

The Gospel and the Christian calendar

Introduction

Paul, writing to the Galatian churches, delivers a stinging rebuke, 'You observe days and months and seasons and years'¹, implying that according to the gospel he had delivered to them they had been redeemed from a state of slavery to the powers of the cosmos but were now reverting both to that bondage and to slavery under the Law. J. Louis Martyn comments that the Galatians having been known by God in the revelation of Jesus Christ 'are now behaving as though Christ had not come, thereby showing that they do not know what time it is.'²

The understanding of the New Testament that God's time has 'invaded' the cosmos in the life, death and vindication of Jesus Christ is central to our discussion here of the Christian calendar. It may be thought that the organisation of Christian worship by means of a Calendar is unnecessary, as the honourable tradition of the free churches is evidence. But the Christian calendar has an established position in the history of the church. We shall be discussing how it can be used to subserve worship rather than control it. While the great festivals of Easter and Christmas are also firmly embedded in the civil calendar, and influence in varying degrees the holiday plans of society, the worship of the Christian church belongs in its own right to a different level of 'time'. It celebrates day after day and Sunday after Sunday the praise of the God who, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus brought into being his plan to re-create humankind. 'When the fulness of time had come God sent his Son.'³ Worship takes place in the orbit of that 'fulness of time' and witnesses in the transitoriness of our daily time to the reality of the grace of God now freely available to all. God has come to us and the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus is in being. Paul is the greatest expositor of the gospel that in Jesus there is a new creation. Christ has set both us and the cosmos free,

'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.'⁴

Worship belongs to this total, dynamic ongoing revelation of life in Christ. But the pre-reformation worship was characterised by a sort of mystery play attitude, content to replicate the historical events of Jesus' life and death each year in a cyclical manner, from Advent to Pentecost. It virtually controlled worship by a limited understanding of the historical events of redemption. There have been various movements since the late nineteenth century to recover this usage of the calendar. In the Church of England it has been with the desire, it was said, 'to recover our catholic heritage.' But we have to note that the strength of this desire was motivated also by a feeling that the calendar as understood by the Book of Common Prayer was too staid and lacking in life, being suitable only for reading Scripture in course and during the seasons and for teaching. But it is possible to have an alternative understanding which sees it in the light of the gospel and the enrichment of worship in the deepest sense. First of all we need to remind ourselves, briefly, how the calendar grew from simple beginnings and note the changes of usage during the centuries of the first millennium.

The First Three Centuries

The two commemorations of the resurrection of the Lord on every Sunday and at the annual festival of Easter, in the first two centuries were an explosion of joy. The author of Acts caught the mood of the first Christians in Jerusalem, 'And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.'⁵ It was the celebration of a person, the Lord who had appeared to the apostles and others in Jerusalem on and after the 'third day'. The only information we have

¹ Galatians 4:10-11

² *Galatians*, Anchor Bible 1998, page 418.

³ Galatians 4:4.

⁴ Romans 8:19-21.

⁵ Acts 2:46-47.

about the inception of the Sunday commemoration is in various hints in the New Testament. There is the reference in Acts 'On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread'. Also the letter to the Hebrews mentions, 'not neglecting to meet together', and Revelation mentions 'the Lord's day'⁶. The annual commemoration of Easter only comes to light in the second century but it is a reasonable assumption that it was the custom of the early Christians to celebrate this day from the beginning. Tertullian has a passing reference to what he calls the Passover in his treatise *On Prayer*, 'Thus also on the day of the Passover, on which there is a general and as it were official day of fasting'⁷, apparently referring to the fast before Easter. The second century also saw the beginning of the commemorations of martyrs such as Polycarp in 155 at Smyrna and later on Laurence, and Cyprian in the third century.

This picture of the pre-Nicene church is not that it was austere because its commemorations were so few, but that it reflected a vigorous discipleship and corporate belonging in Christ in the uncertain and often hostile ambience of the Roman state and the proliferating sects. Duchesne could write of the first three centuries in regard to worship, 'Attention might be called to very interesting liturgical facts in documents anterior to the time of Constantine, but they are isolated facts, and the documents are few, and rarely explicit.'⁸ However, the same could be said of much of the future development of the calendar in the succeeding three centuries. We have little knowledge of why, where and when particular commemorations began.

