

11 | DAILY PRAYER

Times for prayer

The New Testament implies that at least some early Christians engaged in a regular pattern of daily prayer, since it speaks of the disciples as 'persevering with one accord in the prayer' (Acts 1:14) and 'persevering in . . . the prayers' (Acts 2:42). Similar phrases occur in Acts 6:4, Romans 12:12, and Colossians 4:2. None of these references, however, reveals what this pattern might have been. While there are allusions to specific times of prayer, including the sixth hour (Acts 10:9), night (Acts 12:5,12), and midnight (Acts 16:25), it is impossible to know whether these were established hours for Christian prayer, or were merely occasioned by the particular circumstances being described in the story.

We might expect the first Christians to have continued to observe whatever the customary Jewish times of daily prayer were, but there seems to have been a variety of practice among Jews of the first century: some appear to have prayed twice a day, morning and evening, but others three times a day, either morning, noon, and evening, or morning, after-

noon (3 pm), and evening. Thus, examining Jewish prayer patterns does not help us very much in discovering what the oldest Christian customs were.

The first clear evidence that we have for Christian times of prayer comes from the *Didache* (8:3), which instructs its readers to pray three times a day, although it does not say exactly when those three times were to be: presumably it expected them to know that already. Morning, noon, and evening were probably what were intended, as these are mentioned in some third-century sources, although other Christians appear to have preferred to adjust these times slightly to correspond to the principal divisions of the day in the Roman Empire: the third, sixth, and ninth hours (9 am, 12 noon, and 3 pm). All these sources add prayer at night to the cycle, and evidence from North Africa reveals the emergence of a conflation of the two methods of threefold daily prayer into a fivefold pattern that would become more or less universally prescribed in the fourth century: morning, third hour, sixth hour (noon), ninth hour, and evening.

Eschatological expectation

We might assume that the Christian adoption of this custom of daily prayer at specific hours was simply the result of the power of tradition: the first converts had prayed at set times when they were Jews, continued to do so when they became Christians, and passed the tradition on to succeeding generations. While this may certainly be part of the reason for the practice, much more meaning was associated with it than that.

The earliest Christians confidently expected the return of Christ and the consummation of the kingdom of God within the immediate future, and believed that they were called to be alert and watchful at all times for that final salvific event. Just as servants were expected to stay awake and watch for the return of their master, so they too were to be vigilant for the return of their Lord (see Mark 13:32–37; Luke 12:35–40). Several New Testament texts suggest that prayer was regarded as the proper mode of this eschatological vigilance. 'Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation,' says Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:38 and parallels); and the same advice is repeated in the epis-

bles: 'Persevere in the prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving' (Colossians 4:2); 'praying at all times in the Spirit, and to that end being watchful in all perseverance ...' (Ephesians 6:18). The discipline of prayer at regular, fixed times, therefore, was an expression of their constant readiness for the end time, as it also appears to have been among certain Jewish groups of the period.

The offering of life

As time went by, however, and this event failed to happen, the eschatological aspect of daily prayer naturally began to grow dim. Although traces of it can still be seen in Christian writings of the late second and early third centuries, the main justification for maintaining the traditional times of daily prayer has now shifted. Authors of this period continue to repeat St Paul's precept to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thessalonians 5:17) as the only absolute rule binding upon Christians, but they tend to see its fulfilment as being in the turning of the whole of one's life into an act of worship offered to God, and the observance of the fixed hours of prayer as a part of this broader obligation.

There are precedents for this way of thinking in the New Testament itself. For example, St Paul urges Christians to 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God ...' (Romans 12:1). Moreover, the idea that Christians constituted a priesthood (1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6) also encouraged them to view the oblation of their life as their priestly sacrifice to God. Christians of the second and third centuries therefore naturally thought of their times of prayer as part of this offering. Thus Tertullian spoke of prayer as 'a spiritual oblation which has abolished the former sacrifices', and Origen saw the daily sacrifices of the Old Testament (described there as 'perpetual') as finding their true fulfilment in the perpetual prayer of Christians.¹

The 'cathedral' office: the sacrifice of praise

After the Peace of Constantine in the fourth century, Christians began to celebrate publicly certain of the daily hours of prayer which they had previously observed either individually or with their families. The hours generally chosen were the morning and the evening, partly

because these were the only ones for which it was practical for most people to gather together (the other times occurred during the working day, and it was not easy or always safe to venture out for prayer at night), and partly because these were now seen as the Christian equivalent of the daily morning and evening sacrifices prescribed by God in the Old Testament. Modern scholars have labelled these public services the 'cathedral' office, because they were understood by those taking part in them as being the Church's sacrifice of praise and priestly intercession for the needs of all. They were therefore composed of two principal elements: hymns and psalms of praise, and prayers for the Church and the world. The hymns were usually unchanging from day to day. Psalms 148-150 seem to have formed the nucleus of the morning praise everywhere, while in the evening the hymn *Phos hilaron*, 'Hail gladdening light', was often used as the lamps were lit and thanksgiving offered for the natural light of the day, the lamplight in the darkness of the night, and the illumination brought by the light of Christ.

