



*And Easter in Sri Lanka*

*Memories of the 1950's*

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**Catholics of different countries or Regions of the world, practice and celebrate the faith in diverse ways. This applies to Lent too.**

In Sri Lanka events connected with the Passion and death of Christ, have been enacted for years, never as a secular drama, but as a spiritual exercise in collaboration with clergy. Performed on Good Friday, the history of the Passion plays, goes back to the period of the Portuguese, who introduced Catholicism to the country.

My focus is on Lent as we experienced in Sri Lanka in the 1950's. In the then leafy suburb of Kotahena, Lenten traditions were instilled, in school and at home. From Ash Wednesday fasting and abstinence as stipulated then, was adhered to strictly, with significant escalation during the Holy Week. We felt compelled to actively participate in the penitential activities of Holy week, including Maunday Thursday and Good Friday services

**It was a close knit Catholic Community in the Parish served by St. Lucia's Cathedral. Majority of its children attended either St. Benedict's College or Good Shepherd Convent. Hence the catholic students, were very much involved in the religious activities during Lent.**



**Façade of St. Lucia's Cathedral, Colombo**

Maunday Thursday's evening service at the Cathedral, officiated by the Archbishop of Colombo, with Blessing and distribution of Bread and Washing of feet, was indeed very lengthy. The main altar was then stripped and the Blessed Sacrament was moved to a side altar, where, hourly venerations continued all night. This, signified Jesus' all night vigil, in Getsamani. Local community groups were assigned hourly adoration, which continued until 3.00pm on Good Friday, followed by the Mass of the Pre-sanctified.

Crucifixion services were conducted in a few parishes in Colombo and also in the coastal town of Negombo. Alternating with Negombo, a small Island off Negombo called Duwa, staged the service.

The three hour service of the Crucifixion at the Mater Dolorosa Church at New Chetty Street, Kotahena, was an annual event on Good Friday. *It was based on the seven last words of Jesus from the cross. Its readings and chants were in Tamil, interspersed by Melancholic hymns viz. Gethsemani , Mary Remember me, O come and mourn with me a while , sung in English. A life size statue of Jesus, with moveable joints, neck and eyes, hung on the Cross, which, with subtle manipulations, mimicked movements that portrayed His agony on the Cross. This moving spiritual drama lifted up aspects of Jesus' agony and death, into contemporary time and space, in a vibrant*



**Cross after statue of Jesus brought down**



way.

At 6.00pm on Good Friday both above mentioned churches did reopen their doors. At the Mater Dolorosa Church, the crucified statue was brought down from the cross and laid in a 'sepulchre' for veneration. Similarly, a life size statue was laid out at the Cathedral too.



**Statue of Christ laid out for veneration**

Long queues of devotees filed past and venerated the statues. After a long wait in the queue, arriving at the life like image, was surreal – there was a solemn moment of contemplative silence and reflection. They then paid our respects, venerated and moved on.

The queuing public had some light distraction too, provided by pavement hawkers selling their wares – consisting of favoured local sweetmeats viz. aluwa, Bibikkam. Others exhibiting homemade toys and rattles for sale.

Well into the evening and the night, of Good Friday, both churches were busy with moving queues of devotees. Others in groups knelt with lit candles, expressing their grief with doleful chants, which echoed in the vast interior of the Cathedral. The smell of burning candles pervaded the night air.

The hollow of the Cathedral stripped of all its ornamentation was empty on the Saturday until the Easter Vigil mass.

On Easter Sunday, feast of the Resurrection was celebrated with extreme fervor and jubilation encompassing the spirit of the monumental event. The Cathedral was packed to capacity for the special Easter services. As church bells ring out, and braziers swung by altar boys engulfing the air with the scent of incense, the chief celebrant bedecked in shining raiment intones would convey the Easter message.

After High Mass at the Cathedral, the statue of the risen Lord was taken in procession. Thereafter, the celebratory Easter lunch with family and friends was the norm



“ Jesus Chrst is Risen Today Alleluia”

**The re-enactment of the Passion, Death on the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, with statues and Processions was an experience much more palpable, emotionally immediate and experiential, rather than rational, in some ways. These Religious Traditions are, an ancient form of popular piety, partly cultural, that, accompany the Sacramental Life of the Church.**