

A Very Early Easter

Unlike Christmas Day, which always falls on 25th December, Easter Day is a movable feast. It always falls on a Sunday, but it can be as early as 22nd March or as late as 25th April. It all depends on the phases of the moon. Since the Middle Ages, Easter has been observed on the first Sunday after the first full moon that occurs on, or after, the vernal equinox (the springtime date on which the day and night are considered to be of equal length, 21st March).



So, with Easter Day falling on 23rd March this year, it's almost as early as it can be. The last time Easter Day was celebrated on 22nd March was 1818; and it won't be celebrated on that date again until the year 2285. But it is only another 152 years before Easter Day is as early as 23rd March again, in the year 2160!

However, in three years time, Easter Day will be almost as late as it can be. In the year 2011, we will be celebrating Easter on 24th April.

The chopping and changing of Easter's date plays havoc with the setting of school holidays, and there have been suggestions that Easter should be on a fixed date (or Sunday) each year. In that connection, here's an extraordinary piece of Easter trivia that I managed to unearth:

The cycle of Easter dates repeats after exactly 5,700,000 years, with 19th April being the most common date, happening 220,400 times, or 3.9% compared to a mean for all dates of 162,857 times, or 2.9%.

The Very First Easter

Although there's a lot of trivia surrounding the dating of Easter each year, there is nothing trivial about the events of the very first Easter.

The solemn happenings of the first Good Friday and the amazing events of the first Easter Sunday stand right at the heart of our Christian faith, as Paul reminded the first century Christians in Corinth.

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel, you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.
[1 Corinthians 15.1-4]

Paul reminds us which facts about the Christian message he regards as being of *first importance*.

➤ *It's centred on a person: Jesus Christ*

Christianity, at its heart, is not about encouraging people to be 'good neighbours', as some would suppose - kind, caring, good and loving, though these qualities are very important. Nor is it primarily concerned with issues of justice and peace in the world, as some would suggest. At its heart, *it's about a person, Jesus Christ*. The Christ-centred nature of the Gospel is spelt out clearly by Paul in his introduction to the letter he wrote to the first century Christians in Rome.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God - the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

[Romans 1.1-4]

➤ *It's rooted in history by Christ's death, burial and resurrection*

The Christian faith isn't derived from speculative theories, human philosophies, or man-made traditions; nor does it depend on our own personal experiences, emotions or feelings. It is rooted in the unalterable facts of history - what God has done in time and space on planet earth, through his Son. The central facts of the Easter story stand firm for all time - Christ's death, burial and resurrection. They were well attested by contemporary eyewitnesses, whose reliability could be checked out - and was (Luke 1.1-4).

➤ *It's concerned with our salvation - from sin*

The Christian message is about *God coming to our rescue*, in the person of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Specifically, it's about *God coming to rescue us from our sin and guilt* - not just from the mess our lives may be in, or from feelings of loneliness, emptiness or despair. Otherwise, the Gospel wouldn't have much relevance to those whose lives are already happy and fulfilled! But because the Gospel is about God saving us from our *sins*, it's relevant to *every* human being - because *all have sinned and fall short of God's glory* we're told (Romans 3.23). Furthermore, *sin pays a wage and that wage is death* - separation from God, Romans 6.23 informs us. And if we leave this life separated from God, we will spend the whole of eternity without him, with all the horrors that implies. That is why people desperately need to be saved!

➤ *It's anchored in the cross*

Our sins are deeply offensive in the sight of a holy God. They are a personal affront to him (Ps 51.4). God made us in his image to reflect the glory of his own perfect character. Whenever we fail to do that, we sell him short; we misrepresent him; we distort his likeness in us. Understandably, God finds this deeply offensive, which is why his consistent reaction to human sin is always one of divine wrath. But Jesus gave up his life in his extraordinary act of self-sacrifice at the cross in order to absorb all God's wrath against our sin, so that we would be spared it. The Bible teaches us that *propitiation*, the turning aside of God's wrath, was the necessary condition for *reconciliation*, human beings being brought into fellowship with a holy God. So, the cross was more than a very powerful demonstration of the greatness of God's love for us (the extraordinary lengths to which He was prepared to go for us). It achieved something real, something tangible – the removal of our sin and guilt from the sight of a holy God, so that we could be declared justified in his sight for all time (Rom 4.25).

➤ *It's dependent on the resurrection*

However, without the resurrection, we would have no way of knowing what the cross had achieved. The resurrection of Jesus from death is God's receipt to us, proving to us that our sins really have been atoned for. Christ's resurrection also proves that death is now a conquered enemy, not one that will get the better of us once this life is over. Death for the Christian is simply the gateway into God's glorious presence forever!

➤ *It's explained in the Scriptures*

The explanations provided by God's Word are vital to understanding the events of the first Easter correctly. One of the problems I had with Mel Gibson's infamous film, *The Passion of the Christ*, was that there was no shortage of violence in it, but without any explanations as to *why* it was all happening, the violence seemed to be bewilderingly futile. It's the Scriptures that hold the key to us understanding *why* the events of the first Easter were as they were.

➤ *It's good news for those who accept it*

Right from its earliest days, the Christian message has been known as *the Gospel*, *The Good News* – literally, the best announcement the world has ever been given (Luke 2.10-11; 4.17-18; Matthew 4.23; Mark 1.1; Acts 5.42; 8.35; 10.36; 11.20; 17.18). This is why Paul tells us that there are three vital things we must do with the Christian message.

- We must **receive it**, by accepting it as the truth.
- We must **take our stand on it** – it must become the platform on which we build our lives.

- We must **hold fast to it**, like a windsurfer holding on to his sail for dear life, knowing that his very survival depends on it. We cannot afford to let go of such good news! None of us will want to have believed in vain, by letting go of what we once trusted.

So let's make the most of this year's *early* Easter, by celebrating the central events of the *first* Easter for all they're worth, encouraging others to do the same!

Something to watch

We often complain that there's nothing worth watching on television. But that might change this Easter. The BBC is broadcasting a new high-profile drama about the events of Easter week, called *The Passion* (not to be confused with Mel Gibson's film of a similar name!). The role of Joseph of Arimathea is being played by David Oyelowo (famous for his role in *Spooks*). As the only professing Christian in the cast, David appointed himself (in his own words) as the '*guardian of the Gospel*'. He was amazed at the immense opportunities for sharing the good news of Jesus with other cast and crew members while filming on location in Morocco. So, let me suggest that we make time to watch the broadcasts ourselves this Easter and encourage our non-Christian contacts to do the same, so that we have something to talk about with them.

Dates for your Diary

Here are details of important forthcoming events.

- **Tues 11th Mar, Mezzanine Easter Special, 7.00pm**
- **Fri 21st Mar, Good Friday Lunchtime Service: 12 noon – 1.30pm**, beginning with bread and soup lunch
- **Sun 23rd Mar, Easter Day All-Age Service, 11.00am and Evening Celebration, 6.30pm**
- **Wed 26th Mar, Annual General Church Members' Meeting, 7.30pm**
- **Thurs 3rd April, Paraffernalia in Concert with Clarence Adoo, 8.00pm** – an opportunity to enjoy the Gateshead Music Service Swing Band and the remarkable testimony of Clarence Adoo.
- **Sat-Sun 26th-27th April, Church Anniversary weekend** with Rev Rodney Stout, Associate Minister, Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh.

David Hunt