

The Marks and Spencer's TV adverts at Easter said that anyone looking to make Easter really special knows that you need to find the right Hot cross buns. Then search for a delicious joint of roast lamb and finally you need to hunt out the tempting Easter eggs. The perfect Easter only at your M&S. Is that your perfect Easter? Is that how you see Easter? Or do you see it as a time to remember the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour and a time to celebrate what God has done for us? If it is the latter have you ever stopped to think that this makes you different from other people because that's not how they see Easter.

Then perhaps as you were coming to church this morning you saw people doing various things, walking the dog, cleaning the car, going to the shop and coming here makes you different.

What we do at Easter and other Christian festivals and what we do on a Sunday can set us apart from other people can't it?

We have been looking over recent weeks at Leviticus and the main thread of what God was saying to his people through Moses was "Be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy."

Again to remind us being holy meant living godly lives which were different from the people round about them. Those different lives would involve every part of life.

In Leviticus 23 see set out a number of festivals and "sacred assemblies" that God's people were to keep. Times when God's people were to come together in the presence of God.

Three things we need to ask about these assemblies or festivals

- a. What were they?
- b. more importantly why did God call them to observe these festivals, how did they make God's people "holy" and
- c. what significance do they have for us today?

1. The Sabbath v3

The message to his ancient people was that every seventh day was to be different, holy. It should be a day of rest and a time for coming together to worship God. It was part of who they were, part of their identity as the people of God. The key word in what God said to them was rest. The Sabbath was given to them as part of the pattern of life that God showed in creation where he rested on the seventh day and it was given for their well being through rest.

Over the years once they had come into the promised land the Sabbath day became overlaid with many laws and regulations about what they should and should not do on the Sabbath. Jesus was challenged about his disciples use of the Sabbath and replied as we read Mark 2:27-28, "The

Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

So what significance does this have for us today?

I think we find its significance in those words of Jesus “The Sabbath was made for man”. God gave it to be a blessing. From creation God set a pattern into the fabric of creation and he blessed humanity with a day that was different, a day that was for rest. God knows we still need a day of rest and we need time when we can hold a “sacred assembly” that is when we can come together and worship God.

As such I think we should take seriously our use of the Sabbath, which for us is Sunday as the day on which our Lord and Saviour rose from the dead and make sure that we do find time to rest and do things which are not part of our normal working week but also that we take time to meet up with God’s people. Just recently I was speaking with a group of Christians and one person said “Oh I skipped church that day..” Now I don’t want to be judgemental and I don’t want to be Pharasaical in laying rules over our use of Sunday but I do place a high value on being together with God’s people on Sunday and I want others to see that not just in terms of what it gives to us but in terms of what it gives to others when we join with them. Sunday, our Sabbath is there for our rest but also as a time to meet with the people of God – let’s take it seriously

2. Passover and unleavened bread v4-8

The details of these festivals are sketchy here but set out more fully in Exodus.

On 14th of the first month of the year God’s people were to hold a Passover festival followed the next day by a week of eating bread without yeast. Bit like a min Lent I suppose.

Why did God want his people to do this?

These festivals were given to God’s people for **remembrance**. As God was telling his people what he was going to do to rescue them from Egypt when the angel of death “passed over” Egypt, he encouraged them to use the day to remember that event, Ex 12:14 ““This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord—a lasting ordinance.”

We see the same with the feast of Unleavened bread Ex 12:17 “Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.”

God wanted his people to remember what he had done for them, supremely in terms of their salvation.

How good is your memory? I know there are plenty of people who say “I can remember back 20 years but it is what I had for breakfast I can’t remember.”

There are for probably each of us certain events that are clear in our memory and that may well be because we metaphorically run the video of that event over in our minds regularly because it was so significant such as watching Kettering at Wembley or walking through the door at the back there with my daughter on my arm for her wedding.

Well God wanted his people to keep this act of their salvation at the forefront of their thinking and so he called them each year to remember through the Passover feast and the week of unleavened bread that followed it just what he had done for them.

