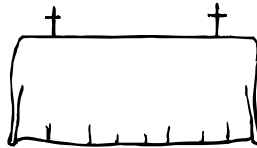


What here? Why?

An occasional series demystifying some of the church's jargon and explaining the symbolism behind the things we do in church.

When I was a curate at St Mary's I often asked Trevor, who was vicar at the time, why we did certain things in church. He lent me a fascinating book called 'The Ritual Reason Why' which certainly answered most of my questions while alerting me to lots of others I'd never considered asking! I really wanted a copy of the book for future reference but it is no longer in print. I was delighted to find a couple of years back that it is available on the internet so when I was asked why we strip the altar on Maundy Thursday I knew just where to look for the answer. Wrong! It merely answered the question 'Will you explain to me why the altar in many churches remains stripped on Good Friday?' It did at least say that the 'custom has reference to the stripping off of our Lord's garments at the pillar'. I knew there must be more to it than that and so I turned to our Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship and here is what I found:

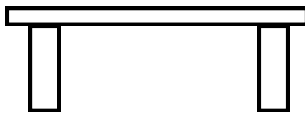


The ritual was simply the removal of the altar cloths and frontal while Psalm 22 was recited. Originally altars just had one cloth to cover them and every week it was removed from the altar after the Eucharist and the altar was left bare all week. It wasn't until the 6th century and even then not everywhere, that the altar had any rich or fine coverings. There was a tendency within the church at the time to allegorise and to look for symbolism in practices and so the altar came to be regarded as a symbol of

Christ's body and the cloths and frontal symbols of the members of his body, Christians.

The Passion according to St John was said or sung on Good Friday and when St John quotes from Psalm 22 following the account of the soldiers gambling for Jesus' robe two deacons, standing either end of the altar, would take the altar cloth away as if they were thieves. This was in the 8th century but by the 10th century it became more elaborate when they removed two cloths, parting them, to represent the tearing of the veil in the Temple.

Eventually the symbolism came to just signify Jesus being stripped of his glory in the passion and in particular the stripping by the soldiers prior to his crucifixion. The altar cloths were taken away without any ceremony.



The removal of any other items from the church or sanctuary have no explanations that I know of. Perhaps we might consider simply focusing on the removing of the altar frontal, cloth and dossal curtain as we recall Jesus giving up any semblance or vestige of glory to be crucified for us. Any other items could be removed before the Maundy Thursday service or when preparing for Good Friday.

Jennie Cappleman