

# Easter

Neil Richardson reflects on the experience of Easter

Easter is a time of mystery. A time when things don't happen as usual. A time of the unexpected, the sudden reversal of normality.

Easter is universal and local, it is cosmic and physical, it is emotion and hard fact, it is diurnal and sempiternal, it is for today and forever.

Easter is deeply connected to the religious framework of several systems from several continents: As we will hear in the readings during the vigil, it is about the fulfilment of the Jewish hope. But that Jewish hope is itself embedded in the deepest human craving for deliverance, for perfection, for justice, for eternal satisfaction and joy.

It is a fierce rage against indiscriminate suffering.  
It is a courageous protest against the wicked tyrant.  
It is a defiant cry in the face of the cruel hand of death.  
The Jewish roots of our faith are never more with us than on Easter morning.

But Easter is also connected to the mysteries embedded in the life-cycle myths of the religions of the east. It is also connected to the fertility myths and practices of the old land-based religions, examples of which Christianity supplanted. Indeed, it was this very connectedness which made for a smoother transition from one to the other.

Because it is so deeply bedded in culturally, Easter speaks deeply to each one of us. Wherever we are in our faith development, Easter themes will have resonance and power, and at many levels.

It is not necessarily the words which will be most effective in evoking the Easter feeling. We feel it in the gathering in the dark, in the strangeness of the unusually early hour. It is there in the walk from the church to the churchyard, in the dark, which takes us to the lighting of the New Fire which will ring true.



**Resurrection** by Daniel Bonnell

It is the marking and lighting of the Paschal candle and the procession into the darkened church which speak volumes.

It is in the sense of dawn slowly creeping into our awareness which conveys the sense of resurrection and new life, rather than the formal words and the scary descriptions of what happened in Jerusalem, 2000 years ago.

Words can be used to express the season's *meaning*, but they often fail to express the season's *feeling*. It is strange that when you consider what Easter means in the faith of Christians, how surprisingly difficult it is to find good hymn words which express the Easter theme. When you look at the seasonal section of a traditional Church hymnary like the English Hymnal, you find that it contains only 18 specifically Easter hymns compared to 28 for Lent and 30 for Passiontide. And of the 18 Easter hymns, 9 were originally written during the *first* Millennium of the Christian era.

Despite the passage of 2000 years, it feels to me that as a Church and perhaps as individuals, we haven't really had a full exposure to the Easter experience, yet. And of course, that is part of our human condition, our human faculty. We are too interested in this world and too afraid of death to allow the Easter experience to penetrate and find its home within us. We are afraid, and this fear, which was felt by the very first disciples, may be I suppose, a good sign, because it means we are at least some way there.

We all know how words can fail to convey what we really feel. Much of our human disagreement and separation stem from our failure to find and use the right words. Words require a special quality if they are to convey the right feelings from one to another. That is why people often give flowers or other gifts to say what they really mean to say.

So too words require a special quality if they are to convey the feelings of Easter. Resurrection descriptions can feel contrived. Historical details seem to cloud the issues. Contemporary referencing feels defensive and theological argument sounds apologetic.

What we need is the equivalent of gifts to awaken the true Easter response in ourselves. We have, of course, gifts of flowers to gild our church building on Easter Day, and gifts of visual art to convey the inner sense of the passion story, and music to accompany and express our joyful thoughts.

It is when we open the poetry book or hear or even sing the strains of music or see the artist's vision in paint that we cross the threshold of truth in religion. Each of us will find things more or less to their own taste, of course, but it is in the creativity of writing or painting or composing or arranging or working to get things right for others, that we come closest to the resurrection experience because we feel the hand of God about us.

George Herbert's poem **Easter**, captures something of this mysterious experience for me. It conveys the sense of utter surprise which God gives and the initiative which God takes, for us, in this resurrection story.

It is essential to admit that this is not our doing. We might want to prepare for it, but even then, we are left standing, for it is unbeknown to us, outdoing all our art and ingenuity, and even whilst we still lie asleep, that Love's redeeming work is done.

I got me flowers to straw thy way;  
I got me boughs off many a tree:  
But thou wast up by break of day,  
And brought'st thy sweets along with thee.

The Sunne arising in the East,  
Though he give light, & th'East perfume;  
If they should offer to contest  
With thy arising, they presume.

Can there be any day but this,  
Though many sunnes to shine endeavour?  
We count three hundred, but we misse:  
There is but one, and that one ever.

George Herbert  
1593-1633