

The Great Three Days and the Catechumenate

What is the relationship between these two traditions which are currently being restored in the life of our churches? And what is the significance of their convergence? I am going to tell four stories to answer these questions: the story of **the emergence of the great three days**; the story of **the convergence of initiation practices**; the story of **the decay of Christendom**; and the story of **the Liturgical Movement and the Second Vatican Council**.

The Emergence of the Great Three Days

In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul recites the teaching he had received about the Lord's Supper, presumably after his own baptism. He claims that he "received from the Lord what I also handed on to you;" however, 'handing on' is what we mean by 'tradition,' and so I take him to mean that, for him, receiving the tradition was the same thing as 'receiving from the Lord,' for the risen Lord is embodied in the community that hands on what it has been given.

And what it was given was a command of the Lord, a command which virtually every company of disciples over the centuries thereafter has tried to keep: "Do this in remembrance of me." But Paul apparently understands 'remembering Jesus' in a very specific way, for he adds, "as often as you [do this], you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Just his death? Is that all? What about his resurrection, for example? Four chapters later we will hear him insisting that if Christ is not risen, our faith is in vain. Indeed, if Christ had not been raised, we probably would never even have heard of Jesus of Nazareth. Just his death?

I am going to suggest that Paul knew only too well that the one thing about Jesus that we are most tempted to forget is the fact that our world rejected and executed the one God sent to redeem it. This reality is so immense and disturbing that even Christians prefer to reduce it to some theory of the atonement, to avoid facing the crisis of the cross. For this event, more than any other, reveals the world's enslavement to fear and death, an enslavement that continues to the present day, an enslavement within which we 'live and move and have our being,' though we continue largely unconscious of it in daily life. For we refuse to face the truth revealed in the crisis of Jesus' execution.

There are two great conversion stories in the New Testament, and both were triggered by an encounter with the Crucified. Simon (whom Jesus nicknamed 'Peter') was the disciple Jesus counted on to be the 'rock' of the new movement, and indeed he was — a 'rock of stumbling' who tried to divert Jesus from the path ordained for him, a kind of

'Satan' who tempted Jesus to claim the throne and avoid the cross. So when the cross began to loom, Simon Peter insisted three times that he didn't know Jesus (which was true, at the deepest level) and took refuge with the opponents of Jesus who warmed themselves at the fire. Even after news of the resurrection had reached him, he still chose to return to his fishing nets. But the Crucified Master confronted him three times with the question, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" and Simon finally had to acknowledge that he did not know *himself either* until he was revealed to himself in Jesus' crucifixion. Only by being confronted with that reality by the Risen One was he enabled to find reconciliation with the One he loved.

Saul of Tarsus was scandalized that the scattered followers of the crucified pretender were proclaiming him as the Messiah, and determined to end this blasphemy by rounding up these people. But on the way to Damascus he was met by the Crucified who asked him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In that instant, his worst fears were confirmed, and he recognized that the zeal with which he was persecuting Jesus' followers was exactly the same zeal that had done Jesus to death. The entire edifice of piety in which he found his identity came crashing to the ground; "I died," he said, "and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

The authorities in Jerusalem assumed, of course, that with the handing over of Jesus to the Romans for execution, they had squashed once and for all this particular threat to the peace (to the *Pax Romana*, that is). And so, when the apostles began publically recounting the story of what had happened (Acts 2 and following), the authorities did everything they could to silence them and erase from history the name of Jesus: "to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name" (Acts 4:17). When the warning was ignored, the apostles were hauled up before the council and told, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us" (5:28). The apostles response was, "We must obey God rather than human authority," and so began the struggle to resist the world's persistent amnesia about this terrible thing that had happened, and about God's astonishing response to that event.

'Remembrance' is a word with a number of relatives: reminiscence, amnesia — and *anamnesis*. Remembering and forgetting (amnesia). *Anamnesis* (un-forgetting) is the technical term that students of the liturgy use to denote that moment in the Great Thanksgiving when we explicitly acknowledge what we are doing: e.g., "we remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, we await his coming in glory" (or some similar declaration, following our recitation of the great story of salvation).

The fourth gospel acknowledges the crucifixion of the Prince of Peace as the supreme crisis for the world: in 12:31-32, Jesus says, "Now is the judgement (*crisis*) of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the

earth, will draw all people to myself." The cross is the moment when the world, by passing judgement on Jesus, passed judgement upon itself. But the cross is also the moment of the world's supreme opportunity — to know itself both guilty and forgiven. Thus, Paul tells the new disciples in Corinth, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:2-5).