The idea that these two occasions constituted the fulfilment of the Old Testament sacrificial law led in the fifth century to the introduction of a regular offering of incense in the services, in accordance with Exodus 30:7-8: 'And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it [the altar]; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening he shall burn it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations.'

Prayer in the desert: ceaseless meditation

At least from the end of the second century, if not sooner, there were some who regarded the observance of fixed hours of prayer as no more than a second-best way of fulfilling the apostolic injunction to pray without ceasing. The ideal was truly uninterrupted praying. This attitude seems to have been particularly prevalent in Alexandria among those Christians who had come under the influence of the philosophy of Plato and the Stoics, and it was extensively developed by Clement of Alexandria. Although he admitted the necessity of set times of prayer for those not very far advanced in the spiritual life, for those who would be perfect Christians (or 'Gnostics' as he calls them) prayer was to be a state of continual communion with God:

During his whole life the Gnostic in every place, even if he be alone by himself, and wherever he has any of those who have exercised the like faith, honours God, that is, acknowledges his gratitude for the knowledge of the way to live . . . Holding festival, then, in our whole life, and persuaded that God is altogether on every side present, we cultivate our fields, praising; we sail the sea, hymning. . .

Now if some assign fixed hours for prayer — as, for example, the third, and sixth, and ninth — yet the Gnostic prays throughout his whole life, endeavouring by prayer to have fellowship with God. And briefly, having reached to this, he leaves behind him all that is of no service, as having now received the perfection of one who acts by love.²

This approach to prayer was appropriated by the ascetics who went out into the deserts of Egypt and Syria in the fourth century, and whose aim was to maintain there as near as possible a ceaseless vigil of prayer, punctuated only by the minimal interruption for food and sleep. Not only did they thus devote more time to actual praying than other Christians, but their concept of prayer was also radically different. They did not see themselves as engaged in offering the Church's sacrifice of praise or praying for the needs of the world, but instead as individuals seeking their own salvation through constant meditation and petition for spiritual growth. Thus the form of the praying was also quite different from that of the 'cathedral' office. Whether praying alone or with others, they used the Old Testament psalms as the basis for their meditation because they understood the Book of Psalms to be a prophecy of Christ, and they alternated the reading of a psalm (or its recitation from memory) with a period of silent prayer. In this manner they gradually worked their way through the whole 150 psalms in order.

Monastic prayer: the traditions fused

The fourth century also saw the gradual emergence of religious communities who did not make their home in desert regions but remained in towns and cities in close contact with the Church around them. The foundations of their prayer life were the older Christian traditions of praying at least five times each day and again during the night. Inevitably, however, they were influenced both by the spirituality of the

desert and by the practice of the 'cathedral' office around them. As a result, their forms of daily prayer became hybrid in character. They included the selective psalmody of the 'cathedral' services as well as the consecutive recitation of psalms of the desert tradition, and the monks and nuns thought of themselves as singing hymns to God and as meditating on the psalms at the same time.

This particular spirituality did not remain restricted to such communities alone. Because nearly every important Christian bishop of the second half of the fourth century had lived as a monk at one time or another during his career, the form of spiritual life that they advocated to ordinary lay people was essentially monastic in character. In addition to attendance at the 'cathedral' office every day, therefore, people were encouraged to maintain the other traditional times of prayer individually, and to learn the psalms and recite them frequently. In this way, the fusion of early Christian, 'cathedral', and desert traditions passed into the mainstream of Christian spirituality of the succeeding ages.

NOTES

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- 1 Tertullian, *De oratione* 28; Origen, *Hom in Num* 23:3; *Contra Celsum* 8:7, 21-2.
 - 2 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7:7; English translation from William Wilson, *The writings of Clement of Alexandria 2* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1872), pp 431, 432, 435.

FOR FURTHER READING

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- Bradshaw, P F. *Daily prayer in the early Church* (SPCK, London & Oxford University Press, New York 1981).
- Taft, R.F. *The liturgy of the hours in East and West* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville 1986).

12 | SUNDAY

New Testament evidence

The New Testament contains only three possible allusions to the early Christian observance of Sunday, and it is not completely clear how each of these should be interpreted. Acts 20:7–12 describes a gathering 'to break bread' that took place 'on the first day of the week' and continued past midnight. But was this the regular occasion for Christian worship every week, or did it take place on that day only because St Paul was about to depart? In 1 Corinthians 16:2, the apostle exhorts his readers to put aside a monetary offering 'on the first day of every week'. But was this day chosen for the activity because the Christians were regularly gathering together for worship then, or for some quite different reason? Revelation 1:10 states that the author was 'in the Spirit on the Lord's day'. But does the expression 'Lord's day' refer to Sunday, as it certainly seems to do when it occurs again in Didache 14, or has it some quite different meaning here?

However, in spite of the absence of any completely indisputable evidence for the Christian observance of Sunday prior to the middle of the second century, most scholars believe that it was adopted as early as the first generation of believers.

The Christian Sabbath?

