

Holy Saturday Possibilities for the Church



a) It is easy to neglect Holy Saturday, as it seems to play no active role in the life of many Christians. We simply wait between Good Friday and Easter Sunday; we wait between the cross and the resurrection.

However, it is helpful to reflect that when someone whom we love dies, it takes time for joy to return to our lives. This time will vary among people, it will vary in relation to the particular closeness we had with the person, and it will vary according to the circumstances of the person's dying and death. But it always takes time.

Indeed, if we know someone who has lost a loved one, but who seems to be full of joy and exuberance very quickly afterwards, we often consider this to be unhealthy; we worry for them, and whether they are really allowing the reality to sink in, and really allowing themselves to grieve.

Thinking biblically and theologically, we can say that in relation to life with God, when we come through a period of terrible suffering, anxiety and death, our grief and anger are not suddenly *replaced* by joy; they are, by God's grace, *transformed* into joy. For those Christians for whom Holy Saturday has real spiritual value, it is a day of reflecting on this transformation of sorrow into joy, of defeat into victory. It is about not rushing to the happy ending; Jesus did not have that luxury.

Could Holy Saturday have value for your church as a day for spending time in prayer for those we know who are living with what is for them a time of serious pain, anxiety, fear or doubt?

People could be encouraged to do this individually, at some point(s) during the day. Or the church could invite people to a prayer hour.



b) i. Although Congregationalist churches are not defined by any particular creed, the Apostles' Creed is highly regarded by most as a summary statement of the key elements of the biblical theology of the Church. Here is the text, with one line highlighted in yellow:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

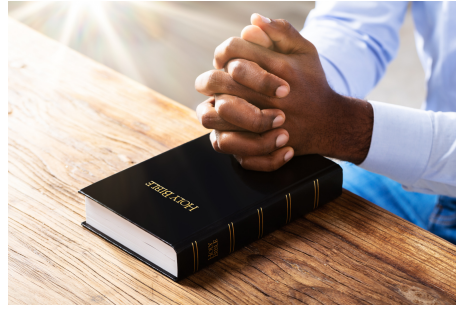
Thinking about the historical aspect of the central part of the creed, the crucifixion of Jesus took place on the Friday, and the resurrection of Jesus took place on the Sunday. In between these two events, on the Saturday, relating to the highlighted line above, Jesus' body lay dead in the tomb. But where was Jesus' spirit, if we can use that language? Christians believe that Jesus 'descended to the dead'. This is the significance of Holy Saturday in the Christian calendar.

b) ii. But what did Jesus do there? Key verses for seeking to understand this have been Ephesians 4:8-10 and 1 Peter 3:18-22. One understanding is that he went to set free those who had lived and died before the incarnation of Jesus, but who had been faithful believers and servants of God.

Another is that he went to preach the Gospel to all the dead – including the wicked. Some Christians believe that this was simply to complete the proclamation of the Gospel to all of humanity. Since Jesus' descent to the dead, this proclamation has been the responsibility of the church and all Christians, but Jesus' descent included all those who had lived before him.

Other Christians believe that Jesus preached the Gospel there so that even the wicked dead would have the opportunity to repent, believe and be saved. But many consider this a 'second chance' theology, and object to it.

What do you believe – and why? A Bible study session held on this day could be a helpful occasion for leading the church in a reflection of this significant theological issue.



c) Because of the solemnity of this day, when Jesus' body was lying in the tomb, many churches have decided that it is not an appropriate day for frivolous or overwhelmingly happy activities. To hold these kinds of activities would be like treating Jesus' death lightly; something you could forget for a while and then come back to later. Many churches would discourage the following kinds of things:

- weddings
- parties
- finalising the buying of a house
- going to the cinema
- going out for dinner or drinks
- going to sporting occasions

Could it be possible to invite your church members to refrain from these kinds of events and activities on Holy Saturday?

Perhaps you could encourage a reflective day of reading and prayer?



d) i. Even the sacraments of communion and baptism are discouraged on Holy Saturday in some churches. However, the following day, Easter Sunday, is traditionally seen as the *great* day for the sacraments of communion and baptism.

d) ii. In much of the early church, baptisms were only carried out on Easter Sunday, with the period of Lent serving as the final preparation period for those wishing to proclaim publicly their faith in Jesus and join the church. This would have resulted, in certain areas, at different periods, with many new Christians being baptised during services on Easter Sunday.

Could you consider including in the Easter Sunday service(s) any baptisms that are being planned for around that time, even if it means delaying them for a few weeks?

and/or

Could the Easter Sunday service(s) be a time for people to renew their baptismal vows before the risen Lord and one another?



d) iii. Sunday has also been seen by many as the best day for celebrating communion - Jesus' resurrection day. And for many, the best of all Sundays is Easter Sunday - the annual celebration of his resurrection, following our journey with him through Lent and Good Friday.

If you do not do this already, could your church celebrate communion on Easter Sunday?



e) Families with smaller children may like to create a miniature Easter garden, with a tomb.

There could be various figures present, representing disciples, Mary Magdalen, etc. But there will be no Jesus, as he is hidden inside the tomb.

A figure representing the risen Jesus can then be placed in the garden on Easter morning.

This creation of an Easter garden could be a church project, done on a larger scale, and created together in the church on Holy Saturday. This larger garden could then be used in the Easter Sunday service(s), with the risen Jesus also represented there.