

## ***Easter in Ireland***

### ***The 'Good Old Days'***

Here in Ireland many of our senior citizens love to talk about the 'Good Old Days'. They tell us that in bygone days life was not as stressful or complicated as it is now. The pace of life was a lot slower and people were more 'laid back' in their attitude to everyday situations. They seemed to be able to pace themselves better than we are, for they believed that 'when God made time, He made plenty of it'. They are always very willing to talk about some of the old customs and traditions that have been handed down from generation to generation. These include some religious practices which had a great influence on their lives. It would be their wish that, among other things, we would not forget the way Easter was celebrated in the 'Good Old Days', particularly in the rural areas of Ireland.

### ***Easter Water***

During Easter week it was customary for people to bring gallons and bottles to the Chapel. These were then filled with Easter water. This was Holy water which had been especially blessed for Easter. The water was taken home and used in various ways, including the following:

- ▶ Farmers sprinkled it on their fields as they prayed for a good harvest.
- ▶ Householders sprinkled it in their gardens as they prayed for a good crop of vegetables.
- ▶ Each member of the family drank three mouthfuls of the water. They prayed silently for good health as they swallowed it.
- ▶ The Holy water font was filled with Easter water. Whenever a person was about to leave the house they dipped a finger in the font and blessed themselves by making the sign of the Cross with the water.
- ▶ The Easter water was sprinkled in each room of the house at night. Many believed this was a means of protection for the family against any evil or illness that might befall them during the night.

### ***Palm Sunday***

The Easter activities began on Palm Sunday when the priest blessed the palms. When mass was ended the members of the congregation collected their palms from the large baskets left at the door of the Chapel or in the yard. They then brought the palms home and cut them into slips, which they placed behind the holy pictures in each room in the house. They were left there until they rotted, and were then taken down and burned. The palms were never thrown out.

Palm Sunday commemorated Christ's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, when the people waved palm branches as a sign of welcome. However, as Jesus entered Jerusalem He wept for the inhabitants of the city. The Saviour was moved with compassion and He wept because these same people who welcomed Him to this great city refused Him entry to their hearts. With great sadness in His voice He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me."<sup>1</sup>

The palms displayed in many Irish homes were a reminder of the opportunity that God has given us to welcome Him, not only into our homes, but into our hearts. The people of Jerusalem were not willing. Are you?

### ***Spy Wednesday***

Spy Wednesday commemorated the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot. At the special service in the Chapel that night the congregation was reminded of the fact that it is not the outward appearance which is important, but the heart. As far as many people were concerned, Judas seemed to be a model follower of Christ. Outwardly, he was doing what was right. He attended the place of worship and performed his religious duties but his heart was far from God. According to the Scriptures the outward performance of religious duties is no indication that your heart is right with God. The Lord highlighted the seriousness of religious hypocrisy. *'And so the Lord says, "These people say they are mine. They honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.'*<sup>2</sup>

### ***Holy Thursday***

On Holy Thursday the Blessing of the Oils took place. This ceremony was a reminder of the oils which were used to anoint the body of Jesus after His death. The service in the Chapel that night included sounds similar to whips cracking. This reminded the people in the congregation of the scourging which Christ endured at the hands of Pilate's soldiers.

### ***Good Friday***

At three o'clock on Good Friday the death of Jesus was remembered at a special service in the Chapel. The 'Adoration of the Cross' took place when a large crucifix, veiled in violet-coloured cloth, was brought to the altar. It was then unveiled and brought to the altar rails. The members of the congregation could then approach and adore the cross. At this point the 'Kissing of the Cross' took place. The worshippers had the opportunity to kiss the wounds on the hands, feet and side of the image of the dead Christ. The people then prayed at the 'Stations of the Cross', a number of images depicting the passion of Christ.

The readings from the Scriptures left people in no doubt concerning the fact that Jesus died as a substitute for sinners. *'Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all.'*<sup>3</sup>

### ***Easter Saturday***

One of the ancient Irish traditions practised on Easter Saturday involved children. Early in the morning the youngsters left home, carrying a basket or a milk gallon. They walked many miles, collecting eggs for Easter, and were determined to fill their gallon or basket before returning home. Most of the farm houses in the area were visited that day. Many of the farmers' wives reared hens, and had a supply of eggs ready when the young visitors arrived. It was of the utmost importance that each family had plenty of eggs for breakfast on Easter Sunday.

Easter Saturday was known as Confessions Day. The priests heard confessions throughout most of the day. Some people walked many miles to confess their sins and to receive absolution from the priest. People were obliged to fulfil their Easter Duty by going to confession and receiving communion.

## ***Easter Sunday***

On Easter Sunday morning many families enjoyed a good breakfast, which consisted of the eggs that had been collected by the children on the previous day. Most of the people had been fasting since midnight on Saturday and had received communion on Sunday morning. When they arrived home after attending Mass they were very glad to partake of the eggs, some of which had been boiled, fried or scrambled.

