

# **EASTER: historical, theological and liturgical perspectives**

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## **1. Meaning of the word**

The origins of the word 'Easter' probably lie in the Old English *Eastre* (Northumbrian *Eostre*), the name of a goddess of fertility and sunrise whose feast was celebrated at the spring equinox. The name is probably derived from the root *aus-*, meaning "to shine" (especially of the dawn). The word probably has links with the Greek for star, *aster* (as in astrology). It is also claimed that the word Easter is linked with the medical term *oestrogen*, used to refer to the female sex hormone. This term derives from Latin *oestrus*, meaning frenzy, or gadfly – which in turn derives from Greek *oistros*, meaning gadfly, breeze, sting or mad impulse. (The patriarchal perception of females is evident in this association.) The plausibility of this link is debated.

The seventh-century monk and scholar, Bede, claimed that Anglo-Saxon Christians adopted the name of Eostre and many of the celebratory practices of her adherents, for their Mass of Christ's resurrection. The word is ultimately related to modern English "east". It is in the east that the sun rises, and so the east is the source of new life. The link between east and resurrection, in the Christian tradition, is thus obvious.

[There was discussion in the Dialogue concerning the fortunate coincidence of the celebration of *Purim* at the same time as Easter in 2008; this feast has a focus on Esther, whose name also derives from *Ishtar*, an eastern goddess.]

## **2. Easter Holidays today**

Because of the place of Christianity as the state religion in the Roman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, and on into medieval Europe, Easter came to have both religious and civic significance. The situation today reflects this history—Easter is best-known as a four-day public holiday rather than as a religious holy day. The four days of Easter, the civic holiday, however, still follow the pattern of the early Christian religious holy days. The first day, Friday, is a public holiday because it was once a high holy day. The Sunday was also a high holy day, so it too deserved a public holiday; but because it was Sunday, the nearest working day was decreed to be a public holiday; thus, Easter Monday, the public holiday in honour of Easter Sunday. In turn, of course, these Christian holy days can trace their origins back to the Jewish festival of Passover, with which Easter was originally linked in the early centuries of the church.

[Some discussion took place as to whether it is appropriate, in a multicultural and multifaith society such as contemporary Australia, for a major festival of one religion to be declared a public holiday for adherents of all religions. Should adherents of other faiths be given the option to convert their Easter holidays into a holiday more appropriate for their own faith?]

### **3. Easter in Christian tradition and its relation to Jewish tradition**

Easter celebrates the day when Jesus Christ rose from the dead. This took place on the third day in a sequence which ran crucifixion, death and burial (first day)...at rest in the tomb (second day)...the discovery of the empty tomb and subsequent appearances of Jesus, risen from the dead (on the third day). So the earliest tradition about Jesus claims: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Cor 15:3b-5). It is in celebration of the resurrection of Jesus that the day he rose came to be known as Easter Sunday.

According to some of the New Testament accounts, this resurrection occurred soon after the Jewish festival of Passover. The last meal of Jesus—in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke—took place at the feast of unleavened bread, the Passover eve *Seder*, when the liberation from slavery in Egypt was remembered by Jews. This was the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan. These gospels claim that Jesus blessed the bread and broke it, and then related the broken bread to his body, which was to be broken or given for the sake of the world. He also blessed the wine and gave to those at table with him, indicating that the symbolism of the wine in relation to the covenant—the agreement sealed at Sinai, according to Israelite tradition—was now also to be related to his mission. In one version of this last meal, his words link “the fruit of the vine” with the promise of the coming kingdom of God, but then he goes on to link it with “the new covenant in my blood”. In another version, the more unlikely claim—unlikely because it would be quite unlike what an ancient Jew would have thought or said—was that Jesus said “this wine is my blood of the covenant”. Whatever he said, these versions agree that this meal was a Passover meal. Jesus died the next day, on the fifteenth of Nisan.

Not all Gospels see it this way, however. The fourth Gospel, attributed to John, actually places the death of Jesus on the cross at the precise time that the lambs are being slain in preparation for the evening meal—that is, on the fourteenth of Nisan. In this version, Jesus dies on the fourteenth of Nisan, a day before the other versions claim. What was historically feasible is hard to say. What is clear, however, is that embedded in the earliest stages of the evolving Christian tradition, is the notion that what took place in the death of Jesus was intricately linked with the Jewish Passover. Lurking behind this claim is the inevitable unspoken text, which I might paraphrase as something like: “what you celebrate, we celebrate too; what you remember as taking place, we recall as having occurred in a way that was more powerful, more significant, than what you remember; yes, God, at Passover, saved his people from slavery in Egypt; but we celebrate that God, in Jesus, saved all people who believe in Jesus from slavery to sin; his death on our behalf inaugurated a new covenant, by which God set people free to a new form of life, symbolized in the resurrection.” As is often the case, hints of Christian triumphalism and supersessionism can be heard at the edges of the Easter story.