The Fourth Century

The feast of Epiphany, found in the church in Gaul in c. 361 on January 6th seems to have had a longer pedigree than most other feasts. There are references in Clement of Alexandria (late 2nd century)⁹ and also in Cassian (in about 426)¹⁰ to some sort of feast of the nativity and of the baptism. It was being celebrated in Jerusalem in 389. But it did not reach Rome until the early fifth century and North Africa in 412. But Christmas originated in the West, probably at Rome where it might have superseded the pagan cult of the sun on December 25th. In the East Christmas was being celebrated in Antioch by 396 and in Constantinople by 380. These two popular feasts are typical of the haphazard way in which the calendar was formed from the fourth century onwards. Often it was in response to the opposition of pagan customs or to the dedication of new churches or the translation of relics. This was certainly the case with the festival of Peter & Paul on June 29th which was the date not of their martyrdom but of the translation of their relics in Rome in 336 to a place on the Appian Way. As Duchesne remarks,

'The practice soon arose of one church adopting the commemorations of another and thus the festivals of the most distinguished saints were celebrated elsewhere, as well as in their own locality The translation of relics, real or representative gave, from the fourth century onwards, a great impulse to this form of veneration and to the festivals associated with it.'¹¹

With the elaboration of the festivals there came the settling of days and periods of fasting. From the beginning there had been two fast days in the week, on Wednesday and Friday as distinct from the Jewish fasts on Tuesday and Thursday. But the fast before Easter, originally one day on the day before the Vigil, was then extended to the previous days for the preparation of the candidates for baptism and finally to the forty days of

⁶ Acts 19:7; Hebrews 10:25; Revelation 1:10.

⁷ *Tertullian's Tract on the Prayer*, transl by Ernest Evans, SPCK, 1953, page 23.

⁸ *Christian Worship*, SPCK, 1904, page v.

⁹ Cf Clement, *Stromateis*, 1.21.146 - 'The followers of Basilides celebrate the baptism also...'

¹⁰ 'In the country of Egypt the priests of that province regard [Epiphany] as the time, both of our Lord's baptism and also of his birth in the flesh, and so celebrate the commemoration of either mystery not separately as in the Western provinces but on the single festival of this day.' Cassian Conferences, X, 2. Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume XI, edited by Schaff & Wace, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964, page 401.

¹¹ *Christian Worship*, page 284.

Lent. Then in the fourth century in the West, in Spain, there arose a fast before Christmas which finally, after the model of Lent, became the four weeks counted back from Christmas, to become Advent. Neither of these periods of fasting was originally penitential in character. This started to happen from the late sixth century onwards and more fully at the turn of the first millennium onwards. But it is true that by the end of the sixth century there was a change in outlook in the celebration of the liturgy. Perhaps as a reaction to the invasions and the resultant instability in the West it was beginning to be thought that the sense of gospel joy would not be appropriate in times of fasting and mourning. So the Rule of Benedict, c. 530, forbids the singing of alleluia in Lent. Later on, pope Gregory († 604) ordered the banning of alleluia in the pre-lenten three week period beginning in Septuagesima as a sign of earnestness and penitence.

The Church of Jerusalem

By far the most important changes to worship took place in the local Holy Week rites in the church of Jerusalem in the fourth century which were to be replicated all over the church in course of time. We know this from the diary of Egeria, the Spanish religious who undertook a three year tour of the holy sites in the Middle East in the latter part of the fourth century.

Jerusalem in the fourth century had become a popular place of pilgrimage. People would come from far away places to venerate and worship at the sites associated with Jesus. How it happened is not known but some have ascribed the rites in Jerusalem at this time as being due to the genius of the bishop, Cyril. A good example is of one of the services held on the Friday before Easter Day in the later fourth century in Jerusalem. We owe this account to Egeria.