We remember his death at table so that we may be a people of continuing conversion — knowing ourselves as children of a world both guilty and forgiven. We are the living memory of the world's salvation, remembering for the sake of the world what the world is hell-bent on forgetting.

But the early disciples needed to choose not only to remember, but *when* to remember. Their earliest pattern of remembering was to do it on the day of resurrection (the day that revealed both the seriousness of the world's crisis and the divine redemption of the world which God was bringing to pass through that crisis) — the Lord's Day. This is not the Christian Sabbath but the new day that follows the Sabbath, the 'eighth day of the week,' the day that broke the world's deadly cycle of violence and death. It was the obvious day to choose for 'remembering the Lord's death.'

But very soon after, it seems, they began to recognize as the other obvious choice the annual festival at which Jesus was arrested, convicted, and put to death: the Passover. This festival celebrated the liberation of the Hebrews from fear and death under the tyranny of Pharaoh, and God was now using the 'Passover of the Lord' to liberate the *world* from fear and death. Thus emerged the annual celebration of a 'Christian Passover.'

But when should they celebrate it? Initially, it must have taken place the same day as the Jewish Passover (which could fall on any day of the week), but eventually they decided that the celebration was most appropriate on the Sunday closest to the Jewish Passover, thus strengthening the association between this '*Great Lord's Day*' and the weekly celebration of a '*Little Easter*.'

It is worth observing, however, that in both English and German, this association has been weakened by the adoption of the name of a Germanic goddess of the dawn (in old English, *Eostre*) for the name of this Christian Passover. In almost all other European languages, the name for what we call Easter is some derivation of the word Passover (*Pesach* in Hebrew): Pâques, Pascua, Páscoa, Pasqua, Påsk, Påske, Pääsiäinen, etc. Thankfully, words like 'paschal' and 'Passover' are now becoming more common in our English Christian vocabulary.

Originally, the Passover of the Lord was a single (lengthy) celebration, beginning the evening before Easter Day and climaxing as the sun rose on that joyful morning, a celebration of the total mystery of *Emmanuel*, God with us: a celebration of Jesus' birth, baptism, ministry, death, resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit. But once the festival of Epiphany (and then Christmas) had been added to the Christian Year, the Passover of the Lord was focussed only on the Passover events themselves.

However, after the persecutions by the Roman authorities had ended, Christians who celebrated this festival in Jerusalem had the added advantage of being able to celebrate not only *at the time* of this saving event, but *at the actual sites* where it all unfolded. Thus evolved a kind of processional observance of the Christian Passover: gathering at the (presumed) site of the Last Supper on Thursday evening, then at the rocky hill of Golgotha on Friday, and finally at the place of the empty tomb nearby. Thus emerged the Great Three Days, from Thursday evening to Sunday — a more elaborate Passover of the Lord, which Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem took delight in describing when they got back home, spreading a form of the Passover of the Lord in which we can 'be there' ourselves. (Thursday to Sunday sounds like four days, but I will demonstrate later how to count to three.)

The Convergence of Initiation Practices

Baptism is initiation into God's new covenant with his ancient people, the new covenant predicted by Jeremiah (31:31) and sealed with Jesus' blood (1 Corinthians 11:23-25, cited above). In Peter's lengthy address to the crowd in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), after explaining how Jesus' death and rising and the outpouring of his Spirit had been foreshadowed in the writings of Israel's psalmists and prophets (thus bringing to its climax Israel's long story), he ended with the announcement, "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." Cut to the heart, the people asked, "Brothers, what should we do?" and Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Baptism is the way to respond to the news of this thing that has happened with Jesus of Nazareth, if you recognize it as good news and want to be part of it.

The same thing is apparent in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). If this man was not actually a Jew, he was certainly a 'godfearer'; he had just been on a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem (even though he was not eligible to enter because of his impaired humanity), and he even owned a copy of the scroll of Isaiah! We would not call him a catechumen, but he certainly had been 'in formation.' Now he was reading about another servant of the Lord who was also "despised and rejected," and he asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" "Jesus," said Philip, and told him the story that brought to

fulfilment Israel's story. This was indeed good news for a eunuch, and he asked to be baptized.

But where had he heard about baptism? Perhaps in Jerusalem — but only if he had met other disciples of the Lord, from whom he would have already heard the story about Jesus. More than likely, it was from Philip who would have felt compelled to mention baptism, since that was the way to respond to the news he was conveying.

In short, the news about Jesus is good news if it fulfils the deepest longings of our hearts, and baptism is the way to respond to this news.

