

For many Christians throughout the western world, an integral part of the annual pilgrimage though Holy Week will involve attendance at a *Tenebrae* service. The word *Tenebrae* is Latin for 'darkness' and *Tenebrae* services typically involve listening to the readings from the gospels which describe Jesus' journey from the Last Supper to his death. As the narrative unfolds, lighted candles (and lights) in the church are gradually extinguished, one by one until those present find themselves sitting in total darkness. Then, to mark the end of the service, and with the building still in darkness, a loud noise is made – called *Strepitus*, again, after the Latin. Sometimes it's a note on the organ; sometimes church bells ring; sometimes a Bible is slammed shut. Whatever the noise, its purpose is to be startling – to represent the death of Christ, and the confusion and desperation as his life ended.

Traditionally, *Tenebrae* services were held on the Wednesday of Holy Week – sometimes called Holy Wednesday or Spy Wednesday, on Maundy Thursday *and* on Good Friday. Today though, *Tenebrae* is most usually held on Holy Wednesday - although in actual fact, these days, adaptations of *Tenebrae* practices are found all the way through Lent and Holy Week – and across many different church traditions, Catholic, Anglican and Reformed.

Here in Echt and Midmar, we use Lenten candles, one for each Sunday in Lent. Lent begins with each of the candles in the Lenten ring lit, and as each Sunday passes and we draw nearer to the darkness of Holy Week, one candle is extinguished. Unlike the Advent ring which uses evergreens to symbolise life, the Lenten ring uses twigs and dry branches to symbolise the simplicity and bareness of life at this time in our Christian calendar. And our Easter cross, this year, standing on the chancel in the church at Echt, was made from our Christmas trees, the branches stripped away and the trunks nailed crudely together. The very same trees that symbolised life and light only a matter of weeks ago, now talk to us of much darker things, of death and suffering.

Symbols have always had an important place in the worship of God's people. And that's because symbols help make visible the invisible. They point us beyond ourselves and make real and tangible, realities and truths that are eternal.

Rarely, perhaps, in recent times have the symbols of Holy Week, bread, wine, bowl and water, the cross, lights being extinguished, darkness falling, spoken so powerfully to us – and with such familiarity, for they each communicate something of our common human experience – what it means to serve, share and sacrifice.

Holy Week for us all is a journey; a journey through darker times to the promise of something better and something eternal; the promise of a love that can and does, overcome everything.

Ours is a faith that unashamedly speaks that message of hope to the world; hope even in the darkest of days when, like *Tenebrae*, we witness – in whatever form – light being extinguished from the world, and when the noise that sounds around us seems to announce

despair and uncertainty. Yet ours is a faith that also acknowledges the joy that comes with Easter and fundamentally the promise of life that endures all things. After all, we know that ultimately, light will triumph over the darkness and hope will triumph over despair.

So whoever we are, wherever we are, and however we are worshipping, may the symbols that are so familiar to us this Holy Week, speak to us anew. May they bring reassurance and resolve, comfort and meaning to our believing and our living.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.