

## Tenebrae Possibilities for the Church

The service of Tenebrae, meaning “darkness” or “shadows,” has been practiced by the church since medieval times. It was originally conceived as part of Good Friday worship, being held after the evening service on that day, and many churches maintain that tradition.

However, it can also be held, as it is by many, following an evening Maundy Thursday service.



**a)** Tenebrae is an extended reflection on Jesus’ suffering as he approached the cross. The biblical readings tell the story of his passion, music is chosen to portray his pathos, and the experience of silence and darkness suggests the drama of this day as he and the disciples lived it then. As the candles (or other lights) are extinguished, we reflect on the depth of his suffering and his death; as we hear the terrible sound of the Strepitus (see below), we remember the violent nature of his death, and through the return of the small but persistent flame of the Jesus candle at the conclusion of the service, we hold on to the anticipation of the joy of his ultimate victory.

Could a meditative service focusing on the love of Jesus that bore so much for our sake be an effective time for your church?



**b)** Some have compared the experience of a Tenebrae service with reading the full text of a book, or watching a whole film, learning of the struggles and pain of the characters as you read or watch the whole piece before the happy ending or resolution. Those who only read the final chapter or watch the closing scenes may note all the joy and satisfaction of the characters, but they can’t imagine the real depth and power of that celebration because they have not travelled with the characters through the whole journey.

In the same way, the Tenebrae service allows us to re-imagine the emotional depths of the passion story, avoiding what might be a more shallow appreciation of the victory of the resurrection. The service is deliberately left unfinished, as it were, because the story isn’t over until Easter Day, which is yet to come, and which was not anticipated by the disciples at that time.

Could this perspective be effective in presenting the possibility of such a service to your church?



**c)** Strepitus is a Latin word which means a crashing din. It refers to the moment in the service when a loud racket is suddenly made, symbolising the tearing of the huge curtains and the earthquake that followed Jesus' death (Matthew 27:51). Following this great noise, everyone departs the church in darkness and silence, awaiting the coming resurrection of Jesus.

If you are considering having a Tenebrae service in your church, this is an effective way to shock people into considering what it must have been like at that moment in Jerusalem.



**d)** One way of conducting the service is to have it begin with the church in candlelight and silence. People are urged to enter in silence and without enthusiastic greetings of one another. There are as many candles as there are readings, plus a white Jesus candle. The readers go up one at a time, read their assigned passages, and then extinguish one of the candles, until only the Jesus candle remains.

In some traditions, several crosses, of different dimensions and materials, are placed in different parts of the room, and the shifting balances of the variously sized and shaped candles, as they are gradually extinguished, cast changing shadows of the crosses on the walls.

In some traditions, someone then reads the first part of Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted on the cross. The Jesus candle is then extinguished, leaving the congregation in silence, in near total darkness, and quite depressed.

Then, out of the darkness, an unaccompanied soloist sings the first four verses of 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?'

This is followed by a longer time of silence that is suddenly and unexpectedly broken by the strepitus, a loud sound signifying the tumult of the earth and the rending of the curtain at Christ's death. This effect can be made in many ways. For example, a mallet can be beaten against a cymbal, increasing ever more in intensity over a minute until the sound thunders.

At this point, there are two commonly followed traditions.

Either the service ends, with no final blessing, and with the people left for a minute or two in total darkness, signifying the coming death of Jesus. The lights are then turned up a little, but only enough for people to see their way out safely, and they leave in silence.

Or people sing a final verse, often the last verse of 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross', as the Jesus candle is extinguished, leaving them for a minute or two in total darkness, signifying the coming death of Jesus. After that minute or two, the Jesus candle is re-lit and people begin to hope for Jesus' resurrection. Then they leave, quietly, with no final blessing.

If you are considering having a Tenebrae service in your church, this is a very effective way of arranging the lighting, if at all possible.