

THE MEANING OF EASTER

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From the Canon Theologian...

For many Australians Easter means a long-weekend with time away, hot cross buns and Easter eggs, but that's about it. The special Easter traditions and foods that ethnic communities retain are also increasingly severed from their Christian origins. Even for those who attend Church over Easter, the meaning of it all may be unclear.

Many practicing Anglicans don't attend Church on Good Friday, let alone our other liturgies of the Easter Triduum (Maundy Thursday, The Easter Vigil). Perhaps they think it's excessive, or unnecessary, or maybe just too sad. While it's not possible to separate the resurrection of Easter morning from the cross of Good Friday, perhaps our cultural preference for success and spiritual uplift makes many of us prefer the risen Christ over the crucified one.

For those of us in church on Good Friday, with its sombre mood and unsparing attention to Jesus' passion and death, the message received will also vary. Not a lot of Anglicans in my experience have a strong sense of sin and the need to be saved from anything by God, let alone of a necessary role for Jesus' sacrifice. Maybe, though, the passion story awakens their love for Jesus whose death was somehow important. Others who aren't sure what they believe will at least take comfort that the dark side is being named in Church—a place too often reserved for anodyne messages and relentless niceness.

Evangelicals are forceful in their Easter preaching about the necessity of Jesus' death in God's plan for salvation. This is an undeniable truth. But it's also a sensitive and subtle one, which needs to be presented carefully lest hearers are caused to stumble. Many will hear this proclamation without going too deeply into its meaning. Yet for others it suggests that God is abusive and that tit-for-tat violence lies at the heart of Christianity.

Atheists still insist on this reading of our motives, and often with good reason as conservative Christians seem to embrace every hard-line position. For modern Western individuals who can't get their head around the bald claim that 'Jesus died for our sins', the sticking point might also be that putting us right with God (at-one-ment) surely has to be a *process*, something more personal and lifelong, rather than an impersonal cosmic *transaction* for changing God's mind.

I want to celebrate Easter with all the dimensions of traditional orthodox Christian faith and practice, including reclaiming our proclamation of Jesus' sacrifice in a way that avoids these overtones of divine harshness and remoteness. So here's how the meaning of Easter looks to me.

The scapegoating, pacifying, tidying-away of the troublesome Jesus by an unsettled community is what humans have always done to keep things in order, and in that sense it's we humans who provide the violence and creepiness on Good Friday, not God. Yet this humble acceptance by Jesus of his inevitable fate is also God's great onslaught on our whole evil, lying, self-justifying way of doing the world.

Yes, God sends Jesus to the cross. But at the same time this is also God's own self, more particularly the second person of the Trinity, freely embracing the unveiled horror of human destructiveness in solidarity with us. The 'admirable exchange' of which St Paul and the early Church Fathers wrote, where God in Christ undertakes this immersion in the full extent of human alienation so that we can come to enjoy a full immersion in God, is the three-dimensional truth behind our sometimes two-dimensional (and hence potentially disorienting) talk of Jesus dying for our sins.

So instead of deflecting an angry God, Jesus' cross reveals the fire of God's love to burn away sin and evil. This looks like divine wrath from the perspective of structures and attitudes that manifest evil in our world, but from the perspective of those of us who crave some joy and real freedom in life, it's good news all the way.

The resurrection is God's great vindication of Jesus' mission. It's the beginning of a new creation in which baptised Christians are taken up with Jesus on a journey into the Trinitarian life of God. The resurrection begins an arc of glorification, as the once-dead Jesus comes to dwell as a life-giving Spirit from God among Christians. The preaching of God's word, the celebration of Christ's sacraments, and our engrafting through prayer and discipleship into Jesus' ongoing life and mission through the Church are all dimensions of the resurrection for Christians to explore and inhabit.

May our Easter worship provide you with a vision and a taste of this life-giving exchange in which Jesus dives deep into our alienation, to find us and draw us with him into the fullness of a transformed life with God.

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