But how would that work with people who had not been formed in such longings by long immersion in the faith of Israel? Acts 14:6-20 tells the story of Paul and Barnabas visiting the town of Lystra (in what is now south-eastern Turkey) in the course of Paul's first missionary journey. They talked to the people about Jesus and the resurrection, and one person, a lame man, seemed especially interested so they healed him in the name of Jesus. Whereupon the whole populace began to chant, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes. And the priest of Zeus brought out oxen to sacrifice to them.

Luke does not explain this surprising response, but according to the Roman poet, Ovid, there was a myth about Zeus and Hermes visiting this very region. They came in human form and called at a thousand homes, but only a poor elderly couple took them in. The couple was rewarded by being spared when the gods flooded the valley and destroyed its inhabitants. So the crowd's reaction to Paul and Barnabas should not be surprising; they interpreted the gospel message in the only way they knew how — in terms of their existing beliefs and values. And they wanted to get it right this time around! Only too late does Paul try to avert this calamity by insisting on the necessary frame of reference for appreciating the news about Jesus. There is no mention of any baptisms taking place.

By the time Paul reached Athens (Acts 17:15-34), he seems to have reconsidered the meaning of his gospel. Although his initial attempts to talk to people in Athens about Jesus and the resurrection were misinterpreted (they took 'Jesus' and 'Resurrection' for foreign deities — *Iésous* and *Anastasis*), when he got the chance to address the wise old heads at the Acropolis, he began by addressing the truest and deepest spiritual instincts of their culture. He quoted their poets and philosophers, and acknowledged their altar to 'an unknown god,' assuring them that now this time of unknowing was coming to an end. The unknown God had appointed a day for the adjudication of the world's cultures; God had identified one man as the Judge by raising him from the dead.

The response to this news was laughter; but at least the news was not interpreted within the popular pagan worldview.

Paul moved on to Corinth (Acts 18:1-18), where he began announcing in the synagogue that Jesus is the Messiah, until he was driven out. Then he moved next door to the house of a Gentile 'godfearer' where he taught anyone who would listen, for the next year and a half. In the course of this, many Corinthians were baptized — and the catechumenate (as we would later call it) had begun. In his subsequent letters to the converts in Corinth, he coaches them further in their understanding of the gospel, including the gospel sacraments (1 Corinthians 10 & 11).

I suggest, therefore, that **initiation in the New Testament** can be characterized in the following ways:

- Baptism is the definitive response to the good news;
- In Paul's understanding, we are baptized into Christ's death (Romans 6:3-11);
- In John's understanding, baptism is a new birth into the way of Jesus (John 3:1-7);
- Baptism is entrusting myself to the mercy of God who is liberating sinners from bondage to sin and death; and
- A whole household of faith can be baptized (Acts 16: 14 -15), when the household itself becomes a 'zone of liberation.'

There are, of course, many images for baptism in the New Testament: death and resurrection with Christ; washing away of sin; new birth; enlightenment by Christ; re-clothing in Christ; renewal by the Spirit; salvation from the flood; exodus from bondage; liberation into a new egalitarian humanity. I suggest, however, that all these images will be seen rather like distant glimmering planets floating in space, until we recognize that one of them is actually the 'sun' around which the others orbit, the source which illumines all the others. That central image — that 'sun' — is *dying and rising with Christ*.

The centrality of this image was not widely recognized through the second and third centuries. In Antioch and the east, converts were initiated into the community, after suitable instruction, with anointing (to share in Christ's eternal priesthood) and washing (as new birth into a new creation). This emphasized John's understanding of baptism.

In Alexandria and Egypt, after suitable instruction, converts were initiated into the community around the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord on January 6. But first the community fasted for forty days (as Jesus did), and then, at the end of the forty days, the converts were first anointed and then washed, as in the east.

In the west (North Africa and Rome), the ritual order was reversed — washing and then anointing, with a preference for initiation during the Passover of the Lord. This emphasized Paul's understanding of baptism.

But beginning in the fourth century, following the Peace of the Church, an empire-wide convergence of initiation practice began to take place. Christian communication across the empire was both encouraged and far easier, in view of the emperor's interest in

using the Christian religion to unify the empire. Furthermore, the developing catechumenal practice of forming disciples now needed to serve a very different purpose. Originally, its purpose was to strengthen converts for their perilous resistance to the pagan empire; now the catechumenate had to ensure that the many converts of convenience flooding into the Church understood that they were dying with Christ.