Some have thought that Christians replaced Saturday with Sunday as their Sabbath day in order that they might differentiate themselves from other Jews. Others have disagreed, and have argued that, while Jewish-Christians may perhaps have gone on observing an actual weekly Sabbath, Gentile Christians who adhered to St Paul's view of the Jewish Law as no longer binding upon them would have had no interest in keeping any day of the week as a Sabbath. Moreover, while early Christian writings certainly retained the Jewish image of the Sabbath rest, they viewed it as coming at the end of time and did not apply it to a day of the week. These scholars conclude that Sunday was therefore not the Christian Sabbath but the occasion chosen for their regular gatherings for corporate worship, and so did not involve a cessation from work on that day, which in any case would have been impossible for most of them, since it was a regular working day (it was only in the fourth century that the Emperor Constantine made Sunday a public holiday).

Commemoration of the resurrection

So then, why did the Christians choose that particular day of the week? Some have thought that it was because, according to the gospel accounts, Jesus had risen from the dead on 'the first day of the week', and hence Sunday was intended primarily as a commemoration of the resurrection. This certainly seems to be a part of the answer, and it continued to have this function in later centuries. In Jerusalem in the fourth century, for example, there was a special early service every Sunday morning at the site of Christ's tomb when one of the gospel accounts of the resurrection was read. This practice subsequently spread to other parts of the world. But other evidence suggests that there was more to the significance of this day than just the remembrance of Christ's resurrection, however important that may have been.

The day of the eucharist

One of the most remarkable aspects of early Christian worship was the restriction of the celebration of the eucharist to Sunday alone. Apart from a single reference in Acts 2:46 to the first Christians meeting day by day to break bread together in their homes (which may well be a bit of idealising by the author), all other evidence from the first three centuries points to the conclusion that the only days on which Christians celebrated the eucharist were Sundays, together with saints' days as those emerged in local churches. Even in the fourth century, many churches resisted the extension of the celebration of the eucharist to other days. While some churches turned the regular Wednesday and Friday services of the word (see below, pp 78–79) into full celebrations of the eucharist, others did not, and still others adopted a compromise, in which communion was given at those services, but with bread and wine consecrated at the Sunday eucharist. While Western Christians did gradually move towards celebrating the eucharist on any day of the week, Eastern Christians have continued to adhere to the older tradition of a full celebration only on Sundays and other holy days.

Early Christian writings do not explain the reason for this restriction of the eucharist to Sundays, but it must have been ancient and firmly rooted for it to survive for so long. One is reminded of the appearance of the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), which not only took place on a Sunday but included a meal in which 'he was known to them in the breaking of the bread'. This story suggests that early Christians experienced the presence of Christ in their Sunday eucharistic celebration, but we do not of course know which element came first. Was it because the empty tomb had been discovered on a Sunday that early Christians decided to meet regularly for a eucharistic meal on that day, and then encountered Christ in the celebration? Or was Sunday already the regular day for their weekly meal together – a custom perhaps even initiated by Jesus in his lifetime – and because they experienced the presence of their risen Lord then, they believed that the resurrection had taken place on the first day of the week? We will almost certainly never know the answer, but what does seem to emerge is that Sunday was not just the occasion for a commemoration of a past event – the resurrection – but the celebration of a present experience – communion with the risen Christ.

The eighth day

Sunday had a reference to the future as well as to the past and the present in the early Church. Not only did the eucharist itself have an eschatological dimension, symbolising the messianic banquet at the end of time, but the titles Christians gave to the day also expressed that same vision. It was known by some not just as 'the first day of the week' but as 'the eighth day'. Since in Jewish thought the number seven symbolised perfection, the concept of an eighth day obviously signified something greater still. Because according to Psalm 90:4 a thousand years was like a single day in the sight of the Lord, they imagined that this world would last for six days (that is, six thousand years), to be followed by a seventh day, a thousand years when Jesus would reign as Messiah, and then an eighth day, a final golden age that would last for ever. Hence, in giving the same title to Sunday, they were envisaging it as a symbolic foretaste of that eschatological time to which they looked forward in hope.

This concept also explains another early title for the day, 'the Lord's day'. Old Testament prophets had used a similar expression, 'the day of the Lord', to refer to the end of time, and the Christian term seems to imply the notion that Sunday was a symbolic anticipation of the age to come when Christ would be Lord of all, just as he was already Lord in the Church. For the same reason, both kneeling for prayer and fasting were forbidden on this day in the early Church, as they were thought incompatible with its joyful character as a foretaste of the kingdom of God. Conversely, Sunday was considered the day most appropriate for almsgiving. We noted at the beginning of this chapter St Paul's injunction to set aside money for the needy on the first day of the week, and Justin Martyr's account of a eucharistic celebration revealed the continuation of this practice in the second century.¹ While it was certainly desirable to be charitable every day of the week, it was particularly suitable on Sunday, the day which proclaimed the welcome that the poor and needy would receive in God's kingdom.

The day of the epiphany of the Church

Finally, we need to note the emphasis that early Christians laid on all members of a local church assembling together on Sundays. As we

have noted in earlier chapters, Justin Martyr stressed that there was a single assembly 'in one place of all who live in town or country', and that the bread and wine were taken to those who were unable to be there so that they might be drawn into that assembly. And for some centuries afterwards it remained unthinkable for there normally to be more than one eucharist in a church each Sunday – a tradition maintained to this day by Eastern Christians – or more than one eucharist in a town. Even when it did later become necessary in large cities to have several congregations, attempts were made to retain links between them. In Rome, for instance, when the Pope presided at a eucharistic celebration, he would send a little piece of the consecrated bread (called the fermentum) to the other celebrations of the eucharist in the city, so that their essential unity could be symbolised.