I don’t think it was by accident that Jesus was crucified at Passover. We are meant to see the events of the Passover as a shadow of this great act of salvation. We see in the lamb slain in those homes in Egypt the shadow of the lamb of God who would be slain on the cross on Calvary to free his people from their sin and just as God wanted his ancient people to remember his act of salvation so he wants his people today to remember the much greater salvation through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The words of Jesus as he shared that last Passover meal with his disciples echo down the centuries to us, “he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

For us it is Easter and especially it is the Communion service which is given to us in our day through which to remember the salvation that God has worked for us. The Communion service especially keeps at the front of our minds just what God has done for us. So today as we later share in bread and wine lets take the time to remember our salvation and to remember the cost of our salvation.

3. Firstfruits v9-14

As we move onto the next festival and the firstfruits God was looking forward to when his people were in Canaan and settled.

This festival was the first part of the harvest festival. As we can see a sheaf (probably of barley) was to be “waved” before the altar as a dedication then accompanied by lamb, cereal and drink offerings.

Why did God require this of them?

It was again part of their being holy and different in that they were recognising that it was their God who is the creator and sustainer of the earth. They were to **recognise** his power in bringing forth the crops.

The festival was in part anticipation of the harvest that was yet to come and therefore part prayer for the harvest. In that sense it is a shame that this sermon didn’t come last week as initially

intended because last Sunday was.... Rogation Sunday, which is a time to pray of blessing for the harvest as we also recognise the first signs of the harvest coming in the lambs and calves that have been born.

The festival of firstfruits It was a time to recognise that God is involved in every part of our lives physical as well as spiritual.

Now not many of us grow crops, even as I say that I know many are saying well I do in my garden or on my allotment! However, not many of us work for our living growing crops but we do work and we should recognise God's role in our work. We should be thanking God for providing us with work and for helping us in our work and we should be praying God's blessing on our work that our work may be fruitful. Now that will work out in many different ways. It might be prayer that your firm will get that contract, or that your students will get level 4 in their SATS or your patients will get better or that your spouse will enjoy her Sunday lunch. We offer up praise and prayer for our work whether our work is paid or unpaid in or out of the home.

4. Feast of weeks

The final festival is at the other end of the harvest and it is in effect a harvest festival.

7 weeks after the firstfruits, that is 50 days, which gave it the name Pentecost, they were to have the feast of weeks.

They were to bring loaves as well as animals, cereal and drink as an offering to God.

It was the end of the spring harvest and as such this is a harvest thanksgiving, a festival of celebration.

God gave it to his people to encourage them to **rejoice** in what God had done in providing for them physically. A time to thank God for the blessings he pours out upon his people.

We do the same at harvest of course but Pentecost is the time when we rejoice in the outpouring of the God's gift of the Holy Spirit. So in a sense it is a pity we didn't have this sermon next week which is... Pentecost Sunday.

God's people were called to rejoice in God's provision for them and to bring a sacrifice as thanks to God for his provision for them.

We do something of the same don't we at harvest. Later in the year when we come to harvest we will rejoice in God's sovereignty over the whole of creation and because of that his faithful provision for us. We will offer back to him some of what he has given to us. However that should be a regular part of our lives and yet one more aspect of holy living that we recognise that what we have comes from God and we sacrifice to him part of what he has given us. I know that regularly on a Monday the entrance area out there is heaving with people at coffee and co and they get to eat some lovely

cakes which are brought by people, an offering of their gifts. That is a tangible loaf to wave before the Lord as we recognise that he has blessed us. Others of us either don't or can't do that but we can sacrifice to God the firstfruits of the wages God provides to us through the work he leads us into. Are we doing that? Are we giving in a thought through and regular way to God and to his work here at Christ Church?

We rejoice at God's provision for us physically but today and then again today and next week we should also be rejoicing at his spiritual provision for not only has he saved us but he has poured out the blessing of his Holy Spirit upon us.

God's sacred assemblies were and are for God's people to enable us to be holy, living godly and different lives they encourage us to rest following God's pattern for our lives, to remember what God has done for us, supremely our salvation in Jesus, to recognise God's provision and the hand of God in the physical things of our lives, to rejoice in all God's good gifts to us and for us today especially the gift of his Holy Spirit who sets our hearts alive to God and who equips us to live the life of Jesus.