Initiation in the fourth century had the following features:

- There is a full flowering of the catechumenate;
- Initiating converts entails a period of formation followed by enrollment on the first Sunday of Lent, a forty day fast (the season of Lent, adopted from the Egyptian pattern, but attached to the Christian Passover, rather than to the Baptism of the Lord), washing and anointing at the Great Vigil, and mystagogy in the days following;
- Restoring those who had abandoned the truth of their baptism entails a period of re-formation and then their presentation as penitents on Ash Wednesday, a forty day fast (the season of Lent), and reconciliation on Maundy Thursday, leading to their full participation in the Great Vigil.

The Decay of Christendom (the new 'household of God'):

If it makes sense for an entire household of faith to be baptized (as in Acts 16), it follows that, when the entire population officially becomes a household of faith, all may be baptized.

Today it is customary for Christians to lament the imperial adoption of the Church and the seduction of Christianity by the powers of this passing age. So it is easy to forget that, to many Christians in the fourth century, the Church's friendship with the emperor Constantine appeared to be the fulfilment of the divine purpose in sending Jesus into the world. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, who was not only the second known historiographer of the Church (after Luke, the first one known to us) but also a good friend of the emperor, described the change this way:

. . . for us who had fixed our hopes on the Christ of God there was unspeakable happiness, and a divine joy blossomed in all hearts as we saw that every place which a little while before had been reduced to dust by the tyrants' wickedness was now, as if from a prolonged and deadly stranglehold, coming back to life; and that cathedrals were again rising from their foundations high into the air, and far surpassing in magnificence those previously destroyed by the enemy . . . There was one power of the divine Spirit coursing through all the members, one soul in them all, the same enthusiasm for the faith, one hymn of praise on all their lips. Yes, our leaders performed ceremonies with full pomp, and ordained priests the sacraments and majestic rites of the Church, here with the singing of psalms and intoning of prayers given us from God, there with the carrying out of divine and mystical ministrations; while over all were the ineffable symbols of the

Saviour's passion. And together, the people of every age, male and female alike, with all their powers of mind, rejoicing in heart and soul, gave glory through prayers and thanksgivings to the author of their happiness, God Himself.

So it was not long before the pool of potential adult candidates for baptism had dried, in many parts of the empire. Infants became the most common candidates, by default. Augustine argued that even though this had not always been the case, infant baptism had been practised to some degree as long as anyone could remember, so it was obviously legitimate. And since baptism is administered for the remission of sin, infants who are incapable of sinning must be baptized for the remission of inherited sin. This logic eventually led to a growing practice of baptism as soon as possible after birth. In addition, the empire's vested interest in the Christian religion for unifying the culture and ensuring allegiance to divinely established authority meant that refusing baptism would be at the very least suspicious, and at worst, an act of sedition. By the late middle ages, most babies were baptized at home within hours of their birth. Even Jews and Muslims were sometimes baptized by force—for political reasons rather than for the 'salvation of their souls.' One of the prayer books still authorized to this day in my own church instructs clergy thus: "It is the duty of the minister frequently to admonish the people that they defer not the Baptism of their children; and diligently to seek out and bring any unbaptized persons in the Parish to the holy sacrament of Baptism."

The **decay of initiation** resulting from this change in the practice of baptism was:

- Baptism was no longer understood as response to the gospel;
- Paschal baptism was replaced by 'emergency baptism';
- The catechumenate virtually disappeared, and so did communal reconciliation;
- Baptism came to be seen as securing exemption from the wrath of a God who condemns sinners to eternal death (instead of entrusting ourselves to the mercy of a God who is liberating sinners from bondage to sin and death);
- Initiation was fractured, separating washing and anointing (resulting in the invention of confirmation).

The **decay of the Great Three Days** which also resulted from this change was:

- The Great Vigil was marginalised and minimalised, largely celebrated only by clergy on Holy Saturday morning;
- Good Friday and Easter Day were separated and polarized, Good Friday becoming a day of mourning for poor Jesus, and Easter Day becoming a celebration of freedom from the memory of this *crisis* (thus began the emergence of a divided Christ: the weak and suffering Christ who, in his first coming, endured abuse; and the triumphant and vengeful Christ who will come again to destroy his enemies);
- Remembering Christ's death was no longer for our continuing conversion, but for the indictment of the Jews (a day for Jews to hide in the forest to escape the attacks of Christians).