All this suggests that Sunday was seen as the day for the manifestation, or epiphany, of the Church. During the rest of the week the Church was dispersed and hidden, as its individual members went about their life and work in different places. But on Sunday the Church came together and revealed itself in the celebration of the eucharist, with each member occupying his or her place in the assembly, or affirming that membership through communion in the bread and wine brought to them. In this way, they were also laying claim to their place at the Lord's table in the future kingdom of God.

Wednesday and Friday

Didache 8:1 directed Christians not to fast on Mondays and Thursdays (the regular Jewish fast-days) but on Wednesdays and Fridays, and this custom continued to be widely observed in later centuries, with regular services of the word also taking place at the ninth hour (about 3 pm) on these days. It has traditionally been assumed that Christians made this change in order to differentiate their practices more clearly from those of the Jews and merely picked these days at random. However, this assumption did not take into account how deeply rooted liturgical customs tend to be, and how unlikely random change would be. More recent scholars have concluded, therefore, the first Christian converts may have been influenced in their choice by the solar calendar in use among the Essene Jewish community at Qumran, in which Wednesday and Friday had a certain prominence, even though these days were not

marked by fasting or by any special liturgical assemblies at Qumran so far as we are aware. The substitution of the ninth hour for the morning for a service of the word, as on the Jewish fast-days, appears to have been made in order to commemorate the death of Jesus at that hour (Matthew 27:46-50; Mark 15:34-37; Luke 23:44-46).

NOTE

- 1 See above, pp 41-43.

FOR FURTHER READING

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Rordorf, W. *Sunday* (SCM Press, London 1962).

Boone Porter, H. *The day of light: the biblical and liturgical meaning of Sunday* (SCM Press, London 1960 = Pastoral Press, Washington DC 1987).

13 | EASTER AND PENTECOST

Early Christian sources reveal two quite distinct modes of celebrating Easter. The one which ultimately became universal was to keep the feast on the Sunday after the Jewish Passover and to focus its celebration upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which – according to the four canonical gospels – had taken place on the first day of the week. The other ancient form of the celebration is attested chiefly in second-century sources deriving from Asia Minor. This tradition makes Easter a memorial of the death of Jesus, and situates the feast instead at the time of the Jewish Passover itself, during the night from 14 to 15 Nisan. Because of their attachment to the fourteenth day of the Jewish month, those who followed this custom were called ‘Quartodecimans’ by other Christians.

The traditional scholarly consensus tended to be that the Sunday celebration was the older of the two (perhaps even going as far back as the apostolic age itself, even though it is only explicitly attested from the second century onwards) and was the one observed by the mainstream of the Christian tradition. The Quartodeciman custom was judged to be

no more than a second-century local aberration from this norm, brought about by an apparently common tendency among some early Christians to 'Judaise', a practice already criticised by St Paul in the first century (see, for example, the Letter to the Galatians).

On the other hand, some scholars have claimed that the Quartodeciman practice began at a much earlier date as a Jewish-Christian adaptation of the Passover festival, while others have gone further still and argued that the celebration of Easter on a Sunday was a considerably later development than is often supposed – that it was not adopted in Rome until about 165, although it may have emerged in Alexandria and Jerusalem somewhat earlier. Prior to this time, these churches would have known no annual Easter observance at all. If this theory is correct, then it effectively reverses the conclusions reached by the majority of earlier scholars, so that Quartodecimanism is not some local aberration from a supposed normative practice dating from apostolic times, but is instead the oldest form of the Easter celebration.

It is not difficult to understand how leaders of communities of early Christians that did not at first observe an annual commemoration of the death and resurrection of Christ might have desired to adopt the practice that they saw among the Quartodecimans. Nor is it hard to appreciate why they would have preferred to locate this innovation on the Sunday immediately following the Passover rather than on the actual feast itself: since Sunday was already the occasion of their regular weekly celebration of the paschal mystery, it would obviously be easier to develop that existing liturgical day than to persuade congregations to embrace a completely new event.

The meaning of the feast

The above hypothesis certainly helps to explain several otherwise somewhat puzzling features of the early Christian observance of Easter, and not least the meaning that was given to it. For not only in Quartodeciman circles but also at first among those who kept the feast on Sunday, the original focus of the celebration was not on the resurrection of Christ but rather on 'Christ, the Passover lamb, sacrificed for us'. While this seems a perfectly natural direction for a feast situated on the Jewish Passover to have taken, it appears to be a less obvious path for

the Sunday celebration, if it were not originally derived from the Quartodeciman custom.

The image of Christ as the Passover lamb is found in 1 Corinthians 5:7, and also underlies John's Gospel. There Jesus is identified as 'the Lamb of God' near the beginning (1:36) and is said to have died on the cross on the day of the preparation of the Passover (that is, 14 Nisan) at the hour when the lambs for the feast were being slaughtered (19:14ff). In addition, the soldiers are said to have refrained from breaking the legs of the dead Jesus in order that the scripture requiring no bone of the Passover lamb to be broken (19:32–36; cf Exodus 12:46; Numbers 9:12) might be fulfilled.