### **4. The theological core of Easter**

The central theological elements of Easter are twofold. First, the death of Jesus is interpreted as a fundamental theological event of significance for all Christian believers. “Jesus died for us” is a New Testament phrase which came to form the foundation for an intricate and complex system of *sacrificial atonement theology*—understanding the death of Jesus as a death made on behalf of, and in the place of, believers. This area of Christian theology has become a debated and disputed arena, with concern expressed about the way that a religious system has a focus on a violent action at the centre of its

belief system. Can it be a good thing to celebrate the way that God causes, or at least approves of, the putting to death of Jesus?

Second, the resurrection is regarded as the pointer to the new form of life, lived in the transformed state of resurrected being, which is promised to all believers. This also is a point of contention within contemporary Christian thinking. The debate has canvassed a number of options as to the nature of the resurrection: must it be in a bodily form? Was Jesus raised ‘in the memory of his followers’, but not as a physical body? Is resurrection a pointer to the spiritual dimension? What was meant by the reference to an immortal state in 1 Cor 15?

It is the apostle Paul who, most of all in the New Testament, provides evidence for the way that early believers began to think in these ways. He probably did not begin such ideas—indeed, the sacrificial understanding of the death of Jesus draws heavily from the Jewish sacrificial cult—but he most clearly and most often has articulated them in the scriptures. These ideas sit at the heart of what traditional Christianity has regarded as its distinctive theological understanding: that God became human, suffered for us, died for us, and was raised to inaugurate the new way of being that will characterise the kingdom of God. This expression of belief comes to form the core of the emerging doctrinal self-understanding of early Christianity, into the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries of theological debate.

A further observation regarding the theological significance of Easter is the way that the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus forms the end point—indeed, the climactic moment—of the story of his life, as it is reported in all four canonical Gospels. There were about 50 Gospels written in the early centuries of Christianity, and most of them do not lead to this dramatic conclusion. The fact that those chosen for inclusion in the canon of Scripture each end with the passion and resurrection narrative, indicates the way that this part of the story of Jesus came to have a central and defining purpose in the development of Christian doctrine. “Jesus, crucified and risen” became the centerpiece of Christian theology.

[The Dialogue included a discussion of the Jewish forbears of this doctrine; resurrection, of course, being a Pharisaic doctrine, developed out of the writings of the later prophets, and eschewed by the Sadducees, who found no reference to resurrection in the five books of Moses. The inclusion of references to the One who “revives the dead...brings death and gives life...is faithful to revive the dead” in the daily prayers of Jews, is testimony to the influence of developing Jewish thought on Christian beliefs.]

## **5. The dating of Easter**

The problem for twenty-first century Christian people (and for public servants and the gazetteers of public holidays) is that the Jewish calendar is influenced by the moon. (This is not a problem for Jews who are fully aware of the lunar cycle through their traditional monthly and yearly cycles.) Consequently, Easter Day is dated in relation to the Vernal Equinox [21 March] of the northern hemisphere. Today, Easter will fall on the first Sunday after (not on) the Pascal full moon, which happens on or after the Official Vernal Equinox [21 March]. The outer limits are 22 March and 25 April, and so Easter will constantly move between these two dates: 22 March or after, but before or on 25 April.

## **6. Easter Controversy in the early church**

It was within the early church that the dating of Easter was first a matter of controversy. There were two disputed elements in relation to the date of Easter. First, it is always on a Sunday. This relates to a debate in the church in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Second, it is linked to the lunar cycle on which Passover occurs. This relates to a debate at an early gathering

of church leaders, at what is known as the Council of Nicaea, which met in 325 CE, decided to keep Easter linked to Passover.

### **6.1 Easter on Sunday**

The first dispute was mainly concerned with the lawfulness of celebrating Easter on a weekday. The first systematic historian of the church, Eusebius, writes about a dispute in the time of Pope Victor, about 190 CE, in his *Ecclesiastical History* (V, xxiii): “A question of no small importance arose at that time. The dioceses of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should always be observed as the feast of the life-giving pasch, contending that the fast ought to end on that day, whatever day of the week it might happen to be.”

Eusebius continues, “However it was not the custom of the churches in the rest of the world to end it at this point, as they observed the practice, which from Apostolic tradition has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast on no other day than on that of the Resurrection of our Saviour. Synods and assemblies of bishops were held on this account, and all with one consent through mutual correspondence drew up an ecclesiastical decree that the mystery of the Resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on no other day but the Sunday and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on that day only.”

The question thus debated was therefore primarily whether Easter was to be kept on a Sunday, or whether Christians should observe the Holy Day of the Jews, the fourteenth of Nisan, which might occur on any day of the week. Those who kept Easter with the Jews were known by the Latin term, *Quartodeciman* (meaning fourteenth), referring to the observance of Easter 14 days into the new moon. It is believed that even in the time of Pope Victor this usage hardly extended beyond the churches of Asia Minor.

