

Scripture, Rich History and Tradition in Holy Week

Time makes ancient good uncouth.... -James Russell Lowell

Long, long before there were Roman Catholics or Protestants, there were, simply, Christians. And for the first several hundred years of Christian history, faithful believers in the risen Lord braved persecution and hardship to build and then hand down a rich legacy of faith. One of the oldest and richest faith traditions centers on Holy Week, the week of the Lord Jesus' Passion. Did you know that very early on in Christian history, believers began to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem during the week leading up to Passover to commemorate Christ's death, burial, and resurrection? We have a remarkable late fourth century account of a Spanish woman named Egeria who, like many other Christians, made that trek to Jerusalem. Through her detailed diary of the week's events, we have terrific insight into what a high time of worship it that must have been:

On Monday and Tuesday, "they sang hymns...and read passages from the Scriptures." Wednesday was similar, except the leader "read a passage where Judas went to the Jews to set the price they would pay him to betray the Lord." On Thursday evening, Communion was celebrated, then everyone returned later to worship all night as a way of reenacting the Gospel accounts of Thursday night. Egeria reports that on Friday, the Christians proceeded to Gethsemane, where Scripture was read and "there is such moaning...with weeping from all the people that [it] can be heard practically as far as the city." Later that night, Christians would touch or kiss a wooden cross, acknowledging that the cross is the instrument of salvation. On Easter Sunday morning, there was exuberant worship, including baptisms, after which new Christians would participate in their first communion.

Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday—these are not Roman Catholic inventions, but rather are Scripture- and history-rich traditions born in the climate of theological faithfulness, moral righteousness, and suffering of the very early church. Our Christian forebears lived in a day not unlike our

own, where most anything or any belief goes, and where one sometimes has to pay a heavy price for standing up for Christ. And here is where the tradition of the early church is so important for us: Our Christian forebears hammered out the fundamental elements of the faith in that same environment: the doctrine of the Trinity, the dual nature of Christ, the canon of Scripture, ethics, basic confessional statements. Early church history and tradition illuminates Scripture, provides truth about God, points us beyond ourselves, helps us not to lose our foundational heritage and repeat old heresies, and reminds us that relationship with Christ is central, experiential, vibrant, present, real.

Let's not let anyone try to steal away bits and pieces of our Christian heritage. I'm convinced that the road to the future runs through the past. Many Evangelicals, especially younger ones, are rediscovering a rich legacy of faith in the early church. And they are also discovering that this rich legacy, like a drink from a deep, satisfying well of water, can uniquely quench many of the postmodern world's thirsts. I'm thirsty, are you? This week we can't go to Jerusalem this week like Egeria did in the long ago, but like her, I long to walk with Christ and, through the traditions of Holy Week, identify more closely with my Savior. There can't be the joy of Easter Sunday without the pain and suffering of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Let's never forget.