

Maundy Thursday

April 2, 2015

Holy Week

According to Egeria¹, what we call Holy Week was known as the “Great Week” in fourth-century Jerusalem. This week of the climactic events of the arrest, conviction, crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ is the most extraordinary week in the Christian calendar, the week in which the redemption of the world happened, in which the re-creation of the world began.

Egeria describes the day-to-day events of the Great Week:

On *Palm Sunday*, all the Christians assembled at the top of the Mount of Olives. Grasping palms and branches in their hands, they sang, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” as they walked slowly to the church in Jerusalem. The bishop of Jerusalem, symbolizing Christ, was in the midst of the crowd. When night fell, evening prayers were celebrated, concluded by a prayer in front of a cross erected for the occasion.

On *Monday*, they continually sang hymns and antiphons, and read passages from the Scriptures appropriate to that day in Holy Week. Egeria reports that these readings and songs were continually interrupted with prayers.

On *Tuesday*, they did the same except for this: “The Bishop takes up the book of the Gospels, and while standing, reads the words of the Lord which are written in the Gospel according to Matthew at the place where he said, “Take heed that no man deceive you” (Matt. 24:4).

¹ See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egeria_\(pilgrim\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egeria_(pilgrim)): Egeria or Aetheria (often called Sylvia) was a Gallaeci or Galician woman who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land about 381–384. She wrote an account of her journey in a long letter to a circle of women at home which survives in fragmentary form in a later copy.

On *Wednesday*, everything was done as on Monday and Tuesday except that the bishop read the passage where Judas went to the Jews to set the price they would pay him to betray the Lord (Matt. 26:1ff.; Mark 14:10f.; Luke 22:3–6ff.). Egeria reports that “while this good passage is being read, there is such moaning and groaning from among the people that no one can help being moved to tears in that moment.” (This, and similar comments throughout her account, suggest the powerful effect that re-enactment can have on the worshipers’ feelings.)

On *Thursday evening*, Communion was celebrated. Then all went home to eat their last meal until Easter, and later returned to worship all night as a way of re-enacting the gospel accounts of Thursday night. “They continually sing hymns and antiphons and read the Scripture passages proper to the place and to the day. Between these, prayers are said.”

Early on *Friday*, after worshipping all night, the Christians proceeded to Gethsemane, where they read the passage describing the Lord’s arrest (Matt. 26:36–56). Egeria reports that “there is such moaning and groaning with weeping from all the people that their moaning can be heard practically as far as the city.” They then went to the place of the cross where the words of Pilate were read (Matt. 27:2–26; Mark 15:1–15; Luke 23:1–25; John 18:28; 19:16). Then the bishop sent the crowd home to meditate, instructing them to return about the second hour so that everyone would be “on hand here so that from that hour until the sixth hour you may see the holy wood of the cross, and thus believe that it was offered for the salvation of each and every one of us.”

On *Friday night*, they acknowledged the cross as the instrument of salvation. A cross was put on a table and the people passed by “touching the cross and the inscription, first with their foreheads, then with their eyes; and after kissing the cross, they move on.”

On *Saturday*, worship was conducted at the third and

sixth hours. After nightfall the Easter Vigil was held. Although Egeria says little about this service, we know from other sources that it was a dramatic re-enactment of the Resurrection. It included a service of light that celebrated Christ as the light of the world, and the annual baptismal service in which people were baptized into Christ's dying and rising. (The early church practice of baptism by immersion was a graphic enactment of burial and resurrection.) And the glorious service that occurred on Sunday morning (after the all-night vigil) celebrated the resurrection of Christ through readings, antiphons, preaching, and the Eucharist.

Consider the involvement, the total immersion in the death and resurrection of their Lord that the worshipers must have experienced. For weeks they had prepared for this service. Then, throughout Holy Week, they had been exhausted by the intensity of following after the events in Jesus' life that led to his death. Now, after another night of vigil and anticipation, the moment of Jesus' resurrection came. Because these people had entered the tomb with him, they were able to experience his resurrection—in a way that would never happen apart from the dramatic journey they had taken.

Finally, Egeria tells us that Easter did not end on Easter day. It was followed by eight days of celebration. The worshipers' fast was over. They identified no longer with death, but with resurrection and life. For eight days the Christians gathered in worship. These festive services were in sharp contrast to the sober preparations for the Passion. They extended the Resurrection side of Easter even as fasting had prepared for the Crucifixion.²

² Robert Webber, *The Services of the Christian Year*, vol. 5, The Complete Library of Christian Worship (Nashville, TN: Star Song Pub. Group, 1994), 277–278.

