

## Lent Course 2026 St Andrew's with St Mary's Stoke Newington

**Good Friday**

**Lent 4 | Session 4 18/03/26**

### **Keeping Holy Time – Good Friday | Liturgies and Egeria**

Good Friday stands at the heart of the Triduum.

If Maundy Thursday draws us into the intimacy of the table and the darkness of the garden, Good Friday brings us to the place of the Cross. The Church gathers not to celebrate a victory yet, but to stand beneath suffering, loss, and sacrifice.

It is one of the most striking days in the Christian year because it contains no Eucharist of its own. The Church does not celebrate the Eucharist on this day. Instead, she keeps what is often called The Liturgy of the Day, a service marked by scripture, solemn prayer, the veneration of the Cross, and communion from the sacrament reserved from Maundy Thursday.

But why does the Church keep this day in this way?

Why do we hear the Passion proclaimed in full?

Why do we venerate the Cross?

Why does the Church pray so extensively for the world?

Why is the altar bare and the mood restrained?

To understand this, we again listen to the Church's memory.

Good Friday does not stand alone. It continues the liturgical movement that began on Maundy Thursday evening. There is still no dismissal from the previous night. The Church has entered the story of Christ's Passion and remains within it.

The quiet, the fasting, the long readings, and the solemn gestures of this day are part of one unfolding act of worship that will only reach its fulfilment in the proclamation of Easter.

### **Egeria: A Fourth-Century Witness**

Once again, one of the most important witnesses to how the early Church kept this day is Egeria, a Christian pilgrim who travelled to Jerusalem in the late fourth century.

What she records is extraordinary.

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The people do not simply hear about the Passion; they walk through it. Through the night they move from place to place: from the Mount of Olives to Gethsemane, to the city, and finally to Golgotha.

The story of Christ's suffering is experienced physically through prayer, movement, and vigil.

Her account of Good Friday is preserved below:

### FRIDAY

When the cocks begin to crow, everyone leaves the Imbomon, and comes down with singing to the place where the Lord prayed, as the Gospels describe in the passage which begins, "And he was parted from them about a stone's cast, and prayed"? The bishop and all the people go into a graceful church which has been built there and have a prayer appropriate to the place and the day, and one suitable hymn. Then the Gospel passage is read where he said to his disciples, "Watch, lest ye enter into temptation", and, when the whole passage has been read, there is another prayer.

From there all of them, including the smallest children, now go down with singing and conduct the bishop to Gethsemane. There are a great many people and they have been crowded together, tired by their vigil, and weakened by their daily fasting - and they have had a very big hill to come down - so they go very slowly on their way to Gethsemane. So that they can all see, they are provided with hundreds of church candles.

When everyone arrives at Gethsemane, they have an appropriate prayer, a hymn, and then a reading from the Gospel about the Lord's arrest. By the time it has been read everyone is groaning and lamenting and weeping so loud that people even across in the city can probably hear it all.

Next they go with singing to the city, and walking they reach the gate at the time when people can first recognize each other. And from there every single one of them, old and young, rich and poor, goes on through the centre of the city to be present at the next service - for this above all others is the day when no one leaves the vigil till morning comes. Thus the bishop conducted from Gethsemane to the gate, and from there through the whole city as far as the Cross.

By the time they arrive Before the Cross it is pretty well full day, and they have another Gospel reading, the whole passage about the Lord being led away to Pilate, and all the recorded words of Pilate to the Lord or to the Jews.

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Then the bishop speaks a word of encouragement to the people. They have been hard at it all night, and there is further effort in store for them in the day ahead. So he tells them not to be weary, but to put their hope in God, who will give them a reward out of all proportion to the effort they have made.

When he has given them as much encouragement as he can, he speaks to them as follows:

“Now off you go home till the next service, and sit down for a bit. Then all be back here at about eight o'clock so that till midday you can see the holy Wood of the Cross, which, as every one of us believes, helps us attain salvation. And from midday onwards we must assemble here Before the Cross again, and give our minds to readings and prayers till nightfall.”

Before the sun is up, the dismissal takes place At the Cross, and those with the energy then go to Sion to pray at the column at which the Lord was scourged, before going on home for a short rest.