### **6.2 Easter Sunday**

The second stage in the Easter controversy centres round the Council of Nicaea (325). Granted that the great Easter festival was always to be held on a Sunday, and was not to coincide with a particular phase of the moon, which might occur on any day of the week, a new dispute arose as to the determination of the Sunday itself. We do not have the text of the decree of the Council of Nicaea which settled this matter. We do have an important document inserted in Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* (III, xviii sq.) , according to which, the emperor himself, writing to the Churches after the Council of Nicaea, says: “At this meeting the question concerning the most holy day of Easter was discussed, and it was resolved by the united judgment of all present that this feast ought to be kept by all and in every place on one and the same day. . . And first of all it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin. . . for we have received from our Saviour a different way. . . And I myself have undertaken that this decision should meet with the approval of your Sagacities in the hope that your Wisdoms will gladly admit that practice which is observed at once in the city of Rome and in Africa, throughout Italy and in Egypt. . . with entire unity of judgment.”

Unfortunately, the desire for a unified practice right across the bounds of Christianity would founder in the divisions of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when Eastern Orthodox believers diverged from Western Roman believers. To this day, the Orthodox Easter falls on a different Sunday from the Western Easter. (Only rarely do the dates coincide—and then, only by chance, not by design.)

In the fourth century, the Church of Antioch was still using the Jewish calendar for its Easter calculations. These Syrian Christians always held their Easter festival on the Sunday after the Jews kept their Passover. On the other hand at Alexandria, Christians calculated the time of Easter for themselves, paying no attention to the Jews. In this way the date of Easter as kept at Alexandria and Antioch did not always agree; it was claimed that the Jews, upon whom Antioch depended, adopted very arbitrary methods of intercalating additional months before they celebrated Nisan, the first spring month, on the fourteenth day of which the paschal lamb was killed. The Christians of Rome and Alexandria declared the Jews were neglectful of the law that the fourteenth of Nisan must never precede the equinox; so Constantine protests with horror that the Jews sometimes kept two Passovers in one year, meaning that two Passovers sometimes fell between one equinox and the next. This took place because the intercalated month that was required to keep the Passover celebration in the (northern) spring season, was done with varying degrees of inaccuracy or imprecision. (We note that this line of argument diverts the responsibility away from the Christians, and places the blame on the Jews; a somewhat characteristic, albeit unjust, way of arguing to be found already in various ways in the early centuries of Christianity.)

In summary, we note that the Council of Nicaea seems to have decided as follows:

- that Easter must be celebrated by all throughout the world on the same Sunday;
- that this Sunday must follow the fourteenth day of the paschal moon;
- that that moon was to be accounted the paschal moon whose fourteenth day followed the spring equinox;
- that some provision should be made, probably by the Church of Alexandria as best skilled in astronomical calculations, for determining the proper date of Easter and communicating it to the rest of the world

## 7. Holy Week: the week leading up to Easter

A more recent development has been the recognition of the week leading up to Easter as *Holy Week*. This probably comes from the narration of chapters 11 and 12 of Mark's Gospel, which portrays Jesus as being in Jerusalem from a Sunday until his last meal on a Thursday. The week starts with **Palm Sunday** when Christians remember Jesus entering Jerusalem and the crowds laying Palm leaves in front of him. Jesus stays near to the city for the remainder of the week.

On **Maundy Thursday** they remember Jesus washing his disciples feet. His words are recorded in John 13:34, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." This gives rise to the name for the day. The Latin for "commandment" is *mandatum*—hence Maundy. In England, on Maundy Thursday, the Queen will follow a very traditional role of giving Maundy coins, in order to demonstrate the love of the new commandment. A complete set of Maundy money consists of a groat (4p), a threepence (3p), a half-groat (2p) and a penny (1p)—totalling 10p.

Some people believe that Lent officially ends at sundown and celebrate with Holy Communion and, often, a meal known as an *agapé* or a "love feast". Others maintain that Lent continues through into Easter Saturday. After Maundy Thursday comes **Good Friday**, when Jesus was crucified. Why Good? Because on this Friday, Jesus died on the cross "for our sins". The **Stations of the Cross** are focused around the events of Good Friday, recalling the various events which took place as Jesus made his way from his trial to his death on the cross. [There was some discussion about contemporary ways in which these Stations have been appropriated, in art or through personal creative responses, as ways of moving attention from the story as a singular 'history', to the significance of the

story and the resonance of the events with universal human experiences. The perils of anti-Semitic portrayals in the traditional Stations of the Cross was also canvassed during the Dialogue discussion.]

