

EASTER SUNDAY¹

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

Christ our Pasch is sacrificed, therefore let us keep the feast.
1 Cor. 5, 7, 8 (Epistle for Easter Sunday)

EASTER Sunday is not a feast day standing by itself. It is the culmination of a celebration which may be said to begin on Palm Sunday and which continues through Low Sunday and beyond to Ascension Day, and even to Whit Sunday and its octave. All this is the Pasch or Passover, which we call Easter. It is the Spring Festival, in a sense the New Year—the New Year not of our arbitrary calendars but of nature and of life, vegetable, animal, human and divine.

Easter is the centre and climax of the whole Christian year. But in a sense it is not *only* a Christian feast, nor does it originate with Christ or in Christendom. We know that the word Pasch or Passover is not a Christian name, nor originally it was a Christian feast: it is a Jewish name and a Jewish feast. By the time of Christ it had come to mean for the Jews principally a commemoration of their passage from the slavery of Egypt to the Promised Land 'flowing with milk and honey'. But originally it seems to have been even for them a Spring fertility celebration, and it was natural that their passing from slavery and death to freedom and life should be associated in the renewal of the life of nature. (This does not contradict the fact that many of their New Year rites, as related so graphically in Raphael Patai's *Man and Temple*, were celebrated at the Feast of Tabernacles just before their rainy season, or that others took place at the feast of Purim a month before the Passover.)

Our own name 'Easter' is in fact a very heathen name, and Easter used to be a heathen feast. According to the Venerable Bede it was the feast of Eostre, a Germanic goddess of Dawn and of Spring—of new light and of new life. Some sort of celebration corresponding to our Easter seems to be the oldest and most widely kept of all the celebrations

¹ The substance of a sermon preached on Easter Day, 1951.

of mankind. Christianity did not invent it, but Christ and his Church have taken it up and given it a new significance.

Researches in ancient history, anthropology, folklore and comparative religion have shown us how beneath all the many varieties of name, place, time, and detail there are constant similarities in the way in which these 'Easter' rites have been celebrated all over the world, but especially in lands bordering on the Mediterranean. We cannot help being struck by the similarity of many of them, not only with our Church ritual but also with the Gospel narratives of the Passion and Resurrection.

Always they begin with what is technically known as a *rite d'entrée*—a solemn opening of the proceedings in which the eventual victim and the participants enter into the holy place or city. It marks not only a change of location, but a sort of mental transition from a workaday to a 'holy' frame of mind—an initiation into a 'mystery'. The plucking of a 'golden bough' has become for us the most familiar feature of this opening ceremony which gives the *entrée* to the mystery, as according to Virgil it was the preliminary to the entry of Aeneas into the underworld.

We can hardly fail to be reminded of our Lord's entry into Jerusalem, nor can we suppose that the evangelists were unaware of the significance of the plucking of palm-branches to strew in his way. All this is re-enacted in our Palm Sunday procession, especially when it is halted at the church doors before admission is granted.

The alternation of weeping and lamentation with rejoicing and exaltation is a constant feature of these celebrations. We find a survival of them in the Book of Ezechiel where the prophet, to his indignation, finds the daughters of Jerusalem weeping for the Semitic corn god, Tammuz, outside the walls of the Temple (Ezech. 8, 14). Lamentation for the departed life—whether called Tammuz, Adonis, Osiris or Baldur—was a universal custom in these celebrations throughout the Mediterranean area. So too a later generation of 'daughters of Jerusalem' weep for Jesus on his way to Golgotha. This mourning is renewed again in the Lamentations of our Tenebrae and the Reproaches of our Good Friday liturgy.

The extinguishing of old fire and light and the solemn kindling of new fire and light is almost equally common in these 'Rites of Spring'. So our Lord in Gethsemani says that 'now is the hour of darkness', and there is 'darkness over the earth' as he hangs on the cross. We notice too how very insistent are the Gospels that his rising synchronises with the first streak of dawn. The progressive extinguishing of the lights at Tenebrae and the opening of the Easter Vigil with the kindling of the new fire are familiar to us all.

An *agon*, an agony or contest, is a usual event in these celebrations. Christ's agony is in solitude in the garden, between his human will for survival and his divine will for the eternal life of mankind. Often too we find the pouring on the earth of blood and water as a life-giving ceremony—hence possibly St John's insistence on the reality of the blood and water which pours from the side of Christ. For him and his readers this evidently had peculiar significance, as we can see if we compare his Gospel, chapter 19, verse 35 with his first Epistle, chapter 5, verses 6 and 8.

A phase of folly, buffoonery or 'light-headedness' is also frequently found in these Spring celebrations—we seem to have a feeble survival of this in our All Fools' day. Often this consisted in a sort of blind man's buff, or buffeting, which made a fool of the eventual victim—which victim, as we shall see, was the king of the old year. Indeed, the plausible suggestion has been made that our Lord was actually used for this purpose by the Roman soldiers when he was clad in a scarlet robe and crowned with thorns. We know from elsewhere that in the celebration of their Saturnalia they used condemned criminals for this purpose (see Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Vol. III, pp. 186ff).

Then again there was often a solemn banquet of corn and fruit—the corn crushed into flour and baked into bread, the fruit (in southern countries usually the grape) crushed and fermented into wine. Among the Jews this was of course the supper of unleavened bread and a cup of wine, before the Passover, which Christ celebrates with his disciples and which in its turn is for us—at his command—the Eucharistic feast.