Eventually, these decays were followed by the **decay of Christendom itself**:

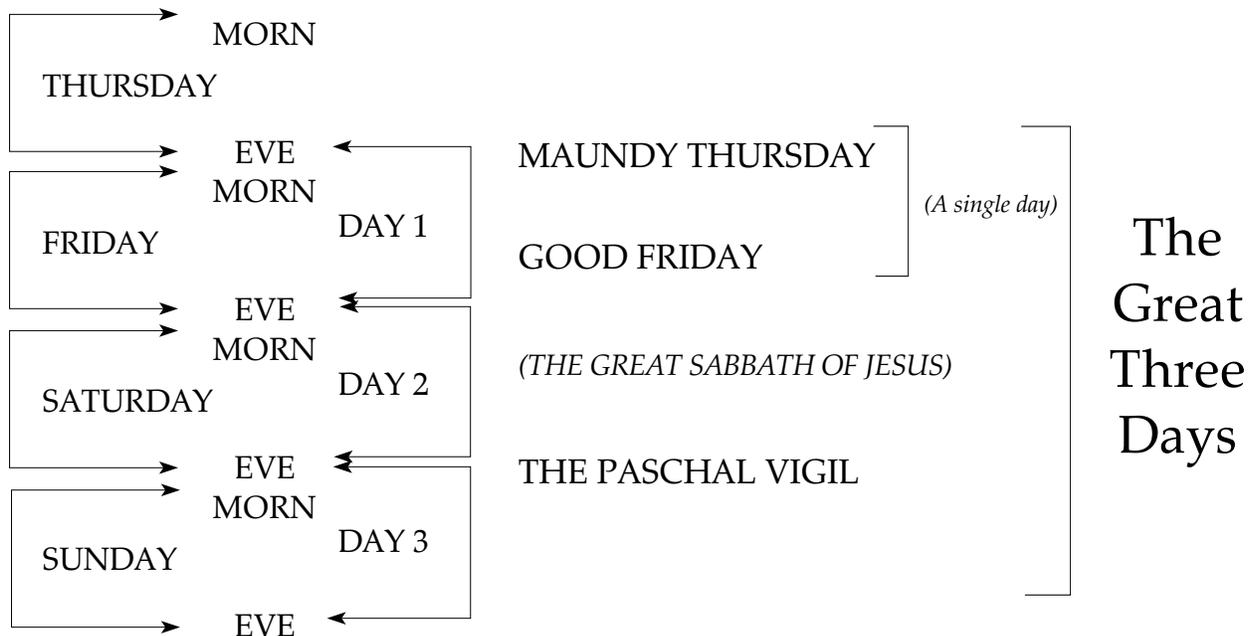
- The Enlightenment was a revolt of reason against the authority of Church hierarchy, leading to a polarization of faith and reason;
- Faith was evicted from the public sphere, restricting it to the realm of the personal and the domestic;
- A debased understanding of salvation emerged (no longer the redemption of the world, but 'getting to heaven when you die'); and
- Amnesia triumphed: biblical illiteracy, and new-age paganism have become dominant characteristics of our culture.

The Liturgical Movement & Vatican II

The Liturgical Movement, which began over a century ago, and came to a virtual climax in the Second Vatican Council, was a response to the growing awareness that the liturgical practice inherited from Christendom was no longer forming Christians. And although we may recognize a turning of the tide in the documents of Vatican II, the awakening is still a work in progress.

Without attempting to survey the movement as a whole, I will try to summarize its implications for the Great Three Days and the Catechumenate. Essentially it meant a **restoration of paschal initiation**:

- The Great Three Days are the 'Passover of the Lord' (three days, rather than four, when reckoned in the Hebrew fashion — from sundown to sundown):



- The Catechumenate is the way we make disciples;
- Lent (according to the lectionary and the scrutinies) is a time for letting go of the life that is buried with Christ by baptism into his death;
- Paschal Baptism is the norm: deliverance from the power of sin and death (the renunciations), and union with Christ in his body, the Church, through sharing in his death and rising (washing, anointing, and first communion);
- The Easter Season is a time for claiming our sacramental identity and calling; and
- The unity of initiation is restored: washing, anointing, and sharing in the eucharist in a single celebration.

These are well-established principles within the liturgical movement, even though their implementation is still in its infancy. Underlying them are two profound convictions:

- The Paschal Mystery is the foundation of our faith; we are the people who are called to 'remember the Lord's death until he comes.' (*Anamnesis*: 'un-forgetting.')
- Paul's understanding of baptism — dying with Christ in the hope of sharing his resurrection — is the basis of all the other understandings of baptism.

That is why the relationship between the Great Three Days and the Catechumenate is important. These two convictions clearly converge in the celebration of paschal baptism within the context of the Christian Year, with Lent and Eastertide as its immediate setting.

- *John W B Hill*