Next comes **Holy Saturday** or **Easter Eve**—a day of vigil, when believers watch, wait and pray. The Christian festival reaches its climax on **Easter Day** with celebration marking Jesus conquering death. Counting inclusively, as was done at the time, beginning from Friday, makes Sunday the third day. So the traditional affirmation is that Jesus rose “on the third day”.

## 8. The development of Lent (40 days before Easter)

The period leading up to Easter is called **Lent**, a name taken from a Teutonic word, originally meaning “the spring season”. It has been celebrated for at least 1500 years. It is typically seen as a time of self-examination and repentance. Roman Catholicism retains a strong sense of this penitential element of Lent. The season comprises 45 days (46 days counted inclusively), but is usually considered to be 40 days long, as the season actually excludes the six Sundays which fall within it. These Sundays are for “joyful celebration” (in classic Christian liturgical thinking, Sunday is always the day to recall the resurrection of Jesus, no matter what season it falls within). They are not days of “discipline and self-denial” and so are not officially part of the fasting of Lent. So, there are 40 days of Lent. During this period, the colour purple is used for the minister’s vestments and the drapings and banners in the church building. (Purple has the sense of “preparation” in the Christian liturgical tradition.)

At the start of the Lenten period is **Shrove Tuesday**—in French, *Mardis Gras* or Fat Tuesday, but still popular in England for pancake consumption (even though the prohibition of milk and eggs during Lent is long forgotten). Shrove Tuesday is the last day before Lent. Shrove means “to have heard confession, assigned penance and absolved” (cf. “shriven”).

Lent starts on **Ash Wednesday**. On this day, many churches have an “ashing service” where ash made from the previous year's palms are sprinkled with holy water and fumigated with incense and symbolically placed on the forehead in the sign of a cross, signifying penance. It is also a reminder of our own mortality: Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and of a time when people repented with ashes and wearing sackcloth. [A similarity was noted with a Jewish custom of burning the branches from a previous year’s festival at the next year’s Passover.]

## 9. The Easter period of the Church’s year (40 days after Easter)

Matching the 40 days before Easter (Lent) is the season of Easter itself, lasting for 40 days after Easter. During this period, the colour white is used for the minister’s vestments and the drapings and banners in the church building. In the Catholic church, there are **Rogation days** (days for prayer, and formerly also of fasting, aimed at persuading God to protect and give a good harvest). These days lead up to **Ascension Day**, 40 days after Easter Day, when the focus is on remembering Jesus ascending into heaven. Ascension Day is the technical end to the season of Easter.

However, in practice the Easter season extends until 50 days after Easter Sunday, which is the day of **Pentecost** (from the Greek for “the fiftieth”). On this day, Christians remember the Holy Spirit first coming and filling Christians with God's power. Pentecost is also known as Whit Sunday so called because of the white clothes worn by those who were baptised that day. [Our Dialogue discussion also canvassed the dubious historical

nature of the event commemorated on this day.] Thus, **Easter**: 39 days = 40 days counted inclusively; **Pentecost**: 49 days = 50 days counted inclusively.

#### **10. Orthodox Christian traditions**

Finally, we might give some consideration to the way in which ancient traditions might be appropriated and redeveloped in the contemporary setting. In our own family, on Easter Sunday, we have adapted some of the traditions of Orthodox Christianity, in that we create a meal involving many of the “fat foods” which have been put aside during the days of denial during Lent. Like the removal of leaven from the unleavened bread, the Orthodox remove all the “fat foods” during Lent, to remind them of the need to cultivate piety and humility. At Easter, the meal is made with abundance of these “fat foods”; the Orthodox tradition would be to take the meal to the priest at the Easter Vigil and have them blessed, so that the meal can begin as soon as the family has returned to the house after worship. In our house, the three main foods of the meal are placed on the table for the Easter Sunday lunch and then blessed; the bread – the lamb – and the pasch (a rich, creamy desert).

The Easter bread is blessed with this prayer: “O Lord Jesus Christ, you who blessed the five loaves and fed five thousand people; bless also this loaf. This bread reminds us of the living bread of your presence.” (The allusion is to John 6) The Easter lamb is blessed with this prayer: “O Lord Jesus Christ, you who told the story of the forgiving father and the prodigal son; bless also this meat. As in the story, this meat signifies our celebration as grateful children of a loving God.” (The prayer alludes to the parable told in Luke 15.) The Easter pasch is blessed with this prayer: “O Lord Jesus Christ, you who told us of the true prosperity and peace to be found in your coming kingdom; bless also this pascha. As we eat it, may we be reminded of your generosity and goodness to us.” (The reference to the prosperity of the messianic era is drawn from Isaiah 7:22 and Joel 3:18.)

In the centre of the bread is placed a coloured egg; other coloured eggs are given to each guest. The eggs are dyed red, to symbolize the blood of Christ. Also on the table are spring greens, to symbolize the new life which is central to the Easter story.