

A Note on the Readings for Holy Week

The Prayer Book's proper readings during Holy Week can be seen as a polychoral musical composition. There are three choirs and five soloists, with different voices coming in and fading out, until all come together in a harmony at the end of the week.

One choir is singing stories of redemption. These typological notes are found on the Sunday next before Easter (Exodus 9 and 10), and then fall out until they come back on Good Friday (Genesis 22:1-19), Easter Even (Exodus 13), and Easter Day (Exodus 12 and 14).

Another choir is prophets anticipating the Messiah, "inquiring about the time and circumstances that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings intended for Christ and the subsequent glory" (1 Peter 1:11 NRSVue). This choir begins to sing on Monday (Isaiah 63) and continues on Tuesday (Isaiah 50:5-11), Wednesday (Hosea 13-14), Thursday (Daniel 9; Jeremiah 31), and Friday (Isaiah 53). The prophets conclude on Saturday (Zechariah 9); on Easter Sunday they fall silent.

The third choir is the authors of the New Testament epistles who sing of the meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection. This choir begins on the Sunday next before Easter (Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 5:1-10), drops silent until Wednesday (Hebrews 9:16-28), has a central anthem on Thursday (1 Corinthians 11:17-34), and then continues on Friday (Hebrews 10:1-25; 1 Peter 2) and Saturday (1 Peter 3:17-22; Hebrews 4), and finishes with numerous anthems on Sunday (Easter anthems on BCP 135-136; Romans 6; Colossians 3:1-7; St. Peter's sermon in Acts 2:22-47).

The evangelists are four soloists. St. Matthew has arias on Sunday, St. Mark on Monday and Tuesday, and St. Luke on Wednesday and Thursday. St. John begins with an arietta on Wednesday, and he has arias on Thursday and Friday. St. Matthew and St. Luke return for ariettas on Saturday, and St. John has the final solo of the evangelists on Easter Day.

And greatest of all is our Lord, who sings the psalms, making the psalmist's libretto his own. He enters the week with determination on

the Sunday next before Easter (Psalm 61), but falls silent until he plumbs the depths of anguish on Good Friday (Psalms 22, 40, 54, 69, and 88), is submerged in darkness on Easter Even (Psalm 88), and rises in hope on Easter Day (Psalms 2, 3, 16, 57, 111, 113, 114, 118).

These voices are interwoven, sometimes together and sometimes in counterpoint, until they finally resolve into perfect harmony with a great crescendo over the Triduum—Good Friday, Easter Even, and Easter Sunday.