‘In the morning ... round about eight o’clock (there is brought to the bishop) a gold and silver box containing the holy wood of the cross.. All the people go past one by one. They stoop down, touch the holy wood first with their forehead and then with their eyes and then kiss it ... The whole time between midday and three o’clock is taken up with readings. They are all about the things Jesus suffered, demonstrating to all the people by the testimony of the Gospels and the writings of the Apostle that the Lord actually suffered everything the prophets had foretold ... You could hardly believe how every single one of them weeps during the three hours because of the manner in which the Lord suffered for us.’¹²

Before this time there had never anywhere been a separate celebration of the passion on Good Friday apart from the Paschal celebration of Easter Day, although the attitude of the communities of Asia Minor in celebrating Easter on 14 Nisan was perhaps of a different emphasis from the communities who celebrated it on the Sunday. Now pilgrims took these services and ideas back with them to their own parishes and dioceses, together with relics and so the new mode of worship spread widely and quickly within another two hundred years. Gregory Dix also comments on the eucharistic liturgy of the fourth century that, ‘...it came to be thought primarily as the representation, the enactment before God, of the historical process of redemption, of the historical events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus by which redemption had been achieved.’¹³

¹² John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, SPCK, 1973, page 138

¹³ G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dacre Press, 1945, page 305

Later Developments

From the tenth century onwards the original understanding of the commemorations of our Lord's life and death and vindication underwent a change. The Jerusalem local rite of Holy Week and Easter had by now become the norm in all the important Christian centres. It was but a step to transfer that understanding of dramatic representation of worship to the cycle of feasts beginning with Advent and ending with Pentecost. Gradually this cycle of feasts became an annual re-enactment of the historical acts of redemption. There was a distinctive historical literalism about late mediaeval worship with the attendant danger of both formalism and superstition. The Christmas cycle also began to take on the form of a second focus apart from Easter. The popularity of Christmas was later helped by Francis of Assisi in the 13th century with the ceremony of the bambino in the Christmas crib of Greccio which came to be copied throughout the Western church. One might also begin to feel in Lent that the resurrection was still to be looked for at the end of Holy Week seeing that alleluias were forbidden and there was a realism about the ceremonies of Good Friday, as in the already quoted fourth century rites of the Jerusalem church. So A. D. Nock refers to the mediaeval rites,

'The eucharist, a meal and thanksgiving linked to the symbolic act by which Jesus made his disciples willing partners in his death, became the re-enacting of that death. Medieval piety developed the drama of Holy Week with increasing realism and in the domain of the Greek church the popular attitude still is that at every Eastertide Christ rises, and that if he did not the crops would not grow.'¹⁴

Towards a theology of the calendar

The calendar used as a progress from Advent to Pentecost, and including the particular interpretation of the historical events of the once for all passion of Jesus as something to be re-presented and imitated in worship, depends to a large extent on a reading of the gospels as literal, chronological biography.¹⁵ While this is one aspect of the gospels it is not the only one or even perhaps the primary one. The authors of the gospels intended to say that the living Lord is like this man Jesus who we are presenting to you. It is the living Lord who brings to the community the grace of mercy and love of the Father. So there are today in our understanding of the New Testament some interesting and fruitful ideas which help us in our evaluation of the Christian life and also of our worship. For instance, one commentator on Mark has suggested that,

'Mark is more the biography of a movement, or at least that movement's beginnings (archē), than it is the biography of an individual, and the narrative points towards the continuation of that movement after Jesus' death, both through explicit prophecies (e.g. chapter 13) and through the way in which Jesus and his followers and opponents constantly become symbols for groups in the Markan present.'¹⁶

The response to the grace of the Father that Jesus brings is faith. It is the fruit of a relationship between persons - between the Lord who calls and the disciple who responds. One goes forward daily through thick and thin in this faith relationship with the living Lord. We are reminded of the incidents in Mark when Jesus stills the storm and also comes to the disciples, walking on the sea when the disciples cry, 'Teacher, don't you care that we die?' (Mark 4:38). As Joel Marcus comments,

'Mark responds to [the Markan community's] fear and despair by retelling the story of Jesus, who conquers wind and waves and comes to his disciples over the stormy sea of death (cf Mark 6:45-52); he thereby recalls

¹⁴ A.D.Nock, *Conversion*, OUP, 1969, page 234.

¹⁵ Cf Thomas J. Talley, 'The gospels, we may believe, were shaped by the expectation that they would be proclaimed in public assemblies over a certain period. That period, shaped by those narratives and by the response of Christian life by those narratives, is the liturgical year.' *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 2nd edition, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991.