That this theme was central to the Quartodecimans' celebration can be seen not merely from the date on which Easter took place, but also from the emphasis on the suffering and death of Christ found in their writings. Indeed, they even claimed that the name of the feast, Pascha (which in reality is simply a transliteration of the Aramaic form of the Hebrew *pesach*), was derived from the Greek verb *paschein*, 'to suffer'. Precisely the same interpretation and theology of the feast occur in the writings of those early Christians who kept Easter on Sunday.

At the end of the second century in Alexandria, however, we encounter a different understanding of the feast, one that focused upon 'passage' rather than 'passion' – the passage from death to life. Clement of Alexandria describes the Passover as humanity's passage 'from all trouble and all objects of sense';¹ and Origen in the middle of the third century explains this interpretation more fully: 'Most, if not all, of the brethren think that the Pascha is named Pascha from the passion of the Saviour. However, the feast in question is not called precisely Pascha by the Hebrews, but *phas(h)*... Translated it means passage. Since it is on this feast that the people goes forth from Egypt, it is logical to call it *phas(h)*, that is, passage.'²

Fourth-century Alexandrian Christians tended to combine the two interpretations. Although this change of focus may in part be simply the result of a more accurate exegesis of the Hebrew scriptures, it is also in line with the general tendency among Alexandrian theologians to allegorise and de-historicise the Christian mysteries. We may also add the influence that would have been exercised by the day on which the feast occurred: Sundays throughout the year were primarily asso-

ciated with the resurrection of Christ to new life rather than with his death. Moreover, evidence from both Egypt and Syria in the third century reveals the beginnings of a trend to view the Easter observance as a triduum, a three-day celebration of the transition from death to resurrection. But in order to understand this development, we must first take a look at the origins of the paschal fast.

The paschal fast and the triduum

The limited evidence that exists for the form of the Quartodeciman observance suggests that the period of fasting which in Jewish tradition preceded the eating of the Passover meal at nightfall on 14 Nisan was extended by the Christians into a vigil during the night, so that their celebration of the feast with a eucharistic meal only began only at cock-crow (that is, around 3 am) after the Jewish festivities were over. The reason for the choice of this particular hour is not explained in the Quartodeciman sources, but it seems likely that it had its roots in watching and waiting for the predicted return of Christ to complete his work of redemption, just as Jewish tradition expected the coming of the Messiah to be at Passover time.

The Sunday celebration also included a preceding day of fasting and a night vigil culminating in the celebration of the eucharist. Once again, these two elements are easier to comprehend when understood as appropriations from the Quartodeciman practice. For there does not seem to be anything intrinsic to the nature of the Sunday celebration to have given rise to either a day of fasting or a vigil. Moreover, primitive Christian tradition regarded all Saturdays, like Sundays, as inappropriate for fasting — no doubt a vestige of respect for the Sabbath that had been inherited from Judaism — and thus the introduction of a fast on a Saturday would have constituted a significant break with tradition which could not have been done lightly.

It was not long, however, before the Saturday fast became extended in some Christian communities. As we have seen, it was already a well-established tradition for Christians to keep every Wednesday and Friday throughout the year as days of fasting, and so some churches began to join the regular Friday fast and the Saturday paschal fast together to create a continuous two-day preparatory fast before the

Easter festival. Christians in Egypt and Syria went even further and created a six-day fast from Monday until the end of the Saturday vigil. The third-century Syrian church order known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* gives a detailed explanation of the practice. This document maintains that Judas was paid for his betrayal 'on the tenth day of the month, on the Monday' (5:17:8), and so it was as though Jesus had already been seized on that day, in fulfilment of the Pentateuchal requirement to take a lamb on the tenth day of the month and keep it until the fourteenth (Exodus 12:3, 6). It then continues:

Therefore you shall fast during the days of the Pascha from the tenth, which is a Monday; and you shall sustain yourselves with bread and salt and water only, at the ninth hour, until the Thursday. But on the Friday and on the Saturday fast completely, and do not taste anything. You shall come together and watch and keep vigil all the night with prayers and intercessions, and with reading of the Prophets, and with the Gospels and with Psalms, and fear and trembling, and with earnest supplication, until the third hour in the night after the Saturday; and then break your fasts . . .³

This passage is interesting in several respects. First, we may note that because the term *Pascha* is understood to refer to the passion of Christ, it is used to denote the period of the memorial of Christ's suffering and death, and not the celebration of his resurrection, as is also the case in other early sources: strictly speaking, the *Pascha* ends at the conclusion of the fast and vigil. Second, the biblical prescriptions about the timing of the Passover have been adapted to fit a quite different chronology, which may possibly be an indication that this section of the text has Quartodeciman roots. Third, this chronology would clearly make Friday the day on which Christ died (even though it does not seem as yet to be marked by any special liturgical observance), and therefore begin to point the Easter vigil in the direction of being a memorial more of the resurrection than of the death of Christ or of the whole paschal mystery. This transition of meaning is in fact made clear by another reference to the end of the vigil later in the text: 'after which eat and enjoy yourselves, and rejoice and be glad, because Christ, the pledge of our own resurrection, is risen . . .'⁴ Finally, although the church order does prescribe six days of fasting, a distinction is still maintained between the older two-day fast and the other days of the week, and this is also emphasised in other parts of the document:

Especially incumbent on you therefore is the fast of the Friday and Saturday... Fast then on the Friday, because on that day the People killed themselves in crucifying our Saviour; and on the Saturday as well, because it is the sleep of the Lord; for it is a day which ought especially to be kept with fasting...⁵

A similar development can also be seen in the Egyptian sources. In the passage from Clement of Alexandria cited above as the earliest evidence for the understanding of the feast as 'passage', he too spoke of it as having begun 'on the tenth day'; and Origen clearly viewed the paschal events as extending over three days, in fulfilment of Hosea 6.2, even if they were not yet liturgically celebrated in this way: 'Now listen to what the prophet says: God will revive us after two days, and on the third day we shall rise and live in his sight. For us the first day is the passion of the Savior; the second on which he descended into hell; and the third, the day of resurrection.'⁶

In the light of all this, it is not surprising to find in sources from the late fourth century the emergence of the liturgical observance of Good Friday as the memorial of Christ's death, with Easter itself now being regarded as essentially the celebration of his resurrection. To this was often added Holy Saturday as the commemoration of his burial and/or descent into Hell. This development seems to have begun in Jerusalem itself in connection with the sacred sites associated with the passion and resurrection, and spread slowly from there to other parts of the Church.

Pentecost

A number of sources at the end of the second century indicate the existence of a fifty-day season following Easter. Called Pentecost, it was regarded as a time of rejoicing, and every day was treated in the same way as Sunday, that is, with no kneeling for prayer or fasting. Since the Jewish feast of Pentecost was celebrated only on the fiftieth day after the Passover, and did not involve any special treatment of the intervening period, this season appears to be a purely Christian innovation, intended to extend the celebration of Easter. At first no particular emphasis appears to have been placed on the fiftieth day itself by Christians, but in the fourth century we find that day being celebrated as a

commemoration of the gift of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with Acts 2. In some places the celebration of the day also included the Ascension of Christ, but towards the end of the century a separate feast of the Ascension on the fortieth day (Acts 1:3) emerged in a number of places and became almost universal early in the fifth century. Thus the original unity of the fifty-day season was gradually broken down, and regular fasting resumed after the fortieth day, or in some places even before it.

NOTES

- 1 Stromata 2:11:51:2; English translation from Raniero Cantalamessa, *Easter in the Early Church* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville 1993), p 52.
- 2 On the Pascha 1; English translation from Cantalamessa, *Easter in the Early Church*, p 53.
- 3 5:18–19:1 (Brock & Vasey, *The liturgical portions of the Didascalia*, p 28).
- 4 5:19:7 (ibid, p 28).
- 5 5:19:6,9–10 (ibid, p 28).
- 6 Hom in Exod 5:2; English translation from Cantalamessa, *Easter in the Early Church*, p 55.

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Talley, T J. *The origins of the liturgical year* (Pueblo, New York 1986), Part 1.

14 | CHRISTMAS, EPIPHANY, AND LENT

There is no firm evidence for the Christian observance of either 25 December or 6 January before the fourth century. Of course, it is always possible that one or both of these festivals was in existence at an earlier date, but if so, we have no knowledge of it. What is clear from the fourth-century evidence, however, is that at first no local church kept both these occasions: Rome and North Africa celebrated 25 December, while all other churches seem to have observed 6 January. It is only towards the end of the century that we find churches beginning to add the other date to their calendar.

25 December

The earliest evidence for the existence of a feast of the Nativity of Jesus on this date is its inclusion in what is known as the Roman Chronograph of 354, which gives a list of significant days in the year for the city of Rome, probably drawn up nearly twenty years earlier in 336. Why this particular date was chosen for the feast has been the subject

of some debate among scholars, and there have been two principal schools of thought.

The first, often termed the computation hypothesis, attributed it to the results of ancient attempts to calculate the exact day in the year on which Jesus had actually been born. Although the assumptions and method of reckoning of the early Christians would not be accepted today, they were convinced that the duration of Jesus' human existence must have been an exact number of years, and therefore the date on which he died would have been the same as the date of his conception. Since some of them calculated that he had died on 25 March, this would have placed his conception on the very same date, and his birth exactly nine months later, on 25 December.

The second, often called the 'history of religions' hypothesis, asserted instead that the date had been chosen because it was the occasion of the winter solstice in the Julian calendar and also of a very popular pagan feast in Rome, established by the emperor Aurelian in 274 to celebrate the *dies natalis solis invicti*, the birthday of the invincible sun. After the Peace of Constantine, Christian leaders would have wanted to draw people away from these pagan festivities and point to Christ as the true Sun of Righteousness, and so instituted in Rome the feast of the Nativity on the same date.

It is quite possible that both these factors played a part in the origin of the feast: calculation may have suggested the particular date, but the need to provide a counter-attraction to the temptation for recently converted Christians to continue to participate in the pagan festival probably encouraged the establishment of the Christian observance. We do know that certain other Christian holy days originally emerged precisely as alternatives to pagan celebrations already held on those dates: 1 January, for example, became a Christian day of penitence in several places, and then later a feast of Mary in Rome, because pagans were keeping the date as a festival of the god Janus.