But it is not long before everyone is assembled for the next service. The bishop's chair is placed on Golgotha Behind the Cross, where he now stands, and he takes his seat. A table is placed before him with a cloth on it, the deacons stand round, and there is brought to him a gold and silver box containing the holy Wood of the Cross.

It is opened, and the Wood of the Cross and the Title are taken out and placed on the table.

As long as the holy Wood is on the table, the bishop sits with his hands resting on either end of it and holds it down, and the deacons round him keep watch over it.

They guard it like this because what happens now is that all the people, catechumens as well as faithful, come up one by one to the table.

They stoop down over it, kiss the Wood, and move on.

But on one occasion (I don't know when) one of them bit off a piece of the holy Wood and stole it away, and for this reason the deacons stand round and keep watch in case anyone dares to do the same again.

At midday they go Before the Cross - whether it is rain or fine, for the place is out of doors - into the very spacious and beautiful court-yard between the Cross and the Anastasis, and there is not even room to open a door, the place is so crammed with people.

They place the bishop's chair Before the Cross, and the whole time between midday and three o'clock is taken up with readings. They are all about the things Jesus suffered: first the

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psalms on this subject, then the Apostles (the Epistles or Acts) which concern it, then passages from the Gospels.

Thus they read the prophecies about what the Lord would suffer, and the Gospels about what he did suffer.

And in this way, they continue the readings and hymns from midday till three o'clock demonstrating to all the people by the testimony of the Gospels and the writings of the Apostles that the Lord actually suffered everything the prophets had foretold.

For those three hours, then, they are teaching the people that nothing which took place had not been foretold, and all that was foretold was completely fulfilled; and between all the readings are prayers, all of them appropriate to the day.

It is impressive to see the way all the people are moved by these readings, and how they mourn. You could hardly believe how every single one of them weeps during the three hours, old and young alike, because of the will he did suffer.

After the dismissal Before the Cross, they go directly into the Great Church, the Martyrium, and do what is usual during this week between three o'clock and evening.

After the dismissal they leave the Martyrium for the Anastasis where, once inside, they read the Gospel passage about Joseph asking Pilate for the Lord's body and placing it in a new tomb.

After the reading there is a prayer, the blessings of the catechumens and then the faithful, and the dismissal.

On this day there is no announcement that people are to keep vigil in the Anastasis. Obviously they are tired. But none the less it is the custom to watch there, and all who wish - I should have said, all who can - keep the vigil there.

Some cannot watch till morning, and they do not stay, but the vigil is kept by the clergy, or at any rate by the ones young enough to have the energy.

All the night through, they sing hymns and antiphons till morning comes. Most of the people watch, but some only come later on, and some at midnight, doing whatever they can manage.

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### What We Learn from Egeria

Several striking things emerge from Egeria's description.

First, Good Friday is marked by long, sustained attention to the Passion story. Scripture is read slowly and extensively, linking prophecy with fulfilment.

Second, the Cross itself becomes the centre of devotion. People approach one by one, bowing and kissing the relic of the wood of the Cross. This physical act of reverence expresses love and gratitude for Christ's sacrifice.

Third, the day involves bodily participation. The people walk, fast, keep vigil, and even weep together as they hear the story of Christ's suffering.

And finally, there is a strong sense of continuity. The worship flows from the night before into the day itself and even into the night that follows. The Church does not rush through the Passion story; she dwells within it.

### The Church's Developing Practice

Liturgical historian Paul Bradshaw notes that three major elements eventually became central to the Western Good Friday liturgy:

1. The reading of the Passion, particularly from the Gospel of John
2. The veneration of the Cross
3. Communion from the sacrament reserved from Maundy Thursday

These elements grew out of the Jerusalem practices described by Egeria and developed over time within the Roman Church.

In medieval Europe, the liturgy became increasingly elaborate. Processions with a veiled cross, sung chants such as the Trisagion, and poetic texts known as the Reproaches were added to the veneration of the Cross.

Some of these medieval developments carried troubling anti-Jewish interpretations of the Passion narrative. Modern liturgical reforms have intentionally removed such elements so that the Church's worship reflects more faithfully the gospel's call to reconciliation and truth.

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### The Shape of the Good Friday Liturgy Today

Today many churches follow a pattern that still reflects these ancient roots.

The Good Friday service often includes:

- The solemn reading of the Passion
- A series of intercessory prayers for the Church and the world
- The veneration of the Cross
- Communion from the reserved sacrament

This service is often called The Liturgy of the Day.