For most Irish families the activities of Easter Sunday included a visit to the graveyard. The Rosary was usually recited as people visited the graves of their loved ones who had passed away. There are a number of Famine graveyards in Ireland. Multitudes of men, women and children perished during the Great Famine of 1845 – 49, and the remains of many of them rest in these graveyards, awaiting the resurrection. On Easter Sunday these unfortunate victims of hunger and disease were especially remembered, and prayers were offered for the repose of their souls. The desire of those who visited the graveyards was that one day they would be reunited with their loved ones in Heaven.

The message of Easter makes this possible, for it points us to Jesus. He died upon the cross as a substitute for sinners. According to the Scriptures we are ALL sinners. 'As the Scriptures say, "No one is righteous—not even one.<sup>4</sup> For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard'.<sup>5</sup> As sinners we are ALL subject to sin's penalty. 'For the wages [penalty] of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.'<sup>6</sup> But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshippers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death'.<sup>7</sup>

## ***Amazing Grace***

A man once asked the apostle Paul, "What must I do to be saved?"<sup>8</sup> Perhaps you are asking the same question! The fact that salvation cannot be earned, bought or merited is emphasized throughout the Bible. No one can be saved as a result of doing good works or by anything the church might do on their behalf. According to the Scriptures, 'He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.'<sup>9</sup> God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it'.<sup>10</sup>

Paul highlights the fact that salvation is a FREE GIFT. 'For the wages [penalty] of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.'<sup>11</sup> For the grace of God has been revealed, bringing salvation to all people'.<sup>12</sup> The grace of God is His unmerited favour to helpless sinners. This grace was demonstrated when God sent His only begotten Son to the cross on our behalf. Christ became the sinner's substitute. All the guilt of our sins was put to His account. On the cross He paid the penalty for sin that we should have paid. God's grace was manifested as Jesus suffered Hell on the cross so that we need not go to Hell.

## ***The Easter Message***

Most of the people who lived in Ireland in bygone days did not own a Bible, or have access to one, so they depended very much upon what they heard in the churches. Many of them learned a lot as a result of listening very carefully to the Scripture readings at the religious services held during Easter week. The readings from the Word of God reminded them not only of Christ's death, but also of His resurrection. In the Gospel of Mark it is recorded that when some of Christ's disciples came to His tomb they discovered that He had already risen from the dead. 'But the angel said, "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He isn't here! He is

risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body.”<sup>13</sup> The apostle Paul said, “I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said.”<sup>14</sup>

The author of the Book of Hebrews highlights the fact that ‘God’s will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time.’<sup>15</sup> The Son radiates God’s own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven.<sup>16</sup> With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.<sup>17</sup> For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who are being made holy.<sup>18</sup> Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf.<sup>19</sup> The Scriptures make it clear that the resurrection of Jesus was evidence of the fact that His substitutionary sacrifice for sins had been accepted.

Through His death on the cross Jesus secured a Pardon for all who will repent of their sins and put their faith in Him. Repentance includes not only sorrow or remorse, but also a determination to turn away from sin. To put your faith in Christ means to trust Him, rely on Him and depend upon Him for salvation.

### ***Resurrection Life***

We have been reminded of those who welcomed Jesus to their city but refused to welcome Him into their hearts. “**You were not willing**”, Jesus said. Friend, what about YOU? Are YOU willing to invite Him into your heart as Saviour and Lord? Jesus says, “**Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.**”<sup>20</sup> Why not invite Him into your life right NOW? ‘For God says, “**At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.**” Indeed, the “right time” is now. Today is the day of salvation’.<sup>21</sup>

If you acknowledge the fact that you are a sinner, come to the Lord in sincere repentance and ask Him to forgive you, He will. ‘**But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.**’<sup>22</sup> God will forgive not just some of your sins, or even most of them. He will forgive ALL of them. ‘**But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.**’<sup>23</sup> If you put your faith in Him (depend upon Him for salvation) He will save your soul, ‘For “**Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.**”’<sup>24</sup>

Here in Ireland, Easter Sunday has traditionally been a day of great joy, as people celebrated the resurrection of our Saviour. Friend, this can be a very special time for you when you can experience the resurrection power of the Easter message in your own life.

Jesus said, “**I am the resurrection and the life.**”<sup>25</sup>

Invite the risen Christ into your heart as Saviour and Lord  
and begin a new life this Easter.

### Scripture References

1: Matthew Ch.23 v 37  
4: Romans Ch.3 v 10  
7: Revelation Ch.21 v 8  
10: Ephesians Ch.2 vs 8, 9  
13: Mark Ch.16 v 6  
16: Hebrews Ch.1 v 3  
19: Hebrews Ch.7 v 25  
22: 1 John Ch.1 v 9  
25: John Ch.11 v 25

2: Isaiah Ch.29 v 13  
5: Romans Ch.3 v 23  
8: Acts Ch.16 v 30  
11: Romans Ch.6 v 23  
14: 1 Corinthians Ch.15 vs 3, 4  
17: Hebrews Ch.9 v 12  
20: Revelation Ch.3 v 20  
23:1 John Ch.1 v 7

3: Isaiah Ch.53 vs 4 – 6  
6: Romans Ch.6 v 23  
9: Titus Ch.3 v 5  
12: Titus Ch.2 v 11  
15: Hebrews Ch.10 v 10  
18: Hebrews Ch.10 v 14  
21: 2 Corinthians 6 v 2  
24: Romans Ch.10 v 13