Whatever the reasons for the selection of 25 December, however, it is important to note that the day was thought of as more than just a commemoration of the birthday of Jesus. For instance, the oldest gospel readings associated with the feast in Rome were not only Luke's story of the birth of Jesus but also the beginning of the Gospel of John, with its assertion that 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (1:14). In

other words, what was being celebrated was not just the historical event of the nativity, but belief in the reality of the incarnation of the Son of God: hence there was a strong doctrinal or apologetic purpose shaping the festival and not merely a popular piety. Even though the Arian heresy had already been condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325, the fourth century continued to be a period of intense debate about the nature of the person of Christ, and so it is easy to see not only why the establishment of a festival that affirmed his divinity would have seemed a good idea, but also why it would later have been taken up enthusiastically in other parts of the Christian world.

6 January

The reasons for the choice of this date in other parts of the early Church are much less clear. At one time it was thought that the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire observed 6 January as the date of the winter solstice in accordance with the ancient calendar of Amenemhet I of Thebes (c 1996 BC), and so again, according to this theory, the Christian feast was established to coincide with that occasion. Recently, however, Thomas Talley has demonstrated that there never was a calendar of Amenemhet I; 6 January was nowhere thought to be the winter solstice; nor is there any strong evidence that it was once the occasion of a widespread pagan festival. He argued that instead the date was arrived at by computation. 6 April had been observed by early Christians in Asia Minor as the annual celebration of the death of Christ and, by the same method of calculation outlined above in relation to 25 December, this practice could easily have given rise to the tradition known to Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second century that 6 January had been the date of the birth of Christ.

On the other hand, what is remarkable about the observance of this festival is that it is not focused on the nativity or the incarnation in every place in which it is encountered. While the nativity (including the visit of the Magi, Matthew 2:1–12) certainly seems to have been its theme in the church in Jerusalem, this was not the case for Christians in Egypt, where 6 January was celebrated instead as the baptism of Jesus. Elsewhere, there are some indications that the miracle at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1–11) may have been the primary focus.

Talley explained this diversity on the grounds that in all these places the birth of Jesus on 6 January was also understood to mark the beginning of the church's year, and so would have been the occasion when the reading of the particular canonical gospel that was especially associated with each region would have been begun – Mark in Egypt, John in Asia Minor, and Matthew in Jerusalem. In each case, the theme locally connected to the feast occurs at the beginning of the relevant gospel. If true, this suggests that it was the arrangement of the lectionary that determined the character of the various celebrations.

This explanation is not without its difficulties, however. While the baptism of Jesus certainly does occur in the first few verses of Mark's Gospel, in the other two instances the relevant narratives are somewhat further along in the text, and so, if the gospel were being read in order, they would not have been reached until a later occasion. Moreover, evidence from northern Italy in the late fourth century reveals the association of a variety of themes with the feast, including not only the visit of the Magi, the baptism, and the miracle at Cana, but also the feeding of the five thousand and the transfiguration.

This weakens the 'beginning of the gospel' theory somewhat. Calculation of the date of Jesus' birth may account for the emergence of the nativity festival in Jerusalem on this date, and the reading of the beginning of Mark's gospel may well have given rise to the celebration of his baptism in Egypt on the same date. However, it seems likely that it was attribution of the name *epiphaneia* ('manifestation') to the feast that then attracted the various other local themes to it. It is even possible that there might after all have been a widespread pagan festival involving some form of divine epiphany on this date, in spite of the lack of explicit witness to its existence, and that the Christian feast emerged as a counter-attraction to it and/or as a means of propagating the belief that Christ was the real fulfilment of truths dimly perceived in other religions.

The fusion of traditions

By the same process of harmonisation that we have already observed going on with regard to patterns of Christian initiation in the second half of the fourth century, churches also then began to adopt various

annual festivals that were already being observed in other places. This eventually brought about the situation where all churches kept both 25 December and 6 January. The first of these became the feast of Christ's nativity everywhere (although including in Eastern churches reference to the visit of the Magi), but the meaning attached to the second date varied considerably. In the East the primary theme of 6 January was the baptism of Christ, although references to the miracle at Cana also occur in later liturgical texts prescribed for the occasion. In Rome and North Africa, however, the focus of the feast was on the visit of the Magi, while elsewhere in the West the theme was the baptism of Jesus, either alone or in conjunction with the other earlier epiphany narratives.

Lent

The origins of this season appear to lie in Egypt where, at least from the beginning of the fourth century, if not earlier, there was a forty-day fast, kept in imitation of Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness after his baptism (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13). This annual period of fasting seems to have occurred immediately after 6 January, which the Egyptian church observed as the commemoration of the baptism of Jesus. It also appears to have been used as the time of fasting before the baptism of new converts, which consequently took place at the close of the forty-day period, and as the final period of penitential fasting for serious sinners before they were allowed to return to participation in the community's eucharistic worship.

