

Hot Cross Buns

Every spring Northern hemisphere peoples welcomed the return of warmth to their region by holding a festival to honour and thank Eostre, the goddess of spring. They baked and offered special cakes to the goddess.

The *cross* was a pagan symbol long before the time of Christ. Bread and cakes were sometimes marked with a cross in pre-Christian times. For example, crosses appeared on cakes offered to the Greek goddess Diana. Whatever the origin, early Christians took the buns and gave them a different meaning

The cross on the bun now represents the cross of Christ upon which Christians believe Jesus won a decisive victory over evil and made possible both our own personal reconciliation with the creator God and the eventual restoration of the entire cosmos.

The Rabbit

The *hare* is an ancient Egyptian fertility symbol and /or symbol of the moon. For the ancient peoples of Europe hares were a spring fertility symbol associated with Eostre, the goddess of spring. According to legend, Eostre saved a bird whose wings were frozen from the harsh winter by turning it into a hare. However, it was a magical hare that could lay eggs. In North America it was not the hare ut the rabbit that was viewed as the Spring fertility symbol. The rabbit was accredited with laying eggs in nests prepared for it at Easter or hiding them away for children to find.

Again, this is an example of Christians adopting pre-existing traditions and investing them with a new, greater, life changing meaning arising from the historical death and resurrection of Jesus.

EXPLORING EASTER

Easter is one of the most important festivals in the New Zealand calendar.

This brief booklet attempts to explain both its origins and the Christian understanding of the event it celebrates.

Spring festivals

Spring festivals have been celebrated at least since the beginning of recorded history. They mark the end of winter, a time when all the earth seems dead, and the start of spring, when everything appears to come to life again.

Long before people celebrated Easter they connected spring with the return of new life to the earth. Early peoples had no idea what caused the changes of the seasons – many ascribing the changes to the activity of various gods. People in northern and central Europe attributed the change to spring to *Eostre*, the goddess of spring. Her name is thought to have come from the word used to describe the direction of the sunrise – “east”. It is thought by some that this is the origin of the word *Easter*. However this is uncertain.

After the death and resurrection (raising from the dead) of Christ, Christians adapted this traditional festival and gave it new meaning in the light of the new life now available in Jesus.

The cross

The cross is the central symbol of the Christian faith. *Crucifixion* was the mode of death penalty used by the Romans, which was reserved for slaves and the lowest types of criminals. The criminal was whipped and then made to carry the cross beam like a slave to the site of his torture and death. This was always outside the city. The condemned man was stripped naked, laid on the ground with the cross beam under his shoulders, and his arms and legs tied or nailed. The cross beam was then lifted and tied to the post, with the victim's feet just clear of the ground. There the condemned man was left to die of hunger and exhaustion. Death was sometimes hastened by breaking the legs.

Traditionally, the cross was a symbol of *shame and humiliation*. Rome reserved it as a penalty for the *lowest and the worst*. Jews viewed those crucified as cursed by God. Yet, for Christians, the cross has become an unlikely symbol of *love and hope*.

Christians believe that, historically, Christ died on the cross to reconcile people to the God at the heart of all life. They believe his self sacrificial death made possible a new life not just for them but, eventually, the complete restoration of a fractured world in every area of life. They believe his well witnessed resurrection (rising from the dead) is compelling evidence of his power and authority over all matters of life and death as well as affirming his identity as, in a mysterious but very genuine way, the actual embodiment of God himself.

The relevance of the cross can be summarised by two quotes from the Bible.

'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible....all things were created by him and for him.'

He is before all things and in him all things hold together....For God was pleased to have his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.'

'Christ died once for our sins. An innocent person died for those who are guilty. Christ did this to bring you to God.'

Eggs

Long before the Christian era eggs were regarded as symbols of *new life, rebirth and fertility*. The ancient Persians, Greeks and Chinese exchanged them in their spring festivals. In several mythologies there is mention of the *World Egg*, from which the divine Sun-Bird was hatched, or from the two halves of which heaven and earth were formed. To the early Christians eggs seemed obvious symbols of the *resurrection* of Jesus Christ and the new life he brings. Thus a most appropriate Easter gift!

The decorating of eggs is an important part of Easter. In many English homes dyed and decorated eggs are served on the Easter breakfast table alongside their contemporary descendants in chocolate. In Hungary young men set up Easter trees from which decorated eggs are hung. These trees are set up outside the houses of girls they admire!