¹⁶ *Mark 1-8*, Joel Marcus, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 2000, page 66.

his audience to Christological memory - in other words, to faith.'¹⁷

To respond in Christian worship is also to recognise what time it is. It is, as we have said, also the expression of a new relationship with God in the Christ who is alive. To think about Christian worship in these terms is to realise how this depends upon a radical change in perception of what worship is about. As we respond to Christ's call to each one of us we receive the grace and gift of faith, so that when we come in community to worship it is by 'faith working through love'.¹⁸ It is from this Christological point of view that we can look afresh at the calendar as holding up a mirror to the gospel. There are three major points.

The Recovery of Easter

First of all, taking our cue from the early beginnings of the calendar when the annual Easter celebration and every Sunday were the only commemorations, it is essential to return to Easter as the single focus of our worship in the year. While the pre-reformation understanding that the ritual of the various seasons had to be performed correctly so that we may arrive eventually at the celebration of the resurrection at Easter and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, in our alternative understanding, every season and every commemoration is irradiated and is given meaning through the glory of Easter. Christmas and Epiphany and the commemorations dependent on those days; the later feasts of the Transfiguration and the apostles and martyrs - all have meaning only in relation to the living Lord who is always dynamically present to the whole church. With Easter as the single focus of the Calendar, Christmas finds its proper level as just one of the events of Jesus' life, even if one of the most important.

Advent and Lent

Secondly, we noticed in the brief historical review of the calendar that from time to time decisions were made to make penitential additions to worship. There has always been a strand of this kind in the thinking of the church from at least the second century. From the Didache onwards, through Barnabas and Hermas we are confronted with a barrage of signposts, as it were, saying, *Not this way*. So the Didache has, 'In church you shall confess your transgressions and shall not betake yourself to prayer with an evil conscience.'¹⁹ The agony of the time over sins committed after baptism became very acute and it is only in Hermas that a second chance is given. But his attitude is not essentially different from the other rigid authors,

"Do you think that the sins of those who repent are forgiven forthwith? Certainly not; but the person who repents must torture his own soul, and must be thoroughly humble in his every action, and be afflicted with all the divers kinds of affliction; and if he endure the afflictions which come upon him, assuredly he who created all things and endowed them with power will be moved with compassion and will bestow some remedy.'²⁰

The grace of the gospel and Christian joy seemed to evade these writers! But as the church became more aligned with society from the fourth century onwards, it seemed appropriate to express in worship the fears of the time and to express penitence for what was happening around them. So in course of time the tradition of penitence in worship, which continues today, became part of the statutory rubrics. Purple as a sign of penitence appears as a colour for vestments; a minor tone is used for music such as the tract that replaced the alleluia between epistle and gospel in Lent (beginning in the early 7th century); the command not to say alleluia in Lent, and the creeping to the cross on Good Friday. In modern times the Lenten hymns stressing 'temptation' and 'sin' have taken the place of some of these catholic usages.

¹⁷ *Mark 1-8*, Joel Marcus, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 2000, pages 78-79.

¹⁸ Galatians 5:6

¹⁹ Didache 4, Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1898 page 231.

²⁰ Hermas Similitudes 7, *ibid.*, page 452.

It is time to say that in the gospel, repentance means to 'turn' to Jesus in faith as he calls us. Penitence is then an ongoing expression of our discipleship in daily life; it should not be the mode and character of worship at particular seasons. What then is to become of the seasons of Advent and Lent? The former has 'second coming' overtones as well as being regarded as a penitential introduction to Christmas. (It is generally accepted today that the New Testament does not really speak of a *second* coming of Jesus but of the Parousia when all things will be fulfilled.) If these seasons are to be kept they could take on a new, non-liturgical function, avoiding both the old penitential liturgical look and the 'second coming' theology of Advent. We might use Baumstark's law of comparative liturgy in reverse here and say that we need to simplify an old usage of the tradition. Advent and Lent could then become personal times of reflection - which is happening already in many places - an opportunity and pause for theological thinking. Then the worship of the time of those seasons can remain joyful, and alleluias and the whole outlook of weekly worship can remain undeviatingly true to the gospel understanding of worship.

