

Good Friday: the day we forget to remember

Few, apart from practising Christians, will today commemorate Christ's crucifixion. How have we come to allow such a momentous event to mean so little?



The way we were: a religious procession passes through Southwark on Good Friday in April 1912

Photo: Getty Images

When I read that Marks & Spencer had pioneered the Toffee Fudge and Belgian Chocolate Hot Cross Bun, my reaction was completely irrational. Hot Cross buns have long been an all-year-round item on supermarket shelves. They are, after all, just sticky buns with spice and a few raisins in them. But then, there is that pastry cross on top of them. Adding fudge and chocolate seems, well, profane: a step in the direction of a chocolate-covered communion wafer.

Of course, this reaction is absurd, but it is what I felt. I am 63 years old. Throughout my lifetime, the observance of Good Friday in Britain has become ever more secularised. Time was, Hot Cross buns were eaten only on this day – and sometimes distributed, with sixpences, to poor widow-women. (Such handouts would no doubt scandalise today's clerics, who regard food banks not as positive opportunities for Christian charity, but as evidence of a deplorable failure by the state.)

This year is the first in which there will be Good Friday race meetings in Britain – at Lingfield and Musselburgh. Why not, if people want to go to the races on the day Jesus was crowned with thorns and nailed to a cross?

I grew up in a religiously divided household. My father was a modern atheist who felt – quite understandably, it seems to me – that there was no reason why he should, for example, not have bacon and eggs merely because of an event that was alleged to have occurred in Jerusalem some nineteen hundred and more years ago.

My mother, however, who normally cooked his breakfast, always refused to cook meat on Good Friday, and we had only one meal in the whole day – a rather tasteless fish pie. She was not fervent in her religion. But there was something special about this day.

I remember one year during the Sixties when we were all listening to Any Questions on what was in those days called the wireless. On the panel were, among others, the writer Marghanita Laski, and some cleric, possibly a bishop. They were asked whether they thought there should be so secular a programme as Any Questions on the day that Christ was crucified.

Marghanita, who had one of the most melodious voices in the history of broadcasting, said, very slowly, that she was an atheist. If, however, like the cleric beside her, she were a Christian, she would be unable to take part in a wireless show on the day her God had died. A strange hush seemed to emanate from the wireless set. A hush fell on the room where we listened. That was it. Good Friday is the day when God died. You could not get more solemn.

In all the churches, there were services. We would go to a said Morning Prayer, followed by the first part of the Communion – for, since Christ was, as it were, dead for the day, there could be no sacraments. Sometimes, we would go to a service called the Three Hours, or part of it, in which a preacher took you through the Last Words on the Cross, interspersed with those haunting hymns, such as Watts's When I Survey the Wondrous Cross and C F Alexander's There Is a Green Hill Far Away.

The Roman Catholics would be having services that seemed almost like Passion plays to our moderate Anglican eyes – "Creeping to the Cross" being one of them – when the congregation would come up to kiss the feet of a replica of the Crucified Saviour.

The more exotic of our Catholic friends would come back from Spain, with stories of the Holy Week processions through the streets of Seville or Cádiz, where the whole solemn story would be enacted, either by people impersonating Christ, His Mother, Pilate and the Chief Priests; or in which gory painted statues would be trundled through the streets in commemoration of those shocking events – Christ arrested in Gethsemane, Christ arraigned before the Chief Priests and Pilate, Christ mocked and scourged and crowned with thorns, Christ nailed to a cross.

It was because of these awesome events that the secular world, whatever it believed for the rest of the year, sank into a shocked stillness on Good Friday. "I would ask you to recollect," John Henry Newman once told his Oxford congregation, when preaching about the last agonies of the Crucified, "that the Person to whom these things were done was" – an electric pause – "none other than Almighty God."

Presumably, by the time I was growing up, fewer and fewer people did actually believe this, with every fibre of their imaginative being. It is, after all, a belief that defies imaginative analysis.

When you think of the sordid and horrific reality of crucifixion – which was a very common form of punishment in the Roman Empire – the origins of the Christian religion seem all the more remarkable. Pilate once crucified 2,000 Jewish rebels in one batch.

But, some time before the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in AD 70, an ingenious Platonist wrote what we call the Letter to the Hebrews, in which all the Temple rituals were seen as foreshadowing the death of Christ. The lambs were taken outside the camp for slaughter; Jesus was crucified outside the city walls. The animal-blood was sprinkled for the cleansing of sin; the blood of the figure on the Cross cleansed his followers from sin. The High Priest entered through the veil of the Holy of Holies; the tortured figure on the Cross was seen as a priest entering the Holy of Holies – Heaven – for the sake of the human race. Anyone who thinks the New Testament was written for simpletons should read Hebrews, and wonder that such a complicated, clever, and utterly paradoxical “take” on a vile execution procedure could ever have been set down.

Even if you do not believe it, the story is so awe-inspiring, so shocking, that the day set aside for its remembrance becomes special. For this reason, bookies and race-goers refrained from going to Epsom or Newmarket. For many years, newspapers did not appear. Oddly enough, this was a 20th-century phenomenon. This newspaper first appeared on a Good Friday in jolly old secular 1856. But in the grief-stricken postwar atmosphere of 1919, it stopped publishing on that day and retained this pious custom until 1987. The BBC, in its Reithian days, went into a purple solemnity, which it still (on Radio 3, at least) partially retains, with renditions of Bach’s St Matthew Passion or Stainer’s Crucifixion.

For most of us, however, in the secularised West, Good Friday has simply become the first day of a holiday. Radio and television stations know that it is a time for assessing the levels of traffic congestion on motorways. Watching the engine overheat all the way to Devon or Pembrokeshire is our equivalent of “Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward”.

It is a far cry from John Donne’s journey from Warwickshire into Wales on Good Friday, when, with all his complicated ingenuity, he meditated on the paradox that he had his back to the East – Jerusalem – and was making his way towards the setting sun. Not because he turned his back on Christ, but because, like Moses, he could not see Glory without being dazzled – and because his back deserved to be chastised by God.

Many of us, even if we are Christians, find it hard to know how to observe this day. Beautiful as the Hebrews “letter” or John Donne’s poem may have been, can we really get our minds round them? The fervently pious will continue to attend the appropriate liturgies. Many of us will sheepishly retreat into silence, thinking that we will simply attend the service on Easter Morning.

For the likes of us, perhaps Auden – in his poem commemorating the hanging of Dietrich Bonhoeffer by the Nazis – will be a more companionable poet than Donne:

Meanwhile, a silence on the cross

As dead as we shall ever be,

Speaks of some total gain or loss,

And you and I are free

To guess from the insulted face

*Just what Appearances **He** saves*

By suffering in a public place

A death reserved for slaves.

A N Wilson - The Telegraph