral Choir. It is also marked by simplicity and austerity, but it is important not to see it as Jesus’ ‘funeral’. We celebrate the Lord’s triumph on the cross and call the day *Good* Friday – something which is only possible if we see Jesus’ death from the perspective of his resurrection.

The service has four main parts: the Ministry of the Word, the Solemn Prayers, the Veneration of the Cross, and Holy Communion from bread and wine consecrated at the Maundy Thursday Liturgy the night before.

In the evening at **7.30** we gather for prayers, readings and chants around the cross using music sung by the Cathedral Choir with chants from the **Taizé** community in France.

HOLY SATURDAY – THE GREAT VIGIL OF EASTER

This is the climax of the whole church year, celebrating the Christian Passover, the victory of Christ over the powers of darkness. Light is a prominent theme in the symbols, readings and hymns.

The liturgy begins normally outside the church building. The new fire is kindled, the paschal candle lit from the fire, then carried into the darkened church. All this reminds us that the rest of the Easter celebration is seen in the light of the presence of the Risen Christ.

The Ministry of the Word includes readings that rehearse God's saving acts in the history of Israel, preparing for the presence of Christ.

In the early church, Easter was the time for baptisms, so the water in the font is blessed, we renew our baptismal promises, and are sprinkled with water to remember our baptism. The service continues with the celebration of the Easter Eucharist.

The Easter Season lasts for fifty days, until Pentecost. During this time, the Paschal Candle is alight at all liturgies, the Alleluia is sung again, a festive form of the Great Thanksgiving is used, and we sing hymns and songs of joy.

EASTER DAY

On Easter Day we gather for three joyful celebrations of the Eucharist: at 7am, using the liturgy from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer; 8am when the Easter Garden is blessed; and the Choral Eucharist with Procession at the special time of 10am with the Cathedral choir accompanied by orchestra singing Joseph Haydn's "Little Organ Mass." At 6pm we gather for Festal Evensong with the Cathedral choir.

You are warmly invited to enter into these special days with prayerful expectancy, experiencing the presence of the crucified and raised Jesus as he transforms us through word and sacrament.

Fr Mark Watson