Holy Week

The corporate memory of the last week of Jesus' life is always very strong and can be felt every year as we approach the annual celebration of Easter. But traditionally, both in the catholic and in the protestant services of Good Friday, Jesus is apparently really absent (apart from the catholic communion of the pre-sanctified). The text in Mark 2:20, 'The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them ...' has often been construed as declaring that Jesus is absent from the church on earth; and therefore particularly so after the liturgy on Good Friday while we await the celebration of the resurrection on Easter day - and then only perhaps present for forty days! But, as Joel Marcus writes,

'... the verse about the bridegroom's absence is surrounded by parables implying that Jesus brings a joyful new reality into the world. ... Jesus has been physically absent since his death, but that absence is, paradoxically, the means by which his presence is achieved. For it is through the eschatological events of his death and resurrection that he has gained the power to be present dynamically with his church everywhere (see 12:35-37 and 14:62).²¹

What is required today is to let the readings of the events of Holy Week be read quite objectively and without the dramatic 'passion play' intervention into the worship. Putting aside then the legacy of the church in Jerusalem of the late fourth century and the mediaeval re-presentation of the events and particularly the veneration of the cross on Good Friday, it is possible, through revised readings, and by re-connecting the Three Great Days of traditional liturgy through the celebration of the eucharist, to allow the good news of 'the things concerning Jesus' to stand out very clearly in worship. From Maundy Thursday to Easter Day the events of redemption are remembered with thanksgiving before the Father in the presence of the Risen Lord. Good Friday stands out as it should do as the praise of the victory of the Lord. It resonates with the glory of Easter. Easter Day gathers up the whole of redemption, from the trial to the resurrection, as the exclusive and sole focus of our response to God who in Jesus reconciled the whole world to himself.

Conclusion

One of the effects of the mediaeval use of the calendar, followed by recent liturgical revivals, in re-presenting and dramatising the commemorations in cyclical form year after year, has been that worship is divorced from the gospel in Jesus, the living, Risen Lord. So that today the calendar is for many people only a historical/liturgical guide to services and how they should be performed in the seasons. This in turn leads to the idea that worship appears to be something that is done only in a place apart, in a sort of sacred temple precinct of the world. The reality is different and if we recover the understanding that all worship is within the orbit of the resurrection we shall become aware that our worship in Christ is actually at the heart of the world of humanity and of the cosmos, with him, the Risen One. So, taking the calendar commemorations in their original

²¹ *Mark 1-8*, Joel Marcus, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 2000, pages 237-238.

sense of thanksgivings in the ambience of resurrection faith, it will recover its purpose of holding up a mirror to the 'things concerning Jesus'. It will declare that every day is Easter in the sense of our worship and prayer. For we are not in charge of worship, we are responding to the Lord, for, as Käsemann says, commenting on Paul's problems with the celebration of the eucharist at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 11:23-34, 'The Apostle is maintaining against every possible magical, metaphysical or mystical misinterpretation that it is the *Kyrios* himself in his self-manifestation who is dealing with us; and dealing with us in such a way as to lay hold on our will, lay claim to our obedience and set himself over us as indeed our Lord.'²²

²² Ernst Käsemann, *The Pauline Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*, page 134, in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, SCM Press, *Studies in Biblical Theology* No 41, 1964.

Appendix

A scheme of readings for Maundy Thursday to Easter Day

Maundy Thursday

1 Corinth. 11:17-32 The eucharistic tradition as Paul had received it.

Mark 14:17-25 The last supper.

Good Friday

Isaiah 49: 8-13 "... one who loves them shall lead them ..."

Hebrews 10:12-22 "Christ offered for all time one sacrifice ..."

John 13:31-38 Jesus said, "Now is the Son of man glorified."

Holy Saturday

1 Peter 3:17-22 "He, the just, suffered for the unjust, to bring us to God ..
and is now at the right hand of God."

John 15: 1-17 "I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener."

Easter Day

Colossians 1:15-23 "Christ is the image of the invisible God ... through him
God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself..."

John 19:17-42 The Passion after the trial before Pilate to the burial.

John 20:1-18 The appearance to Mary.