One of the most powerful moments comes when the Cross is brought before the people and the words are proclaimed:

“Behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the Saviour of the world.”

The people respond:

“Come, let us worship.”

This is not worship of the wood itself, but reverence for the mystery it represents: the self-giving love of Christ.

As on Maundy Thursday, the altar remains bare. The Church keeps the tone of fasting and watchfulness. The liturgy is restrained, allowing the story of the Passion to stand at the centre.

### Other Ways Churches Mark Good Friday

Across the world, Christians have also developed other ways of keeping Good Friday that help communities enter into the story of Christ's Passion.

One of the most visible is the Walk of Witness. In many towns and cities, churches gather together and walk through the streets carrying a cross, stopping at different places to read scripture, pray, or sing hymns. These processions echo something of the movement described by Egeria in Jerusalem, where the people physically travelled between the sites associated with Jesus' suffering. The walk becomes a public act of remembrance and faith a way of bringing the story of the Cross into the life of the community.

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Some churches also keep the Stations of the Cross, a devotional practice that reflects on fourteen moments in Jesus' journey to Golgotha. Moving from station to station, the community prays, reflects, and sometimes uses images, music, or silence to dwell on each step of Christ's suffering.

In other places, Good Friday is marked through meditative or creative acts of prayer. People may be invited to light candles, write prayers, place stones at the foot of the Cross, or spend time in quiet reflection. Some churches offer spaces where people can express sorrow, lament, or hope through simple symbolic actions.

These practices vary widely in form, but they all grow from the same desire: to help people enter the mystery of the Cross not only with the mind, but with the body and the heart.

Whether through solemn liturgy, quiet prayer, walking through the streets, or symbolic actions of devotion, the Church continues to find ways of standing beneath the Cross and remembering the love revealed there.

### **Fasting, Silence, and the Simplicity of the Day**

Good Friday has long been kept as a day of fasting and restraint within the Christian tradition. From the earliest centuries, Christians marked this day with simplicity in food and life, recognising that the Church stands beside the suffering of Christ.

Fasting is not meant as punishment, nor as spiritual achievement. Rather, it is a way of clearing space in body as well as heart so that the gravity of the day can be felt more deeply. Hunger reminds us that something is unfinished, that the story has not yet reached its joy.

Silence also becomes part of the liturgy. The church is stripped of decoration, music is restrained, and words are fewer. In a world that often moves quickly past pain, the Church deliberately pauses here. She does not rush to Easter. She remains at the Cross.

Good Friday asks the Church to stay.  
To stand beneath the Cross.  
To listen to the story slowly.

Here the love of God is not explained  
it is given.  
Here, in the starkness,  
salvation is revealed.

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And so, the Church keeps watch.

Not yet in triumph,  
not yet in resurrection,  
but in the quiet faith  
that love will have the final word.

### Glossary of Terms

#### **Anastasis**

Greek for "Resurrection." In Egeria's account this refers to the church complex in Jerusalem associated with Christ's resurrection (linked to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre).

#### **Catechumen**

Someone preparing for baptism through teaching and formation.

#### **Good Friday**

The Friday before Easter commemorating Christ's passion and death on the Cross.

#### **Reproaches**

Poetic texts sung during the medieval veneration of the Cross, reflecting on humanity's response to God's saving acts.

#### **Liturgy of the Day**

The principal Good Friday service, marked by scripture, solemn prayers, the veneration of the Cross, and communion from the reserved sacrament.

#### **Passion**

From the Latin *passio*, meaning suffering. Refers to the events of Christ's arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death.

#### **Reserved Sacrament**

The consecrated bread (and sometimes wine) kept from the Eucharist of Maundy Thursday so that communion may be shared on Good Friday when no Eucharist is celebrated.

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### **Stations of the Cross**

A devotional practice reflecting on fourteen moments from Jesus' journey to the Cross, often prayed during Lent and particularly on Good Friday.

### **Trisagion**

An ancient Christian chant meaning "Thrice Holy," used in some traditions during the veneration of the Cross.

### **Veneration of the Cross**

A ritual act of reverence in which the faithful approach the Cross often bowing, touching, or kissing it as a sign of devotion to Christ's sacrifice.