Later in the fourth century we find the churches in other parts of the world also observing a similar forty-day season of fasting, which they doubtless adopted from the Egyptian custom. However, they did not locate it following 6 January but instead immediately before their pre-Easter fast, where at least some of them – notably Rome and North Africa – were already accustomed to holding a pre-baptismal fast in preparation for baptism at Easter.¹ This meant that for those churches which observed only two days of fasting (Friday and Saturday) before the festival, the Lenten season began on the Sunday six weeks before Easter and ended on the Thursday immediately prior to Easter. For the churches of the East, which kept six days of fasting before Easter (from Monday to Saturday), Lent began on the Monday of the seventh week before Easter and ended on the Friday nine days before Easter, with

the following Saturday and Sunday as a festal intermission between the two fasts. The church at Alexandria was an exception to this Eastern custom. It apparently made the transition to the pre-Easter position somewhat later than the rest, and when it did so, set its beginning only six weeks before Easter, thus overlapping the six-day pre-Easter fast that it had formerly observed.

Because no church ever fasted on Sundays, and many churches did not fast on Saturdays either (with the sole exception of the Saturday immediately before Easter), the forty-day season always contained fewer than forty days of actual fasting. Gradually, therefore, various churches began to move its beginning backwards so as to extend its length and produce a full forty days of fasting.

NOTES

- 1 For Easter baptism, see above, pp 16–17, 23–24; for the pre-Easter fast, see pp 82–83.

FOR FURTHER READING

Talley, *The origins of the liturgical year*, Parts 2 & 3.

15 | SAINTS' DAYS

As we have seen, prior to the fourth century the only annual festival that was observed universally was Easter, with its preparatory fast beforehand and its fifty-day celebration afterwards. The calendars of the various churches would have been filled out with the commemoration of one or more local martyrs on the anniversary of the date on which they had died, but usually termed by early Christians their 'birthday' (in Latin, *natale*). The choice of this particular word indicates their conviction that for those who had suffered and died for the Christian faith, death was the gateway to a new beginning, life eternal in heaven with Christ, in whose suffering they had participated. Unlike other Christians, who were thought to sleep in death until the time of the return of Christ in glory, martyrs were believed to be accorded immediate admittance to the presence of God.

The veneration of martyrs in this way is at least as old as the middle of the second century. Our earliest reference to this custom comes from a contemporary account of the martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna at this period. This tells us that, after he had been burned to death,

we at last took up his bones, more precious than precious stones, and finer than gold, and put them where it was meet. There the Lord will permit us to come together according to our power in gladness and joy, and celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already contested, and for the practice and training of those whose fate it shall be.¹

It is important to notice that this early practice was intensely local. Churches usually only celebrated the festivals of their own martyrs, and not those of other localities. Moreover, the celebration was held not in the house or other building where the local church normally met, but in the very place where the remains of the martyr were interred. The basis for this custom was the funerary meals of contemporary Greek and Roman society, which were held at the tomb on the deceased person's birthday. In the fourth century Christians began to erect church buildings over the place of burial, in which hold their celebrations, and the sites often became the objects of popular pilgrimage.

It is also important to observe the significance attached to the physical remains of the martyr, as is evidenced by the extract above from the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp. From the beginning, the cult of the martyrs was closely related to such relics, and this explains in large part why celebrations were slow to spread from one local church community to another: other churches did not possess the remains of the martyr around which to organise a cult. It was only later, in the second half of the fourth century, that the practice began of often moving the mortal remains of martyrs from the original place of burial to a more suitable location in an existing church, especially when the tomb had been a considerable distance away from the city itself. Previously, such a action would have been thought sacrilegious in the pagan society of the period. Yet now this development facilitated the removal of individual relics of the martyr – a small bone, for example – from the rest of the body and transporting it to another city, where it could form the basis of a cult there. In this way, churches gradually began to add to their own calendars festivals of martyrs from other places.

The need for relics also helps to explain why the cult of New Testament saints was generally somewhat slow in developing, since the site of their place of burial was usually unknown at first, and why, when this

cult did begin, it was not in the West but in the East, as relics gradually began to be 'found' there. Visits by pilgrims to the Holy Land in the fourth century encouraged this practice, as well as the veneration of Old Testament figures whose tombs were regular stopping-places on the itineraries, although this latter cult did not spread much outside the Eastern churches.

The fourth century also saw the beginnings of the extension of the concept of saints from martyrs alone to other holy men and women. Since the persecution of Christians had now ceased, forms of ascetic life were thought of as constituting a spiritual martyrdom. The noble events of the lives of outstanding ascetic figures were recorded by their disciples, and a cult established after their death. Similarly, bishops often initiated the cult of an illustrious predecessor in their episcopal office, no doubt often in the hope that something similar would be done for them when they eventually died.

We need to bear in mind that what was going on in all this was not the worship of the saints themselves. Early Christian theologians were insistent that true worship belonged to God alone, but the saints were to be honoured as faithful disciples of Christ. Moreover, just as Christians might ask particularly holy people to pray to God on their behalf during their lifetime, so they continued to ask the saints to intercede for them after death, when they were thought to be in the immediate presence of God and so in a position to be effective advocates for the living.

NOTE

- 1 Martyrdom of Polycarp 18:2-3. English translation from Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers II* (Heinemann, London 1913), p 337.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Brown, P. *The cult of the saints: its rise and function in Latin Christianity* (SCM Press, London & University of Chicago Press 1981).
- Michael Perham, *The Communion of Saints* (SPCK, London 1980).

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