The setting up of a felled tree—a pole, our maypole—is also a common feature of these rites. Often it served also as

a gibbet for the victim. Certainly in the time of Christ it was quite commonly in the form of a cross on which the victim was crucified.

For the keynote of all this was the *sacrifice*—the death of the impersonation of the old year and the arising of the new. The ruling idea of all these old 'Easters' was the law which, we read, was announced by Caiphas (not, we remember, because he was Caiphas, but because he was the High Priest for that year): 'It is expedient that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish' (John 11, 49, 50). This was the idea behind the sacrificial death as we find it everywhere. The old priest-king, or some substitute for him—it might be a human being, or sometimes an animal or an effigy—must be put to death if the food supply for the whole nation is not to perish, and the nation with it. All living things must die, but life itself must continue, and the life of man depends on the life of vegetation. The Priest-King which personifies it must die—'weep for Adonais, for he is dead'—but the life-spirit which he embodies must re-emerge from the dead—'The King is dead. Long live the King.'

So after the death there is the Treasure Hunt—the search for the new embodiment of life. This is almost always the task of a woman or of women, for she represents yearning nature which has been deprived of the living spirit, the life she had both wedded and begotten. In the old myths she is Ishtar, Isis, Aphrodite, Astarte, or in northern countries Frigga. Often there is a descent into the underworld: they 'seek the living among the dead' (cf. Luke 24, 5). We can hardly fail to be reminded of this by the search by Mary Magdalen (not Mary Immaculate, but Mary the sinner who 'loved much') and the other women for Christ on Easter Sunday morning—'They have taken away my lord (*Adoni*) and I know not where they have laid him' (John 30, 13). Perhaps we have a survival of this Treasure Hunt for the new life in some of our Easter games—notably in the hunt for the hidden Easter eggs. We are told that in medieval England there was a sort of treasure hunt on Easter Sunday for the Blessed Sacrament which had been hidden away since Good Friday.

Can we suppose that all these similarities are just coincidence? In the providence of God it could hardly be so, nor could it be so in the minds of the early Christians, whether they were Semitic, Greek or Roman, who must all have been familiar with these old pagan and Jewish rites. For St Paul it is quite clear that Christ is *our* Pasch. Must we then say that our Easter is no more or no less than the Jewish pasch or the pagan fertility rites?

We can hardly fail to see that materially there is no very great difference between many details of our Catholic ritual and these old Spring rites, and they have many close parallels in the Gospel narrative itself. Our Lord himself seems to perform them quite consciously, not just as a ritual but in the hardest possible way of the prosaic reality of human self-sacrifice. But we believe he is not just an alleged embodiment of the life of nature, but true God and true Man in one Person; he is no mere personification of natural growth and decay, but the Word by whom all things were made. More obviously still he gives these old 'Easters' a new significance, just as St Paul sees that he gave it to the old Pasch. The aim of the old pagan rites seems to have been human survival. And for that reason these rites had to be performed year after year. The victim of this year, the old king-priest, was the victor of the previous year, and this year's victor must be the victim next year. It is an endless, hideous repetition of annual ritual murder if the nation is not to perish. Macaulay has stated its inexorable law, in a verse which Frazer quotes at the beginning of his *Golden Bough*—

The priest who slew the slayer,
And shall himself be slain.

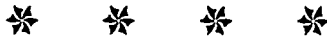
But Christ dies and rises once and for all. St Paul formulates the law of the new dispensation in Romans 8, 9, 10:

*'Christ rising from the dead
dieth now no more;
death shall have no more dominion over him.
For in that he died to sin, he died once;
but in that he liveth,
he liveth to God.'*

Not survival but immortality, a sharing in the eternal,

changeless life of God is now what is signified and effected by the paschal sacrifice.

Christ died once. But annually at Easter, weekly on every Day of the Sun, his sacrifice and sacrament is renewed. It is 'the medicine of immortality'. The old rite is not destroyed, but fulfilled. Still the living corn is gathered, crushed into flour, and baked into bread, to be turned back again into the cells and tissues of our living bodies. Still the living grape is plucked, trodden in the winepress to be fermented and made into wine to make glad the heart of man. But now *This is his body, This is his blood*, and in our Easter Mass we have the culmination of a sacrifice and sacrament whose fulfilment is not in time but in eternity. For as Christ says, 'I will not drink from henceforth of this fruit of the vine until that day when I shall drink it with the new in the kingdom of my Father' (Matt. 26, 29). But 'he that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood shall have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day. . . . As I live by the Father, so he that eateth me, the same shall live by me' (John 6, 55-58).



HERMITS

OSWIN MAGRATH, O.P.

THE absence of hermits as a recognised and esteemed element in the life of the Church for the last century or two is an extraordinary phenomenon, for in other ages hermits have always been numerous and accepted. This is not merely that eremitical vocations are lacking; they possibly exist in numbers; but is in part at least to be attributed to the general attitude of suspicion with which the eremitical life is viewed. In the West there is no legal provision made for hermits in canon law, and the difficulties of a religious or priest embracing the eremitical life are practically insuperable. Spiritual writers rarely treat of eremiticism as a means or state of perfection, and it tends to be regarded as a thing of the past which has no place in the Church today.